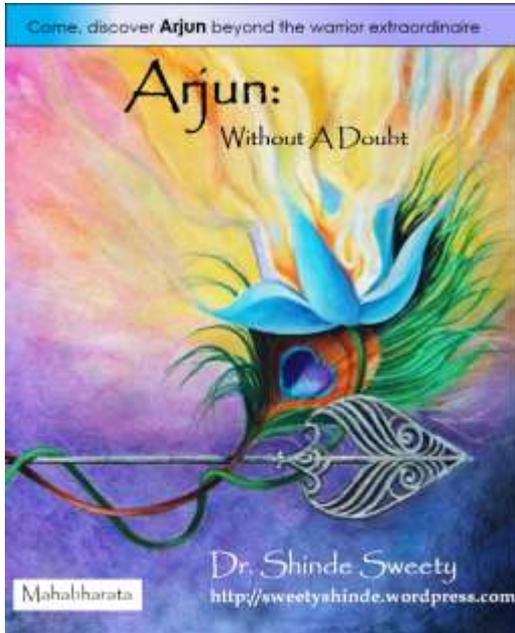


# ARJUN: Without a Doubt

Dr. Shinde Sweety



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## **PREFACE:**

*Mahabharata*, the Indian epic, is classified as Mythology. Myth pertains to fable, legend or fiction.

However, our ‘mythology’ mentioned: airplanes (Pushpak in Ramayana; Matali’s air charter in Mahabharata) much before the Wright brothers’ momentous flight; weapons of mass destruction (Brahmastra, Brahmashira, Pashupatastra) much before the atomic or nuclear bomb; Yashoda who saw the Universe in Krishn’s mouth (Sun revolving around the Earth and the Earth as a round planet aeons before Pythagoras and Socrates claimed the same); test-tube babies (Kaurav princes?), gender-transformation (Shikhandi & Brihannada), Tsunami (Dwarka’s sea-burial), Parthenogenesis (Kunti /Pritha’s aspermatogenic progeny) and the most stupefying miracle of all – a man and a woman being pure friends! Vyas’s mere imagination cannot enfold all these miraculous events.

Our ‘mythology’ has warriors who could harness forces of nature into Agniastra, Vayuastra and Varunastra merely by chanting verses. Impossible? Take the statement, ‘*Specific sound wavelengths can shatter glass*’; wouldn’t that seem impossible to someone ignorant of the Resonance principle? Perhaps verses chanted in a specific rhythm achieved a similar phenomenon. I firmly believe our ‘mythological epics’ are historical narrations.

### *What about the Hero of Mahabharata?*

Arjun is forever shackled within the confines of duty, discipline, dedication and devotion.

He is blessed with Bhagwad Gita and boons, Krishn and Krishnaa, weapons and wars, laurels and triumphs and, to top it all, an heir to carry on his bloodline. What possible agonies can such a child of Destiny have?

But how was the man behind the warrior? How did he feel practicing what others only preached – being told his noble ideology existed only in theory, wandering from exile to exile in constant quests, searching for a soul mate in

unworthy substitutes, being exploited by the three people that he worshipped – his mother, brother and tutor and finding his moment of compassion misconstrued and concreted for eternity?

Dronacharya's arena, Draupadi's schism, Yudhisthir's dazed madness at the game of dice, Urvashi's curse, Keechak's death, Karn's secret...all we get is silence from Arjun. Where is Arjun's voice? Where are his inner demons, his darkest desires, his dilemmas and his pain?

*Draupadi* – The most courageous fighter in an epic overflowing with warriors. A woman who battled brute force with cold logic – the savior of Indraprastha, whose name became synonymous with destruction. The feisty Rorschach test that still evokes awe, curiosity, envy and disdain, and whose name is a taboo for every daughter's parent.

Ayn Rand said *“The person at the center of the storm is often taken for granted, his viewpoint deemed to be the least. It needs a middle man to convey his voice.”*

Because silence is golden no more.

Because silence too can be misquoted.

Because we live in times that vilify the heroes and glorify the villains.

Because, as Ayn Rand says, *“The central theme can never belong to anybody else but the Hero.”*

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**Note:** Draupadi’s narration marked with \*\*\* symbol. Arjun’s narration is without any symbol.

### *Chapter 1: The Blue Magician*

I lay sprawled by the lake, my fingers floated lazily along its edge. I ruffled the surface once in a while and gazed at the ripples – perfectly symmetrical ripples emanating from an epicenter ... this is how arrows should leap. My other hand reached up to trace the reassuring curves of my bow.

Last night, a bunch of wandering bards had setup camp with us. They regaled us with stories related to the grand swayamwar tomorrow ... today.

*A princess fragrant as the blue lotus and born from fire, indeed!* Considering that we had just escaped the murderous fire at Varanavat ... well, we had had enough of fire for a lifetime.

“Arjun does not believe in miracles ... unless they occur at Vrindavan or Dwarka,” Bheem had needled me.

“*Your* Krishn will be attending. You will finally meet your soul-mate tomorrow,” Nakul sneaked in slyly.

“Nakul, if Govind is attending, he will compete. If he competes, he will win. He will be too busy ferrying the blue lotus to Dwarka. I doubt he will have time for us,” I reasoned.

“Maybe Krishn will not compete,” Yudhisthir said dreamily.

“He never has time for us. Our cousin did not bother to seek us out even after Varanavat.”

“He owes us nothing, Nakul. Blood ties are not chains of a dungeon. Besides, he did not seek our help when he created Dwarka, did he?” I asked, partly in admiration and partly with regret at the fact that he was so autonomous, so *complete* on his own. He never seemed to need us. Did he even know I existed?

“You could woo and impress him at Drupad’s court. I wonder what insurmountable contest King Drupad has planned. Nothing is impossible for Dronacharya’s students,” Sahdev said.

“The contest is for Kshatriyas, which is what we are trying not to reveal ourselves to be,” I reminded him. *Avenging angel ... Kshatriya purger ...* yet every Kshatriya would flock to her contest, like moths to a flame.

“We can be there as Brahmins to get alms,” said Yudhisthir.

“Who knows, Drupad may be waiting for you.” Sahdev winked.

“For me? His enemy’s disciple, the reason his Panchal Kingdom got split halfway, the person who led him chained to Acharya? Dream on.” I scooped up a handful of water and watched as it trickled out between my fingers.

---

\*\*\* I was born on the brink of ripe womanhood. I had already lost childhood at birth. Now I had to catch up with youth in a frenzied hurry. My education was haphazard and multi-pronged. My maids tried their best to tame me into conventionality.

Cast your eyes down, speak in gentle tones and – most importantly – speak without saying anything of importance. Don’t smile without reason; don’t speak out of turn and the star of all advices – don’t think!

The art of seduction was endless, relentless – and extremely boring. I did not need it to be taught to me. Besides ...

“Are there men worth seducing?” I asked outright, yawning.

“Man!” They said in unison, shaking their index finger, “... not men. The man who will be Husband,” they stressed the word as if it was the be-all of existence.

I had heard of travelers who condensed solar energy with a sliver of glass and harnessed it into fire. That is what I was supposed to do – concentrate my entire being, personality, joys and lassos of seduction upon one person.

“And the rest?” I teased.

“They are the *outsiders*,” they said, aghast at my words.

I envied my brothers whole heartedly. They did not have to waste time on such drivel. Dhrishtadyumn was ‘the King-to-be’. He was drawn into much better, enriching varieties of education. The judicial laws, administrative strategies, the *shastras* – and above all, the art of warfare.

I followed them sometimes into those hallowed halls where weapons were preserved and pampered. I loved to run my hand over the gleaming blades, the metal cool and reassuring against my feverish skin.

If seduction was my weapon number one, should I not be taught its antidote? Survival, weapon number two? Teaching me one without the other left me too dependent on men ... A man! I reminded myself.

“Teach me,” I commanded my brothers and father.

My implorations and demands were met with amused eyes, gentle frowns and unbending rules of conduct. I heard tales of women who shared the battlefield with their husbands ... husband. But I was born too soon. Too late. I had blossomed in the blink of an eye. Time could not be wasted on mundane things like war tactics.

It was time to marry me off. Time to set me off on another strange journey armed with the great Art of Seduction ... sans Self Defense.

“*Only one*,” the blue-toned magician had said melodiously. “There is only one that is worthy of you.”

I don’t remember when Krishn came into my life; he was just there. My sounding board – the only man who was never tongue-tied in my presence.

“Maharani Kunti’s third son, the peerless archer Arjun. And my cousin. Even your father agrees with my choice.”

I had heard of this name, countless times. The one who made Father yearn for a warrior son, the one who inadvertently compelled my birth; who else could own me? But still ... an enemy – ally of Dronacharya. *Father would conquer an enemy with another enemy, using me?*

“Without my permission? Why is he peerless?” I asked, my questions jumbling up in irritation and curiosity.

“Your father will seek your permission after he finalizes everything.” He coolly ignored my knit eyebrows and continued, “Arjun is Dronacharya’s best disciple. He excels in all the arts of warfare. Nobody can wield a bow like him, with the exception of Dronacharya, Bhishm and Parshuram. His acute hunger to excel, his quest for perfection, his powers of concentration...”

“How so?” I butted in. He narrated the story of Dronacharya’s archery test, the wooden bird on the tree. None of the students could hit the target, because they were distracted by the trees and the branches. Arjun, however, could focus solely on the eye of the bird and was thus able to shoot it.

I shrugged, “A motionless wooden bird. In war, on a battlefield, the target will not sit still. There will be no time to ponder, think and reflect. What kind of tutor bases his tests on motionless objects? I would, however, be more impressed if he hits a moving target – without looking at it. No, I don’t mean sonic

archery, which he is sure to know. Something else, I don't know ... something more impossible, more difficult."

He smiled "You like things to be difficult, do you, Princess?"

"I do. How does his skill qualify him to be my soul mate?"

"It doesn't. It is merely the means to get you."

"Provided Bhishm, Dronacharya and Parshuram don't turn up to vie for my hand." This time I ignored *his* frown and continued, "So give me a valid reason to marry him."

"Because he is a nice person."

I waited for him to go on, but he had finished. "Is that all?" I asked.

"It is. When everything else is gone, it is the only quality that remains."

"How typical of you. Life is still on the first page and you jump to the end of the script."

"That is because I know," he said.

"Bhagwan Krishn, I keep forgetting you are God!" I folded my hands deferentially and bowed. He gazed at me patiently. He was very difficult to rile.

I sighed, "Can your Arjun talk?"

"As far as I know, he can both hear and speak."

"I did not say speak, I said 'talk'. I will be so bored if he just stares at me without getting a word out." Krishn gave me another of those indecipherable looks. I decided to change tack.

"How do I recognize your genuinely nice cousin? How does he look?"

He shrugged. "Nothing special. He may be ugly. Is it important?"

"Would you reject your wives for being beautiful, even if you married them for other reasons? It is my life — and I have only one."

"No man is perfect. Be careful what you wish for, you may get it."

“If he marries me, he better be extra-ordinary.”

“Are *you* so perfect, Princess?”

“Obviously. You would not need to marry so many women if you found the perfect woman. Now don’t give me that scandalized look ...”

“Kshatriya dharma ...” he began. I swatted aside his Kshatriya dharma.

“Never have I known anything more open to interpretation, exploitation and distortion than Dharma.” I conceded, “Alright, tell me why you are so keen that I marry your Arjun. I don’t have to be a puppet to my father’s wishes and your whims.”

“Trust me. You and he belong.”

“A contest in which I don’t get to participate except as a trophy? I don’t like being relegated to this dumb role at all. And if your Arjun decides to play truant ... how will I recognize him?”

“I will guide you. Though, let me warn you - he may already be dead.”

He loved to pepper his speech with such sweetly timed detonations. I took in a deep breath and awaited his explanation. He told me the gory tales of Arjun’s murderous relatives, the repetitive conspiracies and the final lacquer house fire at Varanavat. He refused to confess whether his cousin managed to survive the deliberately accidental fire. He did not seem very sure either.

So, I was to be the beacon and sorceress that would tempt Arjun out of hiding. Arjun – my father’s enemy, the superlative archer, genuinely nice person, ugly and probably dead as well!

“Plus, I have never met him yet,” he concluded.

Great!

***Chapter 2: The Fish and Two Baits***

We brothers filtered in late. The Brahmin section was already overflowing with those thronging Panchal's court in the hope of alms. We scattered ourselves into different corners, so as to avoid detection. I slouched amongst fellow Brahmins, trying to appear innocuous. I need not have even tried, actually, since everybody in the assembly had their eyes and attention riveted upon the entrance, expecting Panchal's blue lotus.

The entire warrior kingdom had sent their representatives. Draupadi's famed beauty seemed to have attracted every proven and potential warrior to her court. The air was thick with expectation ... and a fragrance. The fragrance was intoxicating. It overpowered the fragrance of flowers, the *attars*, the sacrificial offerings. I could not place it fully, but I felt it sink its heady claws into me.

My eyes scanned quickly through the Kshatriyas. My eyes immediately saw faces I did not want to see.

Then I spied the flicker of a peacock feather. I held my breath on a short, sharp intake.

Dronacharya used to tell me about this miracle getting honed in Sandipani Acharya's ashram. Mata kept telling me about the miracle wandering from Mathura's prison to Vrindavan's meadows; back to Mathura and then to Dwarka. Breaking barriers, rules and traditions; battling assassins, disbelief and ridicule with consummate ease and grace. Finally, finally here he was. I sat erect, my spine taut as in combat, the way I stood a split second before I released an arrow. There are moments in life that remain as milestones.

Govind did not feel like a person, he felt like an event. My cousin ... no, something far more – My Destiny. I knew my life would now forever be divided into two phases – before Govind and after Govind.

His large luminous eyes were speculatively moving around the hall. I waited impatiently until – at long last – they swept over and stilled on me. His glance speared through me, ripping open my mind, gauging and evaluating me in one searing moment. I felt paralyzed in the fierce spotlight of it. Never before had I felt so vibrantly alive. Never before had I felt so naked. His eyes sparkled bright, but his gaze was inward, attentive to a thought of his own. A slight regret? No! I wiped away the notion. Those eyes would never harm me, purposely or otherwise. Somewhere in the background, I heard the Panchal prince introduce his sister to the assembly hall. The fragrance was now stronger. Richer. Fresher. It was *here!*

Govind blinked first and then he smiled at me. It felt like an arm put protectively around me. He turned away resolutely and faced the princess. I turned my head, dazed. I was now facing the princess.

Drunk on the vision of Govind, I saw her through a haze of green-blue luminance. Any other woman would have been a colossal anti-climax. *This* one felt like an extension of Govind; like variations of the same theme. They were like a fire holding both the cool blue and the searing orange flickers within its womb.

So far, I never had time or inclination to form a picture of my dream woman. But some magic source had known my deepest desires and created a personified version of it. If ever a woman could be crafted specifically for a man, I knew she was.

She was not an artist's dream. She was not a poet's creation. She looked far too vital and vibrant for that. This was not a woman to be won and wedded.

She seemed like an Idea, a Muse, a Divine weapon. Like *Vajra* – Indra’s thunderbolt.

For a brief moment, I felt acute jealousy for Govind; then a wave of burning shame swept over me. I vaguely heard and understood the conditions put forth by the luminous youth by her side. My heart lurched when I heard it. How could her father set so easy a target? Did he wish to gift away this divine weapon?

It cost many a king their pride, before they learnt that the task at hand was near impossible.

The specially made bow lay inert, but glowing. It looked light as a butterfly and left the strongest kings panting to lift it an inch. Some succeeded. Duryodhan managed to lift the bow, but he was contemptuously tossed aside by the recoil of its string. Jarasandha had the same amount of success, or failure. Shishupal stumbled under its weight.

I felt my arm muscles go tense; I could *feel* that bow within my grasp as clearly as I saw it. But ... the dusky flame on the dais belonged to Dwarka’s elegant plume of peacock feathers. I unfurled my fingers and regretfully shelved my dreams.

I saw Kings glowering with their failure, felt their collective grouse turn into resentment towards the slender form standing up there. The embers in her eyes were now frankly amused. So were Govind’s.

I saw a tall person stand up. A golden coat of arms. My old time opponent. The one who hated me for reasons of his own. I had no time to spare him either hatred or sympathy. Arrows don’t obey caste or class. It only mattered

whether he was good or not. I knew he was good but was he good enough for today?

“*Anga-Raj*, Karn,” announced the courtier, as the golden head strode towards the bow. I saw the bunching of his muscles as he lifted the bow. He stood a moment, adjusting his weight to balance the heavy bow.

I was no saint. I did not wish him to win. It seemed obscene that any mortal should convert that streak of lightening into a mere wife.

Karn knelt gracefully by the pond. I noticed the involuntary twitch of my fingers. He was holding the bow just a little too tight, too coiled. Besides, there was something about that bow beyond its weight ... the center of gravity? The bow seemed to be lopsided in its balance; its center of gravity was off-center. King Drupad had definitely placed value on his daughter’s hand!

I noticed with quiet satisfaction that Karn would miss. I saw Govind relax as he noticed it too. The arrow leapt up and sunk into the rotating machine. The fish eye grinned down, untouched. A murmur of dissent rippled through the hall.

King Drupad sank back into his seat. He raised a commanding arm, allowing Karn to proceed. I remembered suddenly that the flame’s brother had mentioned three chances. Karn would have two more chances! Either he would be able to rectify his mistake, or else ...

Does that happen in battle? One chance is all the difference between life and death. Surely, the King ought to have more faith in Govind’s skills. Couldn’t he have permitted a single attempt to win his slender thunderbolt? I couldn’t fathom what Govind was waiting for.

Karn stood up. I saw the crimson flare effuse into his face. He threw the bow back onto the table, flung his head back once to glare at the fish eye and then marched back to his seat. The crowd drew in a collective disappointed sigh.

At least I could grant him that; he had thought exactly like I would have. *I would not have touched that second arrow.* A second attempt would have been the most vicious insult to Dronacharya and to my self-confidence.

If anyone deserved to win her, Govind did. This ... *Krishnaa* – the dark one. The dusky lotus that would rightfully adorn golden Dwarka.

I heard a confusing melee of voices – a swollen disgruntled wave of audible anger arising from the assembly. They wanted revenge for their collective humiliation.

*And now, Govind. Rise up and show what can be done. Claim her.*

He sat calm, a smile hovering over his lips. He did not rise, but his eyes rose. To mine. He inclined his head, closed his eyelashes in a brief sweep. It was both permission and command.

I felt a rush of blood. I stood up.

---

\*\*\* A silence enveloped the hall suddenly. A tall figure was advancing from way back, from the corner where the Brahmins had crowded.

He walked lightly, easily, every step a spring for the next. His fingertips reached down to his knees – lovely, long fingers. He had the posture of a warrior and the serenity of a Brahmin.

If Arjun was ‘nothing special’ then this was definitely not him. What a pity! He looked competent and nice enough. And neither dead...nor ugly. Not by any standards.

I decided not to be a pawn for either my Father or Krishn. This was my life at stake, not theirs. I did not look in Krishn’s direction. *I could not be accused of disobeying a signal I never saw.* Just this one chance. If he fails, I will wait for Krishn’s nice cousin. If he does not fail ...

What a curious person! Whoever bows to a bow? He stood gazing down at it possessively. I wondered if he would ever look at me like that. I felt a sudden jab of jealousy for the Bow.

I wondered what unseen, unheard vibes he received from the Bow. I bent all my willpower into his left arm that was cradling the bow. His fingers coiled around it and then he swung it up easily. Lifted it high above his head smiling; as if this was too easy. As if Life should never be grim and grey. As if Life was meant to be this joyous and effortless.

He set the bow upright. It was almost twice as tall as him. He bent the prow towards him. His right arm looped and threaded the bow expertly with a fluid movement, swift, graceful and competent. A movement too practiced. He lifted up the bow again and tweaked the taut string, his eyes closed in bliss. The reverberations cut through the tension in the hall.

He took up three arrows, entwining them between his fingers. My brother stepped ahead, wanting to explain the rules, to warn him that he would get three attempts. The serene stranger silenced him with a gentle shake of his head. He knelt by the pond. His movements were unhurried, but they still happened moments before I could register them. He bent his neck down and swung up his

arms in tandem. All I could see of his face was the winged eyebrows and the lips, sharply etched and indrawn. His breath was steady and controlled. Unlike mine.

I did not believe in God, but this time I closed my eyes in silent prayer.

The silence and then the uproar were both deafening. I snapped open my eyes. It had happened! I had missed the chance to witness the trajectory of the arrows. I did not see the flight of those arrows, or the superb archery that was now mine forever.

### *Chapter 3: The Defeated Victors*

\*\*\* Over the tumult of the vanquished Kings, we dodged out of the hall. Our guards blocked the entrance behind us. He intuitively turned towards the north east, where the palace grounds blended with the woods.

It had not been a *swayamwar*; it was a battlefield we left behind. A battle we had won. We were both victors and trophies.

I had hated that loophole my father had left – three chances in return for my life? But my husband had not relied on three chances. When I snapped open my eyes, I had seen three silver arrows; one piercing neatly through the fish’s eye, the other two embedded tip to tail into each other and into the first arrow. It was like the end of all arguments. Final.

His steps were brisk and long, as if moments could not be wasted on movements. When I judged that we were a comfortable way away, I paused to ask, “Are we safe now?”

He slowed down and turned to me, “We were never unsafe, Princess. We were just trying to prevent any more bloodshed on their side.”

I stood still to savor the sound of his voice as it seeped into me. It was such a rich, cultured voice. My toes curled in delight. I wished I could run my fingers through his voice; stealthily ... my mind flew to an image of crumpled silk sheets. But a Brahmin ... well, sheaves of crackling hay would also do. I wondered lazily if hay tickles, and if a fire-born is allowed to rustle among hay.

“He will be fine, don’t worry.” I guessed he was talking about his companion who had taken the other route as the battle abated. They must have a meeting point decided in advance.

“May I know where we are going?” I asked.

“To our hut. It is a long distance away. It is small, humble and uncomfortable.” He searched my face, “Any regrets, Princess?”

“What is there to regret? You completed the impossible.”

His shoulders elegantly shrugged off my impossible contest. I guess he could afford to be smug, winner as he was. He mused, “A Kshatriya princess marrying a Brahmin is not unheard of, but a Brahmin *allowed* to compete at a swayamwar must be a first.”

“I am not a Kshatriya, just the daughter of one. And you are not a Brahmin,” I said confidently.

I saw the pale bruises over his coppery skin. They looked like dancing rays of sunlight. I lifted my hand and traced one long scar with a fingertip. His nonchalance vanished. Revenge time – time for me to orchestrate his breath. I took back my finger and he breathed again.

“Krishn told me you would win,” I explained.

His eyes widened momentarily in shocked delight. “He knows me? I have never met him before. He may have heard of me, a long time ago. But why would he even keep me in his memory?”

I wanted to add, ‘And heart. Are you The One?’

I decided to bait him into admission instead, “I offer my respects to your Acharya. Unlike Dronacharya.” I murmured deliberately, “*His* students did not do him much proud. Hastinapur’s princes did not fare well today, did they?”

I saw the imperceptible tightening of his lips as his eyes refocused on me, “Princess, why should he bear the weight of their failures?”

“Would he not have taken the credit if they succeeded?”

“No person is great in isolation. It takes many hands to shape a life. Denial would mean conceit, and conceit is not the same as self-respect. ”

I searched his eyes in disbelief, wondering if he always fired sentences like they were arrows. Kshatriyas were bred on insolence, bravado and vastly exaggerated views of self. No Kshatriya would openly admit to self or to an audience what he had just said so easily. There was no audience here to impress – except me. I belonged to him irrespective of whether I was impressed or not. Giving credit to another - that was a sign of dependency, of lack of self-assurance ... or was it?

I reflected back to the events at the contest hall. He had been anything but the above. His posture had been taut yet relaxed – the winged eyebrows on a serene brow, the three arrows nestling within his fingers. No! An admission so munificent only stressed its exact opposite; it could only mean complete self-confidence.

I thought back further to Father’s conversation with me, “Why Arjun? His target was to hold me captive; he did not unleash mayhem destruction on our army. His promise to Drona did not encompass insulting me; there were no derisive taunts as he escorted me to Drona. It is a rare trait in a warrior, even rarer for someone so young and almost an impossible trait in a young warrior winning his first ever skirmish. *Success is more difficult to handle than failure. This is an exceptional man.*”

My exceptional victor's narrowed eyes were keenly following my trail of thought to its conclusions. I decided to carry on the baiting, "True. But in that case, Acharya should shoulder the failure of his students too."

He sighed, "Failure is an orphan. Besides, what does a blame game achieve? The accused feels defensive and bitter, the accuser feels absolved of all responsibility ... and neither comes out wiser, cleaner or better than before."

That was true but he still did not admit who he was. There was no point beating around the bush. Discretion and Diplomacy, was Krishn's anthem. I mustered up all of Krishn's advice to come up with, "What is your name?"

"Parth. Pritha's son." He explained. I stared dismayed at him. Arjun was Kunti's son. *Who were Parth and Pritha?* Wasn't he the one meant for me?

His eyes were amused, "You are very brave, Princess. I don't know how a woman gives her whole life in return for a feat performed in a swayamwar. Back in that hall you were terrified of the wrong person getting it right, weren't you? It must take a lot of courage to marry a stranger."

"Are you not marrying a stranger too? Besides, Krishn had already told me how to recognize you. Ugly — and dead. You were not dead and — not ugly," I ended lamely. He had brown eyes, I noticed, with flecks of gold – and very long eyelashes.

He cleared his throat, "You are so very much not-ugly too, Princess. You should see my younger brother, though. He is the good-looking one."

I had no wish to see his younger brother at all. *Not ugly*, indeed! What a way to describe Panchal's fire-born. Irked, I asked "Why do you call me Princess? I have a name."

I saw his eyes move to the garland still clutched in my hand. In the chaotic melee, I had quite forgotten the actual garlanding. Back in the hall, as the

storm erupted, he had got busy with the immediate task on hand. Later, after the opposing Kings were crushed, he had waited for my palm to slip into his in silent acceptance.

“May I call you Krishnaa?” he asked.

I had experienced the thrill of being the unique trophy of an impossible contest. Then I experienced the thrill of abduction; our escape from the hall was almost abduction by mutual consent. Then I had the honor of being won in battle as well. A man who gives credit so generously, whose voice echoes his thoughts and echoes them in such a lovely voice ... which woman gets *that* lucky?

Here, in the deep woods, there was no compulsion from my father or Krishn. I was my own mistress. His eyes sparkled like warm honey as my arms rose willingly to garland him.

I had everything I wanted. Too bad about Arjun. Who told him not to turn up?

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\*\*\* We hurried to where his hefty accomplice was waiting with a chariot. “What took you so long?” he asked. “Better hurry. We need to reach before dark, Arjun. Ma must be worried.”

I was halfway up the chariot. I caught my breath and stopped dead. He had mentioned a name I knew. I whirled back at Parth to confirm it.

Father had willed it, Krishn had willed it and so had I. *Some things in life are just not a coincidence.*

I wished I had stayed longer to savor his answering smile. I would not see him smile at me for the interminable eight years that would follow.

His brother continued chattering. Neither of us heard him.

The hurried life at Panchal gave me many relatives, but not enough time to form relationships. And now I owned an entire family. Two elder brothers-in-law, like fathers. And two younger ones, like sons. They had suffered far too long. Enough of trials and tribulations. Now I would pamper and spoil them all.

It had been a magical silver arrow. It had not only pierced the fisheye, but it had pierced all our lives and bound us together in so many magical relations.

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The miracle has happened! I possess this divine weapon – this tawny tigress with the dancing eyebrows. A pity I have to carry her back to our humble hut. She could have been on her way to golden Dwarka right now and here she is trampling through grass and dust beside me.

And Govind ... must meet him soon again. He looked like all the Universe's plans had already unfolded before him. Why did he allow me to proceed before he tried? What kind of self-restraint made him give up this exquisite treasure? Why did he come to the contest if he had no plans of contesting? Did he come to meet ... oh, high hopes!

I was gifting Dronacharya his second Guru-dakshina by winning the contest. Failure of his students indeed! Would I allow that to happen? Would he mind that his enemy's daughter ...? I hoped this new union melted the ancient enmity between Acharya and King Drupad.

She stood straight in the chariot, absorbing our journey with alert, vibrant eyes. This soul-mate of mine looked like she would turn the tide in our favor. My lucky charm. *My wife!* *My wife,* I repeated in amazement.

She had seemed aloof and intimidating in court, an impossible dream. The short walk in the woods had banished that image. It had converted a trophy into a person. As for the touch of her fingertip ...! I took a deep controlled breath. Her fragrance wafted back to me. Her long hair was playing truant, running back to tickle my arms now and then.

I had never experienced my parent's marriage. Love was still an alien, elusive concept in my mind. I had a vague idea that it encompassed something vast, tender and permanent. I wondered if it included this curious mixture of exhilaration and tranquility I felt.

I know Kshatriya dharma allowed me to marry as many times as I wanted. I would never marry another woman. No other woman would match up to her anyways. You are the only one, I promised her unruly locks. My first and last wife.

Fate whooped and doubled over with laughter. It was wiser than me and more cynical. It knew more than I did.

She was my first. She would be the last. But there would be others in between.

---

We were greeted by a strange reception party. They stood huddled in a defensive group. *Ma Kunti* stood ominously still. Yudhisthir and the twins had left the hall much before us. Yudhisthir stood half turned away as if he was an

unwilling accomplice. The twin kids stood staring at their toenails, as if some enthralling scene was unfolding there.

It wasn't the reception I had expected. Then I realized suddenly that I had behaved out of character. We had still been incognito. I had not crosschecked with Yudhisthir whether it was the proper time and place to reveal our identity and presence to the Kshatriya world.

“Welcome, future queen of Hastinapur.” Mata Kunti smiled as she stepped forward, “Welcome to my household. Arjun, history will always be grateful to you for bringing this treasure into Yudhisthir's life.”

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\*\*\* He had been helping me down from the chariot. We turned as one, shell shocked at the words. His grip on my wrist tightened involuntarily.

“This goddess Laxmi is the greatest gift you could confer upon your elder brother.” She continued, paying no heed to our startled expressions.

“Gift? I have won her in the contest. She is my wife, not a gift.” He spoke simply, surprised that he had to even offer an explanation.

“Surely you remember Kshatriya dharma? It is vile and unheard of a younger brother to marry before his elder brother.”

“But ... Bheem has already married Hidimba. In fact, you were the one who persuaded him to do it back then.”

“That was the need of the hour. Besides, Hidimba is a forest dwelling tribal. She cannot be included in the Kshatriya rules.” I glanced at Bheem. He fidgeted, but he kept silent.

I took a deep breath and stepped forward, “My cousin Vibhavari is of marriageable age and of impeccable lineage. My uncle will be delighted to accept the senior most Pandav as his son-in-law.”

We both looked expectantly at Mata Kunti and her eldest. She was frowning; his eyes flickered red-tinged. We knew suddenly that Vibhavari’s unseen charms would not be enough provocation to stop this madness.

“Do you think this is the first instance in history? From time immemorial, a prince is allowed to win a wife for his elder brother or to get a rightful heir to the throne. The revered Bhishm *pitamah* leads by example. Didn’t he procure three brides for Vichitravirya? Custom and tradition permits, nay, it compels you to present her rightfully to the eldest brother.”

Yudhisthir now spoke, “Arjun won her hand in the contest, Mata. She belongs to him too.”

“Too?!” We looked at each other silently, heard the word echo around us ominously.

“You may have won the contest. But I uprooted the giant pillars in that court. I fought shoulder-to-shoulder with you against those Kings. I played a pivotal role in protecting her honor and life. I have the right to marry her.” The unexpected words came from the cheerful Bheem!

“I will not let anyone’s rights be trampled upon.” Mata Kunti lifted her chin defiantly, “This Panchal Princess shall be bride to all five of you.”

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*Chapter 4: A Kingdom of Tears and Screams*

\*\*\* Khandav forest. Our future kingdom. Our *Karma-bhoomi*.

It looked like a grey vulture, its head cocked, casting a speculative and malignant eye over us. It looked like a challenge Nature had thrown at us. It looked vast, barren, unyielding and ugly.

I loved it with all my heart!

I loved it with the same passion that I hated Hastinapur, the capital city with its opulence and oily smiles. The love of the adoring crowds was genuine; that of the palaces was grudging. Opulence was not new to me. What I wanted was warmth. I wanted a Home.

*This* felt like home. No matter how ugly and unwelcoming it looked, I felt perfectly at peace here. I hoped my husbands were happy with this chance to show their ability – to create a kingdom out of a barren land.

I looked around at them. Yudhisthir, the crown prince looked dubious and worried. Bheem glowered at the land, hands akimbo, as if it should be punished for being so ugly. Arjun looked ... I could not gauge his emotions anymore. He seemed to have withdrawn his emotions and expressions to the safety of his own mind, where nobody could hurt them. He was polite and courteous to me. Too polite and too courteous.

The only time he set his emotions free was when Krishn was around. After their first meeting at my wedding, they talked as if they had picked up the reins of a conversation begun long ago. I did not know why they spoke for such long hours if they already knew what the other was going to say.

Krishn had the ability to make everyone around him feel unique – as if they had the entire focus of his warmth. But with Arjun, it was inimitable and genuine. There was much I wanted to clarify with Krishn. But he was always surrounded by people, always had someone vying for his attentions. He looked at me impersonally – as if I had served my purpose. Arjun claimed him possessively, as if it was compensation for my loss.

I seemed to have lost my husband and best friend simultaneously – to each other. Something warned me that I would get back either both or none. I did not wish to be either intruder or competitor. Krishnaa or Krishn, it did not matter as long as one could be Arjun’s confidante. Till then, patience would be my best friend.

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Govind stood looking around slowly, a smile lifting the corners of his lips. He was looking at the barren land as he had looked at me. Not seeing it like it was, but the way it would be.

“I defeated Indra a long time ago in Gokul,” he said suddenly without context. “I did not know I would be friends with his son.”<sup>1</sup>

I squirmed. I had never been comfortable with this double paternity weighing down on us. It was supposed to give us the dual advantages of being a prince and a demi-God. It was supposed to be an enviable honor.

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<sup>1</sup> Indra (real) and Pandu (foster) are Arjun’s fathers – just as Vasudev (real) and Nanda (foster) are Krishn’s fathers. Indra and Krishn had clashed long ago when Krishn invoked Gokul’s residents to worship Govardhan mountain instead of Indra, the Rain God.

It had not however, saved our childhood from being pelted with nasty comments, being plotted against, from forest exile, not even – as I recently discovered at my cost – from being brutally hurt.

As always, he could read my deepest emotions, “Your life and mine, Arjun, run so much in parallel. My fathers - Nanda and Vasudev, both so instrumental to my core, my existence. Who should get prime credit?

“It rained torrentially when I had to undertake that long journey from Mathura’s prison to Vrindavan. Your father was a witness to that. But I just had to subdue him later on. He was getting far too arrogant.”

“Was he easy to defeat?” I asked.

Govind shrugged, “You will know soon enough, when you fight him. If he chooses to fight us, if he chooses to bring obstacles in our plan. Your father-in-law needs our help.”

“Maharaj Drupad needs us?”

“Are you the only one blessed with two fathers?”

“Oh! Agni needs us?”

“Correct. He needs food. Real live food, not the bland ghee and flowers routinely offered in sacrificial offerings. We need him to clear this wasteland. He needs us to combat your father. This forest land is under the protection of your father.”

“Burn it? But Govind, more than half of this land lies arid. We can build our kingdom there. We don’t have to burn this forestland corner.”

“This forest is home to the Naga tribes. They are ferocious warriors, fanatically devoted to their land and tribe. Don’t expect them to welcome you into their territory.”

“But we don’t have to invade their territory. Surely we can occupy the barren part. We can search for mines and water resources there.”

“The forest is the conduit to the outside world, Arjun. The barren piece of land lies unused and unguarded between Hastinapur and the forest. You are not safe from either side. And when you want to expand your horizons, the forestland will be your biggest obstacle. Its inhabitants will always be an enemy lurking around. Their ruthless tactics will not yield to chivalry or diplomacy.”

“But Govind, there aren’t just warriors in there. There will be families, homes and animals. We cannot base our kingdom on the destruction of someone else’s kingdom.”

“This gnarled forestland is nobody’s kingdom. It has become a haunt for the lawless evil, for ruthless trespassers who have turned settlers.”

“But it will be a massacre! Are we to be remembered forever as scavengers and destroyers?” I asked

“You will be remembered only if you survive long enough for memories to form. Think of it as a sacrificial altar. You don’t shed tears over ghee and nectar, do you? Fire is their salvation, their *Moksha*.”

“A kingdom built on terror and anguish? Built on abuses and curses? I can never expect any peace from such a kingdom.”

“Peace is the first casualty in every ambition. It comes at the price of conflict for every warrior.”

“I have no problem conflicting with soldiers and warriors. But victory at the cost of innocent lives, Govind?”

His voice hardened, “As innocent as the tribal woman and her five companions who burnt in the lacquer house fire meant for you all. Was that sin or just inevitable for survival? Maybe Fate placed them as sacrificial offerings

instead of Pandavas – a sure sign that you brothers are destined for a much vital role in the future.

“It is a very cruel world, Arjun ... and it will only get worse with time. How will you fight your own...?” He stood looking silently at me, weighing his words in his own mind. Then he gave a short dismissive shake of his head.

“Reluctant warrior,” he said in a softer voice, “we will give most of them enough time to flee. We need not kill them all...” He observed my relief, smiled and continued, “... Takshak, the tribal King, is the biggest threat. His dominion spells trouble for us. He, his family and all his cruel soldiers will have to be killed. We cannot afford survivors there.

“The womenfolk can be allowed to escape. Those who are monstrous, those who might fight later on will have to perish – unless you wish to gift revenge as inheritance to your children.”

He put up a calm hand, “Don’t look so aghast. These are not innocent dwellers. They rob and murder travelers. A kingdom thrives on merchandise and productivity. Your merchandise and trade cannot continue until citizens are safe. You cannot have visitors and your citizens ravished and terrorized over and over. Indraprastha needs to breathe freely. It cannot be throttled on all sides. Your citizens are first priority. You owe them complete safety and protection.”

He could sound so soft and so ruthless at the same time. Audacious though it seemed, I could not negate the truth in his words.

His voice reverted back to its soft credence. “And we are not completely destroying Nature, Parth. We are just altering one landscape to rebuild another. We will build an oasis here. Replant trees. Make lakes and water ponds. We will allow a part of this forest to re-grow, but in an organized manner. Nature and life will grow back, but under our control and command.

“Deserts come out of volcanoes. Oceans come out of earthquakes. Nature has its own violent way of balancing its elements. We are just trying to imitate Nature in human form. We may succeed or we may fail. But we cannot live life regretting that we did not try when we could.”

He waited patiently for me to make up my mind, to re-evaluate our options, to come to a decision.

“But these weapons, Govind, are mere toys. Two of us cannot control every nook and cranny of the forest simultaneously. When the forest burns, there will be survivors bursting out from everywhere. We will need special weapons.”

He smiled, “That is where your father-in-law comes in. We satiate his appetite and he gives us the weapons. We need to keep your father at bay, otherwise his torrential downpour will interfere in our plans.”

“These are for you,” said a grave voice beside us. The coppery hued form stood before us, his eyes blazing. I could feel the waves of heat emanating from his person – greedy and impatient. Agni gestured behind me.

I turned and beheld the most ... well, the *second-most* beautiful thing in my life. It lay long and gleaming. It boasted of all the colors of the rainbow. Its glow stood like a halo around it. I cast my eyes along its impressive length. I felt my fingers curl in the instinctive desire to possess it, to feel its cold, metallic hardness against my skin. I could not bear to look away, in case it vanished from existence. What else had made me feel the same way?

“All yours,” I heard a dry chuckle, “the Gandiva bow is all yours.”

I stepped forward, knelt and touched it. My fingers jerked back, surprised. The bow was not cold and metallic. It hummed and throbbed beneath my touch. Pulsatile and warm, it felt like I was holding a live person. My fingers flowed

tentatively over its firm, resilient curves. It snuggled into my grasp. It felt so exactly right. It belonged to me.

“I hope you won’t share *this* gift with anyone,” Agni said in a grave voice – part sarcasm and part resentment.

I remembered with a start what other precious gift he had bestowed on me and which I had frittered away.

**Author's note:** I, Dr Shinde Sweety firmly believe that our 'Mythological epics' are Historical narrations.

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