

*Great Heroes*  
*of the*  
*Mahabharat*



*Kunti & Draupadi*

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Great Heroes of the Mahabharat



*Kunti*

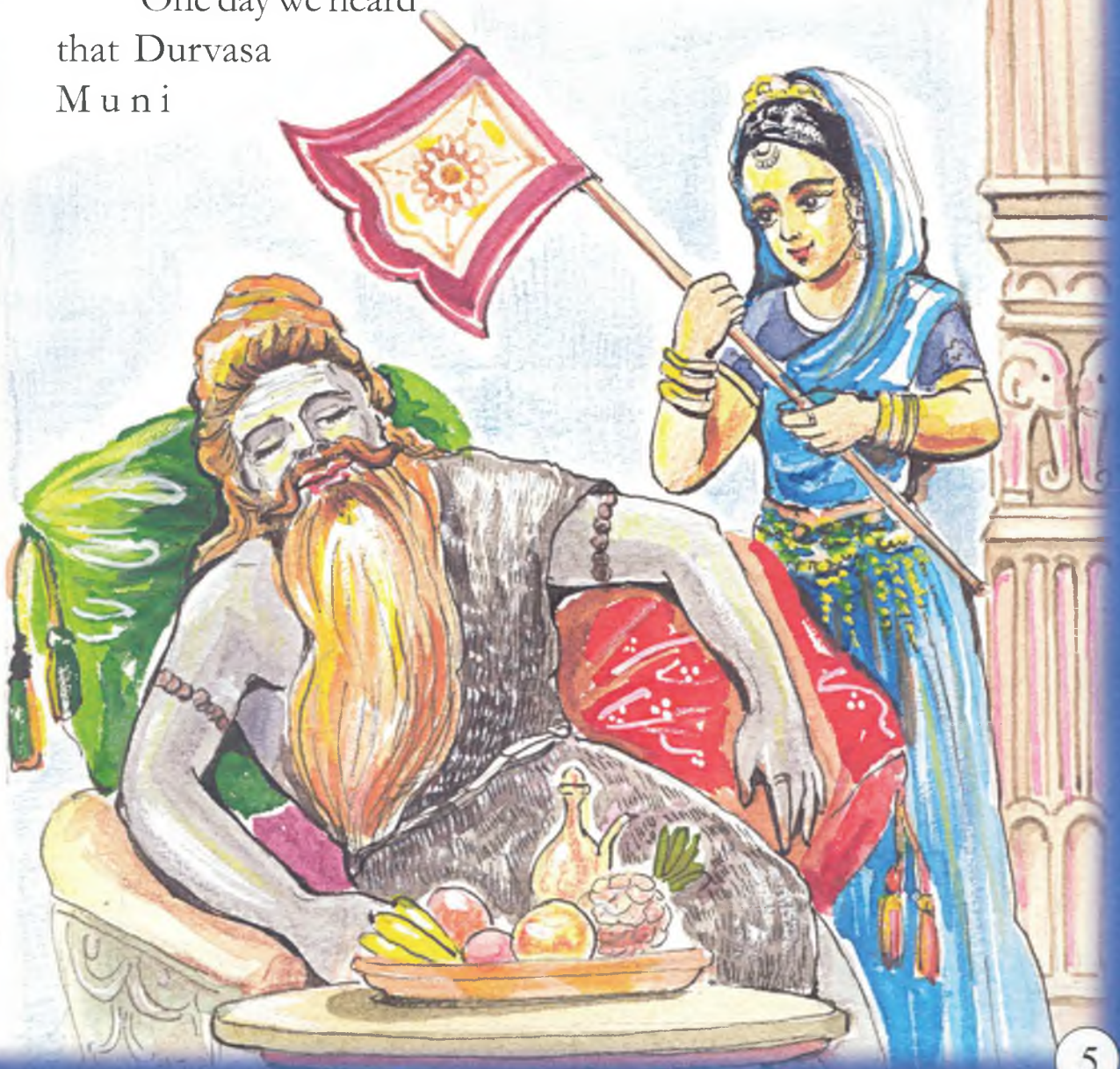
  
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King Kuntibhoja had wanted a child for a long time, and when I was born he adopted me from his cousin Shuraraj. My name was Pritha, but I was also named Kunti after the king. I had a happy childhood because the king and the queen showered me with love, making me feel like their most precious treasure. My smallest efforts pleased them, and in their eyes I could do nothing wrong.

When I was young my duty was to serve some of the very important people who came to stay at our palace. It was sometimes hard work, but it was a challenge and I liked it. Most of all, I wanted to please my father. I knew that he enjoyed hearing his guests praising me, and I tried to give him reason to be proud of me.

One day we heard  
that Durvasa  
Muni



was coming to stay, and a wave of fear spread through the palace. It was common knowledge that the muni had a bad temper and that he often cursed those around him.

Although I was still very young, I was chosen to serve him. He had decided to stay with us for a year, a whole year. It seemed like a lifetime. I hoped that I would get through the year without being cursed. I set my mind to do my best and prayed to Lord Krishna for His help.

I was ready to serve Durvasa Muni at any time of the day or night. Sometimes I was resting when the muni called for a drink of water, and in a cheerful mood I sprang up and took it to him.

He called me unexpectedly, asking for rare vegetables or exotic foods, but I seemed to know in advance what he wanted, and I was always ready to meet his demands. I knew that I was being given special guidance from Krishna within my heart.

When the year was over my father called me and said that the muni was pleased, that he was going to reward me. I had grown fond of my service and didn't expect anything in return, but before he left, Durvasa Muni insisted on giving me six mantras.

He said, "Dear child, chant one of these mantras and call any demigod of your choice. The demigod you choose will come and grant you a boon." I accepted the mantras, although I didn't know if I'd ever use them.

However, it was not long before I was overcome with curiosity. One morning when I finished worshiping Tulasidevi, I decided to test one of the mantras. As I looked up into the sky



I was fascinated by the beauty and power of the sun. I wanted to see the demigod who lived there, so I chanted the mantra to call him. At once Suryadeva arrived in my room. He was brilliant and beautiful, but he was also so grand and frightening that I didn't know what to say.

“Thank you for coming,” I said, finally. “You can go now.”

“No. That cannot be,” he said. “The Mantra cannot be chanted without result.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I started to feel nervous.

“I must give you a child,” he said. “That is the boon you have called for.”



“What do you mean?” I asked. “I am just a girl. I have no husband. How can you give me a child? How will I explain this to my family?”

“You have called me and you must accept the consequences,” he said.

I had never done anything without the blessings of my parents. I wanted to call my father and ask him what to do, but I had chanted the mantra, and it couldn't be withdrawn. I couldn't imagine how such a thing could have happened to me. Later I understood that it had been arranged by higher authorities. Krishna had a plan and I was just like an actress playing a part in a drama.



My baby took birth from my ear. He was born with jeweled armor on his body, and he was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. How I wanted to keep him! But I was a princess and I had to think of my family's good name. My father's happiness was more important than mine. I knew I had to send my baby away without showing him to anyone.

I prayed for his safety, and then I wrapped baby Karna in silk. I snuggled him in a basket, and sent him sailing down the river. The pain and guilt I felt, watching him sail away from me, stayed with me all my life.

I tried to forget Karna and bury the past. After some time, I was married to King Pandu. I was happy to have such a brave





and heroic husband. After conquering the world, he wanted to spend some time living in the hills with Madri, my co-wife, and me. We traveled to the Himalayas and enjoyed a quiet and simple life.

Despite the difficulties of being away from civilization, I was content serving my husband. We were happy until one day a terrible thing happened.

In the forest, near our cottage, a sage turned himself and his wife into deer. They ran together between the trees and then they stopped to embrace. An unwritten law stated that an animal enjoying with his wife should never be killed. The law was common knowledge, and even the most cruel hunters followed it.

Unfortunately, however, my husband did not see the female, and thinking the stag was alone, he shot him. The sage was furious. He returned to his human form, and just before he died, he cursed my husband.

“When I was enjoying with my wife, you shot me,” he said.

“In return, I curse you to die if you embrace either of your wives.”

The curse had terrible implications. It meant that my husband could give no children to Madri or me, that there would be no heir to the throne.

I could tell that my husband was unhappy and I toyed with the idea of telling him about the mantras I had received from Durvasa Muni. I was reluctant to tell him because I knew what it would mean. I had suffered enough as a result of calling one demigod and I didn't want to call another.

But when my husband asked me to request a rishi to give me a child, I thought it would be better to call a demigod, and I told him about the mantras. He was delighted and wanted me to chant the mantras straight away.

“Get a righteous and peace loving child,” he said. All my life, I had been trained to do my duty and that helped me to carry out my husband's wishes.





I called Dharmaraj, the god of justice, and from him I got a son called Yudhistir.

For some time my husband was content. He was thrilled

with baby Yudhistir and loved him as his own. Then one day he asked me to call another demigod. He wanted another child, a boy who was physically strong. I called Vayu, the god of wind. From him, Bhima was born.

Next, at my husband's request, I called Indra, the king of heaven. My husband wanted a son who was handsome and brave. From Indra, Arjuna was born.

We had three beautiful sons. I told my husband I would agree to have no more.

Our life in the forest was peaceful and happy. The children were growing strong and healthy.

It was a joy to watch them playing their rough games together. We watched them as they climbed trees, splashed through streams, and tumbled and fought in the grass. It was one of the best times in my life, but it did not last for long.

Sometimes I stayed at home with the children and my husband went walking with Madri in the valley nearby. Madri was beautiful and sweet natured. I loved her like a favorite sister, but remembering the curse, I felt uneasy if they were away together for too long.

One spring day, they had been away for a few hours and I started to feel anxious and uneasy. I feared that something had happened to them. I kept looking toward the valley, longing for them to return. Then, at last I saw Madri walking home, but she was alone. Even from a distance, she looked pale. As I ran to meet her, I saw that her eyes were full of tears. At first, she couldn't speak, and then she told me what had happened.



“Our husband embraced me,” she said. “I ran from him. I begged him not to touch me, but he wouldn’t listen. I reminded him of the sage’s curse, but didn’t seem to care.”

I was shocked and overcome with grief. I blamed Madri for letting such a thing happen.

“You wanted to enjoy with him,” I said. “You could have stopped him.” I knew I was being unreasonable. Deep inside I knew that Madri was not to blame. The forces of nature are so strong that they sometimes bewilder even the most enlightened people. It seemed that my husband’s desire for Madri had caused his death, but I knew that ultimately my husband had just been playing his part in helping to fulfill Krishna’s plan, that his death would somehow influence the future events of the world.

Twin boys were born to Madri. We called them Nakula and Sahadeva. It was decided that Madri would enter a sacred fire.



She would enter the flames, meditating on our husband, and join him in heaven. I remained on earth to bring up our five sons.

It quickly became clear that I couldn't stay in the forest without my husband, and I returned with the children to the palace at Hastinapur. I placed the children in the care of their grandfather and two uncles.

They were raised with their cousins, the Kauravas. The







Kauravas (sons of King Dhritarastra) and the Pandavas (my sons) should have been treated equally. Unfortunately Dhritarastra favored his own sons and allowed them to do whatever they liked.

The Kauravas were envious of my boys and were so cruel

they even made plans to kill them. I suffered great anxiety, never knowing what they would do next.

I told my boys not to show their anger. We were living as a joint family and I wanted them to learn to co-operate with their family members.

“Don’t even criticize your cousins among yourselves,” I said. “Remember that you must act properly in all circumstances. Be true to yourselves. Do the right thing and Krishna will always protect you.”

My second son, Bhima, was the biggest and the strongest,



and he was the main target of the Kauravas' envy. Once they made him eat a poisonous cake and he fainted. While unconscious, they threw him in a river to drown. Miraculously Bhima was saved. Behind the scenes, Krishna was taking care.

I thought of Krishna daily and thanked Him for protecting us. One day Krishna sent Akrura to the palace to enquire about our welfare.

I always tried to hide my feelings and shed my tears alone, but hearing of Krishna's kindness, my heart melted and I broke down in front of Akrura and wept. I prayed to Krishna to help



us. Without Krishna's protection I don't know how I could have survived those years. I felt like a doe surrounded by tigers—tigers looking for the chance to attack and kill my sons and me. Facing tigers in the jungle is frightening, but living with them is worse.

When the boys were grown, I accompanied them to Varanavat, to live in a house supposedly built for our pleasure, but the house was a death trap, made of inflammable materials. The Kauravas planned to burn us alive.

Fortunately Vidura, my brother-in-law, warned us of the danger. He helped us to escape by having a tunnel built from the house into the forest.

I remember hurrying through that long tunnel in the middle of the night. It was horrible! We ran until I was too weak and tired to go any further. Then Bhima picked me up and ran with me in his arms. Before we reached the end of the tunnel he was carrying me and his brothers. Our life was fraught with problems, but despite all the difficulties, I was grateful that I still had the most valuable things in life. I had my wonderful sons with me, and Krishna's mercy. It was clear that Lord Krishna was protecting us and saving our lives.

I had lived in the forest before and I knew the austerities it held, but I soon realised that we could be happier in the forest than in the royal palace. At least in the forest we would be free from the fear of being murdered by our relatives. After all, they wouldn't try to kill us because they thought that we were already dead.

We dressed as brahmins and stayed in the house of a potter.

Although he and his family were very poor, they were gentle people, and they happily shared their small home with us. I felt indebted to them and I wanted to repay them. One day I got the opportunity to do so.

I heard the potter's wife crying and, when I asked what was wrong, she told me of a cloud hanging over the village. There was a demon called Bakasura living in the cave of a nearby hill. The people had made a pact with the demon. He had agreed to stop killing the villagers, and in return they had promised to regularly send a cart loaded with food, a buffalo, and a person for the demon to eat.

The potter's wife was crying because it was her family's turn to send someone to be eaten by the demon.

I told the lady not to worry, that my son Bhima would be glad to go in her son's place. Yudhistir was shocked and asked me how I could make such a sacrifice, but Bhima knew exactly what I had in mind.

"A whole cart of food," Bhima said. "That sounds fine. Of course I'll go." Bhima set out with the cart. He ate the food and killed the demon.

We didn't want anyone to guess who we were, and as no ordinary man could have killed Bakasura, Bhima said that a demigod had come from the heavens and saved him.

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My sons went out to beg alms during the day. When they came back in the evening, I told them to share what they had in their begging bowls. Once they went to Panchal to enter a competition

for Draupadi's hand in marriage. They were away for a few days, and I was busy in the cottage when they returned.

"Come and see our alms," they shouted. I called back to them without looking. "Share it among yourselves," I said. Then I looked outside and saw Arjuna and Bhima with Draupadi standing beside them. In my life, I had never spoken a lie, and now I had said something that seemed impossible. I had told them to share Draupadi. What was





I to do? After much discussions with the highest authorities, all of my sons married Draupadi.

Soon news of the marriage reached the Kauravas, and almost at once we received an invitation from King Dhritarastra to return to the palace at Hastinapur.

The Kauravas pretended to be delighted to see us, but I knew most of them were putting on a show. We didn't know why they had sent for us, but we guessed that they planned to destroy us. Our military position had become quite strong due to our friendship with Draupadi's father, King Drupada. Perhaps they feared we would gather an army to win our kingdom back from them.

Before we reached the palace, a wound from my past was reopened. I heard about a new man in Hastinapur, a man who had become great friends with the Kauravas. The new man had first appeared at the contest to win Draupadi, but he had been disqualified from entering the competition because of his low birth. The Kauravas liked him and gave him a small kingdom as a token of their friendship.

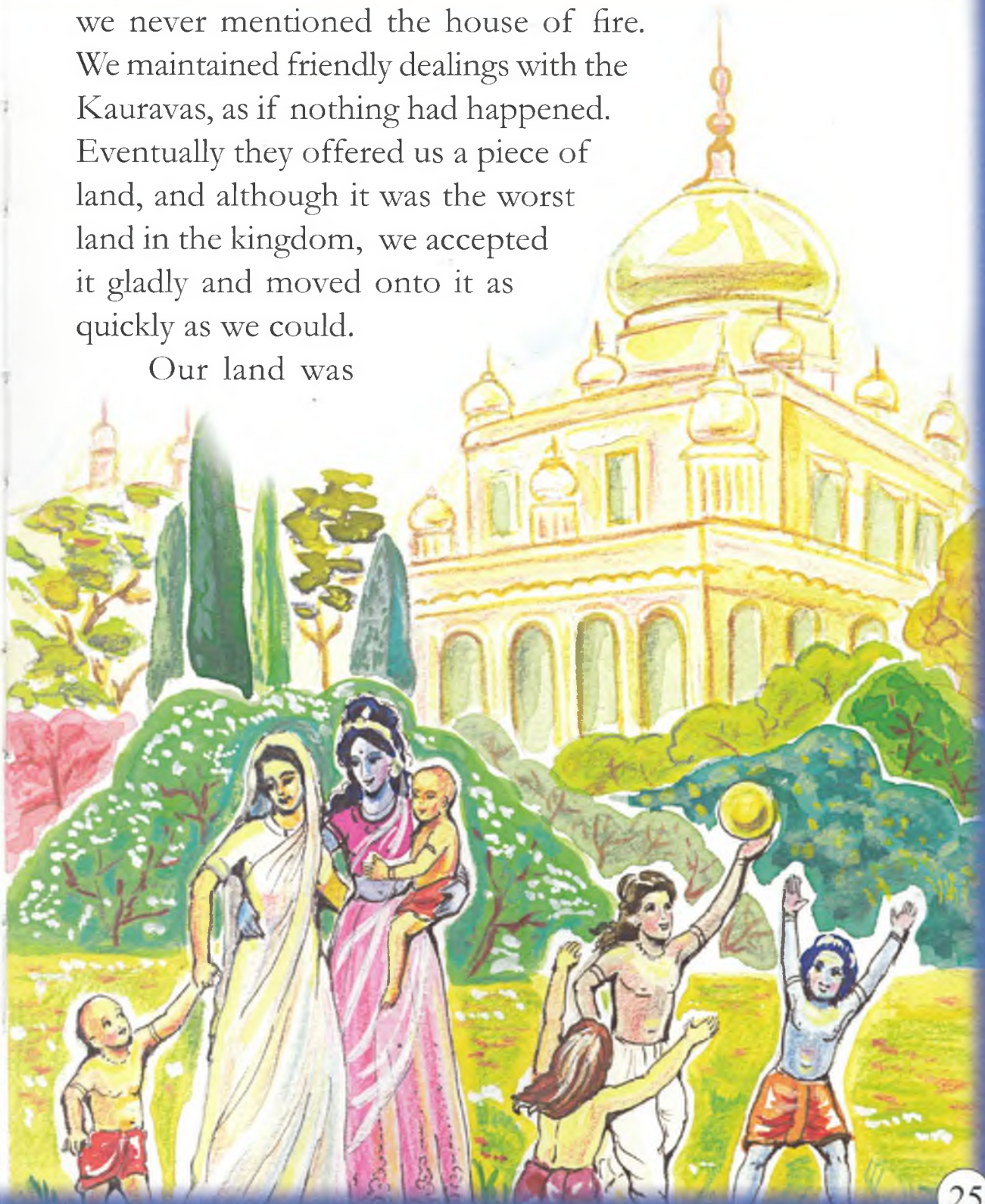
When I heard about his beauty and his natural armor, my thoughts returned to the son I had never known. I was sure the new man was my son Karna, and when I saw him, I had no doubt. How strange fate could be! My first born son, who had no knowledge of his birth, had found a place in the world where he belonged, but he had made his allegiance with the wrong side. Perhaps, at that time, I should have told him I was his mother, but I didn't.

There were many things we did not discuss. For example,



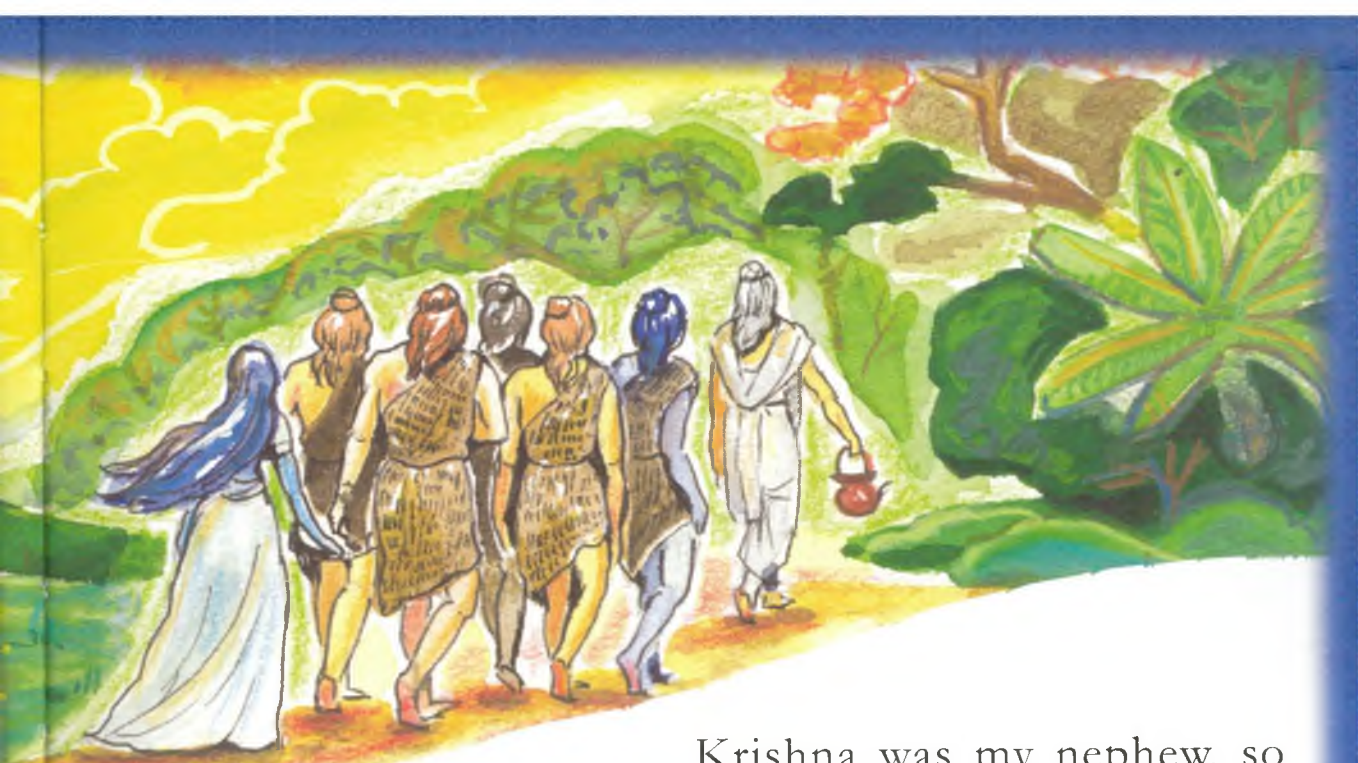
we never mentioned the house of fire. We maintained friendly dealings with the Kauravas, as if nothing had happened. Eventually they offered us a piece of land, and although it was the worst land in the kingdom, we accepted it gladly and moved onto it as quickly as we could.

Our land was



known as Indraprasta. Krishna often visited us there, and by His mercy the land flourished. Many saintly kings and sages blessed us with their presence. Soon the land, which had been no more than a desert, became richly covered in natural opulence and majestic buildings.





Krishna was my nephew, so when He visited, He always greeted me by touching my feet. I allowed Him to do so because His desire was to treat me as His respected aunt, but inwardly I felt embarrassed and I worshiped Him with all my heart paying respects to Him a million times over.

Indraprasta became so rich that it was the envy of even the demigods, and when the Kauravas saw it, they immediately began their schemes to take it away from us. They tricked my eldest son, Yudhistir, into playing dice with them.

During the game, they cheated him and took everything we owned.





They then banished us from the kingdom for thirteen years.

I was considered too old to go to the forest, so during their exile I lived with Vidura. Given the choice, I would have gone with my sons and their wife to the forest, but I didn't want to burden them, so I agreed to stay back.

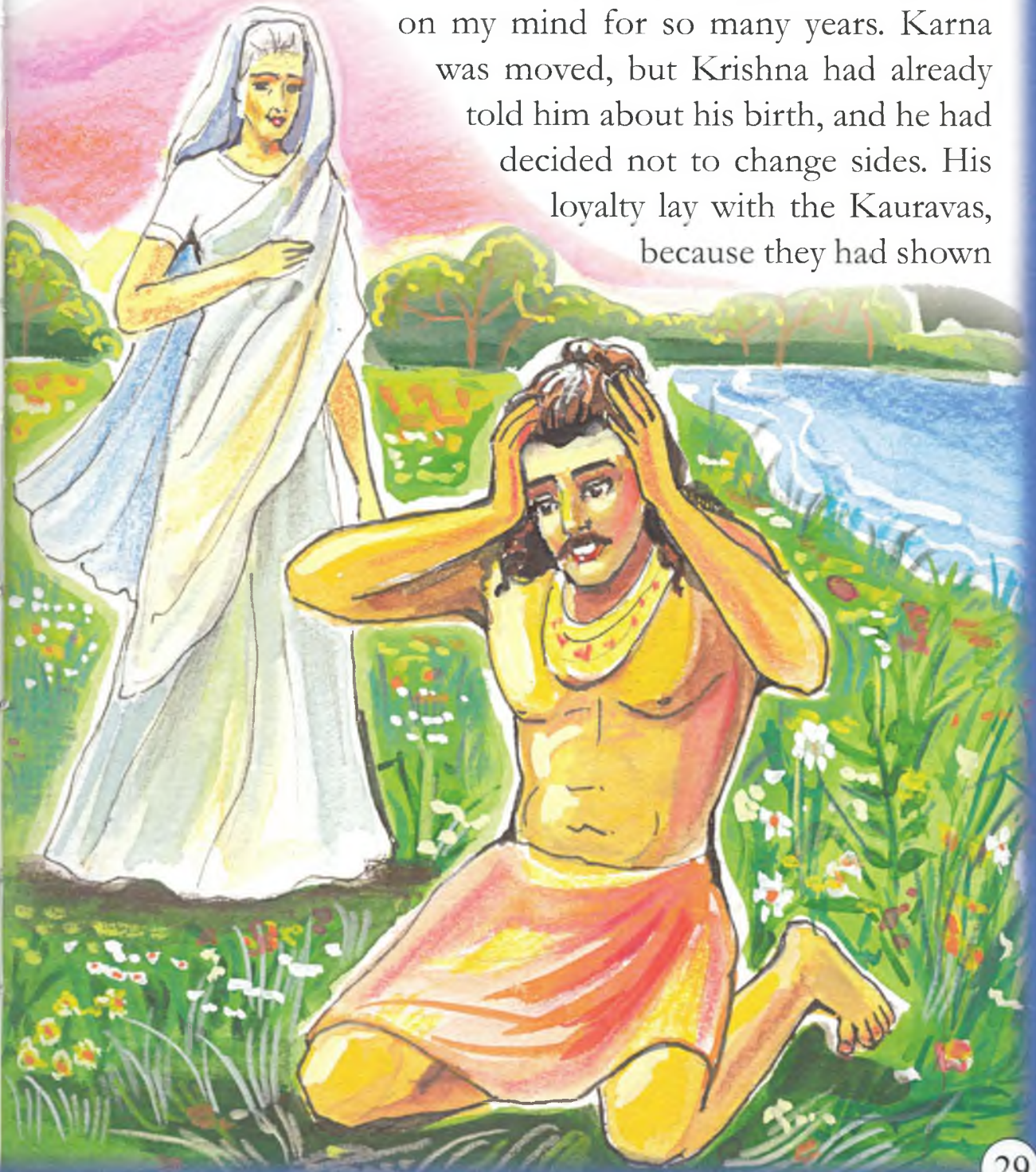
When the period of exile was over, my sons were ready to return to their kingdom. The Kauravas, however, refused to give it back to them. I sent a message to my boys telling them to fight. They were warriors and they had been born to bring

justice to the world. I sent the message with Krishna, and I asked Him to remind Arjuna of his duty. I knew that no one had to remind Bhima to fight.

War was inevitable, but Krishna came to Hastinapur in a final attempt to reason with the Kauravas and stop the war. At that time, I told Him the truth about Karna's birth. I then went to find Karna and tell him. I hoped that when he knew I was his mother, he would change sides and join his brothers.

I found Karna standing beside

the river, making prayers to the Sungod. I greeted him and told him the secret that had weighed so heavily on my mind for so many years. Karna was moved, but Krishna had already told him about his birth, and he had decided not to change sides. His loyalty lay with the Kauravas, because they had shown



him kindness, not with a mother who had abandoned him at birth. Neither my tears nor my pleas could make him change his mind, but he made me a promise before he left.

“I will not kill any of the Pandavas except Arjuna,” he said. “You are famous as the mother of five sons. At the end of the battle you will still have five sons. Either Arjuna or I will die.”

He then asked me to make a promise in exchange. He wanted me to agree not to tell anyone he was my son. Karna realized that if Yudhistir knew he was his brother, he would refuse to fight against him.

I made this promise, knowing that either Arjuna would kill Karna, or Karna would kill Arjuna, and I wouldn't be very popular with the one who survived. I had already ruined Karna's life, and I knew that Arjuna might not forgive me for allowing him to kill his own brother.

Life had always been difficult, but I had always done my duty and kept my promises. I gave Karna my word. Then I sank to my knees in grief as he walked away.

I was grateful that Karna kept his promise in the battle and killed none of his brothers, although he could easily have done so. Eventually when he fought against Arjuna, he was defeated and killed.

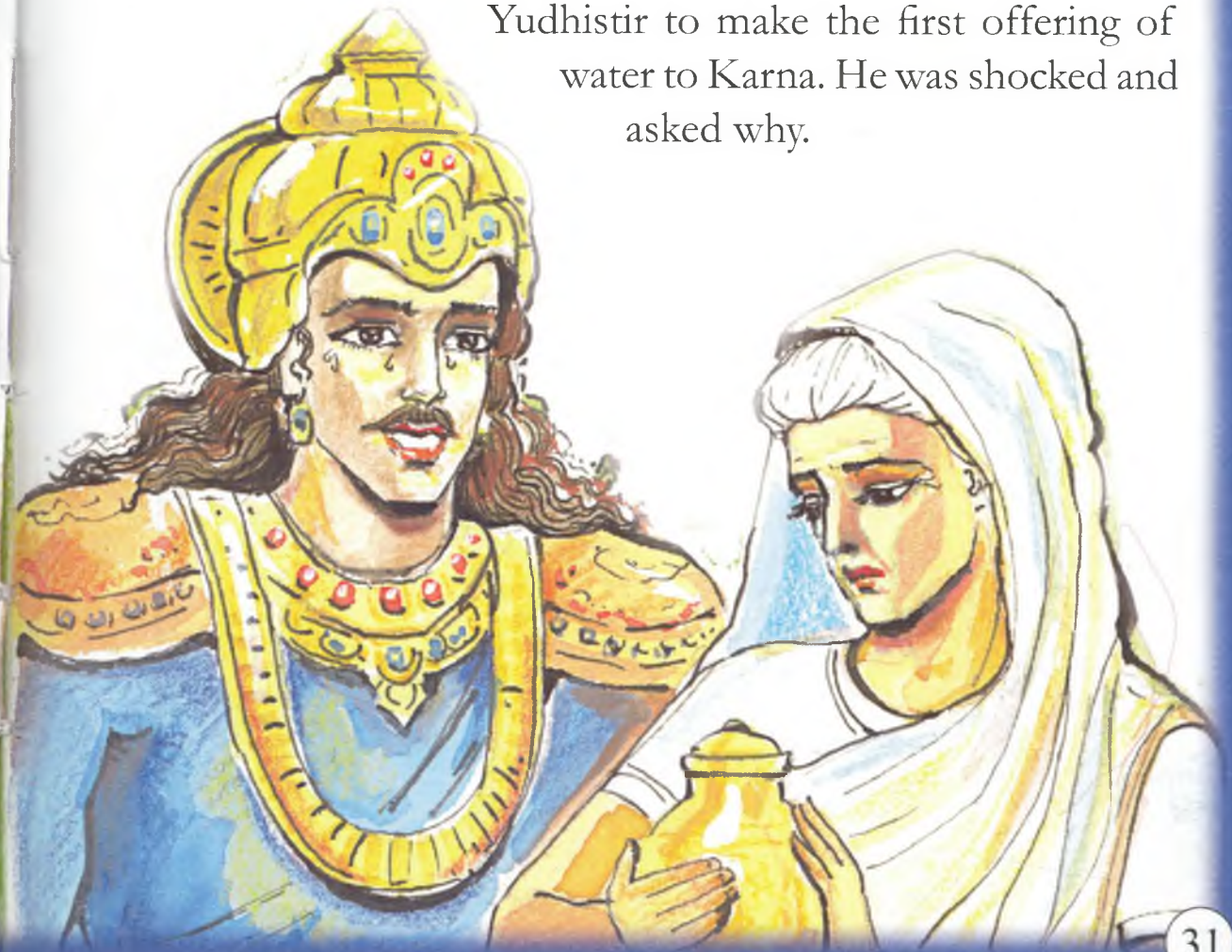
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My grandson Abhimanyu was only sixteen, but he was killed too. He fought brilliantly, but was overpowered by seven of the most powerful warriors of all time. When I went to the battlefield I found Abhimanyu's young widow leaning over his body. She was crying and clutching her chest in pain. I tried to

console her and to hide my own feelings. I can't explain how much we endured as wives and mothers of those great warriors.

The most horific and painful thing for me, was the barbaric and unnecessary killing of my five grandchildren, the sons of the Pandavas. They were murdered during their sleep. On hearing of their deaths, my heart was ready to explode with grief. At that time only Krishna was able to comfort me, and only because of His presence was I able to carry on living.

The battle lasted eighteen days, and at the end the funeral rites were performed on the bank of the River Yamuna. I told Yudhistir to make the first offering of water to Karna. He was shocked and asked why.







“Karna is your older brother,” I said. “He’s my oldest son.”

“But mother, you have never told a lie,” he said. “How could you keep this secret from us? If we had known, the war would not have taken place.” Yudhistir looked grave and thoughtful. “I curse all women,” he said. “Hereafter let no woman be able to keep a secret.”

At the end of the war, Yudhistir was crowned king and I was the queen mother. We didn’t enjoy taking those positions, but we did our duty and cared for the people in the kingdom to the best of our ability. Krishna stayed with us for some time and helped us to forget our sorrows.

When Krishna mounted His chariot to leave Hastinapur, I went before Him and made prayers in an attempt to glorify



Him. Out of His great compassion, He accepted my prayers and smiled at me, a smile that I always carry within my heart.

During the war, all of King Dhritarashtra's sons were killed. He, and his wife Gandhari, felt great bitterness toward the Pandavas. Although the Kauravas had caused the





war, Gandhari was so distressed that she wanted to use her immense power to curse my sons. Fortunately she was persuaded not to curse anyone, and we began to live together trying to forget the past. I did everything I could to make Gandhari comfortable.

I served her and her husband and treated them with love, hoping to help them forget their sorrow. My efforts seemed to give them some relief.

At the end of his life, when Dhritarastra left home to go and die in the forest, Gandhari followed him. Arjuna had brought news of Krishna's leaving this world. After Krishna's departure, I had no reason to live any longer and I went with Gandhari to a forest in the Himalayas. There, we made our final preparations for our next lives. Life in the forest was simple and very severe. We didn't look for comforts of any kind, and did nothing that





would  
take our  
minds away  
from Krishna.

For example, we didn't waste time preparing food. We ate only once every thirty days. We'd had terrible difficulties during our lives, but finally Krishna's plan had unfolded and the drama was over. We were free to absorb our minds fully in thoughts of Krishna.

In this way, at the end of our lives, in complete Krishna consciousness, we prepared to leave this world by entering fire.