



Bhisma had been relieved of the burdens of royal duties and courtly intrigue as the two sons of King Santanu had proven themselves worthy of the Kuru dynasty, and the eldest, Chitrangada, was now upon the throne, and with the Kuru bloodline seemingly secure, the future of Hastinapur and the wealth of its citizens began to flourish.

Fate, however, watches from a distance, she knows past, present and future and like the Moon controlling the seas her subtle influence directs our lives in ways we cannot see. A heavenly gandharva offended that another king should bare the same name challenged the Kuru king to a duel and although the son of Santanu fought bravely he was overcome by the gandharva king.

The Kuru lineage was now reduced to one and amidst much lamentation, Vitchitravirya, ascended the throne left by his brothers death and Bhisma and Satyawati, who were aware of the fragile nature of the Kuru bloodline, set about acquiring suitable wives for their newly crowned King.



'Kasi' means 'the city of lights' from the root 'Ka' whose meaning is 'light' and it was here there resided a beautiful princess called 'Amba' the eldest of three daughters which included 'Ambika' and 'Ambalika' and today was their svayamvara, as Kings from around the globe would compete for their hand.

Svayamvara means personal (svayam) choice (vara) it was the defining moment in the life of a princess where she would choose her prince and the heart of Amba had already been won by the handsome and brave Salva who only yesterday had joined her in walking through the pleasure gardens as they happily anticipated a golden future.

Svayamvaras are sometimes rigged by a princess in favour of her choice just as the prince of her choice may be an expert archer hence an archery competition would win her hand but today no such competition would ensue, all she had to do was place the garland around his neck,

what could possibly go wrong.



Bhisma is a name whose meaning is one who is 'frightening' and within Hastinarpur he paced the courtyard like an angry lion and when Satyawati inquired into the cause of his distress he spat out 'Kasi'. Over centuries it had been the tradition of the Kings of Kasi to offer their daughters to the Kuru monarchs and today upon their svayamvara they had not been invited.

Satyavati sighed, it was true, ever since her husband, King Santanu, had left this world, the fortune of the Kurus began to wane and the awe and respect once synonymous with the Kuru dynasty was no longer so, more than anything Hastinarpur needed a strong and stable King.

Satyavati was a goddess of fortune whose name means the abode (vat) of truth (satya) and while Bhisma stood deep in thought she serenely crossed the courtyard and from the arti tray she touched a flower to his head and blessed him to go and bring back the three daughters of Kasi.



'Sabha' is a word whose primordial meaning is that which shines (bha) together (sa) as in an 'assembly' a 'court' a 'palace' and today the Sabha of the King of Kasi shone like the Sabha of Indra, the King of heaven, as embedded within each of its walls, diamonds, emeralds, rubies and pure crystal quartz shone like a star filled night illuminating the assembly and cooling the hall like the silvery rays of the Moon.

Upon either side of the Sabha the walls were hung with life sized portraits of great warriors and Kings and gods with huge swords and maces as they rode chariots in which some were pulled by horses and others by lions and others fought upon the backs of elephants and throughout this beautiful Sabha there were huge statues of Visnu and Siva and Brahma and the god of war known as Skanda and many other gods such as the King of heaven, Indra.

White marble of the finest quality created the most elegant floor and upon either side jewel encrusted thrones were occupied by powerful warriors who had come to win the hand of the

Written by James Cooper

Friday, 03 April 2015 17:16 - Last Updated Thursday, 09 March 2023 08:30

daughters of Kasi who stood upon a raised platform on either side of the King, their beauty enhanced by crimson sarees which highlighted their golden skin and dark black hair, while golden bangles adorned their arms and golden earrings hung like grapes upon a vine and upon such an opulent stage they were ready to choose their prince.



As the monsoon suddenly appears accompanied by brilliant flashes of lightning, the great warrior of the Kuru dynasty, the son of Ganga and he whom the gods named Bhishma entered the arena, which suddenly became very quiet, as everyone, including the Queens to be, stood staring at the mighty presence of Bhishma.

The tongue is the most difficult to control and amongst warriors impossible, the first to speak was Salva who sneered 'what do we have here ? Bhishma of the terrible vow, surely these daughters have received the highest compliment, even the great son of Ganga could not resist their heavenly charms' laughter filled the great Sabha as one King after another ridiculed the presence of Bhishma.

'Silence' roared the great Bhishma whose voice cut through the ether as the Sudarsana Cakra severs the heads of the enemies of Visnu. The beautiful and diminutive Amba dropped her garland and as autumn turns to winter, the smile so prominent upon the face of the King of Kasi was gone and all that remained was his teeth.



As all devouring death travels swiftly upon the wings of time, Bhishma moved quickly across the hall and as he led the daughters of Kasi off the stage he turned to address the King "as the son of Ganga representing King Vichitravirya, i have come to claim that which is rightfully ours, for centuries the daughters of Kasi have been offered to the Kings of the Kuru dynasty and today will be no different, if any King disagrees prepare to meet my arrows".

As though bound by some hypnotic trance the powerful warriors who had assembled from all over the globe simply stared in amazement as chivalry personified walked off with the prize and the only challenge came from Salva, who only moments before was preparing to be garlanded by his wife to be.

Youth and bravery are capable of many an irrational deed and so Salva prepared to meet the arrows of Bhishma who had been forged within the crucible of the gods, whose lineage was the great King Santanu from the womb of Ganga whose strength can only be contained by Sivas locks and although Bhishma defeated him he was allowed to return home in disgrace.



There was however, a bigger problem, Ambika and Ambalika were more than happy, after all they were now the Queens of the worlds most powerful dynasty, but it was Amba, she informed Bhishma that she had already given her heart to the vanquished Salva.

Bhishma was disturbed 'but why did you not tell me' he replied to Amba as she stood there trembling like a leaf in the wind 'you were so impulsive' she said 'before i could protest i was being driven away in your chariot' this was something Bhishma had not expected and he began to pace the courtyard.

Satyavati scrutinised the dishevelled Amba and as she sat there in deep thought she finally spoke 'let Amba return to the husband of her choice, as a princess has the right to choose, give her an escort and return her to Salva' words which were a balm to the young heart of Amba who saw herself once again within the secure and loving arms of Salva.



The unseen hand of fate was slowly reaching towards Amba, our lives are mere chapters within a very large book and a curtain separates each of these chapters, yet each chapter carries forward the impressions and the effects which we recognise as 'fate' and for Amba, hers, would be painful and cruel.

Salva had changed, he looked upon Amba with different eyes, as though she was nothing but a painful memory "do you really expect me to accept more charity from Bhishma" he sneered "i am nothing more than a remnant of his mercy though i would have preferred to have perished upon the battlefield, it is you he won at the svayamvara and it is you who spent the night at his palace, so please return to him, i will accept no more charity from Bhishma".

Amba, through her tear stained eyes, stared at the back of a man who only a few moments ago she loved with every breath of her life, she stood there bewildered, confused, heartbroken and utterly destroyed, how can a world change so much in just one day, desperately she made her way back to Bhishma.



Amba, having narrated the unfortunate events, stood there, head bowed, while Satyawati listened, as pensive as ever, and Bhishma, arms folded across his chest, paced the courtyard. "I am afraid" said Bhishma 'there is nothing more we can do for you, we allowed you to return, as per your request, everything else is out of our hands".

"But you took me" sobbed Amba "you forcefully took me from my svayamvara, you must at least allow me to be Vichitravirya's wife" Bhishma shook his head "impossible" he replied "your heart is with Salva and you spent the night at his palace, you are no longer a suitable bride".

Amba was struck with horror, desperately she sought out Satyawati who quickly turned towards Bhishma who stood there squeezing his arms, he hated himself, but he knew what had to be said "Amba has been the victim of cruel fate, there is nothing more i can do, i suggest she returns to her father in Kasi".



Amba had become nothing more than a hollow shell, the tears no longer flowed and her fragile body no longer trembled, she expressed one thing and one thing only 'hate'. She quickly turned towards Satyawati who would not meet her gaze, and so she fixed her eyes upon Bhishma, the man who had ruined her life.

"Bhishma" she spat out "you are so proud of your vows and everything and everyone has to suffer because of them. Now please hear my vow, I, Amba, the daughter of the King of Kasi vows, that just as you are the death of my life, i vow never to rest until i have destroyed yours".

There were cries from Satyawati who pleaded with Amba not to curse, but her entreaties fell upon deaf ears and while Bhishma stood there with his head bowed and his arms folded, Amba quickly departed, taking herself as far away from the palace as possible.



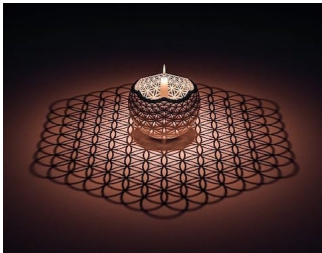
Many years Amba resided within the forest as she performed austerities and penances by which she could empower herself to cause the death of Bhishma and one day she received a benediction from the great Kartikeya who presented her with a garland of blue lotuses, which, when worn by a powerful warrior, would enable them to kill Bhishma.

Amba approached many of the powerful warriors, but every one of them refused to place the garland of blue lotuses around their neck, either out of fear of the great and powerful Bhishma, or, as in most cases, it was simply out of respect for the great man.

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Finally she approached the great King Drupada, who not only refused, but expressed his disgust, holding Bhishma as the embodiment of dharma, and as the dejected Amba departed the Kingdom of Drupada, she angrily threw the garland of blue lotuses, and as the wind caught hold, they came to rest upon the top of the gates.



There were many pleas which were made on behalf of Amba and even the guru of Bhishma, the great Parasurama, tried to intervene, but Amba always knew it would come to this as she found herself all alone within a dark forest where she had spent the whole day collecting wood for the pyre.

She knew she could not fulfil her desire within this life, yet through the strength of many years of austerities and penances she was told by a great yogi that in the next life she would be able to kill Bhishma and so now the time had come, the pyre was ablaze.

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She immediately thought of her family, her two sisters, Ambika and Ambalika, her heart bled and tears ran down her cheeks, but then she remembered Bhishma and her sentimental yearnings disappeared and as she fixed her mind upon the flickering hypnotic flames she uttered "to the death of Bhishma" and fell into the fire.



Many years later within the court of King Drupada, his nine year old daughter 'Sikhandi' was playing ball, and in the distance she saw the golden gates shining at the entrance, there was something on top, though she could not quite make out what it was, but as she began to climb the gate she could see it was a garland made of blue lotuses.

As she placed the garland of blue lotuses around her neck she ran to her father, Drupada, who upon seeing his daughter wearing the garland was horror struck, he understood that Amba had returned as his daughter to fulfil her vow and in fear he vanquished her to the forest.

Within the forest Sikhandi could still remember her past life as Amba and due to the boons from the austerities of her previous life her body gradually changed to that of a male and when Sikhandi left the forest it was as a warrior with the memory of a tear stained princess whose only desire was the death of Bhishma.