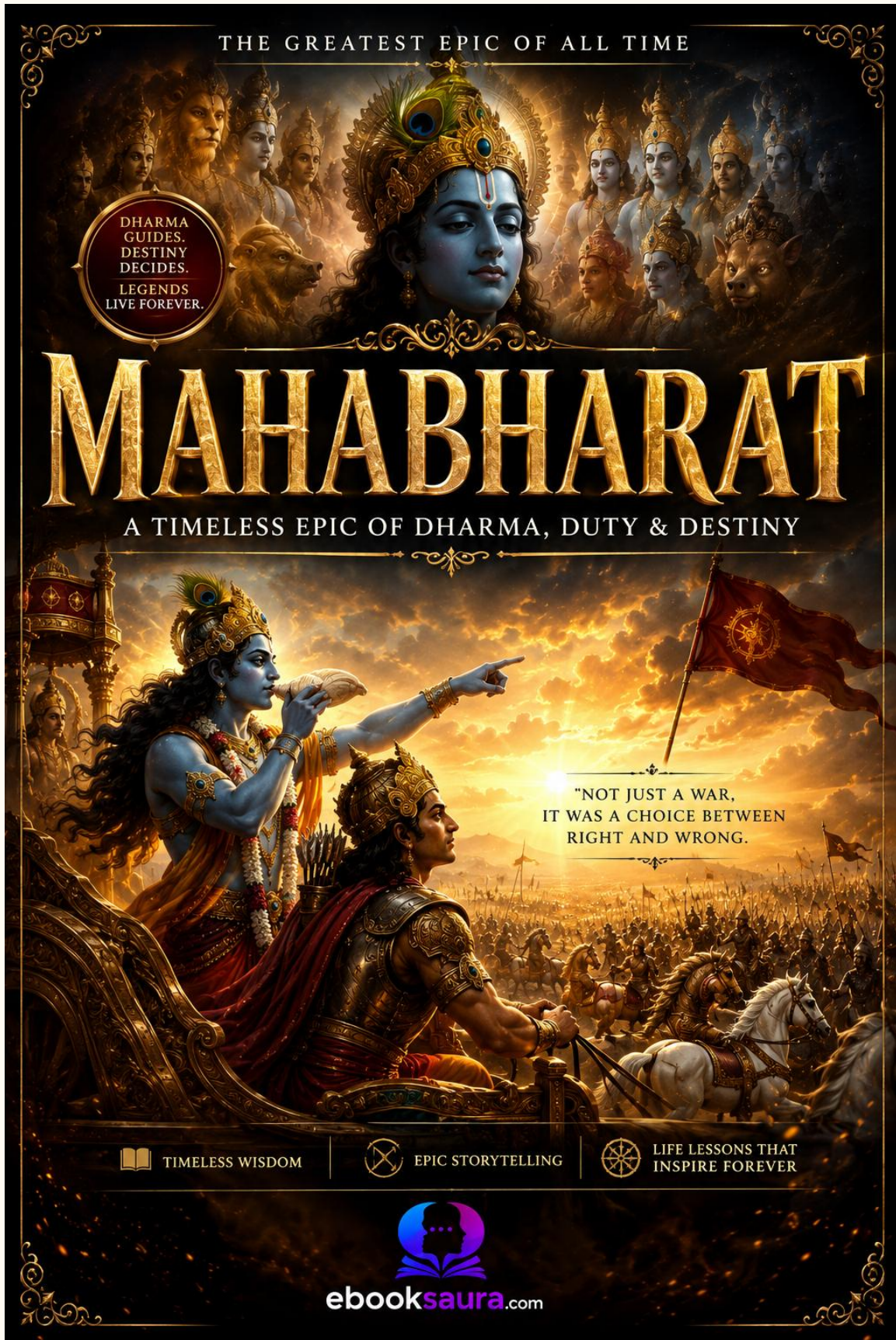




THE MAHABHARATA

An Epic Retold

by Bandi Suresh

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CHAPTER 1

King Shantanu Maharaj Meets the Goddess Ganga Devi by the River

The kingdom of **Hastinapura** sat on the banks of the river Ganga, its towers catching the morning light long before the sun reached the surrounding plains. It was ruled by **Shantanu Maharaj** — a good king, a fair one, the kind whose name farmers said with a nod rather than a bow when he passed through their fields. He had reigned for twenty years by the time this story truly begins, and in all that time he had never once lost his composure before an enemy, a council, or a crisis. His ministers considered him the most even-tempered man they had ever served.

Then, on an ordinary spring morning, with nothing in the sky or the season to suggest anything unusual, he lost that composure completely — to a woman he had never met.

He had gone down to the riverbank alone that day, without his usual retinue of guards and attendants, simply to walk and think, as kings sometimes need to do away from the weight of their courts. She was there already, walking barefoot along the water's edge, and something about the way the light moved around her made Shantanu Maharaj forget, for a full minute, that he was a king at all, that he had a kingdom to return to, that there was anywhere in the world he needed to be other than exactly where he stood.

She wore no crown, no jewels. She did not need them. Her skin held the shimmer of moonlight caught on moving water, and her eyes, when she finally turned and looked at him, held something ancient and amused, as though she had been expecting him for longer than he had been alive. For the first time in two decades of ruling a kingdom, Shantanu Maharaj did not know what to say.

Shantanu Maharaj: Who are you, that even this river seems to bow at your feet? I have walked this bank a thousand times and never once seen anyone like you upon it.

Ganga Devi: Careful, Maharaj. That is the kind of question men ask when they already know, somewhere beneath their curiosity, that they will regret the answer.

Shantanu Maharaj: Then I will risk the regret. Tell me your name, at least.

Ganga Devi: I am Ganga. And you are a king standing rather far from his palace, for a man with a kingdom to run.

Shantanu Maharaj: A kingdom can run itself for an hour. Marry me.

She studied him for a long moment — not with surprise, which he had half expected, but with the calm patience of someone who had already lived this exact conversation before, in some form, long before he was even born. It was a look that unsettled him slightly, though he could not have said why.

Ganga Devi: You propose marriage to a stranger you met minutes ago, beside a river, without knowing anything of her beyond the way the light happens to fall on her. Are all the kings of Hastinapura so impulsive, Maharaj, or is this a quality unique to you?

Shantanu Maharaj: I have been called many things by my council — steady, cautious, slow to act even when speed was called for. This is, I confess, entirely unlike me. And yet I find I do not wish to be otherwise, not today.

Ganga Devi smiled at that, and something in the smile carried both warmth and a trace of sorrow he could not yet understand.

Ganga Devi: I will marry you, Shantanu — but only if you agree to one **condition**, and agree to it fully, with your whole understanding, before I say another word further.

Shantanu Maharaj: Name it, and I will agree, whatever it costs me.

Ganga Devi: You will **never question anything I do**. Not once, not ever, no matter what you see me do with your own eyes, no matter how it wounds you to stay silent. The moment you ask me why — even once, even gently — I will leave, and you will never see me again, nor will you ever learn the reasons behind whatever I have done.

A wiser man might have paused at those words, might have asked what kind of woman required such a promise before agreeing to a marriage at all. Shantanu Maharaj, still half-drunk on the sound of her voice and the strange certainty that he had been waiting his whole life without knowing it for this exact moment, did not pause at all.

Shantanu Maharaj: I agree. Whatever you ask of me, I agree.

And so the king of Hastinapura married a goddess of the river that very season, without knowing what, exactly, he had just promised to survive — and without knowing that the promise itself would become the first thread in a story that would eventually stretch across generations, wars, and the fate of an entire dynasty.

CHAPTER 2

The Strange Promise — Shantanu Maharaj Agrees to Never Ask Questions

For a while, the palace of Hastinapura was the happiest it had ever been. Shantanu Maharaj's ministers noticed it in small ways at first — the king humming while reading reports that would normally have furrowed his brow, the king smiling at nothing in particular during long council sessions, the king lingering at the window of his chambers in the evenings, watching the river as though it might, at any moment, offer up some secret he was still trying to understand.

Ganga Devi moved through the palace like she belonged to it entirely, charming the court with a grace that seemed effortless, and gave no one, not even her husband, any early reason to think the arrangement was anything but a rare and unexpected blessing. The older ministers, who remembered Shantanu Maharaj's solitary years before her arrival, spoke of the marriage in hushed, grateful tones, as though the kingdom itself had been rewarded for some virtue none of them could quite name.

Then, within the year, Ganga Devi was carrying their first child, and the whole court erupted into a celebration that lasted the better part of a week — feasts in every quarter of the city, prayers offered at every temple, the promise of an heir finally within reach after two decades of a king ruling without one.

But Shantanu Maharaj remembered his **vow** every single day, in the quiet hours before sleep and the quiet hours after waking. He had sworn never to question her, about anything, however small or strange, and he intended to keep that oath the way he kept every promise he had ever made as king — completely, and without exception, whatever the private cost to himself. He did not yet know how much that promise would cost him. No one in the palace did.

As the birth drew closer, small requests began arriving from the queen's chambers — instructions relayed through attendants, each one slightly stranger than the last, each one met by the king's immediate and unquestioning agreement.

Minister: My king, the queen has requested to be alone with the child the moment it is born. She has asked that no attendants follow her to the river, not even her most trusted maids.

Shantanu Maharaj: Then no one follows her. Whatever she asks — it is granted, without question, exactly as I promised her before we married.

Minister: Without question, my king? Even if the request seems... unusual? Even if it concerns the safety of—

Shantanu Maharaj: Especially if. I gave my word, and a king's word, once given to his own wife, is not a thing to be renegotiated because a minister finds it unusual.

The minister bowed and said nothing further, though something in his face — a flicker of unease he could not quite suppress — suggested he already sensed what kind of promise this truly was: the kind that looks small and reasonable when you make it, standing beside a river with your heart full of unexpected love, and enormous, unbearable, the moment it is finally tested.

CHAPTER 3

Ganga Devi Drowns Her Newborn Sons, One by One

The first son was born on a night thick with the smell of rain, the kind of storm that seemed to hold the whole palace in a held breath, thunder rolling somewhere far off across the plains. Ganga Devi held the infant for only a moment — long enough for Shantanu Maharaj, waiting outside the birthing chamber, to hear the child's first cry and feel his chest fill with a joy he had waited twenty years to know — before rising from her bed and walking, alone, toward the river, exactly as she had asked.

Shantanu Maharaj, remembering his oath, did not follow. He stood at the palace window instead, watching her small figure move through the darkness toward the water, telling himself that whatever ritual or private grace she intended to perform was hers alone to perform, and that his part in it was simply to trust.

He did not see what happened at the water's edge that night. He only learned of it the next morning, from a trembling attendant who had been too afraid to disobey the queen's order to stay away, and too afraid, afterward, to disobey the king's direct command that he explain, in full, exactly what he had witnessed from a hidden distance.

Attendant: My king... forgive me, I do not know how to say this gently. The queen carried the prince into the river. She held him beneath the water until... until he did not move again. Then she rose, and walked back to the palace as calmly as if nothing at all had happened, as if she had simply gone to bathe.

Shantanu Maharaj said nothing for a long moment. His hands, the attendant would later tell others in the servants' quarters, were shaking so badly that he had to press them flat against the cold stone wall to steady himself, his knuckles white with the effort of remaining upright. But he had made a promise. He had sworn it before the sky and the river itself, in the full flood of a love he had never expected to feel again. And so, when Ganga Devi returned to their chambers that evening, calm as ever, her expression giving away nothing of what she had done, Shantanu Maharaj swallowed the question rising in his throat like a stone and said nothing at all.

It happened again with the second son, born the following year in nearly identical circumstances — the same walk to the river, the same terrible stillness afterward, the same silence the king forced upon himself. And then the third. By the fourth, the whole palace knew, though no one dared speak of it above a whisper, servants exchanging glances in the corridors, ministers falling quiet whenever the queen's chambers were mentioned.

By the fifth son, Shantanu Maharaj had stopped sleeping the nights his wife was due to give birth, lying awake instead in the darkness of their chambers, listening for the sound of her returning

footsteps, waiting, each time, to discover whether he still had it in him to remain silent when every instinct in his body screamed at him to run to the river and stop her.

Six times, this happened. Six sons, each one carried to the river within moments of drawing breath, each one returned to the current beneath his mother's steady hands, and six times Shantanu Maharaj stood by at the palace window — grieving in a silence so complete it had begun to hollow something out of him that even his ministers could see, though none of them dared ask what troubled their king so deeply.

CHAPTER 4

Shantanu Maharaj Breaks His Promise and Saves the Eighth Son

When the seventh son was born, something in Shantanu Maharaj finally gave way — not suddenly, but the way a rope frays for a long time before it finally snaps, each of the six previous losses having worn away at his resolve until almost nothing of it remained.

He watched from the window as Ganga Devi lifted the newborn from the bed, her movements as calm and practiced as they had been six times before, and turned, as she always did, toward the river path. And this time, before he had even fully decided to move, his feet were already carrying him down the stairs, out through the palace gates, across the dark grass toward the water.

He caught up to her at the river's edge, breathless, his heart hammering against his ribs in a way it had not done since he was a much younger man, just as she was lowering the child toward the current with the same terrible gentleness she had shown every time before.

Shantanu Maharaj: No. Stop. Not this one, Ganga. I beg you — not this one.

Ganga Devi went very still, the infant held just above the water's surface, her expression unreadable in the darkness.

Ganga Devi: You gave me your word, Shantanu. Before the sky, before this same river. You promised me you would never question what I do, whatever it cost you to keep silent.

Shantanu Maharaj: I know what I promised. I have kept that promise six times already, and each time it has cost me something I do not know how to name, something I am not certain I will ever fully recover. But I cannot keep it a seventh time. I don't care anymore what it costs me — my crown, your love, whatever punishment the gods see fit to send down upon me for breaking my word. I will not stand here on this riverbank and watch you take another of my sons from this world before he has even opened his eyes to see it.

For the first time since the day they had met by the river, Ganga Devi did not look at him with the calm, unreadable patience of a goddess who already knew the ending of every story before it began. She looked at him, instead, like a woman who had just watched a promise break apart in her own hands — and beneath that grief, buried so deep he almost missed it, something that might almost have been relief, as though some part of her had been waiting, all along, for exactly this moment to arrive.

CHAPTER 5

Ganga Devi's Farewell and the Truth About the Cursed Souls

The river seemed to hold its breath around them. Ganga Devi looked down at the child still cradled in her arms, then back at her husband, and when she finally spoke, her voice had lost the calm, distant quality it had always carried, replaced by something raw and immediate that Shantanu Maharaj had never heard from her before.

Ganga Devi: You have broken your word, Shantanu. Which means the terms of our marriage have been broken with it, and I owe you now the truth I had hoped to spare you from ever needing to hear — the truth you should have trusted me enough not to demand.

Shantanu Maharaj: Then tell me. Tell me why you have taken six of our sons from this world, one after another, and let me believe, all this time, that I had married a monster wearing the face of the woman I loved.

Ganga Devi: Not a monster, Shantanu. A mercy — one you were never meant to witness, let alone question. Long ago, eight great souls, celestial beings known as the **Vasus**, were cursed for a small transgression against a sage to be born as mortals, to suffer the full weight and confusion of human life as punishment for their carelessness. I made a bargain with them, and with the heavens, that I would bear each of them myself, and free them the very instant they were born, sparing them the long, painful burden of a complete mortal existence. That is what you saw at this river, six times over. Not murder. **Release.**

Shantanu Maharaj: And this one? Why did you spare him, when you showed none of the others such mercy?

Ganga Devi: Because this one, Shantanu, was cursed differently from his brothers. He alone among the eight was fated to live a complete mortal life — long, difficult, and extraordinary beyond anything the others would have known. He will grow to be a man of tremendous strength and wisdom. He will never have sons of his own to carry his name forward. And he will carry, for as long as he lives, the weight of every choice this family makes after him, a burden I would have spared him if the heavens had allowed it. I will raise him myself, apart from this palace, until he is ready to return to you. Then, and only then, I will bring him back.

Shantanu Maharaj: And after that — after you have raised him and returned him to me — will I see you again? Will there be any part of this life left for us to share?

Ganga Devi: No, my king. You have asked your question, the one question I asked you never to ask. The river does not answer twice, and neither, I am afraid, can I.

She was gone before the last word had finished leaving her lips — child and all, vanished into the dark water as though she had never stood there at all — and Shantanu Maharaj remained alone at the water's edge for the rest of that night, staring at a current that had already, it seemed, forgotten every footprint he had ever left beside it, carrying with him now not just his grief, but a promise that a son he had not been permitted to raise would, someday, be returned to him.

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