

Act III, Scene 2

[It is past midnight. Half awake and half asleep, Kunti is collapsed on a divan in her chambers, as if in great despair. Atop a pedestal in the corner, an oil lamp illuminates the room. Karna enters noiselessly. He looks briefly at Kunti from a distance and then approaches.]

Karna: Mother!

Kunti: *(stirring)* Who is it?

Karna: I am Karna.

Kunti: Karna? Impossible! My ears must be hearing just the clamoring of my own mind. Who is it?

Karna: Mother, I am Karna. Don't you recognize me?

Kunti: *(getting up and approaching)* Would it ever be possible that I don't recognize Karna? The very ashes of my mortal body would tremble in his presence! Yes—it must be him. The figure of Karna stands before my eyes. But this can't be true. I must be dreaming...

Karna: This isn't a dream. You and I, we were in a dream before—a cruel, merciless dream—but now we have awakened from it... Awakened so thoroughly that we shall never sleep in peace again.

Kunti: Can this be true? You've really come to see me? Is my beloved Karna really calling me 'mother'? O Lord above, I thought you had wounded me enough with sorrow. Don't wound me further with these unbearable blows of joy! But I still think this is all a trick of my mind. In the dead of night, you came to me—to the Pandav encampment?

Karna: It is our misfortune, mother, that our lives have been spliced into warring factions! But if Karna were so weak as to surrender to mere misfortunes, then in all these years, he would have taken his own life a thousand times over. And so I have come here without regard for the consequences—to see you, my mother, and be blessed!

Kunti: But why? Why have you put your reputation, your life, on the line, and ventured into the enemy camp?

Karna: A mother's heart is what brought you to me earlier tonight. Now a son's heart is what brings me to you.

Kunti: Could it be...? Oh, my dear child—but no, I am not worthy of this good fortune! I have wronged you ever since your birth, and today as you are on the threshold of the greatest success of your life, I am the hag knocking inauspiciously at your door. No mother could have destroyed her own son's life more than I have. You were right to call me cruel and revolting. I have forfeited the right to be in your presence!

Karna: No one grants a mother the right to be with her son, and no one can take it from her! In a burst of rage I hurt you deeply with my words, but that angry fire has been burning an equally painful hole in my heart. Forgive me, mother, I apologize—I said what I shouldn't have, I stabbed your already wounded heart with sharp curses!

Kunti: Child, don't say that! I'm afraid my heart will burst! I am prepared to bear your anger, but your love... no, I can't bear that! Curse me, Karna, plentifully. I'm not worthy of your love. After everything I have done, I don't deserve such happiness!

Karna: *(laying his head on her feet in reverence)* These two feet are more than anything I deserve. I ask your forgiveness...

Kunti: (*drawing him near*) My child—my dearest child, Karna! Ask my forgiveness? The world praises you today as a great, noble man, and yet you are so gracious to me... I'm overwhelmed! My ill-fortuned life has never had such contentment, such joy. Never mind the politics of this land of Kuru; today I have regained the wealth that I had lost!—But—but are you going back now?

Karna: Yes. I came, and I must return. I didn't come to defect to the Pandavs; I came to see my mother. I came to receive her blessing before I return to the battlefield!

Kunti: Kunti, who has spent her life in the dark, hiding her misfortune—how can she bless you? And what blessing can she give? Your victory would mean the defeat of my dear sons, the Pandavs, and their victory would mean the defeat of you, my beloved! May your heroism and generosity make you immortal—that is my blessing to you!

Karna: You fulfilled your duty as a mother, and now I will fulfill my duty as a son. I am ready to make you the promise that you never asked for. Mother, I swear upon your blessed feet that I will not kill all your sons—I will not kill all my brothers! He, whose utmost righteousness and honesty have made him the brilliant crown jewel of the Kuru dynasty, Yudhishtir—I will not take his life, even if my own is threatened!

Kunti: O, Karna—

Karna: The triumphant twins who dazzle upon the battlefield, my younger brothers—who had the fortune of growing up under your caring wing, even as your stepsons—your beloved Nakul and Sahadev—I will not wield any weapons against them!

Kunti: O, Karna, how can I ever repay my boundless debt to you?

Karna: He, whose horrible might stupefies and bewilders his enemies, your dear Bheem, my burly brother—I will not kill him even if he is within arm's reach!

Kunti: Giving birth to a son like you is enough to cleanse all the sins of my life!—But you won't attack my dear Arjun either, will you? Well? Why are you silent?

Karna: ... I am not capable of making such a promise about Arjun. Five of Kunti's sons will remain alive—either with Arjun or with Karna!

Kunti: But this duel is terrible, terrible! Two sons of mine—two fruits of the same womb—why must I agree to let Death claim one of them?

Karna: Every braveheart who steps into a war stands at the border of life and death. But mother, it is now more likely that Arjun will take my life, than I his.

Kunti: Yet I want you, too, Karna! If you believe that I am willing to sacrifice your life for the others', then that is untrue, absolutely untrue. I want you both! Is it still impossible?

Karna: It is entirely impossible! I will never betray Duryodhan, great emperor of the armies that I command. Perhaps I have already betrayed him in spirit. But as long as my soul is in my body, the arms I wield will be only at his service. Duryodhan was prepared to go to war, because he knew Karna was on his side. If I abandon his side, his vast love for his friend would not let him say a single word to stop me! He would wish me success and bid me farewell, and continue to fight in a blind frenzy of desperation! But to betray the trust of such a large-hearted, respected friend—to hurl him into the abyss of death—to join the Pandavs to defend my kin—to partake of a majestic, glorious victory—I can't bear the thought of it. There is only one way out. Duryodhan's friend will fight for Duryodhan, and Kunti's eldest son will spare the lives of his younger brothers. But for Arjun, give me free rein! This is the only way left to betray neither friend nor kin!

Kunti: My heart will tear itself apart if I say yes! But there is nothing else I can say! Despite the injustices I have made you suffer, you came to me of your own will to grant me this gift—this is much, much more than I could ask for. I’ve strewn your path with thorns ever since your birth; I do not wish to cause you any more pain. Go, my child, the dawn will come soon. I can imagine the hardship that I have put you through but—but—don’t be angry with me. Have pity on my tragic fate—that’s all I ask of you, as your mother. Go, now... may God grant you a long life! May he make your fame immortal!

Karna: Before I go, let me bow to your feet once more, mother. We may meet again, or we may not.

[From outside, Bheem calls out: “Mother! Mother, are you alright? Who’s there with you?”]