



# DEEP TRIVEDI

The Author of the Bestseller 'I am The Mind'

# I am Krishna

BIOGRAPHY OF KRISHNA

3

Dwarka — From Dreams to Reality

# CONTENTS

## No.

1. [About Deep Trivedi](#)
  2. [The Saga Behind the Research on Krishna](#)
  3. [Preface](#)
  5. [Story so far](#)
- 
- Chapter-1 : [The Secret Behind the Theft of the Syamantaka Gem](#)
  - Chapter-2 : [The Inception of Dwarka](#)
  - Chapter-3 : [Dwarka-bound, Against All Odds](#)
  - Chapter-4 : [Ascending the Throne of Dwarka](#)
  - Chapter-5 : [The Abduction of Rukmini](#)
  - Chapter-6 : [The Early Days in Dwarka](#)
  - Chapter-7 : [The Coronation of the Pandavas](#)
  - Chapter-8 : [My Encounter with the Breathtakingly Beautiful Draupadi](#)
  - Chapter-9 : [My Visit to the Kingdom of the Nagas](#)
  - Chapter-10 : [Satrajit's Evil Ploy](#)
  - Chapter-11 : [A Dawn of New Beginnings](#)



## **About Deep Trivedi**

Deep Trivedi is a renowned author, speaker and pioneer in spiritual psychodynamics. He writes and conducts lectures as well as workshops with an all-pervasive perspective, guiding individuals towards the achievement of their full potential. To date, he has led thousands of people onto the path of success and happiness through his works.

In his voluminous works, Deep Trivedi has extensively explained Nature, its laws, its behaviour, its psychology and the effect it has on human life. No aspect of life and human psychology has been left untouched by him. He states that lack of psychological knowledge and understanding is the sole reason for all the sorrows and failures that pervade human life.

He has authored bestsellers such as 'I am The Mind', 'I am Krishna' and many more. His bestseller 'I am The Mind' has been published in several national and international languages. He has been awarded the Times Power Men Award 2018 for his immense contribution to society.

His command over the biggest psychologies of life can be gauged by the fact that he holds the record for 'Maximum Lectures on Human Life', 'Maximum Lectures on Psychological Aspects of Tao Te Ching', 'Maximum Lectures on Ashtavakra Gita' and 'Maximum Lectures on Bhagavad Gita', spanning 168 hours, 28 minutes and 50 seconds in 58 days in different National and International record books. He also holds the record for 'Maximum Number of Quotations on Human Life' (about 12038) on subjects such as Soul, Human Life, Psychology, Laws of Nature, Destiny and many more. He has also been awarded an Honorary Doctorate for his Psychological works on the Bhagavad Gita. His interactive workshops have brought about a revolutionary transformation in people's lives by addressing their day-to-day concerns. These lectures and workshops have been delivered in front of live audiences across India.

He is known for his special ability to touch upon the deepest aspects of life and explain them by using lucid language, leaving no scope for ambiguity. The distinct spiritual-psychological language and expression in his writings, lectures and workshops, begin to have an instant effect on the mind of the reader or listener, which makes Deep Trivedi a pioneer in this field.

## **The Saga Behind the Research on Krishna**

As the annals of history have innumerable references to Krishna's iconic personality, there can be no two opinions about the fact that he was a real and historical personality. I am making this statement specifically with reference to the trend among scholars to casually dismiss the life and personality of such legendary personages as being nothing more than a riveting story. This may indeed hold true in case of several other personalities, but Krishna is certainly not one among them. From a psychodynamic perspective, when the various threads of a story perfectly match the graph of an individual's personality, then such a person or his life cannot be considered to be a mere myth.

There are three factors which unambiguously prove the truth of Krishna's existence. Firstly, a fictional account has only one author. In other words, if a character is fictional, the entire life of the character is summed up in that one story narrated by the author. However, there is no single book or scripture which details the entire life of Krishna. The most discussed, popular and the oldest literary work that offers glimpses of Krishna's life is the great epic, the Mahabharata. However, this epic focusses mainly on Hastinapur, and thus, the narrative revolves around the Pandava brothers and their cousins, the Kauravas. The Mahabharata mentions Krishna only when he comes in contact with the Pandavas and Kauravas or Hastinapur. In the entire scripture, there is no reference to his birth or childhood nor is there any allusion to the last 36 years of his life. But it has to be admitted that the Mahabharata is the only tome which brings to light all the psychological aspects of Krishna's intriguing personality. I am saying this because the awe-inspiring Bhagavad Gita is an integral part of the Mahabharata, which is included as a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. And the truths that Krishna reveals to Arjuna in this discourse not only stem from his experiences in life but are also an intrinsic part of his personality.

Other than the Mahabharata, fragments of the life of Krishna are available in many other historical texts, and if arranged chronologically, we can piece together his entire life history. At this juncture, it is imperative to understand that out of the 100,000 *shlokas* (cantos) of the Mahabharata,

only 8,800 were composed earlier than 3000 BC. The rest, that is to say, almost 90 percent of the *shlokas* have been added to the Mahabharata between 4<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> BCE by different authors.

Fifteen major works, written over a 1000-year period after the Mahabharata war, have references to Krishna's life. The chief among these are the Harivamsa Purana and the Vishnu Purana, both of which have detailed descriptions of Krishna's life. And these are the only two books which can be considered the most important and reliable resources for those who choose to write or speak about the life of Krishna. Nevertheless, I am presenting to you a brief description of the 15 texts—including the Mahabharata—which have been used to piece together the life history of Krishna.

Name of the Text	Accepted Date of Composition
1. Mahabharata	Out of the total 100,000 verses, the main 8,800 <i>shlokas</i> , also referred to as Jai Khand, have been composed around 3000 BC. The rest were added approximately between 400 and 200 BC.
2. Shatapatha Brahmana	Composed around 900 BC, this Brahman text, which is a section of the Yajur Veda, describes Krishna as a valiant warrior of the Vrishnivanshis (descendants of Vrishni).
3. Aitareya Aaranyak	Composed around 900 BC, this text is a part of the Rig Veda. This work also describes Krishna as a heroic warrior of the clan of the Vrishnis.
4. Nirukta	Composed by Maharishi Yasyaka around 600 BC, this text describes the Syamantaka gem, which plays an important role in the life of Krishna.

5. Ashtadhyayi	A grammar treatise by Panini, this text was written in 600 BC and it contains meanings of terms used to describe Krishna and his life.
6. Garga Samhita	Composed in 400 BC, this text describes the birth and childhood of Krishna. However, in the 15th century, matter related to Brahmanism, avatars, rituals and worship was inserted into the book, corrupting its essence. Therefore, one needs to exercise caution while studying it.
7. Markandeya Purana	This text, written between 400-200 BC, also has many contextual references to Krishna's name.
8. Jataka Katha	Composed around 400 BC, this Buddhist text mentions Krishna in the Jataka Tale titled Ghat Pandit.
9. Arthashastra	This renowned political treatise, written by Kautilya in 400 BC, refers to Krishna as Vaasudeva, the son of Vasudeva.
10. Indika	The Greek scholar Megasthenes wrote this text between 400 and 300 BC, in which he describes a warrior, Heracles, of the Shurasena clan. It is actually a description of Krishna.
11. Harivamsa Purana	Composed in 200 BC by Ugrashrava, this text contains the description of almost all the heroic deeds of Krishna right from his birth.
12. Vishnu Purana	Composed by an unknown author in 200 BC, this is the oldest and the first text which describes the life of Krishna right from his birth to his death.

13. Mahabhashya	Composed in 200 BC by Patanjali, this text sings praises of Krishna.
14. Padma Purana	In the Patal Khand (section) of this book, written in 200 BC, Krishna's birth and his childhood antics have been described contextually, along with those of Rama.
15. Kurma Purana	This text written in 400-200 BC carries a description of Krishna and Balarama, as well as the Yadu dynasty.

Please note that in these books too, there are several contradictions in the facts related to Krishna's life. Thus, while profiling Krishna's life, I have included only those events and descriptions that are in agreement with Krishna's character and personality. Let me make it clear that I am a psychologist, author and speaker, well-versed in spiritual psychology. And the meaning of spiritual psychology is that there are no secrets in the world, that is, there is nothing which cannot be known or revealed.

Indeed, reading the Bhagavad Gita from this unique perspective, one can readily understand that these words must have been spoken by a person who is firmly rooted in the highest levels of consciousness. Any person, well-versed with spiritual psychology, will vouch for this. And when the person who delivers the Bhagavad Gita is so wise, his experiences are bound to be powerful too, because psychologically speaking, anything that one states inevitably comes from his own experience, and needless to say, he has gained this experience from his life. Hence, any statement of a person is essentially a reflection of his life, and his personality, around which his entire life has revolved.

So, I would like to mention here that while writing this story, based on extensive research on Krishna's life, I have given greater importance to his nature as described by him in the Bhagavad Gita. It is a person's own psychology which is of paramount importance in his life, and it is his individual psychology that determines what he would do in a particular

situation, or what he must have done. Therefore, what holds immense significance in Krishna's life is his thought process before taking a certain action or decision, and the reasons behind it. Honestly speaking, for a wise master of spiritual psychology, Krishna's entire life is clearly described in the Bhagavad Gita; all one has to do is match the threads of his life. And this is precisely the reason why, throughout this book, I have linked all the experiences and incidents of Krishna's life to his *shlokas* in the Bhagavad Gita; it is through these *shlokas* that he expounds upon his experiences to inspire Arjuna.

It has taken me five years to research and write this book and during this period, I have done nothing but live and breathe Krishna. Frankly speaking, during these five years, my consciousness was entirely immersed in Krishna and his Bhagavad Gita.

If I divide the descriptions of Krishna available in the various historical texts into two parts, the first part contains texts that were written during the BC era, in which Krishna has been described as a skilled warrior and a supreme human being. The second part comprises texts written in the post-BC era, which include works such as Sursagar by the poet Surdas and the renowned Bhagavad Purana. And it is only in these relatively new works that Krishna's life is depicted as being replete with miracles and the *Shringara Rasa*, or the flavour of romance.

However, I have always perceived Krishna as an immensely gifted, supreme human being. So, while researching my book, I have only referred to the ancient and more authoritative books. Of course, wherever I found a link missing, I have tried to bridge the gap by using psychodynamic extrapolations that I feel are congruent with Krishna's personality and story. Below is a list of the books from the post-BC era along with their descriptions:

Name of the Text	Time of Composition
1. Bhagavad Purana	Composed between 5-10 Century AD, the entire 10th volume and the beginning of the



	11th volume contain descriptions about Krishna's life.
2. Harivamsa Purana of the Jains	This work was composed in the 7-8 AD by the Jain saint Acharya Jinsen and it carries a description of Krishna's life.
3. Geet Govinda	Composed in the 13th century by the famous poet Jaydeva, this poetic work speaks of the transcendental love between Radha and Krishna and glorifies their activities.
4. Padavali	Based on the Bhagavat Purana and Jaydeva's Geet Govinda, Vidyapati from Bihar has described Radha and Krishna's acts of love in this book, written in the 13th and 14th century.
5. Sur Sagar	Surdas, a poet-saint who was the follower of the Pustimarg sect, composed this work in the 15th century which mainly focusses on the childhood activities of Krishna.
6. Guru Granth Sahib	Out of the many couplets compiled in this book by various Sikh Gurus between 1469 to 1708 AD, 2492 are about Krishna's various acts.
7. Prem Sagar	Lallu Lal composed this work in 1810 AD, based on the Bhagavad Purana and the Vishnu Purana. It has hyperbolic descriptions of the acts of Krishna.
8. Shree Prem Sudha Sagar	This is a Hindi translation of the 10th canto of the Bhagavad Purana published by Gita Press.
9. Sukh Sagar	In this work, Makhanlal Khatri has translated the stories of the Bhagavad Purana in simple

	Hindi language.
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Apart from these, this book also includes some incidents from a story on Krishna, titled *Meri Aatmakatha* (My Autobiography).

NOTE: For the convenience of readers, on every page that describes an incident in Krishna's life, I have also included a footnote which lists the books that it has been drawn from. It is hoped that this endeavour and captivating story will appeal to you and also inspire you. Most importantly, I hope that Krishna's elevated level of consciousness and his art of living prove to be instrumental in helping all of us take our life to greater heights. With this fervent desire, I offer this book to you.

## Preface

‘Krishna’ is a name synonymous with victory and flamboyance, yet he has always been an enigma. The diverse facets of his personality make it difficult, or rather impossible, for anyone to grasp his personality in its entirety. Yet, the love showered on Krishna and the manner in which he is revered is nothing short of phenomenal.

Such is the uniqueness of his personality that for some, he is a lover, while for others he is a savant; some believe him to be an ascetic while others perceive him as a *Karmaveer* or a man of heroic deeds. Interestingly, whichever aspect of his personality one chooses to recognise or believe in, one cannot help but be smitten by it; although it is not that everyone is equally enchanted by him, after all, he also had - and still has - his share of detractors. His personality has such a paradoxical effect on people that on one hand, some learned followers of the Hindu religion have hailed him as the only 'complete-avatar', and on the other, the authors of Jain scriptures, as per their own understanding, reasons and perceptions, have relegated him to hell! But Krishna's personality is not contingent on any of these views. Who thinks what, how does it matter to Krishna or his personality?

Even though Krishna's personality does not depend on others' perceptions about him, in the light of these contradictions, it is imperative to understand what exactly his personality was. It is also essential to know how he rose to become the King of Dwarka despite being born in a dungeon and having grown up in the shadow of death. Besides this, there are several other questions that invariably pique one's curiosity about Krishna. It would also be interesting to know what kind of love he and Radha shared. Why did he leave Radha? Why did she roam the streets of Brij for the rest of her life like a woman madly consumed by her love for Krishna, who never returned? At the same time, it is important to decipher the mystery of this awe-inspiring personality, who, on one hand, has been accused of triggering an epic war like the Mahabharata, and on the other, has earned the distinction of being the supremely wise one who imparted words of supreme wisdom, which we know as the Bhagavad Gita. Krishna is such a multi-dimensional personality, that there has never been a dearth of names he has been addressed with such as thief, manipulator, liar and trickster, and at the same time, a colossal number of people view him as Vasudeva,

Madhusudan, Kanha, a supreme being and a supremely wise man! The numerous other questions which invariably make people curious about Krishna are: How many times did he marry? How many children did he have? What exactly is Yadavasthali?

This book contains the answers to all these questions. I have penned this work only after a long and thorough study of all the available scriptures related to Krishna such as Harivamsa Puran, Vishnu Puran, Shiva Puran, Shrimadbhagvat Puran, Markandey Puran, Kurma Puran, Bhavishya Puran and Mahabharata, among other historical texts, and after grasping the practical and psychological aspects of all the dialogues and incidents mentioned therein. I have condensed the 108 years of Krishna's life and all its significant events into this book, endeavouring to keep this account close to the true psychology of Krishna, and needless to say, I have given it the form of a story to make it an interesting read. I have tried to make the events in Krishna's life come alive for the readers, by elaborating upon the incidents as much as possible, keeping in mind the requirements of modern literature.

I am a psychologist and a strong adherent of spiritual psychodynamics and if viewed from a psychological perspective, whether it is an individual or his life, or any kind of incident occurring in his life, eventually, everything is a part of a psychological sequence. And Krishna's personality, in spite of its great aspects and complexities, is no exception to this. Even though psychologically, he has reached the greatest of heights, his state of mind is certainly not beyond comprehension. And I believe that the causes behind the event are far more significant than the event itself. Rather than knowing what a person has done, it is more important to know the reasons why he has done it. Therefore, in this book, I have given equal importance to Krishna's life as well as his state of mind. I am sure, this book will not only shed light on Krishna's life, but will also acquaint you with Krishna's personality and his evolution.

As far as I am concerned, it is the Bhagavad Gita which has transformed my life and taken it to new heights; in fact, Krishna and the Bhagavad Gita are firmly rooted in my heart in their true essence. But in a departure from common belief, I am of the firm opinion that hailing someone as God creates a distance between him and us. Pronouncing someone as God

incarnate is a grave insult to the effort that he has put in to nurture and enhance his potential, his wisdom, his capabilities and his spirit of enquiry. Because the truth is, all those who have accomplished great feats in this world have done it on the strength of their intelligence, capabilities and sheer hard work. It is very convenient to state that Krishna became great because he was destined to. Possibly, it may give you an excuse to conceal your inability to attain greatness. But in truth, by linking the greatness of an individual to his destiny, we insult his skills and hard work. That is the reason, in this book, I have attempted to shed light and elaborate upon all the virtues of Krishna, beginning from his phenomenal grasping power. And it is only by grasping the true essence of his life that we can learn from him and imbibe his qualities. Krishna too learnt from every person and each incident that came into his life. He has scaled the peaks of love, concentration, *karma* (action) and wisdom, solely on the strength of his spirit of enquiry and determination. And this is what is worth learning from his life. As a matter of fact, this book, along with a detailed account of his long, eventful life, contains the entire journey of his transformation from a simple cowherd boy 'Krishna' to the supremely powerful 'Jai Shri Krishna'. I affirm with conviction that yes, Krishna is the only 'complete' personality in the history of mankind, but I assert even more firmly that he has reached this state solely due to his diligence and virtues. Therefore, I salute not only him, but also his diligence and intrinsic qualities.

And as for me, I am determined to imbibe his qualities and endeavour to bridge the gap between his psychology and mine, so that I too emerge victorious at every juncture of my life; so that I too can spend my life in joy and bliss, and so that, inspired by him, my life too can be effectively utilised to help humanity, just like his life did.

Researching on and writing about Krishna has taken me on an incredibly rewarding journey of self-discovery and I hope with all my heart that this book helps you embark on an equally enriching voyage. With this ardent wish, I offer this humble labour of love to you.



## The Story so far...

Very few have been able to rejoice in both victory and defeat...

I was one of them...!

I, Krishna, was born in a dungeon in Mathura, only to face death soon after. But fortunately, I escaped death and was whisked away to Gokula, where I was raised with great love and care in Nanda-Yashoda's house. I was showered with admiration since childhood, and was doted upon not just by my parents, but also the *gopis* of Gokula, who despite being the target of my pranks, never stopped loving me.

Since my birth, death had always hounded me. Barely had I heaved a sigh of relief after combating the demons—Putana, Trinavarta and Shataka—when I had to, once again, marshal my resources to battle yet another problem. This time, it was the terror of the wolves which compelled the *Gokulwasis* to relocate. As a result, the entire village of Gokula had to seek refuge in Vrindavan, on the banks of River Yamuna. In Vrindavan, many of my skills and attributes came to the fore. It was here that I strongly opposed the ideology of people who refused to see light and stubbornly continued to perform *Indra puja*, and instead, encouraged them to celebrate the Govardhana festival. It was in Vrindavan that I learnt to play the flute, and it was only here that I met Radha, who became the epitome of love for me. She was a friend, inspiration and guide and has remained an inseparable part of me, ever since. My life was thus progressing in an ebb and flow when suddenly, it took a drastic turn, heralding a turbulent chapter in my life.

It was on an invitation by my uncle, Kansa, that I undertook a journey to the kingdom of Mathura. The invitation, however, was a mere façade. Uncle Kansa had, under the cloak of affection, hatched a conspiracy to kill me. However, with the power of my sharp acumen, I triumphed against all odds and eventually, slew Uncle Kansa. Thereafter, contrary to my apprehensions, my maternal grandfather, King Ugrasena, unexpectedly gifted me the kingdom of Mathura. But I had not killed my uncle to become king! So, I turned down the offer. Instead, I proposed to make grandfather the King of Mathura, a suggestion which was accepted wholeheartedly by one and all. Actually, turning down the throne was not a losing proposition

for me, because thereafter, I had become a highly renowned individual in the whole of Mathura.

Later, when Jarasandha, the father-in-law of Uncle Kansa, attacked Mathura, the kingdom was not prepared for war. But despite limited resources and a small army, I used my *chhalneeti* (deception strategy) and succeeded in thwarting the mighty Jarasandha. I kept him occupied for fifteen days, and eventually, after suffering heavy losses in reinforcements and power, Jarasandha was forced to retreat. However, a few days later, spies informed me about an imminent second attack by Jarasandha. But this time, Nature had a different plan for me. *Acharya* Sandipani suddenly arrived in Mathura and grandfather saw it as an opportunity to save me from Jarasandha's wrath. He sent bhaiya and me to Ujjaini to be tutored under *Acharya's* guidance and care. And in this way, a simple cowherd boy from Vrindavan became the disciple of an eminent *guru*, fortunate enough to study in a highly prestigious *gurukul* of Aryavarta. After completing my education, I promised my *guru* that I would rescue his son and bring him back as my *gurudakshina*. So, I headed to Prabhasa, the kingdom of the wicked king, Panchajanya, and after killing him, I brought back *Acharya's* son, along with the bounty gifted to me for having slain Panchajanya. After handing the son to his parents, bhaiya and I returned to Mathura.

Back in Mathura, I was, once again, faced with the recurrent problem of Jarasandha, when the spies informed us of an imminent attack by him. This time, seeing no other solution in sight, bhaiya and I had to leave Mathura and seek refuge on the faraway mountain of Gomanta. But we were not safe even there! Chasing us relentlessly, Jarasandha attacked us, but his efforts came to naught! He had to face defeat once again, as bhaiya and I sought the help of the local tribe on Gomanta to create a commotion in the army of the unrelenting Jarasandha. Thereafter, in order to rescue Uddhava from imprisonment, I had to slay Shringalava, the King of Karvirpur, before bhaiya and I returned to Mathura with Uddhava.

One day, grandfather informed me that Mathura had not been invited to the *swayamvar* of the princess of Kundinpur, who was none other than the woman of my dreams—Rukmini. I had fallen in love with her the moment I had first set my eyes on her, and she continued to reign over my heart, ever since. So naturally, the news of Rukmini's *swayamvar* had made me numb.

Moreover, debarring Mathura from attending the *swayamvar* was a political transgression on the part of Kundinpur. According to grandfather, Jarasandha was the principal organiser of this *swayamvar*, and it was on his instructions that his supporter and Rukmini's brother, Rukmi did not invite Mathura. Despite not being invited, I reached Kundinpur to save the dignity of Mathura and to protect the love of my life from a sham *swayamvar*. There, I foiled Jarasandha's plans and succeeded in stopping the *swayamvar*. Consequently, it was not safe for me to stay back in Kundinpur, so I decided to return to Mathura immediately. Ah yes, but not before rubbing salt into the wounds of a defeated Jarasandha!

So, would Jarasandha attack me, armed with a better strategy, the next time? With Jarasandha's ominous shadow lurking over me, would I be able to save my Rukmini from his evil conspiracies? Would the city of Mathura, sucked into a whirlpool created by Satrajit, be able to live in peace? To know the answers to these questions, read on...

## Chapter 1

# The Secret Behind the Theft of the Syamantaka Gem

My victory procession was fast approaching Mathura. The news of my victory had undoubtedly preceded me, and I was expecting yet another grand reception by the *Mathurawasis* (inhabitants of Mathura). Ironically, each time a plan was devised to expel me from the kingdom, I happened to unwittingly commit some acts, which would invariably compel Mathura to accord me a hero's welcome. Immersed in these thoughts and my dreams of Rukmini, I did not realise when our journey had come to an end as, tearing through the crowd, our caravan entered Mathura. Kicking up clouds of dust, the caravan soon reached the main road. The news of our arrival had now spread like wildfire, and as expected, Mathura welcomed us with open arms! Naturally, the city was celebrating the continuance of its royal sovereignty. Amidst this celebration, surging ahead through the crowd, our caravan had reached the palace. I was obviously eager to convey the good tidings to my maternal grandfather at the earliest. No sooner did our caravan reach the royal palace, than I rushed towards grandfather's chamber. As I recounted the tale of my stupendous, single-handed accomplishment, the expression on his face changed from wonder to amazement. He was so thrilled to hear about my feat that he immediately ordered a royal feast in my honour. All the Yadava nobles and the entire council of ministers were also invited to the feast. Meanwhile, as soon as word spread, the people of Mathura had taken to the streets in a celebratory mood, revelling in my success. Each and every inhabitant was immersed in joy, but grandfather was the happiest of them all. Not only had the menace of Brihaddal been averted forever, relieving grandfather, but the cancellation of the *swayamvar*<sup>[1]</sup> had also saved Mathura's reputation. This turn of events had now reassured grandfather about his position as a king. Well, grandfather's happiness was understandable, but why were the people of Mathura going berserk with joy? How did the cancellation of Rukmini's *swayamvar* make any difference to the situation prevailing in Mathura? The royal coffers would still remain empty, the common man would still face starvation and the Yadava leaders would continue to fight amongst themselves like cats and dogs. 'Bah! Let them revel in their madness,' I

thought. As for me, I was on top of the world! Not only had I come a step closer to Rukmini, but it also seemed unlikely that anybody could now drive me out of Mathura. Clearly, Mathura and I had fully accepted each other; the respect accorded to me at the feast that night was evident enough. In fact, several Yadava leaders had also praised and congratulated me. Satrajit and his followers, however, had stayed away from the feast. They could not have attended it anyway; they had, after all, lost face!

I returned home soon after the feast. Exhausted by the journey, I went to bed early, but alas, sleep eluded me! I spent the entire night mulling over the turn of events. Indeed, with Rukmini's *swayamvar* having been called off, I had personally gained a lot, but it had not turned me hysterical with joy like these fools. I had not lost my sanity, although I cannot deny that in my heart of hearts, I was jumping with joy and there were several reasons for this. I had now turned into Rukmini's 'saviour'; I had saved her life from being ruined. There was a strong possibility that, after hearing the tales of my bravery, time and again, the attraction that had been purely one-sided until now, would be reciprocated. As you already know, I was an optimist to the core, so it was only natural that my thoughts about Rukmini would be imbued with greater optimism than usual. Even if I did not consider Rukmini for a moment, what had I not gained by thwarting the *swayamvar*? The very Mathura that had been eager to oust me, using Brihaddal as a pawn, was now effusive in its welcome! This meant that I had overwhelmed the Yadava leaders, at least for the time being. The most important outcome of this particular journey was, it had compelled the whole of Aryavarta to accord me respect befitting a king. In actuality, I was not a king, but at present, I was no less than one. Indeed, what could have been a greater achievement than this for a cowherd boy? And considering the magnitude of my achievements, I deserved to pamper myself and celebrate the victory in solitude for at least one night. Immersed in such thoughts, I thus passed the entire night.

However, that was not the end of the story. Ten days had elapsed since my return to Mathura, but even now, I could not distance myself from Rukmini's dreams. It was becoming impossible for me to make her beautiful face vanish from my mind. To be honest, I was determined to win Rukmini's affection. All my life's accomplishments and everything else seemed insignificant compared to my yearning for her. But my enthusiasm



would vanish instantly the moment I would reflect upon my present circumstances. The question, 'Where would I make her stay once I brought her with me?' still remained unanswered. Mathura was not my permanent home, nor would it ever be. Sooner or later, Jarasandha's anger would reach epic proportions, compelling me to leave Mathura once again to escape his wrath. In such a situation, I certainly could not make Rukmini run around with me from pillar to post. Seething with frustration at not being able to find a solution to my problem, I would invariably direct my rage towards Jarasandha. He was already baying for my blood and was disrupting my peace of mind, and now, because of him, there were obstacles in my romantic pursuits as well. Now, given such circumstances, how could I think kindly of him? But again, why should I curse Jarasandha alone? I was able to discern well the common man's enthusiasm and mindset. I knew that, at present, the people of Mathura were enthused with my victory, which was the reason they were singing my glory, but in the future, they could change their tune. As soon as they would hear of an impending attack by Jarasandha, these very people would show their true colours and would not bat an eyelid before chasing me out of the city again. At present, I was the apple of Mathura's eye, but the tide could turn any moment. And now that I was in the process of cursing one and all, why should I pardon myself? 'If your heart is so bent upon bringing Rukmini into your life, then why don't you make permanent arrangements for her stay?' I taunted myself. Another voice in my head replied instantly, 'Oh...what did you just say? I want permanent freedom from Jarasandha's terror, regardless of my pursuit of Rukmini. Alas, if only a solution would present itself!' 'Well, the solution will emerge only through action.' 'Yes, that makes sense! So, why not embark upon this task by first strengthening my roots in Mathura?' I thought. Having thus made up my mind, I decided to take full advantage of the prevailing circumstances.

Once this decision was made, a plan presented itself in my mind. I asked grandfather to arrange a meeting immediately to choose a new chief of the Yadavas. In addition to the Yadava leaders, the inhabitants of Mathura were also to be invited to the meeting. Grandfather had no objection to this; for him, my wish was his command. At once, he instructed the chief minister to make necessary arrangements. I was determined to become the elected leader of the Yadavas, for, it may be easy for Mathura to drive me out, but

the kingdom would find it difficult to banish its chief. Once elected, my anxiety about being expelled from Mathura would reduce considerably and I would be able to breathe easy. As the chief of the Yadavas, I would then have enough time to contemplate how to tackle Jarasandha. No matter what it took, this time, I had to find a permanent solution to this problem, if not for me, then at least for the sake of Rukmini. I had had enough of constantly living in trepidation of Jarasandha. How could a man breathe free with the sword of death dangling over his head at all times? It was only because of my brazenness that I was still alive; had it been an ordinary person, he would have died due to anxiety long ago.

Soon, amid these worries and concerns, the day of the meeting arrived. I had prepared well before the commencement of the meeting. Leaving no scope for anything to go amiss, I had reached grandfather's place early in the morning, to prepare him for his speech. I wanted the meeting to start with his address and by afternoon, I had made him learn the speech by heart. I was now confident that after his address, there would be no obstacle to my election as the Yadava chief. So, as evening set in, bhaiya, grandfather and I reached the meeting venue, well in time. It warmed the cockles of my heart to see the large gathering and feel their crackling enthusiasm that pervaded the air. However, what surprised me the most was, despite having been made to bite the dust, Satrajit and his cohorts were in high spirits. 'So be it', I thought with a smile. Today, I was not at all worried about Satrajit's cheerfulness, for, my status had been elevated to a much higher level than his. After all, I had thwarted Rukmini's *swayamvar* successfully. Besides, how could anyone hope to match my skills in political manoeuvring? I had trained grandfather in such a manner that nobody would even mention Satrajit's name in this meeting. While I was engrossed in thinking about Satrajit, looking in his direction, grandfather had begun his address without preamble. He spoke in a dejected tone, "In my opinion, the conflict amongst us is the main reason for the present dismal state of affairs in Mathura. Therefore, it is my wish that we should all come together and choose an able Yadava chief, so that we can put an end to our disputes once and for all."

As soon as grandfather finished his statement, a loud cheer echoed in the gathering. Gauging from the reaction of the crowd, the first obstacle towards becoming the chief of the Yadavas had been overcome. At least

everyone had unanimously agreed to choose a leader. As for the choice of leader, well, grandfather delivered the tactical speech I had prepared him for, thus paving the way to my being elected the leader of the Yadavas. Continuing with his address, grandfather said, "In my opinion, it would be far better if we choose a leader keeping in mind the prevailing circumstances and the needs of Mathura. Let us, therefore, elect a leader who is not only brave, but one whom the whole of Mathura is proud of. He should be someone who has already made a mark in all of Aryavarta and be capable of putting Mathura once again on the path towards progress and prosperity." As I had expected, no sooner did grandfather finish his speech, than my name started to reverberate through the crowd, and everyone began cheering for me fervently. Predictably, with the list of qualities that I had made grandfather recount, none but I seemed to fit the role. However, back in his camp, Satrajit and his supporters were trying their best to oppose my election. A few other Yadava leaders too, made feeble attempts to support him, but nobody paid heed to any of them. Today, my star was shining the brightest, just as Satrajit's was shining, in the not-too-distant past. A few days ago, in a similar meeting, I was compelled to remain silent, but now, the tables had been turned. In today's meeting, Satrajit's was the lone voice of dissent as he stood, bereft of support. After all, time was the biggest harbinger of change, and at present, I had been declared the new chief of the Yadavas. The meeting was, thus, adjourned on this cheerful note.

I finally heaved a huge sigh of relief. Now, Mathura would have to support me, come what may! The possibility of an attack by Jarasandha had already created fear in the people of Mathura. Under such circumstances, would anyone even dare ask an elected leader to leave Mathura? On the contrary, Mathura would now feel obligated to protect its leader under all circumstances. Besides, I could clearly see yet another direct benefit of having been chosen the leader of the Yadavas. Jarasandha would certainly have to abandon all thoughts of launching an attack in haste, after learning that I had been elected the Yadava chief despite numerous efforts of great Yadava leaders such as Satrajit. This would allow me enough time to stay in Mathura and calmly devise a strategy to evade a potential attack by Jarasandha. Looking at the present circumstances, Jarasandha was unlikely to attack Mathura at least in the next year and a half. And for a person like me, a year or two was long enough to devise an effective strategy.

With these thoughts flitting through my mind, I indulged in flights of fancy on my way back home. 'But what next?' I asked myself. What I desired the most, still remained unattainable. As you well know, my weakness was my hopelessly romantic heart and my yearning for Rukmini, the queen of my dreams. In fact, ever since I had seen her at the feast, my mind had crossed all boundaries of reason and could think only of her. Becoming the leader of the Yadavas was a step in the right direction, but matters pertaining to Rukmini remained as complicated as ever, with no solution in sight. As a result, my feeling of helplessness refused to fade. For the present, this was the only pain and also the most pernicious problem in my life! To make matters worse, I could not even unburden my heart to anyone. If only I could share my pain with someone, then perhaps I might have found some relief, but for me, that too was not possible!

In my present situation, all I could do was think about my beloved Rukmini with delight. Making her my wife seemed a distant dream; for this to happen, it was imperative that I become a king, possessing my own kingdom. In other words, my predicament was such that, my yearning for Rukmini did not bode well for my sanity, but I was unable to come up with a definite solution to overcome my dilemma. Even though Rukmini was nothing but an unrealisable dream for this cowherd boy, the irony was, he could not live without dreaming about her. In other words, this newly elected Yadava leader's days were being spent between restlessness stemming from his yearning for Rukmini, and distress over the reality of not being able to fulfil his dream. You can very well imagine the condition of Mathura under the command of such a lovelorn leader! Oh, but why taunt a distressed lover in this way? This was only a temporary phase; otherwise, the new Yadava leader was a highly responsible person indeed!

Accepting my situation for what it was, I let the feeling pass. At present, the good news was, Uddhava had come to Mathura to pay me a visit. Not only was I comforted by his arrival, but his very presence worked like a balm, soothing my frayed nerves. Indeed, my affection towards him was growing stronger with time. Although he was the bearer of good news, the sole purpose of his visit was to implore me to return home, to Vrindavan. That's right! The same old refrain! Nevertheless, considering the bleak and cheerless phase I was going through, a trip to Vrindavan did sound like a good idea. But I had only recently become the Yadava leader; the

responsibility of transforming Mathura and restoring it to its former glory rested fully upon my shoulders. The need of the hour, therefore, was to break free from the dreams of Rukmini and to immerse myself in the reality of Mathura. But, here was Uddhava, who had come to lure me with dreams of Vrindavan! Oh, if only these dreams could turn into reality! A person's mind and heart may harbour many desires, but in reality, he has to act in accordance with the demands of his duties at all times. Hence, it seemed unlikely that I would be able to visit Vrindavan anytime soon. So, once I had comprehended this reality, I also convinced Uddhava about it. While it was easy to convince Uddhava, the mere mention of Vrindavan had triggered an avalanche of memories, stirring a longing in my heart. Alas, this helplessness worsened my condition further! Already reeling under the agony of missing Rukmini, my inability to go to Vrindavan was also causing me great anguish. Under such circumstances, how could the poor, lovelorn Krishna maintain his sanity? His flute alone could pacify him, and as a matter of fact, the sweet melodious notes of my flute did help me retain my sanity. To steer my thoughts further away from Rukmini, I had immersed myself in work, toiling day and night, solving Mathura's problems. This was the only way I could obtain respite from this sweet pain called Rukmini and the golden memories of Vrindavan. I would solve the problems of the people of Mathura and hold meetings with businessmen. Sometimes, I would gain insights from Yadava leaders and at other times, I would seek guidance from grandfather. In other words, I was running around all day, expending my energies to come up with a well-defined plan for Mathura's progress. If nothing else, I was diligently executing my responsibilities as the Yadava chief.

While these activities kept me occupied during the day, my problem would rear its ugly head as night approached. Agreed, Uddhava's company did help me turn my thoughts away from Vrindavan, but what about Rukmini? Unfailingly, as the shadows would lengthen and the earth would be enveloped in a velvety cloak of darkness, the queen of my dreams would invade my thoughts, tormenting me with sweet pain. Nevertheless, I would still manage to pass the night in the company of Uddhava and my flute. For some reason, however, I was beginning to feel rather exhausted these days. Could this be the effect of working too hard or was it the result of facing seemingly endless challenges? Another reason behind this feeling of



exhaustion could be that my energy was being divided between my work, fraught with challenges, and my yearning for Rukmini. ‘Well, if that was the case, then so be it!’ I thought. I could learn to live with exhaustion, but under no circumstances would I stop thinking about Rukmini. However, this constant feeling of fatigue was not acceptable either. ‘Wouldn’t it be better for me to take a trip to Vrindavan?’ I wondered. Once I reached there, all my exhaustion would vanish into thin air. If energy was what I was seeking, then could there have been a greater source of energy in my life than Vrindavan? But even before I could indulge myself in the dreams of Vrindavan, I had to abandon that thought immediately. I had only recently become the leader of the Yadavas. If I left for Vrindavan suddenly, all the Yadava nobles, including Satrajit, would get an opportunity to deride me. They would go all around Mathura, saying, “Oh look, your chief has fled yet again! The problems of Mathura have frightened him out of his wits!” So, what was the solution then? Oh, but of course, there was one! Even if I could not go to Vrindavan, the Yadava chief could certainly step outside the city for administrative purposes. No one could call me a ‘deserter’ then. In short, I was in desperate need of not just physical and mental rest, but also a complete change from my present environment. The idea was excellent, but the question was, where could I go?

After much deliberation, I decided to visit *Acharya* Sandipani’s ashram for a few days. As soon as bhaiya and Uddhava heard my plan of visiting the ashram, they jumped with joy. As you know, *Acharya* was a fountainhead of energy and inspiration for me; from this perspective, he was no less than Vrindavan itself! So, if not Vrindavan, then *Acharya* Sandipani’s ashram it would be! Indeed, it was incredible how the very thought of visiting *Acharya* had melted away half my mental and physical exhaustion. In fact, I had already lost myself in dreaming about the ashram. This time, Uddhava would also accompany us, so it was certain that we would have double the fun. Moreover, there was also the excitement of meeting some old friends. Oh...what was this? No sooner did I begin dreaming about the ashram, than all thoughts of Rukmini vanished. ‘Well, good riddance!’ I thought. This was a good excuse to rid myself of the sweet pain. In fact, I was so elated by this diversion that I found myself enveloped in a warm and pleasant feeling, dreaming only about the ashram.

My dreams were now tinged with a sense of pleasantness as I saw myself rejoicing in the company of *Acharya* and friends such as Sudama, Punardutta and Vinda-Anuvinda. Moreover, playing my flute to Sudama's singing always held the promise of a thrilling experience. I was so excited about the impending journey that I flung myself into its preparations right away. The preparations were completed within a day; that was because we did not have to make arrangements ourselves. Now, we had a troop of servants to take care of everything. So, having sought grandfather's permission, we departed for Ujjaini two days later. My entire being was charged with inexpressible excitement; even bhaiya and Uddhava could not contain their happiness.

This was the first trip of my life that I was undertaking for the sole purpose of rest and recreation. Honestly speaking, for the first time, Krishna was making an exception for himself by venturing out in the pursuit of pure joy. And when it comes to pampering oneself, why should one pinch and scrape? So, the preparations for the journey were made on a grand scale, befitting the status of a chief. After all, the reputation of the 'Yadava chief' had to be maintained! At the same time, I had to create a good impression on the princes at the ashram too. Accordingly, our caravan included ten chariots and scores of servants and guards. Since we had made significant progress in life, we no longer had to bother about chores such as unharnessing the horses, plucking fruit, looking for a resting place and staying up at night to keep vigil. Besides, performing such chores for no reason did not really suit a person of our standing. So, all in all, this journey held the promise of a different kind of enjoyment for the three of us—Uddhava, bhaiya and me. It was for the first time that we were not running away from someone out of fear or setting out in search of someone. This time, we were simply undertaking a journey to meet *Acharya* and our friends; in other words, we were travelling for the sheer joy of it. For the first time, I was experiencing the unique thrill of a journey that carried no specific purpose. For the greater part of this trip to Ujjaini, I steered the chariot myself. Sometimes, bhaiya would sit by my side, and at other times, Uddhava would plonk himself beside me. We would halt as soon as we felt the first stirrings of hunger, and at our beckoning, the servants would bring us delicacies from nearby markets. The markets no longer appealed to us, considering our age, maturity and the experiences we had gained in life. But

yes, it was for the first time that Uddhava was travelling with us on such a long journey. So, we did halt and shop for *pitambars* (yellow-coloured garments) and jewellery for him from the markets that we crossed on our way. Once we had bought them, we did not halt anywhere. In fact, we hardly even looked askance at the ponds and lakes that we crossed. We were eager to complete the journey as soon as possible. As a result, it did not take us long to reach our destination. Thus, after a non-stop journey of seven days, we finally reached Ujjaini.

An indescribable thrill pervaded my being as soon as we reached the city. Not a single road or lane that our caravan traversed, escaped my admiring eyes. Although I had come to Ujjaini after so many years, nothing seemed to have changed. Lost in the beauty of the enchanting sights, we crossed the entire city, and, in a short time, drove up to the main gate of the ashram. As soon as we reached the ashram, we rushed in, leaving our chariots and servants outside. A heavenly aroma wafted through the air. Oh good! It was lunchtime at the ashram. *Acharya* and his wife, *Acharya-ma*, were ecstatic on seeing us. Their son, Punardutta's jaw dropped open in disbelief, as if God had Himself appeared before him. In fact, his life had been saved as a result of my deeds. The only disappointing news was, my former classmates had all left the ashram except for Sudama. I sighed at the thought of missing them. But the feeling of disappointment soon passed as *Acharya* introduced us to his new pupils. The ashram brought back fond memories and everything here was exactly as I remembered, except for a surprising change. It was hard to believe, but among the new pupils were two girls! However, my mind was diverted quickly by hunger gnawing at our insides. So, after a quick wash, we too sat down with everyone for a meal. After lunch, we chatted idly for some time before retiring to our chambers. *Acharya* had allocated a separate chamber for the three of us, to be shared with Sudama. As soon as I entered our chamber, I was lost in thoughts of *Acharya*. He was truly a great man and never ceased to amaze me every time I met him. According to prevalent traditions across Aryavarta, girls were not permitted at a *gurukul* (residential school). However, here they were, and I was curious to learn the story behind their presence at the ashram. I wanted to know why and how *Acharya* had brought about this change. And once curiosity is aroused, it is best to satiate it as soon as possible. So, ignoring all thoughts of rest and recreation, I went

straightaway to *Acharya* and asked, “*Acharya*, if girls are forbidden to study in an ashram, then how did you make this exception?” *Acharya* laughed as he explained, “Dear Krishna, what is forbidden and what is indispensable is determined by time and circumstances and not by traditions or rules and regulations.”

I was stumped on hearing *Acharya*’s words. Indeed, how profound his words were! This was the reason I had wanted to come to Ujjaini! It was this mesmerising charm of his, that had always captivated me. The idea was so revolutionary that it was etched in my mind forever. Indeed, *Acharya*’s words, expressions and teachings would always spark new fervour and energy within me. In a way, today’s teaching was sure to lend encouragement to rebels such as myself. It seemed as if, I, the fearless rebel, notorious for breaking rules and regulations, had suddenly been given free rein. For now, I happily pranced back to my chamber and slept so soundly that I woke up only as dusk fell. On waking up, I learnt that a function had been organised in our honour, so Uddhava, bhaiya and I headed there. Addressing the gathering, *Acharya* began his speech by eulogising me for my achievements. This was followed by a musical performance, with Sudama’s vocal recital accompanied by my flute. As the evening progressed, Uddhava developed such a rapport with Punardutta and Sudama that, by late evening, Punardutta also joined us in our chamber. Within no time, we became a group of five from three. So far so good, but the next day turned out to be even better. We had slept off our exhaustion from the journey and had now also become familiar with everyone. To make us feel more comfortable, several restrictions of the ashram had been relaxed, and especially those related to food had been completely done away with!

After all, their dear student, whose love for food was well known, had come to visit them. Overwhelmed by the outpouring of joy from all quarters, we found it difficult to contain ourselves. We were enjoying ourselves to the hilt, but Uddhava’s happiness was truly out of this world, which reflected clearly on his face. His joy knew no bounds, as not even in his dreams could he have ever imagined a life abounding with happiness, in the midst of such wonderful company. Watching him enjoy himself warmed the cockles of my heart. In fact, my own happiness seemed inconsequential compared to his. Our days were, thus, passing by merrily. *Acharya* seemed

quite relieved on hearing about our rising popularity in Mathura. He believed that Jarasandha would now have to think twice before attacking someone who had tremendous public support. He also congratulated me umpteen times for having thwarted Rukmini's *swayamvar*.

All was going well at the ashram, when suddenly, bhaiya's cheerful mood turned wistful. No, no, there was nothing to worry about! He was certainly enjoying his time at the ashram, but these days, he was experiencing a new, sweet pain, this being his first encounter with such delightful agony. Allow me to explain. It so happened that when *Acharya* was introducing us to his new pupils, he had also introduced us to Revati, one of the girl pupils. Once we were introduced, we had moved on, but bhaiya had stood transfixed; he could not take his eyes off her. Truly, it was rare to come across such a beautiful, well-proportioned girl in the prime of youth. Her grace and charm were magical. All in all, her demeanour suggested that she perhaps hailed from a royal family. At the time, I did not think much about bhaiya's attraction and had let it pass. So, while I was happily engrossed in the company of my friends and *Acharya*, I did not realise when bhaiya had fallen in love. Funnily enough, he had taken on the qualities of an ardent lover immediately on being stricken by love. He began staying aloof, daydreaming, and tossing and turning in bed all night. Not only that, he had also taken to stalking poor Revati, doggedly following her wherever she went, gazing at her fondly. In short, all the qualities of a lover had naturally begun to manifest in bhaiya. I was happy that someone had finally swept him off his feet. It was a good development indeed; at least now he would stop pestering me over petty matters. Ahem, I was bound to think of my own interest first, don't you think? Well, all in all, our stay at the ashram was the most enjoyable, in every respect. No stone had been left unturned to make us feel at home. *Acharya-ma* knew about our love for good food, so, contrary to the rules of the ashram, delicacies were being served every day. To add to the excitement, our former classmates, Vinda and Anuvinda, arrived at the ashram as soon as the news of our arrival reached them, and spent two days with us. Basking in the love and affection being showered upon us, I felt proud of my decision to come to the ashram.

Meanwhile, another marvellous development took place before our very eyes. Of course, it was related to bhaiya, and he had outdone me completely. What I had considered to be mere infatuation had transformed

into an incurable ailment called love. Bhaiya's feelings for Revati were growing by leaps and bounds. What appeared to be simple infatuation had gradually turned him into a languishing young man. To be honest, bhaiya's new avatar as a hopelessly smitten man had become a matter of great concern for me, a veteran in this field. It was not because he was in love, but because this appeared to be a one-sided affair. Revati seemed oblivious to bhaiya's love, and hence, was not reciprocating it at all, and I was well aware of how this would end. I felt as if bhaiya himself was slowly slipping away from me. Bhaiya and I had never spoken on this subject, but I had gauged all this, based primarily on my experience. Having evaluated the situation, it had become important for me to come to his aid. So, keeping my activities aside, I began to constantly look for opportunities to bring both of them together. Honestly, this was as much in my interest as it was in bhaiya's! He was not an experienced lover like me; in fact, this was his maiden venture. If he were to end up with a broken heart, then my life would surely turn into a nightmare, for, I had to live with him day and night. It is no laughing matter to live with a heartbroken man, twenty-four hours a day! I also knew that bhaiya could do nothing more than become lovelorn, and well, that step had already been taken. In other words, the task of taking the matter ahead had fallen on my experienced shoulders. Judging by the present circumstances, it was imperative that I accomplish this task as soon as possible, for the sake of bhaiya's peace of mind and my sanity. Did you see that? I had come to the ashram in search of much-needed rest and recreation, and here I was, saddled with work once again! Fortunately for me, this work was not only interesting but also to my liking! So, although we were prancing around the ashram all day, I was also looking for opportunities that would help me bring bhaiya and Revati together. And sure enough, an opportunity presented itself within the next few days.

One evening, after dinner, we were sitting outdoors, enjoying the cool breeze, when, in the course of our conversation, *Acharya* said to me, "Revati has expressed a keen desire to learn mace-fighting and is quite insistent. Now, only you can make her see sense, for, this is beyond my area of expertise." This was it! This was the opportunity I was looking for, and I hastened to grab it. *Acharya* was asking me to make Revati see reason; instead, I marshalled my reasoning powers and made him view the matter from a different perspective. I explained, "Your ashram is not a slave to the



despicable conventions of Aryavarta. So, how does it matter whether these conventions are broken by you or by a student of yours? Why not let bhaiya teach Revati how to fight with a mace? It would indeed be our privilege to be of help to you.”

I had proposed my idea in such a manner that *Acharya* could do nothing but happily permit me to go ahead. On hearing this, bhaiya began to tremble with joy as if this was too good to be true; Revati, too, was pleased beyond words. I was also happy to know, that now, they would start communicating with each other. So, from the very next day, bhaiya began imparting lessons in mace-fighting to Revati. And naturally, with every clash of the maces, romance began to bloom.

Well, this was bound to happen! Could love ever fail to blossom in Krishna’s presence? While a great task was being accomplished, to be honest, Revati had roused my curiosity, and with each passing day, I was becoming increasingly eager to learn more about her. Obviously, it was not merely because my dear bhaiya was in love with her. There were other reasons behind my eagerness to know more about Revati; primarily, she appeared unhappy. ‘Now, why would anyone studying at the ashram be unhappy?’ I asked myself. Even if I were to overlook that aspect, it was clear she hailed from a royal family, considering the way she carried herself. Her behaviour, however, suggested otherwise. Besides, I could not understand her keenness to learn to fight with the mace. As I mulled over these aspects, I noticed, the pieces of the puzzle did not seem to be falling into place. Now, as you already know, I would become restless whenever something intrigued me, and I never rested until I had learnt the truth.

By now, Revati had become quite friendly with us. So, instead of beating around the bush, I decided to ask her directly. The next morning, I went to Revati and bhaiya’s mace-fighting practice and cheered them on heartily. As soon as their practice ended, I took both of them to the ashram’s backyard. We plonked down under a huge, dense tree, watching the River Kshipra flow by. Of course, this enjoyment of the view of the river was just a façade; I had actually brought Revati here with a specific purpose in mind. So, seizing the opportunity, I asked her to tell us something about herself. Responding instantly, she opened up to us, saying, “I am the princess of Kushasthali, a kingdom situated by the seashore. My father,

King Kakumadi, ruled what was once a prosperous and blessed kingdom. All was well until time took a sudden turn! To our misfortune, our kingdom lies between two others, one ruled by Panchajanya and the other by Punyajana. We were safe as long as these two kingdoms shared a cordial relationship with each other, but as soon as the two turned sworn enemies, our lives were ruined. They began competing with each other, one trying to outmanoeuvre the other. Kushasthali was caught in the crossfire and had to bear the brunt of their hatred. Our plight was akin to being caught between the two discs of a grindstone. Whenever either of the kingdoms wished to increase its might, it would simply attack our kingdom and plunder it. Both the kingdoms were gigantic in size and power, and Kushasthali could not withstand their might. As a result, the repeated attacks and pillaging gradually weakened Kushasthali. The situation worsened to such an extent that Punyajana eventually annexed our kingdom. Evil to the core, his cruelty surpassed all limits when he slew my two younger brothers before our very eyes. The gruesome death of my brothers took a toll on my father's mental health and he became deranged. I am his eldest child; and in accordance with my duty, I have not only sworn to exact revenge on Punyajana but have also vowed to wrest my kingdom back from him."

Revati's tale of woe affected me deeply, but bhaiya was completely beside himself with anger. Seething with rage, he sprang to his feet, and brandishing his mace wildly, screamed, "I will go and smash this Punyajana's head right this instant!" Seeing bhaiya's fury, I tried to calm him, saying, "Punjana's head will certainly be smashed, but what is the use of brandishing the mace and hurling curses at him at present? Let us deliberate over the matter, and then we can all swing our maces at him!" Alas! I had no cure for bhaiya's vehemence. I should have known he would react in this manner. Hot-headed as he was, I had no means of reining in his anger. Besides, this time, the matter concerned his lady-love, so, placating him was next to impossible. But somehow, I managed to restrain his fury. Fortunately, bhaiya's outburst had comforted Revati a great deal, as she no longer felt alone in her mission. In the midst of all these revelations, *Acharya's* decision to accept Revati as a student became clear to me. His words rang true in my ears that while other ashrams and their gurus tried to uphold traditions, he (*Acharya* Sandipani) was in favour of moving ahead of the times. No wonder then, that I was filled with pride for my *Acharya*. It

was this unique quality of his, which made me feel proud of him. Incidentally, I felt proud of myself too, for, I had been right about Revati. She was indeed a princess! Once we had confirmed Revati's true identity, I had to devise a strategy to reinstate her as a princess. So, while bhaiya was occupied with comforting Revati, I had set my mind quickly into motion, devising a plan of action. But, as was my wont, while pondering over the problem, my chain of thoughts broke and I could not help but think about bhaiya. It was incredible that I, an expert on love matters, was still dreaming about acquiring a princess, while bhaiya had effortlessly moved past me and had already come closer to acquiring one. The student had surpassed the master! Well, so be it; I had to now focus my energies on resolving the problem at hand, which I was trying to do but... alas! The problem was so knotty that an instant solution was not easily apparent. Hence, we made our way back to the ashram.

It was evident now that we could no longer enjoy ourselves at the ashram; Revati's troubles and the situation at Kushasthali were weighing heavily on our mind. Although I could not think of anything definitive during the day, by night, things had started to fall into place. I had a vague memory of having passed a kingdom on my way to free Punardutta. Oh yes! It was Kushasthali indeed! Revati did say that it was adjacent to Panchajanya's kingdom. If this was the case, then that kingdom was presently being ruled by my friend, Chandak. And, of course, Chandak would help us out! After all, it was because of my efforts that Chandak had been crowned king. There! I had found a solution to the problem, and within no time my deliberation bore fruit, giving birth to a plan. I thought to myself, 'Why not take Chandak's help to free Kushasthali from the clutches of Punyajana?' With Chandak's support, this task should not be very difficult. This would not only mitigate Revati's pain, but it would also help in fulfilling her vow. Moreover, it would be the perfect opportunity for bhaiya to impress her. That was it! With Chandak's help, I resolved to liberate Kushasthali from Punyajana's clutches. Having thus resolved to act, I tried to sleep, but to no avail. My thoughts were running riot. I had started worrying about myself and rightly so! After all, I also wanted to settle down and start a family. But how would that happen without owning a kingdom first?

Unwittingly, my mind drifted towards the establishment of my own kingdom, when suddenly, I recalled Revati's words. Had she not said that

her father had lost his mental prowess? This clearly meant that Kakumadi was not in the right mental frame to be reinstated as king. And with both her brothers executed, Revati was the only heir left, but being a girl, she could not be crowned king. Considering the situation and our contribution towards reclaiming the kingdom, I wondered, why bhaiya could not be crowned the king of Kushasthali instead. His ascension to the throne would not be something that was unheard of. Were this to happen, then not only would bhaiya marry Revati, but it would also pave the path for me to get married and settle down in life. At present, the only obstacle standing between Rukmini and me was that I did not own a kingdom. And this was the only reason why I could not even express my feelings to her. Indeed, this one plan seemed to be the sole solution to all my problems. All in all, I had succeeded in killing two birds with one stone, once again.

Early the next morning, on the pretext of a stroll, I took both bhaiya and Uddhava outside the ashram. I needed privacy to discuss my plans with them and to ascertain our next move. As soon as we were out of earshot, I explained my plan to them in detail, deliberately omitting details of my own desire to settle down. I did not think it was necessary for them to know about this, because they had simply no inkling about my feelings for Rukmini. And, in my opinion, this was not the right time to tell them about it. In any case, I had not yet ascertained Rukmini's feelings. I could not embarrass the poor girl by declaring my one-sided love for her, to the world at large. So, I thought it prudent not to tell them about it. Nonetheless, let us forget what I did not say and focus on what I did say. Well, there was not much to it; bhaiya became truly ecstatic on hearing my plan. However, as I had feared, my innocent, love-struck bhaiya had understood only part of the plan, pleased with the thought that with the liberation of Kushasthali, his marriage to Revati would be guaranteed. Oh dear! Love is indeed blind! His happiness had nothing to do with the fact that he would become a king or acquire a kingdom. The reason was quite clear too; at present, bhaiya was simply a besotted lover. Actually, he was not the only one acting strangely; I was acting strangely too. We had devised a plan among ourselves and had put our seal of approval on it; not only that, we had even started dreaming about the plan's success. However, we had not yet discussed this with the original heir to the kingdom of Kushasthali. What if she had other plans? In

other words, without Revati's endorsement, all this would be nothing more than a beautiful dream.

Once we had decided upon the course of action, it was necessary to seek Revati's opinion on our plan. Retracing our steps, we immediately headed back towards the ashram, with the purpose of discussing our plan with her. Of course, the task of presenting the plan to Revati fell on my shoulders. As usual, when it came to tasks such as talking, striking up a conversation, spearheading a discussion, explaining matters and addressing others, the onus would always fall on me. That was not all; other onerous tasks such as plotting, lying, acting and deceiving people would also inevitably fall on my poor little shoulders! And as you know, I would never shy away from any kind of work that would come my way. So, as soon as we reached the ashram, we beckoned Revati to join us. Well, actually, bhaiya and Uddhava simply trod on my heels and it fell on me to initiate the conversation. The problem, however, was how to initiate the discussion. Nevertheless, I had to start somewhere, and so I did. Addressing Revati directly, I said, "We have made a plan to liberate Kushasthali from the clutches of Punyajana. I don't know if you are aware that I had myself killed one of Kushasthali's enemies, Panchajanya, in the past. Not only that, I had also instated the commander-in-chief, Chandak, as the new king in his place. Chandak is extremely grateful to me because of this. Therefore, he will support us openly in a battle against Punyajana. If, after due consideration, you are satisfied with this plan and give your consent, we can proceed with it."

Overjoyed and excited upon hearing my plan, Revati readily agreed to it. In fact, she was soon lost in her dream world, in which her dear Kushasthali had already been freed from the clutches of Punyajana. It seemed that everyone had taken to daydreaming at the time! Initially, it was only me, but the ailment was contagious and had affected bhaiya too, and now it was Revati as well. Everyone seemed to be building castles in the air! However, this was not the time to dream; it was a time to stay firmly rooted in reality. Having secured Revati's consent, the next step, I wisely thought, would be to find out about Kushasthali's preparedness to launch an attack. When I asked Revati about it, she gave me a detailed description of her kingdom's present situation and the strength of its army. The information provided by Revati, however, was not very encouraging. According to her, only a thousand or so soldiers were left in Kushasthali and even those soldiers

were not completely united after having lost to Punyajana. Altogether, Kushasthali's present condition and its preparedness for a battle were rather hopeless. However, seeing Revati brimming with enthusiasm, I did not deem it wise to sound despondent. Instead, I calmly said, "It doesn't matter! We will make do with what we have. You and bhaiya leave immediately for Kushasthali. Bhaiya, along with Chandak, will prepare for the battle, while you stay in Kushasthali and mobilise as many soldiers as you can. Besides, you can also try to instil confidence in your father and boost the morale of your subjects, by promising them a glorious future, free of slavery. Assure them that you intend to secure them their freedom very soon. This should at least stop them from cooperating with Punyajana's soldiers. Meanwhile, Uddhava and I will leave for Mathura immediately. I will talk to grandfather and arrange for one thousand soldiers of Mathura to leave for Kushasthali under Uddhava's command. So, I don't think Punyajana will stand a chance pitted against a combined army of one thousand soldiers of your kingdom, another thousand from Mathura and a formidable army from Chandak's kingdom."

Hanging on to every word I spoke, Revati's heart was filled with hope. As for bhaiya, he was ecstatic that Revati had agreed to everything. Both had already started to weave dreams, lost in a world of their own. While Revati was dreaming of Kushasthali's freedom, bhaiya had only one dream—that of marrying Revati.

Speaking of dreaming, I was not one to lag behind either, lost as I was in thoughts of Rukmini and of establishing my own independent kingdom. I was absolutely certain that this battle would do the trick, and that Punyajana would relinquish Kushasthali without putting up an intense fight. So, what was the harm in dreaming? Bhaiya and Rukmini certainly saw no harm in it, for, there was no doubt about winning back Kushasthali or getting bhaiya and Revati married. However, the problem lay in turning my dreams into reality, and this definitely did not seem to be an easy task. Well, there is no point in hiding anything from you, so I shall reveal everything to you. My foremost worry was that I was finding it difficult to assure myself that bhaiya would become the king of Kushasthali. Moreover, I could not even complain about it, for, it was our 'pawn' (bhaiya) who was the weak link. He was naïve and his only goal was to marry Revati. In this situation, it was quite possible that he would easily relinquish the throne, as long as he had

Revati by his side. I also feared that once Kushasthali regained its freedom, Kakumadi might recover from his illness and once again aspire to become king. What if bhaiya only managed to become the son-in-law and I would be left with nothing but my dreams? My objective behind sending bhaiya to Kushasthali was to ensure he would ascend the throne and continue to rule it. But what if he returned home with only a wife in tow?

Well, I had done all that I could possibly do. I had specifically instructed bhaiya to crown himself the king of Kushasthali. In return, he had assured me confidently that nothing would go amiss. But, despite his assurances, for some unknown reason, I was unable to trust him completely. Bhaiya was a simpleton at heart, and if he were to get even a whiff of Kakumadi's desire to be crowned king, he would gladly reinstate him on the throne! 'Why hurt someone unnecessarily?' he would say. But who could make my dear brother understand that if he showed concern for Kakumadi's heart, then he would end up breaking Kanhaiya's heart into a thousand pieces. Indeed, I was caught in a strange situation. Neither could I confide in bhaiya about my love for Rukmini, nor could I settle for anything less than bhaiya's ascension to Kushasthali's throne. Oh, what an utterly complicated situation this was! My dreams and Rukmini's future, both were at stake. Oh, why are you so shocked? Do you really believe that Rukmini could find a better husband than me? Well then, it is for you to decide whether the poor girl's future too was at stake or not. Nonetheless, I needed some kind of assurance, because the dreams of so many people and the future course of their lives depended entirely on the way events would unfold in Kushasthali. Therefore, to allay my fears, I thought it wise to take Uddhava's help. As it is, he would be departing for Kushasthali along with the army. So, cleverly casting a spell on him with my words, I tacitly handed him the responsibility of ensuring that bhaiya would be crowned the king of Kushasthali.

Meanwhile, on hearing the news that we were about to reclaim the kingdom of Kushasthali, *Acharya* and everyone else at the ashram heartily congratulated Revati. Moreover, *Acharya* gave me his blessings, especially for carrying out such a momentous task. The entire ashram was in a celebratory mood for two days, and amidst these celebrations, Revati and bhaiya departed for Kushasthali. The next day, Uddhava and I were given an emotional farewell too, and with *Acharya's* blessings, we set off for

Mathura. Imagine! We had arrived at the ashram to get much-needed rest, but were instead leaving with the hope of reclaiming a kingdom. Indeed, Sandipani's ashram was the key to opening the doors to all my significant achievements. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that all the good that was unfolding in my life was the result of his blessings. Once again, it was because of his blessings that our chariots were racing towards Mathura at lightning speed, and why wouldn't they? After all, we were poised on the threshold of entering a new phase in life; we had lent wings to our dreams and were surging ahead with new-found energy. Pleasant thoughts of becoming kings and being tied in wedlock pushed us forward, and naturally, our chariots were bound to support us by matching the pace of our minds. Travelling non-stop, we reached Mathura in just four days! This time around, we had no interest in admiring the scenery along the way; nor did we waste time in trivial pursuits such as halting for a meal. In our eagerness to reach Mathura, we did not even feel the need to rest at night.

Reaching Mathura, I immediately immersed myself in the task at hand and quickly became alert and active. I rushed to the palace at once and met grandfather. After exchanging pleasantries, I came straight to the point, realising that time was of the utmost essence now. However, I was feeling uneasy, as so far, I had never asked anybody for help. Therefore, I was a bit hesitant today in asking grandfather for help. But hesitating at this juncture meant saying goodbye to my dreams of securing a kingdom and marrying Rukmini. So, mustering the courage, I recounted in detail the entire story of Kushasthali to grandfather and requested him to keep it a secret. As for grandfather, he was delighted at the very thought of Balarama becoming king. He was so pleased that he could not stop showering blessings upon me and was highly effusive in his praise for me. Naturally, what else could please a grandfather more than seeing his grandchild make such rapid progress? Well, the conversations and blessings were behind us now, but I had not yet spoken to grandfather about the request I had come with. Bracing myself for his reaction, I finally asked him whether he would lend me one thousand soldiers for our mission. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realised with dismay that asking a favour of someone was the worst pain one could inflict on one's own soul. It does not matter then, whether one asks near ones or Nature for it. Today, I can say with the utmost conviction that a person should be self-reliant under all



circumstances. Our birth as human beings should give us the power of self-reliance, so why should we beg anybody for anything, and why should we snatch someone else's right? Well, let us leave that aside. At present, I was the one requesting grandfather to do me a favour, and as expected, grandfather happily agreed to lend two thousand soldiers to Uddhava, instead of my request of one thousand. Of course, I would bear the soldiers' expenditure, including monetary compensation, travel and food expenses. So, although I was compelled to ask a favour, I knew there were limits to how much I could ask for. Nonetheless, within a span of three days, a regiment of soldiers was formed, ready to march towards Kushasthali. With great expectations, I sent off the army to Kushasthali under Uddhava's command, impressing upon him once again the need to instate bhaiya on the royal throne. I could not help but feel a niggling sense of uncertainty about the outcome of our efforts, as my dream of making Rukmini my wife had taken precedence over everything else.

Well, so be it! With Uddhava's departure, I heaved a sigh of relief. Not only was my final responsibility in this endeavour complete, but I had also come a step closer to realising the grandest dream of my life—marrying Rukmini. All I wanted to do was dream about Rukmini, day in, day out. In fact, the setting was perfect and so was the mood, but what can I say? I was not able to dream to my heart's content. In fact, my mind had begun to feel listless. Even though good tidings had started pouring in from all quarters, my mind was cursing me. The cause of my anxiety, actually, was the help I had taken from grandfather. Even though it was the need of the hour, and I was bound to respect the demands of 'time', for some inexplicable reason, I felt extremely uncomfortable with the thought of having asked grandfather for assistance. Indeed, if you think about it, I had every right to ask whatever I wished for, after having done so much for Mathura, and also as my grandfather's beloved grandson; yet, the situation had left me with a feeling of unease. Just imagine! When I did not like asking a favour even when time demanded it, how despicable it would be to ask unnecessary favours! How demeaning it is, especially for those who make it a habit of continuously making demands on Nature! Always remember, Nature has already provided human beings with everything they need. Therefore, bear in mind, one can only be grateful to Nature...only grateful!

Nevertheless, to dispel the angst at having asked grandfather for a favour, I began to dwell upon pleasant thoughts of a definite victory in Kushasthali. I was confident that the combined forces of Chandak, bhaiya and Mathura would make mincemeat out of Punyajana. So, there was nothing left to think about, on that front. As for my dreams about Rukmini, well, that activity was reserved for the night. So, what about the day then? With this thought, I realised I was now the Yadava chief and it was my responsibility to think about the betterment of Mathura and work for its welfare rather than worry only about my own concerns of settling down. Hence, as the chief of Mathura, I decided to focus my energy on improving its deplorable condition. The royal treasury was empty and the majority of Mathura's inhabitants continued to struggle with starvation and illnesses. Moreover, the infighting among the Yadavas had not been curbed. The fact that I had become their leader had had no effect on their squabbling whatsoever. To make matters worse, the supporters of Jarasandha and Satrajit had still not given up on their efforts to defame me and were just waiting for an opportunity to pounce upon me. Clearly, I was a thorn in their side, which they felt had to be weeded out. Bah! What was the point in thinking about them? This was their problem, while my problem was Mathura itself! Being a conscientious Yadava chief, I wanted to improve the standard of living of Mathura's inhabitants under all circumstances. After deliberating over the matter for several days, I came to the conclusion that a huge amount of money would be required to tackle Mathura's problems. Unless speedy action was taken, it was certain that Mathura and its people would be wiped out, because the city's condition was deteriorating by the day.

Mathura's fundamental problem was lack of money, although there were many wealthy Yadavas who possessed more money than they would ever need. If nothing else, this surplus wealth could be used for the expansion of businesses. Similarly, these Yadavas could also deposit their surplus wealth in the royal treasury on their own terms. And if the money was still inadequate, Satrajit also had in his possession the Syamantaka gem, a boon from Nature. Unfortunately for Mathura, Satrajit and the other wealthy Yadavas had never stepped forward to help the kingdom, and it seemed unlikely that they would do so in the future either. Had Mathura's erstwhile king, Kansa, or the responsible Yadava nobles taken a genuine interest in

Mathura's progress, the city would not have been in such a pitiable state as it was. It was all the more disheartening because it was clearly within the purview of their duties. None of the nobles had to really go out of their way to do it. 'Oh well, forget about the past!' I thought. At present, I was the elected leader of the Yadavas and I was fully conscious of my duties. It was my firm belief that Yadava nobles such as Satrajit needed to help Mathura in its time of difficulty, unquestionably and unhesitatingly. Besides, as per law, it was the Yadava chief who always decided who had to do what, when and how. While mulling over these matters, I began to feel anger surge within me against Satrajit. There were two reasons for this: one, he had left his own kingdom and had stationed himself in Mathura, unnecessarily spewing venom into its day-to-day life. And two, I could not, for the life of me, fathom how he could have the sole right over Nature's gift, the Syamantaka gem. It was the collective property of the state and it should have been deposited in its royal coffers. Were this to happen, a majority of Mathura's problems would be solved.

Of course, I was well aware that all this was wishful thinking on my part. I was well acquainted with the ground reality and clever enough to know that one could not expect an enemy of the royal palace to ever come to its aid. 'So then, what should I do? Accept defeat? Nay! Never!' If they do not agree to help voluntarily, then force would be used on them, to do so. If they were not going to do it willingly, then they would be arm-twisted into doing it! After all, the fate of thousands of people was at stake. The conditions at the royal palace had deteriorated to such an extent that the palace could not even afford to pay the salaries of the royal staff from the subsequent month! The problem was complicated indeed, but at the same time, it demanded a prompt solution. Therefore, looking at the gravity of the situation, I pondered over it for quite some time. I was well aware of an important principle of Nature—no matter how difficult a problem is, and no matter how unsolvable it appears, there is always a solution. The solution to any problem can definitely be found if you apply the correct formula!

Contemplating the matter over the course of a few days was all I needed to find the right formula. The plan was so dangerous that it was possible only for a mischief-maker like me to have conjured it. Well, I immediately rushed to the palace to meet grandfather, because you obviously cannot solve a kingdom's problems without its king's assistance. I found

grandfather in his chamber, crestfallen and woebegone, as if his world had come crashing down; he had all but given up and lost all hope of finding a solution. Indeed, the problem was so grave that it would have impelled anyone to give up; however, my fighting spirit was such that it would never concede defeat. To prove my point, I already had a plan with me, ready for implementation. Needless to add, at present, my focus was more on the plan's implementation than grandfather's downcast face. So, I asked him to arrange a meeting of all the respected Yadava leaders, in the royal palace. Prominent leaders including Satrajit, Satyaki, Uncle Akrura, Bhadraka and father were to be invited.

As for grandfather, my wish was his command, and so, he busied himself, issuing orders and overseeing preparations for the meeting. Leaving him in charge of organising the meeting, I hurried back to complete the remaining tasks; to be honest, it was only I who was capable of implementing a plan as terrifying as this one. Nobody else could have even imagined it! An ordinary person would have got mired in trivial matters such as 'truth and lies', or 'ethical and unethical', and would have been unable to proceed. However, I was a man of firm resolve, resolute and unwavering. It did not hold any consequence for me whether a matter was right or wrong, or whether it was punishment or bias. I had a clear vision of what I wanted to accomplish—the collective interest of the common people was my prime concern. So, whatever was in the common interest of the people had to be done, by hook or by crook! What really mattered was accomplishing the task and nothing else. My plan was so outrageous that even I was astonished at myself for having conceived it! Indeed, I was becoming deadlier with each passing day! Silently, I wondered, 'What if someday I am proved to be too much even for Nature to handle? This was proved by the plan I had charted out, for, it belonged to a league that was far beyond an ordinary human being's thinking capacity. The plan was such that I could not even risk rethinking it, let alone discussing it with anyone. If this plan were to fall in place, I was certain to become so deadly, that in the future, it would become impossible for anyone to contend with me. In fact, I was quite confused regarding my own feelings—whether I should feel proud, be surprised, curse myself or become wary of myself.

Well, irrespective of how I felt, I had to now focus on implementing my plan. So, according to the plan, on the day of the meeting, I went to

Satrajit's house at dawn, and hid behind a large tree situated near it. I stood there, waiting patiently for him to leave his house. After hours of waiting, around noon, Satrajit finally emerged. As soon as he left, I walked up to the main door of his house and knocked on it. As expected, Satyabhama opened the door and warmly welcomed me in, her whole being suffused with delight on having seen me. Her devotion towards me, even at such a young age, was praiseworthy and honestly, I had come to test this very devoutness today.

Satyabhama had never looked as beautiful as she did today. Dazzled by her beauty, I found myself drawn too, but today, the need of the hour was to focus on my goal. This was no time to pursue matters of the heart. Had the situation been different, my attention would most certainly have been focussed on Satyabhama. But how could I forget that today, I had come with the sole purpose of implementing a devious plan and Satyabhama was its most important pawn? So, before this meeting could take an altogether different turn, I quickly enquired about Satrajit. Now, though I had seen him leave the house, unbeknownst to the poor girl, while inviting me in, she informed me that her father was not at home. With a nonchalant air, I accepted her invitation and stepped inside the house, telling her it was alright if her father was not around. I told her that I would wait until he returned. I kept a casual conversation going, but today, my mind was focussed elsewhere. Nonetheless, being the stupendous actor that I was, I lavished a continuous stream of endearments and affection on her, with my eyes doing most of the talking. I was fully aware that today, the success of my plan depended entirely on the strength of Satyabhama's attraction and submission to me. After all, it was Kanha's charm that was working on her. A few attempts on my part were enough, before my magic began to work on her, and Satyabhama became completely besotted with me. Well, she was bound to, for, after all, it was Krishna, who was enticing her. But enough of bragging; let's get down to action! The mood had already been set, so I casually requested her to show me her father's 'prayer chamber'. Satyabhama was incredible indeed; she treated my request as no less than a command and immediately led me towards the prayer chamber. With this, my plan was inching towards success. I was fully confident that Satyabhama would neither doubt nor argue with me over anything. My dear people, that is why I had based my entire plan on her naïve submission.

And to be doubly sure, I had mesmerised her in such a way that she would readily accede to whatever I said. So, everything was bound to happen the way I wanted it to.

This was, however, not the time to rub my hands in glee, for, a lot remained to be accomplished. At present, I was simply following her to the prayer chamber. I was attired as a simple, cowherd boy, so, except for those who met me daily, it would have been well-nigh impossible for anyone to have recognised me easily. In fact, I had even carried a bucketful of milk with me to lend credence to my disguise. It was necessary to take these precautionary measures for my plan to succeed. At present, standing right outside my destination—the prayer chamber—I could feel my heart pounding wildly against my chest, aware that the plan was fraught with great risk. However, I somehow managed to retain my composure, and on entering the prayer chamber, I turned to Satyabhama and asked her to fetch me some curd. As soon as she rushed outside, I immediately started searching for the ‘Syamantaka gem’. Hurrah! Within no time, I found it. Oh, what a gem it was! It resembled the blazing sun and was almost a miniature form of it.

Shining brilliantly in my palm, the gem possessed a radiance that could light up even the darkest moonless nights! I stood transfixed, mesmerised by its splendour. Hypnotised by the beauty of the gem, all I wanted to do was gaze at it. However, considering the delicate situation I was in, I swiftly hid it in the folds of my *dhoti* (clothing wrapped around the lower half of the body), and nonchalantly began to stroll around the chamber. In a short while, Satyabhama returned with the curd and I happily devoured it. Looking around in admiration, I praised the grandeur of the prayer chamber and expressed my gratitude to Satyabhama for having shown it to me. And then, without a second thought, I took her leave, assuring her that I would visit her again very soon. But, yes, before I crossed the threshold to step out of the house, I turned around and swore her to secrecy, eliciting a promise from her that she would not disclose my visit to the house and the prayer chamber to her father, no matter how hard he pressed for information.

The reason for this was quite obvious! Neither Satyabhama nor I had any intention of creating a misunderstanding between her father and me, thereby straining the relationship further. Nevertheless, this was a true test of

Satyabhama's devotion to me and my confidence in her. So far, everything was proceeding as per my plan; however, if, at the last moment, Satyabhama, in her naivety, were to blurt out the truth to Satrajit, then all would be lost! Not only would I be tarnished a jewel thief, but would also be kicked out of Mathura forever, in ignominy. Moreover, all the respect I had painstakingly earned in Aryavarta would also turn to dust. I knew I had taken a huge risk in trusting Satyabhama, but deep down in my heart, I was sure that nothing untoward would happen. I was confident that having made a promise to me, she would never break it, for Satrajit or anybody else. It was indeed praiseworthy that, in just a few meetings, she had gained my trust to such an extent that I could risk a gamble as dangerous as this, based entirely on that trust. No matter how the situation would unfold, the fact that Satyabhama was able to place such trust in me was, in itself, a testimony to the intense love and devotion that she felt for me. I had no choice but to become an admirer of such love and devotion, and of course, use it to my advantage. All said and done, I now had the gem with me. Satyabhama had also reassured me that she would not utter a word to anyone. The only step left for this 'deserter' to take now, was to vanish out of sight. This was no time to think of what had just happened and what might happen in the future. At present, it was prudent to concentrate on the next step. So, panting, I rushed back home; as a precautionary measure, I had not even taken my chariot with me, for, cowherd boys always walked to complete deliveries. Hiding the gem in a safe place, I prepared to leave for the palace to attend the meeting I had asked grandfather to arrange. Father, Satyaki, Uncle Akrura and many other Yadava leaders were already present there. A while later, Satrajit and some other Yadava leaders also arrived. I found myself in a peculiar situation. After my most recent deed, it was difficult to act in a normal manner with Satrajit. Nevertheless, being a master of histrionics, I not only composed myself quickly but also welcomed him warmly. This is the reason I often say, that with each passing day, 'Kanhaiya' was becoming more and more dangerous. Now, should I credit this to the experience gained from all those years of acting and lying to my dear mother Yashoda, or to the art of diplomacy I had learnt in Mathura? Well, it does not matter whom I give credit to; the result is right in front of you to see.

Coming back to the meeting, since I was now the leader of the Yadavas, I did not require anybody's permission to speak. So, I commenced my address without observing formality. Besides, the possession of the Syamantaka gem had instilled new-found confidence in me. And why would it not? Money, after all, is that 'miracle potion' which makes even the greatest of fools appear wise. Armed with its powers, so many weaklings and paper tigers project themselves as bravehearts. So, why would the Syamantaka gem not elevate somebody like me to an altogether new level? Thus, I began my address on a confident note, coming straight to the point, "I welcome you all on behalf of the King of Mathura. I am sure you are well aware that the royal treasury is empty. And who would know it better than you that no kingdom can sustain without a treasury?"

"We should also not forget that whenever danger has befallen us, the royal palace has always stood resolutely behind us. At present, when the palace is in dire straits, it is our duty to extend support in its hour of need. So, I propose that as responsible inhabitants of Mathura, we should all deposit half our wealth in the royal treasury. In exchange, we can use the royal facilities for any kind of work that is required to be done at any time. I do not think that any of us should have any objection to this proposal."

Ending my speech on this decisive note, I took my seat. Although my speech had shocked the Yadava leaders, nobody uttered a word. What could they say? The jolt I had given them was so severe that they needed a moment to recover from it. However, Satrajit was the first to gather his wits, unable to remain silent for long. In fact, he was the wealthiest among all those who had gathered there, so, how could he have remained silent? He sprang up from his seat and speaking agitatedly, said, "Mathura's biggest problem is not wealth; it is you, Krishna! Had you not come to Mathura, the city would not have had to face the brunt of Jarasandha's ire, nor would it have had to witness such woeful days. It would be far better if you left the city; at least then, Mathura's primary threat, Jarasandha, would be thwarted forever. As far as our personal wealth is concerned, it may be a lot, but we have earned it through hard work. Therefore, I see no logic in depositing half our personal wealth in the royal treasury. But yes, since you have conceived this brilliant idea, and have secured your wealth by way of gifts and largesse, you must deposit all your wealth in the royal treasury."



Uh-oh, what was this? My move had backfired! These people had cleverly turned the tables on me and were talking about seizing my wealth! Of course, I could not keep quiet either and lost my temper. How could I have tolerated an attack on my wealth and status? Agreed that I had accumulated my wealth through gifts, but why forget that these gifts were the outcome of my selfless efforts? Hence, I had every right to keep them. So, I also thundered angrily, “Don’t you dare talk about Jarasandha! I have always saved Mathura from his attacks. And as far as my wealth is concerned, I am willing to deposit all of it in Mathura’s royal treasury, on the condition that you too are ready to deposit the Syamantaka gem and all the gold that you have obtained from it, in the treasury. In fact, whether you like it or not, you will have to deposit that gem in the royal coffers because, just like my wealth, the gem too, is not a fruit of your labour, but rather a gift from Nature that you had chanced upon<sup>[2]</sup>.”

No sooner had I spoken about seizing the gem, than Satrajit turned livid with rage. This was exactly what I had been aiming at. I wanted everyone’s attention to shift from me and focus onto Satrajit. Accordingly, everyone’s attention turned from my wealth to the gem. As soon as Satrajit saw everyone’s focus now shifting towards him, he pulled out his sword, and raving and ranting like a madman, stormed out of the courtroom, screaming, “The Syamantaka gem is mine! It will always remain mine! If anybody so much as even looks at it, I will gouge his eyes out!” I sympathised with Satrajit, but he had even greater misfortune coming his way! Nonetheless, as expected, with his exit, the meeting fell apart without having reached a conclusion. The meeting may have ended, but I stood firm on my opinion. Even now, I strongly believed that such a priceless gem and a gift of Nature should be deposited in the national treasury. ‘But why should I worry myself over it?’ I thought. My plan was anyway bi-directional. Had Satrajit willingly agreed to hand over the gem to the kingdom, I would have placed it back in his prayer chamber. And were he to refuse, well, I had already stolen the gem from him forever. In other words, I had already ensured from that point onwards, the gem belonged to the kingdom, one way or the other! Do you see how my plan had worked! Nobody had ever escaped my subterfuges and nobody ever would!

Speaking of escape, it was vital for grandfather to leave the meeting immediately! He was petrified on witnessing Satrajit’s bristling fury and the

subsequent commotion at the meeting. So, as soon as everyone left, I took him to my chamber. I knew that today he would not be placated with mild assurances, so I saw no harm in being more assertive. My strong reassurances thus assuaged his worries and he calmed down to a large extent. However, to truly pacify him, the gem could not be handed over to the palace in haste. If he asked me where it had come from and how, what could I possibly tell him? No, no! Right now, I was both the jewel thief as well as its owner. Moreover, I, who had devoted my entire life in serving the people, would certainly use the gem for their welfare at the opportune time. ‘Considering all this, why should I fear if I have to keep the gem with me a while longer?’ I thought. So, after comforting grandfather as much as I could, I took his leave. I set off on my chariot and was riding all by myself towards the banks of River Yamuna. I watched the sun setting on the horizon, spreading a golden glow as it slowly vanished from sight, my mind caught in a vortex of emotions. But no matter how my present condition was, did you see how deadly my plan was? I was a winner both ways. I could not help but laugh, thinking about my master plan and poor Satrajit’s helplessness. He must have immediately headed back home to try and hide the gem in an even more secure location. What a shock it must have been for him to learn that the gem was not in its usual place and had actually disappeared! He would have spent a considerable amount of time frantically looking for it. Finally, unable to find it anywhere, he would have asked Satyabhama about it. When she would have told him that nobody had come to the house, Satrajit would have turned hysterical. ‘Had the sky devoured his beloved gem or had the ground gobbled it up?’ he would have wondered, almost in tears. I could clearly visualise him muttering like a madman. Now, tell me, who would not be amused on imagining such an entertaining spectacle?

Suddenly, the speed of my chariot slackened. A deep furrow marked my forehead. What if Satyabhama had revealed the truth to him? What if I had lost my most dependable pawn? Were that to happen, this gleeful smile would be wiped off Krishna’s face in an instant. Within no time, I would be sitting astride a donkey and would be expelled from Mathura, and all my wealth would be confiscated too. This thought was enough to knock the wind out of my sails. Certainly, the next few hours were going to be torturous not only for Satrajit but also for me. I had, by now, reached the

banks of the Yamuna, but peace eluded me. It seemed as if every alarming sound foreboded the arrival of soldiers sent out in search of me. Gripped by this disturbing thought, I quickened the pace of my chariot and drove afar to increase the distance between my captors and me. Even if they were to eventually catch up with me, it would take them a considerable amount of time to find me, but as the evening progressed, I felt confident again. For, if something untoward were to happen, it would have happened by now. Besides, I had full faith in Satyabhama's surrender to me. And yet, the question was not merely about the gem; it was also about the father-and-daughter equation. Fearing that things could take a drastic turn at any moment, I kept racing my chariot, and sneaked home only in the dead of night. I finally relaxed when I did not spot soldiers near the house. Though I had polished off an elaborate meal to be able to sleep well, I spent the whole night tossing and turning, haunted by an unknown fear. Nonetheless, the next morning, my fears had vanished. I knew there was no danger now. My confidence and Satyabhama's devotion had passed the test! My intention of working for the greater good had won. Undoubtedly, I had become the owner of the Syamantaka gem.

Even though I had become the owner of the gem, there can be no denying that Satyabhama's contribution to this critically important task was far greater than mine. With this came the astounding realisation of how one could become so devoted to another person in such a short span of time. But then, another question struck me. 'Whom should I credit this devotion to—Satyabhama's innocence or my magnetic personality?' Another thought came up in response. 'Come on, Kanhaiya, why do you hanker after praise? Step aside, for, the credit goes entirely to Satyabhama. She alone deserves it.' 'Alright, alright, I dissociate myself and give her all the credit.' Well, now that I had given Satyabhama due credit for the success, another question immediately cropped up in my mind. 'Who should be held responsible for Satrajit's present state of helplessness?' Of course, I was responsible! With this thought, my focus once again shifted to Satrajit. Indeed, I had put him in a terrible dilemma, for, as far as he knew, nobody had visited the house in his absence. He must be tearing his hair out in frustration, trying to solve the mystery of the missing gem. He must be wondering to himself, 'Had the heavens swallowed it up or did the earth gulp it down?' When nobody had visited the house, whom could he blame

or suspect? To his misfortune, he could not even reveal the theft of the gem to anyone. There were two reasons for this—one, no one would believe him; instead, they would suspect that he was spinning a yarn as he was afraid the palace would demand the gem from him again. The other reason was that Satrajit's personality hardly evoked any respect in the eyes of the people. Whatever status he had gained was solely due to the gem. So, were he to now admit that the gem was no longer in his possession, he would most likely lose his reputation as well.

Indeed, with my well-thought-out plan, I had put Satrajit in deep trouble. I knew that he probably wanted to cry his heart out but, alas, he could not do so openly! He would be forced to shed silent tears, in the quiet solitude of his chamber, away from the prying eyes of the world, for, what if somebody were to chance upon him and ask him what had happened? What would he say was the reason for his distress? This is why I always say, 'Never meddle with me. For, a person may be cured of the bite of the serpent, *Kaaliya* but there is no remedy for the one stricken by Krishna.' I could hear Satrajit's arrogant words echoing in my ears, 'I will never give the gem! If anyone so much as even looks at it, I will gouge his eyes out!' Well, the gem had now vanished! Forget about gouging anyone's eyes out, he was not even in a position to complain! On the contrary, it was now time for him to gouge his own eyes out and keep his mouth shut! By now, you may have sensed how pleased I was with my well-executed ploy. I felt like giving myself a pat on the back in appreciation of my skills in being a master manipulator. Indeed, that morning was one of the most beautiful ones of my life. On one hand, I had come out unscathed after executing the most dangerous scheme, and on the other, I had secured supreme devotion in the form of Satyabhama. But there was yet another reason for my euphoria! With the Syamantaka gem in my possession, I had now become one of the few extremely wealthy people not just in Mathura, but in the whole of Aryavarta as well. Nevertheless, while all these aspects pleased me beyond measure, they also made me aware of a greater sense of responsibility. While on one hand, I was becoming aware of my duty towards Satyabhama, on the other, I was also being inspired to use the gem to bring Mathura back on its feet as quickly as possible. However, I was fully confident about this, for, in the past too, I had worked for the betterment of Mathura and knew that I would continue to do so, with or without the gem.

As we are now talking about Satrajit, let me also apprise you of his situation. Shaken to the core at the calamity that had befallen him, the poor man was in a state of shock, and for the next few days, did not even dare step out of his house. His words were no longer laced with arrogance. Besides, his behaviour had suddenly become quite cordial towards me. This, I surmised, was a sign of danger. His amiable behaviour towards me proved that he suspected my hand in the theft of the gem. However, it could not be helped; he was free to think whatever he wanted to. He knew he could not slander my name on the basis of suspicion only; on the contrary, his helplessness would make him seethe with rage from within. Having said that, the sneaking suspicion he harboured against me had brought about a strange transformation in him. He had started visiting my father regularly at our house on some pretext or the other. Only I could understand this change in Satrajit's behaviour and his regular visits to meet my father. For that matter, who could comprehend my 'deed' better than me? The poor fellow was unable to utter even a word to anybody, and yet his helpless state was revealing his inner turmoil, crying out in frustration at the injustice he had to suffer in silence. Ignoring his helplessness and enjoying his predicament to the fullest, I behaved as if nothing had transpired between us. I had even begun to go out of my way to treat him with greater respect than usual. My behaviour must have surely been torturing him even more. Well, I was not acting in such a manner to make him feel better anyway. He had to realise the consequences of crossing swords with 'Krishna', and for this, he was most certainly bound to suffer.

In any case, I had no shortage of wealth, to begin with. And now, the gem had ensured that money was flowing in, every day. After a while though, I had begun to deposit a specific sum of money surreptitiously in the royal coffers. Come to think of it, I was furthering my own deeds through actions such as these. Even otherwise, right from the beginning, I had always been protecting the people of Mathura using my intelligence and bravery. And now, I was able to assist them monetarily too. In a way, you could say that I had learnt to carry out the duties of a king even before I had become one. The only difference was, until now I had been helping the *Mathurawasis* with my valour and astuteness, but now, I was able to assist them financially too. A wave of contentment washed over me, kindling within me the satisfaction of being a good king without actually having become one.

Indeed, the theft of the gem had ensued favourable circumstances all around. In the midst of all this, my thoughts suddenly turned to bhaiya and Uddhava. I had been so caught up in the chain of events triggered by me in Mathura that I had momentarily forgotten all about them. I was now beginning to wonder what might have happened in Kushasthali.

Deep within my heart, I knew that bhaiya and Uddhava would emerge victorious, but I was aware of the distinct difference between being hopeful regarding a matter, and receiving definite news confirming it, especially as I had pinned all my dreams and hopes on this victory. The possibility of whether I could become a king or not, depended entirely on the news from Kushasthali. Speaking of becoming a king, was it possible to weave such dreams and not think about Rukmini at the same time? After all, my feelings for her were the reason behind my desperation to score a victory in Kushasthali. With each passing day, my ears were straining to hear the news from bhaiya and Uddhava, confirming our victory. Deep down, however, I had begun to worry because it had been over five months since they had left for Kushasthali, and as per my calculations, they should have returned by now. But still, there was no sign of them. Caught amidst all these worries and unrealised dreams, all I could do was, wait for their return.

Fortunately, I did not have to wait long. Twelve days later, bhaiya and Uddhava returned. My heart leapt with joy, as I could see the smile of victory playing on their faces, even from afar. For a while, speechless with emotion, all that the three of us could do was embrace and congratulate each other, but we could not speak at length. In any case, we did not want anyone to catch even a whiff of what had happened. So, we put off our discussion until night-time and, as usual, spent the night at our house near the Yamuna. As soon as we reached there, the three of us spontaneously headed towards the swing in the garden and perched ourselves on it. We had now become kings, and till the time we acquired a throne for ourselves, we could at least begin practising one of the attributes of a king—sitting regally on a swing. Eager to narrate the tale of their victory in Kushasthali, it was natural for bhaiya to become overly enthusiastic. And why would he not be? After all, this was his first victory. Sensing his enthusiasm, Uddhava, wisely, let him do the talking, for, bhaiya was finding it difficult to restrain himself from speaking about Kushasthali ever since they had arrived. According to bhaiya, they did not have to use much force and it had become

easier to liberate Kushasthali with full support from Chandak. The soldiers from Mathura and Kushasthali also fought valiantly. Evidently, Punyajan, standing no chance, had fled the battlefield along with his army. As soon as bhaiya wound up his narrative, Uddhava jumped in and said, “But bhaiya, you forgot to give Krishna the most important news! Never mind, I shall tell him.” Turning towards me, he said cheerfully, “Do you know that our wrestler brother, Ballu, is no longer single? He has got married to Revati amidst great fanfare, in an exceptionally grand ceremony.”

Hearing this, I immediately jumped up to warmly embrace bhaiya and congratulate him on his double victory of having liberated Kushasthali and also for marrying Revati. But strangely, neither of them said anything about what I was dying to hear. My mind was swarming with doubts and apprehensions. ‘What if bhaiya had committed a folly? I was certain that he had! But Uddhava had been with him all along, then how could anything have gone wrong?’ Then another thought occurred to me—anything was possible with bhaiya around. Eventually, I decided that, instead of torturing my mind, why not ask them directly about what had occurred in Kushasthali? Tired of waiting, I shamelessly and pointedly asked, “All this is fine, bhaiya, but tell me, did you become the king of Kushasthali or not?”

Bhaiya blurted out, “Of course not! We reinstated Kakumadi on the throne. Oh Kanhaiya, you should have seen the jubilant look in his eyes after we won the battle. Honestly, seeing him in a euphoric state, we did not think it wise to hurt him by not crowning him.”

My heart sank; I was speechless. For a moment, my brain refused to register what bhaiya had just said. I immediately stopped swinging and stood up. Did bhaiya not care for my feelings at all? Was a heroic and well-heeled individual like me going to stay a bachelor all his life? Well, if I were to depend on bhaiya, then it was likely that I would remain a bachelor forever. I suddenly became despondent! All my fears had come true! Bhaiya had been sent to become king; but instead, had returned only as a son-in-law. He had got married, but my marriage was still uncertain. ‘Grr! Oh, Ballu! Your life is made, but what about me?’ I groaned in my head. I had become so upset that I blurted out in a pained tone, “Bhaiya, you have committed a great folly!”

Alarmed that their story had caused me such distress, Uddhava immediately came to bhaiya's rescue saying, "That was not how it happened, Kanhaiya. Bhaiya was willing to sit on the throne. However, seeing Kakumadi's enthusiasm and the pitiable condition of the kingdom, we had to reconsider our decision. The whole of Kushasthali lay in shambles due to repeated onslaughts by the armies of Panchajanya and Punyajan. In fact, Kushasthali's condition had become far worse than that of Mathura. To rule such a kingdom would have been akin to asking for trouble."

Encouraged by Uddhava's response, bhaiya also piped in enthusiastically, "And we are anyway the uncrowned kings of Kushasthali."

'Well, we are the uncrowned kings of Mathura too!' I thought bitterly to myself. Not only Mathura, but in several other kingdoms too, our standing was no less than a king's! But was it really useful? Were we actually ruling any kingdom? No! Now, how could I explain to bhaiya and Uddhava that without becoming a king and without possessing a kingdom of my own, I could not win Rukmini's affection, and it was well-nigh impossible for me to live without her. But then again, they knew nothing of my heart's desires. Had they known, perhaps this would never have happened in the first place. Nonetheless, no matter what the reason was, and no matter whose fault it was, I was the one who had been left empty-handed, having gained nothing at all for my efforts! Since the matter concerned Rukmini, it did not take long for a pall of gloom to descend upon me. Sensing my sombre mood, it did not take Uddhava long to gauge how low my spirits had sunk. He immediately made me sit on the swing again and said reassuringly, "Kanhaiya, you would have also taken the same decision, had you seen the condition of Kushasthali. I believe that instead of becoming the king of Kushasthali, we should establish our own kingdom. In fact, there are several picturesque and secure tracts of land adjacent to Kushasthali and bordering the sea. Why don't we build our new kingdom on one such tract?"

No sooner did Uddhava finish speaking, than I jumped for joy and planted a firm kiss on his cheek. His suggestion was brilliant indeed, for, he had paved the way for Kanhaiya to fulfil his dream of settling down. This is why I say, no matter how intelligent a person is, there are times when someone else proves to be more intelligent than him. After all, God is



present in everyone. Even bhaiya seemed to agree with Uddhava, whose idea had given a big boost to everyone's sagging spirits. However, both Uddhava and bhaiya were suddenly gripped by financial worries, and quite rightly so. To build and populate an entire kingdom was not as easy as setting up a home for just one family. Certainly, an enormous amount of money would be required to fulfil this dream. However, unbeknownst to these two poor men, I was not too worried, as I had the Syamantaka gem in my possession. On the contrary, I felt greatly relieved, for, at least now, the wealth produced by the gem would be put to good use. But I had to keep it a secret. So, as was my wont, instead of alleviating their anxiety, I pretended to be overcome by the same despair and plonked myself down on the swing, holding my head in my hands. I had not mentioned the gem to them, nor was I about to. I was determined to carry this secret with me to heaven! Of course, if a mind reader were to read my life's journey, he would definitely be able to decipher the truth. However, this matter pertained to the future, and it was not going to make any difference to the present scenario. So, after feigning sadness for a few moments, I put on a show of intense concentration and finally said, "Actually, we do have a vast fortune, which we could use to set up a small town at least. Even so, if we ever run out of money, we could surely resort to some wheeling and dealing to acquire additional wealth. So, leave the financial worries to me."

Hearing this, bhaiya, who seemed to have been waiting for such an opportunity, interjected promptly, "Kanhaiya, I am certain that as far as 'wheeling and dealing' is concerned, you will surely manage it. What else have you done in your life other than craftily devise schemes and hatch plots?" Hearing this, Uddhava could not help but smile; I, on the other hand, remained unmoved. I did not want to show my approval of bhaiya's jibe by smiling, and as far as devising clever schemes was concerned, the deed had already been done. At the same time, I did not want to laugh off such a serious matter either; otherwise, bhaiya was certain to label me a trickster. That would never do! So, when they saw that I had not reacted to bhaiya's remark, the matter ended right there. And as soon as this untimely barb was forgotten, all of us focussed once again on our future new kingdom. We were so enthusiastic about building our kingdom and in such a hurry, that we decided that bhaiya and Uddhava would return to Kushasthali within a day or two to scout for the perfect tract of land. At the

same time, we also agreed to keep all the latest developments—our victory in Kushasthali, bhaiya's marriage, and our search for a piece of land for our new kingdom—under wraps. In fact, even grandfather and father were to be kept in the dark. We thus ended our discussion on this note. Nonetheless, we were unable to stop ourselves from repeatedly embracing and congratulating each other. We then parted ways so that we could sleep, and each of us could weave his own version of the dream of a new kingdom.

After only two days of preparation, bhaiya and Uddhava set out enthusiastically towards Kushasthali, riding high on the dreams of establishing our new kingdom. Bhaiya had begun to glow with happiness at the very thought of returning to Kushasthali. Naturally, he was excited about spending time with his wife, Revati.

## Chapter 2

### The Inception of Dwarka

An overwhelming feeling of joy swept over me; indeed, there could not have been a greater reason than this, for me to be thrilled in life. However, the immense happiness that I was experiencing had its downside too. Thinking continuously of Rukmini and my future kingdom had robbed me of my sleep at night, and of my ability to work during the day. Alas, what could I do? My thoughts revolved only around Rukmini and my kingdom. However, despite this predicament, I was aware of my duties. I was well acquainted with the ground reality that dreams could be realised only by implementing tasks. So, I thought, ‘Why not dream less often and resort to action?’ For, the capital city of a *karmaveer* (man of action) such as Krishna had to be nothing but the best! In the past, I had visited many kingdoms, each possessing its own distinct charm; I also had some experience in building townships. So, I thought, ‘Why shouldn’t I, on the strength of my actions, build a city that would be the finest of all in Aryavarta?’ Firing up my imagination, I pulled myself out of my reverie and began to meditate upon the blueprint of my kingdom. In fact, I had begun to visualise building a kingdom that would be admired and talked about for generations. To be honest, ever since I had seen Panchajanya’s kingdom by the sea, I had harboured a desire to live by the sea. And now, by Nature’s grace and through our dedication, it appeared that this dream would be fulfilled. I resolved that the kingdom of my dreams would become the most beautiful, secure and majestic in the whole of Aryavarta. At the outset, I had also decided that I would provide my subjects heavenly bliss in my kingdom. Unlike the people of Mathura and some other kingdoms, my subjects would live a life free from bondage, poverty and misery.

‘So much for the subjects, but have you thought about anything for yourself?’ The voice within, prodded again. Of course, I had decided that I would not lead a life of distress and hardship either. No more fleeing from Jarasandha! His thirst for revenge would never be quenched and I had no intention of fighting a war with him after having established my kingdom. Therefore, the only solution to this problem was to ensure that my capital city was built in an impregnable location, fortified from all directions, so that Jarasandha would not dare attack it.

In an instant, I decided that my foremost priority would be the safety and security of my kingdom. Did you see how productive my thinking had become, once I had snapped out of my dreams and immersed myself in planning my kingdom? In fact, it was this innate quality I possessed—of ultimate concentration—that had made me ‘Krishna’. Oh! There I go again! Never mind! It has become a habit with me to praise myself every now and then. So, let me return to where I had left off—contemplating my kingdom and how to tackle Jarasandha. Well, my future kingdom and its glory would be meaningful only if its king, that is, I, survived. And there was only one person constantly baying for my blood—Jarasandha. Therefore, without thinking about a permanent solution to this problem, it was futile to imagine anything concerning my kingdom. Carefully considering several possibilities, I realised that Jarasandha did not seem well equipped to attack from the seafront. Nonetheless, I wanted to exercise caution and secure my kingdom from all four directions, just like Panchajanya’s kingdom, which had remained invincible for an eternity. In a way, this anxiety about securing my kingdom had its roots in my past. My entire life had been mired in struggle and conflict; the last few years had been particularly harrowing with Jarasandha constantly at my heels. What I mean to say is, until now, ‘Krishna’ and ‘conflict’ had been akin to the two sides of the same coin, but once my kingdom was established, I wanted to enjoy peace and harmony. While it was easy to imagine an ordinary cowherd boy running around in fear of Jarasandha, it would definitely not befit a king to be on the run. In other words, even if one were to consider the question of saving a king’s dignity, it was crucial to fully secure the kingdom from all directions. Finding a permanent solution to this ‘nuisance’ called Jarasandha, in my opinion, had become my kingdom’s top priority, and the plans I had come up with so far, in connection with this matter, seemed worthwhile.

It had now been about seven to eight days since bhaiya and Uddhava had left for Kushasthali, while I was still staying at our house on the banks of River Yamuna. Of course, I had summoned a few servants and soldiers to cater to my needs. If I had to spend my entire time thinking about my new kingdom, then why should I unnecessarily live amidst the hustle and bustle of Mathura? In any case, my new kingdom not only seemed beneficial to me in several ways but was also fully capable of seeing all my dreams

being realised. It offered me the possibility of settling down with the queen of my dreams, and even if I were unable to settle down, at the very least, I would have built for us a safe haven, which means we would not have to run from pillar to post seeking refuge or depend on anybody. As for struggle, there would be no trace of it left in my life! I was also sure that the humiliation I had endured in the past, having been derided as a mere cowherd boy, would not torment me in the future. Even if I were to overlook personal gains, the new kingdom would certainly become instrumental in providing heavenly bliss to my subjects as well. Not only would this kingdom change my life, but it would also provide a far better life to thousands of people. In other words, the establishment of this kingdom would not only benefit me, but also prove beneficial in the larger interest. Besides, is the well-being of people in any way different from my own well-being? Was it ever so in the past, or would it ever be so in the future? I had always sacrificed my desires in favour of the greater good. So, ideally then, I should also derive maximum benefit from the actions performed for the welfare of the people. In fact, a person who always keeps the collective benefit of society at heart finds blessings bestowed on him as well. And haven't I always wished for my own well-being along with that of the entire humankind? In fact, I had made this my supreme deed as well as duty in life. An important point to understand here is that, when a person's desires and duties differ from each other, he ends up leading an arduous life. However, when his desires and duties are one and the same, then not only does he live a joyous life but also enjoys his duties. Let me elaborate upon this, using my own life as an example. I only wished to work towards the greater good, which would encompass me as well. Similarly, if you observe carefully, that was the case with my duties too; my duty towards the greater good would be in unison with my own betterment. Now, with such harmony between my desires and duties, was I not bound to be happy? On careful consideration, you would realise that this was the only reason why my happiness was never affected, in spite of the numerous challenges I had had to face throughout my life.

I have gone too far and deep with this contemplation, haven't I? Now, let me tell you a secret. I had already decided a long time ago, that I would not marry Rukmini until I was able to provide her with a life of royal comforts, better than those she was presently enjoying at her father's house. For, it is

my firm belief that in life, one must always progress and move ahead. I had no right to marry Rukmini if I could not provide her a lifestyle better than the one she was presently enjoying in her own kingdom. How could I force her to downgrade her standard of living and offer fewer comforts to her, just because I had fallen in love with her? By now, you may have realised how incomplete I would have been without Rukmini in my life. So, I had to put in my heart and soul into making this kingdom the finest in the whole of Aryavarta. Indeed, Rukmini was proving to be my greatest inspiration in my endeavour to build the finest kingdom. However, inspiration and a heartfelt wish were not enough to build a kingdom, were they? In reality, building a kingdom and ensuring it was inhabited, were still distant dreams. At present, it was still uncertain whether it would be built or not. But, being a *karmavadi* (action-oriented individual) and an optimist, I was not only weaving dreams about my kingdom and Rukmini but was also keeping all negative thoughts at bay. I had channelled my entire consciousness into formulating the blueprint of my kingdom. You will not believe this, but I had not only envisioned and contemplated the laws of my kingdom, but had also seriously thought about its financial systems and taxes. After all, this was the perfect time to put to use the lessons taught by my grandfather and my experiences in Mathura. I was truly grateful to grandfather, who had taken me under his wing and had given me the opportunity to learn the intricacies of running a kingdom in an efficient manner. I would have never been able to establish my own kingdom otherwise, despite having possessed the wherewithal for it. But today, I was grateful to grandfather, for, it was because of his teachings, that within no time, I had even decided upon the standard of living of my kingdom. There would be long, broad roads, a magnificent palace, huge gardens, courtyards and grand marketplaces. Even the houses of my subjects would be large and of the finest kind.

In other words, we would not pinch and scrape as far as comforts and conveniences were concerned. Interestingly, as I continued mulling over the blueprint of my future kingdom day and night, I was able to gradually visualise its entire layout. Not only this, I envisaged every single detail concerning the kingdom. I already had the experience of establishing small townships such as Vrindavan, at a very young age. I had also built a settlement on top of the Gomanta Mountain. Considering my

accomplishments, it was hardly difficult for me to conceptualise the creation of my own kingdom.

Nevertheless, it was now close to twenty days since bhaiya and Uddhava had left Mathura. I was still staying at our house on the banks of River Yamuna. No words can express the bliss and contentment I was experiencing, thinking day and night about my new kingdom, drawing up plans and formulating the blueprints. And as for my stay at the house situated by the banks of the Yamuna, well, what can I say? It was nothing less than living in paradise! It had become a daily ritual to bathe twice in the waters of the Yamuna. Often, when I needed a change, I would go for a long ride in my chariot, along the banks of the Yamuna. Once in a while, I would also go to Mathura and visit grandfather and Kubja. Otherwise, my attention was focussed on my kingdom. This constant rumination over the minutest details of the kingdom was helping me gain clarity on a few more details. Most importantly, I realised that if I wanted a kingdom replete with comforts and conveniences, then I would have to build a relatively smaller kingdom. In fact, I would have to build a capital city, in essence, a kingdom consisting of a single city. In any case, we clearly lacked the wealth required to set up a large kingdom, which would not only be grand, but also equipped with adequate security measures. I was also well aware of the importance of formulating a realistic plan. To begin with, I thought it best to make living arrangements for twenty thousand, or at the most, thirty thousand people. As days flew by in deliberating and making decisions relating to my kingdom, eventually, there was not a single detail pertaining to it which I was not clear about. Even the structure of the kingdom was perfectly laid out in my mind. In other words, there was nothing left to think about, concerning my new kingdom.

With my task completed, there was no point in staying back at the house by the River Yamuna, so, I returned to my father's house. Once back in Mathura, I ran my eyes over the city to see if everything was fine. Indeed, everything appeared to be peaceful. For that matter, I did not see any scope for a new eventuality to occur in this city. So, there was nothing for me to do here either. Satrajit's transformed behaviour and his cordiality had rubbed off on other Yadava nobles too, ultimately compelling them to change their behaviour towards me. So, there was nothing to keep me occupied on that front either. Of course, I was well aware that this was a

temporary phase. Satrajit was, after all, a troublemaker, and this docility was nothing but a façade. For the time being though, these people had left me with no work to do. Having said that, I was not fully unoccupied either, because Satrajit was now a permanent resident of Mathura, and as long as the Syamantaka gem was with me, he would not go anywhere. Naturally, the poor man's life was tied to the gem, so it was important for him to keep a close eye on me. Similarly, it was vital for me to also keep a close watch on him and his activities. As a result, for the time being, it was almost as if the two of us were mutually employed to keep an eye on each other. However, a pleasant outcome of the entire situation was the delight I could see on Satyabhama's face. She seemed to bloom and revel in the fact that Satrajit's behaviour towards me had changed and that we were coming closer to each other. The poor girl was so ardently in love with me that she could not see through the superficial show of affection between her father and me. The fact was that, even as we pretended to be friends, both Satrajit and I were quite bitter about each other. Nonetheless, it was interesting to note that after the loss of the Syamantaka gem, which was his lifeline, Satrajit had fully transformed himself into a compassionate and amiable personality, almost overnight. From this, one can straightaway infer that excessive wealth feeds the ego. I am referring to these incidental matters only because I had finished thinking about the important aspects of my kingdom. I had had enough of dreaming too. Now, my condition was such that, if I diverted my attention from Satrajit, my overworked and weary mind would think only about bhैया and Uddhava. So, if it was Satrajit who was keeping me wide awake throughout the day, the wait for bhैया and Uddhava was robbing me of my sleep at night. The result was that although I was living in Mathura, I did not belong there anymore. For how long could I continue to visit grandfather and Kubja? My mind remained distracted even when I was present with them physically. My heart only wished to talk about my kingdom, which I was unable to, and the ones with whom I could talk, were making me wait for their return.

Fortunately, bhैया and Uddhava returned sooner than expected. And on seeing their enthusiasm, my hopes soared too. I was sure they had some positive news to share; my ears were in no mood to hear anything else. Since we could not talk about this matter at home or in the marketplace, I took them along in my chariot, and drove far away on the banks of the



Yamuna. As soon as we had left the city behind, sensing my impatience, they shared the news without preamble. Uddhava began the conversation saying, “We saw a fairly large tract of land lying to the west of Kushasthali, which is roughly sixteen *yojanas*<sup>[3]</sup> in length and about eight *yojanas* in width. It is nothing but rough forest land. It is also safe and secure, guarded by the elements. Not only is it located on the seashore but is also surrounded by the sea from all directions.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Keenly listening to their description and hanging on to every word they spoke while describing the land, I was certain that the tract of land was superior in every aspect. However, bhaiya and Uddhava were of the opinion that I should first take a look at it myself before finalising it for the kingdom. But I was fully satisfied with their description and had already visualised it in my mind. So, what was the point in wasting time by going all the way to see a plain tract of land?

Actually, I had become quite impatient. After all these years of running around and toiling, the prospect of a luxurious lifestyle, thoughts of my own kingdom and the enchantment associated with my potential marriage to Rukmini had all combined, to make me impatient. With these thoughts racing in my mind, I brought the chariot to a halt at our house situated on the banks of the Yamuna. Since we were only interested in talking about the kingdom, and our conversations would continue late into the night, this was the ideal place to do it. The principal merit of this tract of land, from what I could gather, was that it was not very large; as a result, we could easily make it as magnificent as we wanted it to be. Moreover, the land was well secured and also located near the sea. What more could I have asked for? This land seemed to actually exceed my expectations in every possible manner. The description of the land itself was enough to convince me that it was perfectly suited for our kingdom. With that, I had made up my mind to establish my capital city on that tract of land!

As soon as we began our discussion, the first question that arose in my mind was, who would construct the capital? Bhaiya wanted to assign the work to the descendants of the Maya community, as they were highly experienced in building cities by the seashore. However, I did not agree with him because the Maya people were *Rakshasas* (a demon community), and we had only recently become sworn enemies of the *Rakshasas* by

waging a war on Punyajan, a *Rakshasa* himself. In such circumstances, assigning the work to these demons could compromise the secrecy of our kingdom, and we all knew that secrecy was the key to maintaining security. Besides, the Maya people were known for their somewhat garish and ostentatious style, whereas I wanted the architecture of my city to reflect grandeur and elegance. There was a third reason as well, which I had not discussed with bhaiya and Uddhava as I thought it unwise to do so. However, I see no reason to hide it from you. Actually, Jarasandha shared a friendly relationship with the *Rakshasa* clan, and it would be prudent to remember that Jarasandha was our sworn enemy. Therefore, I did not want to broach the topic of Jarasandha in bhaiya's presence as it would have unnecessarily agitated him and he would have even called me a coward for fearing Jarasandha. He would have even gone so far as to deliberately assign the work to the *Rakshasas*, as a result of which, I would have been compelled to once again run helter-skelter in order to escape Jarasandha's wrath. Nay! I did not even want to think of such a scenario. And this was exactly why I did not mention the third reason to him. Honestly, whether it was Jarasandha or my very own brother, both were like phantoms in my life. One would demonstrate bravery to seek revenge, and the other would take revenge on me by flaunting bravery!

On a serious note, I was of the opinion that we needed to seek services of the renowned architect Vishwakarma to construct our capital. At the time, he was the best architect in Aryavarta. There were two more advantages in employing his services. Firstly, the construction of the kingdom and its security would remain a secret, and secondly, it would be the most artistic and aesthetically built city. Moreover, the broad roads, magnificent gardens and the seafront would definitely add to its appeal, making it the finest capital of Aryavarta. Eventually, after carefully elaborating upon the benefits of hiring Vishwakarma for the construction work, I won the argument, and it was decided to appoint Vishwakarma as the master architect. It was also decided that, whenever required, we would personally pay a visit to Vishwakarma to discuss the matter. This, we felt was prudent, for, if he or any of his assistants were to arrive in Mathura to meet us, then the kingdom's secrecy could be compromised. Similarly, it was also not desirable for the three of us to go together to meet him. Since I was in charge of the finances and the blueprint of the capital was also

systematically mapped out in my mind, it did not make sense for anyone to pay a visit to the architect, except me. Now, even though we had finalised the steps to be taken and made all the decisions, and there was nothing more to discuss, none of us wished to retire to bed. Though I had no trouble staying awake, bhaiya and Uddhava were exhausted due to their long journey. Nevertheless, they stayed up late too, and finally, all of us retired to bed well past midnight.

The next morning, we returned to Mathura and busied ourselves, making preparations to leave. There was not much to prepare though, except for a few pending discussions. This was completed in two days' time and on the third day, I took leave of bhaiya and Uddhava. Fortified by their warm hugs and good wishes, I set off alone in my chariot, to meet Vishwakarma. His township was situated on the way to Kushasthali, so I was more or less familiar with the route. This was the most enjoyable journey I had undertaken, lost as I was in the dreams of Rukmini and my kingdom. Honestly, I had never felt so enthusiastic before! This kingdom was the city of my dreams, and one day, the queen of my dreams, Rukmini, would also, most likely, live here with me. In fact, the establishment of this new kingdom was about to herald a new chapter in this humble cowherd boy's life, one that would be filled with love, prosperity and honour. Throughout the journey, I was so engrossed in dreaming about my capital that the distance to Vishwakarma's city was covered in no time. The city, though small, immediately gave the impression of having been built by a master craftsman. An avenue of dense trees shrouded the roads in shade. The crossroads also seemed quite neat. The population could not have been more than three to four thousand people, and most of them seemed to be craftsmen. After asking a few people for directions, I soon reached Vishwakarma's house. Fortunately, I did not have to wait long to meet him. In my eagerness to reveal the motive of my visit, I skipped pleasantries and introduced myself in a direct manner. Despite my lack of courtesy, Vishwakarma welcomed me with open arms. Encouraged by such a welcome, I quickly initiated a detailed description of my kingdom. I explained, "Actually, we have only selected a tract of land, so, we will have to build the city from a foundational level. We are expecting about twenty-five to thirty thousand people to reside in this city. My only desire is that

the kingdom should be equipped with modern amenities and facilities and special attention be paid to its aesthetics and security.”

Under any other circumstances, Vishwakarma would have probably opposed my ideas or straightaway rejected the proposal itself. However, the prospect of creating a whole new city had probably appealed to him. Moreover, my enthusiasm must have rubbed off on him too. However, all this was mere speculation on my part; from his demeanour, he had not indicated or explicated anything. But yes, he had certainly gestured to me to finish speaking about my proposal. This gesture was a positive sign for me. So, in the hope of sealing the deal, I said, “If you like, you could first survey the land, because I would like the construction work to begin at the earliest. I would like to instate myself in the new kingdom within a year, or a year and a half, at the most.”

Perhaps Vishwakarma appreciated my enthusiasm as well as my haste. Hence, after dwelling on it for a few moments, he replied, “I am willing to construct your kingdom. If everything goes according to plan, then, considering the small size of the tract of land, its construction can be completed in a year’s time. I have a large and experienced team of assistants at my disposal.” As soon as I heard this, I jumped with joy, for, I had been awaiting his consent with bated breath. However, before I could make up my mind whether to control my joy or express it, he took the conversation ahead saying, “Before I present my own thoughts on this, it would be better if you could share your thoughts about the capital in detail.”

I was naturally more than willing to comply. I quickly replied, “I do have a complete and elaborate plan for the capital city mapped out in my head. With your permission, I would like to explain.” Obviously, asking him for permission was only a formality, and as soon as he gave it to me, I began to elaborate upon the design of my dream city. “First and foremost, I want you to pay the utmost attention to the security of the kingdom. In this context, I suggest there should be only one main entrance to the city, which needs to be well fortified and impregnable. Since we have the advantage of the sea surrounding us from all directions, the entrance should be built only through the sea. This would make it impossible for any king in Aryavarta to attack us.”

Although I had said this in a grave manner, for some reason, Vishwakarma's face twitched with a mischievous smile. He commented in a teasing tone, "An entry from the sea, especially to keep Jarasandha at bay, am I right?"

I was so mortified on hearing this that I wanted to hide my face in shame. I thought to myself, 'Really, Uncle Kansa, even after your death, you have managed to set loose on me a disease deadlier than yourself!' So persistent was this affliction that even after defeating Jarasandha thrice, it was he who was weighing down heavily upon me, and I was the one running away from him, even today. To make matters worse, Jarasandha had become a perennial cause of my humiliation, making me an object of ridicule. Nevertheless, before the matter could take a humorous turn altogether, I steered the discussion back to my kingdom. Adopting an even more serious tone, I said, "The royal palace should be located in the centre of the city, with an imposing façade, lending it an awe-inspiring look. Besides, it should be replete with all kinds of modern amenities such as a grand courtyard, a large bathing pond and about ten guest quarters. The living quarters for the royal staff should be situated close to the palace with a capacity of about five hundred people. Their quarters should also be well equipped with modern facilities. I also want about twenty modern homes to be built for the nobles, which should include royal amenities. There should be about two thousand small houses for the common people as I do not want them to live in ramshackle homes anymore. Since we are building the city from its very foundations, I want broad tree-lined avenues surrounded by beautifully manicured gardens to be built at the outset. There should also be a large, open ground where we can celebrate festivals. Additionally, I want a vast marketplace to be built next to the main entrance, which should house about fifty shops, ten of which should be big, and the rest, small. Furthermore, next to the market, there should be about five large warehouses where traders can store their goods."

Carried away by my enthusiasm, I rattled all this off in a single breath and then, fell silent. Now, it was Vishwakarma's turn to respond. The architect, nearing seventy, was tall and thin and, in spite of his long and flowing white beard, possessed an impressive personality. He had powerful, impressive eyes, and his piercing gaze disconcerted me enough to make me look around distractedly. We were seated in a beautiful garden attached to his

house which had a large bathing pond in the centre. I found myself attracted to the pond's ethereal beauty. Surprisingly, Vishwakarma resumed the conversation by first giving me a pat on the back. In fact, he was both surprised and delighted on hearing me give such a detailed description of the requirements of the kingdom. Lauding me, he said, "You know your requirements well! Your description is so precise that I can visualise the entire map of the capital without even having visited the site. Nevertheless, for your peace of mind, I shall visit this land and survey it along with my associates as soon as possible. We can carry on our discussions once I return from my site visit, which would be about a month from now." The best outcome of our meeting, however, was his assurance that my royal capital would be the best in the whole of Aryavarta! I was more than ecstatic on receiving such an assurance. This was exactly what I had wanted. The capital city of a cowherd boy had to outshine the other kingdoms of Aryavarta, so that it could completely obliterate the image of the poor cowherd once and for all. We concluded our meeting on this optimistic note, and after spending a night in Vishwakarma's city, I left for Mathura, happy and thrilled with the overall progress of the meeting. Thoroughly pleased with my meeting with Vishwakarma and having taken such a fancy to my yet-to-be-built city, I even dreamt of making it my permanent place of residence.

Back in Mathura, I briefed bhaiya and Uddhava, giving them a summary of my meeting with Vishwakarma. I also instructed them to be present at the site by the time Vishwakarma and his associates reached there, so that they could assist them during the inspection of the site. I did not want the slightest miscommunication or misunderstanding to occur, which might delay the construction work by a month or two. Honestly, I did not want to lose even a moment, let alone days. We were so preoccupied with the thoughts of our royal city, that it felt as if we did not belong to Mathura anymore. As for me, I visualised Rukmini sitting beside me every day on the royal throne of my yet-to-be-built city. Indeed, it was a Herculean task for the three of us to contain our excitement! The desire to constantly discuss our city was so intense that we had decided to move to our house by the Yamuna. After all, we knew we could not utter a single word about our capital city in Mathura's royal palace. Regardless of whether our conversations made sense or not, they would invariably revolve around the

topic of our future capital. All that our hearts desired was to talk about our capital city, so, we had honestly no interest in discussing anything else. And why would we? When we had already embarked upon the path towards realising a great dream, it was only natural that we wished to keep talking about it. Ten days flew by, and soon, it was time for bhaiya and Uddhava to leave for the site, as discussed. With their departure, I was once again left all by myself. Savouring every moment of this solitude, I was so lost in the sweet dreams of my capital city that I was hardly aware I was alone. However, now, as there was no one with whom I could discuss my plans, I quietly returned home. Each passing moment seemed to last an eternity as I began to spend my days twiddling my thumbs, waiting impatiently for Vishwakarma to inspect the site.

Left with nothing to do but wait, my mind began meandering down paths hitherto untraversed. As it has been rightly said, ‘An idle mind is the devil’s workshop’, I was suddenly besieged by a gnawing concern. ‘How much would it cost to build a capital city? What if we were to fall short of money?’ Gradually, these perturbing questions spread their tentacles, holding my mind and body in a vice-like grip. Of course, I still possessed most of the valuables that Chandak had gifted me, the huge treasure trove of diamonds and precious stones that we had found atop the Gomanta mountain and also the jewellery which Queen Padmavati had presented to me. Moreover, I now also had the Syamantaka gem with me. All these were ample possessions, no doubt, but I could still not convince myself that my anxiety was entirely unwarranted. Would all these riches be sufficient to build a beautiful capital city? It was a question certainly worth deliberating upon. Obviously, I had no inkling about it, for, this was not the same as estimating the price of milk, curd or buttermilk. This worry kept my mind engaged and served as a good excuse to while away my time. My mind was constantly juggling between thoughts of a shortfall of money and the anxiety of abandoning the dream of my capital city. ‘If I fall short of money, would the capital never be built? No, no... that could never happen. How is it possible for the capital not to be built? It will be built, probably on a scale smaller than expected, with fewer amenities, but it would definitely be built!’ No sooner would I comfort myself with these words, than another worry would invade my mind. ‘Let’s assume for a moment that all the wealth you possess turns out to be insufficient to build even a smaller

capital. What would you do then, Kanhaiya?’ I would quickly console myself saying, ‘No, no... we certainly have enough wealth to at least build a modest city. ‘But still, what if all the wealth you had was insufficient? Where would you get more money from? Kanhaiya, you do not have the means of securing more wealth. It is not as if you have an enterprise where you could work day and night and earn additional wealth. Would you then resort to stealing?’ ‘Wait, what are you saying?’ I replied. ‘Do I look like a thief to you?’ The voice reminded me, ‘But didn’t you steal the Syamantaka gem?’ I immediately responded, ‘Not really, I was compelled to steal it, as it was the need of the hour and it was for the greater good.’ I had to steal it to give the people of Mathura what they rightfully deserved. If this meant my capital city would not be built, so be it. Neither could I ask anyone for help, nor could I stoop to stealing unnecessarily. While these thoughts ran riot in my mind, I would once again reassure myself saying, ‘Trust me, Kanhaiya, such a situation will not arise. You have enough wealth to build your city, and you will bring Rukmini there as your queen. And when Nature has blessed you with such bountiful wealth, wouldn’t it help you with some more if the need arose?’ Reassuring myself in this manner, I would once again feel happy and satisfied. I was, indeed, playing a strange game with myself. Sometimes, I would become agitated by thinking excessively about the matter and worrying about it, and later, I would console myself and become cheerful once again. I played this strange game for an entire month, until bhaiya and Uddhava finally returned from their site inspection. Not only did their arrival end my waiting, but it also ended the game I was playing with myself.

Satisfied with Vishwakarma’s inspection, bhaiya and Uddhava were also highly excited. Impressed with the master architect, both of them could not stop singing his praises. All in all, my decision of having opted for Vishwakarma to build my capital city had proved right. Seeing everybody so excited, I could not stop myself either. Their eagerness and passion had enthused me as well, and within two days of their arrival, I set off to meet Vishwakarma, carrying bags full of valuables with me. Incidentally, Vishwakarma too, was eagerly awaiting my arrival. This could only mean that both of us were equally excited about the endeavour. He immediately shared his views about his assessment of the site, “Krishna, believe me, there cannot be a better site for your dream city than this! The site is ideal



and wonderful in terms of both security and aesthetics.” Saying this, he suddenly fell silent. After a pause, he resumed speaking animatedly, “Previously, we had considered clearing the forest and then proceeding with the construction of the city. However, on examining the tract of land, we changed our mind. The main reason for this is that the land is naturally covered from all sides by lush greenery, so, it would not be advisable to remove this natural, protective cover. Besides, cutting down the forest would alert the *Rakshasas* settled nearby, who may not only disrupt the construction activities but also damage the kingdom before it is even built. If we preserve the greenery, we can not only save the natural cover of this land but also ensure that the secrecy of our construction is maintained under this green veil.”

I had already been impressed by Vishwakarma’s proficiency, but now, I was also convinced of his foresight. Expressing my admiration, I said, “You have indeed demonstrated great foresight. This will certainly help keep the construction work under wraps. Besides this, if you wish, I will station some of my trusted soldiers to safeguard the site from sudden attacks by the neighbouring *Rakshasas*.”

Highly impressed with my idea, it was now Vishwakarma’s turn to praise my foresight. He was so excited that he quickly started elaborating upon the plans he had in mind. “The large boulders bordering the seashore will be left untouched, as fierce waves continuously lash against them. Besides, the boulders enhance the beauty of the place, lending the entire area a spectacular view. Apart from the beauty, the enormous rocks would provide natural security and help in deterring the onslaught of enemies, making it impossible for them to reach the city. Thus, not only will the security remain intact, but the natural beauty will also be preserved.” Pausing to take a deep breath, he continued, “In my view, even the greatest warrior of Aryavarta would find it impossible to breach the security of your kingdom, despite a thousand attempts. Conceding defeat to the mighty rocks, he would simply be forced to retrace his steps. So, in my opinion, we need not worry about security anymore. Moreover, present-day weapons would be rendered useless in light of the huge, indestructible main entrance gate which we have planned to construct. In other words, I can assure you, Krishna, no other capital in Aryavarta will be as secure as yours. Your capital will remain unyielding and impregnable from all directions. Dressed

in lush greenery and surrounded by gushing waterfalls, this elongated city, with its levelled ground, would resemble a delectable platter, bestowed upon us by Nature. So, with respect to aesthetics too, your city will be unrivalled in the whole of Aryavarta.”

Vishwakarma’s eloquent description of my kingdom was enough to trigger my imagination, allowing me to visualise my city in all its glory. My mind started forming startlingly clear images as he vividly described his vision. Enraptured by Vishwakarma’s narration, I was truly lost in the vision of my city.

Meanwhile, Vishwakarma continued with his riveting description, “Your capital will be surrounded by the Raivataka mountain ranges to the east, the Latvishta mountain to the south, the Sukaksha to the west, and the Venumanta mountains to the north. Needless to say, this will not only enhance the capital’s natural beauty but also make it one of the best in Aryavarta. To retain the natural form of these enveloping mountains and preserve their pristine beauty, we would not break them down to gain access to the city. Instead, we will have to build about thirty doorways for gaining entry into the city.”

Thirty doorways! Vishwakarma’s suggestion not only astounded, but also worried me a bit. Concerned, I exclaimed, “So many gateways? Will they not compromise the security of the city?”

Amused at my reaction, Vishwakarma chortled, “No! These will actually be strong, invincible walls that will be made to look like gateways from the outside. So, the whole city will be secured and surrounded by thick, sturdy walls. In short, despite possessing the characteristics of a large capital city, it will actually be an impenetrable fortress.”

As soon as I heard the explanation, I spontaneously exclaimed, “So many gateways or *dwaras*, surely then, this city should be called ‘Dwarka’.”

Vishwakarma instantly liked my suggestion, and with that, we agreed to name my dream capital ‘Dwarka’. After finalising several details, we discussed a few more aspects related to the kingdom. In the course of our discussion, I also asked him to build six large ships and eighteen small ones. Ever since I had travelled by sea in one of Panchajanya’s ships, I had

nurtured a desire to travel in a ship, celebrate festivals aboard, and fulfil every desire I had harboured ever since. For Vishwakarma, who was building such a huge city, constructing a few ships was child's play. So, this requirement too was added in. Vishwakarma's plans had not only pleased me, but had also excited me greatly. Even though I was physically present with him, I had drifted off into a dream world of a perfectly and beautifully constructed capital city. Then suddenly, the bubble burst, and, with a jolt, I was hurtled back to the present. Anxiety gripped me as that familiar nagging question returned to haunt me—how much would it cost to build this dream city? Unless I could get this calculation right, everything else was meaningless. If I ran out of funds, Dwarka would end up as nothing but an unrealised dream, a cowherd's beautiful but unrealised dream! Seeing me break out into a cold sweat, Vishwakarma asked me the cause of my worry. Well, unwilling to let this opportunity slip by, I opened my heart to him and unhesitatingly poured out my worries, expressing myself clearly, "I need an estimate for the cost of building this city. I want to ascertain whether I have enough wealth for it or not." Vishwakarma not only understood, but also paid heed to my anxiety. He immediately asked ten of his assistants to prepare an estimate of the entire construction cost.

The assistants began working out the cost of construction, and as time ticked by, I waited nervously with bated breath, unsure about the fate of my capital city. I am sure you can empathise with me; my plight was such that I was reduced to a bundle of nerves. It may have been a routine matter for Vishwakarma's assistants, but my heart was pounding wildly as I waited for the estimate. Alone in a new place, amidst unknown people, I was waiting for them to give me the estimated cost of building my dream kingdom. With each passing moment, the anxiety was killing me. My entire life's hard work and efforts, my dreams, the welfare of thousands of people, in fact, everything hinged on the cost estimate of the entire project. With these worries constantly nagging me, even retaining sanity during my waking hours had become a difficult task, let alone getting some sound sleep. However, even as I waited nervously for the cost estimate, I had firmly resolved to establish my kingdom, regardless of the circumstances. If my accumulated wealth turned out to be inadequate, only the outer walls and a few essential elements would be constructed. Eventually, we would build the other facilities the way we had done on Gomanta Mountain and in

Vrindavan. If worse came to worst, my capital would not be the best, and building it would require more hard work and would take longer than expected. However, I would still have a capital! I would still have Rukmini's companionship; my queen would be by my side. As for the hard work that all this would entail, well, did cowherd boys ever shy away from it?

Nonetheless, I spent three harrowing days, besieged by disturbing thoughts and misgivings, when finally, the estimate was ready. Since I was unsure of the value of my treasure, I had not only brought along the count of all the gems and jewellery in my possession but also samples of various valuables, which I quickly handed over to Vishwakarma for proper evaluation.

He had already arrived at the estimated cost of building my capital city, and now he would be determining my worth as well. My fears were justified; the cost estimate turned out to be higher than I had imagined. It was a relief, however, to learn that the suggested estimate was not as steep as I had feared, and I could still establish my kingdom. After intense discussions and much deliberation, we arrived at a middle path. According to the plan, we decided to retain the infrastructural aspects such as roads, marketplaces, the palace, the ground and the gardens, although the number of houses for common people would have to be cut down by half. I also agreed to reduce the number of ships and boats to be built, to a quarter of the original number. To reduce expenses further, Vishwakarma offered a wise suggestion. Instead of building the remaining independent homes, we would build three simple mansions consisting of hundred chambers each, wherein each family would occupy one chamber. That was not all; we also minimised the requirements in various other aspects. Vishwakarma was assisting me enthusiastically in every decision, providing great insight and knowledge. It was only with his help that we were able to finally balance the cost of construction with the wealth available to us. And it was only then that I could truly heave a huge sigh of relief. The rest of the developmental work would be completed gradually after earning some more wealth, but for now, at least the dreams of this cowherd boy would not remain unfulfilled due to a shortage of funds. Honestly, I felt as if I had been given a new lease of life. Happiness and joy emanated from every pore in my body. In fact, a cowherd boy was being given a new lease of life as a 'king'! As soon as everything was finalised, I handed over the gems

and jewellery I had brought with me to Vishwakarma as initial payment. He accepted them graciously, and with this act, we sealed the deal. We had arrived at a decision regarding most aspects of the construction work. We had also arrived at an almost accurate cost estimate for the same. Now, the question was of determining the payment schedules. Well, this too, did not prove difficult. After giving it some thought, Vishwakarma and I decided on a fortnightly payment schedule and I decided to personally come and pay the requisite amount. It was also decided that, during the course of construction, bhaiya and Uddhava would remain at the site along with Vishwakarma's team to help with the supervision. With this, we settled all matters. However, I had noticed an important development during this entire exchange; Vishwakarma seemed more enthusiastic than I was, about building the city of Dwarka. Possibly, as an architect, he also must have been nurturing a dream of building the finest city, and the opportunity to work on my capital city had reinforced this desire. Well, I was glad, for, not only would he find satisfaction in building the city, but in the process, my kingdom too, would turn out to be the best. Besides, I would not be the only one worrying about the city and dreaming about it; my worries were now his, and he had unwittingly become an ally in the pursuit of my dreams. And as our discussions progressed, I was proven right. I had cherished great dreams about my very own palace, as I wanted it to be as magnificent as possible. After all, I had to live there with the queen of my dreams, Rukmini. Vishwakarma's ideas, however, were far more grandiose than mine. His dream of lending an ethereal glow to not just the palace, but also to the entire city, excited me greatly. As a result, we would sit for hours every evening and discuss various details of the city. Even so, after so many discussions, I could fathom only the broader details of the plans. I tried to visualise the rest by unleashing my vivid imagination and letting it run wild with abandon. As opposed to this, Vishwakarma's mind was crystal clear, and he had etched the minutest details of the city in his mind. Perhaps this was the difference between a cowherd boy and a master architect.

By the end of our discussions and Vishwakarma's vivid descriptions, I was delirious with joy. While describing the various aspects of my capital city in detail, he told me that the royal palace and houses would be painted deep gold, while the shops in the market would be painted shimmering silver.

Describing the marketplace, he said it would be built using a great deal of glass and mirror work. Not only did the description sound out of this world, but as soon as I heard it, I lost myself in the world of shimmering, glassy, silver markets. As you are already aware, marketplaces had always been my weakness.

Elaborating further, Vishwakarma stated that all the main roads, as well as the marketplace, would be lit all night long with huge torches. This would make it the first market in Aryavarta to remain open till late at night. ‘In fact, why close the market at all?’ I mused to myself. Thus, lost in visualising the beauty of the all-night marketplace and the main roads lit brightly by flaming torches, I forgot all about Rukmini and the royal palace. Oh, how I wished a magic wand could instantly unfurl the beauty of Dwarka! Unfortunately, the only magic Nature has allowed us is the magic of *karma* (actions), and *karma* always takes time. The good news, however, was that Vishwakarma had estimated that the city’s construction would be completed within a year or so. To construct a city as large as this, a year’s time is not much, but when it is your dream venture, a year seems to be a really long time.

Well, after key decisions had been made, there was nothing left for me to do. So, I bid farewell to Vishwakarma and left for Mathura, accompanied by pleasant thoughts of my capital city. What else could occupy my mind anyway? To realise such a grand dream was not a trivial matter, especially for someone like me who had been facing obstacles strewn in my path by Nature. ‘Be that as it may,’ I thought, ‘Why spoil such a beautiful moment by thinking of Nature?’ By now, I had reached Mathura, basking in my dreams throughout the journey. The first thing I did, upon reaching the city, was to describe my vision of the capital to bhaiya and Uddhava in vivid detail. Listening agog to the ambitious plans, they were delirious with joy; by the end of the narration, we even celebrated the imminent realisation of our capital city. Well, a celebration was in the offing anyway, as bhaiya and Uddhava had to leave for Kushasthali in the next two to four days. Naturally, the responsibility of the construction work rested entirely on their shoulders. So, all we had were these three days and, needless to say, we enjoyed them thoroughly. In fact, our merriment continued late into the night at our house on the banks of the Yamuna.

Caught in a flurry of emotions, we would hug and congratulate each other twenty times a day, at the slightest pretext. That was not all; no matter how much liquor bhaiya consumed, he invariably managed to stay sober. How could liquor intoxicate him anyway? The intoxication of liquor was no match for the intoxicating passion within us of building our own kingdom. Three days thus flew by, and I bid farewell to bhaiya and Uddhava after wishing them luck and a safe journey. With their departure, I was all alone once again, and in this void, a strange sadness engulfed me all of a sudden. Even though everything was fine, I could not shake off a feeling of foreboding. It was as if something were amiss. Could it be that in my enthusiasm for my kingdom I had forgotten a vital aspect which had the potential to ruin everything? I spent days and nights caught up in this worry. No matter how hard I tried, I could not free myself from this gloom. Finally, one day, it dawned upon me! I realised with dread the huge mistake I was making, and the possibility that all my dreams could be shattered in a moment. I had been so engrossed in dreaming and planning my capital city that I had totally forgotten about the perpetual sword hanging over my head. Yes, you guessed it right...Jarasandha! What if he chose to attack us before we could move out of Mathura and into my new city by the sea? Wouldn't all our hard work go down the drain? If this were to happen, then only our dead bodies would reach Dwarka! Clueless about how to chase this nuisance away, I did not know whom to curse—Jarasandha or my uncle, Kansa, or his aggrieved wives who had unleashed this plague upon me. Or should I blame Nature, which was neither allowing me to live in peace nor letting me fulfil my dreams? When Uncle Kansa was alive, he had been after my life. After his death, his wives had unleashed an even greater terror on me in the form of Jarasandha. I earnestly pray that nobody suffers such a terrible fate at the hands of their uncles and aunts!

However, these grievances were of no use. Honestly, with no solution in sight to ward off Jarasandha's attack, I was not prepared to go against him. After our meeting at Rukmini's *swayamvar*, I had merely been clinging on to a slim hope of not being attacked by him any time soon; at least not in the subsequent year and a half. Surely, I had sufficient reason to arrive at this conclusion, the most logical reason being, Jarasandha would definitely not attack me with a small army this time around. He had tried it thrice in the past, failing miserably each time. Therefore, I knew that he would

meticulously plan his next attack on me, and he would certainly launch it with a large army. And organising a huge army would undoubtedly require a long time. I certainly needed such positive thoughts in order to focus my mind on building Dwarka. Besides, some things are best left to Nature's will, especially when there is nothing you can do about them. Assuaging my feelings of despondency, I soon lost myself, once again, in the pleasant thoughts of Dwarka, and this was all I would do, day and night. This was the only way to relegate Jarasandha to the back of my mind and focus on building my city. As a result, I could now focus on matters other than construction activities. Actually, my earnest desire was to see Dwarka become self-sufficient and prosperous in every possible manner. To achieve this aim, it was imperative to establish it as a successful trade and commercial township. Having learnt my lesson well from Mathura's economic deterioration, I had planned to build an imposing market of about fifty-odd shops in Dwarka. Although the plan sounded good, my real concern was that depending solely on the inhabitants of Dwarka was not enough to ensure flourishing trade in such a huge market. I had seen many big bazaars in Aryavarta, and with my penchant for shopping, it was a foregone conclusion that Dwarka's market had to outshine the rest and acquire an enviable reputation as the most magnificent and unique market in Aryavarta. Of course, magnificence alone would not do the trick. The market also needed goods and wares which would set it apart from all other markets in the region. I began to think of goods which could be traded with other kingdoms. The city had to develop the ability to manufacture goods that could be sold throughout Aryavarta by creating a demand for them. It was only then, that having such a grand all-night market would make sense.

While I was lost in dreaming about the various aspects of my capital, construction work had already begun in Dwarka. Vishwakarma had assigned almost three hundred of his finest artisans to work on this project. Bhaiya and Uddhava had also reached the site to oversee the construction work. I too had begun visiting Vishwakarma every fortnight to hand over the requisite funds. Of course, each time I met him, I ensured I received a report on the progress of the work. According to the latest report, Vishwakarma's workers had cleared the site of all unwanted trees and wild grass, within a month's time. They had even planted a number of trees wherever necessary. After receiving updates on the various tasks



accomplished in Dwarka, heralding the progress of my city, a feeling of contentment swept over me. Indeed, you may be well aware of the level of satisfaction and happiness one derives from building his house; so, you can imagine the kind of joy I derived from building an entire kingdom! And now that work had commenced, it was progressing at an incredible pace. With it, my happiness and keenness too, were scaling their zenith. Each time Vishwakarma would apprise me about the progress made at Dwarka, I would return to Mathura and wander about, as if in a trance. At times, bubbling with enthusiasm, I would visit grandfather, and at other times, there would be a spring in my step and a song in my heart on my way to meet Kubja. Sometimes, in moments of delight, I would head to the banks of the Yamuna and immerse myself in the melodious tunes of my flute, and when in need of solitude, I would spend time at our house near the river.

The days were flying by at an astonishing speed, and the work at Dwarka was also progressing at a steady pace. Barely two months had elapsed since the construction began and work on the walls and doorways had already commenced. Bhaiya and Uddhava had not conveyed any news to me yet; whatever information I had gleaned was from Vishwakarma. But it did not matter where the reports came from, as long as they were related to the construction work at Dwarka. Needless to say, every fresh piece of news would fuel my enthusiasm further. Everything was moving smoothly in Mathura too. Even though I was scarcely paying attention to its affairs, I could definitely say that for once, I had nothing to worry about and everything was calm and peaceful.

Indeed, I could attribute this change in Mathura's political climate to Satrajit's amicable behaviour towards me. After all, in light of his friendly behaviour, was there any scope for anyone else to oppose me? An interesting development resulting from this superficial friendship with Satrajit was the number of frequent encounters with his daughter Satyabhama. She reminded me constantly of Radha and Rukmini. In a way, Satyabhama was becoming a bridge between my past and future, and rightfully so. Radha, unwilling to come to Mathura, had become my past. Rukmini was yet to come, so she could be termed my future. This meant that in the present, it was Satyabhama whose presence made my heart beat with joy each time we met. But wait, how could I forget Kubja? It was she, who truly belonged to my present. At any rate, since there was nothing

much to do in Mathura, my meetings with Kubja had also become frequent. To be honest, she was the only one who had made life bearable for me during these idle days in Mathura. Meetings with Satyabhama were occasional, and such chances were few and far between. Besides, it would not be prudent at all to wake up the sleeping lion, Satrajit, by meeting Satyabhama every day.

Oh! Why talk about Satrajit while describing such moments of happiness? Let's forget about him. So, while I spent my days in the company of Kubja, my nights were spent meditating over various matters, some concerning me, and some concerning others. Meanwhile, I had developed a habit of giving myself a pat on the back, reminiscing about the recent events and feeling proud of my achievements! After all, the capabilities of a mere cowherd boy building his own capital city with the help of his wealth, hard work, bravery and intelligence could barely be doubted! Truly, the only thing that remained was to take pride in this man's abilities and applaud him for his success. So, these days, when I had nothing else to do, I would often spend time marvelling at my meteoric rise and commending myself for it. Honestly speaking, my achievements acted as a balm on my ego, which was wounded by the humiliation and ridicule heaped on me, and by the derisive tone in which I was called a rustic, cowherd boy. As you are well aware, I had been subjected to terrible mortification on account of being raised in Vrindavan, herding cows and buffaloes, and for spending my childhood with mediocre means of sustenance. I am sure you also remember the numerous occasions when, in a fully packed courtroom, I had been ridiculed by Satrajit, Brihaddal and other Yadava leaders who had referred derogatorily to me as an uncouth or a lowly herdsman. In the same courtroom, fools such as Shishupala and Rukmi had also never missed an opportunity to pour scorn on me. Have you forgotten that I was not spared even in *Acharya* Sandipani's ashram? Vinda and Anuvinda, who were princes as well as my classmates, had often used indecent and impolite words while addressing me. Indeed, everyone who had found the opportunity to humiliate me, had done so, callously calling me a cowherd, an illiterate, an animal, destitute and bestowing several such 'titles' upon me. However, once Dwarka was established and I became the king of the finest city in Aryavarta, everyone would inevitably have to eat their words. To be honest though, such mockery and sarcasm had never affected me,

because my ego only knew how to surge forth; to sit back and nurse its wounds for no reason, was not in its nature. But yes, since I was blessed with a human's life, it was my duty, not only to progress in life, but also to safeguard my ego, whenever required.

Ego may be false; nonetheless, it drives a person to make progress. Similarly, progress may be illusory, but I believe that a constant endeavour for progress, for oneself as well as for others, is always better than roaming aimlessly like a lunatic in a forest or simply resting under a tree, doing nothing. Besides, there is magic hidden in the folds of progress. A person does not progress alone; the effects of it also radiate outwards to envelop several others around him. For instance, Dwarka was not being built only for me, was it? I was not the only one who would enjoy the vastness of the city. Grandfather, father, mother and many other inhabitants of Mathura would also be leaving their hellish lives behind. They would also enjoy the heavenly bliss of Dwarka.

Having pondered over the various aspects of my life's progress, I would like to add that I am a cowherd boy and, in my mind, I would always remain one. I knew that even when I became '*Dwarkadheesh*' (the King of Dwarka), it would only be so for the world. I would never forget my roots. When a person tries to fool others, it is understandable to an extent; however, there cannot be anyone more unfortunate on this earth than the one who deceives himself. It was for this very reason that in my heart of hearts, I knew that I would always remain an uncouth cowherd boy even when I moved to Dwarka and I intended to abide by this truth until my last breath. I was proud of being a common cowherd boy, and I was not ashamed of it. On the contrary, I believed that my identity as a cowherd boy would serve as an example to the world. The whole universe would bear witness to how a cowherd boy, through the sheer power of his determination and persistent efforts, had become the king of the finest kingdom in Aryavarta. I am sure that my life's achievements would inspire and encourage every poor and weak individual to strengthen his resolve and work hard towards the path of progress. He would overcome the feeling of helplessness and discard the notion which cripples many into thinking that they are destined to be failures because they are born into a poor family. I was convinced that, for ages to come, the establishment of Dwarka would serve as a beacon of hope for all those hard-working and resolute people in

this world, who aspire to fulfil their dreams. In my opinion, poverty is a curse in itself, whereas prosperity and wealth are every person's birthright, and to achieve them, one must make efforts, under all circumstances. When a poor cowherd boy could overcome great hardships and establish the finest city in Aryavarta, it automatically grants the right to every poor and illiterate person to dream big and fulfil those dreams through persistent efforts. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that every human is duty-bound to achieve greatness in life. If nothing else, at least from now on, no one would be able to blame their failures on circumstances, destitution or their family. At least they would not be able to hide their failures and weaknesses. They would not be able to shed superficial tears and say, 'What could I do? It was my misfortune to be born into a poor family; otherwise, I could have scaled great heights of success too. Sadly, I failed to receive an opportunity to educate myself, otherwise, I also would have been somebody worth admiring.' Nay! As long as Krishna's story is recounted and cherished, no excuses would be tolerated. Krishna demands action and progress under all circumstances!

Excuses are like a cloak; they hide weaknesses and failures and prove that you have accepted them as your fate. They are an indication of your surrender. If you consider my life, I came into this world with the shadow of death hovering over me, ready for my existence to be quashed the very moment I took my first breath. Born in captivity, I grew up in an abyss of doom, as a simple cowherd boy who was now poised to become the king of Dwarka. If even this example does not inspire you, then you are free to live a disgraceful life of failure, and I will consider my efforts to inspire and motivate you to have been rendered futile.

Oh well, let us leave that aside, for, this contemplation has stretched on for far too long. But what could I do? You are aware of my present circumstances. When endless dreaming exhausted me, I found myself surrounded by worries. In order to free my mind of these worries, I took refuge in contemplation. When I was tired of constant rumination, I turned to pride and conceit. And finally, when I had had enough of that as well, I began to preach! However, I was not sure how long I could continue in this manner. I had a long wait ahead of me, and there seemed to be no other means to while away my time. My condition was strange; though I was living in Mathura, my mind was in Dwarka. My mind was dreaming of a

better life for the people of Mathura, while my physical body was witnessing the abject poverty of Mathura's inhabitants. While my mind was far away, dreaming of leading a blissful life with Rukmini in Dwarka, my body was here in Mathura, in the company of Kubja. It seemed almost as if I were destined to lead a life divided between my mind and my body. For instance, even though I had left Vrindavan a long time ago, could my mind ever let go of it? Though I dreamt of Rukmini day and night, could I ever truly forget Radha? You are well acquainted with the affairs of my heart, so I shall hide nothing from you. Even when I was living in Mathura, my mind constantly wandered in the narrow lanes of Vrindavan. Sometimes, I reminisced about Radha, while at other times, I recalled climbing up the Govardhana Hill. At times, I remembered playing with my cowherd friends, and at other times, dancing with the *gopis*. My mind could not forget even the minutest detail of the days spent in Vrindavan. And, why would it? All that we have experienced and all that we wish to experience is, after all, part of our lives. In any case, we have the ability to control our mind only, while our body obeys the situational dictates of Nature; it cannot be coerced into doing anything. Consider my life, for instance. Despite my mind being firmly lodged in Vrindavan, hadn't my body travelled miles away? After killing Uncle Kansa, I had to fight Jarasandha, following which I was compelled to escape to *Acharya* Sandipani's ashram, in fear of Jarasandha. Thereafter, I had to slay Panchajanya as a means of paying my *gurudakshina* (a humble offering to one's *guru* for imparting knowledge) to *Acharya* Sandipani. On my return to Mathura, I had to once again flee the battlefield and take refuge in the mountains of Gomanta. However, despite the travels and the accompanying travails strewn in my path, the memories of Vrindavan had never left me. This is the reason I always say, that even when I eventually become the king of Dwarka, in my heart of hearts, I shall always remain a cowherd boy.

Indeed, this is true; in order to endure a thousand hardships in life, all you need is the strength of a few beautiful moments, which you have cherished in the form of memories, provided those days were spent in absolute bliss. At the same time, you must be able to accept the present situation in its entirety while working diligently and honestly. If this is difficult to understand, then let me try to explain it in a simpler manner. Wasn't my attraction towards Rukmini and the dream of spending my life with her

enough to inspire this ordinary cowherd boy to build a magnificent city such as Dwarka? Now, at that juncture, I did not even know whether my dream would be fulfilled or not. I was also not sure whether Rukmini would accept my proposal and come to Dwarka with me. These deliberations, however, were not very important; it was far more significant to build Dwarka while dreaming about her. So, in essence, I believed in nurturing the fondest memories of the past and cherishing dreams of a glorious future, savouring both to the fullest. However, you must understand that, neither was I sad about being separated from Vrindavan, nor was it absolutely necessary for me to make Rukmini my queen. But, was there any harm in dreaming away in one's spare time? The beauty of it was that each time I evoked memories of Vrindavan, it would almost magically become my present reality. Similarly, every time I dreamt of Rukmini, she would suddenly become my present reality. So, in a way, the golden memories of my past and the blissful dreams of the future were my only succour in times of distress. They gave me strength to cope with my present life, fraught with struggles, by becoming the complete reality of my present moments.

There is, however, yet another aspect you need to understand about me. I had always regarded myself as a puppet in the hands of Nature. I would immediately devote myself to any task or responsibility assigned to me by Nature. Thus, I had wholeheartedly surrendered myself to Nature's justice, allowing it to determine what I needed to do—or avoid doing, and where my presence was needed—or not needed. At the same time, I firmly believed that to dream about Rukmini and enjoy this feeling was my personal right and I would not accept interference of any kind from Nature in this matter. Of course, whether I would ultimately marry Rukmini or not depended on Nature's will and I had accepted this as my reality. In other words, there was no confusion in my mind about where to draw the line between Nature's prerogative and mine. Neither did I ever try to invade Nature's space, nor did I ever let it invade mine. It is precisely for this reason I had always accepted whatever Nature bestowed upon me, with open arms. I had never tried to escape from my present situation or shirk responsibility for an action I was duty-bound to perform. In fact, while performing all my actions, I was always a 'witness'. A point worth pondering over here is that the ego of a person who lives only in the present is bound to be stifled. Moreover, when a person becomes bereft of ego, his

life will inevitably become dull and dreary. This was the reason I always enjoyed my moments of leisure in the company of my ego. This was also why I had always nurtured and kept alive the joyful memories of my past and the beautiful dreams of my future. Having said that, I never allowed my ego to feed on the bad experiences of my past or my apprehensions about the future. So, while I kept the positive side of my ego alive, I did not allow its negative side to rear its ugly head. I had never questioned why I was born in captivity, or why I was born a cowherd boy. I had never dwelt on thoughts such as, why Uncle Kansa was obsessed with a desire to kill me, or why Jarasandha was baying for my blood. I also did not fret over why people used to mock me for being a cowherd boy. Nay! I had never allowed such thoughts to linger on in my memory. To dwell on such memories from the past is a perverted form of the ego. Let me elaborate on this—I had elevated even the ego to the level of the soul. To put it succinctly, I had embellished it with the golden memories of Vrindavan and was living my life cherishing these memories.

Similarly, harbouring desires for the future, and becoming despondent on being unable to fulfil them, is yet another distorted form of the ego. I had been careful not to let even this form of the ego take root within me. In fact, I would dream about the future and derive immense joy from it. I did not care whether my dreams turned into reality or not; at present, they were a source of happiness and this was enough for me. In fact, this is the most ‘supreme’ form of the ego which enables it to rise, and elevates it to the level of the soul. I firmly believe that when one’s ego can be elevated to the level of the soul, when it has the capacity to colour the painful moments of life with solace and happiness, then one should not unnecessarily kill it or fight it. I could never comprehend the oft-repeated exhortation by sages and saints to “Kill the ego!” In my opinion, it is imperative to learn the art of elevating the ego to the level of the soul. I have always believed that there is no greatness in freeing oneself of worldly illusions by abstaining from them. True greatness lies in remaining perched atop the peak of worldly illusions, enjoying them to the fullest, yet staying fully detached and unaffected by them. This is the very reason why King Janaka, who had attained self-realisation, had impressed me the most from amongst all the enlightened souls. In fact, I had enunciated this idea to Arjuna in the ‘Gita’<sup>[5]</sup>. In this manner, I had discovered a new way of spending time by

assessing my faculties. However, I had had enough of thinking on these lines as well; so, let us leave it aside for the time being. Instead, let me share the news of Dwarka's progress with you. As time passed by, good tidings had begun to stream in from Dwarka. Even bhaiya and Uddhava were sending me regular reports about the progress of work in the capital. Any news about the ongoing construction work would excite me, and holding these reports close to my heart, I would once again lose myself, dreaming about my kingdom.

According to the latest report, work on the roadways had commenced in full swing. On the other hand, construction of the houses was in progress too. In order to speed up the work, Vishwakarma had assigned separate teams to work on each task. As a result, work on the palace had also begun, slowly but steadily. The marketplace and the main gate of the city too were beginning to take shape. In short, we were making strides on multiple fronts. At any rate, the palace, marketplace and the main entrance required intricate detailing and sculpting, so it was natural that construction work on these elements would proceed at a slow pace. All in all, I was fully satisfied with the construction activities in my capital; not just satisfied, I was highly excited as well! The best part was, not only was the construction activity progressing rapidly, but time was also passing by swiftly. Consequently, my attention had now shifted from the construction activities to time itself. With each passing moment, I had once again grown anxious, for, the whole game hinged upon time. With this realisation, my attention was reluctantly drawn towards Jarasandha yet again; an attack by him would be enough to obliterate everything. Were it not for this sword dangling over my head, I would have been in no hurry to leave for Dwarka. After all, I was not dying here, was I? But in order to make it to Dwarka alive, it was imperative to leave Mathura before Jarasandha's attack, which was becoming likelier by the day.

Meanwhile, Vishwakarma was leaving no stone unturned to speed up the construction work. I understood perfectly well that to build a majestic capital such as Dwarka was, by no means, a trivial matter. But who would explain this to Jarasandha? Indeed, if Jarasandha were to attack Mathura before we could safely relocate to Dwarka, then the whole purpose of building it would become meaningless. I would have to abandon all thoughts of settling there. In fact, getting even a glimpse of my dream city



would be well-nigh impossible. Now, wasn't my situation incredible? Although it was a question of life and death, nothing was within my control. The decision to attack Mathura depended on Jarasandha, while the establishment of Dwarka lay in the hands of Vishwakarma. Between the two, here I was, stuck in the middle of a deep chasm named anxiety. The reason I am telling you all this is, because nearly a year had passed since the construction of Dwarka had begun, yet a lot remained to be accomplished. In a way, all the progress that had been made so far remained suspended in mid-air. Therefore, I thought, why not discuss this matter directly with Vishwakarma? So, on the pretext of paying the next instalment, I paid him a visit. Noticing my anxiety, he assured me that the entire work would be completed within the next four to six months. Considering the magnitude of the project, four to six months was not a long span of time. Yet, for me, it seemed an eternity, for, time was running out. A thousand worries had begun to besiege my mind. Noticing my edginess, Vishwakarma advised me to curb my impatience. But how could I convey my helplessness to him? I was not half as anxious to settle in Dwarka, as I was to flee from Jarasandha! However, no matter how helpless I felt, I could not reveal the truth to him, for, what was the point in displaying my fear of Jarasandha and tarnishing my own reputation? So, I remained quiet, and that was the end of the matter. Meanwhile, Vishwakarma wanted me to visit Dwarka to supervise the work and suggest changes, if any, while there was still time. However, I had full faith in him. Moreover, I could not remain absent from Mathura for long; if I did so, it might arouse suspicion. Besides, I now needed to be on the alert for any news of a potential attack by Jarasandha. The purpose of broaching the topic of Jarasandha was that, neither had he attacked us yet nor was there any news of a possible attack by him. If only I could have a few more months like these, then all my plans would fall into place.

With this worry weighing heavily on my mind, I returned to Mathura, but as they say, worry begets worry. To prove this adage true, one day, Shaivya and Shwetketu arrived in Mathura, out of the blue. Being in my own company all this while, I cheered up on seeing them, and immediately took them to our house by the Yamuna. We had just settled in the veranda when I noticed something amiss; both did not seem to be their usual selves. The colour had drained off from their face and they appeared quite frightened

and worried. Seeing them in this condition, my mind was gripped by a sense of foreboding—had the wicked Jarasandha and Rukmi harmed Rukmini? In any case, I firmly believed in hearing out bad news as quickly as possible. Thus, shaking off all assumptions, I immediately urged Shwetketu to tell me everything in a succinct manner. Sensing my anxiety, Shwetketu instantly revealed how Shishupala had fallen head over heels in love with Rukmini. He was repeatedly pressurising Jarasandha to arrange his marriage with her. Jarasandha loved Shishupala more than his own sons. Thus, finally, Shishupala's efforts bore fruit and Jarasandha promised to get him married to Rukmini.

O brother Shishupala! That is just great! Of all the beautiful maidens in the world, you had to fall in love with this one! How could you even think of it? You are my brother, which makes Rukmini your sister-in-law! But who would explain this to the fool, who would not even pay heed to his own father, King Damghosh? In fact, he had not even bothered to invite his father when he had gone to Rukmini's *swayamvar* the last time, all by himself, ready to marry her. Now, who would want to argue with such a nasty person? Seeing lines of worry crease my face, Shwetketu quickly added, "Actually, this is not the real problem. The main problem is that Jarasandha has pledged that he will not hold Rukmini's *swayamvar* again until he eliminates you and your brother, Balarama. Perhaps, this time, he doesn't want to risk being humiliated again."

Jarasandha seemed to have learnt his lesson. Well, better late than never, I thought! Besides, for the time being, Rukmini was safe, so what more could I have wanted? As for Jarasandha's plan to finish us off, he could continue to dream about it. For, the poor man had no idea that in a few months' time, we would have escaped to Dwarka. So, while the news Shwetketu had delivered was certainly not good, it did not upset me unduly. Once I had worked all this out, I became my usual self. I even laughed, and said to Shwetketu, "You are worrying so much, for no reason at all. This is hardly a cause for concern. It is not as if Jarasandha has only recently pledged to kill me. He has been baying for my blood for ages!"

Shwetketu looked at me solemnly and said, "I know whatever I have told you so far is not really a cause for concern. But what I am going to reveal now will certainly be a matter of grave concern!"

It seemed as if Shwetketu he could not bear to see me happy. ‘All right then, tell me the bad news!’ I said silently; I was prepared for the worst! After all, this was not new for me. Seeing me brace myself, Shwetketu continued in a serious tone, “A few days ago, Jarasandha had organised a meeting of all his allies. At the meeting, it was unanimously decided to take Kalyavana’s help to eliminate you once and for all.<sup>[6]</sup> Kalyavana is a *Rakshasa* king who is also considered to be one of the most powerful kings of Aryavarta. On seeing Jarasandha’s steely determination, Shalva took on the responsibility of enlisting Kalyavana’s help, since he had met Kalyavana previously on a number of occasions. But wait, the worst is yet to come! Sensing Jarasandha’s restlessness, Shalva set off to meet Kalyavana immediately. As if this was not enough, he craftily tried to gain Kalyavana’s sympathy and started singing an altogether different tune to get him to agree. He told Kalyavana that both you and Balarama are flexing your muscles and steadily becoming a threat to Aryavarta, disrupting peace in the region. He also told Kalyavana that the two of you have become bloodthirsty and are mindlessly slaughtering kings across various kingdoms in Aryavarta, which is why the other kings of Aryavarta wished to solicit Kalyavana’s help. Shalva told him that he should, therefore, be considered as the emissary of these kings, who sought his assistance to kill the two of you.” Taking a deep breath, Shwetketu continued, “Shalva informed Kalyavana that both of you lived in Mathura, and that the kings want to attack Mathura from two directions to ensure that you are eliminated. Kalyavana would attack Mathura from the north, while the rest of the kings, under the leadership of Jarasandha, would attack from the east. Flattering the demon king, Shalva told him that with his support it would become impossible for the two brats to escape.”

“Now, as you know, Kalyavana and Shalva are friends,” Shwetketu continued, “Moreover, he was told that all the other kings had collectively requested him to help them. This was enough to pander to Kalyavana’s ego. Swelling with pride and taking their request to be a testimony to his power, Kalyavana immediately agreed to launch an attack on Mathura. The matter, however, does not end there. He is fully prepared and all set to lead a huge army towards Mathura. In fact, he is probably on his way here already.”

The moment I heard this, I felt the ground beneath my feet give way. In an instant, I could feel my dreams being shattered before my very eyes. With

success within an arm's reach, this grave danger had suddenly come knocking at my door. I must say, Jarasandha was surely turning into a good politician, albeit gradually. Had Jarasandha told him that our enmity was personal, Kalyavana would have probably refused to attack Mathura. But now, I could not clarify this with Kalyavana, could I? I had to tackle the situation, regardless of how it had been created. Nonetheless, what could I possibly do about it? I was left with no alternative! My intelligence and wit seemed to have deserted me; I could barely understand what was going on. Besides, bhaiya and Uddhava were also not present in Mathura. If Kalyavana had indeed left for Mathura, then it meant that he would reach Mathura's gates within two months. Around the same time, Jarasandha would have arrived too, ready to pound Mathura from the east. Clearly, this meant that no one could save Mathura this time. With this development, my grandiose dreams and I were as good as burnt to ashes. This news had certainly squashed my dream of possessing my own kingdom and marrying Rukmini. Leave the dreams aside; at this moment, my life itself was at stake. Shwetketu and Shaivya too were badly rattled. Besides, Shwetketu was himself the commander of an army, so he could well understand the gravity of the situation, and that is why he had personally travelled so far to deliver this news to me. Nevertheless, once Shwetketu ended his address, the three of us fell silent, and sat quietly in a corner, fearing impending doom.

For that matter, there was nothing more to be said or done now. Another reason for our silence was that we were unable to come up with a solution. So, the three of us remained quiet and withdrawn. However, we did try and console each other with what seemed like empty words. Just then, in the course of our conversation, Shwetketu mentioned the promise Jarasandha and Shalva had made to Kalyavana that he would reign over Mathura once he had conquered it. Consequently, the *Rakshasa* king had begun dreaming of ruling a kingdom in this part of Aryavarta. 'Well, let him dream,' I thought, for, it was really a matter between him and the other kings. When we would no longer be alive to see it, why worry about who would get the kingdom? Thus, we passed two days wallowing in misery. In any case, Shwetketu and Shaivya's work was done, for, they had delivered the critical news. However, I did not want anyone to be privy to this piece of news; hence, realising the need for secrecy, I sent them back immediately.

## Chapter 3

### **Dwarka-bound, Against All Odds**

To my misfortune, both bhaiya and Uddhava were not present in Mathura, and I could not have discussed this matter with anybody else. For the first time in my life, I felt lonely and despondent. To be honest, today, I was really missing bhaiya's presence. So far, we had braved every challenge together; his mere presence would give me the courage to tackle a problem fearlessly. But now, when the biggest obstacle of my life loomed large before me, bhaiya was not by my side. I found myself in a strange situation; neither could I share my problem with anyone, nor could I bear such a huge shock all by myself. Never mind! When there was nothing left for me to do, the least I could do was distract myself. Lying on the banks of the Yamuna, I resigned myself quietly to the notes of my flute, playing it all night long. However, today, neither did my flute provide sweet succour, nor did it enrapture me. It had failed miserably to evoke even the memories of my beloved Vrindavan. In any case, dreaming of Dwarka and Rukmini was now futile, for, these dreams had vanished with the news of Jarasandha's impending two-pronged attack. So, although I played the flute all night long, I gained nothing. Instead, the pall of despair hanging over me throughout the night drained me further. Perhaps bhaiya's absence was the reason behind such a deep sense of gloom. However, it was not in my nature to remain dejected for very long. As you are aware, conceding defeat prematurely was against my disposition.

But what could I do? It was indeed a grim matter that had turned murkier with the news of a two-pronged attack on Mathura. While I was striving to reach for the stars, Nature had dragged me back to the ground. Not only that, it had dug my grave too. Everything was about to be lost! In a way, everything was already over and it was only a matter of time until events came to pass. It was indeed a complicated problem with no solution in sight. This time, I could not even turn a deserter and flee the battlefield as I had done earlier. If I did so, Kalyavana would instate himself as the king of Mathura, and if this were to happen, then grandfather would once again be thrown into a dungeon in his own kingdom. The people of Mathura would once again face tyranny. In any case, where would I escape to, after deserting my own people? And, for how long would I be able to evade

Jarasandha? He was sure to catch up with me some day. Nay, it would be far better if I were to live with my *Mathurawasis*, and die with my *Mathurawasis*... well, not live really, but die with my own people in Mathura! The consequences of staying back in Mathura were evident. Within two days, the combined forces of Jarasandha and Kalyavana would destroy me, along with the entire city of Mathura. In short, this time, there was no way out. To be honest, it seemed foolish to even think of a solution in this situation. Having said that, it was also not possible to give up on such a precious human life and surrender without putting up a valiant fight. Besides, it is my firm belief and also the proven truth that no matter how grave a problem is, the solution has to be found within the realm of one's actions. In order to act, it was necessary to keep the flame of hope alight, and so, I began to harbour optimistic thoughts once again. Indeed, after your troubles have tested your patience beyond a point, you start noticing a ray of hope. At the end of a long and despondent night dawns a bright new day. In an attempt to shield the flame of survival from being snuffed out, I tried to stoke the embers of my sagging spirit. Nurturing these thoughts, I managed to retain a positive frame of mind.

Soon enough, this optimism bore fruit, and hope rekindled in my heart. My confidence returned as I began recalling my own words, 'No matter how grave the danger, or how serious a problem, there is always a way out.' This was it! I focussed my consciousness on finding a solution. I resolved not to let my dreams of Dwarka, as well as those of my dearer-than-life Rukmini, be shattered. I refused to stare into the ghastly face of defeat, when standing so close to victory. I repeated this pledge to myself over and over again, and with each repetition, the determination to find a solution took firm root in my heart. Now, there was no question in my mind about focussing on anything else, neither on Kubja nor on grandfather. Even if I did meet either of them, I would still be lost in my own thoughts. So, despite living amidst the crowd of Mathura, I kept aloof, immersed in myself and my thoughts. In the solitude of my mind, I would reassure myself, 'Struggle is a part of life. To live and to carry on in the midst of struggles and to emerge victorious has become a habit of yours. So, why let the dark clouds of despair overwhelm you now? This was just another struggle, to be followed by yet another victory. It is far better to enjoy a life of struggle than to live a life of despair. The struggles in one's life are nothing but a game! So, play this

game with all your heart.’ These were profound words indeed and did carry great import but implementing them was not easy! For, this particular problem was certainly unique. Try as I might, I was unable to come up with a solution. To even imagine averting this crisis was useless, whereas in reality, winning had never been as crucial as it was today. The matter was not confined to just me and my dreams, or a tiny village or town. The question concerned the whole of Mathura and its inhabitants. Desperate needs combined with grim circumstances were calling out repeatedly, goading me to take action, ‘Krishna, wake up from your reverie and take charge; pick up your weapons. You do possess a range of interesting weapons, don’t you? A solution would certainly present itself. Besides, you believe in action; knowledge alone is of no use to you. Enough of these motivating thoughts! Now, it is time for action! Draw your formidable weapons—your power of contemplation, your elevated consciousness, your deception, lies, trickery and everything else you possess—and tackle the problem with all your might! Why should you accept defeat? Play your tricks, implement your ingenious ideas and go ahead and save everything!’

This was it! I resolved to overcome this situation at any cost. I motivated myself further by challenging my own ego, saying, ‘You think you are a fearless warrior, don’t you? Then prove yourself by overcoming this situation.’ Jarasandha and Kalyavana had already thrown down the gauntlet, but my identity too was now beginning to challenge me. The thought of ‘now or never’ had set my mind thinking in the right direction. Determined to overcome this situation on the strength of my resolve and good intentions, I repeatedly asked myself, what could Jarasandha and Kalyavana do to me? Now, after having revealed so many aspects of my mind to you, I see no harm in revealing yet another secret. A steady contemplation done to infuse confidence in oneself is what I call a ‘mantra’, and except for this, no other mantras exist in this world. Thus, I had fully immersed myself in constantly repeating this mantra to myself, which gave a tremendous boost to my confidence, and with a surge in my confidence, emerged a ray of hope. No sooner had the idea taken root, than it brought about results that were desirable. My ruminations had, after all, discovered a way out. A great calamity would be averted if I could somehow flee to Dwarka, along with the inhabitants of Mathura, before the arrival of Jarasandha and Kalyavana. Now, this was truly a brilliant idea! Hadn’t I said earlier that no matter how

grave a problem may seem, there is always a way out? In the same vein, the perfect solution to this difficult situation appeared in the form of ‘collective desertion’. Actually, I wonder why I had taken such an immense liking to the persona of a deserter! However, it suited me that, this time around, I would not be the only one fleeing; there would be thousands accompanying me. At least, I would no longer be the only one disdainfully referred to as a *rannchhod* (deserter).

Having given some more thought to it, another facet of this solution presented itself to me. Although the solution was perfect, its implementation was not easy. The biggest hindrance was the shortage of time. Moreover, to proceed further and put things into action, it was crucial for bhaiya and Uddhava to return to Mathura immediately. At the same time, it was also essential to speed up the ongoing construction work at Dwarka, as it was not just a question of one or two people; about twenty-five thousand people had to come together as *saamuhik rannchhod-rai* (collective deserters). This meant that the solution came with its own set of complexities. However, if I were to tap into the vast reservoir of my willpower, then although the task appeared onerous, it was still feasible. In fact, I had no alternative but to make it happen! Incidentally, once the solution was discovered, I felt a renewed surge of energy and vigour within me. Within no time, I had become my usual self once again, the ‘Krishna’ everyone knew so well. And once I had regained my usual, optimistic demeanour, I immediately geared myself up for action. My consciousness had done its work by suggesting a solution; now, it was the turn of ‘*karma*’ (action). And, when it came to action, there was no question of slackening at all.

I immediately set off to meet Vishwakarma. Feeling neither thirst nor hunger, I raced my chariot at the speed of lightning to overcome the paucity of time. As for exhaustion, well, what about it? There was absolutely no question of feeling exhausted, for, if I were to give in to fatigue, Jarasandha and Kalyavana would have put an end to me and my exhaustion forever! I had two main reasons for wanting to meet Vishwakarma immediately. Firstly, his men were regularly travelling to and from Dwarka, which would help me convey an urgent message to bhaiya, asking him to immediately return to Mathura. Secondly, I wanted to request Vishwakarma to speed up the construction work at Dwarka. Once I reached Vishwakarma’s city, I lost



no time in locating him. As soon as I met him, I said, “I request you to head to Dwarka yourself and ensure that the work is completed in the next one and a half months. Due to unforeseen circumstances, it has now become imperative for us to relocate to Dwarka within the next one and a half months.” Sensing the earnestness and gravity in my tone, he also responded with equal seriousness.

“Do not worry! If your need for relocation is so urgent, I shall immediately leave for Dwarka. Even if I am unable to complete the entire project within the stipulated time, I shall still try to finish work on the palace, the main gate and a majority of the big and small houses within the next month and a half. The construction of the marketplace, gardens, courtyard and so on, can continue even after your people have started residing there. This will have no impact on your relocation.”

This was indeed a gem of an idea, and such quick thinking too! In the span of a few moments, Vishwakarma had breathed new life into my dreams. Surely, I was not the only intelligent person in this world! Our main priority was to save lives; so, even if an adequate amount of work was completed, we could begin our new life in Dwarka. Other tasks could be completed at their own pace. At present, it was imperative to successfully escape from Mathura in time as the *saamuhik rannchhod-rai* (collective community of deserters). If we could manage to escape in the nick of time, the opportunity to settle in our own city would automatically open up.

Truly, Vishwakarma had, within moments, suggested what I was not able to envision, despite having pondered over it a thousand times. I certainly had a lot more to learn in life. It was this self-awareness that had always kept the doors of learning open for me. This was the reason I reposed more faith in learning than needlessly regarding myself as a person who knows it all.

Well, now that I had finished my work, having sought the much-needed assurance from Vishwakarma, there was no reason for me to stay back any longer. I then requested him to convey my message to bhaiya to return to Mathura immediately, for, bhaiya’s role in streamlining the process of mass relocation was crucial. Now, I was all set to leave. So, while Vishwakarma commenced his journey towards Dwarka, I left for Mathura. At this point, I was quite at ease, and for good reason too. Once bhaiya returned to

Mathura, and Vishwakarma sped up the pace of work, there was a real possibility of leaving Mathura in time. Now, all that we had to do was to convert this possibility into reality with the help of ‘action’, which I would anyway dive into, on reaching Mathura. However, no sooner had I begun to relax, than my mind was besieged with other thoughts. Wasn’t this the most peculiar—and in a way uncanny—equation which Jarasandha and I shared? So far, not only had I defeated him twice in battle, but had even prevailed over him once by fleeing the battleground. Yet, wasn’t it strange that I was the one who was repeatedly running for my life? Hopefully, this time, the ‘collective desertion policy’ would rid us of Jarasandha’s wrath forever. Once we were all safely ensconced in Dwarka, it would be impossible for Jarasandha to attack us. Forget about attacking us, even reaching the gates of Dwarka would be a Herculean task for him! ‘Now, Krishna, don’t get overly excited. It is not as if you are capable of reaching Dwarka by yourself! So, stop feeling euphoric and focus!’ No sooner did this thought enter my mind, than I returned instantly to the present moment.

I reached Mathura keeping this ground reality in mind and quietly started preparing for the relocation. In the absence of bhaiya and Uddhava, work moved at a snail’s pace; nevertheless, all my efforts were directed towards initiating the process of relocation. In this manner, I had at least kept myself busy while maintaining the thrill of escaping alive. At the same time, I truly deserved to be praised, for, not only did I have the foresight to expect a decisive attack by Jarasandha but I had also been on the alert for such an eventuality. Were it not for my foresight, everyone, including me, would have been ruthlessly massacred by the combined forces of Jarasandha and Kalyavana. ‘There you go again! Krishna... Have you lost your wits thinking about the massive impending attack? Well, it must be so; for why else would you divert your attention towards praising yourself every now and then, wasting precious time? You may swell with pride later, but first, make sure you escape alive! Agreed, you had anticipated an attack by Jarasandha, but did you also foresee a two-pronged attack, supported by other kings?’ At this point, my ego quickly came to my rescue. After all, the ego cannot give up so easily, can it? My dear people, this is what life is, after all! Even a person like me, despite his alertness, awareness and a sound mastery of psychology, is sometimes confronted by the unexpected. Nevertheless, you would agree that this time my ego was not entirely

wrong. In reality, this is what makes human life great. It is often seen that, although a person may be sitting on the pinnacle of success, he is assailed by thoughts of an uncertain future. The truth is, the mysteries of life are far greater and deeper than the highest point a human mind can reach. If considered carefully, it is the vastness of life which brings true joy to mankind. In fact, uncertainty about one's future is what makes life interesting. However, those who are naïve, continue to run around in their quest to find out what the future holds for them!

Oh well! Let's leave this aside and talk about what transpired in Mathura. Barely two weeks had passed, when bhaiya and Uddhava returned to Mathura. Both seemed to be in high spirits as Dwarka had shaped up beautifully. Blissfully ignorant of the gravity of the situation, their enthusiasm would have dissipated long ago, had they had even an inkling of the real reason for being summoned urgently to Mathura. How could they have known anyway? When I could not anticipate this problem myself, there was no question of bhaiya or Uddhava foreseeing it. So, before they could launch into an elaborate discussion about Dwarka, considering the urgency of the situation and the shortage of time, I thought it prudent to immediately apprise them of the present crisis. Naturally, they were frightened out of their wits on hearing about the combined attack strategy of Jarasandha and Kalyavana. All their enthusiasm regarding Dwarka vanished into thin air. Even my typically stoical bhaiya looked as if he had taken a blow to his stomach. To be honest, this was the second time in my life I had seen bhaiya so frightened. As you might recall, the first time was when *Acharya* Sandipani had lost his temper. To see bhaiya frightened out of his wits had not been a cause for concern then, but this time, his fear could affect the outcome adversely. The need of the hour was 'action' and action always requires hope and enthusiasm. You must understand this reality of life—a fearful person can never be useful. So, taking charge of the situation, I quickly said, "There is nothing to be afraid of. I have devised a plan to save us all from this terrible attack. In the next twenty to twenty-five days, we will launch an exodus, taking the people of Mathura together with us to Dwarka. When Jarasandha and Kalyavana reach Mathura and fail to find us here, they will once again face a defeat far worse than before."

Reassured by my words, both bhaiya and Uddhava felt a resurgence of energy in them. Well, the plan was indeed a stroke of genius, so it was

natural for them to feel relieved!

Bhaiya could not help but exclaim, “Kanhaiya, you are clever indeed. It may be impossible for even God to trap you!”

Neither did bhaiya’s words rankle me nor did I see the need to gloat over his seemingly harmless comment as it was a clever blend of praise and sarcasm. At any rate, considering how delicate the situation was, the ‘witness’ within me had kept a tight leash on my ego. So, before my ego could inflate, I quickly busied myself with the tasks at hand. During the course of our discussion, I instructed bhaiya and Uddhava to maintain the utmost secrecy regarding the impending attack. We had also decided on a deadline for the migration; we would leave Mathura within the next twenty to twenty-five days, irrespective of the circumstances. To succeed in our mission, it was crucial for us to be close to Dwarka by the time Jarasandha and Kalyavana reached the gates of Mathura. The reason was clear; it was necessary to maintain a safe distance between their armies and our convoy, for, they could follow us swiftly even after we had left Mathura and possibly attack us from the rear. In case of such an attack, none of us would be spared alive!

With the mission absolutely clear, the question facing us next was, how to begin preparations for the exodus, and more importantly, whom to take along with us? In bhaiya’s opinion, it was better for us to take all the inhabitants of Mathura with us. Obviously, bhaiya was not thinking rationally, the proposal having stemmed from his heart. Actually, Dwarka could only accommodate a maximum of twenty-five thousand people. However, after I had explained it to him, it did not take bhaiya long to understand. I, on the other hand, felt that we needed to invite only the Yadavas to come to Dwarka. However, bhaiya immediately voiced an objection to this, as he felt that this idea reeked of discrimination. But, do you really think that ‘Krishna’ could discriminate? I had, at the time, explained to bhaiya why only the Yadavas needed to be invited and now I will explain it to you as well. Considering the ground reality, we could take twenty-five thousand people with us, at the most. It was also decided to take King Ugrasena with us, as he would be crowned the king of Dwarka. Besides, we were certain that Jarasandha’s attack would coincide with the time of our departure. Like Kansa, we also knew that he would prove to be

a harbinger of death for King Ugrasena, most of the Yadavas and of course, for us too. In such a situation, what could Jarasandha really do on finding out that the majority of Yadavas and the rest of us have left Mathura? At the most, he would enthrone one of his sons or Brihaddal in Mathura and leave! But at least he would let Mathura live in peace, as it would be devoid of the Yadavas. Wasn't this plan better than prompting unnecessary bloodshed and loss of lives? Moreover, I wanted to improve the quality of life of the inhabitants of Mathura, and to ensure that, it was possible to take only a limited number of people to Dwarka. If we were to move all the inhabitants of Mathura to Dwarka, then there would be no difference between the two kingdoms; Dwarka would die a silent death due to overpopulation. Bhaiya had understood my point of view, and I hope you have, too.

After convincing bhaiya, it was Uddhava whom I had to convince. He wanted to take the entire population of Vrindavan to Dwarka; I disagreed with this idea too. Now, you might ask what was the harm in doing so. You might also ask, 'Kanhaiya, now that you were about to become a king, did you forget your beloved *Brijwasis*?' There you go again, harbouring such belittling thoughts about Krishna. Alright then, I had explained it to Uddhava at the time, and now I am explaining it to you too. Just think about it, why would I not want to take my dear *Brijwasis* with me to Dwarka? Why would I not want to give them joy and ensure that they make progress? Who could be dearer to me than my very own *Brijwasis*? My happiness revolved only around them. So, the decision of not taking them to Dwarka would obviously hurt me the most, wouldn't it? But in spite of this, if I did not wish to take them with me, then there certainly must have been an important and valid reason for it, pertaining to their well-being. I had understood this, but I'm sure you have not. You too experience similar situations in your life, but due to your narrow-minded thinking, you are swayed by your emotions while making decisions. Such choices are nothing but selfish, whereas there was no selfish motive behind my decisions. I was ready to endure the pain of separation from the people of Vrindavan, and was even willing to be subjected to their sarcastic comments, but never would I shirk my duty of securing their mental peace and well-being. Actually, you are trying to save only yourself, whereas I was trying to save everybody. The difference between your thinking and mine is that your focus is on your self-interest while my focus had always been on the greater

good. Let me explain further. The people of Vrindavan were already leading contented and peaceful lives. They were spending their days with pride and honour. Their lifestyle too was simple and straightforward. The Yadavas, on the other hand, belonged to a different class altogether. Not only were they arrogant and lazy, but were also ill-tempered, and had become slaves to various vices. If bhaiya could get addicted to liquor in their company, then in the future, he could also develop a fondness for other forms of debauchery. Now, it was worth pondering over the fate that would befall these simple, innocent people of Vrindavan, when bhaiya too could not escape the corrupting influence of these scoundrels. Despite this, if we were to still take the *Brijwasis* with us, wouldn't there be frequent scuffles between them and the Yadavas on a daily basis? Wouldn't they be needlessly humiliated by the Yadavas every day? I did not want my innocent *Brijwasis* to be subjected to derogatory comments such as 'uncouth' or 'uneducated cowherds' on a daily basis, barbs which I had to endure all my life. Besides, if I considered Uddhava's suggestion of only taking the *Brijwasis* to Dwarka, then this too, was not possible, as I could not establish a kingdom on the strength of just four to five hundred people. So, my decision to avoid taking the *Brijwasis* along was in their best interest. If this decision was painful for anyone, it was only for me. My love, joy, peace and solace were being taken away from me, and in exchange, what fell to my lot were disgrace and taunts. In other words, I was clear in my thinking—I was willing to endure difficulties but could not bear the thought of my dear *Brijwasis* facing unnecessary humiliation. In my opinion, a life of humiliation is worse than death and I could never bear to let my dear *Brijwasis* suffer a life of degradation and disgrace. I had offered this very pearl of wisdom to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. Fortunately, Uddhava had understood my point, and I hope you have understood it too.

After convincing Uddhava, I sent him to Vrindavan to bring Subhadra and his family. Uddhava wanted to bring some other relatives too, which was alright with me, for, why would I object? He was anyway supposed to bring Radha, Nanda and Yashoda. Of course, I knew I was clinging on to false hopes, for, obstinate as she was, Radha would never come. Nanda too, bound by his responsibilities towards the *Brijwasis*, would never leave them behind. Nanda was extremely duty-conscious; he could never turn his back

on his responsibilities, especially when the whole of Vrindavan depended on him. Similarly, there was no question of Yashoda coming to Dwarka either. Undoubtedly, mother Yashoda would want nothing more than to be united with Kanhaiya, but her duty towards Nanda would hold her back. After all, being my mother, duty would come first for her as well. I was, indeed, highly fortunate to have been brought up by parents who knew the true meaning of love. In fact, love is a pure emotion experienced from within. Its very existence is enough, for, true love can never demand or desire anything.

Leaving all this aside, let me tell you about my situation at this point, which was rather peculiar. The people whom I held closest to my heart, Radha and my parents, were unlikely to come to Dwarka. You are already aware of how meaningless my existence was without my mother and Radha. So, you can imagine the emotional turmoil I was going through. The pain of being separated from my mother and Radha forever was beyond what my heart could endure. To make matters worse, I could not even sit back and grieve, for, my mind was preoccupied with work. It was not just a question of my dreams, but also the lives of thousands of inhabitants of Mathura. Honestly, the sorrows I had endured, the pains I had borne, and the difficulties I had encountered were far beyond what anybody else could tolerate. Can anyone else face struggles the way I had? ‘Oh! No! Not again! Kanhaiya, you are back to doing what you do best, singing your own praises! Why don’t you first take everybody to Dwarka and settle down there, and then we will gladly accept that there never was, and never will be anybody like you in the history of humanity.’ In an instant, the ‘witness’ within me had surfaced to deflate my bloated ego. Well, if I was not permitted to ponder this from the ego’s perspective, then let me look at things from the point of view of the ‘witness’. The perspective of the ‘witness’ was crystal clear, as it left no room for sorrow or difficulty. According to this perspective, human birth itself is an unending chain of actions and duties. The love which discourages a person from carrying out his responsibilities is not really ‘love’, but ‘selfishness’. Similarly, the pain which hinders a person from carrying out his duties is also rooted in selfishness. Let’s look at my own family for instance. I was the love of my mother’s life, while her duty was towards my father. Her love for me would have been meaningless, had it made her neglect her duties. My father loved me too, but his duty was

towards Vrindavan. Similarly, my love for my mother, Radha and Vrindavan was beyond words too, whereas, my duty lay in rescuing the people of Mathura and giving them a better quality of life. Therefore, I did not have the right to demand they give up their duties for the sake of my love; similarly, their love had never made me disregard my responsibilities. Thus, I can talk about the purity of our mutual love with the utmost conviction. In other words, not only was I blessed with a loving family, but was also fortunate enough to have experienced pure love. Or should I say, this was the only true blessing that had been bestowed upon me in my life. Otherwise, I had mostly been attracting all sorts of Jarasandhas and Kalyavanas in my life, as you are already aware. Speaking of love, let me also tell you that while all other peaks in the world can be scaled with the help of *karma*, love is spontaneous and happens on its own. It can never be attained through *karma*. In my opinion, those who have gained immeasurably from Nature but have been deprived of love in their lives are unfortunate. Those who have never fallen in love even once in their lifetime are unlucky. The lives in which relationships are based on selfishness and the shirking of one's duty are truly ruined! No matter how prosperous such people are, and no matter how much success they have achieved, in my view, they are nothing more than living corpses!

In short, I was indeed fortunate to have received the love of both my parents. This fabled love between my mother and me was all-encompassing and it was the very essence of my existence. Now, you might say, 'Ah yes! You have enlightened us about the mutual love between you and your parents, Krishna, but you haven't said a word about Radha.' Well, it is true; I have not, and I beg you as well not to speak of her, for, I shall surely be moved to tears. One day, at leisure, I shall elaborate upon the depths of her love, but not now. However, speaking of love itself, I emphatically state that love is the power which inspires man to stand firm on the path of duty. Love that makes one oblivious to one's duties or weakens one's resolve is not love, but attachment. It could be ego and selfishness too, perhaps even lust. However, the love I shared with Radha was pristine, devoid of all these debilitating elements. Well, since we have now begun talking about Radha, it is difficult for me to remain silent. It was only because of Radha and my mother's love that I was able to give the people of Mathura a new lease of life. It was because of the strength of Radha's love and my mother's



blessings that I was able to obliterate evil men such as Kansa, Panchajanya and Shringlava. So, even though my parents and Radha would not be accompanying me to Dwarka, they were firmly ensconced in my heart, and I would take them along with me to my dream city. This thought alone gave me supreme contentment. So, until we reached Dwarka safely, I felt it was best not to ruminate on this topic anymore.

It was time to return to the tasks at hand. Time was running out, and both, bhaiya and I were busy making arrangements for the relocation. Except for us, no one in Mathura had any knowledge of this collective disappearing act, but for how long could we continue in this manner? Sooner or later, the inhabitants of Mathura, whom we had decided to take to Dwarka, would have to be told about the migration, and that too, well in advance. After all, relocation on a scale as massive as this was not child's play. These people too, would have a thousand chores to complete before leaving Mathura. With barely twenty days to go, the task, looming large before us, was complex. Indeed, we had taken on a mission which appeared impossible. Although I had already given considerable thought to how I would reveal our plans, when I would reveal them, to whom and to what extent, we wanted to gradually reveal our plan to everybody only after we had made most of the arrangements. According to our strategy, it was now time to tell my father and grandfather about our plans. So, I promptly caught hold of them and apprised them of our victory at Kushasthali and the establishment of Dwarka. My father and grandfather both stood transfixed and could only stare at me in amazement, their mouths wide open in disbelief. They conveyed a look so incredulous, that for a moment, they appeared unable to decide whether to feel proud or surprised! We had made so much progress and they had never got wind of it! Nevertheless, both were delighted, and their hearts leapt with joy, on hearing of bhaiya's marriage to Princess Revati. Of course, grandfather did have some idea about Kushasthali. I had, after all, borrowed two thousand soldiers of Mathura for that purpose, but the rest of the news took him completely by surprise. However, we did not think it to be the appropriate time to tell Mother Devaki about Dwarka and other related developments, as it could compromise the secrecy of the plan and jeopardise it. No one except bhaiya, father, grandfather and I knew about the establishment of Dwarka. I also decided against telling them about the impending attack by Jarasandha and Kalyavana. After all, this

was not the time to create an atmosphere of fear and terror. I knew it would be difficult for an ordinary person to maintain equilibrium in such an atmosphere, and it could end up affecting his work. And that was something we just could not afford!

Alright, now let me tell you about a positive change that had occurred in Mathura's politics. Satrajit's show of cordiality had improved the relationship between his key associate, Satyaki and me. Satyaki had now become my trustworthy friend. This is worth mentioning because, at this point in time, Satyaki's friendship was akin to a life-saving elixir. There was nobody in Mathura who could match his skills in devising bold strategies for the purpose of war. Additionally, having spent so many days with him, I did not doubt his loyalty at all. Therefore, I decided to make him the second-in-command, revealing to him the entire plan. My selfish motive in doing so was because of the crucial role he could play during the time of collective relocation. Besides, as is widely known, when the need arises, one has to flatter even a fool, and this was Satyaki, who was certainly not a fool, but in fact, could prove quite useful! When Satyaki heard of the establishment of a new kingdom, he could not help but feel ecstatic and even congratulated me. Seeing his happiness, I knew I was right in trusting him with the secret. Naturally, I had told him only about my new capital at Dwarka, and had not uttered a word about Jarasandha's impending attack. Had I done so, he would have misconstrued my motive as being selfish, and Krishna could never commit such a blunder! Besides, could anyone surpass me in my ability to divulge just the right amount of information to the appropriate person at the appropriate time?

So, as per plan, we decided to take one thousand soldiers of Mathura along with us. I left it to Satyaki and bhaiya to select the thousand soldiers who would go with us to Dwarka, although most of these soldiers were the ones whom we had taken to battle at Kushasthali and whose potential we had tested. I had also cleverly assigned Satyaki the task of safeguarding the caravan. After all, I had to put his bravery to use. Now, you might say, I was allocating all the tasks, and not taking up any task myself. Well, was a 'deserter' like me of any use to anyone? Just joking; I had, in fact, made myself quite useful. Apart from displaying bravery, there are many other important tasks that one needs to perform, to make life smooth sailing. Thus, finding the perfect task which suited me, I decided to take on the

complex responsibility of maintaining and repairing the chariots and carts that would take us to Dwarka, as the entire journey depended on them.

The days were flying by swiftly, as if on wings. Uddhava had returned from Vrindavan along with Subhadra and some of his relatives. As expected, neither Radha nor my parents, Nanda and Yashoda, accompanied him. There was no use in becoming upset over it, as I had already anticipated it. An intelligent person has few reasons to be unhappy, and this is due to his foresight, because of which he is seldom taken by surprise. And how sad can a person feel about something that is expected?

Even though my loved ones did not come, they had certainly sent me their good wishes, which was the greatest blessing by itself. This is a mark of true love; despite being far away from you, it can still be a motivating factor in your progress. This is the reason I say that, in this world, there is nothing purer and more powerful than love.

Now, with the swift passage of time, I realised there were only twelve days remaining before our departure for Dwarka. With our preparations now complete, it was time to let the people of Mathura know about the relocation. I asked grandfather to call an urgent meeting of the Yadavas. All the important Yadavas such as Satrajit, Uncle Akrura and Bhadraka, along with the common Yadava population of Mathura, had been invited to this meeting. Considering the large number of people who had been invited to the meeting, it was decided that we would address the gathering at Mathura's main grounds. Indeed, this was the final stage of my plan. If I could play this move correctly, then I could rid myself of Jarasandha forever. As far as the construction at Dwarka was concerned, I had stopped worrying about it because no matter what its status was at this point of time, the relocation was inevitable. Saving our lives from Jarasandha was of prime importance now, even if it meant living on the seashore, without a roof over our heads for as long as two months. I had resolved to find the middle path which would save us from certain death, come what may! To be alive was of the utmost importance; all other things could be accomplished eventually, but only if we managed to survive! Keeping this in mind, I had prepared myself to address the gathering of the Yadavas. I was also fully aware of the significance of delivering a balanced speech, as everybody's future depended on the success of this speech.

Finally, the day of the meeting arrived. Feeling edgy, I had reached the meeting place well before time, along with grandfather, bhaiya and Uddhava. I was pleasantly surprised at the large gathering of people that had assembled at short notice. While the dais was packed with Yadava nobles, the ground below had turned into a sea of people as far as the eye could see. Indeed, even Satrajit, Uncle Akrura and a majority of the Yadava nobles had reached the venue well in time. So be it! I did not have the time to dwell upon all this. To be honest, I was quite nervous and restless, for, according to my plan, the realisation of my dreams, as well as the future of the people of Mathura, hinged on the success of this meeting. If things did not turn out the way I had planned, then everything would come to naught. So, instead of thinking about inconsequential matters, I focussed fully on maintaining equilibrium. In my capacity as the Yadava chief, it was my duty to commence the meeting with my address. Since I was in a hurry, I immediately addressed the gathering, not from my usual place, but from the edge of the dais, facing the common people. All the Yadava nobles and the council of ministers were seated behind me. With sheer simplicity and utmost gravity, I commenced, “My dearest and most respected Yadava brothers. Today, I stand before you with a very heavy heart. We are here to bid farewell to you all and take your leave.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Naturally, everyone was shocked to hear this, especially Satrajit, who looked as if his ‘jewel thief’ was slipping away from him, literally! His face was truly worth watching! Taking advantage of the deafening silence, I had even turned around a couple of times to steal a few glances at him. Honestly, I was so amused by his reaction that I felt a wild and uncontrollable urge to laugh. However, considering the need of the hour, I thought it wise to suppress my laughter and carry on with my address. Assuming a solemn stance, I continued quickly in a grave tone, “It is natural for you to be startled on hearing this; especially, for dear friends such as Satrajit. But the truth is that we would have to leave Mathura soon.” I could not help it; as was my wont, I could not stop myself from teasing Satrajit even in such a serious situation. However, I immediately warned myself, ‘Kanhaiya, focus on your speech and stop fooling around! You have your entire life ahead of you to tease and make fun of people.’

With complete seriousness, I once again turned my attention to my speech. I said, “Many years ago, when we had left Vrindavan, we had experienced

similar grief and anguish. At the time, we had consoled ourselves by thinking that we were not going away forever. Besides, Vrindavan is only a *yojana* (unit of distance) away, so we could always return or visit whenever we want to. Of course, that feeling of sorrow was personal, but as you all know, we have not been able to visit Brij even once, ever since. However, what is of relevance now, is that the time has come for us to leave Mathura too. It is with immense pain that we take your leave, but our departure is unavoidable. It is a strange situation, really, and a dilemma for me. On one hand, your love and affection make it extremely difficult for us to part, and on the other, it is imperative for us to leave.” My words were met with pin-drop silence. Some people even made a conjecture that we were probably headed back to Vrindavan. Well, no matter what they thought, my words, expressions and tone in this address were at their choicest best. In fact, having aroused the curiosity of the people, it was the opportune time for me to deliver the final blow. So, without wasting another moment, I continued my address, “You would be happy to know that Balarama bhaiya has conquered Kushasthali, a kingdom located near the seashore. Not only this, he has also married Revati, the princess of Kushasthali. Although the kingdom belongs to us now, we have also established a small kingdom of our own. So, the purpose of holding this public meeting is to share this good news with you and also to take your leave.”

Hearing this, the crowd was taken completely by surprise! For a moment, nobody could even comprehend what I had just said, as they stood silently, looking dazed. They seemed to be wondering, ‘Could these simple boys from Vrindavan actually make such incredible progress?’ Sensing their state of befuddlement, I continued with my speech in order to deliver a few more blows. I said, “As far as this new kingdom is concerned, it is situated on the seafront on the western coast of Aryavarta. Seeing your love and affection, I could not muster the strength to tell you about our departure and this is why I had never informed you about the establishment of this new kingdom. But now, since we have to leave in the next ten days, I had to muster courage and tell you all about it. For your information, let me tell you, we have named our new kingdom Dwarka.”

Saying this, once again, I fell silent for a while. I wanted everyone to assimilate the information I had just shared with them, and then gradually deliver the subsequent blows. As soon as everybody had regained their

composure, I proceeded with a flourish, my words filled with emotion. I affectionately said to them, “While I do wish to take you all with me, what right do I have to ask you to disrupt your well-settled lives in Mathura and move with us to Dwarka? Even so, if some of you do wish to come along with us, we won’t be able to refuse.”

Hearing this, a wave of relief swept over several faces in the crowd. Some still appeared unsure, while others looked dazed, finding it hard to believe their ears. Meanwhile, my speech had shaken up Satrajit and other Yadava nobles. Frankly speaking, this was exactly how I had wanted this situation to unfold. It was for this reason that I had purposely omitted details of Dwarka’s grandeur from my speech; neither had I spoken about the impending attack by Jarasandha and Kalyavana. On the whole, at least I had not incited anyone to leave Mathura! Even though I had been at my cunning best, my mind suddenly started working in the opposite direction. In fact, my heart had begun to pound, seeing the mixed reactions of the people. Fear gripped me all of a sudden, as I wondered, ‘What if I had misjudged the outcome of my speech?’ I was absolutely clear that I did not want the whole of Mathura to come with us to Dwarka. But at the same time, I wanted a sizeable number of people to inhabit Dwarka, so that we could establish a kingdom. With this objective in mind, I had tried to maintain a balance throughout my speech. Had I spoken about Dwarka’s splendour or Jarasandha’s attack, the entire populace of Mathura would have jumped at the opportunity to rush to Dwarka. On the other hand, had my speech been dull and insipid, nobody would have agreed to relocate. Well, I may have delivered my speech with great astuteness and composure, but the way people’s minds worked was an entirely different matter. Honestly, a feeling of unease gripped me on seeing their mixed reactions. What if no one came with us and we ended up being the king as well as the subjects of our kingdom?

With these stormy waves of doubts flowing and ebbing in my mind, I asked myself, ‘If all these people refuse to come with us, what would we do all by ourselves in a huge kingdom like Dwarka? On the other hand, what if everybody wants to come along? Then, Dwarka will turn into another Mathura as soon as it is inhabited!’ With all these questions coursing through my mind, I could hear my heart pound hard against my chest. Moreover, I could still not comprehend the mood of the crowd, although, as

far as I could fathom, most of the people did seem eager to go to Dwarka. However, this was my perspective alone; it did not have any real justification as the final decision rested with the people. In my haste to be relieved of my anxiety, I was eager to know what the people's verdict was, as soon as possible. So, with the objective of hastening their decision and giving it a final push, I said, "Those of you who wish to come with us should load all their belongings onto their chariots and bullock carts and meet us along with their families at the western gate of the city, on the tenth day from today. All the Yadavas who wish to accompany us are also requested to make arrangements for food and water for the journey."

As soon as I said this, a wave of happiness surged through the crowd. Relieved on hearing the sound of applause and cheer, I relaxed. The mood of the crowd had settled the matter. Only Satrajit seemed to be knocked out of his senses as he appeared pale and ill at ease. After all, his 'jewel thief' was slipping away from him. The Yadava leaders, who were closely associated with him, also appeared perturbed. Looking at Satrajit's condition, I realised that neither he, nor his followers were likely to come with us. 'Well, so be it', I thought. 'It would bear well for me if they stay away from Dwarka. If they decide to come, they may not let me live in peace, even in my own kingdom.' Besides, it now appeared that a large number of people were more than willing to come to Dwarka. So, I quickly cast aside the thoughts of Satrajit and his group and concluded the meeting. On this note, we set off for the palace, having accepted everybody's good wishes, but the crowd refused to budge. We could hear people chanting our names, cheering us and extolling our bravery, as they narrated stories of our exploits to each other. The enthusiasm pervading the air was an indication that Dwarka would be established soon enough. Honestly, this task had been accomplished with much less effort than I had imagined. I was rather proud of my fine speech. In fact, I give the entire credit for this day's success to my choice of words and manner of speaking. Well, after having accomplished such a momentous task, I was bound to praise myself a little!

There was no important task at hand now. Everything had come to pass with clockwork precision, exactly the way I had wanted it to. So, I wondered, 'Why not plan a quick visit to Vrindavan for a couple of days and meet Mother Yashoda and Radha?' Despite staying in Mathura, I had found it impossible to meet them; I was unsure if I would ever get a chance

to meet mother and Radha once we would have migrated to Dwarka. Besides, it was just a matter of a few days and bhaiya, Uddhava and Satyaki were anyway present in Mathura to look after its affairs in my absence. No sooner had I decided this, than I lost myself in dreaming about my beloved Vrindavan. When I gave bhaiya this good news, he insisted on accompanying me to Vrindavan. Obviously, his enthusiasm was justified. Uddhava too, could not contain his joy on hearing this, and for good reason too—his heart's desire was about to be fulfilled! As for me, I was flying so high in my dreams of Vrindavan that my feet refused to touch the ground! With tremendous enthusiasm, we decided to go to Vrindavan even if it was only for a day; in fact, we had planned to leave the very next morning. Brimming with excitement, I put my tasks aside and started preparations for Vrindavan. I had packed the finest clothes and jewellery. After all, one of Vrindavan's own cowherd boys had now become a noble and a king, so it was vital to dress up and carry myself like royalty.

Of course, I was also taking along heaps of garments and household essentials for everyone in Vrindavan. There is no reason to hide this from you; I had even made a long list of dresses and ornaments to adorn Radha with. My list, however, did not end there! I was also taking with me a large procession of chariots, soldiers and servants. The reason was simple—if I had to make an impression, why not make a grand one? You would not believe it but I set aside all my other work to personally shop for gifts in the market. I bought clothes and other items for every person I could think of in Brij. Engrossed in shopping, I did not even realise that dusk had fallen. As for the gifts, I had bought a cart full of them. Why wouldn't I? This was, after all, the first opportunity I had received to give something back to my dear *Brijwasīs*. Indeed, today was the finest day of my life and my excitement was at its peak. While Radha and Mother Yashoda were always at the back of my mind, at this moment, I was so consumed by their thoughts that although I was physically present in Mathura, mentally, I had reached Vrindavan already. Spontaneously breaking into a smile, I thought, 'Just wait and watch how Radha would jump with joy on hearing the news of my arrival! When she'd see her Kanhaiya in all his magnificence, dressed in fine silk and ornaments, she would probably just faint! And mother! Oh! My dear mother would be so overwhelmed with my progress that she would weep with joy and flood the River Yamuna with her tears!'



I don't think I had ever been this happy in life, but...alas! Nature could not bear to see me happy. On reaching home, I had placed all the gifts in the veranda, and was in the midst of giving instructions to have them loaded in a large chariot, when suddenly, Satyaki stumbled in, terror writ large on his face. He had come with the most earth-shattering news. After I had heard him out, forget Vrindavan, even the ground of Mathura seemed to be slipping away from beneath my feet. It seemed as if the chariot holding my gifts for Vrindavan had been set on fire. I, who had been soaring towards the skies a moment ago, felt as if I had suddenly plunged into a deep, dark abyss. Bearing the most terrifying news, Satyaki revealed that Kalyavana and his army had reached quite close to Mathura. Though they were moving at a slow pace due to a large infantry, they were sure to reach our gates in the next ten to fifteen days, at the most. We still had ten days to leave, and Kalyavana was almost here, about fifteen days sooner than expected! Hearing this terrifying news from Satyaki seemed to have turned me to stone. Not a drop of blood would have trickled out of me, had anyone run a knife through me. If Kalyavana had indeed entered Mathura, then it was certain that none of us would remain alive to migrate to Dwarka. And if Kalyavana was almost at the gates of Mathura, it meant that Jarasandha too, was not far behind. My mind had turned numb and my intelligence had practically deserted me. To think, analyse the situation, or even come to a decision, seemed impossible for me. As for our trip to Vrindavan, the very thought of going there had vanished into thin air after hearing the news about Kalyavana's approaching army. The situation had become so critical, that regardless of whether my brain was willing to function or not, I had to activate my mind to think of a solution. As usual, with the sword of death dangling above our heads, my mind had to become active. After all, this was a question of life and death. A solution had to be found, and it had to be now or never. And as you know, once my thought process was activated, a solution was bound to appear.

My initial analysis revealed that we urgently needed to take two steps. First, we would need to alter our route, and second, we would need to ensure that we somehow maintain a fast pace throughout the journey. The reason was obvious—as soon as Kalyavana hears about our migration to Dwarka, he would surely come chasing us, which would definitely sound the death knell for all of us. Besides, the span of time between our escape and his

arrival was so narrow that it would not be difficult for him to catch up with us, in which case, none of us would survive. Within no time, everything would be destroyed. Suddenly, the situation had changed, and I found myself in a strange condition. I was sitting on the stairs of the veranda with my back resting against the wall, watching the chariot being loaded with all the gifts. Satyaki was sitting beside me. No matter how the events unfolded, I knew I had to toughen up and face the problem. To even think of going to Vrindavan in such a situation had become pointless. So, while I was not sure what turn this situation would take, it was certain that I had once again been deprived of the joy of meeting my parents and Radha. In addition, I had also resigned myself to being labelled a ‘traitor’ for life.

Shaking off all other thoughts, I had to concentrate on the present. The need of the hour was to find a solution to this problem. If we managed to stay alive, then someday, we could also deliberate upon the stigma of being branded a traitor. With this terrifying cloud looming on the horizon, we found ourselves in a quandary, and it was well-nigh impossible to come up with a solution. Although we were sitting together, there was a deafening silence between us. Interestingly, while Satyaki was worried about Kalyavana’s march towards Mathura, he was unaware that Jarasandha was also about to honour us with a visit. It was a stroke of luck that Satyaki had taken a trip in the direction from which Kalyavana was approaching, and hence was able to spot the advancing army; else, we might have still been unaware of the looming threat. Nevertheless, this raised another question—had Jarasandha reached Mathura too? When bhaiya and Uddhava arrived, they found us sitting forlorn with our heads in our hands. Once they had been apprised of the latest development, their enthusiasm dissipated and they also sat with us, their heads held in despair. However, sitting despondently was not going to help. Clearly, nothing was in our hands now. We could take action only after the journey commenced. But yes, I did make a clever move; I told Satyaki all about Jarasandha’s impending foray against Mathura. To stay united and yet hide things from each other was not advisable, at least in the wake of imminent danger. We now pondered over our next move...but alas! The solution eluded us, and eventually, all of us went to bed in this anxious state.

The next day, we were faced with an even more peculiar situation. While we were paralysed with fear and apprehension, frightened out of our wits,

the situation in Mathura was in stark contrast to our state of mind. Enthusiasm and joy pervaded the air, with the *Mathurawasis* celebrating their good fortune. Oblivious to the reality that their lives were in grave danger, these poor people were busy preparing to relocate to their new kingdom. In fact, wherever we went, people treated us like royalty; however, their behaviour towards us only added to my woes and misgivings about our impending journey. Mathura was in double trouble, and I blamed myself for it, because the menacing duo of Jarasandha and Kalyavana was on its way here only because of me. Moreover, I had offered the people of Mathura beautiful dreams of a splendid new kingdom. Holding myself responsible for this situation, I was beleaguered by a nagging thought, ‘What if these people are forced not only to bid adieu to the glorious dream I had shown them, but also lose their lives because of me?’

However, aware of the paucity of time, I quickly composed myself, pushing aside such debilitating thoughts. As soon as I regained my composure, I considered the people’s respect for me and their enthusiasm as a reminder that it was my responsibility to take them safely to Dwarka. However, the main question still remained unanswered—how could I turn this dismal situation to our advantage? It was not in my hands to slow down Kalyavana’s cavalcade towards Mathura. I was still unable to think of a possible solution to resolve this situation. Time was ticking by, and the fate of thousands of lives hung in the balance. In fact, my life, my dreams and Rukmini’s future were at stake too. Now, you might ask, how did this situation concern Rukmini? Well, consider this: If something were to happen to me, what would happen to Rukmini? Where would she find a husband better than me? So, I leave it to you to decide whether Rukmini’s future was at stake or not. Well, do you see how I could indulge in humour even in times of peril? Had I not learnt this art, I would have been dead long ago, crushed under the weight of grave problems.

Speaking of graveness, to be honest, these days, I was a bit irked at myself. I could not understand how someone like me, who was always so cautious, could have committed such a blunder. Why had I not sent my spies to keep an eye on Kalyavana’s progress? Of course, the compulsion of keeping Jarasandha and Kalyavana’s impending attack a secret, the acute scarcity of time and the innumerable preparations, combined with bhaiya and

Uddhava's absence, had caused this oversight. Nonetheless, a mistake is a mistake, and offering excuses for it or providing justification is futile. This habit, of offering excuses, is a way to hide one's faults or weaknesses. But no matter how valid an excuse seems to be, one has to pay the price for oversight, because excuses and justifications never influence the outcome. Therefore, I humbly accepted my fault, and to avoid repeating this mistake, I raced my chariot in the direction from which Jarasandha's army was expected to arrive. What if he too, arrived sooner than expected? I had already made a mistake regarding Kalyavana, but I could at least be vigilant this time and keep an eye on Jarasandha and his advancing army. Interestingly, in my anxiety and out of a fear of repeating the mistake, I raced a long way ahead in that direction, just to be doubly sure. A temporary wave of relief swept over me when I could see no sign of Jarasandha's army. This meant that we now had to tackle only one danger—Kalyavana.

Seeing no imminent danger to our convoy from the direction in which Jarasandha was approaching, my confidence began to soar once again. With this new-found enthusiasm, I could channelise my thoughts in a completely new direction. I began wondering if there could be a way to delay Kalyavana's procession by a few days. My mind was now fully focussed on finding ways to thwart his march towards Mathura. I could not throw away my dreams and all the preparations without putting up a fight, could I? But even after considerable thought, when I was unable to come up with a concrete solution, I thought, why not directly seek contact with the enemy instead? There was the possibility of a solution presenting itself in the process. Therefore, I decided to send an emissary with a message for Kalyavana, and who other than Satyaki would best fit the role? I immediately sent him on his way, but he was not going empty-handed. I had given him a gift for Kalyavana—a sealed earthen pot containing a live, poisonous snake! All that Satyaki had to do was to hand over the pot to Kalyavana. This earthen pot with the snake was a veiled message for Kalyavana.<sup>[8]</sup> My sole objective was to delay his arrival by five to ten days, and I was hoping this ridiculous message would do the trick. I was absolutely sure that when Satyaki would present this pot as a gift on my behalf, an incensed Kalyavana would definitely think long and hard and probably even reconsider his strategy, thus wasting some more time over it.

I was certain that he would send a response to this ‘gift’. I had no doubt that Kalyavana would waste a day or two trying to decipher the message behind the pot and send a befitting reply to it. I had also instructed Satyaki to stall Kalyavana wherever he encountered him and for as long as possible. Thus, I had already begun making my own attempts to impede Kalyavana’s march towards Mathura.

With this clever move, I had managed to get respite for a day or two, thereby regaining my enthusiasm. It had become crucial for me to speed up the relocation process. In Mathura, anything could happen at any time. So, first and foremost, with the help of bhaiya and Uddhava, we assembled the soldiers, palace chariots, bullock carts, horses and elephants at the designated spot. We also alerted the soldiers to be prepared for any eventuality. We still had five more days to go, which seemed long enough, but in reality, we barely had time. So, without wasting even a moment, the very next day, we started our preparations for stocking up on food and water for the journey. I took special care to include people from all classes of society in our journey to Dwarka. We would need blacksmiths, cowherds, washermen, businessmen, traders and other professionals too, because a kingdom can run smoothly only when it consists of all classes of people in society. Fully aware of the crucial contribution of experienced people in the smooth functioning of a kingdom, we had also decided to take grandfather’s entire council of ministers with us. In short, pushing Kalyavana to the back of my mind, I became engrossed in making arrangements for the establishment of Dwarka. Moreover, despite being busy with work, my mind was constantly alert and on the lookout for omissions, especially after having previously committed a blunder. And, it was this very alertness which warned me of yet another peril. That’s right! Apart from Jarasandha and Kalyavana, there was a possibility of danger knocking on a third door.

While I was still unsure whether Satrajit would accompany us to Dwarka or not, there was a possibility that he would kick up a storm on seeing his precious Syamantaka gem slip away from his hands forever. I was very well aware of the kind of person he was, and surely, he would not easily forget his precious gem. So, I began to keep a close eye on his activities as well. If he really created a problem, it would be dealt with too. In any case, nobody could actually ask him about his intentions, could they? So, I had to return

to the problems at hand and solve them, rather than think about Satrajit. I was already surrounded by a surfeit of problems which demanded immediate attention.

If only we had set the date of our journey to about three to four days earlier, we could have safely escaped to Dwarka. However, the date and time of the journey could not be altered now, as it would have been impossible to notify the people in time. Therefore, seeing no solution in sight, we thought it best to focus only on our preparations to leave. With not a single moment to spare for sleep or rest—speaking of which, was it even important to sleep? Even the slightest mistake on our part was sure to put us all to sleep forever. The next day, suddenly, in the midst of ongoing preparations, I made a strange decision. I told bhaiya to take along fifty of the finest courtesans with us to Dwarka, for, without them, it was impossible to even imagine a kingdom of Yadavas. On careful consideration, addiction to these three weaknesses—courtesans, liquor and gambling—had become a way of life for the Yadavas. Having said that, according to me, singing and dancing are simply forms of art; the problem lies only in people's perception.

Nonetheless, we were now four days away from commencing our journey to relocate twenty-five thousand people. This relocation, however, was different from what we had undertaken from Gokula to Vrindavan; this one was from Mathura to Dwarka, which meant the journey would take longer than a month to complete. Besides, the two shadows of death, Jarasandha and Kalyavana, would be our constant companions, hounding us on our journey towards our destination. Needless to say, these two had turned into gods of death in Aryavarta. In other words, departing from Mathura was not enough; the safety of our journey was also equally important. It was clear that we could not possibly fight a battle to keep ourselves safe. We had to avoid facing Kalyavana's army and there were only two measures we could take to do that—maintain a fast pace throughout the journey and delay Kalyavana from reaching Mathura. So, we focussed all our energy on both these tasks. Considering the complexity of the situation, it was imperative for me to maintain equilibrium, both physically and mentally. I had battled death on many occasions; in fact, I had also mastered the art of defying death. However, this time, I had to not only defy death and escape from its clutches, but also overpower it and emerge victorious. Besides, I firmly believe that success comes to those who keep the flame of hope and self-

confidence alight, and the key to the door of opportunities can be found only in persistent efforts and diligence. Moreover, isn't it man's foremost duty to strive for survival and never give up till his last breath? So, how could I shirk my duties?

Although my thoughts and intentions were certainly lofty, it was difficult to maintain equilibrium because of the innumerable problems beleaguering me. We had only three days left to commence the journey, and Satyaki had not yet returned after meeting Kalyavana. Now, there could be various reasons behind this. While on one hand, I was extremely worried about him, on the other, I was feeling rather relieved, for, a delay in his return could also mean that Kalyavana was still far away from Mathura. Satyaki had left on horseback, and thinking logically, if it had taken him an entire day of continuous riding to reach Kalyavana, then it would take Kalyavana and his bullock carts, chariots, elephants and infantry roughly five to six days to reach Mathura. However, we faced a similar problem too. With old people, children and animals included in our procession, it would be rather difficult for us to maintain a fast pace and Kalyavana's army could easily chase us down with its cavalry and chariots. On the other hand, Satyaki's delay in returning to Mathura had also given rise to several apprehensions. What if they had captured him? Or, what if they had already reached dangerously close to Mathura? However, considering Kalyavana's reputation, it was unlikely that he would ill-treat a messenger, but we could not entirely rule out the possibility either. In other words, the matter was extremely complicated. All in all, I could not sit quietly and wait for Satyaki to return. It had become crucial to think of an alternate plan immediately. For the safe transit of our caravan to Dwarka, it was necessary to ensure a gap of ten to fifteen days between our departure and Kalyavana's entry in Mathura. This was necessary because on reaching Mathura, if Kalyavana learnt that we had left just four days earlier, he would lose no time in chasing us with his finest soldiers on horses and chariots. If this were to happen, it was certain that we would never reach Dwarka, and all our efforts and hard work would come to naught. I immediately rebuked myself, 'Why dwell on such negative thoughts, Krishna? Such an eventuality has to be averted at any cost.' But a solution to this problem still eluded me. After much deliberation over it, I finally decided on one last move, which was actually a gamble. But with so many innocent people's lives hanging in the balance,

I had to take that risk. It was a sound plan and could lead to a decisive outcome. But if I tell you about it, you will definitely doubt Krishna's sanity. You will surely think that Krishna had devised such a ludicrous plan because he had buckled under the pressure of circumstances. Well, you may think what you would like to, but this was the only alternative I was left with. I had decided to meet Kalyavana personally to disrupt his journey! I was risking life and limb, but the effort was well worth it!

Having made up my mind, I immediately apprised bhaiya of my plan. Understandably, he was terrified too, just like you. Kalyavana was coming all the way to Mathura with the sole intent of killing me, and here I was, willing to walk into the jaws of death, like a fool. But do you really think I enjoyed putting my life at risk? What else could I do? I saw no other alternative. It was perfectly clear that in order to outmanoeuvre Kalyavana, I had to personally go and meet him. Without outwitting him, we could not delay him by ten to fifteen days, and without delaying him, it would be impossible for us to escape safely. While I was trying to work out the sequence of events, bhaiya had put his foot down. He was adamant and did not want to let me go, no matter what happened. Uddhava had also played a clever move and dug his heels in, unwilling to budge from his stance of accompanying me to meet Kalyavana. Nonetheless, the question worth considering was, if the matter could be resolved with the death of just one person, why sacrifice two? In my opinion, it was understandable if someone wished to live together, but to also wish to die together was indeed foolish!

Well, I was firm in my decision to proceed with my plan at any cost. It was a question of giving up one life to save a thousand others. Such being the case, do you think I would care for only one life, especially mine? But how could I convince bhaiya and Uddhava? 'What do you mean by that? The only alternative you have is to convince them about the feasibility of your plan.' 'Alright, so let's do it then.' Explaining my point of view to bhaiya and Uddhava, I said, "All I would do is go to Kalyavana and try my best to somehow keep him occupied for ten to twelve days. I promise you, I shall be extremely cautious about my own safety. If I meet Satyaki on the way, then I will tell him about it; otherwise, you can explain this to him as well. I suggest, you both stop worrying about me and begin the journey taking the other route at the designated time. Additionally, try to maintain a fast pace throughout. Try to travel as much as possible at night. I shall delay



Kalyavana and catch up with you on the way. Rest assured, I will not allow Kalyavana to reach Mathura before the next fifteen days.” My words seemed to have some effect on them, but they did not seem completely convinced. I could clearly see that they needed a strong assurance about me, so I offered them that as well. Once again, I said, “You two are needlessly worrying about me. It is not as if I am going to wage a war on Kalyavana. All I am going to do is disguise myself and lay a trap for him, because, at present, we do not have any other alternative. You need to understand that it is Krishna, and not an ordinary messenger of Mathura, who is in danger from Kalyavana. In any case, you know quite well how good I am at confusing and tricking people. I shall be back before you know it; you won’t even notice my absence!”

I had left them with no choice, and they had to agree with me. Even though they had understood my rationale long ago, their attachment to me made it difficult for them to accept it. Even now, it was beyond their capacity to accept what they considered a reckless plan. As soon as it was decided that I would go to meet Kalyavana, both started bawling like infants. However, the situation demanded that they learn to be strong. The circumstances, at this point of time, were far more compelling and left little scope for the consideration of personal attachment, love or relationships. Today, it was not a question of just one or two persons, but twenty-five thousand people, and their dreams of living a better life. Therefore, everybody was bound to make a sacrifice. In any case, it was impossible to migrate to Dwarka and establish it without bhaiya, Uddhava and me. So, bhaiya and Uddhava had to let go of their attachment towards me, in the interest of the greater good. They had no alternative but to bear the pain of their overwhelming concern for me. Wasn’t I letting go of my attachment to my life and dreams too? The need of the hour was to put my life at stake in order to provide a better life to the people of Mathura, and I had always done whatever time and circumstances had demanded of me. Similarly, they too, had to learn to cope with circumstances. At any rate, one has to obey the commands of time. Bhaiya and Uddhava’s pain and sorrow, my dreams and I were of no consequence before it. So, leaving their forlorn faces behind, I set off to put my plan into action. Treading the path of death, I was reminded neither of Dwarka nor of Rukmini. Neither was I taking Radha along with me, nor was I carrying the golden memories of Vrindavan. It was only my sense of

duty and the ‘resolve’ to send this contingent of people safely to Dwarka, at all costs, which was compelling me to move forward and achieve my goal. Interestingly, this was the first time in my life that I had set off alone on a horse. Of course, I was an expert charioteer, but time was of the essence now, and it demanded that I go on horseback. The most important goal, at present, was to reach Kalyavana as soon as possible and delay his contingent from reaching Mathura. I was carrying my *chakra* (discus) as a weapon, and to ensure my safety, I was travelling in disguise. You would not believe it, but despite my lack of experience in horse riding, my horse seemed to be flying, as if I were an excellent horseman. Indeed, when death is hovering above you, everything happens involuntarily and with perfection, even in the very first attempt. Did you see how Nature had worked its magic? Once upon a time, I used to dream of becoming the king of Dwarka and marrying Rukmini; and today, reaching Dwarka itself seemed a far-fetched dream. Not too long ago, I had been preparing to go to Vrindavan bearing gifts and joy; instead, today, I was racing ahead to meet death itself. Truly, it is these vagaries and vicissitudes of human life which make it unique and wonderful. If life were to become predictable, similar to the sun with its predictable cycle of rising and setting for aeons, there would be no novelty to it.

I had set off in the afternoon, and it was close to evening now, but my horse showed no sign of stopping. This being my first ride on horseback, it was becoming difficult to continue riding, yet I knew that nothing was more problematic at this time, than Kalyavana himself. As soon as I was reminded of him, all my insignificant pains seemed to vanish. Indeed, I could feel neither the pangs of hunger nor the urge to quench my thirst. How could I, anyway? Where was the time to waste on food and drink?

Suddenly, I spotted a horse approaching from the other direction. For a brief moment, fear gripped me. Was Kalyavana somewhere close by? If so, he would not take long to reach Mathura. But as soon as the horse drew nearer, I jumped with joy. It was Satyaki! Surprisingly, he was still clutching the earthen pot I had given him to present to Kalyavana. It made no sense to me. Meanwhile, Satyaki was astounded too on seeing me here and obviously, his reaction was inevitable. Well, this game of shock and surprise could go on forever, so, we stopped it instantly. We both were well aware of the importance of our race against time. Indeed, this was the first instance in

my life when I was feeling so pressed for time. Until now, I had always moulded myself a countless number of times in accordance with the need of the hour. I had also watched time fly by in the happier moments of my life. Similarly, during times of trouble or while waiting, I had also experienced the pain of time dragging. However, the scarcity of time I was experiencing at this point was totally new to me. Time surely has myriad forms. To scale the pinnacle of success in life, it is vital to correctly identify each of these forms, and it is also equally important to act accordingly. If you notice carefully, you would see that human life is nothing but a form of time. Birth is a form of time and so is death. Similarly, aren't happiness or sorrow, success or failure just various forms of time? In fact, on careful consideration, what is life itself? Life is only a length of time between birth and death.

While we are on this subject, I must praise Satyaki too, for his sense of 'time'. Realising the paucity of time, he began to dispel all my doubts without wasting a moment. Delivering the good news first, he told me that he had succeeded in making Kalyavana waste an entire day. Hearing this, I immediately reached out to embrace him and congratulate him. I was surprised to see him acknowledge my compliment just as swiftly. He continued, "As soon as I met Kalyavana, I handed the pot to him. Spotting the live snake in it shocked him momentarily, but he quickly regained his composure. This was the only interaction we had had on the first day. Ordering his guards to arrange accommodation for me under strict vigilance, he left. The next day, he summoned me, and handing me the same pot, he said, 'Give this to Krishna. He will understand everything'."

Indeed, while Satyaki's succinct narration of the event had saved considerable time, it had also left me befuddled. The pot appeared to be in the same condition that I had sent it. What could it mean? So, I opened it, and when I peeked inside, I saw thousands and thousands of ants scurrying about; the snake I had placed in the pot lay dead.<sup>[9]</sup> For a moment, I was stunned into silence. Did this mean that Kalyavana's soldiers would do the same to me? They certainly would, if they were to catch hold of me. I composed myself quickly and as soon as I did so, I realised that I had become an admirer of Kalyavana's intelligence. His message was loud and clear: 'If you think you are as dangerous and poisonous as this snake, then my huge army of soldiers, akin to ants, will finish you off in minutes.' This

meant the enemy was not only strong, but intelligent as well. Indeed, this was not good news at all! The message was explicit; it would not be easy to trick Kalyavana into wasting another ten to fifteen days. I would have to revise my strategy and simultaneously employ every trick and cunning move I knew in order to deceive him. ‘Well, so be it!’ I thought. I was in no doubt about what my goal was; I had to stop him at all costs. But how could I do it? Well, gauging by the condition of the pot, it appeared that achieving my goal would be an uphill task. While I was mulling over what my next step should be, my eyes fell upon a cave just ahead of us. The moment I saw it, a devious plan instantly formed in my mind. In this hour of crisis, even ideas seemed to emerge in my mind within moments. Perhaps these ideas had sensed how hard-pressed we were for time, on this day. At once, I asked Satyaki, “How long do you think Kalyavana would take to reach this particular cave?”

After a quick mental calculation, Satyaki answered, “Four to five days, at the most.”

‘In that case, my plan might just work,’ I thought. As soon as this ray of hope was kindled within me, I geared up for action. Satyaki and I started stocking the cave with dry branches and twigs. We first broke the branches and then lugged them to the cave. Although we spent almost the entire night doing this, there was no sign of exhaustion on our faces. There was indeed no time to feel tired. However, Satyaki could not comprehend the strategy or the reason behind storing so many dry branches in the cave. He was simply unable to put his finger on the connection between filling the cave with so much dried wood and stopping Kalyavana in his tracks. For all I knew, he was probably wondering if Krishna had lost his mental equilibrium as a result of exceeding troubles. Surely, how would anybody know that it was precisely in such moments of difficulty that Krishna’s consciousness always functioned at its peak? This is why I say, ‘I am the only one who knows my tricks.’ Well, to be honest, it was necessary to set a number of traps to trick Kalyavana; and this trick was only one of them. Who knew which trap would successfully serve its purpose, and what I might require at any given point?

It was almost sunrise now and I knew Kalyavana would take a while to reach this place. According to the plan, pieces of wood had been arranged

in the cave. Feeling relieved, I set off for Mathura along with Satyaki. It really enthused me to realise I now had another two to three days in hand. I felt that the best option would be to encounter Kalyavana somewhere near this very cave. With a few days in hand, I thought of returning to Mathura to take care of a few matters. To be honest, I was worried about bhaiya as well. He loved me dearly and could not imagine his life without me. I knew that for him it was akin to enduring a punishment worse than death itself.

Besides, now that I had time in hand, I thought it wise to personally see the cavalcade off from Mathura. I knew only too well that my absence at the time of the caravan's departure would give an opportunity to my enemies, lying dormant this past year and a half, to raise their ugly heads and slander me, thereby creating a thousand new problems for everyone. They might say, "Oh, do you think it is child's play to build a new kingdom? He is cheating all of you. If even cowherds start building their own kingdoms, then there's no hope for Aryavarta!" In fact, they could even incite the Yadavas by saying, "Krishna is a trickster, after all. Why are you being carried away by his charming words? He is making a fool out of you all. There is no new kingdom to go to; for, he has not built one. He has asked all of you to gather here to simply make fun of you." What if all these words frightened the people, who would be leaving behind their well-settled homes? What if they all refused to come to Dwarka? In such a case, it would have become impossible for bhaiya and Uddhava to manage the situation. My main cause of concern was, what if we became kings of a kingdom that had no subjects? Well, as far as I was concerned, anything could happen at any time. Thus, considering all these possibilities, I decided it would be best to outwit Kalyavana somewhere near the cave. In this way, I could see the cavalcade off and also return in time to stop Kalyavana.

Meanwhile, bhaiya and Uddhava were overjoyed to see Satyaki and me return home safely. They were so happy that it seemed almost as if they had been granted a new lease of life. Relieved on seeing me, bhaiya could not stop hugging me. Of course, poor bhaiya had no idea I would be leaving them soon. However, with no inclination to dishearten him again, I thought it wise to remain silent for the moment. Since Satyaki and I had been awake the entire night, we retired to our chambers for much-needed rest, and slept soundly, secure in the knowledge of the good news we had brought with us. Early next day, as soon as we woke up, we got ready and set off to

supervise the preparations for the procession. Dusk was about to set in, and the rays of the setting sun were illuminating everything around us. Chariots, soldiers, servants and other men at arms were all present at the scene. Everyone was busy gathering and organising things to eat and drink during the journey. By dusk, we returned home, satisfied with the pace of preparations. Satyaki had dinner with us and then returned home, while the rest of us retired to bed. Alas, circumstances had other plans for me, as the spectacle which caught my eye was enough to rob me of my sleep. When our visit to Vrindavan had been called off, bhaiya had given instructions to unload the cart full of gifts, which now lay scattered in our house. No sooner did my eyes fall on those gifts lying in the veranda, than I could not help but break down. The gifts strewn about were a painful reminder of my inability to visit my beloved Vrindavan. Of course, I could have sent the gifts to Vrindavan without going there myself, but doing so would have hurt the sentiments of my dear *Brijwasis*. I had already hurt their feelings by not visiting them even once in all these years. Now, I did not want to insult their benign love for me by sending gifts, and not actually visiting them. They would have certainly been hurt, for, it was not gifts, but my love and companionship that they yearned. To be honest, I felt undeserving of their love and affection. On one hand, here I was, providing succour to thousands of people, promising them a life of heavenly bliss in Dwarka, and on the other, I had been unable to spare time enough to meet my *Brijwasis* even once in all these years. In this moment of despair, when I could not think of anything else, I simply sat down among the scattered gifts. Picking them up one by one, I gazed at them intently and longingly, with an untold sadness wrenching my heart. But when my hands brushed against the *dupatta* (a long piece of cloth worn around the head, neck and shoulders by women) I had bought for mother and Radha, my shoulders slumped forward in dejection. It was almost midnight now, yet I felt no urge to get up and retire to bed.

Well, so much for myself, but what about my dear *Brijwasis*? My feelings and my love for them was a different matter, but I could not overlook the fact that I had not been able to visit them even once in all these years. Wouldn't it be natural for them to think of me as a cheat and an opportunist? Wouldn't they be right if they called me selfish and labelled me a trickster? But only I knew the torment I was experiencing today. I do

not think anybody had ever endured such pain before. I was not able to meet my dear Radha or receive my mother's blessings; I had kept postponing my journey to Vrindavan. And now I was left with no time to visit. Well, let the world believe and say whatever it wants about me, but I have bared my heart to you. You have seen me endure the trauma of not being able to go to Vrindavan. You must have realised by now that all this was just a game that time was playing. All I had done was comply with the need of the hour. I also knew that as soon as I would wake up in the morning, I would have to, once again, act with diligence and respond to the demands of time. With this thought playing on my mind, I finally went to bed despite sadness weighing down heavily on me.

The next morning, as soon as I woke up, I forgot all about Vrindavan and immersed myself in work, for, I would never let my personal feelings come in the way of my duties. With two more days left for us to leave, we had already started camping at the western gate of the kingdom. In any case, it was crucial to keep an eye on the ongoing preparations, as even a tiny mistake on our part in these final moments could cost us dearly. Apart from us, several others too, had begun to arrive and pitch their tents. Greetings of 'Jai Dwarka', hailing and glorifying us, would often come our way. While royal chariots, servants and soldiers were already camped here, the charm of this encampment had been further enhanced with the arrival of the Yadavas. The adjoining ground was already teeming with soldiers, chariots and horses, and now, even the main road was swarming with carts. The scene before me was changing swiftly, turning into a beautiful sight—one I did not wish to take my eyes off. Bhaiya, Uddhava and Satyaki were busy running around, overseeing last-minute arrangements. Subhadra walked around with us too, marvelling at the phenomenal progress her brothers had made after their arrival in Mathura, and at the fact that they had become capable of establishing their own kingdom. With throngs of people continuing to pour in with their carts throughout the day, and until late into the night, the entire landscape had turned into a sea of bullock carts and chariots; by midnight, the air pulsated with their enthusiasm, reflecting the mood of the people. Everybody had brought their cattle along as well, for, these animals were the very source of our livelihood. Though it was vital to take them along, we had anticipated that they would slacken our speed

considerably. Wasn't this an irony of life? Many a time, the very things that you cannot live without, can invite death to your door!

We spent most of the night celebrating the fact that we were about to embark on our great journey and slept only for a short while. By next morning, however, more people had begun to stream in. It was expected too, as we were scheduled to leave for Dwarka the subsequent morning. Indeed, the exuberance of the people was worth watching, though this fervour also served as a reminder of my responsibility to escort them safely to Dwarka. Of course, I was well aware of my responsibility towards them. Nevertheless, people continued to stream in from all directions of the kingdom with their cows, buffaloes, horses and camels. By evening, Uncle Akrura, Daruka, grandfather, mother and father had also arrived. On the other hand, a constant stream of people continued to arrive throughout the night. The entire atmosphere wore a festive look; rejoicing, many people showed up playing the drums, while several others arrived singing and dancing. Although we had to leave the next morning, everybody was in a joyous mood already. But, amidst all this, I was caught between feelings of contentment and misgiving as I watched the happiness on Subhadra's face. She was the chirpiest of them all, but seeing her joyful mood, I was besieged with doubt. 'Would her happiness last long? Would the procession reach Dwarka safely?' What could I do? The threat was so terrifying that every smiling, excited face would only torment my heart further.

The prospect of being freed from this pain anytime soon seemed unlikely. Similarly, there was no question of sleeping tonight either. While Uddhava and Satyaki were busy throughout the night forming a queue for the procession, I was busy with various arrangements, even as a thousand possibilities flitted through my mind. Bhaiya was busy too, assembling the soldiers, servants and officers of the palace. Seeing all of us engaged in our respective tasks, Subhadra joined my parents as soon as they arrived. To give you an idea of the mass of people that had gathered, well, it had far exceeded my expectations! Perhaps they all wanted freedom from their miserable existence in Mathura. However, each time I looked at their expectant and radiant faces, I trembled with a terrifying thought, 'What if they end up being freed of their lives, because of me?' I discarded the thought quickly from my mind. Meanwhile, just as the first rays of the rising sun bathed us in a mellow glow, bhaiya surprised us all; heeding to



my earlier request, he arrived with fifty courtesans. Well, this was an era that revolved only around liquor, women and gambling. Proof of this was the visible change seen on the faces of most of the men at the sight of the courtesans.

This was yet another attribute of my nature. I had never interfered in the personal lives of people; I believed that it is a person's prerogative to pursue whatever interests him the most. Rather than trying to change prevalent norms, I was more interested in changing what lies within a person, because what lies within matters the most. How can anyone judge whether an outwardly action is good or bad? For instance, both King Janaka and the people of Mathura loved dance as an art form, but the difference lay in their perception. While the people of Mathura enjoyed a particular kind of dance form, King Janaka was a connoisseur of a different form altogether. While one savoured it in a state of unawareness, with lust as the predominant emotion, the other was a self-realised, enlightened person. Though King Janaka loved dance as an art form, there was no desire, lust or greed in him; he was totally detached from it. Here, the analogy of the lotus would serve to illustrate the meaning of what I wish to say. There is no harm in living in muddy waters, but in order to do that, one must possess the quality of the leaves of a lotus, which enables the leaves to stay disengaged from the muddiness. Thus, I have never considered any action to be innately good or bad. When this world is devoid of sin or virtue, then what am I supposed to oppose? It was because of this progressive approach to such matters that I never interfered in anyone's personal life. I have only opposed people who are responsible for the ruination of thousands of lives or the rituals and traditions that have proved to be detrimental to humans, ruining their lives birth after birth. People like Panchajanya, Shringlava and Kansa were slain by me, because they were responsible for destroying thousands of lives. But I never troubled anyone who was ruining his own life. Similarly, I opposed traditions such as *Indra Puja*, because they had been wreaking extreme mental havoc upon the populace. But I never objected to people hankering after prostitutes or gambling. It is worth understanding that opposing the collective desires and addictions of a society robs it of its charm, rendering it dull and lifeless. Who would want to live in such a lifeless society? Just imagine, if liquor, gambling and prostitution had been banned in Aryavarta

at the time, then life across the region would have undoubtedly become unexciting and dull, and overnight, everybody would have become lifeless.

Undoubtedly, a human being is the supreme creation of Nature. Nothing is more valuable in this world than a human being's pleasure and happiness. Even though this pleasure and happiness may originate from an improper source, it is still better than leading a sad and dull life. Now, do you see exactly where the hermits have gone wrong? For centuries, they have been trying to divert the mind of humans, exhorting them to abstain from happiness and pleasure. But can anyone truly escape Nature's justice and succeed in such endeavours which are against Nature's set laws? This is why, despite the rigorous efforts of hermits over the centuries, they have been outnumbered by common people. The ratio of hermits to common people is one to one thousand. In fact, the situation has reversed now. Hermits are now dependent on common people, their stature having been reduced to naught. Sad and miserable as they are, nobody pays heed to their sermons. On the other hand, a worldly person, on the basis of his intelligence, is hard-working, happy and self-reliant. He is intelligent because he has kept hermits at an arm's length by simply respecting and honouring them for their godliness so that he can lead a peaceful and happy life. I have only this to say to hermits and god-men—to create detachment in someone's beautiful life by opposing any social practice or cultural element that gives joy and happiness to that person is equivalent to the sin of killing mankind. Since such hermits are the root cause of this sin, they have neither thrived in the past, nor can they do so in the future, because, if everything is an 'illusion', then surely any social practice which offers happiness is also nothing but an illusion.

That being the case, why oppose it? You might remember, I had enunciated this even in the Bhagavad Gita, to Arjuna. Hadn't I said, "A wise man established in the Self should not unsettle the mind of the ignorant, attached to action, but should get them to perform all their duties, duly performing his own duties."<sup>[10]</sup> This means, none of the enlightened sages have any right to create detachment by interfering in the collective acts performed by ignorant people. The endeavour of a wise man should not be to change the era; instead, he needs to accept the norms of that period, and work to bring about a change in the 'inner self' of a person. Let us try to comprehend this in depth. It is easy to imagine an enlightened person hinting at a path that

will lead to eternal happiness. His suggestions for gaining knowledge are also understandable. However, to discourage common people from attaining collective happiness is certainly not acceptable. The reason is clear; knowledge, eternal bliss and enlightenment will be attained at an opportune time, but why should one forsake one's present pleasures till then? After all, pleasure is only a subtler form of bliss. The mind, after all, is a reflection of the soul. So, can anyone please explain to me how one can attain self-realisation by killing joy and happiness and denying what the mind desires? What kind of self-realisation do these hermits want a human being to attain, by snatching away his happiness or by suppressing the poor man's desires? In fact, I believe that it is because of this extreme ignorance and dogmatism of the so-called 'enlightened beings' that self-realisation, which ought to have been a natural process, has now become elusive. This is the precise reason I have never imparted knowledge to anyone; nor did I ever label anything as evil or wrong. When one can easily attain 'ultimate happiness' by accepting life in its entirety, then why should one needlessly make life dull and drab? Look at this: my own life was at stake here, the lives of thousands of people hung in the balance, and here I was, contemplating and worrying about age-old problems of humankind! But do you not realise, this was the pinnacle of my 'compassion' which is impossible for anyone to scale!

At this time, however, it was prudent to steer my compassion away from the age-old problems of humankind and focus on the people who were dependent on me for the journey. By the break of dawn, it had become extremely difficult to handle the mass of people that had congregated on the ground. In any case, it was time for our cavalcade to commence its journey. Finally, the moment I had been waiting for arrived; every heart was beating with the hope of a glorious future as our caravan moved towards its destination. In fact, I was unsure whether to call it a caravan or 'the procession of our dreams'. A contingent of soldiers marched ahead of it to safeguard it. Behind them came the carts carrying women and children. These were followed by carts carrying important and influential people who were shielded by yet another contingent of soldiers. Among the important people were grandfather, mother Devaki, father Vasudeva, Subhadra, all the Yadava nobles and a few eminent businessmen.<sup>[11]</sup> Bhैया, Uddhava, Satyaki and a number of youths including myself were following on foot.

Guarding the rear was another contingent of soldiers. The arrangement was so elaborate that the caravan was secured at both ends to ward off sudden attacks. Indeed, the huge caravan was a splendid sight to behold! It was perhaps for the first time in the history of humankind that migration was being undertaken on such a large scale. The size of the convoy was so enormous that the first cart exited Mathura's western gate at the crack of dawn, but it was afternoon by the time the last section of the caravan moved out of Mathura! Naturally, watching the large caravan had not only made me well up with tears, but had also made me feel happy with the thought that so many people were willing to leave behind a life worse than death, to seek a life full of bliss and happiness in Dwarka. Nonetheless, a thought which kept nagging me was whether they would reach Dwarka safely or walk straight into the jaws of death. Would a 'death sentence' be the price for trusting me? Nay, such misfortune would definitely not occur! I considered it my 'supreme duty' to save the person who placed his trust in me. So, even if I had to give up my own life or move heaven and earth, this caravan would certainly reach Dwarka! However, even if I were to give up my life to achieve this goal, the situation facing us did not guarantee a positive outcome. In fact, even if I sacrificed my life to protect the caravan, it needed to be done in a way that would impede the progress of Kalyavana's cavalcade by eight to ten days. I was confident that it would not be difficult for me to trick Kalyavana. As time progressed, I was gradually becoming more and more resolute that regardless of whether I remained alive or not, the caravan had to reach Dwarka, come what may!

With these thoughts coursing through my mind, I naturally became engrossed in formulating the future course of action as soon as the caravan set off. On the other hand, we were getting a good amount of exercise too, for, it was already afternoon, and while supervising the smooth passage of the caravan, we were running from one end of the caravan to the other. Well, it was not exactly supervision; our sole aim was to focus on ways to somehow increase the caravan's pace. But how could we quicken the pace of a caravan as enormous as this one, carrying so many animals and people on foot? All these factors were pointing towards the necessity of stalling Kalyavana, by any means, at least by a fortnight. To some extent, even Satyaki was worried about it. As for bhaiya and Uddhava, they had no clue how far Kalyavana had reached, and as for the rest of the caravan...well,

they had absolutely no inkling about anything. They were simply moving ahead, cheering and hailing us, oblivious of impending danger, with the sound of drumbeats reverberating throughout the way. If there was anyone feeling gloomy in this festive atmosphere, it was Satyaki and I. Indeed, were it not for the sword of death—Jarasandha—hanging over our heads, we also would have been singing, dancing and making merry. Had it not been for him, we too would have been celebrating the greatest joy of our lives.

Nevertheless, we had travelled only a little distance when, to everyone's utter surprise, Satrajit arrived with his grand caravan. It comprised ten bullock carts, twenty chariots, several horses and cattle and over twenty-five soldiers and servants. All his carts were laden with supplies and luggage. And yes, Satyabhama accompanied him. Clearly, he had set forth too with the intention of settling down in Dwarka. Nevertheless, everybody was astonished to see him arrive. As for bhaiya and Uddhava, they were extremely unhappy to see him join us. Undoubtedly, they perceived him to be our arch enemy, who could disrupt our wonderful lives in Dwarka. Now, you could not really blame bhaiya and Uddhava, for, they had no inkling of the altered circumstances in Mathura or the change in Satrajit's behaviour for the past year and a half. All this time, they were busy in Dwarka, supervising the construction activities. I, on the other hand, was overjoyed to see Satrajit, for, he was a king who possessed a kingdom of his own. According to me, if reputed individuals like him were to accept Dwarka as their own, then it would certainly be a matter of great pride for Dwarka. Being an astute politician, I was, therefore, bound to welcome him with open arms. But it was natural for bhaiya to be shocked, and even irked, at my behaviour. How could I explain to him that it was not out of free will that poor Satrajit was joining us; it was actually the magnetism of the 'Syamantaka gem' that was pulling him towards us! In any case, Satrajit was a fearless lion as long as he had the gem in his possession; at present, he was nothing but a timid cat!

Interestingly, while Satrajit was obviously pleased with my warm welcome, his daughter Satyabhama was euphoric. It was clear that she was ecstatic about the prospect of moving to Dwarka. The reason was obvious too; the opportunity presented several possibilities to be in close proximity to me! As for me, I had not one, but several reasons to welcome Satrajit and

Satyabhama wholeheartedly. Of course, I was not an ungrateful wretch; I could not forget that Satrajit's 'Syamantaka gem' was the chief contributor towards the establishment of Dwarka. At the same time, there was no question of not acknowledging Satyabhama's wholehearted devotion to me. In fact, there were various reasons why I could simply not forget her! Imagine this: what would have happened to me had Radha broken my heart? I might have remained a cowherd boy wandering the lanes of Vrindavan at this point of time. So, how could I break Satyabhama's heart then? My heart, at all times, would pray for her, 'May Nature bless her life with a bounty of joy'.

Returning to the caravan, it was so enormous that one could barely spot its two ends. Close to two hundred bullock carts, two hundred chariots, hundreds of domestic animals, a thousand or so foot soldiers and a thousand guards and servants made up its bulk. And if these were not enough, we also had three kings, Ugrasena, Satrajit and bhaiya travelling with us, and perhaps me too—the King of Dwarka—that is, if I managed to stay alive! There were about two thousand families which, at a rough count, totalled twenty-five to thirty thousand people. It was a strange situation indeed; on one hand, we were all coping with the grief of having to bid farewell to a well-settled life in Mathura, and on the other, there was also the charm of establishing a new home. An avalanche of emotions swept over us. While the mind was gripped by sadness, it was also euphoric at the same time. No doubt, the journey was long and tiring and fraught with danger. But at the end of it, sublime peace and harmony awaited us. There was the reality of the present moment and also the dreams of the future. To fulfil the dreams of all these people and to escort them safely to Dwarka was my responsibility. They had, after all, placed their faith in me. So, considering my duty towards them, they were now the people of Dwarka, not Mathura. They were my subjects now, and it was the duty of a good king to protect his subjects under all circumstances. Besides, it was in my nature since childhood that if someone trusted me, sought refuge in me, then I took it up as my responsibility to improve their life. I would not let harm befall a person seeking refuge in me! I had repeatedly enunciated this very idea to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, "Surrender to me, be devoted to me, worship me."<sup>[12]</sup> But how could Arjuna's ego ever yield to me? He was Arjuna, after all; you may remember how he had been unable to surrender unto me until

the very end. These people, however, had completely surrendered themselves to me.

Be that as it may, going by the speed of the caravan, it would surely take us at least twenty days to cross the Lavana valley. In my opinion, with Kalyavana being the only threat to the caravan, we were not safe until we had crossed this valley. If only he could be stopped from entering Mathura for a few days, then the grave danger to our lives would be averted. The responsibility of delaying him rested solely on my shoulders; I was aware and well-prepared for it too. So, by evening, as the tail end of the convoy crossed the outer boundary of Mathura, I took bhaiya, Uddhava and Satyaki's permission and set forth to meet Kalyavana. Obviously, this time, I had to go to great lengths to seek bhaiya's permission. Uddhava and Satyaki too insisted on accompanying me till the last minute. However, just like Arjuna, their attachment too, was untimely. Obviously, I was not going to be swayed by such ill-timed attachment, was I? So, I set off on my mission, leaving their sad faces behind. As I rode off, I cast an affectionate glance at my caravan. Ah, if only I could express the wondrous feeling that swept over me at that moment! So many people, on the strength of my assurance, were willing to leave behind a deathlike existence and move towards a life full of hope. It was this very hope which fuelled my courage today. What can I say, seeing the caravan proceed with such enthusiasm, I could not stop myself from becoming sentimental. Needless to say, I bid an emotional farewell to the caravan, and rode off in the direction of Kalyavana's convoy.

The caravan had set off, but its safety was still not assured. Only I knew the severity of the mental and emotional turmoil I was experiencing at this moment. I had raced off on my horse, hoping to stop Kalyavana and thereby ensuring the safety of the caravan; however, I had no concrete plan or ideas about how I would stop him. Moreover, it was a question of the lives of thousands of people. I was in such a state that barely had I travelled some distance when I was gripped by yet another worry. Was it possible that I had miscalculated and Kalyavana had already crossed the cave by now? If that was indeed the case, it would be impossible to stop him!

For a moment, it felt as if the wind had been knocked out of my sails. However, I composed myself quickly because the task I had set out to

perform could not be accomplished in a worried state of mind. Besides, bowing down to defeat before actually being defeated is conceding defeat without a fight. So, at once, I sniffed the potion named 'confidence' and surged forth. If Kalyavana had not crossed the cave yet, then it would be great; but if he had already crossed it, then I would simply have to think of another trick. It was not a problem really, because to come up with a solution was in my hands, and I would think for as long as I wanted. But no matter what happens, I would not let Kalyavana reach anywhere near the caravan. Unable to come up with a definite solution, I repeated this resolve in my mind umpteen times, while my horse continued to gallop at lightning speed. I wanted to reach the cave as soon as possible to implement the plan I had devised to trick Kalyavana.

In spite of racing my horse all through the night, I was able to reach the cave only by next morning. Fortunately, there was no sign of Kalyavana's army. Naturally, I heaved a huge sigh of relief, as this meant that I was close to reaching Kalyavana, but he had yet to encounter me. Despite the exhaustion, my vigilant mind would not even let me blink. I tethered the horse to a tree and fetched some grass from pastures nearby, for it to feed on. I then plucked some fruits for myself and took shelter under the same tree. I could see the cave clearly before me, surrounded by lush foliage and hillocks on all sides, as I waited once again for the arrival of death, amidst these idyllic surroundings. Indeed, although I had waited with patience on numerous occasions previously, this time, my wait was unique. On one hand, I was awaiting death in the form of Kalyavana, and on the other, I was waiting for life, that is, the caravan to reach Dwarka safely. The wait for death was unique for another reason as well. The longer the wait, the better it was for the welfare of all! However, with each passing moment, this wait only seemed to stretch a little longer. Hours ticked by and the evening set in, but there was still no sign of him. I knew there could be no greater news than this. At this rate, there was no chance of his arrival before the next afternoon. It seemed impossible for an army, with so many soldiers, to march on at night. With a peaceful night ahead of me, I cast all thoughts of Kalyavana aside and immersed myself in the music of my flute. Who knew whether I would get another opportunity to play my flute or not? Tonight, it was just me and my flute. Neither was I thinking of anyone, nor was I waiting for anyone. Why think of or wait for anyone in the last



moments of one's life? These were moments I needed to spend with myself. It was a day to live only for myself, and honestly, I had never experienced this kind of peace and solace before.

With the break of dawn, a new idea struck me. I wondered, 'Would it not be better if I started moving towards Kalyavana's army, instead of sitting here waiting for him?' It would be in the best interest of the caravan if I could increase the distance between Kalyavana and the people of the caravan. The idea was excellent, so I took off immediately at a gallop, riding straight into the jaws of death. I was extremely happy because in spite of having journeyed for almost half a day, I could see no sign of Kalyavana's army. Perhaps, due to its enormous size, the army was moving at a much slower pace than I had anticipated.

My happiness, however, was short-lived. By afternoon, I could spot Kalyavana's huge army before my eyes. For a moment, the appearance of the mighty and fierce army sent a chill down my spine. But then I thought, 'Why should I be afraid?' I had set out to embrace death anyway, so, I made my way fearlessly towards the army. Just as I had anticipated, seeing an unknown rider galloping towards them, Kalyavana's soldiers surrounded me and started shooting a volley of questions at me, "Who are you? Where are you headed? Whom do you want to meet?"

Adopting my most confident tone, without batting an eyelid, I replied, "I am a messenger of King Ugrasena of Mathura, and I have been sent to deliver a message to your king, Kalyavana."

As soon as they heard this, six of the soldiers closed in on me and, in a way, detained me with their suspicious stares. Anticipating a welcome exactly like this from the enemy soldiers and preparing well for the situation, I had disguised myself before leaving. Had I dared appear before them as Krishna, I would have, in all probability, died at a sacrificial altar! Well, well, well...was there anyone who could equal me in foresight and vigilance? I thought, 'I might as well take this opportunity and feel proud of myself.' Who knew if I would ever get another chance to indulge in self-praise?

Leaving me under the watchful eye of the other soldiers, one of them went to Kalyavana to report this new development. Since I had nothing to do, I spent time admiring Kalyavana's huge army marching towards us. Oh! What can I say about the army? It stretched as far as the eye could see. By now, many of the mounted soldiers had reached me. I could even spot Kalyavana's mammoth chariot being pulled by eight horses. Honestly, the sight of Kalyavana's well-equipped, vast army had sent a shiver down my spine. Indeed, had this army reached Mathura ahead of time, all the Yadavas, including myself, would have been eliminated instantly. Even now, if they were to catch up with the caravan, all would be lost. I silently blessed Shwetketu, for, he had warned us in the nick of time; else, before we could get even an inkling of the attack, the whole of Mathura would have been annihilated. The after-effects of this bloodshed would have even spilled over to Vrindavan, and Nanda and Yashoda, being my parents, would have lost their lives too. These lunatics could not be trusted, for, they would have even destroyed the whole of Vrindavan.

While we are on the subject of Vrindavan, I want to share something with you that was nestled deep in the recesses of my heart, especially today, at this juncture of my life. Jarasandha was another reason why I was hesitant and not fully convinced about my decision to go to Vrindavan. Had he found out how important Vrindavan was to me, he would have lost no time in destroying it along with me! Apart from other circumstances, this fear had played a major role in keeping me away from Vrindavan.

Returning to Kalyavana, as soon as he heard of the arrival of King Ugrasena's messenger, he ordered the entire convoy to stop at once. The soldiers immediately dismounted from their horses, and within no time, poles were dug into the ground, and materials required to set up tents were brought out. Soldiers and servants swiftly spread all over the camp, and there was a general buzz of frantic activity. All the horses were untethered too. Standing in the midst of all this, surrounded by soldiers, I continued to observe the commotion around me. By now, Kalyavana had already retired to his tent, and having rested awhile, was ready to meet me. Needless to say, it was evening by the time everyone had settled down. I was feeling quite pleased with myself for, my arrival, if nothing else, had cost him at least a day! Soon, Kalyavana summoned me. The situation was ironic; death had beckoned me and I felt like a corpse already, especially since I

had been riding my horse all night and was then made to stand under the blazing sun for almost the whole day. Honestly, I was suffering from stiffness in my legs, and was hobbling. But how did it matter to the soldiers; they dragged me callously in this state, and within no time, I found myself standing inside Kalyavana's tent. Despite his gigantic physique, I could not help but notice the sparkle in his eyes. Emanating intense self-confidence, Kalyavana's personality was indeed awe-inspiring. In fact, his tent too, was quite impressive. Since this was the first time I had seen a tent in my life, I forgot everything for a few moments and was absorbed in admiring it; the tent was nothing less than a magnificent chamber. Kalyavana was seated before me on a raised platform, while I stood before him, surrounded by soldiers. Before I could forget the reason for having been brought here, Kalyavana roared, "What is your name? And what gift have you brought for me this time? A giant cobra?"

Kalyavana's imposing personality and booming voice startled me significantly. Already stunned at the magnitude of his imposing army, I was totally flustered on hearing his query. However, regaining my composure quickly and realising the need of the hour, my spontaneity scaled its ultimate peak at once. Thus, with utmost humility and confidence, I began, "Messengers have no names, Your Highness! Messengers are simply messengers. Actually, sending the snake was nothing but an unsuccessful attempt to rattle someone as powerful and strong as you. Ultimately, it only proved to be a foolish act on our part. King Ugrasena has asked for your forgiveness for having committed this folly. Kindly consider me a messenger of King Ugrasena at this moment."

I was a mere youth, so, hearing me speak with great humility, and even begging for forgiveness on behalf of the king, for his folly, Kalyavana had no choice but to calm down. In fact, this time, he asked calmly, "What if I make you my prisoner?"

Although spoken in a calm tone, the question was cleverly laced with threat. Diplomatically, I replied, "O King, you are renowned for your supreme knowledge of all the principles of warfare and strategy. You are also ranked high among kings who adhere to these principles. King Ugrasena and all of Mathura have implicit faith in you. Isn't that why I

have had the courage to come to you alone and unarmed, despite a snake having been sent to you on the previous occasion?”

Indeed, ego is the weapon which, when used wisely, has the capacity to make even the mightiest bow down. It is a weapon which, when used judiciously, has the power to melt even the mightiest rock. Kalyavana was no different, and thrilled at being praised, he swelled with pride and said, “What you have heard is true. So, tell me, without fear, what is the message you have brought for me this time?”

What message did I really have for him? My only intent was to somehow involve him in futile conversation and waste his time as much as possible. So, I said, “King Ugrasena wants to surrender Mathura to you without a fight.”

Jubilant on hearing this unusual message, Kalyavana suddenly knit his brows and asked in an astonished tone, “But why?”

“I cannot reveal the reason, Your Highness, for, I would be betraying Mathura,” I replied in dramatic overtones.

Naturally, this reply of mine piqued his curiosity. This was precisely why I had added a dramatic touch in the first place. As a consequence, he not only asked his soldiers to relax their guard, but almost coaxed me into revealing the reason saying, “You will have to tell me. Without learning the actual reason, it would be impossible for me to determine the veracity of your message.”

Well, how did it matter to me? So, this time, I made a great show of having understood his viewpoint and said, “What you are saying is absolutely right. So, I will have to reveal it all. The truth, Your Highness, is that we do not wish to die an untimely death by clashing with an adversary as powerful as you. As far as Jarasandha is concerned, Mathura has already defeated him twice. Jarasandha’s son-in-law, Kansa, had tyrannised the people of Mathura and now, Jarasandha wants to continue the same tradition. This is the reason King Ugrasena wants you to rule over Mathura so that its inhabitants can live peacefully.”

Hearing this, Kalyavana went soft like molten wax. Speaking in a friendly manner, he said, “It is certainly King Ugrasena’s greatness to think first of the welfare of his people and then of his ego, but what about those two scoundrels, Krishna and Balarama?”

“O King,” I said, “Those two are the grandsons of King Ugrasena. Jarasandha harbours personal enmity against them, as he wants to exact revenge for the death of his son-in-law, Kansa, because it was they who had killed Kansa to rescue the people of Mathura from his tyrannous rule.”

Kalyavana was a bit startled to hear this. He said, “But Shalva’s opinion about those two was something else altogether. Never mind! Rest assured, you and your people have nothing to worry about. According to my pact with Shalva, Mathura will anyway remain under my rule. I promise that I shall not torment the innocent people of Mathura in any way.”

Hearing this, I chuckled on purpose and with great melodrama, said, “The whole of Aryavarta knows that Jarasandha’s plans always differ from his promises!”

My words had brought about the desired effect. He was momentarily taken aback. I had succeeded in shaking Kalyavana’s faith in Jarasandha. My task had been accomplished! In an uncertain tone, he asked, “What do you mean?”

Feigning helplessness, I replied humbly, “How can I tell you that, Your Highness? I have brought to you only the message of Mathura’s surrender.”

As soon as he heard this, Kalyavana’s demeanour changed. He was determined to know what I meant, at any cost. But how could he force the hand of a child like me? Besides, I was also a messenger who had pampered his ego. Hence, in order to ferret out the story from me, he signalled to me to move closer to him and arranged for me to sit facing him. From being held a prisoner to being seated before him as an equal was indeed a great achievement! So far so good; he now leaned towards me and warmly coaxed me, “Why don’t you understand? Unless you reveal the entire matter to me, how can we arrive at a well-grounded conclusion?”

Well, how did it really matter to me? When he was going out of his way and paying heed to what I said, I also made a great show of having understood his point and rattled off an impressive story. My theory was simple; when your enemies are stronger than you, turn them against each other. So, I spoke gravely, as though I was about to reveal a great secret, “What you are saying seems to make sense. The truth, however, is that Jarasandha is not only using you for his own interest but is also stabbing you in the back. I am sure all of Aryavarta and even you, certainly know of Jarasandha’s aspiration to become the ‘emperor’ of Aryavarta. But he is unable to do so because you, O King, are the biggest impediment in his path, for, you would never accept anyone as your emperor. Everyone is aware that you would neither serve him nor submit to him. Thus, the only way he can become emperor is by defeating you in war, and this is not possible without attacking you. Hence, he has devised a scheme to eliminate you by using Mathura as a pawn. Actually, he intends to trap you here and put an end to you once and for all. Once you are out of his way, he would lose no time in declaring himself Emperor of Aryavarta.”

Using my words as a subterfuge, I had kept my gaze trained on Kalyavana’s face to gauge his reaction. It was clear that I had succeeded in deceiving him with my glib talk as he listened with rapt attention to the lies I had so cleverly woven to befuddle him. After I had finished speaking, he took a long, deep breath and was lost in thought. Watching the effect my story had had on him, I relaxed inwardly, but being a fine actor, I continued to maintain a solemn expression. You would not believe the innocent look I had put on as I sat before him. Of course, Kalyavana was no less of a wonder; he seemed to be testing my acting prowess thoroughly. I did not mind at all! I was, after all, a master at histrionics. For someone who viewed life as a huge performance, I was versatile in displaying a range of emotions. My own life, especially, was being played out on a vast stage, replete with melodrama and fraught with danger. If there was any consistency in it, it was my nature, my soul, my love, my happiness, my peace and my joyfulness. The rest of it—battles, deceit, establishment of Dwarka, my relationship with mother and father, the life I led in Vrindavan, and my quest for Rukmini—were all performances. However, the beauty of it all was that, although these were mere acts, I had performed them in their entirety. For me, these acts were truer than truth itself, and deeper than any

attachment. Even so, they were just acts! While performing all these roles too, I was nothing more than a ‘witness’—the Soul. And all that matters is the soul, for, the soul is immortal! Besides, who could understand the immortality of the soul better than me? Have you forgotten, how I had expounded upon the glories of the immortality of the soul in great detail to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita? Nonetheless, coming back to Kalyavana, he was still brooding, and this was the right time to deliver the final blow to his psyche. In the pin-drop silence that followed my verbal machinations, my subsequent words reverberated in the stillness of the tent, as I spoke in all seriousness, “O King, consider this: do you think Jarasandha is bringing such a vast army and so many kings only to conquer Mathura? Is it not worth deliberating that Mathura would anyway be powerless in the face of such a huge army and would bow down to it? Then why did he feel the need to call you all the way here to fight this puny, one-sided battle?”

Kalyavana was already anxious, having borne the brunt of my sly manoeuvrings; but now, he was at his wits’ end, unable to comprehend at all. I had put him in a quandary, and it seemed as if his mental faculties had stopped functioning altogether! He was now compelled to think in the direction I wanted him to. This indicated that his mind had now surrendered completely to ‘Krishna’s machinations’. Consequently, as he came to terms with Jarasandha’s diabolic politics, he was baffled, as he sat with his mouth wide open. Moments later, when he failed to comprehend anything, he roared with rage, “I would have never trusted that wicked Jarasandha. It is only because of my friendship with Shalva that I find myself in this trap.” Saying so, he sighed deeply.

Then, all of a sudden, he became livid, and placing a hand on my shoulder, said, “You have brought me King Ugrasena’s message; now take my message to him. Go tell him that neither Jarasandha, Shalva nor any other king will be able to return alive from Mathura.” Brimming with strong emotions, an enraged Kalyavana drew his sword out and swung it over his head, determination writ large on his face.

I was elated; I now had Kalyavana wrapped around my little finger. He had become a puppet in my hands; my thoughts were now controlling him! In other words, Dwarka was almost a reality now. Presently, my situation was such that on one hand, I was lost in dreaming of a well-settled life in

Dwarka, and on the other, I felt like chuckling at the tall stories I had just fabricated! The reality was that after his bitter experiences in the past, Jarasandha had set forth with a much smaller army this time, but in order to manipulate Kalyavana, I had told him that Jarasandha's army was huge, raising suspicion in Kalyavana's mind about Jarasandha's true intentions. How intelligently I had played my cards and had stumped the astute and mighty Kalyavana within no time! That is precisely why I keep saying, 'Do not rub me the wrong way; neither while I'm alive, nor after my death!' Mind you, I am not saying this in an egotistic state of mind; one can truly learn the art of winning in every situation from me. First, confuse the opponent, then, attack his psyche to such an extent that he has to depend on you for the most trivial of decisions, and then manipulate him as you desire. Finally, destroy him by setting him against his own self. This was exactly what I was trying to do with Kalyavana presently. My inner voice chimed in again, 'Krishna, first see the task through to completion, and then boast about your prowess. If you commit even the slightest mistake now, you will be diced to pieces right here!' Well, this surely was the truth. So, I immediately jolted myself out of my reverie and returned to reality. Meanwhile, Kalyavana's expressions clearly indicated that despite all my efforts, the yarns I had spun had not entirely convinced him. So, sensing an opportunity, I decided to attack his psyche once more. With immense confidence and determination, I said, "If you are indeed capable of slaying Jarasandha, then I can guarantee the support of the whole of Mathura. The army of Mathura is not very well organised, and I admit it does not have contemporary arms and ammunitions either. Nevertheless, it has about five to six thousand soldiers who will readily assist you in your battle against Jarasandha. Under the guidance and leadership of someone as great as you, I can say with conviction that they will not prove lacking in bravery."

As soon as Kalyavana heard this, his face lit up with joy. His optimism was of great use to me at present. So, without wasting another moment, I played my trump card—the card of ambition. After all that had occurred, there was no chance of this card failing either. Thus, I said with utmost humility, "O great King, if you succeed in killing Jarasandha, then you would become the undisputed emperor of Aryavarta, and the entire region will be at your feet. In fact, Aryavarta would feel blessed to have a kind-hearted emperor like you."



My arrow had found its mark! I could clearly see Kalyavana's eyes glowing, as he dreamt of becoming the emperor of Aryavarta. In his excitement, he sprang up from his seat. Then, turning to his commander-in-chief, he said, "Let us rest tonight. Make preparations with full speed to set off for Mathura tomorrow. We have to put an end to Jarasandha as soon as possible."

It was my turn to be aghast now! So far, I had been able to delay him by only a day. Kalyavana setting out for Mathura with his entire army, early tomorrow morning, spelt danger for me and the caravan heading towards Dwarka. In an instant, my relief vanished, with the false stories and countless lies having gone in vain. It meant that my task was still not complete. It was imperative to somehow stall him here for at least three to four days. As soon as the tables were turned, my pride and presumptions dissipated. I had already contrived rosy dreams of him becoming the emperor. Now, did I have to show him dreams of becoming the master of the universe as well? I was miffed with myself. Meanwhile, the night was upon us and the camp was already alit with torches. However, the dark cloud of death hovering over our heads could not be dispelled. Unless I quickly thought of a way out of this situation, my 'dream' of settling in Dwarka would remain a dream forever. But what could I do? Well, as you know, 'necessity is the mother of invention'. Thus, a new scheme sprang forth from my consciousness. Well, this was not a scheme; it was yet another lie, yet another story! Adopting an innocent look immediately, I said, "O King, I beg your permission, may I say something? The route we are planning to take is a circuitous one. If we continue on this route, we are likely to reach Mathura at the same time as Jarasandha's army. Under such circumstances, we would not be able to make optimal use of Mathura's army. We should reach Mathura ideally ten days prior to Jarasandha. This way, you can take charge of Mathura's army and work out a foolproof plan. Moreover, I believe it would be best if the battle is fought entirely according to your strategy, because Mathura, at present, lacks an expert with experience in war tactics. At any rate, it is always best to fight a battle with the help of a single strategist."

Kalyavana immediately asked, "So... what... is there another way to reach Mathura?"

I instantly replied, “Yes, of course! There is a much shorter route. In fact, I have travelled by that path to meet you. If we take that road, we can enter the outskirts of Mathura in just three days.”

There! I had lied once again; obviously, there was no shorter route to reach Mathura! But since I had started weaving this web of lies, I had to continue with it. Entranced by my spell, Kalyavana instantly agreed and said, “Alright! Tomorrow, we will proceed on this shorter route.”

I thought to myself, ‘My dear King, I would love to take you, if only there was an actual shorter route!’ However, having confidently suggested this passage to Mathura, it was my responsibility now to lead him there. As a result, I heard myself suddenly saying aloud, “Perhaps you should come and inspect the route first, because it is a narrow and somewhat rocky trail. I mean, God forbid if the army is unable to pass through it, then we will have to turn back and take the longer route. If we leave in the morning, we can inspect the route and return by evening itself. What’s the worst that could happen? At the most, we would end up wasting a day, but at least our convoy would be on the right path.”

Since Kalyavana was not his usual self, he was willing to accede to whatever I said. I knew that he was placing his trust in the wrong person. Well, that was his misfortune! The good news was, his instant agreement sounded like sweet music to my ears. In fact, he even retired to bed without a worry! As for me, I was allotted a tent under tight supervision. Even though I was exhausted, it was impossible to sleep, with death lurking around the corner and soldiers sleeping all around me. I had succeeded in wasting yet another day, but what next? Lost in this contemplation, I soon realised that dawn was upon us.

Early the next morning, an enthusiastic Kalyavana, clad in his armour and carrying a range of weapons, was ready to inspect the new route, along with a few soldiers. To me, it seemed as if I was taking my own death procession with me. ‘So, wouldn’t it be better to reduce the risk?’ I thought to myself. Keeping this in mind, I made a humble suggestion, “O King, we are heading out only to inspect the path, for which two to four soldiers would suffice. Besides, what is the need to carry weapons as well? I say this, because too many soldiers and heavy weaponry will

unnecessarily delay us. Moreover, I am unarmed too and the route is also close enough, with no danger around. So, why needlessly waste an entire day?"

Saying thus, I cleverly manipulated Kalyavana into doing my bidding. In any case, with Kalyavana's mental abilities dimmed considerably, he had become entirely dependent on my intelligence. Not only Kalyavana, but even his commander-in-chief and ministers seemed to have lost their senses! Flummoxed, they could not understand how Jarasandha and Shalva, who had been Kalyavana's friends until yesterday, had suddenly turned foes. They seemed to be wondering, 'Hadh't we travelled all this way to attack Mathura? Instead, we are now friends with Mathura and are attacking someone else? But whom are we attacking?' It was beyond the understanding of these poor men to comprehend whether they were going to attack somebody or somebody was going to attack them. How could I tell them that 'Alas, Commander, there is no use trying to untangle the knots created by Krishna himself, for, it will only drive you insane without even having to fight a battle.'

Leaving humour aside, the good news, at present, was that Kalyavana had agreed to my suggestion to put away his weapons, so taking only four soldiers along, he set off with me. I breathed a sigh of relief; certainly, the risk had been reduced now. Having said that, even if the risk was low, it was still the angels of my death who were accompanying me; who knew what would happen next? By evening, they would surely realise that I had been fooling them all this while, and left with no alternative, they would surely kill me. Oh well! I would cross the bridge when I came to it. At present, Kalyavana and I were riding side by side on the path leading us to the cave with the four soldiers riding behind us. We had been riding for almost an hour now, but there was no sign of any other route. Of course, we would have seen it, had there been one, right? Meanwhile, Kalyavana's expressions and questions clearly indicated that he had now begun to suspect me. I had realised too that this farce would not hold up for long and the truth would be out in the open at any moment. To make matters worse, the cave was nowhere in sight. A feeling of unease besieged me, but luckily, before my anxiety could get any worse, I spotted the cave from a distance. Oh yes, it was the same cave where Satyaki and I had, only recently, stored dried-up branches for an emergency like this. Naturally, on

spotting the cave, I felt a new lease of life surge through me. I gently steered the horses in the direction of the cave. Seeing our course change, Kalyavana's lost confidence began to return. The cave was quite large and very deep. I had chosen it keeping in mind two possibilities: firstly, if I ever needed to flee from Kalyavana in an emergency, or if I needed to trick him and waste his time, this cave could prove useful. It was obvious that Kalyavana would have come across this cave on his way to Mathura. Besides, I had to meet him at some place to stall him. So, I thought, why not this cave? If nothing else, I could hide in it for a while, until I had thought of a way to save my life. Secondly, the cave was so dark, that it would have been impossible to even see one's own hand at night. I had kept the dried-up branches in the cave for exactly a situation like this, so that when the need arose, I could ignite the piled-up sticks to light the cave. There was yet another advantage to this deep, dark cave. Although my death was inevitable here, at least it would make Kalyavana waste another day or two, because, it would take him rather long to kill me and find my corpse in this darkness. I was willing to lose my life, if it could help in wasting Kalyavana's time.

In fact, there were several other possibilities as well, one of them being that Kalyavana, realising the extent of my lies, could become suspicious and could halt his journey right here, in order to first send his messenger to Mathura to gauge its present situation. In such an eventuality, I could consider the caravan as good as having reached Dwarka.

Riding towards the cave, I could not help but think of how this single trick of mine had opened the door to a host of possibilities. Afternoon was about to set in, and we could clearly see the cave now. However, just then, something unexpected happened! As luck would have it, while riding towards the cave, we met a few locals who had been grazing their cows nearby. Naturally, as a matter of courtesy, they greeted me. Everything was fine until one of the elders enquired, "O Krishna! How come you are here? Weren't you supposed to be on your way to Dwarka?" As soon as I heard this, in an instant, without looking left or right, I spurred my horse to a full gallop and sped off towards the cave. Well, hadn't it all become clear now? I had been exposed!

No sooner did Kalyavana hear this, than he turned livid with rage. Stunned into inaction momentarily, in his anger, he could not understand what to do next. Within moments, a thousand thoughts must have crossed his mind, however, he soon composed himself and started chasing me. Since Kalyavana and his men had no weapons with them, they could not attack me from afar and were compelled to catch me first! Feeling helpless, Kalyavana began screaming like a lunatic even while giving me chase, “So, you are ‘Krishna’, not a messenger, eh? You concealed your identity and lied to me? So, whatever you had told me was all false? Oh, you are such a liar, cheat and a rogue. I will kill you!”

He could scream as much as he wanted; what did I care! Ignoring his threats, I focussed on racing my horse towards the cave, while death was following me swiftly, trying to catch up with me. As for death, it was inevitable! If I was caught now, I would be killed instantly! Even if I managed to enter the cave, I would still be killed, but Kalyavana would have wasted a couple of days more. The good news though was that I had reached the cave safely. Jumping off my galloping horse, I quickly raced inside, and only then did I heave a sigh of relief. For one, with the setting sun, the cave was already dark inside. Inevitably, a while later, the great Kalyavana had also reached the cave. However, suspecting foul play, he wasted some more time waiting hesitantly at the entrance. Perhaps, having been tricked once, he did not want to take a hasty step and fall into another trap. Moreover, the pitch-dark cave did nothing to allay his apprehensions. Considering all this, he thought it best to exercise caution. As he paced outside, the sound of the crunching gravel was proof of the dilemma facing Kalyavana and his soldiers, who were perhaps wondering if a full-fledged army awaited them inside the cave! As for me, I was happy to let him ponder over the situation, as I sat quietly, lurking in a corner of the cave, hoping it would be best if Kalyavana decided to enter the cave in the morning. However, Kalyavana, being who he was, was unable to wait for long. Perhaps his ego had taken a beating after having been fooled in front of his own soldiers. So, when he realised that there had been no sound or movement from within the cave for quite some time, he entered it with his soldiers. He knew I was unarmed and as soon as he entered the cave, he also came to realise that I was all alone. Wasn't it incredible how a person who had trusted everything I had said, until a moment ago, could no longer

trust me? Now, how could the poor man be blamed for this? It was I, in fact, who was not trustworthy at all.

Nevertheless, at present, the situation worked in my favour, as I had been inside this cave before. Moreover, when I had entered it, there had been some light, so I was more or less familiar with the cave, whereas Kalyavana was not only unfamiliar with this cave, but it was also dark when he entered it. Consequently, although he had entered the cave, he was totally clueless about where to go and how to search for me. Meanwhile, I remained perfectly still, breathing silently. I could hear Kalyavana and his soldiers poking and prodding in the dark. Whenever they bumped against something, they would immediately become alert. But of course, they would not find me there. In any case, I was crouched in a corner from where it would have been extremely difficult for them to reach me and pull me out. Of course, I would also become alert as soon as the sound of their footsteps came closer and felt relieved as it moved away again. By now, it had become certain that Kalyavana had no intention of leaving the cave until he had hunted me down and finished me off. In other words, it was certain that he would be wasting a good amount of time in this cave. So, naturally, with each passing moment, chances of the caravan reaching Dwarka safely were also increasing. This thought was enough to help me regain lost confidence.

Suddenly, my hand brushed against the sticks Satyaki and I had gathered earlier, and this gave birth to a marvellous idea. I felt electrified! The tables could be turned now, and if I succeeded, my task would definitely be accomplished. I quickly pulled my discus out and stuck it on my finger. I was certainly feeling proud of my weapon today. Had it been any other weapon, it would have been confiscated long ago. But can a discus be called a weapon? Fully alert, my ears were straining to hear the sound of their footfalls; a while later, I could clearly hear Kalyavana's heavy footsteps. Gradually, the sound inched extremely close to me. I was already on high alert, and immediately lighting a small fire, I swung my discus towards him. Before he could understand what was happening, or even spot me, my discus had done its work. Kalyavana's head was severed from his body and he fell with a thud on the cave floor. Needless to say, with his death, I breathed a sigh of relief. Though I was safe at the moment, this was

not the time to celebrate, because the battle had not yet ended. Just like Kalyavana, I had to eliminate his soldiers too, using my discus.

There was no point in rejoicing prematurely, for, it was likely that the four soldiers would marshal their strength and put an end to me instead. However, I killed three of them easily in the same manner I had slain their king. But instead of killing the fourth soldier, I injured him with a well-placed punch and overpowered him. Though he was fully under my control, honestly, I was not yet satisfied. This was a serious matter and also the biggest gamble of my life and so, I needed to exercise extreme caution. Since I had already stacked the cave with twigs and dry sticks, I decided to use them to my benefit. Besides, because of the darkness, I was not entirely sure whether Kalyavana's men had died or were simply unconscious. What if I had lost the game just as I was about to win it? With this thought in mind, I dragged the wounded soldier outside and immediately set the cave on fire. It was not long before the cave went up in flames, and with this, a feeling of reassurance set in, that Kalyavana and his men were truly dead.

However, even now, I was not completely satisfied. At present, my consciousness was fully alert and active. I was standing outside the cave next to my horse. The horses belonging to Kalyavana and his soldiers were also tethered nearby. I still had the wounded soldier in my stranglehold and naturally, both of us were staring at the fierce fire raging in the cave. It was well past midnight, and I was left with no doubt of having eliminated the root of my problem, Kalyavana. Nonetheless, even now, we were not completely safe, for, there was one last thing left to be done, after which I could truly say that I had accomplished my task. In fact, this was the reason I had spared the life of the fourth soldier. I instructed him to return immediately to his camp with a message for his commander-in-chief. It was a perfectly clear message, the gist of which was: Jarasandha has deviously killed Kalyavana and before he finishes off Kalyavana's entire army, turn around and go home.

Once the soldier left, I finally let my guard down. Slaying Kalyavana was probably the biggest achievement of my life so far. Now, the dream of Dwarka certainly seemed realisable. Soaring on wings of joy, my mind immediately veered towards thoughts of Rukmini and the possibility of making her my queen. However, this was surely not the time to become

delirious with joy. It was crucial to remain sane, for, danger still lurked, threatening to upset my cart. I immediately reined in my wandering mind, and concentrated on racing my horse at full speed in the direction of my caravan, but after galloping a short while, this new-found enthusiasm began to wane. For one, the path was rocky and it was pitch dark. I simply could not see where the path was leading, and if this was not enough, I was also utterly exhausted. In other words, neither were the circumstances conducive to a long journey, nor did my body, weary with exhaustion, have energy left for it. So, finally, after riding for a short while, I decided to halt for the night, tethering my horse to a tree. I climbed atop the same tree and tried to sleep, nestled in some branches. I instantly felt my eyelids drooping, but the ominous sounds of wild animals all around me refused to let me sleep. So, I courageously decided to stay awake. What was the use of saving myself from Kalyavana if I were to fall prey to a wild animal in my sleep? Then, all of a sudden, I remembered *Acharya* Sandipani's words, "If the mind does not desire to harm anybody, then even the most dangerous animal will not attack you." And at present, my psyche was at the peak of *ahimsa* (non-violence), so why should I have worried?

Indeed, *Acharya* Sandipani's words were profound in their meaning and worth mulling over. According to him, selfishness is tantamount to violence, whereas at present, I had risked my life selflessly and had not only saved the lives of twenty-five thousand Yadavas, but was also going to give them a better quality of life. So, what was the need for me to worry? Holding on to this thought, I drifted off to sleep, only to wake up at the break of dawn. Immediately, without even bothering to wash my face, I jumped onto my horse and raced in the direction of the caravan. As evening set in, I had reached its tail end. It was moving at a much slower pace than expected. Well, it did not matter now, for, there was no particular cause for concern. Of course, there was the remote possibility of a slight danger which kept me vigilant; else, I would have started celebrating even before I had reached the caravan. It was quite possible that the commander-in-chief of Kalyavana's army could disregard my message and set out in search for me to avenge the death of his king. However, in such an eventuality, I doubted whether he would bring the entire army. Besides, he would first march towards Mathura in search of me, and learning about our caravan moving towards Dwarka, he would then follow our trail. Certainly, this



would entail wasting a huge amount of time. Considering all these possibilities, there was no harm in being cautious, especially when thousands of lives were at stake. In fact, danger could also knock on our door in the form of Jarasandha, but honestly, it was a bleak possibility and almost non-existent, because his army would not have reached Mathura. Moreover, our caravan was moving in the opposite direction of the route Jarasandha was using to enter Mathura. So, according to me, we were not at risk from Jarasandha at any point during our journey from Mathura. In other words, we were now reasonably safe and definitely moving towards a brighter future.

## Chapter 4

### **Ascending the Throne of Dwarka**

The caravan was so gigantic and grand that I could not tear my eyes away from it. As I had told you, the mammoth size of the caravan made it almost impossible to view it in its entirety. Nonetheless, I immediately began to search for bhaiya, Uddhava and Satyaki; a daunting task indeed, considering the hordes of people all around me. Moreover, I had to stop to greet anyone who crossed my path. This, however, was not going to stop me from locating bhaiya and Uddhava. Finally, I managed to spot Uddhava, who was walking alongside father and a few relatives. Delirious with joy on seeing me alive, Uddhava could hardly control himself from expressing relief. Needless to say, he located bhaiya and Satyaki in the crowd at once. When bhaiya turned around and spotted me, he broke down in tears of joy on seeing me unharmed. Hugging him immediately, I said enthusiastically, “Now, it is our enemies’ turn to cry their eyes out. Bhaiya, you will not believe it, but I have killed Kalyavana!” Hearing this, the three of them stood transfixed, staring at me with their mouths agape. None of them could believe that something like this could actually happen. However, after I had narrated the entire sequence of events, they were convinced that I had, indeed, eliminated Kalyavana. As soon as I finished speaking, bhaiya could not hold back his joy and at once declared, “This definitely calls for a celebration tonight!” Well, there was no question of denying that. It was a cause for celebration, indeed, and even if it were not, what was the harm in celebrating anyway? I already enjoyed a formidable reputation as an aficionado of festivals, celebration, dance, music and sports. In fact, I was always on the lookout for opportunities to enjoy and celebrate. Of course, it was a different matter that Nature granted me such opportunities only after putting me through relentless struggles, which meant that I was allowed to celebrate only after putting in strenuous efforts. This time, however, my achievement was far greater than the effort. Poised on the brink of realising my greatest dream, my life had soared to unimaginable heights; indeed, one lifetime was insufficient to encompass the celebrations for all our achievements. The spectacle was such that as our caravan moved forward, we laughed and jumped about, patting each other’s back and congratulating one another.

However, after we had calmed down a bit, I wondered, ‘Why don’t I first meet everybody and then take a nice, long bath, relish a meal and laze around?’ Besides, it was necessary to become a civilised person again, in order to celebrate such a grand achievement; Krishna could not be found snoring due to exhaustion in the midst of a celebration, could he? To be honest, I was so exhausted that I did not have the energy to even go around meeting people, but I knew how important it was to mingle with them. It was essential to boost everyone’s spirits and ensure enthusiasm was high throughout the journey. Besides, I did not want anyone to actually spark some silly rumour or even plot against me in a moment of recklessness on noticing that I was missing. ‘When everything has worked out seamlessly, why take this risk now?’ I asked myself. In any case, I had to only make my presence felt in the crowd, especially for people such as Satrajit; it was not as if I had to sit down and have a conversation with them. All I needed was to exchange a few pleasantries with grandfather and the others. And soon enough, I had completed these formalities. I even found plenty of time to rest and have a bath too. So, it did not take long for evening to set in and the celebration to begin.

For the purpose of this celebration, I chose a closed carriage because I knew that for bhaiya, celebration meant only one activity—drinking liquor. Meanwhile, Uddhava had already made arrangements for the food. So, as soon as the sun had set and the caravan had stopped for the day, the four of us climbed into the carriage and began congratulating and embracing each other once again. At that moment, it felt as if the entire world’s happiness had descended upon us and into our carriage. Not only were these simple cowherd boys about to become kings but were also on the verge of creating history.

As soon as we finished congratulating each other, bhaiya sat down to guzzle liquor. Satyaki was giving him company in equal measure. Uddhava, on the other hand, had never touched liquor, and as far as I was concerned, my attention was focussed entirely on the food, for, I had not eaten much in the last two days. Bhaiya, I noted, was drinking to his full capacity. Well, I could understand his state of mind. He must have certainly been under extreme stress, worrying about me ever since I had left and until the moment of my return. Even Satyaki and Uddhava must have been equally restless. So, naturally, bhaiya was drinking to his heart’s content to drive

away mental exhaustion. I had set out to embrace death only once, but I knew that bhaiya had experienced death a hundred times over, in the past two days. Though he was not expressing himself verbally, he was acting quite strange. He kept looking at me repeatedly, downing one glass after another. Perhaps he wanted to reassure himself that I had actually returned alive.

Throughout the evening, bhaiya was mostly silent, while the rest of us continued to chatter amongst ourselves. Actually, we were not conversing much; in a way, we were simply celebrating our miraculous victory over Kalyavana for having slain him. During the course of our conversation, Satyaki said, “Poor Jarasandha! After so many attempts, he was truly well prepared this time around, having enlisted Kalyavana’s help. He must have cherished such glorious dreams of defeating you, but now look, the poor man has lost his chief pawn even before he could reach Mathura.” Hearing this, Uddhava swelled with pride and said, “Forget Jarasandha, no other king in Aryavarta will ever dare lock horns with Krishna! Kansa, Panchajanya, Shringlava and now, Kalyavana—these were the most powerful kings of Aryavarta whom nobody ever dared challenge, and our Krishna has slain them all! And as for their leader, the great Jarasandha, he has himself been defeated by Krishna a number of times! In fact, right now, Krishna has become the ‘uncrowned emperor of Aryavarta’. In my opinion, at present, the greatest name in the whole of Aryavarta is that of Krishna!”

Now that my friends were bent on singing my praises, I need not have blown my own trumpet, right? My ego, in any case, was satiated after hearing all this! And for that matter, they were speaking the truth. It had been only ten years since our departure from Vrindavan, yet so much had happened during that period. Perched on the pinnacle of success, this cowherd boy had, indeed, achieved so much at the young age of twenty-eight, and all on his own merit. This was no mean feat, especially considering the fact that he had spent the first eighteen years of his life as a cowherd boy in Vrindavan. In light of these magnificent achievements, my ego was certainly justified in not only inflating itself and rejoicing, but also in celebrating its victory. So, although I remained silent and did not indulge in self-praise on the outside, from within, I had already let my ego soar to the skies. Meanwhile, bhaiya was still quiet. I did try to engage him in conversation once or twice, but it did not work. Clearly, he had not yet

recovered from the shock. Of course, I could empathise with him, but as soon as he was drunk, he started bawling. In between sobs, he spoke up, “Kanhaiya, had you not returned before we reached Dwarka, then not only Jarasandha, I would have burned down the entire kingdom of Magadha. I would have even destroyed the whole of Aryavarta!”

Oh! Poor bhaiya! Gripped by intense emotions, he was still reeling from shock. It was, indeed, a delicate situation, and I was unsure of how to take care of him. Ever since we had climbed into the carriage, I had been trying to comfort and reassure him that I was perfectly alright. But my dear bhaiya was still unable to recover from the shock of an eventuality, which was entirely improbable now. Bhaiya’s trauma was so severe that he could not reconcile himself to the fact that I had returned alive and that circumstances had turned in our favour. Once again, I attempted to reassure him by saying, “Bhaiya, as long as you are with me, can anything untoward ever happen to me?” Hearing this, he sighed deeply and said, “Yes, if only I am with you! But you are so engrossed in your own self, formulating plans which do not include me. What do you have to say about that?” Once again, I had become the culprit! Well, there was nothing wrong with that, but just think, how could I possibly risk my innocent bhaiya’s life, while I was neck-deep in playing out my tricks? However, I could not let this subject stretch on. Since I did not have anything to say in my defence, I simply smiled charmingly at him, as if apologising for my mistake. And that was it; bhaiya softened up and embraced me tightly. Instantly, my disarming smile had brought bhaiya back to the present with us. Returning to the present, he could finally bring himself to believe that everything had, indeed, been well taken care of. This brought on a fresh wave of tears that subsided only when he had finally vented all grief and anxiety. Indeed, bhaiya’s love for me was immeasurable, and this made his personality truly unique. Behind that tough exterior, he was soft, sensitive and more tender-hearted than even a loving mother!

Now that bhaiya had regained his composure, I felt buoyant instantly. In my mind, I could clearly visualise Jarasandha’s plight; I chuckled as I imagined the look of dismay on his face. The poor man had not only faced pointless defeat on Gomanta Mountain, but had also suffered grave humiliation due to the defeat. And this time around, only God knew how many dreams he had cherished. Gripped by arrogance after forming a military alliance with a

king as powerful as Kalyavana, he must have dreamt of an assured victory over me. I was sure that he may have even tried to assuage his ego by bringing several other kings along and blowing his own trumpet, in order to alleviate the humiliation of his defeat at Gomanta. Imagine his frustration when the poor man would reach Mathura and hear about Kalyavana's death and the news of our escape; how would he face the other kings after that? He would be forced to hide his face in shame for the rest of his life. Indeed, the poor man's dreams were going to wither like shrivelled leaves as soon as he would reach Mathura. While our caravan would have most certainly reached its destination amid great fanfare, the silly Jarasandha would be left behind in Mathura, staring glumly at the clouds of dust kicked up by our caravan. The thought itself was so amusing! Uddhava, however, did not seem too happy seeing me smiling to myself. He suddenly turned grave and said, "You know Kanhaiya, you took off to meet Kalyavana, and here, we were tired of answering people's queries about your whereabouts."

Well, Uddhava was right. Indeed, they had endured greater difficulties than I had, in the last three days. My difficulty was purely physical and my goal and task were both clear—I had to somehow impede Kalyavana from reaching Mathura, even if it cost me my life. However, bhaiya, Uddhava and Satyaki had to endure not one, but several mental ordeals. They had to endure the pain of not knowing whether I would return alive or not, and to aggravate their mental woes, they had to bear that pain in silence. The fundamental rule of pain is that, when revealed, it is alleviated, and if borne in silence, it induces grief. Besides, the three of them may have become tired of answering the thousands of questions that people may have shot at them, concerning me. Lastly, Kalyavana would not have stopped advancing towards us just because I was trying to stop him. What if he had killed me and attacked our caravan as well? Thus, they had to also focus on protecting the caravan from his attack. In other words, they must have died a thousand deaths in these two to three days, whereas, the possibility of my death in the past few days had arisen, at the most, only once. That is why I say, a body dies only once in its lifetime, but the mind can die a thousand deaths in the span of a moment! What was Arjuna's predicament in the Gita? Gripped by the fear of physical death, he had mentally died countless deaths every second he breathed. I had explained to him that "The death of the physical body is of no consequence; out of fear of that one physical death, why are

you needlessly dying a thousand deaths now?” Arjuna, however, had not been willing to listen! My explanations to make him understand had fallen on deaf ears. For that matter, are you willing to understand? The slightest imbalance in life causes you to die from within. In this short existence of ours, no problem or obstacle is so huge that it cannot be overcome. But it is you who continues to imagine thousands of problems, and then torment yourself by perpetually ruminating over them.

Returning to our journey, we chatted away throughout the night, and did not even realise when we had finally fallen asleep. And when we opened our eyes, we were greeted by the most beautiful sunrise of our lives. This morning was special indeed, for, it was the first dawn of my new life. The cowherd had almost become a king! Everyone knows about the kind of life I had led until then. You all know how I had defeated death a number of times in so many challenging situations, from the moment I was born till the events of the previous day.

If I was well and alive today, it was only by virtue of my capabilities. However, that does not alter the fact that my life had, indeed, been spent under the shadow of death all these years. Perhaps now, after settling in Dwarka, I would finally be able to live in accordance with my true nature. It would only be me and my flute, delicious meals served every day, celebrations and festivities galore, driving my chariot unabashedly all day long, strolling along the seashore every evening, travelling in my ship...and hopefully, Rukmini's lovely companionship too! Not only that, I would also gain freedom from plots, plans, struggles and battles forever!

Indeed, this is the way one ought to live one's life! After all, what need did the King of Dwarka have for subterfuge and lies? This was exactly the kind of life I had always wanted to live. Isn't one ultimately meant to enjoy such peace and joy in life? And if one wishes to experience and enjoy a glorious future, one has to contend with myriad present moments in all their different hues. Besides, how could I forget that it was only because of these struggles in my life that I had managed to reach this far with so many achievements? Could I have reached this position today without facing struggles? Thus, in reality, my mind saw no difference between conflict and peace. They are both Nature's blessings. Yet, there is an innate difference between conflict and peace. Peace testifies that everything around you is

fine and in harmony with Nature. At the same time, if seen from a different perspective, these very struggles had set me far behind in the real race of life. Even my education had been acquired with great difficulty, and that too when I had long passed the age for it. And as for marriage, well, that was yet to happen. Wasn't it incredible that a handsome, talented, capable and worthy young man like myself was still a bachelor? 'Oh well, don't be upset now. Wait until you reach Dwarka, then you can make up for all that you have lost. Recompense yourself a thousand times over for all that you have missed out on, so far.' Then, I suddenly reined myself in, wondering, 'What is this, Krishna? With this new beginning dawning in your life, you have already started playing with your mind?' And with this realisation, I immediately returned to the present, to the caravan.

The caravan was moving at its own pace. The mountains and hills on the way were, indeed, a sight to behold. As for the rivers and ponds, the entire caravan would jump for joy whenever we would pass by one. Sometimes, we would cross a village and at times, a town. Nobody had ever seen such a large caravan; whoever espied it, would just stop and gaze in wonder. It would also make them curious. And when they were told that it was Krishna's caravan, on its way to his new capital, Dwarka, I would swell with pride. In fact, due to this, I had started gaining immense popularity amongst the masses, even before settling down in my kingdom and being crowned its king...but suddenly, I came back to my senses as my inner voice cautioned me once again, 'Don't get ahead of yourself too soon, Krishna; you haven't reached Dwarka yet! The threat has not been evaded completely. What if Jarasandha reaches Mathura sooner than expected? What if he has started following your trail on his swiftest horses? Similarly, are you forgetting that Kalyavana's commander-in-chief still poses danger? So, first, cross the Lavana Pass at least, then you can gloat to your heart's content.' 'Yes, yes, I know all that! That is why I am restraining myself from soaring too high.' I replied. But the voice refused to give up. 'Oh, is it? When you can't let yourself go completely, what is the sense in doing it in bits and pieces? Since when have you started doing things half-heartedly?' After being reprimanded in this manner, I once again became alert, cautious and serious.

Meanwhile, our caravan was continuing its journey swiftly, traversing innumerable forests and mountains, without hindrance. Everybody was in



an enthusiastic mood, except me; I was worried about being chased by our enemies. By now, we had been travelling for almost twelve days. Certainly, as the days passed by, the possibility of danger had also reduced considerably. Finally, on the eighteenth day of our journey, we were greeted with the most splendid sight, sending our hopes soaring. The Lavana Pass loomed imposingly in the distance, signalling that the last barrier was also about to be crossed. It was a strange scene indeed. A tall mountain could clearly be seen in the distance, nestled amongst several small ones, and the path went right through it. Even from afar, the road lying in between the mountain ranges seemed quite narrow, which meant that crossing it would not be an easy task. 'Well, once we cross that mountain, just watch my demeanour change,' I said to myself.

However, by the time our caravan had almost reached the pass, evening had set in, and the pathway looked too dangerous to be crossed at night. Hence, we decided to wait the night out, camping near the pass, and when the first rays of the sun hit the ground at dawn, we entered it. Unlike what I had imagined, crossing Lavana Pass was turning out to be a Herculean task because of its narrow and rocky trail. However, despite the hurdles, we had to overcome this last obstacle at any cost. Travelling tirelessly day and night, overcoming considerable hardships, and with the light of the torches to lead us forward, it took us three days to cross over to the other side. Indeed, it is a proven fact that without enduring hardships, nothing can be attained in life.

Well, as you are aware, I was only waiting to cross the Lavana Pass, and once we had crossed it, I breathed a huge sigh of relief. As mentioned earlier, we knew that our caravan would not be out of danger until we had crossed the Lavana Pass. Even though the possibility of Jarasandha's army or Kalyavana's commander-in-chief chasing us had become almost negligible, it existed nonetheless. Besides, it was also possible that my calculations were incorrect. Jarasandha could have reached Mathura earlier than expected. After all, this entire game was solely dependent on news from my spies. However, now that we had crossed the pass, I could say with conviction that there was, indeed, no danger anywhere. Chasing us this far and crossing the Lavana Pass was next to impossible for them. So, there was really nothing to worry about. Honestly, this was the first time my mind was bereft of worry, as it soared freely with gay abandon. With our

destination drawing closer, the enthusiasm of the people was lending pace to the caravan, and the increase in pace was, in turn, fuelling their enthusiasm.

After a continuous journey of about twenty-eight days, our caravan reached Kushasthali, the kingdom belonging to bhaiya's in-laws. You do remember Kushasthali, don't you? Well, we set up camp quite close to the kingdom's border, for, we certainly needed some rest; obviously, we could not have crammed such a massive caravan into a kingdom. As soon as we had pitched our tents, we sent word to Revati *bhabhi* (sister-in-law). Needless to say, the moment the message was sent, bhaiya became restless. Fortunately, he did not have to wait long. Kakumadi and Revati soon arrived, flanked by nearly a hundred servants and soldiers. Congratulating us on our new kingdom, they immediately called for another two hundred servants after seeing the enormous size of the caravan. Within no time, cartloads of food and drinks, as well as other essential items, arrived to cater to our needs. I was amazed by Kakumadi's wisdom and promptness. Indeed, on reaching Kushasthali, it felt almost as if we had reached our own kingdom, Dwarka. In any case, we were supposed to be the official kings of Kushasthali, but thanks to dear bhaiya...oh, forget it! Whatever happens, happens for the best. Handing over the throne of Kushasthali to Kakumadi had given us the impetus to establish our own kingdom. Now, where did I drift off to? At present, I should be talking only about the hospitality that was being showered upon us. I must admit, Kakumadi and Kushasthali gave a grand reception to their son-in-law, Balarama; not only I, but the entire caravan was extremely pleased with this warm welcome. At this point, I could truly say that bhaiya's decision to reinstate Kakumadi as the king was not wrong. Did you see how simple-minded I was? A single instance of warm hospitality had changed my perspective entirely!

Needless to say, Revati *bhabhi's* face lit up with rapturous joy on seeing bhaiya. I introduced her to my grandfather and parents. Mother was so happy to meet Revati that she refused to part with her. In fact, everybody was pleased to meet her. Even Revati felt blessed on receiving everyone's love and blessings, and the pleasant outcome of this was, with a bit of coaxing, we convinced her to come with us to Dwarka. In any case, Kakumadi now appeared to have recovered completely, and seemed capable of taking care of his kingdom. So, what was the need for bhaiya and Revati

to unnecessarily endure the pangs of separation? My bhaiya, who was head over heels in love, jumped with joy as soon as Revati agreed to come with us. So far so good, but Kakumadi requested us to stay in his kingdom for a few days. It was a heartfelt request, and our bodies too were begging us for some rest, so we could not refuse his invitation. As a result, the entire caravan spent three days in Kushasthali. During this period, Kakumadi left no stone unturned to extend the warmest hospitality to us. Now, let me tell you a secret. During our stay, we also got the opportunity to play a fun game. Naturally, bhaiya was eager to spend some time alone with his wife Revati, but Uddhava, Satyaki and I were in the mood for mischief. To tease them, we would constantly hover around the two, not giving them the opportunity to spend time alone with each other. Poor bhaiya was unable to protest, but his restlessness was clearly conveying everything! Deriving immense pleasure from bhaiya's predicament, we were in no mood to relent or empathise with his condition; in fact, we were quite enjoying it! Hence, we deliberately turned a blind eye to their hints. Since we seldom got a chance to tease and torment bhaiya, how could we let go of such a golden opportunity?

Meanwhile, Satrajit was astonished to witness the grand welcome we had received. For one, he was still reeling from the news of Kalyavana's death. I had personally given him this good news, so that if he were considering hatching a plot against me, he would return to his senses. This was a precautionary measure, because we had not yet reached Dwarka. In any case, he had already received a jolt in the form of Satyaki. That was because a great warrior such as Satyaki had left his side and become my friend. In other words, while it was highly unlikely that Satrajit would think of plotting against me in the near future, the impressive welcome that Kushasthali extended to us had completely wiped off such a possibility.

Oh, Satrajit just reminded me of a beautiful incident that I wanted to share with you, but had slipped my mind. I wonder how I forgot to mention this! During our journey, a delightful situation repeatedly manifested itself. Yes, you guessed it right; I would end up meeting Satyabhama very often in the course of our journey and each time I met her, she would feed me delicacies, gazing longingly at me, with love in her eyes.

Coming back to Kushasthali, we were already in high spirits with Kakumadi's warm welcome and hospitality; while bidding us farewell, he also gifted us several carts filled with essential items and supplies. He was of the opinion that with a new kingdom, it could take us a while to settle down; therefore, we would surely need these essential items once we reached Dwarka. Well, he was right! It would be easier for us to start our lives in Dwarka with the help of his gifts. Indeed, Kakumadi's foresight and loving behaviour had truly impressed me.

Finally, after three days, we bid an emotional farewell to Kushasthali. With a song in our heart and a spring in our steps, we commenced the last leg of our journey. The energy, ardour and excitement in our caravan were at an all-time high. Soon, we were about to reach our destination, Dwarka, which was quite close to Kushasthali. Yet, because of our eagerness to cover the distance quickly, this final leg of our journey seemed rather long. On the other hand, Kakumadi's hospitality had won not just my heart but also the hearts of the rest of us. Everybody in the caravan was singing his praises. And now, with Revati *bhabhi* accompanying us, the collective appreciation for Kakumadi was helping her mingle easily with everybody. As a result, the journey had become a fun-filled one. Not only did the three-day halt at Kushasthali invigorate everyone, but the enthusiasm of being very close to our destination kept excitement soaring.

Moreover, when a task is carried out with joy and enthusiasm, then the 'task' automatically turns into a fun-filled game, and there is no question of tiredness while playing a game, is there? It was by virtue of this enthusiasm that the journey of seven days passed by as if it had been completed in seven hours. Soon, the gates of Dwarka loomed before us, and amidst the sounds of beating drums and merriment, the moment heralded the fulfilment of all my dreams.

In the distance, I could see Dwarka's seashore; spellbound, I stood admiring the vastness of the sea. As you are aware, a moonlit sky and the deep ocean beneath it had always fascinated me. Besides, this seashore held a special allure as it belonged only to us. Wild with enthusiasm, bhaiya, Satyaki, Uddhava and I raced ahead of the caravan. Our exuberance had a catalytic effect on the rest of the caravan; sensing that Dwarka was nearby, the rest of the travellers began rejoicing too. The sound of drums, big and small,

reverberated all around. Several youngsters matched steps to the beat of the drums and were singing and dancing along the way. A few furlongs away, we could spot Dwarka's grand entrance gate touching the seashore. Rooted to the spot, I stood spellbound gazing at the entrance to the city of my dreams. But what was this? I could see Rukmini's face at the entrance gates! This was, indeed, the height of being madly in love! My inner voice returned, this time to assure me, and not to censure me, 'Be a little patient, Kanhaiya. When the dream of building Dwarka has been fulfilled, then we will surely bring Rukmini here too!' I replied, 'That's alright, but try to understand my situation as well. I am entering Dwarka without Rukmini by my side. Wouldn't I miss her? Wouldn't my heart ache at the thought of her?' And for the first time, the inner voice did not respond.

Oh well! Speaking about the entrance, not only did it seem grand, but it also appeared equally well-built and secure. We could now clearly see the walls of the city bordering the entranceway. Overwhelmed with a feeling of indebtedness for his craftsmanship, I was convinced that Vishwakarma had, indeed, worked a miracle! Only someone who has cherished a grand dream and seen it to fruition would understand how elated this cowherd must have felt, as he stood on the seashore and marvelled at the doorway to his kingdom. Meanwhile, our caravan had halted, now that we had reached the main seashore of Dwarka. People had started alighting from their carts and chariots. It was the first time they were breathing in the scent of the sea and feeling the humid air on their bodies, as the vast expanse of the seashore spread before them. As far as the eye could see, we were surrounded by water on all sides! With the vast sea and the entrance to Dwarka right in front of us, the people's euphoria was truly indescribable. Nobody could believe their eyes! While some were dancing happily, others were screaming with joy. Several appeared spellbound, darting their eyes between the sea and the entrance. Indeed, even the heavens above could not have surpassed the zeal and bliss that pervaded the atmosphere around us.

It was an incredible sight indeed—thousands of people were sitting on the seashore, gazing at the entrance to Dwarka. And as for me, well, my gaze would constantly shift from them to the gateway and back! The sun had not even reached its peak yet, and such was the mood of the people that joy and cheer abounded wherever one turned one's gaze; people were embracing each other and could not stop congratulating one another. Even so, amongst

all these people, my happiness was unique. I would sometimes sit on the ground, and then jump up suddenly. At times, I would embrace bhaiya or sit down to congratulate Uddhava. As for Satyaki, I had lost count of how many times I had pecked him on the cheeks. I was so delirious with joy that I found it hard to control myself; 'proud' of my achievement, I seemed to have swelled up like a balloon!

Suddenly, the next moment, I realised that the real contribution towards the establishment of Dwarka had been made by bhaiya and Uddhava. 'Kanhaiya, you were needlessly taking the entire credit for it.' No sooner did this thought strike me, than my pride-filled balloon deflated and shrunk considerably! In any case, this was necessary because at present, I needed to focus on imminent tasks and rein in my enthusiasm and joy. This was especially applicable to me, because I was a *karmaveer* (man of action) and consequently, my focus was always on the tasks lying ahead. So far, we had only made it to Dwarka; we were yet to enter it. Besides, it was not easy to cross the sea, carrying innumerable chariots, carts, animals and luggage along. However, there were ships and boats anchored on the shore, ready to take us across, to Dwarka. About fifty of Vishwakarma's men were also standing nearby, waiting to take us, many of whom were hefty boatmen. I was highly impressed by Vishwakarma's foresight and the manner in which he had carried out his responsibilities. Now, the time had come for me to carry out my responsibilities as well. Undoubtedly, Vishwakarma's arrangements were of the finest kind, but I knew it would be challenging for us to carry out the tasks lying ahead.

No sooner did I realise the amount of work that lay ahead of us, than I immediately summoned my three companions and apprised them of the tasks to be accomplished, discussing the course of action to be taken to complete them. The task was present before us, so, formulating a plan did not take long. Without wasting a moment, we boarded the ships and boats and commenced the process of sailing towards Dwarka. The first group to set sail towards Dwarka comprised the elderly, women and children. Standing on the mainland, we watched them make their way into Dwarka. Each one of them, whether the elderly or the womenfolk, broke into a dance as soon as they set foot in the city. What a sight it was to behold the ships and boats carrying people to their new homes! An infectious gaiety prevailed all around. However, while the process of moving into the city

was progressing smoothly, evening was about to set in and the ships were still only ferrying the elderly, women and children. Realising this, I sent some food with Uddhava on the last ferry of the day. I also advised the people to relax for the night in the three rest houses that had been built in the city. With this, the first day of ferrying people to Dwarka had ended. We had already learnt how risky it was to travel by sea during night-time on our way to Panchajanya's kingdom, so there was no question of taking that risk this time around.

In other words, all the groups that could have been ferried today were through. Now, standing on the shore, the rest of us could only watch them go. At any rate, by sending away most of the elders, women and children, we had completed a huge part of our task. It was also good that we had remembered to send Uddhava along with food supplies in the last trip; in fact, this was a good opportunity for Uddhava to do what he liked best—taking care of people. That was not all; he was the first amongst us to set foot in Dwarka, proving that the noble are indeed fortunate. The good thing, however, was that with the elderly, children and most of the women having left, the majority of the people remaining onshore were young men and women. I am saying this, because we had to spend the night on the shore, whether we liked it or not, and such being the case, the company of the young is definitely more delightful than that of the old! The excitement was so infectious that many of us spent a sleepless night pacing the seashore. Nevertheless, as the night progressed, some people did fall asleep. After all, one needs to preserve energy to keep the enthusiasm alive!

While everything was fine, I found myself in a peculiar condition. I spent all my time looking fixedly at the entrance and the walls surrounding the city, which was akin to a fortress. When I felt tired of that, I would gaze at the lofty mountains that surrounded the city on three sides as far as the eye could see. And when I felt tired of that as well, I would observe the ships moored to the shore. Oh yes, the ships just reminded me—Vishwakarma's craftsmanship, the construction of the ships as well as the arrangements he had made, were all truly praiseworthy. Had we not found the ships waiting for us on our arrival, or the group of boatmen in attendance, we might have had to spend many more days waiting on this shore. 'Really! I must cure myself of this habit of taking all the credit for myself,' I thought. And the moment this thought crossed my mind, I was filled with admiration for

bhaiya and Uddhava's choice of land for Dwarka. The city was so secure and impenetrable, that forget Jarasandha, even if all the kings of Aryavarta were to attack Dwarka together, they would all have had to face defeat and retreat. First of all, it was extremely difficult to reach even the shore that we were standing on. Secondly, you could cross this shore and reach Dwarka's coast only by ship. Now, I leave it to you to use your intelligence and think whether it was possible to carry ships to this place. The ships could either be brought in by sea or they had to be built on this very shore. Both alternatives were impossible. And as far as our ships were concerned, those would be moored on the shore on which Dwarka stood. Besides, even if somebody were to cross over to our shore, it would still take months to knock down, pry open or even jump over those entrance gates. How could anybody carry enough provisions for such a prolonged siege? In other words, for the first time in my life, I did not face danger either from an external attack or from wild animals. Nor could I see any imminent danger from Nature at present. Besides, my biggest relief was that, I was now free of the menace called Jarasandha. I could say with surety that we could now lead a carefree life. To be specific, it was now time to fulfil all our wishes to our heart's content. One could say that all of life's struggles and battles had come to an end. The shadow of death had been fended off forever. Finally, I could say that I was about to receive the opportunity to enjoy the true joys of human life.

Now, this was where I had erred! For, as soon as I thought of living a carefree, happy life, full of fun, I was immediately reminded of mother Yashoda. Indeed, she had brought me up with great difficulty. I, on the other hand, had left no stone unturned to trouble her. Yet, her love and affection for me was always unwavering. And now, when I could finally provide her with the comforts of life, she was not by my side. This was an opportune time for me to repay her debt, but she had deprived me of the opportunity. As a matter of fact, it is never easy to repay the debts of people as great as Yashoda and Sandipani. I could at least invite *Acharya* Sandipani to stay a few days in Dwarka, but there seemed to be no opportunity to repay a mother's debt.

These thoughts made me feel sad and forlorn. It was incredible how I had begun playing these games with my mind, when most of the people lay down exhausted by the day's activities. But yes, Satyaki and bhaiya were



still wandering on the shore with a group of youngsters. Bhaiya was probably busy narrating his experiences about the establishment of Dwarka. Indeed, considering the hard work he had put in, he was entitled to indulge his ego. Returning to the scene before me, midnight had long since passed. I was still standing on the shore gazing at Dwarka's gateway while thousands lay sprawled behind me in deep slumber. A few restless people, however, had formed groups and were busy chatting. Moving my gaze a little further, I could see a handful of people still wandering about. Although I had turned morose on thinking about mother Yashoda, another spontaneous thought lifted my spirits. I became eager to invite the Pandavas to Dwarka. I knew it would be great fun when the Pandavas, Satyaki, bhaiya, Uddhava and I got together. Oh, we would really have the time of our lives! Did you see how my skittishness was only growing with age rather than abating? Well, you already know how I hated being serious. I had not become anxious even when tangled in the serpent *Kaaliya's* hood. I had not been worried even for a second when I had intentionally walked into the jaws of death, towards Kalyavana's camp. It was not in my nature to be afflicted by ailments such as fear and seriousness. So, although my heart was overwhelmed with emotions, I knew that the pain that Yashoda's absence had caused, was bound to vanish too.

The night passed by quickly as I continued ruminating over these matters. And soon, the first rays of the sun dispelled the velvety darkness of the night, nudging the rest of the troop to awaken. Before long, there was frenzied activity all around. Everyone was happy, except Satrajit, who wore an odd expression on his face. Gauging by the manner in which he was repeatedly looking at Dwarka's gateway, I was sure he had gradually realised that I had stolen the gem. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that he was now fully convinced about his suspicion. Well, it was the truth, for, how could one create such a magnificent city without the help of a gem like the Syamantaka? I could empathise with him, but in my opinion, he was wrong in his thinking. Had his perception been sound, he would actually have been pleased that at least his gem had been put to good use and had become instrumental in providing a heavenly life to so many people. Now, was it possible to think of the Syamantaka gem without recalling Satyabhama's assistance? I was eternally indebted to her; in fact, repaying her was not only impossible, but also unimaginable!

Speaking of debts, how could I forget Jarasandha? I owed all my accomplishments and success to his kindness alone! After all, it was he, who had been controlling the reins of my life since the past ten years. Consider this: had it not been for the fear of Jarasandha, would grandfather have ever sent me to Sandipani's ashram? Had I not been sent to Sandipani's ashram, how could I have made a mark across the expanse of Aryavarta by slaying Panchajanya? Moreover, had it not been for Jarasandha, neither would we have received the treasure from Chandak, nor would I have been offered such a magnificent gift by Queen Padmavati. Besides, we were able to discover the Gomanta Mountain and unearth the boundless treasure buried there, only because of Jarasandha. Whichever way you look at it, this cowherd boy had become the king of Dwarka only because of Jarasandha. At present, I was well aware of the truth, that when a person progresses, his progress is actually based on the support of so many people. A thought worth pondering is that if a person's progress is the outcome of so many people's support, then could any other God exist for him except these very people? Radha's love, the friendship of *gopas* and *gopis*, Kansa's atrocities, grandfather's love, Jarasandha's revenge, enthusiasm inspired by Rukmini, Sandipani and Shrutiketu's teachings, Sudama's bad behaviour, Satrajit's gem, sage Parshuram's guidance...the list of contributors to my success was endless, but were any of them less than gods for me? And of course, how could I forget Satyabhama's devotion towards me, which certainly equalled the embodiment of the Almighty in my eyes? How could I overlook her love and trust? It was a grave error to overlook her assistance. So, let me rectify that by being grateful and acknowledging her contribution a thousand times over. Indeed, it is next to impossible to count the number of people who help you and impart knowledge to you in your life, that is, if you really want to acknowledge their contribution to your success from the bottom of your heart; if you really consider them to be a form of God.

Indeed, even the creation of Dwarka would have been impossible without the love and assistance of bhैया and Uddhava. However, my upbringing by Nanda and Yashoda surpassed all these factors. My mother, Yashoda, was a peculiar woman indeed; no sooner did her name crop up, than my mind became absorbed in her thoughts once again. So, I gently guided it back to the seashore where I was sitting. By dawn, the people on the shore had

awakened and were moving about. Hence, I had to relegate Yashoda's thoughts to the back of my mind, as it was my responsibility to complete pending tasks on time. However, Yashoda was not willing to listen! Once I had started thinking about her, my train of thoughts just could not be reined in; in fact, I could even see and feel her presence next to me, as if she were actually standing close to me. Believe it or not, I was no less of a wonder too, for, I began conversing with her. I pleaded with her, "Mother, come to Dwarka and live with me. I will no longer trouble you, I promise. I will have my meals whenever you tell me to; I will go to bed whenever you ask me to. I will no longer smash pots, filled with butter, either! Believe me, I will never pester you to bring me the moon. O Mother! Now, nobody will come to you complaining about me; your precious child has changed. On the contrary, now, people will throng to you to sing praises of your beloved son. You will hear many tales of his valour and intelligence. You will be elated, Mother, you will be ecstatic!" But how would Mother Yashoda trust me now? How often had I promised her that I would neither steal butter nor break the pots! But I had repeatedly reneged on my promise. How many times had I told her not to be angry or feel sad; that nobody will come to her with complaints about her beloved son ever again?! However, despite having made a thousand promises to her, had I mended my ways? Indeed, at this point, my heart ached because my harried mother had stopped trusting me. Well, it was right too, for, how could she suddenly accept that I would not trouble her anymore? I thus blinked away tears which were threatening to flow after my heart-to-heart conversation with Mother Yashoda.

However, before my entire being could fall victim to sorrow, I suddenly began to think of Radha and Kubja. Their memories acted like a catalyst, instantly lifting me from despondency. Engrossed in their thoughts, I was unaware of the crowd milling around me, and neither could I concentrate on the tasks lying ahead. I simply sat on a large boulder on the shore, staring fixedly at Dwarka's imposing gate, glimmering in the light of the morning sun, while my mind oscillated between happiness and sadness. As mentioned earlier, my mind had pushed away the sorrow of Yashoda's absence and had become cheerful thinking about Radha and Kubja. Had Radha been here, she would have gone wild with excitement at the mere sight of the entrance gates. Not only that, she would probably have made this twenty-eight-year-old Krishna sit on her lap and kissed him. As soon as

she would have kissed me, all her anger would have dissipated. As for Kubja, well, it was she who had showered me with love on my arrival in Mathura. It was the strength of her love alone that had boosted the confidence of a cowherd boy like me in a city as large as Mathura. Without Kubja's love, perhaps I would not have been able to live in Mathura at all. Nonetheless, today, even she had betrayed me, by refusing to come to Dwarka. Of course, there was a valid reason behind her decision. Her father's health did not permit him to undertake such a long and tedious journey.

All these thoughts had once again made me feel downhearted. Indeed, the people to whom I was greatly obliged, and the ones whom I loved beyond measure, were not here with me today. Despite my desire to repay my debt to them, the opportunity to do so, had slipped past me. I had been deprived of spending even a few moments with them, even though I wished for it with all my heart. In other words, although my life was now on the path of progress, I had had to pay the price for it, by losing the company of those dear to me. The world calls me a cheat, but you can very well understand and deduce who the real cheat was. That was it! I steered my thoughts in a new direction to vent my anger. There was not much that I could do, for, I was a mere pawn in the hands of destiny; all that I could do now, was to think fondly of my dearest ones and pine for them all my life. When Nature had left no stone unturned in hurting me, then how could it miss the opportunity to dampen my spirits, on this occasion? It had finally succeeded, making my eyes well up with unshed tears! 'Well, let them flow,' I said to myself, for, the sweetness in the tears of love can be experienced only by a true lover. As far as Nature was concerned, it had become obsessed with attacking me relentlessly. Sometimes, Nature would attack me and at other times, my psyche. However, now, it had learnt to do something new; since the past few years, it had begun to attack my love life too! Alas! Was there no solace for the distressed Krishna? But of course, there was, for, I had always carried succour with me. My flute was my source of solace and I would always carry it with me.

With this thought in mind, I instantly reassured myself and shrugged off these fleeting thoughts too. With renewed energy, I got up from the boulder I had been sitting on and sprinted towards the crowd to take care of the tasks awaiting me. I immediately caught hold of Satyaki and bhaiya and

assigned tasks to the youths accompanying them. On the opposite shore, Uddhava had also busied himself with further arrangements. At his signal, all the ships and boats had sailed back to our side of the shore, once again flagging off the process of ferrying. Once again, we first sent the rest of the elders, women and children. Thereafter, we spent the entire day ferrying the chariots, bullock carts and luggage to Dwarka. Even so, innumerable carts and bullock carts remained to be ferried. Needless to say, we had to spend yet another night on the seashore. It did not matter! *Karmaveers* are rewarded only in the end! Thinking in this manner, I watched, with a sweet ache in my heart, the city of my dreams spread before my eyes, so near yet so far, as I had not been able to set foot in it yet. In fact, this process continued for another three to four days. Sometimes, we would send the elderly, women and children and at other times, it would be the animals, carts and luggage. And then, finally, on the sixth day of our arrival, I entered my kingdom—Dwarka.

Oh well! Better late than never! As soon as I set foot in the city, I was spellbound by its magnificence. Ignoring the enthused crowd milling around, I immediately called for my chariot. First and foremost, I wanted to take a tour of the entire city. At this point, my happiness matched the untainted exuberance of a child's. I remembered how excited I had been, when on my insistence, Mother Yashoda had shown me the moon's reflection in a platter. I was experiencing a similar kind of joy at present. Swelling with pride, I sat in my chariot as I took the reins in my hands. As soon as I entered the main gateway, a long and wide road welcomed me. On both sides of this road were magnificent shops. I had never seen kingdoms with such wide roads; nor had I seen such a grand market in the whole of Aryavarta. Up ahead, I saw a crossroad, and when I reached it, I was momentarily confused about the direction my chariot should take. My mind wanted to race in all four directions simultaneously, to see the whole of Dwarka at once. On every byroad, there were settlements of about thirty to forty houses on either side. And every settlement had a small park situated in its centre. There were about thirty to forty such colonies on all four sides of Dwarka. For a while, I just stood there, uncertain of the direction to take, but then I turned my chariot to the right. Riding on the main road, I noticed there was a crossroad every few yards. The main road was undoubtedly wide, but the other roads were not narrow either. On the fourth such

crossroad, there were huge rest houses on the right side, each consisting of about fifty living quarters. The most beautiful thing about Dwarka were the huge grounds dotting the landscape, the beautiful, majestic gardens, and the trees spread all over, lending a fresh, verdant look to the city. You can imagine the satisfaction this humble cowherd boy must have felt on seeing his city's beauty and magnificence. Besides, the people did not tire of singing my glory and pampering my ego, wherever I passed them. Their genuine appreciation was sweet music to my ears, filling me with gratification. At the same time, their enthusiasm made my diligence worthwhile.

Now, I was eager to see the royal palace. Well, the reins of the chariot were in my hands, so, how long would it take to reach the royal palace? I reached there within moments! Oh, my goodness! It was so magnificent! I had had the opportunity to see many royal palaces before, some of them much larger than this. However, none could match the beauty and grandeur of my palace. Within no time, I had toured the entire palace. Whether it was the royal palace or the rest of Dwarka, every aspect was impressive and majestic indeed. Of course, construction work in several areas was still in progress. Many of the residential colonies, in particular, were not entirely ready. The market was also not yet painted. After all, building such a massive city was no child's play. So, I let the work continue. I had seen many dreams being realised, but for the first time, I was experiencing a reality that had turned out to be more beautiful than its dream! Every pore of my being was profusely thanking Vishwakarma for his exceptional planning, designing, execution and other architectural skills. In fact, a sublime feeling of gratitude pervaded my entire being.

Feeling exuberant, my mind refused to be satiated. As soon as I left the palace, I had the urge to tour the city once more. Well, I could not help myself; I wanted to ride the entire length and breadth of Dwarka once again. And in any case, it was not as if I needed anybody's permission to do it. So, I set out once again. After all, if I could not live freely in my own city, then where else would I do it?

Meanwhile, everybody had temporarily taken refuge in the guest houses and the open grounds nearby, because of the ongoing construction work in most of the colonies. Their permanent homes were not ready as yet, but this

did not dampen their spirits or stop people from becoming delirious with joy. However, from amongst them all, the joy radiating from the faces of grandfather, father, mother and Subhadra was indescribable. After all, it was their grandson, son and brother respectively, who had accomplished a great feat. On the other hand, even the Yadavas were considering themselves equally blessed. I could feel their blessings and benedictions for me. In this short period, I had probably earned more blessings and prayers in my life than wealth and fame. Everyone around me was lost in his own beautiful world. People roamed about everywhere, taking in the scents, sights and sounds of the entire city; in a way, they wanted to have the city imprinted in their minds and hearts, all in the span of a moment. To be honest, everybody had gone berserk and was delirious with joy.

Now that we had crossed the threshold and entered this great city, let me praise myself too; let me blow my own trumpet and gratify my ego as well. It was I, who had built everything, from Gokula to Vrindavan. I had even risked my life a number of times to protect them both. It was I, who had rescued Mathura from the torturous reign of the evil Kansa. I am sure you remember that it was I, who had ended the terrible rule of Panchajanya too. Once again, it was I, who had killed Shringlava and liberated thousands of people who were suffering under his tyranny. In other words, I had saved a million people from misery and had given them the opportunity to lead happy, peaceful lives. Have you ever seen a *karmaveer* like me? And wasn't this the sole reason I had been able to establish Dwarka with the help of their prayers and blessings? Oh well! Alright, I will not become egotistical. But at least allow me to take pride in the fact that it was I, who had been instrumental in enabling the people of Mathura to experience heavenly bliss in Dwarka. The inner voice, which had been silent for a long time, surfaced again to pull me back down to earth, 'Now Krishna, you are calling yourself an instrument, and yet you are taking pride in what you did.' I replied instantly, 'Do you not understand? I was an instrument, in fact, in not just this task, but all other tasks too; but even so, it was I who was the instrument, wasn't I? Agreed that the entire plan was designed by Nature, but it was I who had allowed myself to become an instrument, by keeping my ego aside, hadn't I?' But yes, I do accept wholeheartedly that Dwarka was the outcome of not just my actions but also the prayers of thousands of people. That is why I repeatedly say, that the biggest achievement in life is

the blessings we receive from people, and I clearly owned a vast storehouse of benediction. So, from this perspective, I was the richest person in the whole of Aryavarta!

However, before I could swell with pride, a profound thought manifested itself in my mind, and gave rise to a strange question: What had this simple cowherd boy, born in captivity and raised amidst the poverty of Vrindavan, done to have led him on this journey to become the king of Dwarka? Perhaps he had done a lot, but if one examined his life carefully, he had done nothing at all. Both surmises were true in their own way. Are you bewildered? Well, allow me to explain. To say that I had fought many battles, killed many people, worked extremely hard and endured severe hardships, is true. However, in reality, it is simply a misperception; rather, it is a truth seen from the point of view of ignorant people and fools. Those who are knowledgeable about the secrets of the cosmos would never see it this way. Their understanding would be simple and clear. They will sum up the entire journey of my life in a single statement, “I had done whatever was the right thing to do, at the right time.” This is the truth indeed. I had simply moulded myself as per the demands of time. I had done whatever was required, without a second thought; in fact, I had even deserted the battlefield when it was necessary to do so. When I had felt the need to lie, I had done that too. Furthermore, I did not even hesitate to steal the Syamantaka gem, when I felt it was for the greater good. Simultaneously, I had gleaned invaluable lessons from life whenever an opportunity arose. This was the reason why, after seeing the destruction caused by just one war, I had always avoided a clash between two armies. Thereafter, I had always avoided unnecessary violence and had instead, directly attacked the root cause of every problem.

The lesson I want you to understand is clear and precise. If a person carries out his duties and does whatever is required to be done, at all times, then he can become a king too in some field of his life. If a person leaves aside all his selfish interests, his life, his thoughts, his religion, his discrimination between right and wrong, and continues to act relentlessly in accordance with the demands of time, then he too can certainly scale great heights of glory, in this lifetime itself. If a person such as Krishna, who was born in captivity, could attain self-realisation and become the king of Dwarka; if he could truly achieve this astounding dual feat, then imagine the phenomenal



heights other human beings with circumstances far less adverse, could scale! Therefore, in my opinion, the primary reason behind failure and unhappiness in this world is, failing to do what is right and for the greater good, based on the need of the hour.

Well, returning to Dwarka, our first day in our dream kingdom was well spent. We toured the entire city until afternoon and after lunch, rested for a while. This was the first time I was able to actually laze in a palace, and more importantly, in my very own palace; so how could I have let such an opportunity slip past me? Later, after I had barely woken up from my nap, the four of us decided to head to the seashore, much before sunset. I drove the chariot myself and obviously, took a circuitous route to the seashore, so that we could ride through the lanes of the city once more.

The roads were teeming with people. Of course, not everybody owned chariots or carts, so, some had set out on foot to see Dwarka. They wanted the air, sights and sounds of Dwarka to seep into every pore of their being, as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, we felt proud that we were being greeted like royalty wherever our chariot went. Well, we had become kings now, although none of us behaved like one. A king would not take his chariot out by himself, and certainly not steer it himself. Besides, kings would always be surrounded by servitors. However, we were cowherds, who were not fond of these trappings.

After riding around Dwarka, our chariot finally came to a screeching halt at the seashore. We were astounded at the visual beauty that met our eyes! Oh, what an incredible sight it was! A massive crowd with awestruck faces had gathered on the shore, admiring the never-ending coastline; in fact, streams of people were walking along the seashore. Apart from Uddhava, bhaiya and I, everybody else was taking in the view of the sea for the first time in their lives. It was also the first time these poor people had left Mathura's depressing atmosphere and were experiencing the vastness of the sky and the sea. So, it was natural that cheer and merriment abounded everywhere. Even Nature must not have been privy to such collective happiness before. Well, what could poor Nature do? For, an event like this could be triggered only by an individual such as Krishna! Alright, let me stop blowing my own trumpet again and tell you more about the scene playing out in front of me. The old, youth and children mingled together as one, united in their

happiness as they took in the breathtaking view of the sea. In fact, even the men and women, delirious with joy, swayed with abandon. The shore was a teeming mass of people, and not an inch of space remained vacant. A group of young people was dancing nearby to the cheerful beat of the drums. Their enthusiasm was infectious, and watching them, I felt a strong urge to join them and dance to my heart's content. I immediately grabbed hold of my three companions and joined the young dancers. Swaying to the beat of the drums, I began to dance to its rhythm, and matching my steps, everyone around us began to dance to the drum beats. Needless to say, the youngsters' enthusiasm doubled in an instant and they too danced blissfully. Several other youths were also dancing alongside me, and it hardly mattered to me whether they were *gopis* or young men. I was bubbling with so much joy that it is well-nigh impossible to express it in words! Dancing away, as if in a trance, we hardly realised when the last rays of the sun disappeared on the distant horizon, enveloping us all in a hazy golden hue. Watching the scene, a thousand memories of my beloved Vrindavan began to flit through my mind. Some people might have viewed my behaviour with scorn. They might have said that I had thrown royal etiquette to the winds; does a king ever dance with his subjects in a crowd like this? Well, so what if I did? Of what value is progress which hinders natural joy? Thus, not only were we kings, but we were also partaking in the exultation. The line between a king and his subjects had blurred indeed; how could there be a difference anyway? The kings, after all, were also cowherd men, and that too, straight from the village of Vrindavan. In fact, the king was a cowherd boy who hailed from a village, while the subjects were from the city of Mathura. Wasn't that incredible? Indeed, this was the reason why we were able to share so much love and joy with each other. Moreover, I am not exaggerating when I say that this freedom from false ego had lent its sweet scent even to the sea breeze. Breathing in this scene, and watching the gaiety around us, I was suffused with a feeling of contentment that no words can describe. The excitement in the air was so palpable that I was almost tempted to stay back and continue celebrating, but alas, we still had to complete several important tasks in Dwarka, with a number of chores demanding attention. So, I had to urge myself to be patient for a few more days until everyone in Dwarka settled down; after that, I could celebrate to my heart's content.

Well, I was incredible indeed, for, as soon as the thought of helping Dwarka settle down entered my mind, I became engrossed in it, so much so that the seashore had paled into insignificance and lost its appeal, all of a sudden. I immediately rounded up bhaiya, Uddhava and Satyaki for a discussion on the pending tasks. Walking along the shore, we moved away from the rest of the crowd until we reached a secluded spot. Stretching ourselves under a coconut tree, it was I, who started the discussion, “Our actions will truly be put to test now. We have to set up the entire city and make it functional. To do this, we will certainly need the help of many people.” I had not even finished speaking when the trio began suggesting names of people who could be of help. After due consideration and discussion, we collectively decided on all the names; Kandal, Viprabhu, Shrayphalak, Chitrak, Gaddh, Satyak, Sankarshan and Prabhu were some of the main ones on this list. Many of them were our old friends, while the rest were friends of Satyaki. Given the long list of tasks to be accomplished, it was obvious that the work had to be distributed among various groups, without which it would be impossible to complete it on time. Uddhava was, therefore, handed the responsibility of gathering everyone at the royal palace the following afternoon. We also decided that grandfather, that is, King Ugrasena, would grace the throne of Dwarka.<sup>[13]</sup> Besides, we would also hold a grand coronation ceremony and invite all the kings who were our friends, so that they could also witness our stupendous achievement. This would also serve the purpose of sending the message across the whole of Aryavarta that Krishna and Balarama were no longer ordinary cowherds, but princes of the most beautiful city in Aryavarta. Thus, kindly refrain from calling us poor, illiterate or cowherds in the future! With this objective, we also decided to schedule the coronation ceremony two months later, because I wanted to first establish Dwarka in its totality, as the perfect kingdom, lacking nothing. Since we wanted to create an impression, I thought we had better make a great one. Besides, we also needed time to send out invitations as well as make necessary preparations to welcome the kings. It was dark by the time we finalised most of the plans. So, we decided to discuss the rest of the arrangements the next morning at the palace, in everybody’s presence. With that, we slept off the excitement of our first day in our very own dream city.

The next day, everybody had congregated in the royal palace by afternoon. Our first priority was to inform everyone of King Ugrasena's coronation. After that, we announced our decision to include all the youths in attendance, into the council of ministers, because I wanted young blood to be infused into Dwarka's administration. My objective was clear—give the opportunity to the future generation to handle its own future.

Of course, we were also making an advisory committee of the older, experienced members such as Akrura, father, Satrajit and others, so that the youth could seek their guidance as and when required.<sup>[14]</sup> Similarly, we also took decisions on various posts and departments of the ministry and who would head them. For instance, we decided that Anagrasthi would be made military commander-in-chief of Dwarka, and Satyaki, general of the army. In our earnest desire to settle administrative matters, we also discussed the constitution of Dwarkapuri, although we did not have enough time to discuss it at length. A majority of the laws were drafted along the lines of those of Mathura, with a few minor amendments. The constitution of Mathura was not lacking in any aspect; the only problem was its implementation, which was not strict.

As for putting everything in working order, we decided to focus on the royal palace first. This was essential because, to finish impending tasks on time, it was necessary to make the palace functional within a week, at the most. It was decided to hand over the task of hiring palace staff such as security guards, cooks, male and female servants, to bhaiya and Vikadru, who promptly set about carrying out the assigned work. It pleased me to see everyone's enthusiasm. I knew that if this enthusiastic pace was maintained, then Dwarka would soon attain the pinnacle of its glory. It was my earnest wish to see the inhabitants of Dwarka prosper. As a step in that direction, I proposed giving the palace staff twice the monetary compensation they were receiving in Mathura. I had learnt from my experience in Mathura that the royal staff served as a kingdom's key pillars. With this in mind, it was also decided to arrange for their quarters to be situated right behind the palace. Well, what can I say? I had seen such abject poverty in Mathura, as well as in Vrindavan, that it was difficult to obliterate those memories from my mind, no matter how hard I tried. And if this was not enough, I had also seen Mathura's treasury perpetually empty. I had, therefore, resolved that I would put every inhabitant of Dwarka onto the path of prosperity and

success. I would also strive to keep Dwarka's coffers full and flowing at all times. Of course, to keep the coffers full, I already had the Syamantaka gem with me; nevertheless, I wanted Dwarka to be self-sufficient too. Well, there is no point in hiding my enthusiasm from you; I had already reflected over this matter for a considerable period of time. These thoughts and decisions were enough to keep me busy till late in the night. So, in this manner, Krishna spent this particular day like a busy king, constantly on his toes, and it greatly appeased this cowherd when he thought about it. [\[15\]](#)

The next morning, we gathered at the palace once again. Important decisions and discussions had already been dealt with. It was now time to start implementing them. However, this day was earmarked for the courtesans. The day commenced with their topic, because the previous day, we had been unable to discuss anything relating to the poor girls. In Mathura, these women had had to endure a great deal of torment and harassment. In fact, in Mathura, the palace had no control over them. As a result, they were not entitled to protection from the royal palace either. Now, how could I have tolerated violence against women? Therefore, I decided to bring this matter under the purview of the royal palace. Besides, I also ensured that they would be provided protection from the royal palace, for which a tax of twenty-five percent would be levied on them. I also arranged for them to live together so that they could forge friendship amongst themselves and also enjoy a life similar to other inhabitants. With this propitious decision, we immediately made arrangements to house all of them in one of the guesthouses; hence, the first community to be settled in Dwarka was that of the courtesans. Simultaneously, I named their guesthouse 'The Official Courtesan House.' Thus, theirs was the first naming ceremony held in Dwarka!

Another matter demanding urgent attention was that of the soldiers. We had brought one thousand soldiers with us, obviously far more than our requirements in Dwarka. There was no need to maintain an extensive army here, as there was no possibility of an external invasion. However, since we had brought them with us, we had to assign them duties. Thus, I allocated around twenty-five soldiers for the protection of the courtesans, which meant that the guesthouse would be guarded at all times. We also decided to collect tax immediately. I had seen the people of Mathura spending a considerable amount of their time in the company of the courtesans,

knocking on their doors from early morning itself. I definitely did not want this situation to be repeated in Dwarka. So, my proposal to keep the guesthouse open only in the evening was also accepted. Now, we had to find a solution to the problem of liquor. Indeed, it was the second most important cause of Mathura's downfall. It had become a common sight to come across *Mathurawasis* tottering along the streets in an inebriated state from morning itself! I did not want Dwarka to be afflicted by this malaise of alcoholism. I was determined to keep these loafers in check in every way I could. Therefore, I passed a decree prohibiting drinking in all public places such as roads, shops, eateries, gardens and open grounds. I also included provisions for law-breakers to be punished severely. This was because liquor had been the root cause of the degeneration of the Yadavas. To enforce this rule, I created a task force of fifty soldiers to patrol the city day and night and ensure that the rules governing liquor consumption were obeyed. Additionally, to ensure that no injustice was done, I arranged for two liquor houses to be run by the royal palace, one situated near the marketplace and the other near the main grounds of the city. This would keep them away from residential areas. After considerable thought, we also made arrangements to ensure that liquor would not be made available elsewhere in the city, apart from these two places. The liquor houses would open only in the evening hours and I passed a decree to implement this rule as well.

My primary aim in passing these orders was to stop the inhabitants of Dwarka from intemperance during the day. You must be wondering why the normally permissive Krishna was so adamant about restricting the consumption of liquor in Dwarka. Well, this matter concerned not just one or two persons—this was the question of twenty-five thousand people. It was also the question of a tradition which, if allowed to continue, would affect the lives of millions of people and innumerable generations thereafter. In fact, this had been the very reason I had opposed the tradition of worshipping Indra. Bear in mind that I was not against liquor, but against alcoholism. If you recall, it had completely destroyed the social and commercial fabric of Mathura. You can see the havoc it had wreaked in Mathura, and how the perpetual inebriation of the Yadavas had made them lazy and weak-willed. They had turned into useless, slothful people, in every sense of the word. I agree that free will is a human being's birthright.

When neither Nature nor God interferes in the free will of a human being, then who was I to do so? When did I ever restrain myself because of others' objections? When I had proclaimed to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, that I existed in everything, then was I not present in liquor too? However, just as it is necessary to destroy a person responsible for the suffering of thousands, it is also essential to weed out social evils that have destroyed the lives of thousands. I hope you have understood what I am trying to explain.

To further keep a check on the consumption of liquor, I imposed a tax of fifty percent on liquor houses too. I also ensured that the right to produce and sell liquor rested completely with the administration. With that, I was certain, that unlike Mathura, there would be no proliferation of brothels and liquor houses all over Dwarka. More importantly, these two indulgences of the Yadavas would take care of the royal coffers as well. There was also the possibility that these taxes and impositions would change public behaviour and make people regard their two favourite interests as recreation, rather than habit. Of course, it suited us that bhaiya was not present when we formulated these laws; else, he might have asked for four liquor houses instead of two; if nothing else, he might have insisted on opening the doors to the liquor shops from early morning itself! Let me clarify that I was able to pass such strict laws only because, considering Dwarka's current population, the soldiers at our service were more than sufficient to ensure strict implementation of these laws. In other words, we had the wherewithal to ensure a disciplined administration. On the other hand, it was not as if my only agenda was to be strict; I had decided to not levy taxes on the hard-working sections of society such as cowherds, farmers, potters and blacksmiths; their professions were free of taxes in Dwarka. I had also decided that a cow would be gifted to every farmer and cowherd in the kingdom. Frankly speaking, I had seen the miserable lives led by farmers and cowherds in Vrindavan and Mathura with my own eyes, so it was natural for me to be sympathetic towards them. In any case, I had a soft spot for those performing their duties diligently. Besides, how much would it really cost the royal palace? At the most, a portion of the tax collected from the liquor houses and brothels would be spent on implementing this policy. It was surely not going to put a dent in the royal coffers.

We had finalised these policies when bhaiya and Satyaki finally reached the palace, albeit a little late. These two had certainly been busy, supervising the construction of the palace as well as attending meetings that we had been organising. In a way, bhaiya and Satyaki had been the first ones to begin working since our migration to Dwarka. Well, they had arrived right on time, for, the most important decisions had to be taken now. So far, we had taken only minor administrative decisions. Next on the agenda were the housing and commercial spaces. As things stood, the royal palace had already constructed all the houses and marketplaces. Now, all we had to do was discuss how to allot them to the people. In any case, if we wanted to become kings, then we would have to first build houses and shops for the people of Mathura, because, at present, none of these Yadavas had the resources to build anything on their own. I am not referring to Satrajit or a few other Yadava nobles; I had already constructed palatial residences for them. Of course, I wanted to give the best palatial residence from amongst them to Satrajit, which I proposed in the meeting. However, I knew that this proposal would be met with strong resistance, especially from bhaiya. I was right, for, this was exactly what happened. However, I finally succeeded in convincing everyone that Satrajit was, first and foremost, a king; additionally, he was the wealthiest of all the Yadavas. So, from this perspective, having him in Dwarka was a matter of pride for this kingdom. That being the case, we were not extending him a favour by giving him the largest palatial mansion. Everybody had to agree with my reasoning, for, it was really simple and straightforward. On the other hand, to be honest, I wanted to repay Satrajit as much as possible, for his Syamantaka gem.

After having resolved the matter of the Yadava leaders and Satrajit, I also wanted to finalise the decision on the establishment of shops. After lengthy deliberation, we decided that the shops could be sold at their original cost to those who wanted to buy them. Thereafter, the remaining shops could be run in partnership with the palace. We also decided to impose twenty-five percent tax on the income generated from these shops. Apart from this, we would also extend loans to the needy to start their businesses. Of course, we made it clear that the shops hired by people, without paying for them, would continue to be the property of the royal palace. And in such cases, instead of levying the usual twenty-five percent tax on the shop's profit, the palace would take up fifty percent partnership in that shop. Of course, these



were my own suggestions and decisions; the others did not possess a sound understanding of such matters. Actually, I had involved them in these discussions, so that they could also learn how kingdoms were run, and what far-reaching effects our decisions could have on the subjects. If I had not wanted them to learn all this, I could have simply informed everybody about the decisions I had taken on my own. But in this manner, they would learn as well as appreciate that they were part of the decision-making process. It would not only boost their confidence, but also lay the foundation for a better administrative routine in Dwarka in the future. Well, there was no point in dwelling much on the future. At this time, it was important to finalise all shop-related matters. The beauty of our two-pronged strategy was that we had not only provided enough incentives for traders to establish businesses, thereby boosting their enthusiasm, but had also ensured a steady flow of wealth into the royal treasury by way of taxes. At the same time, we had also given the much-needed boost to those who were involved in laborious work such as cowherds and farmers, by extending assistance and providing relief to them.

Now, the time had come to call a meeting of the businessmen and the Yadava leaders and discuss these shop-related matters with them. I had already chalked out a plan for them, but how well the plan would work depended on their response—their enthusiasm or the lack of it. I called for a meeting the following day, in which I discussed matters relating to business and tax structures with them. You would not believe it, but by the end of my introductory speech, everyone scrambled to stake a claim to the shops. There were fifty shops on offer, but we received over two hundred applications. I was stumped by the response of the businessmen. Indeed, after leaving Mathura, at least the desire to work hard had been rekindled in the Yadavas. ‘Krishna, this is indeed a great victory for you,’ my inner voice congratulated me. ‘Well, of course, it is!’ I replied triumphantly. Now, it may have been a resounding victory, but it had created a dilemma in the allocation of the shops. In the end though, the matter was resolved in a favourable manner. Gauging the demand for shops, which had far exceeded their availability, Satrajit and a few other wealthy Yadavas made a clever move and collectively bought almost half the shops on sale. Beaming from ear to ear, my heart soared, with the money pouring into the royal treasury. This augured well for us, because considering the significant amount of

work yet to be completed in Dwarka, this windfall had come at a propitious time, and was, therefore, most welcome. Surprisingly, Satrajit had bought the maximum number of shops—ten in all! Did you see how he had come to my aid even at this juncture! Now, how could I have still considered him an enemy? Nevertheless, the remaining shops were distributed amongst various businessmen on the basis of a fifty-fifty partnership with the royal administration. Of course, those who were not able to acquire a shop through this allocation system were dismayed, which was inevitable, considering the huge demand for the shops. But honestly, seeing the people's enthusiasm, I had to blink back my tears.

After we had finished the task of allocating the shops, the time had come to decide the nature of businesses that would be conducted. First and foremost, ten shops were allocated to the textile and clothing business, while another ten were reserved for food and eateries. Ten other shops were allocated for essential supplies. The rest of the shops could cater to whatever the people wished to trade in. This meant that my favourite shops would also hopefully open soon. The best part of this whole exercise was that while I had been apprehensive about whether the businessmen would be interested in buying these shops, we were now falling short of shops to allocate! It was astonishing, and this was certainly auspicious for the future of Dwarka. However, on seeing the unprecedented demand for shops, I immediately decided to get an additional fifty shops built, because it did not make sense to disappoint those who were eager to start a business.

As days passed by, our relentless efforts on a daily basis helped accomplish many tasks. However, an important task—the allotment of houses—still needed our attention. For this, we adopted the same policy we had used for the allocation of the shops. In other words, those who were capable of buying houses were allowed to buy them first. As expected, all the Yadava nobles and some of the businessmen bought the houses. For the allotment of the rest, we had anticipated trouble, because out of twelve hundred, we had managed to sell only fifty, and this was certainly not good news. These sluggards had barely worked in Mathura, so how could they afford to buy a decent house in Dwarka? However, as king, I had to make initial arrangements for them; this was the sole reason I had constructed houses for them using my own wealth, but I knew that they would not be sold! Therefore, I had already devoted some time to find a solution to this

problem. In the end, as per my plan, we decided to allot the houses after imposing a tax of ten percent of the cost of construction. We also made a provision to transfer the house in their name, if they regularly paid taxes for the next five years. I was clear in my objective—dangling the bait of owning their own house at half the price could actually motivate these idlers to work for it. My reasoning was crystal clear. I was not going to take any of this wealth with me to heaven; at the same time, I had to fulfil my duty as a king. Thus, my motto was: ‘Hereafter, I shall run the royal palace and you will run your household.’ In other words, this was the first and last bit of assistance the royal palace would be giving its people. Within seven days, we had completed most of the tasks, and whatever else was pending would be completed in due course.

With most of the matters pertaining to public welfare having been resolved, I turned my attention to the royal palace. The good news was that bhaiya had managed to get the construction work completed and the palace was now ready to be inhabited. So, there was no need to wait any longer, and with immediate effect, our family, Uddhava, Satyaki and several others moved in. With the royal palace fully furnished and functional, it had become easier to plan the tasks ahead. In the next four to five days, our ministry, led by youths, had also moved into the quarters allocated to it, close to the palace. This had enabled the easy flow of internal communication. I had everyone practically at my fingertips, simply because the speed of work depended entirely on the speed of communication. In fact, if there were to exist a facility to relay my voice across Aryavarta in a matter of moments, then I could have advanced the date of the coronation ceremony by a month, because at this time, an entire month was being wasted only in sending out invitations to all the kings. Thus, I firmly believed that communication was directly correlated to the speed of execution. To be honest, I had made Dwarka a city-state for this very reason; to facilitate the finest communication network in the kingdom.

In the midst of our ongoing work, suddenly one day, Vishwakarma himself arrived in Dwarka to give finishing touches to the construction work. Seeing him, I was naturally elated; there could not have been a greater source of joy for me than this. Welcoming him warmly, I arranged for him to stay in the best guest chamber of the palace. I also congratulated him and expressed my gratitude for the marvellous work he had done with the

construction of the city. Surprisingly, after resting only for a day or so, he began to discuss the tasks lying ahead. Well, I too, wanted to expedite the pending work; the best part, however, was that he seemed to be in a greater hurry than me.

Settling down comfortably in my chamber, we began our conversation with the first bit of good news. According to Vishwakarma, the ongoing construction work was most likely to be completed within the next month. This meant that there would be no need to postpone the date of the coronation ceremony, but there was another problem, which we discussed at length. In my opinion, Dwarka still needed another four hundred houses, fifty shops and two to three guesthouses. Additionally, security cabins were needed on either side of the main gate of the city, lest strangers or uninvited guests entered the city, unknown to us. Vishwakarma immediately agreed to build the security cabins but offered a unique solution for the additional construction work. He said, “I shall leave fifty of my architects here; you may commission them as per your requirements.”

As soon as I heard this proposal, I became overly excited, and thinking of the imminent future, I immediately said, “If you permit, I can make them permanent residents of Dwarka. I shall make top-notch arrangements for their stay and give them handsome salaries as well.”

Pondering this for a few moments, Vishwakarma asked me, “Are you suggesting that you will make them your royal staff?”

Turning red with embarrassment on hearing this, I answered hesitantly, “Yes... that is, if you have no objection.” Taking a deep breath, I added, “In this way, we won’t have to trouble you for every small requirement.”

After reflecting upon it for quite some time, he agreed to my proposal. This was, indeed, a big victory for me! Fifty architects would become permanent residents of Dwarka! This was a great achievement in itself. Vishwakarma also proposed another idea that could save us time as well as money, and discourage people from imposing upon the generosity of others. According to him, it would not be appropriate for the royal palace to stay engaged in construction work. He suggested that people be allowed to build their own houses, just like they did in other kingdoms. Therefore, in the future,

whoever wished to build a house would be allotted land by the state...and nothing more! I liked this suggestion very much; this would save the royal palace unnecessary trouble with respect to the ongoing construction activities. I immediately decided to implement a scheme to lease land at a nominal fee to people who wanted to build their own houses. I also discussed plans with Vishwakarma to build fifty new shops and made necessary arrangements for starting the construction work. I knew that if I wanted to make Dwarka prosperous, I would have to first look after its businessmen. Vishwakarma stayed with us for about fifteen days during which, he completed all his tasks. Of course, I had requested him to stay back longer, but he wanted to return. In any case, no matter how long he would have stayed, it would have always seemed insufficient. Indeed, there was no limit to what one could learn from him. We had spent the majority of these fifteen days in each other's company, with me gleaning knowledge from his vast repertoire, whether it was about construction work or learning something entirely new.

Soon, Vishwakarma bid us farewell. Naturally, during his stay here, I had not paid much attention to the affairs of the city, for, life had begun to move at a smooth pace in Dwarka. People had already moved into the houses they had been allotted. Of course, those who still did not have houses continued to live in the guesthouses, although the land to construct their own houses had been released to them. In addition, considering the scarce space and people's enthusiasm, I sanctioned the construction of two additional guesthouses. Well, these matters would eventually sort themselves out, but at present, the biggest problem was to make the market operational. It seemed that this would take another two months or so. Everybody had acquired houses by now, but I wanted these sluggards to commence working as soon as possible. To be honest, I was scared stiff of the laid-back attitude of these Yadavas. Nonetheless, I had regulated the administration in such a way that nobody could live here without working for a living. If nothing else, everybody was bound to pay their house tax, and it was not possible to pay taxes without working. I was firm in my mind that those people who were unable to pay their taxes would be sent back to Mathura to lead an undignified existence once again. Surely, there was no place for such people in Dwarka. I had expressed myself clearly to everyone at the outset. Now, I leave it to you to decide whether anyone

would want to forsake this spot of heaven and return to the hellish existence of Mathura. In other words, although I had made proper arrangements for them, I certainly did not want these lazy people to remain without work for too long. They had a strong tendency to continue living in this inert state of nothingness and keep twiddling their thumbs forever. Thus, first and foremost, I sent Uddhava to our neighbouring kingdoms to purchase one thousand cows, so that at least the cowherds could start their work. I admit that I had a selfish interest in this; I wanted the sweet shops in the market to start selling delicacies as soon as possible! After all, for how long could this cowherd boy go without his favourite dishes? Speaking of food, I had made arrangements for free food for everyone, to be taken from the royal storehouse, until the businesses started running smoothly, so that no one would go to bed hungry, unlike in Mathura.

After working tirelessly day and night—both physically and mentally—for an entire month, I had completed most of my tasks. Now, one could put in long hours of physical labour in accordance with the need of the hour, but there is certainly a limit to how much mental work one can undertake. Hence, I took three days off to relax. I ate, slept, chatted with friends and enjoyed strolls by the seashore, and yes, I played my flute softly, basking in Dwarka's success. You will not believe it, but only then did I feel human once again! And no sooner did I become my usual self, than I was immediately afflicted by the typical maladies of a human. A tricky matter of ego gratification was staring me in the face. The problem was that until now, all the administrative decisions had been made only by me and the youth wing. We had not consulted grandfather and his experienced ministers even once.

Now, I was certain that grandfather would not object to this, for, he trusted me implicitly, but if the ministers were to take offence, then that could create a problem for us. As such, I did not want their advice, nor did I need their opinion in any decision-making until now. I had seen the way they had ruined the state of affairs in Mathura, but at the same time, I did not want to offend them. Therefore, to rectify this situation, I immediately asked grandfather to call a meeting of his council of ministers. At the meeting, I presented before them our decisions, stating specifically that these were only our plans, and asked for their opinion on them. Being a seasoned actor, I expressed great humility while asking them for their suggestions. In any

case, the evidence of our work was laid out, right before their eyes, and after the mismanagement of affairs in Mathura, could they really have said anything? All our plans were so superior that apart from making some minor suggestions, as a way to gratify their egos, they did not have much to say. I had anyway brought them along to Dwarka as mere embellishments. They could enhance Dwarka's prestige, but actually, they were of no use here.

So, having assuaged the ego of these experienced men, I decided to focus once again on the ongoing work in Dwarka, which was progressing at full speed. By now, life had returned to normal. All necessary steps required to get the businesses running, had also been taken. There was an air of enthusiasm all around. And seeing the happiness which reflected on the people's faces, I knew I had been justified in stealing the Syamantaka gem. This gem had been with Satrajit too, but its possession had only served to inflate his ego. Here, on the contrary, the gem was granting a blissful life to twenty-five thousand Yadavas. In spite of this, my heart was such that I still personally felt obliged towards Satrajit. This was also why I had allowed him to own most of the shops, the finest house and the best of everything. You can even consider this my own way of giving credit to others. This gratitude towards Satrajit, however, was making matters difficult for me, for, it was inviting the wrath of bhaiya and Satyaki. Now, how could I possibly explain to them that we owed so much to Satrajit! I could not reveal this secret to them, could I? So, I had to face their ire silently.

Nevertheless, these days, my mind was completely pre-occupied with improving the efficiency of Dwarka's marketplace. In fact, my mind would constantly veer towards Dwarka's market even in the midst of other tasks. I had seen the marketplaces of various kingdoms, and considering my penchant for shopping, it was natural that I wanted the market of my kingdom to be outstanding. Secondly, I had a particular affinity for ornaments. In fact, they were my passion! I also had formidable knowledge of gems and precious stones. I knew it was impossible to ascertain the actual value of ornaments, which was why one could earn the maximum profit in manufacturing them. Thirdly, Mathura had some of the finest jewellers, many of whom had migrated and settled in Dwarka. Indeed, what else could they have done, with no business left in Mathura? Nevertheless, while reflecting on the importance of markets and ornaments, I came up

with an excellent business idea. Hadn't I mentioned earlier that all my focus was on increasing the income-generating power of Dwarka? After all, money makes the world go round. The idea was so wonderful that I could not help but feel proud of my intelligence. I was in such haste to implement this idea that I immediately called a meeting of all the traders and shop owners in Dwarka. To call a meeting these days, carried a thrill of its own! Neither grandfather nor bhaiya would attend these meetings. So, I would have the opportunity to sit on the royal throne all day long. Today, in this meeting, Satrajit and all the respectable Yadava nobles were seated before me, the very people who had made my life miserable in Mathura. At the same time, I need not tell you that I had brought about this transformation in my life by working for the greater good and on the strength of my actions.

At present, however, nothing else mattered to me except the progress of the people of Dwarka. Here, I was simply describing the scene of the meeting from an outsider's point of view; otherwise, they too had forgotten everything else and were as excited as I was. Continuing in this enthusiastic mood, I commenced the meeting, while I was still seated on the throne. Now, of course, no king would ever stand while addressing a meeting. Oh, what was wrong with me? I was digressing far too often today...but not anymore! I immediately began my address with absolute seriousness, "My dear Yadava businessmen! You are experts in conducting business and inspired by your expertise, I have a dream for your progress and that of Dwarka, which I would like to fulfil with your support. Actually, I have started dreaming of making Dwarka the most progressive city in Aryavarta. Certainly, this dream of mine cannot turn into reality without your support, far-sightedness and business acumen. If you assure me of your support, then I would like to discuss this idea in detail with you. I am not only hopeful but also confident that after the implementation of this idea, you will become the finest businessmen not just in Dwarka, but in the whole of Aryavarta too."

Now, is there anyone who would not want to become accomplished and successful? In fact, every businessman's primary motive and dream is to become rich and famous. So, as expected, everybody agreed to support me unanimously. Noticing their enthusiasm and staunch support, I was eager too, to share my plans with them. I immediately began, "No matter how



hard we try, we will still find it difficult to become prosperous beyond a point, if we limit ourselves to trading within Dwarka. We have some of the best dressmakers and jewellers in our kingdom, so why not use their skills to make beautiful, contemporary garments and ornaments and sell them in the whole of Aryavarta? We can even use Nature to our advantage, since Dwarka is situated on the seashore. The ocean can give us pearls, shells, coral, and many more precious gems, which can then be moulded with gold and crafted into contemporary jewellery.”

I continued, “Similarly, we can purchase raw fabrics from other kingdoms and embroider them with pearls, gold and thread to make stunning garments. I am certain that if we work towards this objective, we can command a high price for our products. It is my firm belief that if you work enthusiastically towards this goal, then the day is not far when our wares would grace all the major markets in Aryavarta. I can say this with conviction, that if we make our garments available in all the major markets of Aryavarta, then we will soon establish our name in this business. I have even thought about making the necessary finances available for this; I can arrange for a loan from the royal palace for importing fabrics from other kingdoms, and for extracting pearls and shells from the ocean. In other words, the royal palace is eager to work shoulder-to-shoulder with you, in this initiative. Not only that, if we require more craftsmen or artisans with unique skills from other kingdoms, then the royal palace will also offer them residence in Dwarka, for, the palace is well aware that artisans are the lifeblood of both these businesses.”

My proposal had, indeed, caught the imagination of the traders. Since my idea was straightforward, lucid and lucrative, none of the businessmen took long to comprehend the endless possibilities of this venture. Nobody would have even imagined that they could take their business this far. Thus, once they heard me out, it was natural for them to become enthused. Watching ardour and fervour in their eyes, I could see my plan heading towards its accomplishment. Besides, expanding the reach of businesses beyond the boundaries of the kingdom was not just my dream, but also the need of the hour for Dwarka’s journey towards progress. Clearly, all these businesses would have to be run in equal partnership with the royal palace. Hence, once they were set up, the problem of replenishing the royal treasury would also be permanently resolved. I immediately settled the matter with all the

concerned businessmen. Everybody was so full of zest that they immediately began working on implementing my ideas, and with this, I was freed from one of my biggest worries.

Although the tasks were being completed one by one, the list seemed endless. Now, the biggest mission before me was to make arrangements for the coronation ceremony of King Ugrasena. However, it was more likely that we would have to postpone it, because there had been so much to do, that I had paid scant attention to it. Construction work was progressing in full swing in several places. At the same time, I wanted to invite as many kings as possible to the ceremony, and for that, I needed enough time to send out invitations and to give the guests sufficient time to reach Dwarka for the ceremony. Moreover, I had envisaged a grand ceremony, so I obviously needed time to organise it. When I discussed my ideas for the ceremony with bhaiya, Satyaki and Uddhava, they agreed instantly with everything I proposed, including postponing the ceremony by two months. And now that I had more time in hand, I thought it wise to involve the council of ministers too, so that they would also feel honoured to be part of the organising committee. Besides, the coronation fell within their purview, and there was nothing wrong in giving them due importance in such matters. With this idea, I asked grandfather to call a meeting of the advisory council.

Thus, after taking care of all important matters, we assembled for the very first meeting of the council of ministers of Dwarka. Grandfather presided over the meeting, seated majestically on the royal throne, flanked by bhaiya and me on either side. The entire council was seated facing us, enthusiasm writ large on every face. As soon as we suggested celebrating grandfather's coronation with great festivity and fanfare, a murmur of excitement and smiles emanated from the faces seated before us. Grandfather, however, protested, but upon our insistence, finally relented. At any rate, we did not have to try too hard, for, he was only protesting, and not refusing. Nonetheless, now that we had the chance, we immediately divided the duties and handed out responsibilities concerning the ceremony. We also appointed a few more office-bearers in this meeting. One of the most important appointments was that of Daruka as my permanent charioteer. At the same time, everybody proposed that the diplomatic and political affairs of Dwarka should be handled by me. I was also given the responsibility of

sending out invitations for the coronation ceremony. As such, only I was capable of performing both these tasks. Other than this, bhaiya and Vikadru were in charge of the food, while Satyaki and Sankarshana were put in charge of security arrangements. Decorations and arrangements at the venue were the responsibility of Uddhava and Chitrak. In the end, I requested Satrajit to take care of the financial accounting, pertaining to the ceremony. Apart from repaying the debt of the Syamantaka gem, I also had a far-sighted reason for doing so. Actually, I wanted to extend respect and responsibility to him in Dwarka and have him blend in so well with the others here, that he would not feel the need to conspire against us, the way he had done in Mathura. Besides, I also wanted him to be thoroughly pleased with the comfort and progress of the Yadavas so that he could forget all about losing the gem! It was my earnest wish that he realised that his gem had been put to good use. Do you not understand? If he created trouble, it would only spell trouble for me. Nobody else could challenge him and I would have to tackle him alone. Thus, to lessen my own difficulties too, I needed to give importance to Satrajit at all times. In a way, Satrajit had become an obligation, and I was required to take care of this obligation with as much care as I had shown in looking after the Syamantaka gem.

Soon, the first meeting of the council of ministers concluded. I was greatly relieved that the coronation ceremony had been postponed by two months. Now, I had enough time to make the coronation a grand success. Meanwhile, the teams in charge of arrangements for the coronation had already begun their work on an enthusiastic note. Seeing everyone's enthusiasm, I busied myself too with various responsibilities. In fact, the invitation cards were ready within four days.

Since I had already prepared a list of the invitees, I started sending out the invitations at once, keeping in mind to specifically send invitations to King Bhishmak and Rukmi. In fact, I wanted King Bhishmak to see how far his future son-in-law had progressed. Besides, there was also the chance that Rukmini would be suitably impressed too, on hearing all this. I had also extended invitations to both the Kauravas and the Pandavas in Hastinapur. Of course, Chandak, Queen Padmavati, King Damghosh and all the kings, who were my friends, were also invited for the coronation ceremony. I had also invited Vinda and Anuvinda, my friends from Sandipani's ashram.

Additionally, I had sent invitations to most of the Yadava kings. As for *Acharya* Sandipani, how could I forget him? It was his guidance and teachings alone that had set me firmly on the path to progress. I also felt the urge to invite Jarasandha and his allies, for, it would have given me immense pleasure to see the envy on their faces. But then, a cold shiver immediately ran down my spine as I wondered, why wake up sleeping lions and invite trouble? Why dig our own graves by provoking them unnecessarily?

So, having finished all the work at hand, I found myself with plenty of time to spare, while the others were yet to finish their assigned responsibilities. So, what could I do by myself? Well, as soon as I found myself free, my mind began to reflect on matters pragmatically. Was it really necessary to make the coronation ceremony this grand and spend so much money on it? Or was it just the cowherd in me trying to seek revenge from everybody else, for their behaviour in the past? Did the humiliation that we had suffered as cowherds all our lives have anything to do with this? Was this ceremony more of a personal necessity rather than Dwarka's need? How did it matter even if it was? When we had single-handedly achieved so much, there was no harm in gratifying our egos a little. And if we ourselves did not nurse our egos, then who else would? Certainly, deep down, it was our way of showing the whole of Aryavarta that we were no longer mere cowherd boys; both bhaiya and I were now the princes of Dwarka, one of the finest cities in Aryavarta.

For that matter, this feeling of pride was not limited to just bhaiya and me. Grandfather was on cloud nine too! After all, not many would be so fortunate to receive such a grand coronation at an advanced age. Moreover, I do not believe that anybody at this age had received so much happiness from his grandson, as I had been able to give my dear grandfather. Mother Devaki's joy also knew no bounds. Her dear son, whose very existence had once been hanging in the balance, had grown up to establish such a breathtakingly beautiful city. This was bound to make any mother feel proud!

Well, it was not just our family, but the whole of Dwarka appeared equally proud and joyous too. Wherever I looked, people were busy running around, engaged in various tasks and brimming with enthusiasm. Some

were busy decorating their houses, while others were busy setting up businesses. Even the royal palace was busy, preparing for the ceremony. The only person who seemed to be unoccupied was yours truly! The tables had now turned! Now, isn't this what Krishna's miracle is all about? I had transformed everything in less than two months of governance. There was a time when I was the only one working hard, and now, I was without work, while the others were busy with theirs. So, you tell me, could anyone now stop Dwarka from becoming a prosperous kingdom? The inner voice made its presence felt again, 'Krishna, stop flying so high! Have you forgotten about the Yadavas' addiction to liquor and women?' I retorted, 'Hey! Why are you scaring me unnecessarily? I have already made arrangements for that.' With so much free time on my hands, I would occasionally talk to myself like this. Additionally, taking a stroll along the seashore had become a daily routine for me now. In any case, I had no work to do, other than surrendering to the sound of the rising waves of the sea and hearing them crash against the huge rocks dotting the seacoast.

All this was fine, but this sudden abundance of time for contemplation, after a hectic period of work, was a new experience for me. You would not believe it, but I had been so preoccupied with administrative work that I had totally forgotten Rukmini. But now that I had time to spare, I realised that Rukmini had found a way to silently tiptoe into my consciousness. As soon as thoughts about her assailed my mind and began to haunt me, I realised that even the glory of Dwarka had become tinged with a strange kind of melancholy that had now enveloped me; everything seemed empty without her presence. Just then, another thought trickled into my mind; was love perhaps meant only for those who had spare time at their disposal? I realised that as long as I had been occupied with work, there was not a single thought about Rukmini, but now that I was unoccupied, she had promptly invaded my thoughts. I began to fervently wish that King Bhishmak or Rukmi would attend the coronation ceremony so that news of my progress could reach Rukmini. Do not misunderstand me; I harboured no ill intention; I wanted only to settle down in life. But of course, I had not left this to chance; I had invited Shwetketu and Shaivya to the ceremony, thus ensuring that Rukmini would hear of my progress one way or the other. I earnestly felt that if Rukmini failed to hear of my accomplishments, then they were absolutely worthless. During these days, I was consumed by only

one thought, that Rukmini should come to Dwarka somehow. If this were to happen, then my life would, indeed, be suffused with absolute bliss. With Rukmini by my side, I could achieve everything in life. The inner voice assured me, ‘Why worry about ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’? She will surely come; she will have to!’ Then, I addressed my beloved mentally, ‘Rukmini, you will have to come running, on hearing Krishna’s heart calling out to you; otherwise, bear in mind that this cowherd boy will keep wandering aimlessly, broken-hearted for the rest of his life!’ Gradually, every pore of my being was suffused with thoughts of Rukmini, filling me with a yearning for her. However, I could not remain in this state for long. So, I promptly devised a plan to distract my mind from her thoughts. Seven days from then, was a full moon night, a weakness of mine; besides, the seashore would also heighten the magic of the full moon. So, I wondered, why not take advantage of this picturesque setting and organise a festival by the seashore on a full moon night? As soon as this thought came to my mind, thoughts of Rukmini started fading automatically.

This meant that my thought process was aligned with my objective. In any case, we had reached Dwarka after travelling tediously for more than a month, a task that had exhausted us all. Besides, ever since we had arrived in Dwarka, we had been busy day and night, engaged in a variety of tasks important for the smooth functioning of the city. I firmly believed that, excessive work always demands rest, and if the relaxation also eases the mind along with the body, then it cannot get any better than that. Now, wasn’t celebrating a festival the best way to unwind physically as well as mentally? I was sure that all of us—the inhabitants of Dwarka and I—needed a celebration. Therefore, I decided to organise a mass festival by the seashore, accompanied by delicious food, games and fun as well as dancing and music. As soon as I informed bhaiya of my intention, he instantly jumped with joy. In fact, our entire group of friends was delighted. Naturally, all expenses for the festival had to be borne by the royal palace, and presently, the palace was capable of bearing the expense, as the sale of houses and shops had generated significant wealth in the royal treasury. So, brimming with enthusiasm, not only did we decide on organising the festival, but also quickly put together a plan for it, assigning duties for the same. Uddhava was assigned the task of relaying the message, informing the people about the festival, while bhaiya was assigned the task of

organising the food; he also gladly volunteered to arrange liquor for the feast. Meanwhile, as soon as the people heard of the upcoming festival, a wave of happiness ran through them. The poor folks could not even imagine that the palace could spend money on arranging such a grand festival for them.

Surprisingly, this time around, the night of the full moon seemed to have arrived quite quickly too. Actually, we were so busy making arrangements for the festival that we did not realise how time had flitted by. In their excitement, the people had already begun to assemble on the seashore since morning itself, even though the festival was scheduled to begin only in the afternoon. So, it was hardly surprising that by afternoon, Dwarka's entire shore had turned into a sea of people. There were activities suited for not just women and children, but for everyone. Many games and competitions were organised especially for the children. I was happy to see that people of all ages were participating in the festivities from the very outset. There were stalls at regular intervals offering a mind-boggling variety of scrumptious food, which the people relished to their heart's content. Indeed, this festive fair on the seashore was a sight to behold. The ambience was so joyful that even the sky seemed incapable of taking in the sight and sound of cheer and laughter. There must have been about five thousand people on the shore at that moment, most of them women and children. Colourful tents were fluttering in the breeze, with cheerful children playing around. Uddhava and I were ambling around, taking in this joyous scene. Wherever we passed, people would bow in gratitude and respect; we were being welcomed warmly everywhere. It was especially delightful to watch the bright faces of mothers light up with joy on watching their children play. On the other hand, Satyaki and bhैया were still busy with their arrangements. By night, the moon had risen, and in its luminescence, the waves had begun to crash wildly on the rocks by the sea. With the intensity of the crashing waves increasing, their sound reverberated louder and louder, matching the fervour of the people at the festival.

Bhैया had set up two liquor stalls right in the centre of the festival arena, and now, it was time to throw them open to the public. As soon as they opened up, people, both young and old, rushed towards them, like a pack of thirsty camels. Meanwhile, the children continued to play on the seashore. Some people were strolling on the shore. Many women had already formed

groups and were busy chatting, while several others were splashing around in the cool sea water. Some even stood on the rocks to catch the spray from the crashing waves. Meanwhile, this cowherd boy was feeling ecstatic watching the others enjoy. Of course, the sight of the children at play warmed the cockles of my heart, spreading a glow of contentment. They would play for a while and then run into the food stalls to grab a bite to eat. At times, they would just pick up a fruit from the stalls. Their celebration was all about games and food. In fact, their playful activities and the joy on their faces were the most unique. This time, my inner voice was all praise for me. 'That's wonderful, Kanhaiya, one should learn from you the art of being happy and giving happiness to others!' Well, there is a lot that people could learn from me, if only they would! If only they kindled the desire to do so, in their heart.

As the night progressed, the games gradually came to an end and everyone headed for the food stalls. The women had joined the crowd too. On the whole, there was joy and contentment all around. While some were savouring the food, others were relishing the liquor that was freely available. The mood was so merry that even the silvery lustre of the moon appeared to have dimmed in comparison to the joy and happiness emanating from the shore below. Long before darkness had set in, several women and children left for their homes. Naturally, the children were sleepy and there was nothing much for the women to do either. Meanwhile, the sound of the waves indicated that the sea was turning stormy. In the moonlit sky, the waves appeared as if they were wrapped in a silvery blanket, as they crashed on the rocks, their milky white foam momentarily caressing the shore. I called out to Uddhava and some of the young people nearby, and we perched ourselves on the rocks. From that spot, we would sometimes look out at the magnificent, stormy waves before us, and at other times, at the feasting Yadavas.

At midnight, we had organised a song and dance event by the dancing girls. In other words, I had taken care of all the vices of the Yadavas. My philosophy was simple: if you want to give joy, give it wholeheartedly. And do it in a way that others liked, not as per your own likes and dislikes. Frankly speaking, if music, dance and liquor were available all at once, then the Yadavas were the most content lot, no matter where they hailed from. And the Yadavas of Mathura were surely the biggest victims of these



maladies. Indeed, these Yadavas were privileged, as they had experienced bliss in Krishna's kingdom today. The beautiful full moon night, the stormy waves in the ocean, the sight of the Yadavas guzzling liquor on the seashore, and the performance of the dancing girls on the ships moored to the docks. Who would have wanted to get up and leave such a scene? So, it was hardly surprising that this magnificent festival continued until the wee hours of the morning. Indeed, not even in their wildest of dreams could the people of Mathura have ever dreamt of a festival on such a grand scale! Forget dreaming, I do not think anybody had even imagined such a festival until that day.

Well, needless to say, Dwarka did nothing but rest for the whole of next day. After staying awake the previous night, this was necessary too. My experiment had succeeded; the festival had given everybody much-needed mental and physical relaxation. There was no doubt that the Yadavas of Mathura were feeling blessed under my rule. Who else had the good fortune of being ruled by such a large-hearted and liberal-minded king? The best part about this relaxation was the motivation it provided to the people. From the next day onwards, all of them returned to work, refuelled with double the enthusiasm. The royal palace was also busy with preparations for the coronation ceremony. Since I had enjoyed the recreation too, I resumed work with renewed vigour. Presently, I had only one priority—to make the marketplace fully operational before the coronation ceremony in Dwarka. To accomplish this goal, not just I, but the entire business community was working tirelessly. They all understood that an influx of visitors could result in high sales of products and for that, it was necessary to make a sufficient quantity of splendid ornaments and contemporary garments available. While the shopkeepers were thinking of immediate sales, I was two steps ahead of them. Actually, I wanted to hold an exhibition of garments and jewellery in the royal palace. All the businessmen were astute, and they did not wish to lose such a wonderful opportunity to exhibit their products and establish their business. They were anyway working hard towards this objective, but when I spoke to them about wanting to hold an exhibition at the royal palace, it was almost as if I had added fuel to their enthusiasm. On the other hand, I also had to look after the coronation part of the ceremony. I was aware that the honour of Dwarka, as well as my own reputation, depended on the success of this event. We were at a slight disadvantage

though, as we were not acquainted with many kings. Moreover, there was no sense in inviting Jarasandha's allies and displaying our abode to them. So, we were left with only a few kings, whom we could impress and hope that they would spread the word about Dwarka across the rest of Aryavarta. For that, we had to ensure that all the construction activity was completed before they arrived in Dwarka. The entire city had to be spruced up and made to look spotless. Additionally, just as opening the market was important for Dwarka's future, it was also important for Rukmini to hear the news of the success of this coronation, for the sake of my future. So, in short, the dreams of everyone in Dwarka, including mine, depended on the success of this coronation ceremony.

However, opening the marketplace was not the only problem, as there were several other aspects of the event that required special attention. For instance, the palace was not large enough to accommodate each and every king whom we had invited. Moreover, we had not constructed a single guesthouse royal enough to accommodate our guests. Therefore, it was important to resolve this problem on a priority basis. Fortunately, the Yadava leaders had a sense of ownership, because when I discussed the problem of guest accommodation with them, they offered their personal residences for the use of the royal guests. Needless to say, I was overwhelmed by their offer. I doubt if any other kingdom had ever experienced such a patriotic gesture from its subjects. This was definitely my first decisive victory in Dwarka. I was anyway of the firm belief that a king and his subjects were equally responsible for the good governance of a kingdom, and only under such administration could the people of a kingdom live happily forever. Well, it was reassuring that the inhabitants and I together had passed the first test successfully. However, I still had difficulty believing that such collective transformation was possible in the people, and that too, in a short span of time. What can I say? This change had bewildered even a person like me! It was, indeed, surprising to see that the very people who had once been the enemies of the royal palace of Mathura, were now working together with the royal palace of Dwarka to make this ceremony a grand success. In a way, this single gesture on their part had certainly helped create a sound foundation for Dwarka's future. Meanwhile, enthusiasm ran high even amongst the common people, who were labouring diligently at their own tasks. Indeed, when so many people

were working wholeheartedly, what could possibly go wrong with the preparations? Perhaps the festival that the royal palace had recently organised for the people, had also played an important role in boosting their morale.

Well, no matter what the reason was, the collective hard work was already beginning to show results. There were still twenty days left for the coronation ceremony, but preparations were already completed. Uddhava and I had gone over each detail twice to check if we had missed out on anything. Everybody had indeed put in a marvellous effort. Every house had been beautifully decorated, and every street was cleaned, and what do I say about the royal palace and the houses of the Yadava nobles! They were gleaming like bright diamonds. Each and every inhabitant of Dwarka was ready to welcome our guests, who were expected to arrive any moment.

As for me, I was especially happy to see that the first guests to arrive were the Pandavas of Hastinapur. I felt blessed, simply by welcoming them. Bhaiya was also delighted to meet Bhima. Not only us, even Uddhava, Satyaki, and just about everybody, jumped with joy on meeting them. As you well know that even though the Pandavas were our guests, they were more friends than guests. Needless to say, all of us, that is bhaiya, Uddhava, Satyaki, the Pandavas and I had stationed ourselves in one of the largest chambers in the palace. The coronation ceremony had its own place, but why lose out on the joys of friendship? So, in a way, the celebration had already begun for us with the arrival of the Pandavas. For me, there was no greater celebration than spending quality time with friends. Meanwhile, Uddhava was greatly impressed by the simplicity of the Pandavas, while they, on their part, were so impressed with our progress that they kept congratulating us at every opportunity. Over two *prahars* (unit of time; one '*prahar*' equals three hours) had passed since they had arrived, but their congratulatory wishes had not ceased yet. We were all so excited to be in each other's company that before the afternoon had passed, we had already toured Dwarka twice.

We headed for the seashore as soon as evening set in. Awestruck by the vastness of the ocean that spread before them, the Pandavas, who were seeing the ocean for the first time, stood transfixed, taking in the beauty of the huge rocks and the waves lashing at them, dispersing white foam on the

seashore. Indeed, the view of the sea, the ships floating in the water, and the sea breeze had together made the beauty of Dwarka incomparable, the moment it came into existence. Moreover, none of the kings I knew, friendly or inimical, had established their kingdoms by the sea. This was because the *Rakshasa* community had established its stronghold on all sea coasts surrounding us. As for me, I owed it to Jarasandha, for, it was because of him that I had to leave the company of civilised people and stay among the *Rakshasas* where I felt safer! Nevertheless, with the onset of dusk, we had returned to the palace and started to enjoy our beverages. But our merriment showed no signs of abating. Bhaiya and Satyaki were truly enjoying the company of Bhima and Arjuna. Liquor was being guzzled amidst conversation, and we were all sprawled on the floor in our chamber at the palace. In this light-hearted atmosphere, I do not know what came over me when I suddenly thought of teasing Bhima. Perhaps the cheerful atmosphere had gone to my head. So, I asked him teasingly, “Well, Bhima, how are the two sinners of Hastinapur doing?”

Bhima replied, “What do you think? They are progressing well, thanks to my own brothers. Honestly, I wish I had a brother like you.”

Oh, what had just happened? I had wanted to tease Bhima but had ended up provoking the other Pandavas. None of them were pleased with his sarcastic remark. I also felt that perhaps I had said too much. However, the deed had been done! Consequently, an uneasy silence fell over the chamber that lasted until everybody had retired to bed.

Well, as the date of the ceremony approached, naturally, the guests in Dwarka also kept increasing in number, and with this, the hustle and bustle in Dwarka had also increased. However, my biggest worry had been eliminated well before time—Dwarka’s marketplace was now ready to welcome visitors. While the coronation ceremony and the celebrations were surely important, my main concern had been the marketplace. Had we failed to get the marketplace up and running, then half the purpose of holding such a grand celebration would have been defeated. To my great relief, Vishwakarma himself had arrived to take charge of arrangements and lend his expertise to the final stage of Dwarka’s beautification. His arrival had finally put my mind at ease. The fact that he was taking so much interest in our affairs was surely a good omen for the ceremony. Actually, it

was his reputation too, that was attached to Dwarka's reputation. After all, like mine, his name was also connected with Dwarka. Well, Vishwakarma was the epitome of duty, for, as soon as he reached Dwarka, he busied himself with supervision. In the first stage of the beautification phase itself, he arranged for innumerable lamp posts to be placed along all major roads, main gate and marketplaces.

Meanwhile, across the sea, on the mainland, Uddhava waited with a reception committee to greet the kings, princes and ministers who were arriving day and night. The guests were then ferried across the sea to Dwarka's main gate, on ships adorned with flowers. From the main entrance, they were led to gaily-decorated chariots, which took them to their respective accommodation. Not only this, every important guest was provided five chariots, soldiers and charioteers so they could tour Dwarka whenever they pleased. Interestingly, all of them were as astounded by the sights of the city, as the Pandavas had been. Their amazement itself was a testimony to Dwarka's magnificence. Needless to say, this was a matter of great satisfaction for a cowherd like me.

It also pleased me greatly to see that several kings and princes of Aryavarta, regardless of their stature, had already arrived. I swelled with pride when they congratulated me and appreciated the beauty of Dwarka. The pride I felt on hearing these words was so overwhelming that even Dwarka seemed too small to contain me. However, the arrival of the kings and princes also increased my anxiety with every passing moment, for, everyone seemed to be arriving except those whom I was eagerly waiting for. Yes, I was impatiently waiting for my future brother-in-law, Rukmi and my future father-in-law, King Bhishmak to arrive. Even though the possibility of their arrival was remote, I was perhaps being too optimistic. What could I do? It was, after all, a matter of finding a bride for myself. However, even after four days, when there was no sign of their arrival, I became extremely worried. Even if my future father-in-law and future brother-in-law did not arrive, at least Shwetketu and Shaivya should have arrived by now. If they too did not turn up, then this entire exercise of celebrating grandfather's coronation would be futile. 'Why dwell on such negative thoughts, Krishna? You are a king now. And, for a king, nothing is more important than the prestige of his kingdom and the happiness of his subjects. So, cast away these thoughts and continue performing your duty,' my inner voice

reminded me. I replied, 'Alright, I will do just that then!' The inner voice added, 'At least be content that with the attendance of so many kings, princes and ministers, the word of Dwarka's magnificence will now spread all over Aryavarta. And sooner or later, the news will reach Rukmini as well, regardless of whether Shwetketu and Shaivya are able to attend the ceremony or not. So, now, forget Rukmini and focus only on the upcoming ceremony.' I replied promptly, 'Alright, I shall do just that! After all, I was always in control of my mind.'

Well, let me put my internal conversation aside and return to a very positive development in Dwarka. A significant number of beautiful garments and exquisite jewellery had been crafted for the exhibition, and when I received an invitation from the traders to take a look at them, I went delirious with joy. Certainly, all our craftsmen had toiled day and night to create these marvellous pieces of art. I had never seen such splendid garments and spectacular jewellery before. Mere praise was not enough to appreciate the work put in by the traders and craftsmen. I began preparing immediately for these creations to be exhibited at the royal palace, a day prior to the coronation ceremony. This was also a unique experiment in itself. I arranged for the exhibition to be held in the beautifully decorated main assembly hall of the palace. The jewellery was arranged in the centre of the hall on four platforms, whereas the garments were displayed all around it. After labouring all day and night, the exhibition hall was finally ready for its visitors.

Invitations had been sent to all visiting kings and princes to view the arts and crafts of Dwarka's jewellers and garment designers. At sunrise itself, the exhibition was thrown open to visitors. Even lunch was arranged to be served here. Eager to be the first to view the exhibits on display, kings and princes had started arriving at the venue well in time, enthusiasm writ large on their faces. We too had arrived at the venue early morning itself to make a final inspection of the premises. As for the Yadava nobles, they were so excited that they had been here all night with the craftspeople, giving finishing touches to their exhibits. No sooner did the visitors start arriving, than the businessmen enthusiastically began to display their creations to them. We were strolling through the hall, mingling and conversing with the kings and princes, when I realised that this idea of mine had, indeed, worked very well. All those who set their eyes on the displayed goods, fell

in love with them immediately. There was not a single person who was not impressed by the wonderful garments and jewellery. By afternoon, we had sold a considerable portion of our wares. Enthused by this response, I made good use of the present opportunity and requested all the visitors to reserve shops in their respective kingdoms for Dwarka's goods. In exchange, I proposed that twenty-five percent of the earnings from the sale of those goods would go to the royal treasury of that kingdom. Everybody liked my proposal; in fact, they immediately assured us that they would allocate three to five shops in their markets to sell Dwarka's goods. Now, this business alliance was an absolute windfall, and not only I, but all of Dwarka's businessmen felt buoyant with the thought of expanding business in the other kingdoms of Aryavarta. The mere thought of our goods being sold in all corners of Aryavarta was enough to send our spirits soaring to the skies. At the same time, I also breathed a huge sigh of relief, because with the expansion of business, my anxiety about Dwarka's royal treasury would be reduced greatly. There was another piece of good news for this business-savvy Krishna; we had earned enough from the sale of garments and jewellery to cover most of the expenses incurred in arranging the coronation ceremony.

Finally, the day of the coronation ceremony dawned. Bhaiya and I dressed like princes for the occasion. I do not know about bhaiya, but a merry song played in my heart and I strutted about with a distinct spring in my step. Frankly speaking, I had already admired myself in the mirror a dozen times since morning! Nonetheless, let me talk about the ceremony, which needless to say, was a grand affair. Everything had proceeded with clockwork precision. However, something utterly amazing had occurred on this day. To everyone's surprise, grandfather had insisted that I should also be crowned king of Dwarka along with him. I had no inkling that something like this could even happen; I was not prepared for it either. Perhaps grandfather wanted to use this opportunity to honour me in the presence of all the assembled kings of Aryavarta. Of course, I could not refuse his request in the presence of such eminent people, so, I was crowned too, as the official King of Dwarka.<sup>[16]</sup>

As the ceremony drew to a close, everybody's enthusiasm began to wane. Surely, everyone was tired after a stream of hectic activities. In the course of the next four to five days, many guests left for their kingdoms.

Undoubtedly, Dwarka's splendour and its awe-inspiring markets had left a deep imprint on everyone's minds. The brilliantly lit torches at night had, especially, amazed everyone. Vishwakarma's genius idea had, indeed, left an indelible impression on all the guests. Actually, I had almost forgotten about the idea of installing the lamps amidst all other preparations. I would like to tell you that as soon as evening approached, all these lamps would be lit, piercing the darkness of the night sky and enveloping Dwarka in their radiance. The light cast by these lamps on the city's marketplaces, roads and houses lent them an ethereal appearance. The palace shone bright and looked so stunning that it was difficult to avert one's gaze from it. As for the market, it took on an unbelievable air of gaiety in the light of the lamps, appearing even more inviting than in the daylight. Typically, all the markets in Aryavarta would shut down by sunset, but the marketplace of my kingdom remained open until midnight. It was indeed a wonderful sight to see people thronging the night market. You can imagine how beautiful Dwarka must have appeared from the fact that all the guests had made it a routine to ride through the city every night. In fact, they seemed to have taken over the main streets of Dwarka during their stay here. One could see their chariots plying on the streets late into the night. The light of the burning lamps would give a luminescent glow to Dwarka, making it appear like a city of gold. But that was not all; with the passage of time, this feature attracted the people from the entire Aryavarta region to Dwarka, so much so that Dwarka soon acquired the epithet, 'City of Gold.'

Gradually, all the guests had departed, but I had not permitted the Pandavas to leave. How could I let them go? Since we had been busy with the festivities, we could not really spend much time together. The Pandavas too, were happy to concede to my wish. Perhaps they too liked Dwarka and our hospitality so much that they were happy to spend a few more days with us. I was elated by their decision; in fact, there were a thousand other reasons to be happy about, for, everything had gone so well. The ceremony had also turned out better than expected. In the midst of all this, suddenly, anxiety began to gnaw at me. While it did not surprise me that Rukmi and King Bhishmak had not come, it was certainly a matter of concern that Shwetketu and Shaivya had not attended the ceremony either. I wondered to myself, 'Had something terrible happened to Rukmini?'



My inner voice assured me immediately, ‘Kanhaiya, do not worry. Had that been the case, Shwetketu would have surely conveyed a message to you. Rest assured, your Rukmini is safe and well. There must have been some other compulsion or Shwetketu must have suddenly been held up because of some important matter; else, he would have surely been here long ago. As far as Rukmini is concerned, nothing has happened to her...else, Shwetketu would have left no stone unturned to come and inform you about it.’ Whenever such fear would grip me, I would calm myself in this manner, to step out of my misery. I was afraid that if my heart were to get the better of me, then I might not enjoy being in Dwarka at all.

## The Abduction of Rukmini

Dwarka was scaling new heights of glory, with every inhabitant enjoying a life of bliss. After having lived arduous lives in Mathura, naturally, Dwarka seemed like heaven to all its inhabitants, and the happiness reflecting on their faces made this King of Dwarka beam from ear to ear. Indeed, there is no greater feeling of contentment in this human life than the one which results from giving happiness to others and experiencing the same joy within ourselves. I fervently prayed to Nature, with all my heart, to bestow its kindness upon all *Dwarkawasis* (inhabitants of Dwarka) and keep them happy forever. However, at times, my heart would be seized by a vague fear: would the vices of these Yadavas ruin this happiness forever? You might remember how these very Yadavas had shirked work and responsibility in Mathura due to their addiction to liquor and courtesans. Well, that was in Mathura, but in Dwarka, they would find it impossible to maintain their present standard of living or pay taxes and make the palace prosper, without actually working for it. And my aim was not only to see each and every inhabitant of Dwarka prosper, but also to see that the royal coffers overflowed with gems and jewellery. However, a desire by itself was not enough to make this happen. It was crucial for these idlers to make an effort and lend a hand in making the kingdom prosper.

I would, however, like to make it clear that neither was I against the enjoyment of any kind, nor was I opposed to any particular object. But yes, it had always been my firm belief that a person should work hard and rightfully earn happiness and enjoyment in life. After a tedious day of labour, a few moments of entertainment at night is every person's right; however, drinking all day long and not doing any work was akin to dishonouring human life. Besides, without working hard and earning for oneself, one cannot enjoy life forever, because wealth is a prerequisite for all kinds of happiness and for leading a prosperous life. However, having said that, I did not see any such problem arising in Dwarka, at least in the near future. Everybody was preoccupied, fulfilling their duties and responsibilities with the utmost sincerity and seriousness. One could gauge the extent of their sincerity towards their jobs from the fact that the thousand cows that Uddhava had brought were now insufficient; whereas in

Mathura, these very cows would have been sent by the palace to graze in Vrindavan, as nobody would have been willing to take care of them. Nonetheless, I wondered to myself, ‘Will this level of enthusiasm remain intact, and will it continue to prevail in Dwarka for a long time to come?’

As far as my personal life was concerned, what can I say about it? You cannot even imagine how wonderful it felt to be living a regal life in my own dream city. Besides, at this point in time, there was no struggle in my life, either mental or physical. This was exactly the kind of life I had been yearning for, since childhood. The most satisfying aspect about this was that everything I had achieved in life was on the strength of my actions. Otherwise, you know how I had spent my entire life, living in the shadow of death until the present moment. I was either fighting wild animals or facing Nature’s blows. At other times, I was either battling the demons sent by Kansa or running helter-skelter to avert Jarasandha’s attacks. However, this was the first time in my life when I did not sense danger; neither did I see any of my enemies looming on the horizon. Moreover, I was also enjoying the pleasant company of my friends, the Pandavas.

And when you are in the company of friends, why unnecessarily waste time thinking about enemies? Similarly, when the present is so beautiful, why think about the past? So, let us talk about the Pandavas instead. Most of the guests had left by now, and all the guest chambers in the palace lay vacant. However, bhैया, Uddhava, Satyaki, the Pandavas and I were still lodged in one of the most spacious chambers of the palace. Enjoying each other’s company to the fullest, none of us were willing to stay in separate chambers. All that we would do the whole day was joke around, tease and pull each other’s leg. Like little children, we would hide each other’s things and then blame one another and fight over them. At times, we would go hunting in the forest and at other times, dive into the sea for a swim. Riding our chariots on the streets of Dwarka late into the night and indulging in idle talk by the seashore had become a daily routine for us. At the same time, playing my flute and enjoying all the praises showered upon me by others had also become a daily habit for me. And yes, another daily activity which had turned into a custom ever since our arrival in Dwarka, and had remained a custom ever since, was having *Chhappan Bhog* (a feast comprising fifty-six dishes) prepared for our meal every day. After all, I was the King of Dwarka now, and in my mind, I was the king of kings! So,

what else would the royal palace feed me and my friends, if not *Chhappan Bhog*? In any case, you are well aware of the fondness I had, for good food. And the far-reaching effect of this was that, with the passage of time, our grand festivals and *Chhappan Bhog* feasts acquired as formidable a reputation as Dwarka's grandeur, beauty and its night markets, all over Aryavarta.

On the whole, it felt as if the days in Dwarka had grown wings; they were swiftly flying by. Honestly, at present, I was spending the most splendid days of my life. The Pandavas had become instrumental in lending charm to my life at this time. You would not believe it, but it was during their stay in Dwarka that I had learnt archery from Arjuna. He was truly an accomplished archer and I was captivated on seeing his exemplary skill with the bow and arrow. Nevertheless, no matter how well he tutored me, my arrow would still miss its mark. For that matter, I would also practise wielding the mace with bhaiya and Bhima sometimes. One could say that I had begun to show an interest in learning to use royal weapons as soon as I had become king.

However, even as this merriment continued, my keen observation made me suspicious that all was not well with the Pandavas, and this was a serious matter, indeed. My suspicions were further confirmed when I paid closer attention to their conversations and behaviour. Certainly, something was amiss back home in Hastinapur. Bhishma, Drona, Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana and Dushasana had become a baneful fist of five that was wringing the Pandavas tighter and tighter each day, squeezing the very life out of them. Surprisingly, despite that, none of the Pandavas, with the exception of Bhima, was willing to openly oppose them. So, although the situation certainly evoked sympathy, none of them actually deserved pity. They were powerful themselves, and if they wished, they could have very well saved themselves from ill-treatment. But in spite of this, if they chose not to do anything about it, then they were doing themselves a grave disservice. And, it is a fact that one has to bear the consequences of inflicting distress upon oneself. Interestingly, though I was meeting the Pandavas after many years, neither had their circumstances changed, nor had their nature. Bhima was still extremely resentful of Duryodhana and Dushasana; in fact, with time, his anger against them seemed to have become worse. Arjuna's bag of questions still brimmed with unanswered

queries. This was not all; Yudhishtira's seriousness was gradually turning into a disease. Similarly, Bhima's habit of speaking his mind, and Yudhishtira's tendency to reprimand him, had also remained unchanged. And so had the two youngest Pandavas, Nakula and Sahadeva. They had always been as quiet as a mouse, and even now I would often yearn to hear their voices.

Let me clarify, however, that the personal problems of the Pandavas were never a hindrance to our enjoyment. Our days were passing by merrily, when suddenly, one day, my dear Yudhishtira decided to return to Hastinapur. There was one problem though; Bhima had become so used to *Chhappan Bhog* and the magnificent life in Dwarka that he was in no mood to return to Hastinapur. For that matter, I did not want them to leave either. But did Bhima stand a chance against the will of his brothers, and I against the will of time? All of us wish to hold on to our happy moments, almost as if to lock them up in a cage, but has anyone ever been able to do that? The Pandavas had their own kingdom, their own *karmabhoomi* (a place where one performs his deeds). So, they were bound to leave sooner or later. Naturally, we were all sad to see them go. Even though we did nothing but celebrate for the last two days of their stay, our hearts still remained unfulfilled, yearning for more.

Finally, after a stay of nearly two months, the Pandavas left for Hastinapur, and with their departure, my happiness seemed to have left too. In fact, the carefree time spent with them, and the fun and games and the unbridled happiness, which we enjoyed in each other's company had completely relegated the love of my life, my dear Rukmini, to the innermost recesses of my mind. However, as soon as the Pandavas left Dwarka's shore, dreams of Rukmini began to plague me once again. Dwarka abounded with the best of everything, but alas, it remained bereft of the presence of the one who had inspired its creation...I began to wonder what state she must be in. No sooner did I think of her, than anxiety about her began to plague my mind. Deep down inside, I was sure she was facing some problem, and this was not just a lover's apprehension. I had valid reasons to arrive at this conclusion, for, had this not been the case, Shwetketu and Shaivya would have certainly attended my coronation ceremony; in fact, they would have come running to celebrate my success. For them to not attend the celebration of Krishna's achievements was unthinkable under normal

circumstances. In other words, it must have been impossible for them to leave Rukmini alone. But what kind of trouble could have possibly befallen Rukmini? As soon as the Pandavas had left, or should I say, as soon as I was alone once again, this anxiety gripped me completely. But of course, I kept these thoughts to myself; on the outside, I appeared absolutely normal. The ongoing work in Dwarka had been progressing at a steady pace; newer construction work had also picked up speed. Besides, a lot needed to be accomplished towards establishing businesses in Dwarka. In such a situation, their king's listlessness and low spirits would have certainly dampened the enthusiasm of the subjects. On the other hand, it suited me that at present, Satrajit was fully engrossed in his business. Therefore, other than the constant, nagging anxiety about Rukmini's well-being, there was peace all around. Nonetheless, without Rukmini, this peace was meaningless, for, it could become meaningful only after her arrival in Dwarka.

Well, there was more to life apart from matters of the heart. For instance, there was a positive development, which I would like to share with you. It pleased me to see that Satrajit had become so enamoured of life in Dwarka that he had visited his own kingdom only once, since we had arrived here. This meant that he had turned over a new leaf after setting foot in Dwarka. Neither was he instigating people against me, nor was he plotting against me. Meanwhile, the people of Dwarka were busy too, carrying out their tasks with the utmost sincerity. Now, with everything functioning smoothly, for how long could I have continued to feel miserable thinking about Rukmini? Every evening, I would head to the seashore, and once I would set my eyes on the infinite expanse of the sea, I would be unable to stop myself from playing my flute. However, instead of lifting my spirits, the melodious notes of my flute would once again remind me of my beloved Rukmini. I would feel powerless, nay, defenceless! To overcome this feeling of despondency, I would talk to her, and even assure her, in my own mind. Thus, I would spend my days in Dwarka holding imaginary conversations with Rukmini. I would be busy all day, but when evening descended, it would involuntarily bring memories of Rukmini with it. One could say that a king, without his queen, was wandering about in Dwarka, nurturing sweet memories of his beloved Rukmini in his heart.

Besides, these days, I was also experiencing another noticeable change within myself. I had begun to smile a lot lately. Of course, this was a façade to conceal the real pain I carried in my heart. You could say that, on becoming the King of Dwarka, I had learnt not only to fool others, but myself as well. Actually, progress often brings its share of ills too. And to be honest, this was my present condition—on the outside, I was busy with my duties towards Dwarka, but internally, a flame called Rukmini was burning bright in my heart. To make matters worse, neither did it appear that she would come to Dwarka, nor was there any news of her. Moreover, her memories refused to leave my hopeless heart. Dwarka had everything, so to speak—I had realised my dream and had progressed in life from being a cowherd boy to becoming a king. So ideally, this was a time for joy and celebration. Yet, this lovesick Krishna had often begun to stay aloof. Not only that, I had also started avoiding my friends out of fear that they would discover the sorry state I was in. Frankly speaking, this was the first time I was experiencing the plight of a man hopelessly in love.

Nonetheless, just as every wait has to end, this wait too, had to end some day or the other. So, finally, one day, Shwetketu and Shaivya arrived, bearing the news of my ‘love’, Rukmini. I greeted the news of their arrival with mixed feelings of curiosity, happiness, anxiety and excitement. To experience such extreme emotions all at once was also a first for me. It was afternoon; I was resting in my chamber, when a servant brought in the news of their arrival. I jumped up and raced to the assembly hall to meet them. I embraced them straightaway while trying to gauge from their expressions the nature of the news regarding Rukmini. However, with my state of anxiety clouding my vision, I could not get very far. Never mind! Before they could even utter her name, I quietly escorted them to my private chamber. Locking the doors securely, the three of us sat in my meeting chamber. Yes, this felt much better. They began the conversation by congratulating me on Dwarka and praising the grandeur of the city...but my mind was not interested in listening to praises. It did not take Shaivya long to sense my anxiety and in a single breath, she apprised me of the developments in Kundinpur. She said, “We had received your invitation to the coronation ceremony well in advance and were eager to attend it. However, to our misfortune, Jarasandha was visiting Kundinpur with Shishupala, at the time. Not only that, this time, the two were engaged in

serious discussions with Rukmi. Meanwhile, seeing them in Kundinpur had agitated Rukmini. To make matters worse, Shishupala was trying every trick possible to win Rukmini's affection and get close to her under some pretext or the other. Finally, harried by his ill-mannered advances, she took me along to stay at her grandfather Kaishik's house. Considering these circumstances, it would not have been right on our part to leave Rukmini...pardon me, your Rukmini, alone! This was why we were unable to attend your coronation ceremony despite wanting to."

Well, they had certainly done the right thing, but Shaivya had not told me anything about Rukmini yet. I wondered where she was, and in what condition. Reading my expression, Shwetketu immediately understood what I wanted to hear. Continuing the conversation from where Shaivya had stopped, he informed me, "This time, Jarasandha, Shishupala and Rukmi have kept their plotting so secretive that even King Bhishmak is unaware of their plans. However, judging by the behaviour of this nefarious trio, it is evident that, irrespective of Rukmini's feelings or her life, for that matter, they are determined to get her married to Shishupala under any circumstance. Besides, ever since you have settled in Dwarka, they have become fearless. They are certain you will not come and upset their carefully laid out plans for Rukmini's *swayamvar* this time around." Hearing this news made me extremely impatient. 'All this is old news, but how is Rukmini? Tell me that first!' I grumbled in my head. This time, Shwetketu truly comprehended my impatience, and winding up the conversation, came straight to the point. In a serious tone, he said, "Krishna, the trio, brimming with confidence, has once again decided to hold Rukmini's *swayamvar* next month on *Akshaya Tritiya*.<sup>[17]</sup> This time, they have decided to invite Mathura as well. Unfortunately, you are no longer a resident of Mathura...and Dwarka, I fear, is not going to be invited to the *swayamvar*."

'Well, isn't this just great!' I thought. An invitation was to be sent to a place where I no longer resided. But no invitation would be sent to the place where I now resided! In other words, once again, I remained uninvited to the *swayamvar* of my love, my life. A surge of thoughts flooded my mind. But I would deal with that later. I straightaway asked Shaivya, "What does Rukmini think of this? And how is her health presently?"



To this, Shaivya said, “Rukmini is not willing to marry Shishupala under any circumstance. Not only that, to express her disagreement, she has gone to live with her grandfather, Kaishik, who, in turn, has conveyed his opposition to the *swayamvar* to King Bhishmak and Rukmi. On the other hand, while King Bhishmak feels compelled to hear out Grandfather Kaishik’s views, Rukmi has broken all protocol and tradition. He has clearly told both of them in no uncertain terms, that Rukmini will be married to Shishupala, come what may.”

Well, that was perfectly clear; there was not much to glean from this anyway. They were trying to execute the same old, unsuccessful plot in a new manner, this time around. My only concern was that earlier, I had somehow managed to save my dreams from being shattered by claiming to defend Mathura’s honour as it was not invited to the *swayamvar*. What excuse could I present this time to stop the *swayamvar* from taking place? The honour of Dwarka...? No, no; what prestige and pride could a new kingdom possibly have? Besides, what relationship did Kundinpur share with Dwarka anyway? In other words, if I wanted to disrupt the *swayamvar* this time, it meant I would have to publicly confess my feelings for Rukmini to the world at large.

Everyone would know that I had lost my heart to her. This would, in fact, work against me, as Rukmi, Shishupala and Jarasandha would then become more determined than ever to get Rukmini married off to Shishupala at once. Indeed, they would not lose any opportunity to hit me where it would hurt the most. Therefore, another visit to her *swayamvar* would sound the death knell for my dreams of making Rukmini my queen. The trio would then not rest until they get Rukmini married off to Shishupala. On the other hand, if you think about it, not visiting Kundinpur would also inevitably lead to the same result—Rukmini’s wedding to Shishupala. All in all, circumstances had conspired in such a manner that I was sure I had lost Rukmini forever. So, did this mean I would have to forget her? No! That was impossible! Kindly tell me, is it possible for a person to forget his own self? So, how was it possible for Krishna to forget his Rukmini? In other words, my poor ego was now caught in a dilemma. It could neither go to save Rukmini, nor could it imagine life without her! In fact, this dilemma did not end here; my ego could not bear to see her suffer either. Funnily enough, while my ego was trapped in a vortex of emotions, the ‘witness’

within me was quite pleased. It had probably rubbed its hands in glee, thinking that it would be fun to watch the game now. Indeed, the game was a challenging one. I had somehow managed to save this life of mine from Jarasandha's vice-like grip by establishing Dwarka, but now it seemed that my second life—Rukmini—was badly trapped in his grip.

Seeing me in a pensive mood, Shaivya chortled and spoke cheerfully, “Bhaiya, why are you so restless? Come on, close your eyes now. I have brought you a wonderful gift.”

Well, that was just great! It was not just the ‘witness’ within me, but Shaivya too was having a laugh at my expense. In fact, she seemed to be two steps ahead of my ‘witness’. She was not only laughing at me, but by presenting gifts to me when I was in such a terrible state, she was also poking fun at me! Now, how could I possibly be interested in her gifts at this juncture? Besides, she was saying it in such an enticing tone as if she had brought along Rukmini herself as my gift. Nevertheless, my heart was already sinking, so what was the point in needlessly breaking Shaivya's heart too? So, I immediately shut my eyes, following which, she quickly placed a letter in my hands. What can I say? My hands began to tremble as I opened my eyes. I looked enquiringly at Shaivya and then at the letter. When I saw it closely, it seemed as if I was dreaming. It was from Rukmini! I could not believe my eyes. Did Rukmini really write a letter to me? You would not believe it, but I had to actually pinch myself hard to believe that all this was not a dream. Oh, but this was very much real! The letter was indeed from Rukmini. Dancing with joy, I opened it quickly, for, what was the point in waiting now? And when I read it, I could not believe my eyes. The letter read...

Krishna,

By now, you may have heard from Shaivya that the drama of my *swayamvar* will be enacted once again on *Akshaya Tritiya* of the following month. Seeing Jarasandha and Rukmi's determination and Shishupala's desire to marry me, it seems that I will surely be married off to Shishupala this time around. If this were to actually happen, it would be like throwing me alive into the dungeons of hell. I do not have anyone to protect and support me here, because even my father is helpless in the face of Rukmi's

dictates and sadly, nobody listens to grandfather anymore. In such a situation, I cannot think of anybody who can save me from this looming danger. In this state of helplessness, I can only see your face shining like a true beacon of hope. ...Although we do not share a relationship with each other, it cannot be said that there is no connection at all between us. Because by stopping my *swayamvar* previously, you had given me a new lease of life, albeit for a short while. However, a slight problem persists... and that is with regard to your personality. It is indeed strange, because at times you run away from battles, and at other times, you fight like a hero. So, if you are feeling heroic at present, can I expect you to once again come and thwart this *swayamvar*? While congratulating you on your new kingdom, can a helpless princess once again hope to seek help from you?

Rukmini<sup>[18]</sup>

Oh, why not, why not, indeed! What could I say? All my dilemmas had vanished in an instant! 'O Rukmini! You have no idea how this lovelorn cowherd boy was waiting for an opportunity like this. Well, consider me almost at your doorstep, having arrived to protect you from your tormentors! However, I do have a grudge to bear against you. You could have at least written, 'Yours, Rukmini' at the end of the letter. Oh well! It does not matter. I will console myself with this letter for the moment.' The letter had indeed put me on cloud nine! Even though she had not declared her love for me in the letter, Rukmini had at least considered me trustworthy, someone close to her whom she could rely on. She had at least thought of me as a hero! She had at least pinned her hopes on me. And as far as love was concerned, when one rescue mission had led her to express her expectations from me, the second rescue attempt would easily impel her to declare her love for me. What a wonderful turn of events this was! I was already reeling under the heady intoxication of Dwarka, and now this inebriation, in the form of Rukmini, was also making my head spin. I still remember those days when this illiterate cowherd had gone to visit a city like Mathura for the first time, and had seen a princess for the first time; a princess by the name of Rukmini. You may remember how her dignity, charm and style of dressing had taken my breath away. You might also remember how I had fallen hopelessly in love with her. It was in that very moment itself that I had dreamt this beautiful dream, of making her my queen. Not only that, to turn that dream into reality, I had made myself

worthy of her and from a mere cowherd boy, I had become the King of Dwarka. And today, the princess of my dreams had written me a letter. She had considered me her own. She had asked me to help her out. This day had marked not just my victory, but the victory of every lover in the world who invests his willpower in his pursuit of love. Honestly, if a man is determined enough, then who or what is beyond his reach?

I did not know what to do. My feet refused to stay on the ground and my head was already floating in the clouds. And what could I say of my heart? It seemed to have pierced the skies and flown far, far away, because in my mind, receiving a letter from Rukmini was an achievement greater than building Dwarka itself, especially since this was a personal achievement of Krishna. But although I was euphoric, I did not lose my senses.

I was very well aware that this letter was more of a result of Shaivya's insistence than Rukmini's own idea. It was likely that Rukmini had heard stories of my heroic feat at the previous instance of her *swayamvar*, which may have raised her hopes. And as she was drowning in despair, this lone ray of hope might have compelled her to write the letter. You might have understood by now, that though I was a lover, I was not a mindless one, who would raise his hopes needlessly.

Nevertheless, at present, I could not have felt more grateful towards Shaivya, for, she had somehow facilitated communication between Rukmini and me. Now, it was up to me to paint the rest of this canvas of love in the shades of my choice. It had been seven days since the arrival of Shaivya and Shwetketu; I had clearly lost track of time after my discussions with them about Rukmini. To be honest, there was nothing new about that. This love-stricken man had spent the past ten years of his life longing and hoping for Rukmini's affection. On the eighth day of their stay, however, Shaivya and Shwetketu sought my permission to return to Kundinpur. I wished for them to stay longer, but it was better for my heart's sake that they returned immediately. Presently, Rukmini desperately needed them by her side, and her needs were, in turn, my needs. So, there was no question of unnecessarily insisting that they prolong their stay with us. You will not believe it, although they had been here for seven days, I had not taken them to meet bhैया or Uddhava yet. The reason was clear; we were discussing matters related to Rukmini's *swayamvar* and I did not want to discuss them

in the presence of bhaiya or Uddhava. However, on their final night in Dwarka, I was compelled to invite everybody, including Satyaki. All of us feasted together; obviously, we were careful to not mention Rukmini's name. The next morning, I bid goodbye to them as they commenced their journey back to Kundinpur.

Rukmini's letter had surely solved a problem, but at the same time, it had put me on the horns of another dilemma. Last time around, I had been able to incite everyone and take them along to stop the *swayamvar* by claiming Mathura's prestige as a grave matter. But what excuse could I make this time? Moreover, how should I explain the situation to bhaiya? If I were to go alone, there was no way I would be able to stop the ceremony. Well, the matter was absolutely clear; an innocent, aggrieved princess was crying out for help. In other words, the matter no longer concerned saving my love; the matter was about rescuing a damsel in distress. And Krishna was bound to respond to this plea from a woman in distress; therefore, I had to save Rukmini by all means. Now, all I had to think about was a plan of action. The date of the *swayamvar* was still one and a half months away, so there was plenty of time to come up with a solution. In any case, I had Rukmini's letter with me as the ultimate weapon. I would explain to bhaiya that although the letter was in my name, the princess had actually addressed the letter to Dwarka. I was in no hurry to tell anybody anything yet. For, whether the secret concerns the matters of the heart or a strategic plan, it is best revealed at an opportune time to achieve the most desired outcome. Well, putting future plans aside for now, my own condition, at present, had become quite interesting. A single letter from Rukmini had suddenly lent a rose-coloured hue and a special charm to Dwarka! Even the dark, moonless nights appeared to be covered in a silvery blanket of moonlight. Agreed that a person who has suffered a blow to the heart becomes good-for-nothing, but perhaps he who wins somebody's heart is also no better than a half-wit. In both these cases, love-struck people are hopeless indeed. Well, so be it, for, one cannot give up on love altogether, can one?

Putting the matters of the heart aside, this lover, compelled by his nature, had already sent a strong assurance to Rukmini through Shaivya. I had told Shaivya to assure Rukmini with the utmost confidence that the *swayamvar* would be stopped at any cost and this was Kanhaiya's promise. Besides, this was not an empty assurance; the *swayamvar* had to be stopped at any

cost because how could my Rukmini marry anyone other than me, especially now that she had personally sought my help? Indeed, come hell or high water, no matter how impossible it appeared to be, no matter what happens, this *swayamvar* could not be allowed to take place. But even after pondering over it, when I could not think of a way out, I began to affirm myself with this resolve over and over again. Actually, by doing this, not only was I boosting my self-confidence but in a way, also reassuring myself. At the same time, it was not as if I was only playing with my mind these days; I was also engaged in serious contemplation on the level of my consciousness. Not only was I contemplating my plan, but also slowly giving it direction. Firstly, I wanted to reach Kundinpur three days before the date of the *swayamvar*. This was necessary to maintain the secrecy of my arrival, for, if I reached there too early, it would be difficult to hide my presence. Secondly, I was also sure that as soon as they heard that I was present in Kundinpur, they would be determined to carry out the ceremony as quickly as possible. Neither Jarasandha, Rukmi nor Shishupala's egos would bear to face humiliation for a second time, especially when the *swayamvar* was being organised by them in their own kingdom. Moreover, the ignominy would be too severe to bear, considering that I would be instrumental in defeating them. At the same time, there was another aspect to consider. On the previous occasion, my pretence of fighting to save 'Mathura's honour' had managed to keep me safe. This time, however, I had no such excuse; in fact, my life could be endangered if the news of my arrival reached the trio. Under such circumstances, instead of saving the love of my life, I might end up losing my own life. In fact, the ceremony could get annulled for another reason too—if Rukmini were to fall unconscious once again. However, this time, there was no possibility of that happening either, because I had already given her my word that I would stop the *swayamvar*. Moreover, I had also given strict instructions to Shaivya to take utmost care of her. By doing that, I had myself foolishly done away with an opportunity to stop the *swayamvar*. In other words, now, I had to rely on my own actions to stop this ceremony.

Indeed, human beings have no choice but to rely on their own actions. So, why create such a hue and cry about it? With these thoughts coursing through my mind, it was also clear to me that at this juncture, Dwarka no longer held my interest. All day long, I was lost in dreams of Rukmini. This

was all about the mind, but the body demanded activity too. So, at times, whenever possible, I would go for a walk along the seashore and play my flute, but that too in the company of my solitude. As you are well aware, wounded lovers prefer the quietude that seclusion offers. Even the company of friends is painful during such times. So, it was the sound of the waves lashing the seashore and the haunting melody of my flute which provided solace to my restless heart and mind. At least, in this way, I could soothe my troubled mind by talking to myself about Rukmini. But then, how long could I continue in this manner? Only sixteen days were left for the *swayamvar*. In other words, a considerable amount of time had already elapsed. This is the uniqueness of time—regardless of whether the times are good or bad, whether you are happy or sad, time passes by at its own pace. And with the passage of time, a new *karma* is sure to beckon you. Meaning, it was now time to speed up the process of stopping the *swayamvar*. Besides, what is the point in hiding anything from you? The truth was, I had already formulated a plan. This was precisely the reason I was roaming about, in such a carefree manner. In other words, the period of seclusion for this lover had finally come to an end.

Now, I promptly stepped up to the occasion. I immediately called bhaiya, Satyaki, Uddhava, Daruka and other friends to assemble in my chamber for a meeting. It was obvious, wasn't it? I could not stop the *swayamvar* without the help of these people. So, as soon as it was time for the meeting, all of them assembled in my sleeping chamber. Without observing formalities, they seated themselves comfortably, albeit a bit puzzled at being summoned in this manner. Well, I was there to explain that, wasn't I? So, once everyone had settled down, I silently handed Rukmini's letter to bhaiya and sat down wearing a grave, solemn expression. 'Let us see how he reacts to the letter', I thought to myself. Certainly, my heart was beating faster than usual, and my eyes were carefully watching every expression on bhaiya's face as he read the letter. However, bhaiya fell into serious contemplation as soon as he had finished reading. I was puzzled to see bhaiya in a state of contemplation; it certainly did not suit him! What if he ended up misunderstanding the situation? But how could I have helped it anyway? All I could do was wait for his response. The situation was such that while every second seemed like an eternity to me, bhaiya was taking his own time to mull over the contents of the letter. I do not know what

transpired in his mind, but after a period of silent contemplation, he handed the letter to Satyaki. He did not say anything, though. Now, this was quite unusual. Meanwhile, Satyaki read the letter too and passed it on to Uddhava, who then passed it on to Pralambha. Now, the situation was turning ridiculous; they all seemed to be mocking my sentiments, my deepest feelings. It would have been far better had I read the letter out myself. At least then, I would not have waited impatiently for them to react. That was not the end of it either; to my utter amazement, the letter did the rounds and came right back into my hands. Here, I was sitting with lances piercing my heart, while these shameless men simply sat there without uttering a word or giving any reaction. All in all, they had made a mockery of the letter of a damsel in distress.

Feeling irked at their actions, I could also feel my heart pounding wildly against my chest. I could not allow my life to hang in the balance like this. By now, I had become absolutely restless. So, before the discussion could veer off somewhere else entirely, I decided to steer it in the right direction. Pretending to read the letter again, I immediately said, “I have received this letter only yesterday, and to be honest, I have been in a dilemma ever since. A young lady is seeking our help. In my opinion, we should definitely rush to her aid, especially since the person responsible for her misery is our arch enemy, Jarasandha.”

In other words, I had turned the matter around completely! Had I told them that I had received this letter twenty-five days ago, I would have surely faced a barrage of questions. As far as bhaiya was concerned, I had already hit him where it hurt the most, his raw nerve—Jarasandha. As you already know, bhaiya had always hated Jarasandha, probably because he was the reason bhaiya had to become a *rannchhod* (deserter) along with me. Moreover, he was also responsible for the pathetic condition that we found ourselves in, on the Gomanta Mountain, where we were reduced to lead an animal-like existence. In the present situation, bhaiya’s bristling rage was a boon to me. As for me, I did not harbour the slightest of anger against Jarasandha; on the contrary, I had always been sincerely grateful to him, for, I believed, and knew for certain, that all my achievements were a result of Jarasandha’s hatred and enmity towards me. To be honest, this was the only difference between my perspective and that of bhaiya’s. While bhaiya limited his vision to the problem at hand alone, my vision, on the other



hand, was limitless. Besides, Jarasandha was my personal adversary, and not the enemy of all of humanity! Everybody had the right to become my enemy. For that matter, even Nature had openly harboured enmity towards me, putting me in precarious situations throughout my life. So then, should I have considered Nature my enemy too? Most certainly not! I had always considered my foes as my friends, who had helped me grow and progress in life. My true enemy is the one who is an enemy of humanity; one who oppresses or causes harm to people on a larger scale. This is because such a person proves to be detrimental to the lives of thousands of people together, whereas, my enemy harms me alone, which is my personal loss. Besides, I firmly believed our personal gains and losses were not our prerogative; it is the concern of Nature, which is best left to Nature.

Well! That's enough philosophy for now! Returning to our meeting, my gaze was now fixed on each person's expression after I had delivered my artful speech. It seemed to me that almost all of them were willing to save Rukmini; still, I wanted to be absolutely sure. After all, it was a matter of the heart, which could not be taken lightly. Thus, with the intention of settling the matter, I said, "In my opinion, it is only right that we go. By doing so, not only would we be able to save Princess Rukmini's dignity, but we will also get the opportunity to defeat Jarasandha once again."

Indeed, my words had hit the target! As I had expected, hearing me utter Jarasandha's name yet again, bhैया's face turned red with anger. At once, he burst out fiercely, "Yes, we will go...and we must definitely go! We will make Jarasandha taste defeat once again. He will never forget that he had locked horns with Balarama!"

See how easily my work was done! Did you notice how I had manipulated the situation to get everyone's support? This is what diplomacy is all about. All you have to do is begin the conversation in such a manner that you depict a larger picture wherein the kingdom stands to gain, and thus rouse people's sense of duty, thereby serving your personal interests. It is only then that you will be able to prepare people to kill or die in your personal war. Earlier, it was Mathura's prestige that had done the trick, while this time it was the dignity of a powerless woman that had become the reason for people to unite. No matter what the reason was, the goal, in the end, was to prevent Rukmini's *swayamvar* from taking place. However, this was only

the first step; there were still several hurdles to overcome and many tasks to complete. At this point, we had only decided to go; we had not stopped the ceremony yet. So, with immediate effect, we all engaged in preparations. We had to leave the next morning itself with the whole clan on a mission to rescue a helpless princess from her forced *swayamvar*. Needless to say, at present, everyone was enthusiastically engaged in making preparations with me for this journey.

The next morning, we set off at the appointed time with a convoy of fifty chariots and about one hundred soldiers and servants. The caravan, consisting of bhaiya, Uddhava, Satyaki and our entire group of friends, had set out to save a damsel in distress and to once again make Jarasandha taste defeat. Did you see how I had, in a moment, turned my mission into everybody else's as well? This is why I say, whether it is a plan or a secret, it ought to be revealed only at the right time. This was the sole reason I had handed over Rukmini's letter to bhaiya and my other friends, only a day prior to the need of taking actual action. Sometimes, if too much time is given for deliberation, it can prove detrimental and work against one's interest. In any case, I always preferred to get my work done with immediate effect. Allowing the other person time for thought can make him come up with new solutions and reasons, and this can gradually dilute the seriousness of the matter. What's more, if given sufficient time, a person can also, oftentimes, arrive at the right decision. Consider Rukmini's letter, for instance. Had I revealed it to all in advance, say twenty-five days ago, then, although initially everyone might have agreed to go, the next day, they would have come up with a slew of new ideas and suggestions, for instance, they might have said, 'Why should we interfere in someone else's business?', 'How can we counter Jarasandha's mighty forces with only fifty or one hundred soldiers?', 'What if we get captured there?' or 'We are living so peacefully in Dwarka; why should we awaken the dormant Jarasandha again?' And with these arguments and discussions, the original plan of rescuing Rukmini would have eventually been struck down. You can imagine then, the condition which poor Krishna and his dearer-than-life Rukmini would have found themselves in, under these circumstances. But because they were given barely a day to reflect over the situation, there was no chance of such deliberations whatsoever. As soon as it was decided that we would embark on the mission, everybody busied themselves with

preparations to leave. By early next morning, we had already left. So, do you see? It was only because of this knowledge of 'time' that all my plans and schemes had always been successful.

Now, let me tell you about the journey itself. As a precaution, we were all dressed in ordinary clothes. We had also taken down all the insignias of Dwarka from our chariots. And with all such safety measures in place, our convoy was racing swiftly towards Kundinpur. Bhaiya was travelling as royalty with so many chariots for the very first time. For that matter, even my friends were travelling such a great distance for the first time. As a consequence, the mood that had set in was also wonderful. Enthusiasm ran high, because we were on a noble mission to save the dignity of a helpless maiden. Travelling in royal comfort, we were laughing and making merry, as we ate and drank along the way. However, compared to everyone else, my state of mind was entirely different. For the first time in my life, while everybody was in a happy and jovial mood, I was feeling despondent and gloomy. Otherwise, you know me well; I was one of those who would always be cheerful and optimistic, under all circumstances. However, today, I was caught up in my concern for Rukmini and hopes for the future. I knew this was the consequence of not keeping my mind focussed on the present. There was an ache in my heart, but it was so sweet that it almost felt pleasurable. On the other hand, because it was a matter of the heart and the situation was poised at such a crucial juncture, it was causing me extreme restlessness; in fact, I could not even enjoy eating or drinking. In other words, I continued my journey in this lovelorn state.

Finally, amidst the upbeat mood of the rest of the caravan and my lovelorn state, we reached Kundinpur on the tenth day of travel. As a precaution, we camped outside the kingdom in various rest houses and temples, for, if our large contingent had camped at one place, it would have meant inviting the attention of the royal palace of Kundinpur. Instead, if we stayed in groups of ten at various places, we would look like mere travellers who had arrived from distant places to witness the *swayamvar*. And as you already know, in Krishna's life, safety and security were top priority; like a *dharma* in itself. But as soon as we reached Kundinpur, I was beside myself with anxiety, for, although I had emboldened my companions and had brought them here, ready to storm Kundinpur if the need arose, I knew that stopping the

*swayamvar* this time would not be easy. This was akin to snatching the prey right out of the lion's mouth. How could I forget that although last time, I had reached the palace under the pretence of saving Mathura's prestige, the actual reason behind the annulment of the *swayamvar* was that Rukmini had become unconscious? I was anyway not one to harbour false illusions in life. Therefore, this time, I knew I had only my *karma* (action) to rely on. In addition, my biggest predicament, this time, was that, I could not let myself be seen. On the previous occasion, I was safe because I was representing Mathura and its objection to the ceremony; this time, if Jarasandha or the trio were to get wind of my arrival, then my death was absolutely certain.

Contrary to my distressed self, the others appeared cheerful and happy, as if they were out on a leisure trip. Do you know why? Because they were confident that this time too, I would spin some web or the other and manage to have the *swayamvar* cancelled; but only I knew what I was going through. Obviously, I could not wage a war with only fifty to one hundred soldiers at my disposal. Moreover, I could employ a political strategy only if I were invited to the palace to personally interact with someone. However, I was in no condition to reveal my identity to others; if it ever happened, then my death was assured. Indeed, my anxiety had reached its peak on entering Kundinpur, for, it was not just my love but also my beautiful dreams that were at stake. I was faced with a unique predicament. While I had come to play the biggest gamble of my life, I did not have a strategy in mind to see it to fruition. Considering the dismal situation, you can well understand my restlessness, agony and the condition of my poor heart.

In any case, if a problem appears to be bereft of a solution, or if there is nothing much one can do about it, it is usually wise to leave it to 'time'. Besides, we still had three days in hand before the *swayamvar* commenced; I was sure that some solution would surely present itself during this period. I was determined to rescue my Rukmini, and in no way was I going to let someone else take off with the princess of my dreams. After all, I was a 'resolute strategist' too. Thus, boosting my confidence in this manner, I began to work actively on ways to find a solution. Although, before I could think of anything further, it was imperative to know about the present situation at the royal palace and Rukmini's condition. So, I immediately sent Uddhava to call for Shwetketu and Shaivya. Now, Uddhava, as was his

wont, simply conveyed the message to them and returned at once. So, once again, all I could do was wait for the events to unfold. I was becoming rather impatient, waiting for both of them to arrive. As for Uddhava, now that his task was over, he had returned to his merrymaking friends, while I was left to myself, pacing my chamber, brimming with anxiety and impatience. The *swayamvar* was only three days away, so I knew Shwetketu and Shaivya were probably busy with its arrangements and would find it difficult to leave the palace now, especially if they were to leave together. Even though I fully understood all this, it did not relieve my impatience in any way. In fact, my anxiety had reached its peak, and in order to overcome it and kill time, I ended up having lunch twice! But now, even the afternoon was coming to an end, and dusk would soon be upon us. Honestly, this was the longest day of my life. I realised for the first time that ‘wait’ is the most unpleasant facet of time, and as if to confirm my belief, Shwetketu and Shaivya arrived just before dusk. Shwetketu immediately apologised for arriving late and explained that they had found it impossible to leave the palace all of a sudden. In case he was needed urgently at the palace, then the royal soldiers would have come looking for him, a risk he did not want to take. ‘Yes, yes, I know all that,’ I mumbled under my breath; now, kindly tell me what I want to hear.

Thankfully, Shaivya understood my state of mind quickly. Better still, without further ado, she immediately apprised me of Rukmini’s condition. She said, “Rukmini is absolutely normal. She is confident that you will stop the *swayamvar* once again in some way or the other.” Now, should I have considered this to be good news or a bad omen? ‘Rukmini, my dear little fool, all you have to do is faint a second time as well; the *swayamvar* will automatically get stalled! There is really no need to depend on me for this!’ Indeed, time had taken such a strange turn that even the news of Rukmini’s happiness and well-being seemed painful to me. I could not help feeling this way, for, a great opportunity to stop the *swayamvar* had thus been lost! Did you see how sometimes in life, when you receive the news that the person, whose happiness is most important to you, is truly happy, it becomes a source of great pain! Dear ones, such things are commonplace and keep occurring in life; isn’t that why ‘time’ holds the ultimate power?

Well, now that I was assured of Rukmini’s well-being, I also wanted to hear about the preparations at the royal palace. Naturally, Shwetketu answered

this question for me. He said, “All preparations for the *swayamvar* have been completed. This time, Jarasandha, Rukmi and Shishupala do not want to take any chances. That is why they have converted the main compound of the palace into a fortress, garrisoned by soldiers on all sides. In other words, it would be impossible to stop the *swayamvar* this time, without spilling blood. In fact, in my opinion, the ceremony would be unstoppable without bloodshed and waging the war of wars! On the other hand, Rukmini has become completely carefree because of your firm assurance to her. Seeing her in such a happy state, Rukmi and Shishupala are receiving wrong signals, which is further fuelling their enthusiasm! They are misconstruing her cheerfulness as tacit agreement to the marriage.”

‘Oh no!’ I thought. ‘Here comes another setback, adding on to the already dismal situation.’ I became extremely annoyed. ‘My foolish love, no matter what I had said, you did not have to go around displaying your happiness.’ Indeed, every piece of news I had received so far was worrisome. All my moves were playing out wrong. Meanwhile, the *swayamvar* was only two days away. This day was already wasted; forget stopping the ceremony, it now seemed dangerous to even enter Kundinpur. Shwetketu too appeared extremely worried; he had even asked me how I was planning to stop the *swayamvar* under such circumstances. I had assured him in my usual manner, “Don’t worry, I am here, I’ll do something.” What else could I have said? I could not have possibly revealed to him that I was more worried than him on hearing all this, could I? Had it been some other time, it would have been a different matter altogether, but presently, it was imperative to keep his spirits up. I found myself in a strange, complicated situation; at present, I could not think of any means of rescuing Rukmini. Jarasandha had both my life and me, meaning Rukmini and me, firmly in his clutches. To make matters worse, I had to put on a façade and wear a smile of confidence on my face, as if everything had already been taken care of. Honestly, for the first time today, I felt anger rise within me for Jarasandha. I had left Mathura to settle down in Dwarka, but the monster that he was, he refused to let me live in peace.

At the moment, my intelligence seemed to have deserted me as I could not come up with any plan. As proof of this, I had begun worrying about something else altogether, momentarily forgetting the urgency of the *swayamvar*. If I was unable to stop this ceremony in time, forget about me,

what would happen to Rukmini then? The poor girl would become a laughing stock, and everybody would say, ‘Oh! The foolish girl had relied on the ‘*rannchhod*’ (deserter) to come to her rescue!’

‘Krishna, stop it! Get hold of yourself. Instead of dwelling over such futile thoughts, direct your intelligence towards productive thoughts. Focus instead on how you can stop this *swayamvar*,’ my inner voice reprimanded me. Indeed, I had no inkling of how to proceed from here. I found myself in a peculiar situation. From within, I was deeply troubled, but I had to adopt a smiling visage, because at this critical juncture, it was my self-confidence alone which was providing succour to everyone around. Indeed, with all my energy expended in putting up this pretence, how was I supposed to contemplate? How was I supposed to focus on devising a strategy, when the only thing I was concentrating on was maintaining a calm exterior, and conversing, as usual? Finally, when I could not think of anything, I simply asked Shaivya, who was sitting, facing me, “Can you arrange a meeting between me and Rukmini?”

Shaivya laughed and replied, “Before the *swayamvar*, right?” Though she had said this only to tease me, in my present condition, it seemed like a taunt. I felt she was mocking my helplessness, so much so that I even cursed her under my breath. ‘O silly girl! If the *swayamvar* turns out to be a success, I would not even like to meet my own self!’ Besides, what would I gain by meeting an already wedded Rukmini? Nonetheless, I chose not to respond to her; in fact, I was unable to come up with a reply. Seeing my pitiable condition, Shaivya paused and said cheerfully, “Why do you worry so much, bhaiya? I will let you know tomorrow itself after speaking with Rukmini.”

Now, these were the kind of statements that were more to my liking, and truly worthwhile! I was greatly consoled on hearing Shaivya say this. We ended our meeting on this note and both of them returned to the palace. Meanwhile, the youths who had accompanied me to stop the *swayamvar*, were busy enjoying themselves. They were oblivious to their sense of responsibility and the actual reason they had come to Kundinpur. Even after dinner was over, they simply sat chit-chatting with each other. There were only two days remaining for the *swayamvar*, yet not one person had come forward to discuss strategies on how to stop it. However, this was not

entirely their fault either. They were all confident that Krishna had a plan up his sleeves, and at the appropriate time, he would reveal to them how the plan had to be implemented. Even for this belief of theirs, I could not blame them, for surely, it was all my fault. I had myself created such an atmosphere that it made them feel reassured. I wondered why all my plans were failing so miserably this time around. On one hand was Rukmini, who was happy on account of my assurance, and on the other were these men from Dwarka who, because of my boasting, had become completely carefree. In other words, I had thrown away my own trump cards. Now, the only person I could depend on, was myself. Unfortunately, in spite of my cleverness, I could not come up with a solution. In fact, the situation had turned so dismal that their carefree enjoyment had begun to irk me. They were all celebrating with such fervour, as if they had arrived in Kundinpur to attend my wedding or as if they were here on vacation. In a way, watching them in such a carefree and laidback mood, I felt as if daggers were being pierced through my heart. To be honest, their laughter and light-heartedness appeared to be mocking me. There was nobody who could understand my predicament; how could they anyway? I had never revealed my feelings for Rukmini to anybody. In fact, I had cleverly hidden my feelings from everyone, burying them deep within my heart. Therefore, here I was, suffering the consequences of it all. I had never felt so helpless in life the way I did at this point. There was so much I wanted to do, but alas, I was unable to do anything at all. Finally, in despair, I returned to my chamber. But how was that going to help either? I spent the whole night tossing and turning. By now, I had even stopped thinking of solutions. I could only wait for morning, when Shaivya would return with Rukmini's message for me.

As soon as the sun rose, I once again waited for Shaivya to arrive, my restlessness having become too difficult to bear. While despair had caught me firmly in a vice-like grip, the edginess of the previous day had once again overpowered me. The *swayamvar* was scheduled on the following day and yet, there was no solution in sight. Time was already scarce, and Shaivya had not arrived even by afternoon. My restlessness was only increasing with every passing moment; I had become really anxious now. All in all, it seemed that this day would prove to be even longer than the previous day. Indeed, as the time of the *swayamvar* inched closer, I felt the



distance between me and Rukmini lengthen. A thousand questions loomed large on the horizon, the first being, how would Shaivya manage to arrange a meeting between Rukmini and me, under such tight supervision? Even if I were able to see Rukmini from a distance, how would that help anyway? And even if Shaivya did manage to arrange a meeting for a few minutes, what would I say to Rukmini? How would the rest of it work out? All in all, the matter was turning complicated with every passing moment. Besides, with the tide against me, whom could I blame? All I could do, in the meantime, was pace my chamber all day, waiting for Shaivya, who arrived with Shwetketu only by evening. Well, at least she had managed to come, considering her innumerable responsibilities at the palace. However, I was flustered when she crossed all limits of politeness by laughing at my hapless state! In any case, the world always laughs at the helpless, so what is so unusual about one's sister doing the same? Besides, the plight of a wounded lover is such that he anyway suspects that the whole world is laughing at him. Well, it was easy to talk about it but the truth was, her laughter had made my condition even more pitiable. To make matters worse, despite my miserable condition, she would not stop laughing. After a while, though, her amusement abated when Shwetketu reprimanded her. Nevertheless, when she spoke, she had a twinkle in her eyes, "Bhaiya, why do you worry when you have your sister by your side? The *swayamvar* will take place tomorrow evening. However, early tomorrow morning, Rukmini will visit the royal temple along with some handmaidens and me. I will arrange for you to meet her then."

I jumped with joy on hearing this; Shaivya had, indeed, breathed life back into me with this glorious piece of news. My consciousness immediately dove into action. Sensing a clear opportunity to save Rukmini, I instantly barraged Shaivya with a string of questions. I asked her enthusiastically, "Tell me something, how large is the temple? Where is it, and how far is it from the royal palace?" Shaivya replied instantly, "The royal temple is situated behind the palace, on the riverbank. Though the temple is small in itself, its courtyard is quite large. There is only one doorway to enter the temple."

I replied, "Alright. Can you tell me how many soldiers will accompany you?"

Gesturing towards Shwetketu, she said, “Perhaps he can give a more informed answer to this question.”

Shwetketu immediately said, “About a hundred soldiers under my command will be accompanying Rukmini to the temple.”

I could hardly believe my luck. Apparently, even Nature had decided it was time to rescue Rukmini! Wasn’t that why Rukmini was going to the temple under Shwetketu’s vigilance, and accompanied by her close friend, Shaivya, to ease matters further? This implied that Nature had seamlessly made arrangements for me to meet Rukmini, and I did not even have to risk my life for it. Now that Nature had paved the way to this extent, I was sure it would also show us the next step. I thanked Shaivya and Shwetketu profusely, and with that, I was back to being my cheerful best. Seeing me cheer up, Shaivya even said, “Shall I tell you something, bhaiya? Sadness does not suit you.”

‘Well, who likes to be sad anyway,’ I thought to myself. However, when your beloved’s life is under threat, it is impossible to even smile. Nevertheless, Shaivya and Shwetketu left early this time. In any case, it was not safe for them to stay here very long, especially on the eve of the *swayamvar*. And as soon as they left, I quickly got down to work. The single bit of good news that Shaivya had shared brought back the quintessential spirit of Krishna. I called everybody immediately and asked them to be prepared by midnight in full strength with their weapons. Hearing my instructions, perhaps for the first time since we had set off, they all recalled the actual reason for having come to Kundinpur. ‘Oh yes, weren’t we here to stop Rukmini’s *swayamvar* from taking place?’ A voice within me retorted, ‘Of course, that is why you are all here, but all that you have been doing is having useless fun.’ Oh well! Better late than never! Everybody quickly got down to assembling their weapons and preparing the horses and chariots. Meanwhile, I did the unthinkable! Seeing that things were falling into place, I left them all and quietly returned to my chamber to dream of the future.

My enthusiasm had soared to the skies. The following morning, I would finally meet the love of my life. ‘But only meeting her is not enough; you have to free her from the clutches of Jarasandha and Shishupala,’ my inner

voice reminded me. I replied, ‘Of course, when all these arrangements have been made, then the rest would fall into place too. Why are you unnecessarily fuelling my anxiety and obstructing my dreams?’ I was absolutely certain now that the *swayamvar* would be stopped at all costs. It would be the biggest day of my life. I even nurtured the hope that after the grand performance tomorrow, Rukmini would fall in love with me. In just one masterstroke, the grandest dream of my life would actually come true. From the next day onwards, Krishna would truly live up to his name. However, it was ludicrous to realise that although there was no solution in sight, here I was, cherishing all kinds of rosy dreams. Well, if things did not work out according to plan tomorrow, then I would be sad anyway. So, what was the point in being sad on this day and the next? It would indeed be foolish of me to be unhappy at this moment. Besides, I was performing all my *karma* (actions) for the present. And when I was performing my *karma* diligently, the results too would eventually become known, whether in the form of success or failure. When there was a fifty percent chance of success, what was the harm in thinking positively from this moment itself? Lost in these thoughts, I did not realise when night set in.

This was it! I put aside all my dreaming and contemplating and joined the others where they had assembled. We dressed up immediately like the locals of Kundinpur, and got ready. Without wasting time, we quickly divided ourselves into groups of ten and took positions around the temple. That was not all; our charioteers were ready too, to tackle the unexpected if the need arose. This night heralded the unfolding of one of the most crucial events of my life, and the morning was bound to be even more decisive. I was finally going to set my eyes on the princess of my dreams after nearly two years. Ordinarily, I would have been lost in thoughts of her at this moment too, but in the present situation, it was not so easy to do. For the first time, I realised how difficult it is to dream when apocalypse is around the corner.

Returning to the temple in Kundinpur, I hid behind a large tree near the temple, waiting with bated breath for the break of dawn. The silence that had descended around us was pulsating with an air of expectancy. At the same time, an inner quietude enveloped me in its serene warmth, and my entire being was cloaked in silence. Eventually, the first rays of the sun pierced through the dark sky. Unsure of the kind of chaos the rising sun

would bring with it, I was certain about one thing—I was perched precariously on the precipice, as a major life event was about to unfold, one way or the other. Either I would stop the *swayamvar* and impress Rukmini once and for all, or else, the love of my life would become someone else's bride, on this very day. However, in the present circumstances, it was impossible for me to even imagine a life without Rukmini. And if Rukmini were to marry the wicked Shishupala and spend a lifetime with him, what would be the fate of my love then? Of what use would my intelligence and bravery be then? Undoubtedly, this morning would not only test my prowess in every way, but also be a deciding factor in my life. Indeed, even though this morning was glorious, it had failed to impress me, for, the most beautiful dawn of my life would arrive only if I could stop the *swayamvar*. The crucial moment had arrived; Rukmini was expected to arrive any moment now. I was fully alert, with Daruka standing right beside me. The queen of my dreams would appear any moment now, and in that single moment, all decisions regarding my life would be made. Though I did not have to wait long, each moment seemed to stretch to eternity.

Finally, the decisive moment arrived. Looking resplendent in a bright yellow silk sari (a long garment of cotton or silk draped by women around their body), Rukmini appeared in her chariot. It felt as if the radiance she emitted had somehow overshadowed the sun on this splendid morning. Rukmini looked like a goddess in her yellow silk sari, her beauty outshining that of a thousand celestial maidens put together. And what could one say about the plight of this poor cowherd boy? Rukmini's beauty and her radiating glow had together taken my breath away. At this moment, I was completely under her spell. At the same time, I was becoming incredibly excited as well. I could hear my heart pounding hard against my chest, desperately yearning for her. My mind had turned blank. Every pore on my body was calling out to her. I had lost all self-control. Meanwhile, Shwetketu had also cleared the way for us to meet. He had made his soldiers halt outside the temple, while Shaivya came walking alongside Rukmini as she entered the temple, followed by six handmaidens, who carried platters laden with various articles for the worship.

Suddenly, I asked Daruka to bring my chariot. As soon as he came, I quickly sat behind and motioned him to steer the chariot closer to Rukmini, who was still climbing the stairs to the temple. And just as my chariot came

close to Rukmini, I quickly whisked her off and seated her in the chariot.<sup>[19]</sup> Rukmini, perplexed by what was happening, started screaming loudly. Perhaps she was unable to recognise me in my disguise. Even I seemed to be out of my senses, but then, I do not know what had come over me; I immediately instructed Daruka to turn the chariot around in the direction of Dwarka and race away. As I left, I instructed bhैया and Satyaki that in case of a confrontation, they should keep the soldiers engaged in a battle at least until afternoon so that I could get a reasonable head start, thus eliminating any chance of getting caught. I also asked them to bring Shaivya and Shwetketu along, without fail.

Meanwhile, realising that she was being abducted, Rukmini began to scream for help. As a precaution, I quickly clamped her mouth shut with my hand. Even though it was still early morning with not many people around, I still had to exercise caution, for, a princess crying out for help would definitely not go unnoticed. Of course, all this had happened within a split second; as of now, our chariot was zooming past the city as if on wings. And in a short while, we had crossed the boundary of Kundinpur. Daruka, like me, was one of the best charioteers of Aryavarta. And now with Kundinpur behind us, I heaved a sigh of relief, because now, it was confirmed that Rukmini's abduction had actually occurred, and the abductor was none other than me! My Rukmini was now seated right by my side.

The abduction had taken place spontaneously. I now began to wonder, 'What had I done? Rukmini had called me to stop her *swayamvar*, and instead, I had abducted her. Had I betrayed her then?' But, what else could I have done? I was compelled by the dictates of my heart. Seeing her draped in her glorious yellow silk, I had lost control over myself. My ego had become restless to somehow make her mine. My desire to make Rukmini mine was so overwhelming that at this point, not only my mind and intelligence, but even my consciousness had capitulated to this call of the ego. In reality, though, I had not abducted Rukmini; the abduction had occurred through me. To be specific, everything had transpired within a split second, in a state devoid of thoughts, as if on its own accord, and actions that occur through spontaneous consciousness, without any conscious thoughts involved, usually have the support of Nature.

Besides, so what if I had abducted her? After all, I had to save her from that wretch, Shishupala. Moreover, Rukmini had herself sought my help to rescue her. Considering the circumstances, there was not much else I could have done to save her. Moreover, if you take into account all my qualities, I was a much better alternative than Shishupala. Not only that, I also felt I had all the right to make Rukmini mine. After all, I had spent the past ten years driven solely by my love for her. Day and night, I had dreamt of her. I loved her truly and true love gives you absolute authority. Thinking and reasoning in this manner, I had now become perfectly calm. And as soon as I had calmed down, I realised with a start that my hand was still covering Rukmini's mouth. At any rate, our chariot was racing towards the forest by now and we had left all human habitation far behind. Rukmini's protests had also lessened, perhaps because she had finally recognised me. So, I took my hand off her mouth.

Meanwhile, Daruka was equally astonished by this sudden abduction, but he concentrated on racing the chariot. So far so good, but as soon as I had taken my hand off her mouth, Rukmini began protesting once again. From her protest, I could clearly make out that she was still a stranger to me. Well, I let her be, but at present, my happiness knew no bounds, for, it was true that the *swayamvar* had been annulled now. I had successfully managed to rescue Rukmini from Shishupala's clutches. I had defeated Jarasandha yet again. And I had certainly saved Rukmini from a lifetime of unhappiness. So, whether she understood this or not, I was surely happy about having performed my duty. And, in any case, when the person you have dreamt about since the past ten years was seated right beside you for the first time, how can you not be happy?

Revelling in this delight, I glanced sideways at Rukmini. However, one look at her made my happiness vanish into thin air. Her displeasure washed away my sense of euphoria. Not only that, her untimely resentment made me forget all my happiness, compelling me to pause and reflect. Oh, what had I done? Had I made a mistake in understanding Rukmini? Had I really committed a blunder? Well, Krishna could never commit mistakes. Do you think she would have been happy spending her life with Shishupala? Certainly not! Rukmini was naïve; she did not understand the situation. 'Well, never mind!' I thought. 'In time, I would make her understand.' But how could I do that? The princess was no less of a wonder. It had been quite

some time since I had taken my hand off her mouth, yet she had not uttered a single word until now. The only way she expressed her displeasure was through the stern look in her eyes. I was no less either; ignoring her, I sat quietly, wearing an innocent expression on my face, as if I had no inkling of what was going on. Meanwhile, the chariot continued to race ahead at full speed. Naturally, at present, silence had taken over the entire chariot.

But for how long could this have continued? Finally, Rukmini did break the silence; she had to because, after taking such a big step there was not much that I could say. Besides, I was already at a loss for words on seeing her displeasure. Nevertheless, when she spoke, it was only to voice her disapproval. Well, what else could she have done anyway? She was obviously not going to reward me for what I had done. In a miserable tone, she spoke, “What have you done, Krishna? I had called you to stop the *swayamvar*, instead, you have abducted me, betrayed me!”

Although I had expected this response from her, I was still taken aback at the magnitude of reproach in her voice. She had opened her mouth only to curse me! Nonetheless, she deserved to be praised for her immense self-confidence, which was still intact; it was admirable that even though so much had transpired, she appeared unshaken. Her speech still held poise and authority. Nevertheless, at present, what could I have possibly said to an angry Rukmini? Had the circumstances been different, I might have become my suave self and adopting a stylish demeanour, might have said to her that it was this very endearing charm of hers that had wounded my poor heart. Well, obviously, I could not have been so straightforward with her, but I had to still show her some of my flair... Krishna’s flair! When the queen was so determined to exhibit self-assuredness, how could the king hold back? Despite understanding the root cause of her anger, I did not let myself become disconcerted; on the contrary, I replied calmly, “Rukmini, what you are thinking might be correct from your point of view but that is not the truth. The truth is, I had not planned to abduct you; it all happened on the spur of the moment. And let me tell you another truth; from the moment I had set my eyes on you in Mathura, I fell madly in love with you. Honestly, I have been able to undertake this journey to becoming the King of Dwarka only because of my one-sided love for you. I owe all my progress to the inspiration your love has given me.”

Hearing my proclamation of love for her, she was dumbstruck. Confounded on hearing such unexpected words from me, she looked at me with surprise. I looked back at her with hopeful eyes, smiling ever so slightly. I do not know what and how much she was able to discern, but it was certain that my words had had some positive effect on her. Her anger appeared to have dissipated too. This would suffice for now; I considered this the first victory of my love and honesty towards her. With that, I felt my confidence returning and I felt enthused once again. Meanwhile, regaining her composure quickly, Rukmini shot a question at me. With the utmost seriousness, she asked, “Your love for me has its own place, but how can you justify this abduction?”

I felt jubilant; at least she had opened a pathway for conversation, that too directly and earnestly. I became even more confident. Armed with this surge in enthusiasm and confidence, I continued the conversation, “Actually, if you think about it, the authority with which you had called me here, what was it if not your love for me? Besides, I was compelled to do whatever I did, as a last resort. Just imagine, how many times could a *swayamvar* be forestalled or thwarted? For all you know, the next time, they may have forcefully married you to Shishupala, without even organising a *swayamvar*. Consider this too; if I had been officially invited to the *swayamvar*, whom would you have chosen for a husband—Shishupala or me? If you had had the liberty to make your own decision, then you would have surely chosen me. So, just think that this is what has happened. On my part, I promise you, I shall do everything I can to always make you happy.”

This straightforward confession of my love had brought about the desired effect on Rukmini. Unable to utter a single word, Rukmini sat there speechless, simply staring at me. Trying to weigh every word I had said, she was trying to gauge the expression on my face. Perhaps the princess was testing this cowherd boy-turned-lover, trying to discern whether he was even worthy of her or not. Although I had passed the toughest tests of life successfully, nothing came close to winning this one. ‘Let us see then, how I fare today in this important test,’ I thought. Naturally, I was wearing my heart on my sleeve as I waited in anticipation, curious to know the result of this test, looking at her with big, hopeful eyes. She was surely intelligent enough to understand the present situation and gauge what I was trying to say. So, although it was a slow process, I was gradually but definitely



inching towards success. And because I had been honest in expressing my feelings, I felt her protest slowly weakening. She was gradually becoming mine, not just on a physical level but also mentally. However, she continued to remain silent. Perhaps she was trying to convince herself. Well, she could take her time, and convince herself thoroughly; I was in no hurry. We were, after all, on our way to Dwarka.

Soon enough, this wait came to an end too. After a few moments of silence, she said thoughtfully, “Perhaps what you have done is right. Even so, it is extremely humiliating for a royal palace if its princess is abducted from her *swayamvar*. I am not as worried about myself as I am about my father and grandfather.”

Oh, what was this? I could not believe my ears! This was akin to conquering a fort! The concern had now shifted from her to her family. This meant that her consent had now come to the fore. Appearing to be concerned and empathetic, I immediately said, “I know the abduction of a princess ruins the reputation of a kingdom. However, this *swayamvar* was being organised by Jarasandha, Rukmi and Shishupala. Everyone knows they were responsible for your safety as well. Thus, from this perspective, your abduction is a matter of disgrace for Jarasandha and Shishupala, not the royal palace of Kundinpur. As far as your father and grandfather are concerned, in my opinion, a father always wishes for his daughter to be married to the best man ever. I may not be the most eligible king in all of Aryavarta, but I am sure that King Bhishmak and Grandfather Kaishik will surely agree that I am a far better choice than Shishupala. I can, therefore, say with certainty that they will not be sad about what has transpired; instead, they would be happy for you.”

Rukmini was intelligent and wise; it did not take her long to understand the gist of what I was trying to say, and with that, all her questions, doubts and worries were put to rest. I was thrilled to bits! Not only was the queen of my dreams sitting next to me, but she had also become mine. Honestly speaking, only now was I able to muster the courage to actually admire her, from head to toe. Until now, I had not even been able to meet her piercing and accusatory gaze. On the other hand, despite having travelled together this far, only now was she looking at me with a concentrated gaze. In fact, presently, she was not just looking at me but peering closely at me. Perhaps

she was evaluating me to see whether she had been right in requesting my help, or had this turned out to be a losing proposition for her? As for me, I was wholly enchanted by her beauty and innocence. I had become quite excited as well, for, although she had become mine to a certain extent, my heart badly wanted to make her mine in entirety.

Nevertheless, at present, the condition of her health could not be ignored. Out of fear of the impending *swayamvar* that was being forced upon her, she was naturally suffering great mental stress in these last several months. And now, this unexpected abduction had left her exhausted, draining her of energy. As a consequence, she kept crumpling and collapsing due to unconsciousness, perhaps a consequence of the intolerable mental pressure she had had to endure. It pained me to see her in this condition, my heart breaking into a thousand pieces. I thought, maybe eating some fruit would make her feel better and provide her some strength, but she was not in the mood. Rest was another cure, which was sure to do her good, but halting the chariot was a risky idea. Similarly, I could not have stopped at a rest house either, for, a wounded Jarasandha and a hysterical Rukmi could not be trusted at all. It was entirely conceivable that they might give chase in order to stop me, because as per prevailing customs, until and unless I had reached Dwarka with Rukmini, this abduction could not be considered marriage. Moreover, even if I were not to consider this as a concern, I still had to worry about Rukmini's condition. If we were caught, they would undoubtedly deal with me as they pleased, but Rukmini would also be handed over to Shishupala. And judging by her condition at present, if she were forced into such a marriage, she would most likely cry herself to death, which meant that this abduction was far more crucial for her, than it was for me. Now, whether she agreed with this or not was another matter, but Krishna would only work for the betterment of others.

In short, Rukmini was not fit to travel any further, and yet I was compelled to continue travelling. So, we moved onwards with the journey. It was now high noon and the sun was beating down on us, but we were not concerned with the morning, noon or evening; we only knew that the chariot had to keep moving at all times. At this juncture, even the beautiful mountains, waterfalls and rivers did not seem to hold any interest for me. My only objective was to take care of Rukmini in her deteriorating condition and reach Dwarka safely, but Rukmini's condition refused to improve. Although

I was trying my best to take care of her, my worry was that her exhaustion was more a result of mental stress than physical strain. Although her disapproval at being abducted seemed to have somewhat dissipated, judging by her behaviour, it did not seem as though she was fully convinced yet.

Finally, by evening, considering Rukmini's condition, we were impelled to take shelter in a small, deserted rest house. As a precaution, I hid the chariot in the rest house's backyard to conceal it from prying eyes. Not only that, to exercise further caution, I had put out the torches at the rest house so that even if somebody was pursuing us, they would not suspect that the rest house was occupied. It was not a good idea to stop for the night, but what could we have done? Rukmini's exhaustion and her health were preventing us from travelling continuously. The only comforting aspect was that we had come far enough, and were thus, presumably safe until next morning. And if we could take off early next morning, then, with Daruka's expert hands holding the reins once again, who could possibly catch up with us before we reached Dwarka? Thus, after a careful calculation, I had finally decided to stop for the night. Nevertheless, I left Daruka to sleep in the chariot in case of any strange activities at night. This obviously meant that my beloved and I had the rest house all to ourselves.

Well, after resting for some time, Rukmini certainly seemed to feel better. This was evident from the fact that although I had to implore her a great deal, she finally agreed to eat something. Nonetheless, this did not improve her condition immediately. She still appeared quite weak. Furthermore, one could gauge how tired she was from the fact that she dropped off to sleep as soon as she had eaten.

I had wanted to rest too, but time did not permit it. Once Rukmini had fallen asleep, I instructed Daruka to get some sleep too, as he had to ride the chariot the next day as well. And who could know better than me, how tiring it was to ride a chariot all day long? Nevertheless, despite my exhaustion, as soon as Daruka fell asleep, I became even more alert, carefully listening to the sounds of the night, as the unwarranted and unforeseen could occur at any time. On the other hand, I could not rest anyway, considering Rukmini's condition. I was no fool to let go of such a big achievement by committing a silly mistake! In other words, there was not one but several reasons for me to stay awake. Besides, my mind was

caught up in several concerns. Not only did I fear Jarasandha and Rukmi's arrival in the middle of the night and was worried about Rukmini's health, but somewhere deep in my mind, I was also worried sick about bhaiya, Uddhava and Satyaki. Besides, the well-being of Shaivya and Shwetketu was my responsibility too. Certainly, this abduction had now made them my accomplices in the eyes of the world. And if caught, they would surely be sentenced to death!

Indeed, it was not one or two worries that were plaguing me, I was besieged by a plethora of problems. The only comforting thought was that such a grand dream could not be realised without facing complications. However, let me tell you that it was not just my anxiety and worries that were bothering me; I was also experiencing a pain that was quite pleasurable, for, it was the first time that Rukmini and I were in each other's company. I wanted to speak to her about so many things, but her exhaustion and displeasure held me back. The princess of my dreams, the love of my life was right here beside me; I desperately wanted to hold her hand, but I had to exercise restraint and keep all these thoughts to myself. What can I say about my state...it felt as if a dagger had pierced my heart, shredding it to pieces! Truly, whichever way you looked at it, this night would bear witness to the most enduring test of my life.

Nonetheless, like every other night, this one ended too, with the first rays of the rising sun. But this dawn was special, for, not only had it dispelled the gloomy night, it had also brought good tidings in its wake. My patience had finally paid off. Rukmini had woken up looking not just healthy, but her mood too, seemed to have improved greatly. Perhaps this was the beautiful outcome of my having stayed awake the whole night worrying about her. Somewhere deep in her heart, she had begun to believe that I truly loved her. A voice within me spoke up, 'Now, how else do I make you believe me? Do you want me to tear open my heart for you? Oh, you silly, silly girl, if only you knew that you were dearer to me than my own life!'

Nevertheless, we had a lifetime ahead of us to open up our hearts to each other. Now that Rukmini was looking better, I felt it would be wise for us to be on our way quickly. So, we freshened up and prepared to leave. However, as we were about to leave, we saw a chariot approaching the rest house from a distance. As a precaution, we once again hid ourselves behind

the rest house. In the span of a moment, I was fraught with unnerving thoughts and worries. Whose chariot could it be? Who was following us? Would this imaginary boat reach the shore or would it sink just when the shore was so close? However, as the chariot drew nearer, a wave of relief swept over me, because there appeared to be only a single chariot heading towards us, and a single chariot could be tackled easily, regardless of whom it belonged to. Therefore, we came out of our hiding place. But what was this?! The person riding the chariot was my brother-in-law, Rukmi. I was puzzled! Was he not supposed to be accompanied by a huge army? And because I had left bhaiya and Satyaki to delay their advance, I was sure the army would not be able to catch up with us that quickly. No matter what the reason was, we had very little to fear from a lone Rukmi. For all I knew, he might have come to invite us back to the palace! It is always a good idea to think positive, isn't it? He was, after all, my brother-in-law, so, I had to think positively about him. So, we brought our chariot onto the main pathway and waited for him.

Rukmi, on the other hand, halted his chariot a bit far from ours. His face was contorted with rage, and his whole being seemed to spew venom at us. It was obvious he had not come here with the intention of inviting us. It was also clear that he was unable to tolerate the fact that his sister had been abducted, and that too by me. And before I could comprehend further, with amazing agility he jumped off his chariot and started running towards me, swinging his mace wildly in the air. I realised that my brother-in-law was not one to give in easily. The scene was incredible—seeing him darting towards us with his mace raised, I too jumped off my chariot and stood cautiously by its side. The pathway before us was deserted, it was still early morning and the only sign of human habitation was the small rest house where we had taken shelter for the night. Meanwhile, Rukmini was seated in the back of the chariot, while Daruka was seated in the front, holding the reins, all prepared; whereas I stood by the side of the chariot, watching the hysterical Rukmi advancing towards me brandishing his mace, and wondering about how to tackle this insane man. In the meantime, seeing her brother's fury, Rukmini's face was contorted with lines of worry and she appeared greatly perturbed. Bewildered, I stood my ground, my eyes darting between Rukmini and her insane brother. Nonetheless, I quickly collected myself and picked up my mace as a precautionary measure. At the

same time, gauging the situation to be sensitive, I motioned Daruka to move the chariot from the main pathway and station it next to the rest house. By now, Rukmi had reached me and we stood face to face, glaring at each other while a frightened Rukmini, seated in the chariot, was watching the drama unfold. Rukmi, on the other hand, seemed to have lost his senses as he let out a tirade of abuses and insults, “You low-born, wretched, illiterate villager. How dare you abduct the princess of Kundinpur? You should have at least considered your status, worth and stature before abducting my sister. You lowly despicable cowherd! If you value your life, hand over Rukmini to me and begone!”

Rukmini was stunned to see her brother in this state and his use of such harsh words. My ego too was finding it impossible to tolerate such disgraceful language and behaviour in Rukmini’s presence. Rukmi had humiliated me severely, and that too, in the presence of my sweetheart. Moreover, he had hit a raw nerve by calling me a cowherd. Did he not know I was the King of Dwarka now? I had thought, at least now, I would be rid of these derogatory names. However, I failed to understand, where these kings and princes got their arrogance from.

I grumbled in my head, ‘You fools! Don’t you dare talk about me; I am better than all of you because I have established my own kingdom on the strength of my own hard-earned wealth. Unlike you, I have not received it as an inheritance. This is why I ought to be respected, for, I am certainly suitable and worthy of it. You cannot respect me, for, it hurts your ego...well, I won’t mind that! But why deride me like this?’ Perhaps this is the difference between the ones who inherit a kingdom without having worked for it, and those who build it on their own strength. I had always felt irked by the false pride of princes, but at present, I was even more furious to see that Rukmi had upset my Rukmini, who had just about managed to calm down. As if this was not enough, he continued to rain abuses on me. That was it! I felt so enraged that I wanted to swing the mace and break his head right away. However, controlling myself, I stopped dead in my tracks, for, killing Rukmi would surely drive Rukmini away from me. How could I let such a thing happen? So, with this thought, I somehow calmed my fury induced by my ego.

However, in a situation like this, of what use was such positive thinking? Seeing us in a face-off, mace ready in our hands, Rukmini fainted once again. I was in a quandary now; should I attend to the unconscious Rukmini or should I first tackle this unwarranted nuisance that was ready to strike me down? I decided to deal with Rukmi first. I tried to speak to him calmly, “Rukmi, what was meant to happen has happened. Rukmini is now my wife and you are my brother-in-law, my closest relative. Today, I am extremely happy to have Rukmini by my side; therefore, I do not want bloodshed. It would be much better if you accept this reality.”

However, Rukmi, consumed with rage, was in no mood to listen. Instead of calming down, he became even more furious and thundered, “A cowherd becoming a relative of the royal family of Kundinpur, you say? For once, I can accept animals becoming our relatives, but cowherds, never! Listen, you wretch, I have vowed that I will either bring Rukmini back with me or never step foot in Kundinpur again.”

I burst out laughing on hearing this and spontaneously said, “Okay then, don’t step into Kundinpur again. I see no problem with that!” Now, I had said what I had to say, but I immediately realised my folly. I had taunted him at the most inopportune time.

Nevertheless, the folly had been committed now. Consequently, Rukmi immediately raised his mace and struck at me with great force. I dodged the blow quickly, but was still not in favour of fighting. My only concern was Rukmini’s feelings and keeping this in mind, I wanted to avoid a fight with her brother. Thus, trying to reason with him once more, I said, “Look, my friend; you cannot take Rukmini away with you. So, it would be wise to simply bless your younger sister and return to where you came from. By doing this, you can show that you have a generous heart.”

My words, however, fell on deaf ears. Once again, he began foul-mouthing me. In the midst of all this, Rukmini regained consciousness, but when she saw us armed with our maces, she was dumbstruck. She could not bear to witness this scene. In spite of her condition, the poor girl jumped in front of Rukmi in order to reason with him. She positioned herself right between the two of us. But Rukmi, being who he was, became livid on seeing her standing there, trying to stop the fight. He was so outraged that this time, he

began spitting abuses at her, “You unchaste, shameless woman, keep your mouth shut! I know that both of you have enacted this drama of abduction to fool the rest of us.” Saying this, he once again swung his mace at me. This was enough now! This time, I really lost my self-control. How could I have tolerated such foul words used for Rukmini? So, although I somehow saved myself from his attack, I could not stop myself from counter-attacking him and swinging my mace at him. In a single counterattack from me, his mace fell off from his hand. Jumping at the opportunity, I immediately grabbed his neck with one hand, while swinging my mace with the other. I was just about to land it on his head to crack it open when suddenly Rukmini screamed. She came running towards me and fell at my feet begging for mercy, “O *swami* (master), your anger is justified. But this is my brother. His sister has just been abducted. He is not in his senses at the moment. I beg you to forgive him. Let his life be a wedding present from you to me.”

Hearing this, I did not even realise when my hands automatically let go of Rukmi’s throat. Rukmini’s plea had perhaps worked like a command for me. The thought that she had agreed to marry me was enough to thrill every pore on my body. So, I thought, let the poor wretch be, I would spare him for Rukmini’s sake. This was, after all, the easiest way to please her, to make a place in her heart. Moreover, the astute businessman in me was telling me, I did not have to part with anything as a gift; I would only be returning her own brother to her alive. So, I threw my mace aside, but I could not stop myself from landing a hard blow on his face. Perhaps my anger had not subsided entirely. On the other hand, a single punch from a cowherd was enough to make his mouth bleed. ‘You keep demeaning me by calling me a ‘cowherd’, don’t you? Well, a single blow of mine was enough to deflate you and your big talk about killing me...how about that?’ So altogether, I had let him go on Rukmini’s insistence, but my anger still refused to subside.

Besides, I did not trust my brother-in-law at all. If nothing else, he was definitely not someone who would comply easily. It was a strange scene indeed. Rukmi lay wounded beside the chariot. I was shaking with rage, while a terrified Rukmini stood beside me, watching us both. I immediately called out to Daruka and told him to put away both the maces in our chariot. Seeing the weapons being put away, Rukmini calmed down a bit, but I had



not regained my composure yet. I kicked at Rukmi's chariot and broke its wheels so that he would not follow us any further. However, I was still boiling with rage. He had, after all, used disgraceful words to insult my beloved Rukmini. How could I have calmed myself then? Of course, I was not so blinded by anger that I would kill him. In any case, I could not take his life and hope to make the 'love of my life' happy. But I had to do something to calm myself down. So, when nothing else occurred to me, I simply took the dagger lying in my chariot and chopped off Rukmi's hair. When even this did not seem enough to calm me down, I shaved off his moustache and his beard too. Though it may sound incredulous, only then did my temper begin to recede somewhat. I know I had acted in a ridiculously childish manner, but what could I have done? I was so consumed by anger.<sup>[20]</sup>

However, that was enough for now. Leaving Rukmi behind, I caught hold of Rukmini's arm and seated her next to me in my chariot. This was the first time I had held her hand in mine. Did you see how I had won Rukmini over by letting Rukmi live? And with that, we once again set off for Dwarka. Interestingly, as I became calmer, I felt a tremendous sense of gratitude towards Rukmi. He had become instrumental in bringing Rukmini closer to me. Wasn't it incredible that, in my fury, I had wanted to kill him, but now that I had brought the 'witness' within me to the fore once again, I was actually grateful to him! There is indeed a great difference between the perspectives of the ego and the 'witness'; and even greater is the difference between their behaviours. Just think, what truth can a person who is living with an inactive 'witness', only blinded by ego, possibly perceive?

Nevertheless, I put these thoughts aside, for presently, my mind was soaring, scaling the ultimate heights of bliss. Rukmini sat lovingly in my arms while I stroked her hair softly. My dream was now complete. Honestly, now that I had achieved my dream of being with Rukmini, the establishment of Dwarka seemed to pale in comparison. With Rukmini by my side, I did not care if I lived in a palace in Dwarka or in an ordinary shack. I could hardly believe that Rukmini had surrendered herself to me completely... and so quickly too! What had seemed to be a forceful abduction until yesterday had now turned into a marriage with consent, and the only person I could thank for this incredible transformation was Rukmi.

Is this not an irony of life that enemies are not really enemies and friends are often not true friends?

Well, in a short while, another miracle occurred—Rukmini asked for something to eat, of her own volition. My happiness knew no bounds. I immediately halted the chariot and rushed to pluck the choicest fruits for her to eat. I had plucked fruit so many times before—that was what I had been doing all my life—but at this point, the joy of plucking fruit for Rukmini was truly unique. Rukmini too, seemed to be pleased with my loving and caring behaviour. To be honest, she was also becoming comfortable and more at ease, with the passage of time. She was becoming increasingly reassured that she had, indeed, found an excellent life partner. Well, what can I say, personally, I never had any doubts about that!

Once she had eaten, Rukmini expressed a desire to sleep. I made her rest her head on my lap and lovingly caressed her to sleep. Now that she had accepted me as a good life partner, it was for me to prove to her that I could, indeed, be very good to her. I cannot describe how happy I felt at that moment, caressing her to sleep, with her head on my lap. In any case, it is very easy to experience sweet, loving emotions, but almost impossible to describe them. So, let us put that aside too. By now, we had left Kundinpur far behind, so, there was no likelihood of danger now. Moreover, with the sun overhead, the heat of the day was undoubtedly making Rukmini uncomfortable. In addition, the bumpy road we had taken was disrupting her sleep for no reason. So, I thought to myself, now that there seemed no imminent danger, why let Rukmini continue suffering in discomfort? Thus, I asked Daruka to station the chariot under the shade of a large tree so that Rukmini could sleep comfortably. Do you see how I was taking care of my beloved, tending to her comfort with so much care and attention?

In any case, Daruka and the horses also needed to rest, and honestly speaking, I also wanted to wait for bhaiya, Satyaki and Uddhava to catch up with us as I had begun to worry about their safety. They had carried out their duty by staying back and engaging the soldiers so that Rukmini and I could escape, but what if, in the process, they were themselves seized in Kundinpur? Admittedly, it was not an easy task to capture heroic warriors such as bhaiya and Satyaki. Besides, they also had the finest soldiers of Dwarka with them. Hence, I estimated that if everything had gone

according to plan, they would be here by evening or latest by night—that is, only if everything went right! God forbid, if something unfortunate had occurred in Kundinpur, my entire jubilation of marrying Rukmini and establishing a kingdom like Dwarka would be ruined. Although, with Rukmi coming all alone to confront us, it was clear that the trio of Jarasandha, Shishupala and Rukmi would be unable to pull any more tricks on us, or even think in that direction. However, since it was a matter of bhaiya and my friends' safety, I continued to be worried, even though the possibility was almost non-existent. On the other hand, I was even more worried about Shaivya and Shwetketu, for, even though I had asked bhaiya to bring them along, what if they had committed a mistake in haste? If Shaivya and Shwetketu had been left behind accidentally, then it was certain that the evil trio would unleash its fury on them. And if that was really the case, I would have never been able to forgive myself for it. At the same time, it would completely ruin the joy of my success in making Rukmini my wife.

In other words, I was besieged by an avalanche of worries, but was helpless as I could do nothing about them. So, I quickly put them aside; and with that, my trust in Nature was renewed once again. 'When you cannot help it, the least you can do is trust in Nature. Besides, when your intentions are noble, why would Nature work to your detriment? Consider the present example. Rukmi had come to take Rukmini away from you; instead, his obnoxious behaviour had only brought Rukmini closer to you. He may have wished a thousand awful things upon you, but what actually transpires is ultimately what Nature desires. Similarly, how does it matter what Jarasandha desires? Has anything ever happened according to his whims and fancies? When everything that has occurred till the present moment has been ordained by Nature, how would Jarasandha dictate the future course of events?' Thinking in this manner, I freed myself of anxiety. Worries put aside, my entire focus returned to Rukmini. Why ruin the present by worrying unnecessarily? Instead, I thought I should at least enjoy the dream I had finally realised, a dream I had worked so hard for. But how could I do that with Rukmini still fast asleep? Meanwhile, there was still no sign of bhaiya and the others. So, I was left with no alternative but to wait—wait for one to wake up and the others to arrive.

By evening, Rukmini finally woke up and with that, the first part of my wait had come to an end. Now that she was well-rested, she looked cheerful and lively. Encouraged by her cheerfulness, I thought, why not spend some time with a rejuvenated Rukmini in a decent rest house? I could also use some much-needed rest tonight. This would also give me the opportunity to indulge in a romantic conversation with her. At the same time, I could wait for bhaiya and the others. We did not have to go far to find a rest house. Rukmini breathed a sigh of relief too, as soon as we stopped for the night at this rest house. Perhaps her reaction was the result of having averted a potential night-time journey. Or, I could also say that this was the pleasant fruit I had reaped on having taken such good care of her.

Well, we had just about bathed, when we heard the sound of several chariots approaching from a distance. I signalled Daruka to find out what was happening. For a moment, I became tense, although I had a hunch that it was probably bhaiya arriving with the others. But I could never be sure, for, anything could occur at any moment with me around. Fortunately, however, my guess was right; bhaiya had arrived along with our friends and soldiers of Dwarka. Daruka rushed in with the news of bhaiya's arrival, hearing which, I ran out too, to greet bhaiya at the entrance of the rest house. When I saw that Shaivya and Shwetketu were with him, I felt immensely relieved. In this single moment, all my life's happiness had converged and embraced me with open arms, for, previously, I had Dwarka but not Rukmini. When I had Rukmini beside me, I was gripped by anxiety about bhaiya and my friends' safety. But, in this moment, everything had fallen into place. Life had bestowed upon me a moment so blissful that even my ego had become non-existent in that one moment. Even my ego's wishes and desires had been fulfilled in this one moment. You will not believe it, but my ego had also involuntarily placed itself in a state of 'no desire'. Perhaps this was also the first instance where both the 'witness' and the ego had together merged into nothingness.

Nevertheless, presently, the chariots were rolling in noisily, lining up on the narrow road outside the rest house. Bhaiya, Uddhava and Satyaki had already stepped off their chariots, followed by Shwetketu and Shaivya. Relieved to see everyone safe and sound, we grabbed the first opportunity to embrace each other right in the midst of all the chariots. Soon enough, we all headed inside the rest house. Of course, everybody needed rest, but

the rest house was not large enough to accommodate so many people at once. So, I led them to my own chamber where we all set up camp. On one hand, Rukmini was amazed to see so many people arriving, and on the other, she was overjoyed to see her close friends, Shaivya and Shwetketu among them. Naturally, we spent some time meeting and greeting each other, after which, Rukmini and Shaivya settled themselves on the high bed, while the rest of us spread ourselves out on the floor.

Now that everybody was comfortable and relaxed, I was curious to know all that had transpired back in Kundinpur. As soon as I asked, Satyaki quelled my curiosity by telling me that they did not have to face stiff opposition. There were two main reasons for this: one was that they had Shwetketu's support, and the other was that because of the early hours of the morning, there were not many people around. But yes, we did lose two soldiers, and a few others were slightly wounded. However, on the whole, everything had progressed smoothly. Well, that was good then; I was relieved to hear this account. Interestingly, even though everybody was obviously exhausted, their weariness had vanished on seeing Rukmini amongst them. Meanwhile, seeing Rukmini hugging Shaivya, it seemed as if they were meeting each other after years. But what made me extremely happy was that Rukmini's beauty and gentle demeanour had cast a spell on everyone at first sight itself. What was even better was that Rukmini had also fallen in love with their innocence. Subsequently, everybody had gradually become so comfortable with each other that they were soon chatting away like old friends. Now, as you very well know, bhaiya, Uddhava, Satyaki and the rest of my friends were all simple, genuine people. On the other hand, Rukmini, who had already witnessed the arrogance of the royal palace, had probably never seen so many simple, down-to-earth people together. Since we were cowherds at heart, the innocence of village folk was ingrained in us. And to be honest, at this moment, I was feeling proud of this very innocence, for, it had united me with Rukmini.

Well, I was glad to see that soon enough, everybody had started to indulge in light-hearted banter. I could not have felt greater relief than to see everyone getting along with each other so well. It seemed as if Nature had changed its tune, showering me with happiness today. Otherwise, you know that, as a rule, it was fond of unleashing a spate of struggles and difficulties

upon me. Indeed, I was quite surprised by this radically different facet of Nature.

Well, let me describe to you the atmosphere in our camp. Bhaiya, in his typical style, and with his trademark enthusiasm, was already busy organising a celebration, and why should he not celebrate? After all, his darling brother had just got married. That was not all, my excited brother had also arranged for a wonderful meal, not just for our soldiers but even for the servants at the rest house. With the help of the servants, he had even arranged for liquor to flow freely at the feast. At any rate, a celebration without liquor did not hold much weight, especially when the celebration's reins were in the hands of my dear brother. Oh! I forgot to tell you about a principal character, the one who had been responsible for putting Rukmini at ease with all of us. That's right! It was Shaivya. Rukmini had cheered up immediately on seeing her. In any case, one always feels comfortable on finding a familiar face in a sea of strangers. But for me, Shaivya's arrival had a downside as well, for, it had shifted Rukmini's attention from me to Shaivya. Well, if this was what made Rukmini happy, then I did not really mind it. This was the first time Rukmini appeared completely at ease since her abduction. So, there was no question of my wishing for anything else at present.

Since we were all camped in the largest chamber of the rest house, in a way, the celebration had already begun as soon as we had set foot in the chamber. We were all in a cheerful frame of mind; sounds of our laughter and loud conversation resounded everywhere, but ironically, everyone was enjoying the festivities except me. Now, you might ask, why I was in a gloomy mood. It was because of Shaivya, who had arrived only to usurp my place, and by doing so, had thereby turned into my greatest foe. She was proving to be a distraction because Rukmini had left my side and was now seated next to her. All her attention was focussed on Shaivya, while I sat there alone, fretting. It became even more unbearable when Shaivya, bhaiya, Shwetketu, Satyaki, Uddhava, Daruka and the rest began to team up against me. It felt as if all of them had together begun to rally against me. Well, I did not mind that either, but gradually, they even attempted to tarnish my character in Rukmini's presence. First, they enlightened Rukmini about Radha, then the *gopis*, *Raasleela* dance, Kujja and I wonder, what else! I simply hung my head in embarrassment, listening to it all quietly.

Meanwhile, Rukmini too was listening to all the stories with a solemn face. For a moment, I was worried, wondering if all this talk would once again drive her away from me; after all, I had worked so hard to come close to her. I was thinking to myself, what a strange bunch of family and friends I had, who were hell-bent on ruining my marriage! I was glad I had not introduced them to Rukmini earlier; otherwise, by now, these people would have ensured that Rukmini never ties the knot with me. Moreover, these mean friends of mine were spicing up each tale to such an extent that, for a moment, even I fell for it, wondering if I really was so promiscuous. However, I breathed a sigh of relief when, in the end, Rukmini said with a laugh, “You need not worry, now that I am here. Rest assured that all his *raasleelas* will be put to an end!”

On hearing this, everyone burst out laughing. Well, they were already laughing the moment they started tattling my stories to Rukmini. Interestingly, Rukmini was not upset on hearing the tales; seeing this, I heaved a sigh of relief and for the first time that evening, I felt cheerful. Well, it was almost midnight now, and this one declaration by Rukmini had put an end to all the rakish comments that were flung wildly at me, tarnishing my character. And with that, there was no reason for anyone to stay awake. So ultimately, everyone went off to sleep. However, there was a problem here too. Shaivya was still clinging to Rukmini and both had slept off together. Dejected, I found a spot on the floor next to my friends and surrendered myself to sleep.

As soon as the next day dawned, we prepared to continue our journey to Dwarka. And what can I say about our caravan? About fifty chariots were racing towards Dwarka; my chariot was leading, with its reins in Daruka’s expert hands. Of course, Shaivya and Rukmini were seated on either side of me. Behind us were bhaiya and my friends in their chariots, followed by soldiers and servants extending far into the distance. Everybody was jubilant and in a celebratory mood. Rukmini was overjoyed too; she had become an inhabitant of Dwarka after spending just two nights in my company. Perhaps she was convinced that regardless of how Krishna was as a person, at least his friends and family were good people. Besides, she must have thought that the abduction had already been executed, so why continue to feel bitter about it? Oh, I am just being flippant. She was the

happiest of all because she had me for a husband. Now, whether it was true or not, I had certainly deluded myself into believing it.

Well, we would journey all day long and rest at night, after a small celebration, every day. This had become our daily routine during the course of our journey. In a way, it appeared as if Rukmini's bridal procession was making its way to Dwarka, in keeping with age-old tradition. To be honest, I was relieved that Rukmini had made herself at home with everybody else. After all, there was a nagging suspicion in my mind; would such a dainty princess be able to live with such rustic folks like us? I was not worried about myself; I had learnt the ways of royalty, but was worried about the rest of my family and friends. But now that everything had fallen into place, I thought, why not make it better all the way? Thus, I started looking for opportunities to impress Rukmini, and one day, I made her sit beside me as I took the reins of the chariot in my hands.

You already know what an expert charioteer I was! I rode at such a great speed that within moments we had left everybody far behind. I had succeeded in my attempt as Rukmini was quite impressed with my chariot riding skills. Seeing the wonder and appreciation in her eyes, my excitement soared to the skies. Bursting with enthusiasm, I turned the chariot around, while it was racing at full speed. Rukmini watched me as I did it; naturally, she was all the more impressed with this feat of mine. In fact, she would repeatedly urge me to swerve the chariot around as it raced at full speed, and I would indulge her each time she made such a request. She would applaud gleefully each time I performed this feat and made a dramatic high-speed turn, encouraging me further. In this way, journeying together, our hearts were slowly uniting. But, alas, my friends were such spoilsports that they did not seem to like the fact that we lovers were getting closer. They would hound me, trying to undo whatever favourable impression I created on her. However, impelled by my nature, I would attempt to impress her once again. And once again, my friends would spoil it all for me. It had turned into a kind of a game between us. However, the most enjoyable part was that the centre of it all was my beloved Rukmini.

Our journey towards Dwarka was thus progressing amidst much fun and frolic. Enjoying ourselves to the hilt, none of us were in a hurry to reach Dwarka. During one of those days, we had stopped for the night at a small



rest house on the way. After the evening meal, we were all comfortably seated in the garden. An animated conversation was under way, when suddenly Uddhava mentioned to Rukmini that I played the flute quite well. As soon as Rukmini heard this, she was agog to hear me play it. I was more than happy to oblige; how could I let go of an opportunity to impress her? With that, my flute ruled the festivities that night. Though this was nothing out of the ordinary, the great news was that my flute's melody had made Rukmini fall madly in love with me. Well, she was bound to, for, I had played it so lovingly, with only her as the centre of my attention. To be honest, I cannot say to what extent Rukmini had been captivated by my heroic deeds or my way with words, but I can definitely say that my chariot riding, as well as my flute performance, had surely impressed her.

This growing affection, however, did not seem to go down well with my friends. So, when I had stopped playing, Uddhava passed a sharp sarcastic remark saying, "Rukmini, do you know, this flute is much more to blame for ruining Krishna's character than his own nature? So, always be careful of this flute." Hearing this, everybody burst out laughing while I could only sit there embarrassed, staring resentfully at Uddhava.

In this way, we reached Dwarka on the twelfth evening of our travel, laughing and making merry. My happiness knew no bounds! All my dreams had been realised. I had succeeded in bringing the queen of my dreams into the kingdom of my dreams. I was so overjoyed that I do not believe anyone in history had ever been as happy as I was, entering Dwarka with Rukmini by my side.

## Chapter 6

### **The Early Days in Dwarka**

We could not have reached Dwarka at a more opportune time. The sun had just set, casting a mellow orange hue, enveloping the entire landscape. In a way, it was good that dusk had fallen. Don't you remember how the city would begin to glow in the light of the flaming torches? I am sure you remember how beautiful Dwarka looked at this time of the day! As expected, as soon as we reached the seashore, Rukmini's astonishment and joy surpassed all limits. The city, glimmering under the light of the torches, had already bewitched her; and then, the picturesque seashore with ships anchored in the sea enamoured her completely. This was the first time she had seen the sea and an array of ships anchored in it. What occurred next was totally unexpected. As I held her hand and helped her onto the ship that would ferry us to Dwarka, she became so wild with enthusiasm that she turned around and, in her excitement, embraced me in a tight hug. With this single gesture, Krishna's victory was complete. Rukmini had accepted me wholeheartedly and in addition to that, she had accepted Dwarka and its people too. At present, I was about thirty years old and Rukmini must have been about twenty-one. It felt as if all my dreams had been realised today. And my decision of choosing the path of action, in spite of having attained self-realisation, had proved to be correct.

Well, as soon as the ship docked in Dwarka's harbour, I proudly took Rukmini's arm in mine, and with her in the lead, we made our way to the city's main entrance. Rukmini was thrilled with this honour bestowed upon her. With the queen of my dreams by my side, I could hear the lilting sound of sweet music played by my heartstrings! Together, we entered a resplendent Dwarka, sparkling under the light of the torches. Not only that, I also rode the chariot myself from the kingdom's main entrance to the royal palace. Needless to say, the queen of my dreams and I took a tour of the city of my dreams, Dwarka. Rukmini, at first sight itself, fell in love with Dwarka's wide roads, vibrant marketplace, and just about everything else, so much so that she could barely conceal her delight. She not only threw her arms around my neck, planting a kiss on me, but also congratulated me for having built such a splendid city. Her loving embrace, kiss and compliments had accorded Krishna all that he had been yearning for, all these years. If

the princess of such a great and magnificent kingdom could be so impressed by what we had built, then really, we must have definitely created a remarkably beautiful city.

‘Oh well, let us leave this aside,’ I thought. In this situation, there was no place for ego anyway. Moving on, I sat in my chariot, holding its reins, with my beloved next to me. This was the very first time that we were on our own, ever since we had met. Imagine then the beautiful dream world that Krishna was about to step into. Imagine the world that I, Krishna, must have entered, as soon as I thought of this, for, this was my first chance to spend some time alone with the love of my life, and I was not about to lose this opportunity at any cost. Thus, holding the reins of the chariot in my right hand, I circled my left hand around Rukmini’s waist, pulling her closer to me. She submitted sweetly too, nestling against me. You will not believe it, but we rode almost all over Dwarka in this manner. For that matter, we were also enjoying the hustle and bustle around us. And how can I describe how it felt when the inhabitants of Dwarka greeted us with cheers, bows and curtsies throughout our ride! This mattered to me, only because Rukmini was also being honoured and cheered all the way along with me. But yes, some people did seem curious about her. Ignoring these minor details, I focussed on Rukmini, who had already fallen in love with Dwarka during her very first tour. The glowing torches and the hustle and bustle on the streets, even after sunset, had greatly impressed her, and to my utter delight, each time she praised Dwarka, I found myself swelling with pride. After all, this was my own city, my beloved Dwarka. It was with persistent efforts that a cowherd boy had built it. And the best part was that the princess for whom it had been built, had also fallen in love with it.

Eventually, I turned my chariot towards the royal palace. As per Aryavarta’s prevailing tradition, Rukmini and I were considered married to each other on entering Dwarka. So, it was only fitting that I showed her my home, the royal palace. On entering the palace, I took Rukmini straightaway to the main assembly hall. I seated her there and hurried out to gather everyone. As soon as everybody had assembled, I introduced Rukmini to grandfather, mother, father, Subhadra and the others. Everybody was delighted to see that their darling Krishna had brought home a daughter-in-law. Rukmini felt blessed too, having received their grace and good wishes. Shortly after conversing with Rukmini, mother disappeared into the kitchen. Surely, she

wanted to personally prepare all kinds of delicacies for her daughter-in-law. That was a good idea indeed, for, it would also satisfy the glutton in me. Meanwhile, the news of my arrival had spread and all my friends were now streaming into the palace to meet me.

Interestingly, I noticed that Rukmini was caught in a difficult situation between grandfather and father. They were both talking to her animatedly, with no intention of letting her go. Meanwhile, my friends too were behaving in a queer manner as they herded me into a separate chamber. In other words, we had to submit to the will of our friends and family from the very moment we had entered the palace. Obviously, for me, even a moment's separation from my dear Rukmini was unbearable. However, there was no escape from this situation, because of the benevolent dictates of our friends and family. But how long could it continue anyway? So, after chatting idly with my friends for a short while, I shamelessly returned to Rukmini. Moreover, behaving like the perfect husband, I also freed her from the clutches of grandfather and father, on the pretext of showing her our sleeping chamber. At the same time, I also arranged for Shaivya and Shwetketu to occupy the chamber next to ours. Upon entering the sleeping chamber, I finally breathed a sigh of relief. First and foremost, we bathed to rid ourselves of fatigue from the journey, as we were not sure when we would truly get to rest tonight.

We had just returned to the assembly hall after bathing, when a new drama began to unfold. My friends had taken up a unique task upon themselves. I could not understand why all my friends had together started decorating our sleeping chamber. Soon, the entire chamber was covered with braids of flowers hanging from the ceiling to the floor. The fragrance of the sweet-smelling flowers, combined with the sweet scent of *ittar* (a fragrant essential oil) sprinkled liberally in the chamber, permeated the entire palace. It was only then that I realised that all these preparations were for our wedding night. Our friends, I noticed amusedly, were more excited about our first night together as man and wife, than we ourselves were.

Nevertheless, by this time, Shwetketu and Shaivya had also arrived, refreshed and ready to celebrate. The rest were already present in the assembly hall. Our friends had joined in too, after having completed the task of decorating our chamber. Eventually, the hall was teeming with quite

a lot of people. I was overjoyed to notice how Rukmini effortlessly mingled with everyone, despite having arrived in Dwarka only a few hours ago. It seemed as if she had been living here for years together. And if you think about it, this was true in a way, for, she had been residing in my heart for so long that it could be said that she had, indeed, toured Dwarka several times before.

It was a day full of wonders. In addition to my grandfather, father, mother, bhaiya, Revati *bhabhi*, Uddhava, Satyaki, Daruka, Shaivya and Shwetketu, there were about fifty guests invited to dinner. In other words, people all around us were celebrating Rukmini's arrival in Dwarka. As for mother, well, what can I say about her? Not only did she serve freshly prepared delicacies to Rukmini, but was also feeding them to her with her own hands. On the other hand, Rukmini also felt overwhelmed by the love and attention being showered on her by people, whom she had met barely a few hours ago. To be honest, I was basking in the warm reception being accorded to Rukmini even more than she was.

While we were feasting and making merry, another wonderful event had begun to unfold. The news of my marriage had spread like wildfire all over Dwarka and soon, hundreds of people swarmed the palace premises, wanting to catch a glimpse of their queen. And why wouldn't they? After all, Rukmini was not only Mother Devaki's daughter-in-law, but a daughter-in-law to everyone in Dwarka. Now, as king, it was my foremost duty to respect the wishes of my people, so, after dinner, I took Rukmini to the balcony, on the first floor of the palace. There was a large crowd gathered below, and naturally, on seeing their *Dwarkadheesh* alongside his queen, the crowd let out a loud cheer. Within no time, people started cheering and hailing us, shouting, "All glories to the King of Dwarka! All glories to Queen Rukmini!" Rukmini was moved to tears on seeing their immense love for her. Truly, within a few hours, Rukmini had been accepted in totality by Dwarka and she, in turn, had wholeheartedly accepted the city as her new home. With that, my decision to abduct Rukmini met with a resounding approval.

Meanwhile, the journey spanning several days and the endless welcoming ceremony in Dwarka had exhausted Rukmini, eventually taking a toll on her health. Moreover, this was our first night together as a newly married

couple. I was not overly excited about it, but of course, I could not have disappointed my friends, who had so lovingly decorated our chamber for the night, could I? This reasoning suited me well, but jokes apart, Rukmini bade everyone goodnight and retired to our chamber, while my dear friends were still not willing to let me go. Furthermore, it surprised me to see bhaiya encouraging them. Well, I could understand bhaiya's excuse for exacting revenge; I had tormented him in a similar manner in Kushasthali, by preventing him from going to Revati. But what was wrong with my friends? What did they have against me? Finally, I somehow managed to wrest myself out of their clutches. I was also a bit nervous; Rukmini could be upset that I had kept her waiting for so long on our wedding night. Was I going to face her wrath on our very first night together?

I rushed to reach the chamber, and there she was, resplendent in her finery, waiting impatiently. Truly, in a way, seeing Rukmini wait for me in our chamber, made me feel as if I had accomplished everything. Hadn't I been waiting for this very moment for the past ten years? Indeed, in this one moment, it felt as if I held the entire happiness of the world in my hands. As you already know, this was the first time Rukmini and I were absolutely alone. This was not only the greatest moment of my life, but also the biggest test of my skills. After all, I was only a simple cowherd, and Rukmini, a highly educated princess. Although I had adopted the mannerisms and etiquette of royalty, I was aware of the difference between being naturally born into royalty and trying to pose as one. I wondered all of a sudden, 'What if Rukmini found me to be unworthy of her?' This was the only thought nagging me. But then I thought, 'Nay! I am Krishna! How did it matter if I was born a cowherd? I was a king now, and a fine one too! I would impress Rukmini so much that she would fall madly in love with me.' With these thoughts coursing through my mind, I had almost reached Rukmini's side when suddenly, there was a knock at the door. I opened it to find a very flustered Satyaki, and what he told me was worrisome indeed. One of our ships carrying jewellery as cargo had been stranded in the sea. This was truly a matter of great concern, because at this point in time, Dwarka was in no position to bear such losses. Even though Satyaki was here only to report the matter, on gauging the seriousness of the issue, I decided to accompany him. Obviously, Rukmini could not fathom what had happened so suddenly, that the king had to leave her in such a hurry to

attend to it. ‘Well, what was the rush? I would explain it to her when I returned,’ I thought. Meanwhile, bhaiya, Uddhava and the rest of our friends, waiting in the assembly hall, were surprised to see me walk in, with Satyaki. None of them wanted me to come along, but under these circumstances, I knew that if I stayed back, my wedding night with my wife would not hold value for me. I could enjoy my first night with her the next day, but this ship had to be saved right now.

So, I left for the seashore along with the others. About fifty soldiers, servants and divers were accompanying us. I suddenly began to think about Rukmini. I had left in a hurry without giving her an explanation, as if the skies had come crumbling down on us. Oh, what had I done! How would she react? I was not even sure if I would return to the palace before morning. I hoped all my efforts to woo her would not go in vain. However, it was essential for me to be part of this rescue mission, because not only was I the best swimmer in the whole of Dwarka, but also its best diver. Immersed in these thoughts, I suddenly realised that we had reached the shore. I was shocked to see the state of the ship; it was, indeed, trapped badly. Well, it had to be steered ashore anyhow. We made nooses with heavy ropes and tied them to the hull of the ship. Many divers, including me, had to dive repeatedly into the sea; only then did we manage to somehow pull the ship ashore by morning. With the ship salvaged, I left the others behind to tend to it and immediately headed for the palace. I was exhausted beyond measure, but somehow managed to ride my chariot and reach the palace.

As soon as I entered the palace, my concern for Rukmini started nagging me. I had just completed one *karma* successfully and here I was, staring point-blank at another, this time with trepidation. Not only that, this mission seemed tougher than the previous one; I wondered what kind of mood Rukmini was in!

But Krishna need not have worried about such trivial matters; he was a *karmaveer*, after all, and would deal with whatever came his way. With these thoughts, I reached my sleeping chamber, tired and aching, only to find Rukmini awake. She did not appear to have slept at all. To know that Rukmini had stayed awake all night, awaiting my return was, in a way, a matter of pride for me. But as soon as she saw me, she quickly turned her

face away. Well, she was probably upset with me; what else could the poor girl do anyway? She was still unaware of my reason for having deserted her the previous night. And this was entirely my fault; I had left without explanation. 'Well, never mind; now that I was back, I would make it up to her,' I thought. But my clothes were soaked in slush and dirt. And once again, I found myself in a fix. On one hand, I wanted to placate an angry Rukmini, and on the other, I needed a deep cleansing bath. While bathing was a need of the body, placating Rukmini was that of the heart. Naturally, I listened to my heart. Accordingly, I tried to strike up a conversation with an upset Rukmini, but to no avail; she refused to speak to me. I took this action of hers positively as well. After all, it was a delicate matter, so how could I hope to resolve it in my present grimy condition? 'It would be better to first bathe and then approach her, cleansed and fragrant; then we would see how this princess resisted me,' Assuring myself with these thoughts, I immediately went for a bath.

While bathing, I was wondering why Nature harboured such enmity towards me. Why did it always present me with the most difficult choices? Why did it always engage me in some conflict or the other, even during the most beautiful moments of my life? For example, consider the incidents of the previous night; on one hand, it was my wedding night with my beloved Rukmini, and on the other, a ship laden with jewellery was stranded in the sea. In such a situation, naturally, my duty took priority over matters of the heart and I chose to save the ship. I had no regrets about it though, as I was well aware of the fact, that in life, one often has to make choices. I was also aware that behind every positive choice lies Nature's will and a wise person should never go against it. I could celebrate my wedding night the next day, couldn't I? I had my entire life for that, but could I have rescued the ship later? Rukmini was being difficult; she should not have been upset with me without giving me a chance to explain. After all, her love for me was only ten days old whereas I had loved her for the past ten years. She should have shown faith in me and my love for her. She should have known that I was more anxious than her to celebrate our wedding night. Being the sensible princess that she was, she should not have made this mistake. However, this was neither the time nor the day to explain all this to her; this was the time to surrender quietly.



Hence, once I had bathed and was ready, I went up to her quietly and sat beside her on the bed. But she turned her face away from me once again. I realised that she was far more upset than I had presumed. Now, this was yet another task for Krishna. Although I was tired beyond measure and sleepy, I could not possibly rest without placating the princess of my dreams. So, after having finished one *karma*, I got down to another. However, she appeared determined too. No matter how much I tried to talk to her, my words fell on deaf ears.

‘Very well then,’ I thought. If she does not wish to speak to me, then so be it! But I could surely tell her about my predicament and explain my actions to her. After all, she was a sensible princess, and no stranger to royal duties. Perhaps her anger would subside then. So, with this intent, I informed her about the stranded ship and our midnight rescue mission to save it. Similarly, I proudly acquainted her with my talent for swimming and diving. Now, I am not sure to what extent she understood the story, but she did seem somewhat calmer than before and that was good enough for me. I took the opportunity to lie down close to her and put my arm around her, stroking her hair gently. But she shook my arm off angrily and moved away. Now, this was truly exasperating. She was being difficult and was giving vent to her anger even after I had explained the situation to her.

‘When would Nature finally stop hurling the most complicated choices at me?’ I wondered. Well, this was Nature’s realm of action, whereas I held the right to my own actions, so, I decided to focus on doing just that. I was already accustomed to living amidst struggles and enduring them. Besides, I was not one to lag behind when it came to learning something new. Hadn’t I learnt to treat my struggles as games and played with them all my life? Thus, I prepared myself to do the same now; I had to play a game with Rukmini. And with this mindset, I now started enjoying this game of pacifying an offended Rukmini. ‘Let’s see who wins this game!’ I thought. I would sometimes try to talk to her or rub her back and stroke her head, but an angry Rukmini would reject all my advances, warding off every move of mine, not just once or twice, but every single time! And even though we had been at it for quite some time, there was still no sign of victory. I had to play this terrible game after having completed a non-stop journey of around twenty-five days. To add to the exhaustion of the journey, the previous night’s rescue mission had worn me out completely. So, all in all, Rukmini’s

stubbornness and my pitiable condition had made the present game extremely difficult. However, for me, the very meaning of struggle was to either win or die, and as you know very well, I always liked to win. In the end, making a final attempt to win this game, I released my *Brahmastra* (the ultimate weapon). With feigned remorse, I said, “I had thought that after marriage I would be blessed with a wife who would care for me lovingly, but it does not seem to be the case. I am tired and hungry, and my body aches too. Moreover, I cannot even call out to my handmaids to take care of me, because with my wife by my side, it would be gross disrespect to my love to call upon my maidservants. Oh well, I will try to sleep it off. Perhaps the weariness will make me fall asleep.” I stated this last line dramatically and lay down immediately, as if to fall asleep.

As soon as Rukmini heard this, she grew frightfully restless, and immediately got up from the bed. Hurriedly, she fetched fruits and buttermilk and placed them lovingly before me. Now, we were back in the game! In any case, at this point, the glutton in me was hungrier for love than for food. So, I took the opportunity and, pulling her towards me, embraced her tightly. She blushed deeply, with her cheeks going red. And with that, the tables had been turned, and victory was finally mine. We were both extremely tired and soon enough, we were fast asleep in each other’s arms. If not the wedding night, I had at least celebrated the first dawn of my marriage by appeasing Rukmini. I felt quite proud of my *Brahmastra*; indeed, it had never failed me. We slept so soundly that we woke up only by evening. We even had our dinner in our chamber with both of us feeding each other lovingly. This time, Rukmini had herself decorated the chamber. Like me, she was fond of fragrances too. That was not all; she even applied sandalwood paste on my body after bathing. The best part was that after dinner, she offered me something I had never tasted before—*paan* (areca nut and spices wrapped in betel leaf), which I enjoyed immensely. In the course of our conversation, Rukmini informed me that people in Kundinpur were fond of eating *paan* after dinner; in fact, it was quite a popular tradition there. Well, I could say that I had become a fan of this tradition too.

Indeed, this was the most beautiful night of my life. I had been mesmerised by Rukmini for years, but now, I could see that even she was completely under Krishna’s spell. This was the first experience of our intimacy. So

naturally, we were talking to each other until almost midnight. I took the opportunity to impress her further and acquainted her with many of my heroic deeds. I even narrated the entire story of how I had killed Panchajanya. Of course, I exaggerated it a little to impress her. To be honest, I used to really enjoy boasting about my prowess to Rukmini, and that was why I did not leave out a single opportunity to impress her. Perhaps it was the compulsion of a cowherd boy, and perhaps that was why I had played the Panchajanya conch when she had actually requested me to play the flute at around midnight. My arrow had hit the mark; she was struck by the beauty and the resounding melody of the conch. Encouraged by her interest, I had also told her how I would always blow this conch before beginning a battle or facing a struggle head-on. I had told her how the sound of the Panchajanya conch would produce fear in the hearts of the enemy, warning them that they were facing the ever-victorious Krishna. Honestly, this night had elevated Krishna to another level. My first night with Rukmini would be etched in my memory forever, just as Radha and Vrindavan were permanently etched in my memory. Eventually, we were able to sleep only in the wee hours of the morning.

Well, this was only natural and agreeable too. But after spending an entire day in my chamber with Rukmini, I had become the object of ridicule among my friends, who did not miss a single opportunity to tease me. During lunch the next day, they all pounced upon me. This time though, there was a difference in their raillery. This time, even Rukmini had to pay the price for being my better half. Eager not to miss this opportunity, Revati, Subhadra and Shaivya targeted her as well. Shaivya even went on to say that there was a rumour floating in the palace that we were planning to stay put in our chamber for an entire week. Rukmini blushed on hearing this. I, on the other hand, being shameless, had no problems with such buffoonery. I thought, ‘It was our life and we will live it as we wish to. We will not step outside our chamber for our whole lives if we so wish! How does it concern anyone else?’ Do you think Krishna was afraid of such silly rumours?

Incidentally, the joy and cheerfulness were not limited only to the palace. The whole of Dwarka was celebrating our marriage with fervour and zeal. Everybody was dressed in their finest clothes and each house was feasting on mouth-watering delicacies in our honour. Moreover, the number of

people congregating outside the palace to catch a glimpse of the new queen swelled by the day. The whole of Dwarka was in a celebratory mood, with everyone congratulating one another. People all around the city were in awe of Rukmini, holding animated discussions on how beautiful their queen was. Rukmini's charm had enraptured everybody for almost a week. Meanwhile, I was pleased to see the love and blessings being showered on Rukmini by the inhabitants.

This was not the end of the story. My grandfather and parents wanted to organise a wedding ceremony as well, for me and Rukmini. At this time though, I was against unnecessary wastage of money and time. There were two reasons for this: firstly, I did not wish to burden the royal treasury till the time Dwarka's trade and business were firmly established, and the second and the more important reason was that I did not want to stay away from my darling Rukmini by engaging myself in preparations for the ceremony.

Truly, my life was filled with inexpressible joy and happiness, now that Rukmini was finally in it. Every evening, the two of us would go for a stroll along the seashore, hand in hand, engrossed in each other's company; she loved going on long walks too and had taken quite a liking to the sea, just like me. Many a time, bhaiya, Revati, Uddhava, Satyaki, Shaivya and Shwetketu would also accompany us to the seashore and we would stay there until late into the night. And as you already know, once they were together and had Rukmini on their side, they would not miss the opportunity to make fun of me. Sometimes, I felt these wicked people accompanied us only to poke fun at me, and not to enjoy the scenic seaside. Even bhaiya had started enjoying this, often calling me names such as '*chakri*' or '*chakram*' (a wheeler-dealer or con artist). Sometimes, I would be labelled cunning and at other times, the 'king of wheeling and dealing'. Now, did I honestly deserve this? What kind of nicknames were these? Not only that, they would also narrate exaggerated tales of my trickery and deception to my dear Rukmini. For that matter, I was not spared even by Revati and Shaivya. And you might ask how I reacted to all this. Well, all I could do was to let it pass; this way, at least they were acquainting Rukmini with my real self. I thought that the more she understood me, and the sooner she did it, the better it would be for both of us. If nothing, this would at least ensure a smoother relationship between us in the future.

I had a special relationship with the sea too. I just cannot express in words my love for the sea, and now with Rukmini by my side, my love for it had only deepened. All of a sudden, I had the desire to build a small palace by the seashore, and when the thought was so admirable, its execution had to be quick. Thus, I immediately selected a site for the palace that lay on the right side of the marketplace, facing the sea. Since this palace was meant for Rukmini and me, I personally drew up its blueprint. The palace was to have only four sleeping chambers, two guest chambers, an area dedicated to receiving visitors and a formal meeting chamber, so that I could enjoy Rukmini's company in solitude, as much as possible.

Now, although the palace would provide enough quietude, considering my reputation, I had to make suitable arrangements for enjoyment and entertainment too, am I right? Well, there was no scarcity of that in Krishna's kingdom. Therefore, I also planned to build a grand pool within the palace, so that Rukmini and I could go swimming whenever we wished. If you are unaware of this, let me tell you that my sweetheart and I were both exceedingly fond of swimming. That was not all; a wide, open veranda was to be built adjoining our sleeping chamber, from where we could view the expanse of the sea. Additionally, the palace was to be kept open from all sides so that we could enjoy fresh air all the time. Not only did I like to go for a stroll, have long chats and rest in the open, but I also loved to have my meals in the open. And this was why I usually took a stroll twice a day. Moreover, a large garden was to be built right next to the sea, and in this garden, I had planned to install only one swing. I'm sure you know why—so that we could be alone and nobody could disturb us. All in all, I had taken so many precautions while planning this palace that there was neither the scope nor the amenities for anyone to either visit us or stay with us.

Soon, construction work for the upcoming palace had picked up pace. Not only I, but Rukmini too was quite excited about it. We would visit the site together at least once a day to supervise construction activities. She would also give brilliant suggestions to improve the beauty and grandeur of the palace. Seeing her enthusiasm, I decided to name this palace *Rukmini-Mahal*, meaning 'The Palace of Rukmini'. Lost in each other's company, we would often lose sense of time, oblivious to everything around us. Spending even a few hours away from one another had become unbearable and we would not be without each other for more than four hours in a day.

While I was overjoyed on having Rukmini as my wife, she felt blessed too that she had come to Dwarka. Now, when we were so much in love with each other, why suffer the pangs of separation for even a moment? But somewhere deep within, this cowherd's heart still harboured a little doubt—had I really made the princess of my dreams mine? Perhaps that was why I had let this childish streak of mine, which yearned for approval, run free. Proof of this was that although Rukmini and I had developed a close bond, I was still looking for ways to impress her. For instance, whenever I got the opportunity, I would start narrating stories of my bravery and heroism to her. Sometimes, it would be about Kalyavana and at other times, Shringlava; and then there was *Kaaliya* and Keshi too. As for the story about chasing Jarasandha from the Gomanta Mountain, well, I never got tired of extolling my feats and must have narrated the story to her several times. Meanwhile, Rukmini had become so tired of hearing my tales continuously that one day, she finally shot a sarcastic comment at me; one that made me forget my boasting forever. It so happened that one night we were chatting away till the wee hours, and it was one of those days when I was yet again raving about my heroic deeds. Rukmini was relaxing on the bed, when suddenly, stretching herself, she asked, “My lord, you have often spoken of your victories over Panchajanya, Shringlava, Kalyavana and the rest. But I am surprised that you have never told me anything about the incident, following which, you were labelled *Rannchhod* (deserter); that time when you had fled from the battle.” Well, this was it; I fell silent instantly. I covered myself with a blanket and pretended to have fallen asleep, hardly moving a muscle until I woke the next morning. I had learnt my lesson indeed, and after that day, I stopped bragging about my victories to Rukmini. What could I do? The princess had cornered me in such a manner that even a shameless person like me was put to shame.

Well, this became an event of the past once I had learnt my lesson. Nonetheless, there were many other beautiful interactions between Rukmini and me, apart from my narration of boastful tales. After all, she was the dream I had been cherishing for the past ten years, which had been realised only now. And to be honest, the reality was far sweeter than the dream. I could barely focus on anything else. All I could think about was Rukmini. Nearly two months had passed since she had set foot in Dwarka, but all I had done ever since was spend more and more time with her. I was so

consumed by her love that I had forgotten all about the affairs of Dwarka. But then, for how long could this continue? I was a man of action, after all; how long could I live without doing anything? So, gradually, my fascination with Rukmini waned, and once again I started focussing on Dwarka's affairs. After all, I was the King of Dwarka, but there was hardly any work left for the king. After having meticulously planned Dwarka's administrative affairs, there were few matters that I needed to resolve personally. Soldiers were stationed all over the city so that discipline could be strictly maintained. The royal treasury was full. With businesses firmly established, we had started receiving taxes as well. Dwarka's garments and jewellery were in great demand all over Aryavarta, as a result of which, exports had picked up as well. In other words, the King of Dwarka was out of work now. He was totally free from his preoccupation with Rukmini; moreover, there was hardly any administrative work requiring his attention.

So, the heady feeling of overseeing the affairs of Dwarka had also died out. Krishna, the man of action, was now left with nothing to act upon. With nothing else to do, my mind became active, and the only thing left to contemplate upon was how to improve business and trade. Soon, this brought about a favourable outcome. After only a few days of contemplation, I came up with a revolutionary change in the business structure of Dwarka, a change that seemed profitable in every respect. Every kingdom in Aryavarta manufactured exclusive items. Some regions were famous for their sculptures, while others for their home furnishing items. There were kingdoms famous for weapons, whereas a few others were well known for their garments. I realised we could bring the best items from each of these kingdoms in exchange for our jewellery and garments. I immediately convened a meeting of all the businessmen in my kingdom and presented my idea to them. They liked the idea and within two months, the best merchandise from other kingdoms began flooding Dwarka's marketplaces. Needless to say, my business acumen changed the entire face of Dwarka's marketplace. Now, a single market in Dwarka was providing all the famous products of Aryavarta.

Very soon, the market of Dwarka, known for staying open until midnight, gained popularity all across Aryavarta. Everybody began to seek permission to shop here. This development gave rise to yet another idea; that of improving tourism in Dwarka, as this would help in furthering trade and

business in the city. Besides, security was not a problem in Dwarka as we had a surplus of soldiers, and this move would help in employing them optimally. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, I decided not to allow more than five hundred visitors at any given time. Simultaneously, I appointed five hundred soldiers to take care of these visitors and keep an eye on them. That was not all; I also had an entire guesthouse vacated for tourists. The guesthouse was refurbished as I was hoping to earn a sizable rent from it too. The idea was brilliant in itself. Thus, after four months of intense preparations, this vision too was brought to fruition. As an added measure, I sent my spies to all the major kingdoms to spread the word of Dwarka's grandeur and prosperity amongst their common people.

With this strategy, Dwarka soon became witness to a trail of wonders. With facilities available for wandering along the seashore, hopping on to a ship to enjoy a ride in the ocean, riding on chariots through the well-paved and well-lit streets at night, and for walking along the delicately manicured gardens, beautiful parks, with a conveniently located grand market, tourists began thronging to Dwarka as soon as its gates were thrown open for them. Whoever visited Dwarka, would shop to his heart's content. Truly, the decision of developing tourism in Dwarka had enlivened its markets. At this point, the rich and wealthy people from various kingdoms in Aryavarta would visit Dwarka to shop for weddings or other festive occasions. They could not only experience the joy of visiting a beautiful city situated by the sea, but also find the best merchandise from all over Aryavarta in a single market. Could any rich person resist such an opportunity? Needless to say, Dwarka soon transformed into Aryavarta's most precious jewel, sparkling with an assortment of merchandise. People would consider it a matter of pride to have visited Dwarka. The grandeur of the city and the appeal of its night markets had together mesmerised the people, capturing their hearts completely. The best news was that soon enough, the constant stream of tourists resulted in money pouring into Dwarka's coffers. This, in turn, made the King of Dwarka even more carefree. I am sure you know by now that the royal treasury had always been a matter of concern for me. To provide a good life to the inhabitants of a kingdom, it is essential for the royal coffers to always be full. In this regard, I can say with pride that my efforts and farsightedness had borne great results. Additionally, this move had helped even the businessmen and traders of Dwarka to become more



prosperous than before. With a sense of well-being all around, enthusiasm among the rest of Dwarka's residents was also at an all-time high. All in all, there was prosperity and happiness all around.

However, even though businesses were flourishing and the royal coffers were overflowing with money, I cannot say that everything was truly fine. These developments had given rise to a new problem. I had become so busy with Dwarka's business affairs that I was not able to spend as much time with Rukmini as I did earlier. Naturally, she began to resent this. Of course, she would understand the situation whenever I apprised her of my activities and the developments in Dwarka, but a little while later, she would once again slip into dejection. Now, you tell me, who in his right mind would not want to live in such a beautiful city with the princess of his dreams? However, I was helpless; I could not ignore my duties as a king either. You already know that I had resolved to provide every bit of happiness to the people of Dwarka, the kind of happiness that would be greater than heavenly bliss. On the other hand, it was also true that I wanted to build a heaven of my own with Rukmini by my side. Nevertheless, I was trying to maintain a balance between the two. I had neither forgotten my royal duties as a king due to my love for Rukmini, nor had I neglected Rukmini's pleasure for the sake of Dwarka. However, the heart always craves more, and so was the case with Rukmini.

Oh well! Such incidents are part of life. Now, let me tell you about a positive development—our dream palace, *Rukmini Mahal*, was ready. In fact, Rukmini and I had already moved in there. We had also taken along some servants and handmaids with us. As the palace was located by the seashore, special arrangements were made for its safety as well. I am sure you can gauge how enjoyable our stay at the palace was, from the fact that we had barely stepped out in the first week, after we had moved there. Of course, we would go out for strolls by the seashore in the morning, as well as in the evening. For our evening meal, we would settle for nothing less than *Chhappan Bhog*. After the meal, the pool would beckon us for a bath, besides other things. In other words, we were experiencing pure bliss. Rukmini and I would sit in the veranda and gaze out at the sea for hours on end. We would sit quietly, hand in hand, for hours together, doing nothing but marvelling at the sea, enjoying each other's company and the quietude. I do not think anyone has ever experienced such joy and love in life. It is not

difficult to imagine how enjoyable this quiet and peaceful life with Rukmini must have been for me, especially after spending most of my life fighting and struggling, wracked with insecurity and poverty; whereas now, it was only Rukmini, Dwarka, family, friends, my dear *Dwarkawasis* and me.

Now, shall I let you in on a secret? Conversing with Rukmini used to be the most enjoyable activity for me. Her self-confidence, mannerisms, extensive knowledge and, as a matter of fact, almost every aspect of hers was commendable. I could speak to her on any subject under the sun. Whether it was policies or politics, battle strategies or adornment, she was well informed about everything. This was the only trait that the *gopis* lacked. You will not believe it, but Rukmini and I would often talk throughout the night. Besides, swimming in the pool had become almost a daily ritual for us. And, many a time, we would fall asleep in the veranda itself. At times, we would break our solitude by spending time with our friends. Sometimes, we would invite bhaiya and Revati over, or Shaivya and Shwetketu; sometimes, our other friends, and at other times, the entire gang for an evening meal, so that people would not think that Kanhaiya had forgotten them after having fallen in love with Rukmini.

Life was beginning to resemble a whirlpool indeed, with happiness and pleasure gushing in from every direction. If you think about it, human life is a wonderful opportunity to enjoy and celebrate. This was the reason I had never missed out on a single opportunity to stay happy, celebrate or enjoy. In my opinion, the sole objective of human life is to experience as much joy as possible, whenever and wherever possible; in fact, I even rejoiced in and derived pleasure from games that involved appeasing my loved ones when they became angry with me. It did not matter whether the game was being played with Rukmini or Radha. In fact, it is an irrefutable truth that it is these small joys in life which bring immense happiness and nurture the soul. Similarly, it is also a fact that only by discharging every small duty and performing every essential action, a kingdom as great as Dwarka can be built. To be honest, I believed that life should be filled with so much happiness that no human should aspire for *moksha* (liberation of the soul). After all, if one knows how to live life the way it should be lived, then why would anyone want to seek freedom from it? Besides, a state of liberation is something to be experienced while one is still alive; what meaning does liberation or bondage hold after death? Consider my example; I had given

myself such freedom that I was liberated, even when alive. You can see for yourself that I was not dependent on death to liberate me. Besides, when life can be filled with so much joy and happiness that *moksha* and renunciation become meaningless, those who continue to seek *moksha* are, indeed, fools. My life revolved only around joy; it did not matter whether that joy was obtained through love, by executing my duties, or even when enduring struggles.

Thus, my days were passing by happily, when one morning I received a message from Father Vasudeva, asking me to meet him right away. This was the first time father had summoned me in such a manner ever since we had moved to Dwarka. Often, it was I who would go and visit him and Mother Devaki. So, I immediately set out to meet him. My mother and father were both seated in their chamber, appearing morose. For a moment, I was alarmed to see their sorrowful disposition, but before I could enquire, they handed me a letter. I read it, only to be astonished by its contents. The letter was from my great-grandfather. He lived in the land of the *Nagas*, which was under his reign. The letter read as follows:

Dear Vasudeva and Devaki,

I am happy to know that your sons, Krishna and Balarama, have established a fine kingdom like Dwarka on the strength of their courage and heroism. First of all, let me congratulate you on this remarkable achievement. We had received your invitation to the coronation ceremony well in advance but were unable to attend it; I sincerely apologise for the same. The truth is that, I have grown very old and my health is in poor condition these days. Besides, our kingdom is presently besieged with many difficulties. Therefore, I wish that Krishna and Balarama visit my kingdom for a short duration. As it is, I wish to see them once before I die and with the help of their courage and intelligence, we might be able to overcome some of our difficulties.

Yours sincerely,

Grandfather

After reading the letter, I fell silent for a while. Both mother and father were watching my face intently, but when mother could contain herself no longer, she asked me, “When do you plan to leave?”

By now, I had made up my mind to go. I said, “Soon. We will go as soon as possible to meet great-grandfather.”

It was incredible how engrossed I had been in enjoying Dwarka’s grandeur and Rukmini’s love all these days. I had forgotten there was a world outside of Dwarka too. However, this single letter from great-grandfather was enough to bring me back to reality. I began to ponder—I was happy, Rukmini was pleased, my family was satisfied, my friends were having fun and the people of Dwarka were enjoying a life of heavenly bliss. Taking all this into consideration, was it appropriate that my great-grandfather was facing difficulties? Besides, I had not even met him yet. Did I not have any obligation towards him? He was my grandfather’s father; in fact, he was the very root of my existence ‘Therefore, I shall surely go,’ I said to myself and returned to my palace.

Rukmini was waiting for me, while enjoying herself on a swing in the veranda. I sat down next to her, thinking about great-grandfather. We sat silently for some time, looking out at the sea. However, it did not take long for her to realise that my silence was due to unhappiness. When she asked me what the matter was, I told her all about great-grandfather’s letter. She quickly understood the essence of the letter and advised me to go immediately to his aid. She stated clearly that there was absolutely no need for me to worry about her. How wonderful she was, my Rukmini! Of course, I had wanted to leave too, but not right away, as I still had some business to take care of, in Dwarka. Moreover, I had to ensure that a steady stream of tourists kept pouring into our city, for, I had no idea when I would return to Dwarka once I left to visit great-grandfather. Thus, it was essential for me to explain and hand over this responsibility to someone before I left. Meanwhile, as we kept discussing my great-grandfather, I noticed that Rukmini had suddenly become despondent. Actually, she had started missing her father, Bhishmak and grandfather, Kaishik. Well, it was only natural for her to feel dejected on thinking about them, for, she had not even had the opportunity to bid them farewell, considering that she had been abducted from her *swayamvar*. All preparations for her *swayamvar* must

have suddenly come to naught. Her father and grandfather must have had sleepless nights, worrying about their daughter's well-being. Oh, how could I have been so thoughtless! I was surprised at myself.

In fact, I was even angry with myself. How could I have made such a mistake? Why did Rukmini even have to express her sadness? Why did I not discern her sorrow? Where was my love for her? I had probably been too involved in Dwarka's affairs to pay attention to her, and this was perhaps why I had erred. But then, the supremely aware being that I was, nothing should have escaped my attention. Perhaps the pleasure of spending time with Rukmini and the joy of living in Dwarka had weakened my focus. But if a person's intoxication adversely affects his focus, then of what use is such enjoyment? Obviously, Rukmini must have been concerned about her father and grandfather, and I should have gleaned this sentiment before she expressed it. 'Well, better late than never,' I thought. I decided to take her to Kundinpur; not only that, I also decided to take bhaiya, Revati, Shaivya, Shwetketu, Uddhava and Daruka with me.

When Rukmini heard my plan, she became delirious with joy. Of course, all the others were just as excited, but Rukmini's excitement was truly unique; she immediately got down to making preparations for the journey. Like me, she was also fond of clothes and jewellery, so we bought many garments and jewels from Dwarka's market. Not only this, I also got a new crown made for myself with tufts of peacock feathers embellished on it. By doing this, I immortalised Radha's memory by making it my identity. To be honest, ever since Rukmini had become my wife, I had been plagued by thoughts about Radha. While I was enjoying my life here in Dwarka, I wondered how she was faring, back in Vrindavan. I did not have any control over Radha's condition, but the ones over whom I did, were all enthusiastically preparing for the journey to Kundinpur. While everybody else was excited, Rukmini's enthusiasm had crossed all boundaries. But then, this was expected; after all, ten months had elapsed since she had been abducted, and the poor girl was now going to meet her father and grandfather. Indeed, these were moments of bliss for her, and to see Rukmini so blissful and excited was, in itself, the biggest moment of happiness for me. As it is, I was an avid seeker of pleasure and celebration in life. It did not matter if I was experiencing happiness myself or if someone else was receiving it; how can one lose out on opportunities to be

happy in human life, which is generally so difficult? When flowers that bloom are so colourful, when a motley flock of vibrant birds chirps gleefully all around us, when Nature has created such splendid multi-hued fish, then even humans should lead a vibrant life, abounding in joy and pleasure. However, let me tell you that it is certainly difficult to find a person more vibrant than me. To be honest, I can say with conviction that I was the only one among those around me who was experiencing all the myriad flavours human life had to offer. If you do not believe me, then consider the present situation. In this instance, it was decided to take Rukmini to Kundinpur, and once it had been decided that the journey had to be undertaken, I thought why not enjoy it and make it lively? It was with this intention that I was taking the others along. And that was not all; I had made special arrangements for various foods and delicacies to be carried with us on the journey. Moreover, I had also arranged for many servants to accompany us to ensure we would be taken care of. After all, I was the King of Dwarka now. I could well afford to provide comfort and joy to my friends and family. Besides, I wanted to create a striking impression on my in-laws too.

Thus, we began our journey, brimming with hope and enthusiasm. We stopped at scenic spots on our way, enjoyed meals in the open, laughed, joked and even found time to squabble with each other. All in all, we were one big happy family, with Rukmini being the happiest of us all. I had been travelling all my life, but for the others, this journey was a new experience. I was immensely pleased to see that Revati *bhabhi*, Shaivya, Rukmini and Subhadra had become close friends and were now an inseparable foursome. Oftentimes, they would travel in the same chariot. Needless to say, during such times, Rukmini would take the reins of the chariot in her hands. Sometimes, even Revati *bhabhi* and Shaivya would try their hand at steering the chariot. This was the advantage of being born princesses, for, every bit of essential education would be imparted to them in childhood itself. Noticing all this, I decided immediately to train Subhadra too, to steer a chariot. After all, now, she was a princess too.

The journey was progressing flawlessly, but this time, I caught on a new malady while travelling. Throughout the journey, I felt a sense of great pride in my progress and achievements. I remembered the time when I had first set my eyes on Rukmini in Mathura. I was so smitten by her at that

moment; I was so impressed by her pomp and splendour! Her attire, mannerisms and demeanour had made me go weak in the knees. She seemed like a fairy who had descended from another world. And now, here I was, travelling with three princesses. And the best part was that these princesses were considering it an honour to travel with us! Indeed, these cowherds from Vrindavan had made great progress; there was no doubt about that, for, our procession of chariots and servants was truly a sight to behold. Each one of us was revelling in the joy of this splendid journey; in fact, it had become imprinted on our minds as one of the best days of our lives. As for Rukmini, well, this journey was no less than a beautiful dream.

Amidst all this laughter and merrymaking, we finally reached Kundinpur on the tenth day of our travel. I had sent word of our visit to King Bhishmak well in advance so that even my friends could witness how the king welcomed his son-in-law. As expected, on the outskirts of Kundinpur, a grand reception committee was awaiting our arrival, headed by King Bhishmak himself. Seeing her father arrive for the reception, Rukmini welled up with tears and was brimming with happiness.

As if all this was not enough, as our procession entered Kundinpur, huge crowds of people lined up on both sides of the road to catch a glimpse of their daughter and their accomplished son-in-law. Although this sight had made Rukmini quite emotional, I, on the other hand, was swelling with pride. Moreover, our entire troupe was accommodated with full fanfare within the royal palace itself. Grandfather Kaishik had already arrived at the royal palace to meet us. On meeting him, Rukmini was beside herself with joy, finally feeling contented.

With Kundinpur's royal palace giving us a ceremonious welcome, Rukmini and I too, did not lag behind in showering affection on them. To express our love for the king and Rukmini's grandfather, we would wear garments of different colours every day, complementing each other. So, if Rukmini wore a white sari, I would wear a white *pitambar*. My intention in doing so was that I wanted to reassure the king and grandfather that Rukmini's future was in safe hands. The two of us would also wear splendid ornaments every day. After all, this was my first visit to the kingdom of my in-laws. Moreover, I wanted to impress not just Rukmini's parents, but all of Kundinpur too. Needless to say, King Bhishmak had also made extensive arrangements to

take care of his guests. In fact, not only the palace, but the common people too had tried to make our visit as comfortable and enjoyable as possible. Huge crowds would gather outside the palace all day long, and the people felt blessed just to catch a glimpse of us. At the evening meal, various guests would be invited, especially to meet us. Grandfather Kaishik would introduce me enthusiastically to everyone. Honestly, he seemed to be the happiest of all, to see us.

So far, the events were progressing smoothly. Happiness and cheer abounded all around us. However, I noticed during my stay, that Rukmi was nowhere to be seen. I was informed later that after Rukmini's abduction and his scuffle with me at the rest house, Rukmi did not return to Kundinpur. Instead, he had established a small kingdom for himself. I then recalled the words he had spoken that day; in the heat of the moment, he had vowed that if he could not take Rukmini back with him, he would never set foot in Kundinpur again. It was then that I understood why Grandfather Kaishik had moved back into the royal palace; after all, Rukmi was no longer a resident of Kundinpur.

Well, let us not talk about Rukmi; instead, let me tell you how much I enjoyed being a son-in-law for the first time in my life. Truly, the welcome and hospitality showered upon a son-in-law is unsurpassable. This single visit had made me realise why people basked in the special treatment they received from their in-laws. I had witnessed the grand welcome bhaiya had received in Kushasthali, and to be honest, ever since that day, I had harboured a desire too, to visit my in-laws. Rukmini too, was more than pleased with the hospitality extended by her family. She had become so carefree and light-hearted that she seemed to have gone back in time and become a sixteen-year-old instead of the twenty-two-year-old that she actually was. At least, in this way, my visit to Kundinpur had been beneficial. Do you not see?! It was I, after all, who was living and enjoying life with a sixteen-year-old Rukmini. Incidentally, during our stay in Kundinpur, I noticed that Rukmini shared an extremely close bond with her grandfather. The bond between a grandparent and a grandchild is always special, and witnessing the strong bond shared by Rukmini and her grandfather, I also felt a strong urge to meet my grandfather and great-grandfather.



We enjoyed the extravagant hospitality showered upon us by my in-laws to such an extent that we did not even realise that a week had already elapsed in Kundinpur. We had planned to stay in Kundinpur for only a week. I did not wish to prolong my stay in the kingdom of my in-laws more than was necessary, and thereby lose hard-earned respect. Of course, everyone, right from grandfather to the king, did not want us to leave, but we had to go. Needless to say, not only the royal palace, but all of Kundinpur bid us an emotional farewell. The people of Kundinpur seemed truly pleased with me. Perhaps, because they felt that I had saved their dear princess from the clutches of Shishupala. Well, whatever the reason, we now had to bid goodbye to all of them. Soon, we were on our way to Dwarka. Despite having left Kundinpur far behind, we were still enchanted by its warm hospitality. However, there was a dampener, which diminished the intoxicating effect of that hospitality for Rukmini and me. Although this trip to Kundinpur had been enjoyable in every aspect, we had suffered a major loss during our visit there. Actually, it so happened, that King Bhishmak had convinced Shaivya and Shwetketu to stay back in Kundinpur with them. In other words, Shaivya and Shwetketu were not accompanying us on our journey back to Dwarka. Well, that was alright. Since Rukmi was no longer living in Kundinpur, they had nothing to fear now. Moreover, Shwetketu was an independent and self-respecting human being, so, for how long would he have stayed in Dwarka anyway? Therefore, I shrugged off the feeling of losing the company of my dear friends and began my journey back home. As soon as I rid myself of the feeling, I began enjoying the journey, which was certainly proceeding on an enthusiastic note. All our conversations were centred on the wonderful time we had spent in Kundinpur. Rukmini was truly proud to hear that everyone had enjoyed their stay at her home. Finally, we reached Dwarka on the eighth day of our journey.

Back in Dwarka, we could hardly forget the warmth and generosity shown by the royal palace of Kundinpur, for days to come. Whenever and wherever we met, our conversations would revolve only around Kundinpur and its people. These conversations pleased Rukmini so much that she would beam from ear to ear, adding to her cheerfulness. And this was the reason, that on returning to Dwarka, she was happier than before. Perhaps, seeing her father and grandfather hale and hearty and receiving their

blessings, Rukmini had felt a sense of relief. On the other hand, life in Dwarka was scaling new heights every day. The main reason for this was discipline, for, I knew that granting the Yadavas too much freedom could prove dangerous. They could easily lapse into their old habit of laziness and turn into degenerates.

Dwarka's magnificence became a major topic of discussion in Mathura too. As a result, Dwarka suddenly started to experience a huge influx of Yadavas from Mathura, and we had to be prepared to welcome them. However, despite our efforts, the construction activity seemed to go on endlessly. Consequently, we had to construct additional residential houses and rest houses on new tracts of land, with a new spurt of vigour.

This was a good move indeed, but in the midst of all these activities, I noticed a change in Dwarka, although it was difficult to ascertain whether this change was for the better or worse. These days, Satrajit had started spending more and more time in his own kingdom instead of in Dwarka. The reason for this move was best known to him, but I could not completely ignore this development either. And now that we are talking about Satrajit, how can we not discuss Satyabhama? She used to live mostly alone in Dwarka, but despite this, I was barely able to meet her, as my time was being spent with Rukmini and in managing the affairs of Dwarka. Satyabhama had forged a deep friendship with Subhadra. So, whenever she visited the palace and found me busy or unavailable, she would end up spending time chatting with Subhadra. As a result, they became such close friends that with the passage of time, I would get the opportunity to meet Satyabhama only when she came to visit Subhadra. But it did not really matter what the reason for meeting was, as long as we kept meeting each other, for, in my mind, she was no less than a goddess, even at this point in time. After all, it was only because of the support she had lent me that I was leading such a beautiful life in Dwarka. Interestingly, even though she had become close friends with Subhadra, it did not affect her feelings for me. On the contrary, she seemed to be getting closer to me with the passage of time. Moreover, with age, she had blossomed into a beautiful woman. So, even though Satrajit's travels outside Dwarka could be considered a matter of concern, his daughter, Satyabhama was certainly making me feel at peace.

Well, let me stop eulogising Satyabhama. The reality was that after having spent so many years struggling, I finally had the opportunity to live a safe and happy life in Dwarka. So, I decided to not pay much attention to Satrajit's erratic behaviour and instead enjoy my present life in Dwarka. My days were passing by merrily, when suddenly, one day, to my utter surprise, a messenger from Hastinapur arrived, carrying a letter from the Pandavas. The letter served as a humorous reminder that our friends, the Pandavas, were indeed residing in Hastinapur. For a moment though, I became anxious; were my friends in trouble? Were they facing some great problem? But no; this was good news. Grandfather Bhishma and King Dhritarashtra had finally agreed to make Yudhishtira the crown prince of Hastinapur. His coronation ceremony had been scheduled after three months. The messenger was, in fact, the bearer of the invitation to the ceremony.

I was quite pleased on receiving this news. This meant that the danger looming over the Pandavas had been averted. Now they too, would be able to live a joyful and glorious life. Their reign would prove beneficial to the people of Hastinapur as well, as I knew that the Pandavas would take good care of their people. But my mind was behaving in a strange manner. As I thought of the Pandavas, I was overcome with a desire to meet them once again. I especially looked forward to meeting Bhima and Arjuna. So, I made up my mind to attend the coronation ceremony. I confirmed my attendance for the coronation ceremony to the messenger and immediately sent him back to Hastinapur. As soon as the messenger left, I was reminded of yet another invitation that I had received—that of my great-grandfather. That visit was pending too, but now I could visit both these places, and it would be like killing two birds with one stone.

I was scheduled to leave after two months. When Rukmini heard of my plan, her face fell immediately. Had circumstances been different, I would have definitely taken her along, but I could not do it now, as she was pregnant. That's right! This young Kanha was soon going to become a father. Well, did you expect that this mischievous Krishna's merrymaking and childishness would lessen on becoming a father? That would never happen. Proof of it was that even though I had to leave only after two months, I was already lost in daydreaming about it; of course, not to the extent that I would neglect my duties. I was fully aware that I had to complete two major tasks before leaving Dwarka. One was to ensure that

Dwarka's trade and business continued unimpeded even in my absence. And the second was to spend as much time as possible with Rukmini so that she would grieve as little as possible once I left. Meanwhile, because of Rukmini's pregnancy, mother and Subhadra had come over to our palace to stay and tend to her. I did not leave any stone unturned either, in taking care of her. However, despite my best efforts, I would end up spending most of my time attending to Dwarka's administration and trade, albeit unwillingly. The irony was that the more I thought of Rukmini and the more I wished to spend time with her, the more I would be occupied with work. Gradually, the workload had increased to such an extent that, many a time, I would return home only by midnight. But what choice did I have? Dwarka was the city of my dreams and I wanted everyone to be happy here. I wanted the inhabitants of Dwarka to feel that they were living in heaven, and not on earth. Obviously, wealth was the key to fulfilling all these dreams, and it was not possible to gain wealth without trade and business. Besides, no one could deny the fact that I alone was capable of setting up businesses and making them flourish. Rukmini and my child were no doubt important, but a happy Dwarka was, and would always remain, my topmost priority. Unfortunately, each time I returned home late from work, I had to face Rukmini's wrath. But how did it matter to me? I was used to living a tough life. My days were thus passing by, trying to strike a balance between Rukmini and Dwarka, when suddenly, out of the blue, *Acharya* Sandipani set foot in Dwarka.

I was extremely thrilled to see him, for, all that I had achieved so far was because of his guidance and teachings. Needless to say, I immediately made arrangements for him to stay with me at the royal palace. After all, how could I miss this opportunity to be of service to my teacher? I had wanted him to bless us during the coronation ceremony too; in fact, I had even waited anxiously for him, but he had not come. Perhaps he disliked such pompous ceremonies. I had also wanted to invite him to Dwarka just to stay with me, but the opportunity had never presented itself. In any case, does a true *guru* (teacher) ever show up on receiving an invitation? Teachers are self-motivated, free-willed people, who pay a visit as and when they please, just the way my *guru* had visited me at this time. Naturally, first and foremost, *Acharya* congratulated me on Dwarka's beauty and grandeur. I expressed my gratitude by saying that all this was the result of his blessings.

Soon, I took him to meet Rukmini, who also felt fortunate on receiving his blessings. After all, who was not aware of *Acharya's* wisdom and erudition? Rukmini too, had heard a lot about him; consequently, she was very happy with his arrival. Soon, my palace had turned into a small *gurukul*, for, every evening, all my friends would gather at the palace to listen to *Acharya's* pearls of wisdom and seek inspiration from him. Every day, after *Acharya* and I returned from our evening walk, we would be greeted by a huge crowd of people waiting to meet him. *Acharya* would perch himself on an elevated seat, with the elders seated next to him. The rest of us would sit wherever we could find a spot. These impromptu discussions and discourses would continue late into the night. Everybody, from grandfather to my father, would arrive on time to hear *Acharya* speak. My friends would arrive long before evening and settle themselves in the meeting chamber of the palace. And by the time we returned from our walk, even Rukmini and Subhadra would be hovering around the assembly chamber. Oftentimes, elders such as Akrura and Kritavarma would also be present. Even the ministers of Dwarka would frequent this gathering; after all, no one wanted to miss the company of such a great personality. I would swell with pride on seeing the honour and respect being accorded to my *Acharya*. A feeling of incredulity would grip me whenever I thought of how a simple cowherd boy had been blessed with the opportunity to be tutored by such a great teacher. This realisation would instantly make me feel grateful towards my grandfather. Well, speaking about *Acharya*, while our eagerness to be with him was quite natural, he enjoyed conversing with Rukmini the most. Indeed, she was the most educated of all the people of Dwarka. Perhaps this was why *Acharya* was more pleased to meet her than she was impressed by him. And as you very well know, *Acharya* meant more to me than God himself, so, I was happy to see my dearer-than-life Rukmini receive his blessings.

Well, now that I have apprised you of all the activities and the consequent happiness that had swept over us with *Acharya's* visit, I have to admit to the gravest folly I had committed, something which I had realised on *Acharya's* arrival. The kingdom of Dwarka had everything but a *gurukul*. *Acharya* had even reprimanded me for this, chiding me for having forgotten that the future of every kingdom was dependent on its *gurukul*. I apologised to him profusely for this oversight. However, my concept of education was slightly

different from that of others. I believed in the all-round development of a person. In my opinion, it was not enough to only educate one on how to wield weapons or how to rule a kingdom, and neither was it sufficient to teach one how to be courageous or sail through life during tough times. Besides, I did not desire a *gurukul* that would engender ascetics, as I was anyway completely against them. I believed that by not doing anything productive, ascetics, in the end, were nothing more than a burden on society. In fact, I had also enunciated this idea to Arjuna in the Gita. I had told him, “He, who, outwardly restraining the organs of sense and action, sits mentally dwelling on the objects of senses, that man of deluded intellect is called a hypocrite.”<sup>[21]</sup> Such a person who renounces the world can never be called an ascetic. This is why I wanted people to be strong not only internally, but also in the external world. People who, instead of chasing futile pursuits, are resolute on the path of progress, by always remaining in a non-violent and truthful state. I wanted to create diligent yet selfless youths who would always recognise their personal benefit in the greater good. In other words, I wanted them to be armed not to destroy enemies, but to annihilate sinners. I wanted them to be determined to use their knowledge of royal affairs and business for the progress of all. These were the kind of students I wanted to see emerging from my *gurukul*.

I firmly believed that the meaning of human life is to work continuously for the welfare of all without personal wish or desire, and to use even the smallest of opportunities to enjoy life to the fullest. Additionally, I believed that whenever an opportunity presents itself, one should use it to set oneself and others on the path of progress.

In fact, I wanted people to become more and more like me. In my opinion, achieving liberation after death is absolutely nonsensical; in reality, to be liberated while being alive is the greatest achievement of human life. Consider me, for instance; I was living proof of a liberated person. Not only my body, but even my mind and senses were liberated. Even my ego was liberated, so much so that I had never tried to restrain either my anger or my love.

When I was angry, there would be nothing but anger. Bear in mind, I never became angry, for, anger and I did not have anything in common. I used to live every moment, in every circumstance, only reflecting Nature like a

mirror. So, essentially, I wanted to establish a *gurukul* that would help create a Krishna in every household of Dwarka. To make it clearer, I wanted to create brave ascetics. I did not have respect for spineless ascetics anyway. At the same time, I did not care for brave people who were cruel, and I would annihilate such people at every opportunity. In other words, I firmly believed that nobody except *Acharya* Sandipani could have guided me in realising this aspiration of mine.

With these thoughts coursing through my mind, I discussed this matter at length with *Acharya*, who offered suggestions. However, in the end, I realised that to create Krishna, a *gurukul* would not suffice. To transform someone into Krishna, it is essential to provide him the love of a mother like Yashoda and complete freedom that a child requires. A lot also depends on a child's own insight into his life and his ability to understand and learn from every situation in his life. Therefore, to become like Krishna, a child needs unconditional love, complete freedom, the wisdom to learn from life and yes, a teacher like *Acharya* too. Well, if not complete Krishnas, we could at least create 'fractions' of him. 'Who knows, one of them might actually turn out to be as gifted as I am?' I thought, and with this idea, I decided to set up a *gurukul* under the guidance of *Acharya* Sandipani. Since the youth of a kingdom is a predetermining factor in its progress, I did not want Dwarka's youth to follow in the footsteps of the inhabitants of Mathura. And so, I immediately issued instructions for the construction work on the *gurukul* to begin with full speed. *Acharya* also recommended some teachers for the *gurukul*. I assigned Uddhava the responsibility of meeting these teachers and convincing them to come to Dwarka. I was pleased that Dwarka would finally have a *gurukul* now. Undoubtedly, Dwarka was the best city in Aryavarta, so our *gurukul* too, would be par excellence. Truly, what an amazing personality *Acharya* had! I was always greatly inspired on meeting him. It had been only seven days since his arrival, and during this period, the construction of the *gurukul* had already commenced. Truly, the love of Mother Yashoda, Radha and Rukmini, and the inspiration from *Acharya* Sandipani were the real guiding forces of my life. Without them, Krishna was nothing!

Meanwhile, people from Mathura continued to flock to Dwarka. They were the ones who informed me that Jarasandha had been terribly disappointed on hearing of our move to Dwarka. Moreover, Kalyavana's death had

shaken him badly. However, facing no resistance from Mathura, Jarasandha had easily established his rule there. Presently, Jarasandha's son was ruling Mathura. Overall, the conditions in Mathura were exactly as I had anticipated. To be honest, this was no news for a far-sighted person like me.

So, let me return to *Acharya*. While he was happy with the royal hospitality accorded to him in Dwarka, I was happy that we had started construction work of the *gurukul*. In other words, the teacher and the student were enjoying each other's company and making the most of it. One day, *Acharya* took me along for a walk in the evening. The two of us had walked far into the distance, away from the seashore. For a while, we chatted casually, after which *Acharya* revealed the real reason behind his visit to Dwarka. I was so astonished to hear it that I did not even realise I had stopped walking. I stood there transfixed, gaping at him in surprise. The reason for his visit was definitely one of the greatest surprises of my life so far. Now, you must be wondering, what the matter was. I am sure you too will be amazed on hearing it. Perhaps it will leave you astounded too. Well, instead of building more suspense, let me reveal the news to you. Actually, *Acharya* had brought King Dhrupad's daughter, Draupadi's marriage proposal for me. According to him, Draupadi was the most beautiful woman in Aryavarta and more importantly, King Dhrupad had himself sent this proposal. This was beyond any surprise or wonder that I had encountered. I could not comprehend the situation, for, if she was indeed so beautiful, then why did King Dhrupad send this proposal for me? There was no shortage of eligible princes in the whole of Aryavarta. Suddenly, another thought struck me—why did King Dhrupad choose to send the proposal through such an esteemed person, a person I could not possibly refuse? This was definitely the most unexpected proposal, through the most unexpected person. My brain had stopped functioning. I had realised that this cowherd boy had, indeed, made great progress, and receiving a proposal to marry a beautiful princess had validated it.

On a serious note, *Acharya* had brought along with him such a strange proposal that it was really not possible for me to respond immediately. Moreover, responding to him without fully comprehending the situation was out of the question. Seeing me in deep contemplation, *Acharya* broke the silence, "What thoughts are you lost in, Krishna?"



Honestly, it was only now that I was jolted back to my senses. Speaking in a bewildered tone, I said, “Oh nothing, *Acharya*. You have a much better understanding than me of what is good for me and what is not. So, I would be insulting you if I were to doubt the proposal brought by you. But I was wondering, both you and King Dhrupad are aware that I am already married. Then why bring a marriage proposal for a married person?”

Hearing me, *Acharya* burst out laughing. Amused, he led me to a large boulder, where we both perched ourselves. After staying silent for a while, he spoke with the utmost seriousness, “Krishna, you are really naïve. A king has to tackle thousands of problems on a daily basis, which is why he has a greater need for love, joy and relaxation. In fact, even the scriptures and society permit kings to marry as many times as they wish to.”

I replied, “That is alright; I can understand what you are saying. But what about Draupadi? If she is so beautiful, why would she accept a married man for a husband, especially when she has not even seen him?”

Hearing my question, *Acharya* became a bit grave. Then, with the same serious expression, he placed a hand on my shoulder, and solemnly said, “Krishna, the truth is that, there has been a misunderstanding between *Acharya* Drona and King Dhrupad. Feeling resentful and consumed with rage, Drona had captured half of King Dhrupad’s kingdom. Not content with that, he even impelled his brave disciple, Arjuna to capture King Dhrupad and make the king bow down to him, terming it Arjuna’s *gurudakshina*. Obeying his teacher’s command, Arjuna captured King Dhrupad in a cruel manner and brought him to his knees, before Drona. Ever since, Dhrupad has been seething with rage because of this humiliation and living like a wounded tiger, waiting to exact his revenge. And now, the situation is such that he wants to give his daughter in marriage to a courageous hero, who can avenge the humiliation he had been subjected to by *Acharya* Drona. You have put an end to tyrants such as Kansa, Panchajanya, Shringlava and Kalyavana. That is why he has sent this marriage proposal your way. After all, at present, who is braver than Krishna in all of Aryavarta?”

I was flabbergasted; *Acharya* Drona was a shockingly cruel person. He had once asked a student for his right thumb as *gurudakshina*, and now, he had

asked another to capture an innocent king and humiliate him. Indeed, it is because of such teachers that the glory of *Acharyas* in Aryavarta had been tarnished. No matter how misunderstood he was, or how unfairly he may have been treated, an *Acharya* needed to always conduct himself with dignity. If *Acharyas* were to resort to anger and revenge, then what would Aryavarta's future be like? Well, important as it was, this was not the subject of my contemplation at the moment. At present, I had to provide a suitable answer to *Acharya*. I was on the horns of a dilemma—neither could I refuse him, nor did I feel inclined to accept his offer. It was a tricky situation. As I was contemplating, suddenly, my line of thought digressed. I began to wonder if Draupadi was really so beautiful that even Rukmini's beauty was nothing compared to her. Oh no, my thoughts had once again veered in the wrong direction. But what could I do? I was so dazed on hearing the proposal that I was unable to think in the right direction. Though I was trying my best, I still could not focus my mind on the present dilemma. Nonetheless, it was essential for me to respond to *Acharya* in a manner that would not be considered disrespectful. Finally, when I could not think of a suitable response despite racking my brains, with the intention of buying time, I asked, "I can understand King Dhrupad's position, but is a father's revenge so important that he is even willing to push his own daughter into the turmoil resulting from it? And is Draupadi willing to become a sacrificial lamb for the sake of her father's revenge?"

Amused at the question, *Acharya* replied, "What are you saying, Krishna? Draupadi was born out of this very fire of revenge. This fire has been burning from even before her birth. Therefore, the aim of both the father and daughter's lives is the same—to make Drona and Arjuna pay the price for their deed."

Now, there was nothing more for me to say; *Acharya* had left me speechless. I could not muster the courage to ask any more questions. Besides, we had become so engrossed in conversation that we had lost all sense of time; it was already quite late in the evening. Retracing our steps towards the palace, I wondered, 'Arjuna is incredible indeed; why does he have to get entangled in such controversies?' What was the need to capture King Dhrupad? Ideally, he should be putting Duryodhana and Dushasana in their place, but he was unable to do that. Instead, he had unnecessarily made an enemy of King Dhrupad. A human being is strange indeed! He

shirks actions that he is ought to do, and engages himself in those that he is not supposed to.

Amidst thousands of such thoughts, my contemplation finally steered itself in the right direction. I thought, 'If Draupadi was indeed so beautiful, then anyone would be willing to lock horns with Drona or Arjuna to attain her. And if Drona were to be challenged, then the whole of Hastinapur would turn out to support him. Under such circumstances, if Dhrupad were to join forces with Jarasandha, then this battle could turn into a full-fledged war. There would be unnecessary violence and Aryavarta would witness large-scale destruction.' Disturbed by this, all of a sudden, I exclaimed loudly, "No...no...this is not possible. This should not happen."

Seeing me mumbling in this manner and lost in deep thought, *Acharya* reassured me saying, "You do not have to decide right away. I suggest you meet Dhrupad and Draupadi once, before arriving at a decision."

I nodded in agreement, glad that I had been saved from making a difficult decision, at least for the time being.

## The Coronation of the Pandavas

Well, *Acharya* Sandipani returned to his ashram, but not before handing me an attractive proposal that put me in a serious dilemma. No matter how much I reflected on it, the riddle simply refused to be solved. Whenever I focussed on finding the answer to a particular question, several other questions would surface. On the other hand, ever since Rukmini had heard that I had received a marriage proposal from Draupadi, the most beautiful woman in Aryavarta, she had made my life miserable. The irony was that the beauty of women, of which Krishna was an ardent admirer, had turned the tables on him with a marriage proposal from the most beautiful woman. Apart from the mental turmoil that the proposal had brought, Krishna had to face marital friction too. Rukmini would frequently become upset with me on the slightest pretext. Moreover, she was caught in a vortex of misery which was directly affecting her health and my life. Certainly, it must have been affecting our unborn child as well.

However, Rukmini was adamant and refused to understand. Moreover, she had begun to behave as if my marriage to Draupadi was fixed already. This was probably due to the fact that bhaiya and my friends had tarnished my character in Rukmini's presence. As a result, she was bound to be suspicious of me. The poor woman was compelled to presume that Krishna, who became enamoured even at the sight of *gopis* and Kubja, would undoubtedly accept the proposal of Draupadi, the most beautiful woman in Aryavarta. Of course, I could not disprove her opinion on this matter, but even so, it was not in my nature to clarify someone else's perception. Secondly, it was my firm belief that people's lives are a product of their own thinking. The anguish that Rukmini was currently suffering from, was a result of her own thinking. Such being the case, how could I help it? Rukmini's ego and stubbornness had reached their peak. At present, she was unnecessarily troubling herself, especially at a time when she was pregnant, and her condition was delicate. At such a time, it was imperative that she take care of both, her health and happiness. She needed to at least be aware that a mother's physical and mental health undeniably affect the unborn child. I wondered why she was caught up in futile worries at such a critical time. The silly girl was troubling herself thinking that if a beautiful

woman such as Draupadi were to arrive in Dwarka, then Krishna would surely ignore his Rukmini. She was worried that although she was a queen, she would be reduced to the status of a handmaid. Even though I was trying to calm my beloved in a number of ways, all my efforts were repeatedly reduced to naught. In any case, once the evil thorns of insecurity lodge themselves into a person's psyche, it is usually quite difficult to reassure and comfort that person.

I found myself in an uneasy situation because of all these developments. On one hand, Rukmini was not willing to understand my position and on the other, it was time for me to leave for Hastinapur. Have you forgotten Yudhishtira's coronation ceremony? I was filled with an intense longing not only to attend the coronation, but also to meet the Pandavas. Even if I were to forsake this wish, I still had to travel to the land of the Nagas to try to solve their problem. This was anyway my responsibility and besides, I was eager to meet my great-grandfather. Moreover, I had to visit King Dhrupad and Draupadi too, as I had promised *Acharya*. I could not avoid this eventuality at any cost. In other words, I had more reasons than one to undertake the journey. Additionally, considering the number of tasks lying ahead, the journey was bound to be a long one. It could possibly take me a year to return to Dwarka. It was necessary to start preparing for the journey, and it was high time that I got on with it. What I mean to say is, on one hand, time was short, and on the other, Rukmini's health was deteriorating due to her stubbornness. Honestly, I wanted to spend the remaining days with Rukmini in love and peace. I certainly wished to see her as her normal self before setting out on such a long journey. On the other hand, I also wanted to thoroughly enjoy the kingdom of Dwarka I had so lovingly built, for, I would be gone a long time. Moreover, I had to ensure smooth administration of the palace's affairs in my absence. I also had to pay attention to various impediments in the commercial aspect of the palace's affairs. So, while the time to leave was fast approaching, the list of things to attend to, was growing by the moment and there seemed to be no end to it. Thus, with a heavy heart, I immersed myself day and night into completing the unfinished tasks at hand.

As if there weren't enough troubles already, a suspicious Rukmini had caught on to a new whim. She insisted that I do not leave Dwarka at all, even though she knew that my journey was planned in advance; in fact, she

had been the one to suggest that I should go to meet my great-grandfather. She also knew the significance of attending Yudhishtira's coronation. However, the marriage proposal from Draupadi had shaken her up completely. In any case, I was quite worried about her. Despite having a thousand tasks to attend to, I would spend most of my time with her. Of course, I could not give in to her unreasonable demands. So, I regretted not having been able to alleviate her sadness.

How could I have lessened her pain anyway? Her anxiety was a figment of her own imagination; it was not a reality which could be dealt with. This type of imaginary anxiety has to be soothed by one's own self. Nobody else could help with that, no matter how much one wanted to. It was certain that I had to leave Dwarka; there was nothing more to discuss or reconsider in this matter. Most importantly, even my date of departure had been finalised and it was not possible to change it now.

At present, preparations for the journey were under way, on a scale that befitted the King of Dwarka. About twenty chariots, thirty soldiers, numerous servants and abundant food and supplies were ready to go with me. And of course, I was taking Daruka along to ride my chariot. Since time was scarce and a lot had to be done, I finally decided to pull my attention away from Rukmini for a while; she was worrying about eventualities that did not even exist. Her sorrow was generated out of her own negative thoughts, which only she could get rid of. For me, her sorrow was gradually turning into a problem, with no possible solution. What could I do when she was not even willing to understand? She would get annoyed with me, sulk and fight. Instead of worrying about her own health, she was constantly worrying about Draupadi marrying me; this was definitely not a sign of intelligence. Meanwhile, as the day of my departure drew nearer, I was becoming busier than ever and Rukmini, on the other hand, kept inventing new ways to torment me. Her grouse, now, was that I was not giving her enough attention, which in turn was making her sad. Now, this was indeed unreasonable; in spite of so many responsibilities, I was taking all possible care of her. What more could I do? I also understood that deep down, Draupadi was the cause of her anxiety, but Rukmini would not admit it openly. Even if she did talk about it, what could I have really said to allay her fears or comfort her?

Considering the innumerable tasks at hand, I set aside my worries about her and immersed myself into my duties at the palace and the business affairs of Dwarka. As for Rukmini, what could I say about her? She was no less of a wonder. When she saw that none of her tricks were working on me, she began to make new demands. She insisted that I leave after a few days, for, she was due to give birth any time now. She wished that I see the child once and then undertake the journey. However, this was not possible—only twenty days remained for Yudhishtira's coronation ceremony. There was no point in reaching Hastinapur after the ceremony was over. Hence, I had to leave in a week's time. Besides, if I had postponed my trip to a later date, then my visit to the land of the Nagas would have been delayed further. My great-grandfather was on his deathbed; what if something untoward were to happen before I was able to reach him? Considering all possibilities, there was no question of delaying the journey even by a day, without a valid reason. So, on one hand, I was busy preparing for the journey, and on the other, I continued my efforts to convince Rukmini and make her understand my situation, until the eve of my departure. I did not want to leave her in an unhappy state of mind before commencing such a long journey. So, on the last night in Dwarka, before my departure, we sat talking to each other late into the night, while I tried to shower affection on her. Sitting on the swing in the veranda outside, I pulled her close in my arms and spoke lovingly to her in an effort to make her understand. I said, "Our child will be born whether I am here or not. Mother, Revati, Subhadra and several handmaids are there to take care of you and our child. Besides, it is not as if the child would recognise me as soon as it is born. So, do you want me to stay back where my presence makes no difference; do you want me to avoid going where it is imperative for me to go and where my presence is crucial? That would mean that I am shirking my duty because of attachment, and you know very well that I never shirk my duties. Besides, why don't you understand, you foolish girl, that I have to leave tomorrow morning? You are intelligent, you are a princess, and you are well aware of royal duties as well as my nature. So, why don't you send me off with a cheerful smile?"

I was speaking to her endearingly, but I knew deep down in my heart that it was not possible to make her see sense in one night, when I had been trying in vain to make her understand for so long. Ironically, the very person, who was supposed to put me on the path of duty, was now trying to distract me

from my duties. It was not as if she did not understand the urgency of my trip, but her intelligence seemed to have deserted her completely, swayed by the description of Draupadi's beauty. Her insecurity had cast a veil over her power of reasoning and once someone becomes insecure to this extent, it is well-nigh impossible to make that person see sense.

As our conversation and this game of sulking and consoling continued, it was well past midnight. I had to leave early the next morning. Finally, considering my exhaustion from all the work I had to attend to, during the past several days, Rukmini relented and took pity on me. My efforts seemed to have borne fruit. In any case, in the deep recesses of her heart, she knew that neither was I saying nor doing anything wrong. It was just that all her efforts had been limited to thwarting the threat named Draupadi from her life. Realising that despite all her manoeuvrings, she had been unsuccessful in her efforts, she probably thought it wiser to fulfill her duty as a sensible queen. Thus, she took my hand and led me to the sleeping chamber where she lovingly stroked my head as she lulled me to sleep. Well, I do not know whether to call it my luck or Rukmini's change of heart, but whatever it was, it did help me sleep peacefully that night.

I woke up on time the next morning and got ready quickly. I felt a unique sense of enthusiasm; I did not know whether this was the effect of the excitement of the journey or whether it was because of the new turn that my life was about to take. There was yet another reason why this morning appeared to be glorious; Rukmini was back to her usual self. Her composed behaviour was certainly giving me a great sense of relief. At present, however, she had become rather emotional too. I embraced her warmly, insisting that she take good care of herself until my return; after all, she was my life. Being a skilful actor just like me, she too, seized the opportunity to plead with me to return as soon as possible. Well, I was no less; I wasted no time and immediately gave her a false assurance.

All my friends, my grandfather, my parents and thousands of people of Dwarka had come to the seashore to bid me farewell...and why wouldn't they? After all, their king was leaving Dwarka for the first time. Ah yes, at the last minute, I had made a minor change. Apart from Daruka, I was taking Uddhava along too. This decision had relieved Rukmini to a great extent, for, she believed that Uddhava would definitely rein in my amorous



nature. Poor Rukmini! Little did she know that I would end up doing whatever I deemed appropriate, and in such a situation, even God himself could not stop me from doing it, let alone Uddhava.

We finally set off on our journey after a grand and emotional farewell. Uddhava was also very happy to join us. This was the first official journey I was undertaking since I had become king, and that made it all the more memorable. However, deep within, I was still feeling a bit gloomy. Even though Rukmini had bid me farewell with a smile on her face, I knew in my heart of hearts that she was really despondent. First of all, she was due to deliver the child any day now and one cannot emphasise enough how important a child is for a mother. Besides, I was going away for at least a year's duration, which meant that she was bound to endure separation from me for a long period as well. Most importantly, she would also have to cope with the biggest anxiety weighing on her mind—the mental stress named Draupadi. Thinking about all this made me anxious, as I set forth on my journey, worrying about Rukmini every now and then. I wonder why Nature always presented the most difficult choices to me. On one hand, there was Yudhishtira's coronation, and on the other, the impending birth of my child—my first child. Now, why did these two important events have to coincide with each other? Rukmini had to needlessly undergo so much trouble because of all this.

Truly, ever since Rukmini had arrived in Dwarka, I had assumed that I would be relieved of the struggles of life. Little did I realise that I was not destined to enjoy a calm and peaceful life. After having resolved the problems that Rukmini was facing, and assuaging her fears to the best of my ability, I had three major engagements, or rather confrontations, lined up. One of them was with the very beautiful Draupadi, and honestly, when confronted by beauty, I often found myself defenceless. As you are well aware, my nature found it unacceptable to win against beauty. Thus, you can say that after a whole year's rest and enjoyment, conflict was once again beckoning me, 'Come on over, Krishna! Rest and peace are not for you. You have to find joy in conflict itself and play your flute in the shadow of death.' 'Alright,' I thought. 'I will accept Nature's wish, whatever it is. I have always been and will continue to be a devoted soldier of Nature.'

Oh well, let us put that aside; I need not tell you all this, for, you are already familiar with my situation. Returning to the journey, the first day turned out to be quite interesting. We had just made our first halt for the night, but sleep eluded me, as I recalled the day when *Acharya* Sandipani had brought the proposal and my subsequent conversation with Rukmini. I recalled the exact moment when *Acharya* had broken the news to me, and that had made me quite sad. Well, I was not sad about the marriage proposal, but about the fact that a father was using his daughter as a pawn in a game to exact revenge. Can a person stoop to such an extent in his desire for vengeance? Can a teacher use his own disciple to seek revenge on his enemy? If kings and teachers were to resort to such lowly tactics, then how could the common people live in happiness and peace? Would this not put the basic purpose of human life itself at stake? I had retired to my chamber that day, troubled by all these thoughts. As always, Rukmini was lying in bed, waiting impatiently for me. That night, she appeared quite happy too. She had worn a yellow silk sari, a favourite of mine, making her all the more attractive. What could I say, the colour suited her beautifully! Of course, it is a different matter that I preferred orange or pink-coloured *pitambars* on myself.

Returning to Rukmini, I distinctly remember how happy she had appeared that day; her smiling countenance was etched in my heart. Let me also familiarise you with her most endearing virtue—she would instantly perceive my anxiety or sadness and would often advise me to not worry needlessly. However, that day, she was lost in her own thoughts. Espying me, she had asked all the maidservants to leave, and as soon as they left, she had stood up, wrapping her arms around me. Thereafter, she had held my hand and had lovingly made me sit on the bed. Placing her head on my chest, she had said cheerfully, “Today, I am going to give you good news that will make you go wild with joy. The whole of Dwarka will be immersed in celebration. Do you know that any day now, we are going to become parents?”

I remember that I had not welcomed this news with much enthusiasm. Surprisingly, she had still not noticed my gloominess; she was preoccupied with her own thoughts and emotions. She had continued talking, “Just wait and see, it will be a boy. And he will be just like you—dark, handsome and heroic. Now, all our time will be spent feeding him, playing with him and

bringing him up.” Despite hearing her plans, I had continued to remain silent. It was only then that she noticed my silence and naturally, was surprised that I had not expressed joy on hearing such wonderful news. And then, noticing my cold response, the cheerful Rukmini had become so sad and dejected! I cannot forget the look on her face. I had not wished to ruin her moment of joy; I did not want to disappoint her. But what could I do? After hearing about *Acharya* Drona’s manoeuvrings, I was troubled to see the degeneracy of human beings, the level to which humans had stooped to achieve their aim. I had started worrying about their future. Such being the case, I could not partake in her happiness no matter how much I wished to. The poor girl had become so upset that she wanted to know the reason behind my indifferent behaviour. In that instant, I do not know what came over me, but I began to offer pearls of wisdom to her. Stroking her head gently, I said, “Listen, my dear. Hear me out carefully. Being pregnant, having a child, all of this, is the result of our actions. If we perform our duty, it is bound to lead to an outcome. Every human being must fulfil his duty with enthusiasm, because he is obliged to carry out his work thoroughly and to the best of his ability. However, it is wrong to worry about the result, to set expectations or be excited about what fruit your action might bear, because it is Nature that has a right over the fruit of our action, not us. That is why, the one who accepts the fruit of his action without discrimination never becomes unhappy. Therefore, while it is good to be enthusiastic when performing your duty, becoming unduly excited about its result is not advisable. Remember this, my dear, enthusiasm regarding the fruit of your action always brings grave results.”

I was not sure, what and how much Rukmini had comprehended from all this, but she was certainly not pleased, and had every right not to be. Indeed, that was not the time to talk about such serious matters. Nevertheless, what I had said was true. It is true that the root cause of all unhappiness is the expectation of the fruit of action and feeling enthusiastic about it. Look at Rukmini, for instance. Had she not laid the foundation for her sorrow by showing so much enthusiasm for her unborn child?

Consider this: if a daughter were to be born to her, she would be unhappy. On the other hand, if she were to give birth to a son and he did not grow up to be as good-looking or heroic as I was, it would only disappoint her. My intention was clear; I wanted to save her from the pitfalls of sorrow in the

future. I wanted to explain to her that if one has performed one's duty, then it was bound to lead to an outcome, so, one should allow it to materialise. I wanted to tell her that we would accept our child, whenever it arrived and no matter what kind of a child it was. What was the need to be so happy and enthusiastic about it in the present?

Well, it was not as if Rukmini was simply a victim of weak sentiments. She was an extremely wise and mature woman, well-versed in every subject. Therefore, I too would share all my thoughts with her, the way one would with a good friend. That day too, she had risen above all personal weaknesses and had tried to understand the reason behind my unhappiness. I had not held back either and had apprised her of the developments, in detail. I had clearly told her that *Acharya* Sandipani had brought a marriage proposal for me from the finest beauty in Aryavarta, Draupadi; however, taking revenge on *Acharya* Drona was a mandatory stipulation of this marriage. Surprisingly though, when she heard this, the colour had drained completely from her face. That was not all; I could clearly see that she had fallen into an abyss of anxiety. Now just imagine, a person who had been as happy as her, just a moment ago, had turned so grim in no time. This is exactly what happens when people cling on to the desire for the fruit of their actions. Their happiness is futile, and so is their sorrow. This is exactly what I had wanted to explain to her.

Nonetheless, let me not delve into the workings of the human mind and philosophise again. That day, Rukmini soon overcame her dejection, regaining her composure. In fact, she had remarked sarcastically, "You should accept this proposal. If you are able to marry a beauty like Draupadi in exchange for revenge against *Acharya* Drona, then the deal is surely not a bad one." I wonder what had come over me then, for, without thinking, I had immediately commented in a jocular tone, "That's wonderful! You have resolved my dilemma! A wife should be as wise and understanding as you. I shall send a messenger to King Dhrupad today itself, accepting his proposal!"

That was it; the damage was done. I had made a grave mistake. Suddenly, Rukmini had lost all enthusiasm in her pregnancy. Her sadness had become more intense than her happiness. I was amazed, for, human beings are strange creatures indeed. They enjoy the future or endure the pain of the

future in the present moment itself. Rukmini failed to understand that the child was not born yet and neither had I married Draupadi yet. She did not realise that we would experience a thousand other joys and sorrows before these two events unfolded. Then what was the point in experiencing these imaginary joys and sorrows in the present moment itself?

Although my thinking was correct, this time, I refrained from imparting words of wisdom. I had gathered from the latest experience that the need of the hour was to comfort Rukmini, rather than preach practicality to her; however, she refused to be placated so easily. It had taken me a whole week of persuasion and cajoling to bring about a semblance of normalcy in her behaviour. However, despite my persistent efforts, her anxiety and despondency had not been alleviated, and this continued till the time of my departure. So, while on one hand, I had the journey to Hastinapur ahead of me, on the other, Rukmini's sullen countenance refused to leave my mind. Consequently, I had been unable to enjoy the first day of my journey, and I had not been able to think about anything else either. However, sadness had never suited me. It was not in my nature to worry unnecessarily. The root cause of Rukmini's sadness was her flawed thinking and her ego. Therefore, she had to deal with it on her own. Besides, for how long could I keep worrying about her? The whole of Aryavarta was calling out to me. The common people were beseeching me to intervene and prevent the political situation in the region from worsening. Their hearts were crying out saying, 'Do not hurl us into unnecessary battles and into the fire of revenge; we want to live and make progress. Someone save us, please!' And true to my nature, I had always responded to the call to act for the greater good. So, there was no question of ignoring it this time either. And so, by morning, my anguish concerning Rukmini had disappeared on its own.

The moment I was free of this worry, a new dawn greeted me. I became engrossed in the journey and even took the reins of the chariot in my hands as the journey resumed, seating Daruka and Uddhava by my side. Our chariot was followed by twenty-five chariots. The inhabitants of every kingdom gaped at us in awe and wondrous amazement as the procession of the King of Dwarka passed through. But my childishness had still not left me, as I sat in the chariot with a feeling of pride. One might say that, in spite of having become the King of Dwarka, I was still a cowherd at heart. On a serious note, I became exuberant at the thought of meeting the

Pandavas. I was also enjoying the experience of stepping out of Dwarka after such a long time. One might say that as soon as I had rid myself of worrying about Rukmini's sadness, I surrendered to the thrill of the journey.

Indeed, it seemed as if time had grown wings. After travelling continuously for eight days, we finally reached the outskirts of Hastinapur. We camped just outside the city in a rest house. Actually, I wanted Uddhava to go ahead and announce my arrival in Hastinapur, before entering the city. There were two reasons for this. It was a known fact that Yudhishtira's coronation was finally being held after much difficulty and that Duryodhana would try his best to create obstacles to prevent the ceremony from taking place. Therefore, I thought it wise to gauge the internal situation of Hastinapur on the pretext of sending news of my arrival. Secondly, now that I was the King of Dwarka, and this was my first official journey in that capacity, I wanted to be honoured and welcomed like a king; this was possible only by announcing my arrival through a messenger.

In other words, not only was I conscious of my duty towards everyone, but was also aware of my duty towards myself—the King of Dwarka. Besides, I had this bundle of talent called Uddhava by my side, who had become an expert in sensing a situation, bringing messages and conveying them, worming out secrets and even hiding them. Shall I let you in on a secret? Although Uddhava appeared naïve, he had been blessed with all these regal qualities from the very beginning. All I had to do was explain a matter to him and he was quick to grasp my intentions. Carrying my message with him, he immediately left for Hastinapur. Meanwhile, I decided to rest for a while to ease off the exhaustion from the journey. So, the King of Dwarka sat back and enjoyed being massaged twice that day by his horde of servitors.

But then, the very next day we were met with a major setback. Uddhava was scheduled to return the next day, but he arrived only on the third day. On hearing news of his arrival, I rushed out of the rest house to greet him. But surprisingly, he had come all alone. Agreed that the coronation ceremony was in two days' time, and everybody was preoccupied with it, but at least Bhima or Arjuna could have accompanied him to welcome me. My ego had almost taken offence at this, when I took note of the expression on Uddhava's face. What had happened to him? He looked as if a great

calamity had befallen him. I had never seen him so upset and troubled before. It frightened me to see him in this state, my mind clouded by several doubts and apprehensions. However, before I could ask him anything, he started bawling like a child on seeing me. I was terribly worried now. My wits had deserted me and I was flummoxed. However, looking at his pitiable state, I held him and led him to my chamber. We both sat down on the bed. He was still wailing. Something unexpected had happened, of that I was certain. Now, I simply had to ascertain how bad the unexpected actually was. I tried to calm him down. I gave him water and consoled him, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not bring himself to say anything. Uncertainty is always terrifying; therefore, I wanted to know what the matter was, as soon as possible. I could gauge from his condition that the news was certainly dreadful. My heart was pounding, but Uddhava was still inconsolable. Flustered by now, I could not understand what to make of this situation. Intuitively, I realised that the news concerned the Pandavas. But what could it possibly be? ‘Oh, forget it,’ I thought to myself. It was better to console Uddhava first, if I hoped to get to the heart of the matter. I continued with my attempts to console him, and eventually, my efforts bore fruit. With great difficulty, Uddhava composed himself a little and blurted out, “Actually, Yudhishtira’s coronation ceremony had already taken place a while ago. But, surprisingly, he was not made the crown prince of Hastinapur; instead, overnight, a new kingdom by the name of Varnavat was built and he was crowned the king of that kingdom. This means that, in effect, Duryodhana is now the crown prince of Hastinapur. The intent behind this was the belief that if the Pandavas and the Kauravas each had their own kingdom, then the animosity and fights between them would end forever.”

Well, so far, I could not see any reason to be so upset over what Uddhava had said. If not the crown prince of Hastinapur, Yudhishtira had at least become the crown prince of a part of Hastinapur. As it is, there is no greater treasure in this world than a sense of contentment. I was just thinking of all this when a fresh spate of tears began to flow down Uddhava’s cheeks. Now, I was really concerned. I knew that Uddhava wanted to deliver some terrible news, which he could not bring himself to even speak of. He had stopped talking at a delicate point in our conversation, making it difficult for me to fathom what exactly the matter was. The situation had turned

quite strange. On one hand, my heart was sinking uncontrollably and on the other, Uddhava's bawling continued unabated. With great difficulty, I managed to calm him down once more and only then was he able to reveal the rest of the story. What he stated was terrifying indeed. In between sobs, all that he could say was, "Kanhaiya, one night, when they were sleeping in their palace, all the five brothers along with Aunt Kunti perished in a fire."<sup>[22]</sup>

Hearing this, I was stunned, my body turning numb. Still reeling under the devastating news, I felt as if the earth below me had just caved in. A thousand thoughts besieged my mind. What had happened all of a sudden? How could an entire palace burn down? On one hand, a thousand questions surged forth in my mind and on the other, I felt as if I had lost everything, as if parts of my own body had been burnt down and turned to ashes, for, the Pandavas were indeed part of me. We had met only twice, but in just two meetings, we had become so close to one another. Arjuna and Bhima had become dearer to me than life itself. I had felt our hearts beat together as one. And here I was, waiting outside Hastinapur, expecting to spend some peaceful time with the Pandavas, drawing up plans to stay up all night talking to each other. But now, everything was over. Besides, this news boded danger for Aryavarta as well, because Duryodhana was certain to act like an unharnessed bull now, wreaking havoc in the region. I knew that dark clouds of war would undoubtedly hover upon Aryavarta, because of his wicked ambitions. In other words, disaster had already struck, and calamity would inevitably follow.

Nevertheless, I took charge and controlled myself soon enough. Meanwhile, Uddhava's tears had dried up. We were shaken up so badly that we were not in a position to console each other or even think of any more words to exchange. Of course, I continued to contemplate the matter. The fact that an entire palace could burn down to ashes like this did not make sense to me. By now, Uddhava had calmed down considerably. So, I asked for his opinion, "Do you smell a conspiracy behind the burning of the palace?"

He seemed to have been waiting for me to pose exactly a question like this. He replied immediately, "I agree with you, Kanhaiya! Even I was unable to fathom how an entire palace could burn down. I wanted to unravel the mystery behind this calamity, and so I decided to extend my stay by one



day. There are rumours that the palace was made of lacquer. Another fact worth noting is that the construction of the palace took place under the supervision of Duryodhana and Shakuni. Frankly speaking, this information only strengthened my suspicion that the Pandavas had perhaps fallen victim to foul play.”

I had arrived at a similar conclusion too. I began to wonder at the extent to which human beings had degenerated. Can a person be so overcome by personal ambition that he could kill his own brothers? Not ‘could kill’; he had actually killed them. With this thought, my sorrow suddenly dissipated, and I was overcome by fury. I was angry not only with Duryodhana and Shakuni, but also with King Dhritarashtra and Grandfather Bhishma. I knew that the situation was far gone, and nothing could be done now, but still, a lot needed to be done. Therefore, I decided to visit Hastinapur. It was almost afternoon; I sent Uddhava back immediately with the message of my arrival. I still did not want to go to Hastinapur unannounced. Since Hastinapur was not far, Uddhava delivered the message and returned at dusk.

Obviously, we did not have to wait for an auspicious moment to enter Hastinapur, so we reached the city the next morning itself. As soon as we made our way into the city’s boundaries, the news of our arrival reached the palace. Duryodhana personally came to greet us along with a few of his brothers. Their uncle, Shakuni had also accompanied them. I did notice that the whole of Hastinapur was in mourning, but I saw no such emotion on Duryodhana’s face. His behaviour confirmed our suspicions that the Pandavas were, indeed, victims of foul play. Moreover, Duryodhana was welcoming me as per royal customs and traditions, as if I had come to attend a joyous event, whereas I had come to grieve Hastinapur’s loss. As if this was not enough, the maidservants even applied *tilak*<sup>[23]</sup> on my forehead and performed *aarti*<sup>[24]</sup>. Seething with rage from within, more so after all the rituals that were being performed, as if nothing untoward had happened, I lost my temper. I immediately ordered the maidservants to go away and addressed Duryodhana angrily, “Here, my heart is weeping for my aunt and the Pandavas who have been swallowed up by flames, and you are greeting me as if I have come to celebrate their death?”

This was my first meeting with Duryodhana, but it was surely enough to understand what kind of a person he was. Nevertheless, my reaction had baffled him. Perhaps this first meeting was sufficient for him as well to understand my nature. Evidently, he was taken aback by my behaviour but the clever person that he was, my outburst was met with silence on his part. Seeing that the situation was taking a turn for the worse, Uncle Shakuni stepped in. He immediately said, “The thing is, my son, this is your first visit to our kingdom after becoming the King of Dwarka. So, all this was necessary from a political standpoint. If we do not welcome you suitably, then people will think that we are jealous of your ascension as the King of Dwarka. Actually, Duryodhana was not in favour of doing all this. He was not in the mood to do anything at all, but he was duty-bound by the royal palace. The truth is, he is feeling so miserable because of this terrible tragedy that he has lost the ability to think.”

Tragedy...? I immediately pounced on Shakuni for his use of the word tragedy. Raising my voice and expressing surprise, I asked, “Tragedy or conspiracy?” The moment they heard the word ‘conspiracy’, the colour drained from both their faces. Well, I did not care. I continued my verbal attack. Spewing more venom, I said, “And as far as Duryodhana’s sorrow is concerned, I experienced it as soon as I stepped into Hastinapur. In fact, the common people here, appear to be more distressed and in greater grief than Duryodhana.”

My sarcasm was so vitriolic that both were completely flustered. Satisfied that my scorn had hit the target, I decided to let the matter rest, as I had planned to launch several strikes on them at a later stage. Thus, changing the subject, I said, “First of all, I would like to meet Uncle, that is King Dhritarashtra, and convey my condolences to him.”

This request was simple enough, so our procession made its way to the royal palace and within moments, I was standing in the presence of King Dhritarashtra. When King Dhritarashtra heard of my arrival, he got up from his throne and bellowed, “Welcome, O King of Dwarka, welcome!” Then, he started sobbing and said, “You have come at a very sad time. We are so grieved that we cannot even congratulate our own child on becoming the King of Dwarka.”

Queen Gandhari too was crying inconsolably. I offered my condolences to them saying, “I can understand the suffering you are going through and that is why I have come, to share this unbearable sorrow with you.”

Dhritarashtra and Gandhari appeared highly distraught indeed. Clearly, they were not a party to this plot. After some polite conversation, the king asked me where I was staying. With great humility, I said that I would like to stay with my uncle, Vidura, instead of staying at the royal palace. I clearly did not want to risk staying at the palace with Shakuni and Duryodhana both present here. Who knew, they might even reduce me to ashes overnight in my sleep. Once our meeting ended, Uddhava and I went straight to Uncle Vidura’s house.

Finding us at his doorstep, Uncle Vidura felt blessed to have us as his guests. In any case, he was a relative, a very simple and affectionate person. Bhima had earlier told me that Vidura was the most ardent well-wisher of the Pandavas. He had also mentioned that because of this, Duryodhana and Shakuni were always looking for ways to have him displaced from the post of the chief minister. This was yet another reason I had decided to stay with him; perhaps I could instigate him and get him to divulge some of the secrets of the royal palace. In fact, I wanted to get to the root of this conspiracy at any cost. This was my sole objective in coming to Hastinapur, otherwise, what work did I have in Hastinapur when the Pandavas were no longer here?

Now, whether there was anything to do in Hastinapur or not was a different matter, but now that I was here, let me describe the kingdom. Hastinapur was a much bigger kingdom than Dwarka, at least ten times bigger. In a way, Hastinapur was one of the superpowers of Aryavarta, and this was the main cause of my concern. To be honest, this was the anxiety that had brought me here. Now that Duryodhana had managed to eliminate the Pandavas forever, his growing ambition could lead to unnecessary attacks on smaller kingdoms. To prevent unnecessary violence in Aryavarta, it was, therefore, necessary to tarnish Duryodhana’s name for hatching a plot to kill the Pandavas so that his reputation was ruined, both in the eyes of the royal palace as well as the common people. This would ensure that he remained embroiled in trying to solve matters in Hastinapur, rendering him unable to even consider attacking other kingdoms. As you already know, I was

strongly averse to battles between armed forces. Such battles invariably lead to a massive loss of lives and wealth. Apart from causing mass destruction, they also have an adverse effect on the standard of living and the economy of the kingdoms involved in the battle. The Pandavas were destined to leave us, and so they had departed. However, that did not mean that my responsibilities were over. Now that I was here, I considered it my duty to ensure that peace and goodwill continued to prevail in this vast region.

Nevertheless, early next day, we went to meet Grandfather Bhishma. Uncle Vidura was already with us. Grandfather Bhishma appeared truly distraught. I touched his feet in veneration and said, “Forgive me, for, I was delayed in arriving here.”

Grandfather spoke sadly, “You are right. You are, indeed, very late, Kanhaiya.”

I quickly retorted, “When all this could happen in spite of your presence, what difference would my presence have made?”

This was, indeed, a unique trait of mine; I never missed an opportunity to make people feel guilty, either by passing sarcastic comments or by launching verbal attacks on their psyche. By doing this, it not only made people realise their crimes and follies, but it was also an effective tool to rein in their wrongdoings. Indeed, it is a universal truth that everybody wants to commit a crime, but nobody likes to be proved a criminal. And at present, this was exactly what happened with Grandfather Bhishma; my single taunt had shaken him badly. After all, I had made him an accomplice in the conspiracy that had been hatched in the royal palace. Really, this one assault had silenced him for quite some time. But then, he spoke in a broken voice, “It is not true. At present, I am akin to an ageing, toothless lion whose roar is meaningless.” In the next instance, however, I wondered what happened to him, for, he suddenly began offering justification saying, “I did not object to the Pandavas moving to Varnavat because I thought that this would offer a permanent solution to the fight between the Pandavas and the Kauravas.”

Well, I was not someone who was going to respect his age or pity his condition. So, once again, I replied in a caustic tone, “And surely, with the death of the Pandavas, a permanent solution to the fights has emerged!”

I had intended this to be a severely barbed taunt, and he clearly understood it. Becoming even more distraught, he said, “But what could we have done once they were reduced to ashes? It was destiny... fate.”

I replied, “If it was indeed destiny, then I would not have become so miserable, for, I have always accepted Nature’s wish. However, this was a plot orchestrated by Duryodhana and Shakuni. Their palace was not a real palace...it was made of lacquer, and a tiny spark was sufficient to burn it down.”

Shocked to the core, all that Grandfather Bhishma could do was stare at me in disbelief. Realising that I was attacking him with my verbal prowess, he became distressed and once again began offering explanations. This time, nearly folding his hands in an appeal, he said, “Kanhaiya! All of Hastinapur knows that both the Kauravas and the Pandavas are equally dear to me. But all this has probably happened because of my weakness and helplessness.”

I was happy he had accepted responsibility to some extent, but I was not fully satisfied. I was still in no mood to let him off the hook so easily. Striking once more with my acerbity, I wanted to rouse his conscience thoroughly. Although I maintained decorum and was polite, considering his age, I spoke without mincing words, placing the blame squarely on his shoulders. I said, “Grandfather! Perhaps I am being too big for my boots. Forgive my saying this, but it is not the intentions that matter. What matters is the consequence; and trust me, the consequences are right in front of us. Therefore, in my opinion, King Dhritarashtra and you are equally culpable for this treachery, along with Duryodhana and Shakuni.” Seeing me level a direct accusation at him, grandfather’s face fell. He was unable to utter a single word after this, so I finally took pity on him, considering his age. Besides, a dose of verbal attack like this was enough for now. Thus, concluding my first meeting with him, I stood up to leave. I could not, however, resist giving him a last piece of advice before leaving. Shooting a barb at him sweetly, I said, “At least now, you should try to rein in

Duryodhana and Shakuni's atrocities. If nothing else, this can avert catastrophes in the future."

With this parting shot, I took leave of him. Uddhava and I left with Uncle Vidura for his house. Vidura, who was sitting beside me, was quite pleased that I had spoken so bluntly to Grandfather Bhishma and the king. Unfortunately, even though I had vented my anger at Grandfather Bhishma, I was still seething. Because, in my opinion, failure is a grave sin in itself, no matter what the excuse behind it is, and one has to pay the price for this sin at any cost. You all know how much I hated failure and this was why I had never failed at anything in life. Due to my strong resolve, I had always attained success. I had made success my destiny, no matter what the circumstances, and perhaps that is why I am referred to as '*Jai Sri Krishna*'—one who is always victorious.

I firmly believed that irrespective of whether a mistake is intentional or accidental, one has to bear its consequences. And because all this had occurred while Vidura was the chief minister, he too could not absolve himself of his responsibilities by projecting that his intentions were good. I was still angry, so I vented my anger on Uncle Vidura too. On reaching home, as soon as I found a moment alone with him, I turned on him and said sternly, "Despite being the chief minister, you did not even get a whiff of what the Kauravas were planning. Therefore, in my opinion, you are also equally responsible for this unfortunate event. The king, I know, is blind since birth and now, the love for his eldest son has blinded his intelligence as well. But what had happened to you? The Pandavas had always trusted your knowledge, experience and judgement. Tell me, of what use are these virtues if they could not save the lives of my aunt and her sons?"

Uddhava, however, did not like the tone I had used with Vidura. Nonetheless, I considered Vidura to be equally culpable of the misdeed. Hearing me level a direct accusation at him, Vidura replied, "I was helpless then, just as I am helpless now." His argument made no sense to me; on the contrary, it only made me angrier. This time, I said in an enraged tone, "This is the great thing about Hastinapur. Over there, grandfather is helpless, here, you are powerless and the king is already blind. This is why the nefarious and ambitious duo of Duryodhana and Shakuni is able to do as they please. I hope you are aware that Hastinapur is not a small kingdom. It

is the collective responsibility of all of you to keep its people happy and set them on the path towards progress. If you are even slightly aware of your duties, then at least now, try to rein in the duo of Duryodhana and Shakuni.”

Well, this was enough for the time being, I thought. Actually, my intent behind all this drama was to save the people of Hastinapur from the trio of Shakuni, Duryodhana and Dushasana. And this is why I was instigating the other trio of grandfather, Vidura and the king against this evil trio. I considered it my ultimate duty to save human beings, whichever kingdom they belonged to. The Pandavas were gone, but what about those who were left behind? To achieve this objective, I continued to camp in Hastinapur so that I could create a suitable atmosphere against Duryodhana and then rein him in. Now, I was working towards this objective since the day I had arrived in Hastinapur, but let me tell you something. Hastinapur had several well-wishers and relatives of mother and father; the common people too considered me a son of Hastinapur. Moreover, I had acquired a formidable reputation across the Aryavarta region as a valiant warrior having killed the likes of Kansa, Panchajanya, Shringlava and Kalyavana. As a result, there was a continuous stream of visitors at Vidura’s house wanting to meet me. Being the superlative strategist that I was, I decided to use this to my advantage. I knew that the people loved the Pandavas dearly; so, gradually, I began to discuss the idea of the Pandavas being made victims of foul play, with the common people. Soon, this rumour spread all over Hastinapur, and just as expected, it sparked displeasure among the people. Within the span of just fifteen days, a hostile atmosphere was created in Hastinapur. And just as I had intended, the royal palace was completely gripped in a turmoil that shook it by its very foundations.

Needless to say, once the volcano had erupted, the ground beneath the royal palace quaked, and the reaction was instantaneous. This was bound to happen. Indeed, whenever I took up a cause, the possibility of failure became non-existent. I received the latest news of all the activities at the royal palace through Vidura; he was the chief minister, after all. So, naturally, all discussions at the palace were held in his presence. And ever since I had reprimanded him, he had made it a point to keep me informed of every development at the palace. Considering my astute nature, I was bound to take advantage of every piece of information. The day before, Vidura had informed me that the royal palace was not taking kindly to my prolonged

stay in Hastinapur and my act of inciting the people against Duryodhana. Consequently, Grandfather Bhishma had summoned Shakuni and Duryodhana and had reprimanded them severely. This was not all; he was also questioning them about the supposed conspiracy. A frightened Duryodhana and Shakuni had tried to explain the situation to Grandfather Bhishma and had labelled all talks of a conspiracy as rumours, but grandfather was not convinced. He even told Duryodhana that if such unrest continued among the people, then it would be difficult for him to continue as the crown prince of Hastinapur. Moreover, if King Dhritarashtra continued to support Duryodhana, then they might even lose their hold over Hastinapur.

After a moment's silence, Vidura continued, "It was all going very well initially, but the real disruption began thereafter. Hearing such harsh words from grandfather, Duryodhana lost his temper, but before he could say anything inappropriate to grandfather, Shakuni managed to drag him out of the chamber. However, he was unable to calm him down completely. Consequently, as soon as he was outside the chamber, Duryodhana grumbled loudly, 'All this is Krishna's doing. He should be expelled from Hastinapur immediately.'"

Hearing this outburst, Shakuni was frightened and immediately retorted, "No, no, my dear nephew! First of all, we cannot ask the King of Dwarka to leave as it would be against protocol. And even if we were to do so, the whole of Hastinapur would sympathise with him."

However, had the crazed Duryodhana ever listened to reason? Boiling with rage, he said, "Then let us imprison that fiend for instigating the people against the palace."

Shakuni replied, "My dear nephew, this is exactly what Krishna wants; he wants you to do something silly so that he can overthrow you."

Duryodhana said, "So then, should we just keep quiet?"

Shakuni shrugged helplessly, "What can we do! Krishna is like uninvited trouble; he comes and goes of his own accord."



I was happy; I had managed to ruffle the feathers of both the parties without going through much trouble myself. Besides, a devious person like Shakuni had praised me; was it not something to be proud of? Vidura continued, “While the two were worried about how to tackle you, Grandfather Bhishma and King Dhritarashtra were even more troubled. They had both begun to feel rather guilty after you had accused them of being party to the crime committed against the Pandavas. Consequently, both were left feeling disturbed since that day. To add to their woes, they now have to grapple with disgruntled inhabitants and your accusation of conspiracy in the palace. Both are worried about their reputation being ruined at this stage in their life.” Well, this was even better news! This had, at least, improved the chances of curbing the evil intentions of the trio. Hearing all this gave me immense satisfaction. I had been able to fulfil my primary duty towards the inhabitants of Hastinapur.

Now that Vidura had revealed the situation at the royal palace, I was not going to withhold anything from him either. So, I shared my thoughts with him in a candid manner. I told him firmly, “In reality, both grandfather and the king ought to be disgraced. There is no need to be sympathetic towards them, because both have committed the crime. In my opinion, Duryodhana is not so much of a culprit as Shakuni, King Dhritarashtra and Grandfather Bhishma are. Shakuni incites Duryodhana to commit a crime, the king ignores it and Grandfather Bhishma chooses to remain silent even after knowing everything.” Vidura, however, did not react or respond to my statement. What could he say anyway? I had reprimanded him as well. He was probably thinking that if he were to say something disagreeable, he too would be subjected to cross-questioning once again.

With Vidura’s silence, the matter ended there. Nevertheless, let me tell you a secret—I had a keen interest in reading people’s minds. If someone said something, I always asked myself, “Why did they say it?” If they remained quiet, then I wondered why they did so. I knew that if you are able to read a person’s mind, then he is bound to become your slave. Then, it becomes easy to attack his psyche and get him to do your bidding. I had accomplished many arduous tasks in life and there were many tasks that remained to be accomplished yet. But how could I accomplish any of them all by myself? Nay, I always need slaves. Therefore, I play with people’s minds whenever I get the opportunity. And this was exactly what I was

doing at present. I was playing with the psyche of not only Grandfather Bhishma, King Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana and Shakuni but also with the collective psyche of Hastinapur.

One day, Uddhava and I were relaxing in the veranda of Vidura's house. It was evening and by this time, Vidura had returned from the palace. As usual, the conversation revolved around the royal palace, though sometimes we would reminisce about the Pandavas as well. This had become more or less a daily ritual for us. That day, however, to our great surprise, we saw Satyaki standing at the doorstep. More surprising than his arrival was the look of distress on his face. He seemed to be quite exhausted too, probably because of the long journey. But why did he appear so sad? He must have brought some terrible news. The most important thing in life is 'time'; our very lives are dependent on it. Moreover, our time keeps changing in accordance with our state of mind, and with the ebb and flow of happiness and sorrow in our lives. In other words, the wheel of time is continuously turning. And perhaps because it was our time to receive bad news, another piece of dreadful news had come knocking on our door, when I had not even recovered from the shock of the Pandavas' death. But what could this bad news be? At present, I did not have the strength to speculate on what it could be. In fact, I was not even trying to guess what it was. Satyaki too, was not making the situation easy by continuing to remain silent. He kept glancing at me every now and then. Perhaps he was trying to gauge if I was ready to receive the bad news. Then, all of a sudden, he broke down, and this meant the news was far worse than I had imagined. Seeing Satyaki weeping inconsolably, Uddhava became worried too, while Vidura looked on anxiously.

To be honest, seeing Satyaki in this state had perplexed me completely. I was gripped by deep anxiety. How terrible could this news be that it had turned a man as brave as Satyaki into a snivelling child? Now, I had to hear the news right away. However, Satyaki was still unable to speak. I could feel my heart thumping hard against my chest; it felt as if my chest would burst open anytime now. Indeed, the anticipation of news is far worse than the impact of the news. And presently, Satyaki's silence was heightening this dreadful anticipation for us. I could feel as if life itself was slowly being wrenched out of my body; intuitively, I knew that the bad news had to be related to my lifeblood, Rukmini, for, she was the only one who was in

jeopardy and the only one who had been unhappy with my departure from Dwarka.

Whether the news concerned her or not, the basic principle of receiving bad news is that the sooner you hear it, the lesser the pain you have to endure. So, I was definitely not averse to hearing it. But what could I do? Satyaki was not in a condition to utter a single word. It was only after much cajoling and coaxing that he finally spoke, albeit between sobs, “Krishna! Just four days after you left Dwarka, Rukmini gave birth to a boy.<sup>[25]</sup> He was so adorable, almost a mirror image of you. Rukmini was on cloud nine. She even organised his naming ceremony and we had started calling him Pradyumna. The whole of Dwarka was revelling in delight. Indeed, what could have been a more joyful event than the birth of a prince? There was celebration everywhere and the whole of Dwarka was rejoicing at the birth of its prince.”

In eager anticipation, I was hanging on to each and every word of Satyaki. We had even seated him between Uddhava and me. But then, he immediately fell silent and just as suddenly, became choked with emotion. Once again, he seemed to be on the verge of tears. He could not utter a single word. Confounded at the drama unfolding before me, I could not comprehend the reason behind Satyaki’s grief. I have a beautiful son. Dwarka has been blessed with a crown prince. Then why is Satyaki so miserable? Had something happened to Rukmini? No, no, that was not possible! If something were to have happened to her, then what would I do? I had not even heard the whole news yet but was already drowning in a swamp of misery. Both my body and mind had become lifeless. Meanwhile, Satyaki was not able to say anything further. By now, it was clear that the bad news definitely concerned either Rukmini or Pradyumna, or perhaps both.

The scene was strange indeed. The four of us were now sitting in a circle. Satyaki was not in a position to speak a word and the three of us were unable to comprehend anything. Uddhava looked as if he was about to crumple up any moment. Vidura was also engulfed in a feeling of hopelessness. My condition was no different, but I wanted to hear the rest of the news first. And for that to happen, we made Satyaki drink water so he would be able to clear his throat and speak. The situation was so grave that

even poor Daruka appeared to be on the verge of fainting. At present, however, we had to focus on Satyaki; if only he would speak. We gave him a thousand assurances; we even acted as normally as we could. Only then did Satyaki begin to speak again, “Perhaps Nature did not approve of Rukmini’s happiness. On the seventh day of the child’s birth, someone kidnapped him. Consequently, the whole of Dwarka has been immersed in sorrow. Rukmini is inconsolable and seems to have gone insane with grief. Even after searching tirelessly for three days, we could not find the kidnapper. Dwarka, Rukmini and Pradyumna need you desperately! Therefore, I have been sent to convey this news to you and bring you back with me.”

This was terrible news indeed. However, it was not as dreadful as I had imagined. Satyaki’s expressions had made it seem far worse than it was. But it was bad news, nonetheless. I thought, ‘Poor Pradyumna! Who could have kidnapped him? What must Rukmini be going through?’ The matter was grave indeed, for, it was not just the matter of Rukmini or Pradyumna; the question was—how did such an incident take place in a kingdom as safe and secure as Dwarka? Was this the act of an outsider or was this an act of treachery by someone within Dwarka? In a few moments, my analysis had reached far beyond sentimental considerations. My mind began to question the very existence of Dwarka; ‘If a city like Dwarka, akin to a fortress, is not secure enough, then where else could a person be safe?’ The questions were too many but the answers, none. ‘Who could have taken an innocent child away, and why? Do I have an enemy? Or does Dwarka have one? Was this act carried out by Jarasandha? Or had Satrajit kidnapped him so that he could use him as bait to retrieve the Syamantaka gem from me?’ Anything was possible, if you think about it. And poor Rukmini! How would she be able to cope with the loss of her dear son? She must be in a terrible state, enduring so much pain right now. I had already warned her at that time not to become so excited about the fruits of *karma* (action). I had told her, “Enjoy your actions and leave the fruit to Nature.” She had been unnecessarily excited about the birth of our child. But then, could you really blame her for this? Much like ordinary people, did she really know the ways in which Nature worked?

It was certain that both Dwarka and Rukmini needed me urgently. Besides, this concerned Dwarka’s existence as well. If the kidnapper was not

apprehended soon, Dwarka could no longer remain a safe and secure city. This, in turn, would encourage people such as Jarasandha, Satrajit and the rest to become bold and brazen. And if that were to happen, then Dwarka would soon turn into another Mathura. Whatever had to happen with the Pandavas, had already happened. I had already weakened Duryodhana's position to quite an extent. Thus, I decided to stay in Hastinapur for two to three days more, make a few more attacks on the psyche of its inhabitants and then return to Dwarka. What else could I do? Not one, but two of my dreams were at stake. As you already know, I had harboured only two dreams in my life: Rukmini and Dwarka.

Meanwhile, Uddhava, who had still not recovered from the shock of the death of the Pandavas, was a completely broken man after hearing this news. He had become numb, almost lifeless. I was afflicted by this tragedy too, but I believed in immersing myself immediately in formulating my course of action and in pending tasks, instead of spending too much time succumbing to human frailties. What had happened could not be undone, but what after this? On the other hand, Vidura was quite shaken up too. He also advised me to return to Dwarka immediately. Turning sentimental, he advised me not to worry about Hastinapur and that with time, everything would be alright.

I did not know what Vidura meant by this and why he had said it, but his words shook me to the core. To be honest, what he had said sounded a bit mysterious too. How could I not worry about Hastinapur? Besides, how would the situation improve on its own? The Pandavas had been killed, so how could anything change for the better now? Surely, a person as sagacious as Vidura must not have made this statement in passing. Perhaps his words had veiled a secret which I had been unable to decipher. I strongly felt there was something I did not quite know and which only Vidura was aware of. Ultimately, when I probed him in every possible manner, he was compelled to reveal the truth. He told me that my aunt and the Pandavas were alive! Apparently, he had informed the Pandavas of the conspiracy well in advance. So, they had escaped the palace before it was set on fire. The charred bodies found there, were those of some forest dwellers. Seeing these bodies charred beyond recognition, everybody was convinced that the Pandavas were dead.

Hearing this, I jumped for joy; I was ecstatic, my happiness knew no bounds. I was surprised too; when Vidura had known this all along, why then had he hidden it from me for so long? Actually, what he had done was right. How could he have trusted anybody so easily? Nonetheless, I was filled with admiration for Vidura's farsightedness and sense of duty. He had needlessly been at the receiving end of my wrath along with Grandfather Bhishma and King Dhritarashtra. I apologised immediately for my blunt behaviour. He replied humbly, "What are you saying, Krishna! Your anger itself is proof of your love for the Pandavas and that is why I have been able to reveal this secret to you."

On hearing the news that the Pandavas were alive, the sorrow over my son's kidnapping seemed to reduce considerably. My mind became engrossed in reflecting on the various implications of this news. All things considered, I knew that in the present situation, it was necessary for me to meet the Pandavas immediately. Vidura, however, denied knowledge of their whereabouts. It was certain, however, that wherever they were, they were in disguise. Vidura further informed that this had, in fact, been his suggestion; for, in his opinion, it was better to let everybody believe that the Pandavas had indeed perished in the fire, until things settled down in Hastinapur.

On hearing this, my face creased up with a thousand worry lines. This meant that the Pandavas were alive, but unsafe. In other words, if they came out of hiding, they could once again be made victims of Duryodhana's evil plots. What he had said was right, but then suddenly, my thinking veered off in a strange direction. The Pandavas were quite brave and had the support of the people of Hastinapur as well. In other words, they were not as weak as they seemed to be. Therefore, one fine day, the Pandavas would come out of hiding and demand their rights, which would escalate hostilities between them and the Kauravas. And the terrible consequences of this enmity would have to be borne not only by Hastinapur but possibly the whole of Aryavarta too. No, this could not be allowed to happen. There was only one way out; they had to make peace with each other. However, this was only possible if the Pandavas were to become stronger than the Kauravas, or if the Kauravas' position weakened. Duryodhana was not one to give up willingly; he could only be pressurised into doing so, and he could be pressurised only by the use of power, not by the use of reasoning or truth.

Well, having read the situation well, I realised that an important aspect worth contemplating was that Hastinapur was a much larger kingdom than Dwarka. Hence, its problems could have a rippling effect across the entire region of Aryavarta. Therefore, I needed to be more concerned with the problems in Hastinapur than those of Dwarka. Now, as far as the call of duty was concerned, Hastinapur and Dwarka were all the same for this *Gopala*; my concern was much broader; it was about the well-being of the entire world. So, I had to rise above personal attachment and surrender to duty. And the only lasting solution to this problem seemed to be in saving the Pandavas and making them powerful. This could also be accomplished by weakening the Kauravas, and I had been at it ever since my arrival in Hastinapur. I had clearly understood that until the reins of Hastinapur come into the hands of the Pandavas, the people here would continue to be crushed under Duryodhana's personal ambition. Forget Hastinapur, even the smaller kingdoms surrounding it would have to face the same fate. Therefore, seeing the present state of affairs, I felt that the safety of the Pandavas was my first priority, bestowed upon me by 'time' itself. Besides, it was also necessary that I visit Panchal and meet King Dhrupad, for, Dhrupad's desire to wreak vengeance could also push Aryavarta into a state of terrible violence. Moreover, going to Nagakoot, the land of the Nagas, to respond to my great-grandfather's request was also my supreme duty. If I did not help him in his old age, then how would I stand true to my sense of duty?

Did you see how life had once again forced me to make a difficult choice? It had not made a mistake this time either. On one hand, there was the sorrow of my dear Rukmini and the anxiety of my firstborn's kidnapping, the far-reaching effects of which Dwarka would have to suffer; and on the other hand, I had to maintain a balance of power in Hastinapur as well as assuage King Dhrupad's anger; otherwise, the whole of Aryavarta could be engulfed in flames of hatred and revenge. Besides, my duty towards Nagakoot was also calling out to me. Rukmini's sorrow and the separation of my son were insignificant losses compared to the possibility of Aryavarta being burnt down; I had to choose the latter, for, I had always dedicated my life for the greater good. The welfare of all was my foremost duty. My love for Rukmini and my son was the attachment of a petty ego. I was not one to

be tied down by such attachments and allow Aryavarta to perish because of it.

Once I had made my choice, there was no reason to delay action on it. I threw myself into my work, discarding all my worries about Rukmini and Dwarka. It was with great difficulty that I managed to convince Satyaki to return to Dwarka. He protested initially, but yielded later, when my explanations baffled him completely. When he failed to convince me, he insisted that Uddhava accompany him back to Dwarka. However, since my work in Hastinapur depended heavily on Uddhava, Satyaki finally relented and returned to Dwarka alone. Revati, Subhadra and mother were all present in Dwarka to take care of Rukmini. Moreover, if Dwarka's accomplished spies and bravehearts such as bhaiya and Satyaki could not succeed in finding Pradyumna, then what could I alone accomplish by going back to Dwarka? Besides, I did not know what kind of a son I had, and what he would accomplish on growing up. Under these circumstances, instead of using my energy in locating his whereabouts, I thought it better to use the same energy in saving the whole of humanity. However, I had not said any of this to Satyaki or Uddhava. I did not like to explain the reasons behind my actions or provide clarification to anybody. This decision of mine did shock Satyaki a bit. Even Vidura was taken aback, but Uddhava was different. Whether he understood my rationale or not, he reposed complete faith in my actions and decisions. This was exactly why I had not let him go. Besides, I needed his help at almost every step, whether it was searching for the Pandavas or accompanying me to Panchal. Indeed, he was akin to my own shadow, so how could I separate him from myself?

Well, I had taken the tough decision of not returning to Dwarka, but for a moment, my decision had shaken even me to the very core. If my decision not to return to Dwarka despite the kidnapping of my newborn son and Rukmini's sorrow had shocked Satyaki, then I could well imagine the kind of trauma that Rukmini would go through when she learnt about it. I shuddered on thinking about it. I thought, 'Perhaps the queen of my dreams will never forgive me; she may even consider me heartless.' But what could I do? Only time and circumstances could determine what I needed to do; not someone's attachment or need. Rukmini was mine and so was Pradyumna. I loved them both and even worried about them, but only when I belonged to myself. When time demanded that I put the needs of the world



before me, then how could I ignore my foremost duty? In other words, I had to bear the terrible pain of imagining Rukmini's distress. Even though the life of my 'life' was at stake, I had to exercise control over my own life.

Oh well, one has to endure various pains in life while performing one's duty, so this was nothing out of the ordinary. More importantly, it was now pointless for me to stay back in Hastinapur. My duty was calling out to me to find the Pandavas right away. In fact, even as their friend, I was longing to meet them. So, I immediately engaged myself with finishing my work in Hastinapur. There was not much to be done here anyway. I simply had to take care of a few formalities. I was feeling enthused; the news that the Pandavas were alive had filled me with renewed energy. Before leaving Hastinapur, I met Grandfather Bhishma, King Dhritarashtra and Mother Gandhari. I also met Duryodhana and Shakuni as a formality; indeed, the happiness on seeing me leave Hastinapur was clearly visible on their faces. They were probably feeling relaxed for the first time after so many days.

Well, as my thoughts shifted back to the Pandavas, I could not help but marvel at the noble feat Vidura had accomplished by saving them. In fact, words would not suffice to describe the magnitude of his feat. What he had done was nothing short of a miracle. Needless to say, while leaving, I did not forget to take his blessings and express my gratitude to him. On that note, our caravan set out in search of the Pandavas. Since we did not know how far we would have to travel and the places we would have to go to in search of them, we had limited our procession to only ten chariots. Additionally, we had set off with only the bare minimum number of servants and soldiers. But Uddhava was still in a peculiar condition. On one hand, he was distressed that his nephew had been kidnapped, and on the other, he was relieved that the Pandavas were alive. As far as I was concerned, I had forgotten Rukmini, Pradyumna and Dwarka. In the present moment, locating the Pandavas was my topmost priority, which consumed my entire attention. In any case, I liked living entirely in the present, especially when performing my duty as prescribed by Nature. In such difficult times, I practised the art of leaving a few matters to Nature's justice. Indeed, had I not learnt this art, then considering the kind of life I led, I would have died of anxiety a long time ago.

Now, let us leave all this aside and return to my search for the Pandavas. We had embarked on a journey with no clear direction, but this was not new to me. When I had to leave Mathura because of Jarasandha, I had no idea where I was headed. Even when we had set out to search for Punardutta as a means to pay *Acharya* Sandipani's *gurudakshina*, we had no idea how to proceed. Human life is, indeed, a journey filled with uncertainty. No one knows where that journey will take them or where their final destination lies. In fact, the state in which they will find themselves at the end of their journey also remains a mystery. Well, enough of my philosophising, but the fact remained that we had to travel with our convoy in a particular direction. So, we decided to head in the direction of Kapilya. After travelling for just three days, we had entered the outer limits of Kapilya. This was the only kingdom adjoining Hastinapur where the Pandavas were most likely to take refuge. When we reached Kapilya, we came to know that Parashara Muni had an ashram there. The sage was one of Aryavarta's most respected teachers. *Acharya* Sandipani had had such a great influence on my life that my mind always yearned to meet such teachers and learn something from them. So, I could not stop myself from visiting his ashram. Of course, I kept Uddhava engaged in our search for the Pandavas.

It was surprising to see that the ashram of such a revered sage was so small and austere, and located so far away from the city. Moreover, there did not seem to be many disciples around either. It was evident that the royal palace was not according great teachers the honour and deference they deserved. This was a strong testimony indeed to the degradation of the kings of Aryavarta. Well, it was afternoon and in the centre of the ashram's ground, we could see *Acharya* seated under a *peepul* (Sacred Fig) tree, conversing with five to six disciples. I felt blessed simply watching him from a distance. He had an extremely impressive personality. I went up to him immediately and touched his feet in veneration while introducing myself. He was extremely pleased on learning that I was Krishna. This meant that he knew everything about me, so much so that he even congratulated me on Dwarka. In honour of having met me, he not only dismissed his disciples, after introducing me to them, but also extended an invitation to me to spend the night at his ashram. I had neither the choice nor a valid reason to decline his offer. Moreover, it was I who stood to gain by being in the presence of an erudite teacher, gleaning knowledge from him.

And that is exactly what happened. We were talking about various matters, seated in the veranda outside his chamber at night. During our discussion, he appeared quite worried about the state of affairs in Hastinapur. He was particularly worried about Duryodhana's ambition. Seeing his concern for humanity, I was both surprised as well as pleased. He even mentioned that the cowardly behaviour of Dhritarashtra and Bhishma was primarily responsible for the death of the Pandavas. I felt quite relieved on hearing this, not only because he had the same opinion as I had, but also because he was right. A pall of gloom had settled over the otherwise tranquil demeanour of Parashara Muni while discussing the affairs of Hastinapur. So, to alleviate his worry, I revealed to him that the Pandavas were alive. In other words, I had got carried away by emotions and ended up divulging the secret to him.

However, the deed had been done. Surprisingly though, on hearing this, he looked at me in a strange manner. I had not been able to fathom the meaning behind his gaze at all, because there was no amazement, no joy nor any disbelief in his eyes. Indeed, it was this very quality of detachment that made him an *Acharya*. I could easily read what a common man was thinking even before he would begin to think or what he is capable of thinking; even what he was doing and what he was capable of doing. However, it is not that easy to read the mind of teachers. Eventually, I gave up and shot an arrow in the dark. I said, "It is true that the Pandavas are alive. The chief minister, Vidura, has played a huge part in saving their lives and I have set out on this journey only to search for them."

This time, *Acharya* replied very calmly, "I know they are alive. After escaping the house of lacquer, they had come straight to my ashram with their mother. Actually, they were looking for a safe place to hide."<sup>[26]</sup>

I heard him out in amazement. In fact, I was very happy too, for, I had never imagined that a difficult task such as this could be accomplished so easily. I knew that now, it would be easy to reach our destination, for surely, *Acharya* was aware of the Pandavas' whereabouts. Excitedly, I asked him, "If you don't mind, can you please tell me in which direction they have gone?"

*Acharya* smiled and said, “I had advised them to go to Panchal. Perhaps that is where they have gone.”

Hearing his words shocked me beyond belief, and a thousand worries gripped me. He had mentioned Panchal, the kingdom of King Dhrupad, who was anyway desperate to exact revenge on Arjuna and Drona. If Dhrupad were to discover that the Pandavas were staying in his kingdom, he would surely hunt them down, and certainly would not spare Arjuna’s life. Seeing my face creased with worry, *Acharya* started chuckling. Despite not wanting to, I felt irked on seeing him appear so gleeful. Gauging my reaction, he once again laughed and said, “The Pandavas also looked doubtful when they heard my suggestion. However, I had advised them to disguise themselves as Brahmins, enter Panchal and take refuge in the kingdom. If news of their survival spreads in the region, the Kauravas will move heaven and earth to hunt them down. They will look for them everywhere, but it will never occur to them to search for them in Panchal. Similarly, even Dhrupad will never search for them in his own kingdom.”

Indeed, I was not only amazed at *Acharya*’s rationale, but also thoroughly impressed by his intelligence. I considered myself highly intelligent, but he had surpassed me, both in terms of intelligence and foresight. It is true, if you spend time in the company of foolish people, you start taking pride in your own intelligence. However, if you spend time in the company of intelligent people, then this misconception vanishes and you realise your own true worth. This is why, whenever I met a great teacher, my conceit would be reduced to dust, whether it was after meeting *Acharya* Shrutiketu or *Acharya* Sandipani, Maharishi Parshuram or Parashara Muni.

Well, I was extremely relieved that for the time being, there was no threat to the lives of the Pandavas. Undoubtedly, the entire credit for this masterstroke went to Parashara Muni. Indeed, my respect for him increased manifold. I would now be able to kill two birds with one stone. In any case, I had to go to Panchal to meet King Dhrupad and Draupadi. And now that the Pandavas had taken refuge there, I had all the more reason to go there to search for them. By evening, Uddhava had also returned. Obviously, he had been unable to obtain any news about the Pandavas’ whereabouts. Well, there was no need for that now. I revealed everything to him, and with that, both of us happily drifted off to sleep. In the morning, I expressed my

gratitude to *Acharya*, took his blessings and set off for Panchal along with Uddhava. It was because of *Acharya's* guidance that this time, we were sure of our destination.

## **My Encounter with the Breathtakingly Beautiful Draupadi**

Bubbling with enthusiasm, as we set off for Panchal, I looked forward to meeting not only the Pandavas, but also Draupadi. According to *Acharya Sandipani*, she was the most beautiful woman in the world...and Kanhaiya was bound to feel excited about meeting such a woman. Feeling restless and unable to contain the excitement coursing through me, I had taken up the reins of the chariot for the entire length of the journey. Daruka, Uddhava and I led the procession in my chariot, with soldiers and servants following behind. Obviously, our conversation revolved around the Pandavas, although, whenever I got a chance during the journey, I would indulge in quite a bit of contemplation as well. In fact, whenever I found myself unoccupied, contemplation would become my main interest. At this point, the subject of my contemplation was how had I made so much progress, achieved so much fame, established Dwarka and accomplished so many heroic deeds in such a short span of time? Was I worthy of so many achievements? Perhaps not. Was it destiny then? Well, I never believed in destiny. I was a man of action, and for a man who believes in action, there is no such thing as destiny. So then, it was obviously my action-oriented nature and deservedness. However, on delving deeper, I realised that I had not done something extraordinary to have accomplished so much. Yet, how was I able to achieve such great feats?

If I were to say that this was only because of my deservedness, then you would say, ‘Oh, there he goes again, blowing his own trumpet at the first available opportunity.’ Actually, one cannot question my deservedness or my sense of duty, but since we are on the subject, let me introduce you to a different dimension of my deservedness from where credit can be taken as well as shared. Actually, the biggest reason for my success was the fact that I had surrendered myself completely to Nature. It could take me wherever and whenever it wanted to. It could make me do whatever it wanted to, and whenever it wanted to. Its wish would become my wish; I did not have desires or demands of my own. And my surrender to Nature had certainly worked its magic. My calculation was simple—what was the harm in rising

above one's petty ego and attachment and submitting one's life to a power that was controlling everything, from the colossal stars and the moon to the winds and the expansive seas? When all of Nature's energy is already engaged in the welfare of the entire universe, then why should we not work in unison with it and dedicate our life for the greater good? The status and success I had achieved today were not just because of my capability or the faith I had put in my actions. It was also due to the total absence of my ego, because of which I had been able to surrender myself completely to Nature.

While we are still on this subject, I can state this fact with conviction—when a person gives up his petty ego and devotes himself to the welfare of all, then Nature itself invariably sets him on the path towards progress. He is bound to find his heart brimming with joy and peace. He is bound to become totally self-contented, and there is no greater wealth in this universe than self-contentment. In fact, I was a prime example of how a devoted soldier of Nature—which has the power to light up the entire universe—makes its devoted soldier shine bright in the world. Nevertheless, these ruminations, in addition to conversations with Uddhava, soon brought us to the outskirts of Panchal. We did not even realise how soon we had reached our destination. Indeed, living a life surrendered to Nature has its own joy.

I had to accomplish two main tasks in Panchal. Firstly, I had to meet King Dhrupad and Draupadi and secondly, I had to seek out the Pandavas. Of course, our search for the Pandavas was a secret mission, one that had to be accomplished by Uddhava alone. Therefore, I was left with the task of meeting King Dhrupad and Draupadi—a pleasant task, indeed. However, I did not wish to go to the king's court unannounced. After all, I was now the King of Dwarka, and probably Dhrupad's future son-in-law too—well, at least according to the king. Therefore, we stopped at a rest house near the border of Panchal and I sent Uddhava to King Dhrupad with the message of our arrival. I thought it better to get a night's rest and to set foot in Panchal the next morning, refreshed and rejuvenated. Honestly speaking, I had two other reasons for delaying our arrival in Panchal. This was the first time I was being considered a power to reckon with, in the political realm of Aryavarta. My politics was no longer limited to Dwarka alone. Therefore, by sending a message before entering Panchal, I wanted to further heighten the increasing glory of the King of Dwarka. Secondly, the reception I would receive from King Dhrupad would give me an idea of how desperate he was

to make me his son-in-law. Moreover, I wanted to know the influence I presently exerted over Aryavarta. Indeed, it is as necessary to ascertain the depth of friendship as it is to determine the severity of an enemy's hostility.

Meanwhile, on receiving news of my arrival, Prince Dhrishtadyumna and Chief Minister Udbhasha of Panchal arrived to welcome me early next morning. They escorted me with full royal honour straight to the palace where King Dhrupad himself greeted me at the entrance. Seeing the reception that he had been accorded, the King of Dwarka felt contented indeed. There was a time when none of the kings of Aryavarta were willing to offer me refuge out of fear of Jarasandha, but now, every other king was going out of his way to welcome me to his kingdom. They say that the tide turns, but here, the tide had not turned; all this change was the result of my actions. I was, therefore, deserving of this honour.

I was not being honoured in such a manner because I was the son of a great king. No, this was entirely the outcome of the great deeds that I had performed. In fact, Nature had intended to put an end to me as soon as I was born. It had ensured that the shadow of death followed me everywhere. So, you see, right from the moment I had stepped into this world, the tide had not turned for me at all. This is the reason I like to repeatedly declare that my success was the result of the great deeds I had performed. After continuously battling Nature and society at large, I had reached this stage in my life on the strength of my actions. Therefore, at least at this juncture, I could not share the credit for this success with anybody; neither with Nature, nor with society or religion. All of my life's accomplishments were the reward of my selfless deeds. In short, I give the credit for my success to the actions performed for the greater good, after surrendering only to the Almighty. Even so, it was I who had performed the deeds, and it was I who had surrendered; therefore, ultimately, it was I who deserved credit. With this conclusion, I assuaged my 'ultimate ego'. And thus contented, I entered the palace of Panchal.

King Dhrupad felt highly honoured to see me arrive in Panchal. Did you see how my actions had brought about fruitful results? This Kanha, who once used to play around with the *gopis* of Vrindavan, had been invited with the honour befitting a king to wed the princess of Panchal; not just any princess, mind you, but the most beautiful princess in the world! The



reception I was accorded was incredible indeed. King Dhrupad escorted me straightaway to the private assembly hall, where food and drinks were called for, instantly. Though I was satisfied with the reception I had received, to be honest, I was exhausted. This was not only because of the continuous journey, but also because of the news about the Pandavas' alleged death and the subsequent news of their survival. Now that I had reached our destination, my exhaustion had scaled to another level altogether. I needed to rest for a few days. Therefore, avoiding any kind of conversation, I excused myself, assuring King Dhrupad that I would meet him soon.

I could always enjoy his hospitality some other time; in any case, I had already gleaned enough information at first glance itself. Besides, we had come here with the intention of spending a fair amount of time; there was no question of leaving Panchal until we had found the Pandavas. In other words, there was plenty of time to assess the situation in depth and savour the hospitality of the royal palace. So, when I expressed the need to rest, we were escorted with full honour to one of the guest chambers in the palace itself. I was impressed not only with the reception we had received from the king, but also with the royal palace and the opulent lifestyle of its occupants. Everything was carried out to perfection. Every nook and cranny of the palace was adorned beautifully, speaking volumes of the prosperity of Panchal. The corridors too displayed magnificent artefacts including tiger and lion mounts. The walls boasted all kinds of impressive weapons. Paintings and artwork that hung on the walls seemed priceless too. Clearly, there was no lack of grandeur in Aryavarta. It was only kingdoms like Mathura that were ruined due to the despicable activities of its inhabitants. Nevertheless, I now took the opportunity to send a messenger back to Dwarka with the news of our well-being. Similarly, I wanted the messenger to bring me the latest news of the events in Dwarka.

After resting for the entire day, Uddhava and I sat down to chat in the evening. My ego was riding at its peak with the honour I had received, first in Hastinapur, and then in Panchal. In due course of our conversation, I said to Uddhava, "There was a time when we used to wander around aimlessly in Vrindavan. The animals too would hound us back then. And, here we are, today, receiving such respect and honour. Even the kings of great repute feel blessed to welcome us."

Uddhava laughed and said, “Yes! There is no doubt that today we are among the most respected kings of Aryavarta, but in my opinion, this reception from Panchal is not so much for the King of Dwarka as it is for the ‘brave, future son-in-law’ of Panchal.”

I agreed with Uddhava. I had not come here in the capacity of the King of Dwarka; I had come here only as a prospective son-in-law of the king. Be that as it may, as soon as I heard the word ‘son-in-law’, I was instantly lost in thoughts of Draupadi. She was supposed to be exceedingly beautiful, the finest beauty in all of Aryavarta. I wondered what she was like. What would I say to her; would I get married to her, or not? ‘Rather’, I thought, ‘Should I get married to her or not? What if I were to pale in comparison to her?’ My inner voice interjected, ‘What is this you are thinking about, Krishna? How could Krishna pale in comparison to women? It is just not possible.’ In any event, these were matters of the future and were best left to it. At this point, it made more sense to rest and relax. So, Uddhava and I chatted for a while before retiring to bed.

The next morning, while we were still relaxing, Prince Dhrishtadyumna visited us, carrying an invitation from the king to join him for lunch. Surprisingly, the invitation was only for me; Uddhava was not invited. So, as soon as Dhrishtadyumna left, Uddhava grabbed the opportunity to tease me. He said, “Do you know, Kanhaiya, when is a prospective son-in-law invited all alone? It happens only when the wedding is to be finalised. Also, do you know, when the prospective son-in-law is so eager to go, it usually means that he intends to accept the proposal!”

Uddhava’s analysis was accurate, hitting the nail on its head. But at this juncture, I did not think it appropriate to pay much attention to him or provide him an answer, for, I knew that a response from me would change his wry humour into biting sarcasm. But what difference could my silence make to someone who was clearly looking for an opportunity to pull my leg? Nothing could stop him from saying what he had to. So, once again, he began, “Kanhaiya, if you think about it, this union seems to have been arranged by Nature itself. The king wants a brave son-in-law, and that you are. You are also a connoisseur of beauty, and she, in turn, is the most beautiful woman in the world!”

I still remained tight-lipped, occupying myself with preparations for my meeting with the king. To be honest, seeing Uddhava in such a fiery mood today, I thought it unwise to lock horns with him. However, he was not one to give up easily. He did not seem affected in the least by the fact that I was ignoring him. He was not ready to let go of a brilliant opportunity such as this. Noticing my non-responsive stance, he changed his tactics, and instead offered me advice laced with an underlying threat. Adopting a loving tone, he said, “Kanhaiya, you have to confide in me. After all, I am the only one who can help you console an upset Rukmini. I will be the one to tell her that Kanhaiya did not want this marriage at all, but what could he have done? After all, he could not ignore the orders of *Acharya* Sandipani.”

This time, I could not help but giggle; for how long could I remain quiet, after all? Uddhava considered this his victory, and he was right. He had eventually won against me, succeeding in eliciting a reaction out of me. But more importantly, what he had said was right. If such a situation were to really arise, then only Uddhava could reason with Rukmini. Well, as Uddhava continued to needle me, it was a relief to see that at least Daruka had no interest in such matters or in taunting me. But now that I had begun to think of Rukmini, I became worried once again. I wondered how she was coping with the situation back home. What was she thinking of, at this moment? Was she wondering why I had not come to her aid even in this hour of difficulty? Was she thinking that it was perhaps because of Draupadi? If that was what she was thinking, then she was creating grief for herself. It meant that she was gripped in the clutches of her petty ego, and that she did not really know me. Such being the case, how could I help her? Well, Rukmini was responsible for her own thinking, but I began wondering about Pradyumna too. Had he been found? Where was he? What state was he in? Who could understand the pain of being separated from one's mother at such a tender age better than me? I had been fortunate to find the finest mother in Yashoda, but who would look after Pradyumna? As I continued thinking on these lines, I became despondent. My mind began to feel weak. So, I composed myself immediately, and reinstated myself in my 'witness'. 'O Krishna! Why are you getting caught up in attachment? When you have detached yourself from the sorrow of Rukmini, then what is stopping you from overcoming the sorrow of your son?' Indeed, I had become so weak for a moment, falling into the trap of attachment; however, once I brought

the ‘witness’ within me to the fore, I regained my composure immediately. Just as I had taken great strides in life on the strength of my actions despite various difficult circumstances, so would Pradyumna... and this was his duty towards himself. Besides, at this point, my own duty was calling out to me, and ‘attachment’ is an impediment to one’s duty, no matter what type of attachment it is. Thus, I put all thoughts of affection aside and became neutral at once.

Now, I was fully prepared to lunch with King Dhrupad and was just waiting for a call from the palace. I did not have to wait for long though, as Dhrishtadyumna arrived on time. Since I was ready, I left with him immediately. Seeing me leave, Uddhava did not say anything; perhaps Dhrishtadyumna’s presence had stopped him...but he did flash me a mischievous smile, which was perfectly alright with me. As we walked through the corridors of the palace, I was gazing with admiration at Dhrishtadyumna’s good looks. He was much taller than me and very fair-complexioned too. His face was also quite attractive. Honestly, I had never seen such a handsome youth in my life; naturally, it led me to think about Draupadi. If her brother was so good-looking, then how beautiful she must be! ‘My eyes may just pop out of my head on seeing her!’ I thought. Well, a thousand imaginary visuals of Draupadi began flashing before my eyes.

Lost in Draupadi’s thoughts, I did not realise when we had reached our destination. But surprisingly, instead of being escorted to the dining hall, I was led towards a mango orchard in a large garden situated at the southern end of the palace. I had never seen such a vast and beautiful garden in any palace before...but then, how many palaces had I really been to before? As for the garden, I could spot one large pond and two smaller ones, from afar. In addition, there were several tiny decorative ponds that were filled with flowers, with a motley of birds flitting around the flowers. The garden, abounding in all kinds of large trees, could impress anyone at first sight itself. As far as security was concerned, ten to twelve soldiers were seen patrolling the garden. We were led to a large seating area where King Dhrupad and the chief minister, Udbhasha, were awaiting us. They stood up and greeted me as we approached and politely asked me to take a seat. As Dhrishtadyumna and I sat down, the Chief Minister got up and excused himself. I understood then that the conversation would be purely of a personal nature. In a short while, maidservants appeared as if from nowhere

and began pouring liquor into gilded goblets. When I was offered some, I declined politely saying, “I am not very fond of liquor, so having it at such an early hour is impossible. Of course, if my brother were here, he would have given you company till the very end.”

King Dhrupad blurted out in a sad tone, “Then I ought to have invited him instead.”

Dhrishtadyumna did not appreciate this remark from his father. The king too, realised that he had committed a folly and should not have spoken bluntly. He apologised immediately, saying, “I don’t know what has happened to me these days. I wish to say one thing, but end up saying something else altogether.”

I could empathise with his helplessness. He wanted to see *Acharya* Drona and Arjuna begging at his feet as soon as possible. The scorching desire for revenge had robbed him of his capacity to think clearly. Therefore, I did not take his comment to heart; I simply smiled and let it pass. However, I knew that what escapes one’s lips spontaneously is exactly what the heart wants to say. In order to say something in a measured manner, one needs to apply the brain and the brain is an expert at concealing what is going on within oneself and projecting something entirely different on the outside. This was not new to me; I had myself applied this art numerous times. If you ask someone directly if he is angry with you or not, he will not admit that he is angry; he will always smile and act in the most loving manner. However, if you want to discover his true feelings, you will need to inhibit his intelligence for a few moments. In order to do that, it is necessary to provoke that person—incite him to such an extent that he responds impulsively, revealing his actual state of mind. In other words, although King Dhrupad had apologised for what he had said, what had unexpectedly slipped from his lips was his actual state of mind. And it was true; at this point, he did not need the King of Dwarka; what he needed was someone who would help him in exacting revenge. And there was nothing wrong with this either; to each his own.

King Dhrupad had consumed a considerable amount of liquor during the course of our conversation, glancing at me several times on the sly. Clearly, he wanted to say something to me, but was unable to muster the courage to

do it. However, excess liquor often helps provide courage and also helps loosen the tongue. Finally, he seemed confident enough to speak. In a grave manner, he asked, “You must have received the message I had sent through *Acharya* Sandipani.”

I nodded in acknowledgement. I was fully alert, for, it was essential to stay balanced; the tiniest mistake could lead to a wrong conclusion. Seeing me silent, he continued, “So, have you considered the proposal of marrying Draupadi?”

Dhrupad had asked me a very direct question. Now, how was I supposed to answer this in a roundabout manner? But being the adept that I was, I knew that to respond with another question was the only way to avoid such a direct question. So, I did just that. I asked him, “As you very well know, I am married already. Then why are you according me this favour?”

Dhrupad replied in a candid tone, “Because you are the only one who can avenge me against Drona and Arjuna.”

Oh! He was being extremely straightforward. ‘Never mind,’ I thought. Speaking cautiously, I continued, “Perhaps Your Highness is not aware that the Pandavas have been burnt to death in a palace made of lacquer. Arjuna has already been punished for his actions. As far as Drona is concerned, he will meet his downfall and will be punished for his actions at the opportune time, as ordained by Nature. Why then, do you want to burden yourself unnecessarily with the sin of revenge?”

This news should have calmed him, but the fire of revenge is so unique and severe that it burns more intensely than any other form of anger. I noticed that the king was not pleased to hear the news of Arjuna’s death. On the contrary, saddened deeply, he said, “This is unfortunate indeed; he should have died at my hands. Never mind, but I will still punish his *guru*, Drona, myself, and that too with your help, by making you my son-in-law.”

I said, “That means I will have to accept your desire for revenge along with Draupadi’s hand in marriage?”

“Of course!” King Dhrupad replied.

Indeed, Dhrupad was in a belligerent mood and was, therefore, speaking bluntly. He was not giving me a chance to evade or circumvent the matter. Nevertheless, I had to try my best to divert the discussion. I had to ensure the conversation did not reach any conclusion. Even Dhrishtadyumna was surprised by his father's stark approach. So, he too had not expected the king to express his wish with such straightforwardness. Well, whether expected or not, the fact remained that at this point, Dhrupad was talking directly and unambiguously. So, once again, I tried to dodge the matter saying, "You are willing to trade even the future of your daughter for the sake of getting even with someone. But have you ever asked Draupadi for her opinion on this matter?"

Dhrupad replied, "Of course! Do you think I would take such a crucial decision without consulting her? She is the daughter of King Dhrupad! She is more restless than I am to exact revenge on Drona and Arjuna, because she is unable to bear her father's humiliation."

Well, what could I say now? Both father and daughter were alike, harbouring an intense desire for revenge. Moreover, Dhrupad was determined to talk in a straightforward and upfront manner. And this was surely not the time to either accept or reject the proposal in such a straightforward manner. My inner voice rebuked me, 'Krishna, you think you are very clever, don't you? How will you wriggle out of this situation now?' I replied, 'Well, watch me do it then.' All of a sudden, I changed the course of our conversation and said, "Why don't you try using a mediator, someone like Grandfather Bhishma, to discuss the matter?"

As soon as Dhrupad heard my suggestion, he roared, "How can he possibly mediate between Drona and me? Till today, he has not been able to mediate between the Kauravas and the Pandavas."

I was rendered speechless on hearing his outburst, for, what he had said was absolutely true; there was absolutely no answer to this. And at this juncture, there was no scope of tossing a new question at him either. So, I thought it best not to comment. Noticing my silence, an incensed Dhrupad asked, "Instead of trying to change the subject, why don't you respond directly to my proposal?"

Now, Dhrupad had put me on the horns of an even bigger dilemma. Neither was I in a position to accept his proposal right away, nor did I want to disappoint him by rejecting it. Acquiescing to his proposal meant going to war with both Arjuna and Drona, which would lead to unnecessary violence. Rejecting it would mean opening up the possibility of Draupadi marrying some other king, which would also ultimately lead to war. For that matter, King Dhrupad could get so overwhelmed by his desire for revenge that he could even marry off Draupadi to a fiend such as Jarasandha, who was older than Dhrupad himself. Honestly, considering the present condition of the king, this was a strong probability; rather, this eventuality seemed most probable to me. And if Jarasandha were to attack Drona, then all of Hastinapur, including the Pandavas and the Kauravas, would support Drona. That would lead to a massive war—the war of wars! And a war like that meant the death of thousands of innocent soldiers. It would destroy the lives of millions. Nay, I could never let that happen!

Indeed, the matter had become quite complicated. The king would stop at nothing to exact revenge, and his daughter seemed even more determined to avenge the insult. In other words, the situation had gone from bad to worse. Moreover, there was no doubt that any king would be willing to challenge Drona in a battle, if only to marry this beautiful princess. War was inevitable! Obviously, at the moment, my sole priority was to avert war. My priority was to save human lives from useless destruction. But the matter was so complicated that were I to say ‘yes’, I would have to seek revenge, and were I to refuse, then somebody else would step in, and it would inevitably spell doom for Aryavarta. In other words, the only way to keep war at bay was to keep the matter unresolved and steer Dhrupad into a different direction altogether. And to do that, we had to keep the conversation going. Thus, in an attempt to evade the matter once again, I said, “Alright, then let me meet Draupadi once. It is essential for me to understand her viewpoint as well on this matter. She too, ought to know what kind of a husband she would be getting and what sort of conditions she would have to spend the rest of her life in.” On hearing my words, Dhrupad’s face lit up with a glimmer of hope. To reassure him and evade the matter further, I continued, “O King, do not worry. Draupadi and I will together arrive at the right decision. You may rest assured now.”



The king seemed convinced with my reasoning, and I breathed a sigh of relief too; I had been able to postpone the matter for at least a few days. Even though I had not been able to outwit Dhrupad, I still had a chance to do so with Draupadi. She was probably not as adamant as her father. I was scheduled to meet her soon; in fact, in the next two days. So, I quickly finished lunch, excused myself and escaped from there.

I had to exert my mental prowess to its limit in order to tackle Dhrupad in a diplomatic manner. Indeed, it was only because of this prowess that I could confuse the king and successfully evade giving him a direct reply. However, even after I had returned to my chamber, my mind remained preoccupied. War had to be averted at any cost, but there was no solution in sight. Everything depended on being able to hoodwink Draupadi. However, my main concern was that when I had not been able to change Dhrupad's mind, then what would I do when confronted by the beautiful Draupadi? Beauty, after all, was my innate weakness. 'Oh well, I would cross the bridge when I came to it,' I thought to myself.

While I was engrossed in these thoughts, Uddhava was trying to gauge from my expression the outcome of my supposed meeting with Draupadi. So, I put my contemplation aside and spent some time talking to him. He then steered the discussion away from Draupadi and the Pandavas, and broached the subject of Dwarka. There had been no news of Dwarka for a while now, which was just as well, for, I was not especially awaiting any news myself. I had anyway sent a messenger, who would bring the news eventually. Even if I was not present there physically, the whole of Dwarka was there. So, what was the point in worrying needlessly? At present, I had to tackle the situation staring me in the face, in Panchal. With the onset of night, I had once again focussed my attention on the prospective meeting with Draupadi. I would like to emphasise, as far as possible, I always liked to remain focussed, without deviating my attention from my present goal. Very often, my mind would be present exactly where my body was. The human mind, if it so desires, can be at several places at the same time; but the physical self can be present only in one place at any given time. This is the limitation of the human body. However, I would always keep my mind where my body was, and my body would always be where it had to be at that time. Thus, at present, not only my body, but my mind too was fully present in Panchal, contemplating ways to chase away the dark, ominous

clouds of war hovering over Aryavarta. That being the case, there was no question of diverting my focus by worrying about Dwarka.

Meanwhile, the exhaustion resulting from the continuous journey, coupled with the mental stress I had to undergo, had made me lose track of time. I did not even realise when two days had passed by. These two days were enough for the body to rest, but because my mind was engrossed in contemplation, I could not keep track of time. And so, the day of my meeting with Draupadi had arrived. Uddhava was more excited than I was about the meeting, and there was only one reason behind his excitement. He did not want to lose the opportunity to tease me. I ignored him though, as I was preparing myself mentally for my meeting with Draupadi. Additionally, I also focussed on dressing up well. I tried on many garments and discarded many, before I was satisfied with the right one. The same was the case with my jewellery. I continued to go about my work with my ears trained on Uddhava's barbs and ramblings. My enthusiasm did not dampen; after all, I was preparing myself to meet the most beautiful woman in the world. Eventually, I was ready in my favourite costume comprising a fluttering *pitambar*, a crown worn with the characteristic peacock feather, a golden upper garment flowing down to my knees, a garland of *gunja*<sup>[27]</sup> around my neck and my flute and discus in my hands.

Seeing me dressed in my characteristic costume, which I had put together carefully, Uddhava did not lose the opportunity to taunt me. Never mind! He was at it since morning. He was busy taunting me, whereas I was busy preparing for my meeting with Draupadi. It was Daruka, however, who had the privilege of enjoying the entire drama. It was not as if I was dressing with care because I was going to meet the world's most beautiful woman; I was fond of dressing well even otherwise. Of course, on this day, I had taken special care to do so, which was justified too, but I knew that giving any clarification to Uddhava would only invite a few more barbs from him. So, I chose to remain quiet. I had yet another special trait that I might as well acquaint you with. I would always remain calm and unperturbed, irrespective of external distractions or disturbances. A sweet melody of the flute would always play at the back of my mind. It was due to this very quality that my personality always held a magnetic appeal. Women especially would find this extremely attractive; at least that had been the case so far. But after meeting the world's most beautiful woman, this could

prove to be a mistaken belief. It was also possible that I would not get the opportunity to praise myself like this.

Oh well, what was the point in rambling on about all this? It was time for the two ultimate forces of attraction to come face-to-face with each other. It would be a historic meeting, as the two of us would cast a spell on each other. Only time would tell who would triumph over the other. Indeed, the ‘witness’ in me would also love to watch this game. So, instead of delving into other matters, let me talk about the matter at hand. Out of sheer excitement, I was ready before time, and was now pacing up and down my chamber. However, let me make it clear that pacing restlessly was a habit with me even under normal circumstances. I would find it impossible to sit in one place for a long time. So, even if I were not waiting, I would still be pacing around, instead of sitting idly. Uddhava knew this only too well, but what difference would that make at this point? He intended to tease me and had now, also found the opportunity. So, he grabbed it and said playfully, “O dear bridegroom! Why are you so nervous and impatient? Hold your horses, the invitation will be here soon.” I was prepared to hear all these comments, so I simply ignored him and continued pacing the chamber. Now, was there any logic to Uddhava’s comment? If a person is dressed up and pacing the chamber, does it necessarily mean that he is impatient and finding it tedious to wait? Uddhava just wanted to have fun at my expense, so I let him.

By afternoon, Dhrishtadyumna came to fetch me. I was already waiting; moreover, I wanted to escape Uddhava’s teasing, so I set off with Dhrishtadyumna immediately. We trotted along the passageways of the palace with four soldiers marching behind us. Now, all we had to do was go from one part of the palace to another, so how long was that going to take? Yet, within the span of these few moments, a thousand thoughts surged through my mind. Very soon, we reached Draupadi’s chamber. This was where Dhrishtadyumna left me, gesturing me to enter it. He had granted me the privilege of privacy at the outset. I knocked on the door enthusiastically, and in a grand manner, entered the chamber of the world’s most beautiful woman. The chamber was scented with incense and perfume. Draupadi was waiting with her maidservants for me. Dressed in robes of shining silk, her body glistened like the rays of the setting sun. The moment I saw her, her beauty and physical form made a deep and lasting impression on my mind.

The first thought to cross my mind was, ‘A woman cannot be more beautiful than this!’ Draupadi had surpassed the scores of visual images I had formed of her in my mind. She was, indeed, a thousand times more beautiful than I could have ever visualised. Of course, she was not as fair-complexioned as her brother. ‘Oh, stop it! Even you are not fair-skinned,’ my inner voice retorted. I responded, ‘So what? Don’t you know how attractive I am?’ I thus began to mumble to myself, beholding the epitome of beauty before me.

It was a strange scene indeed. I was still standing on the threshold of the chamber, taking in her beauty, my thoughts having come to a grinding halt. Draupadi was half reclining on her seat, while four maidservants attended to her. Two were fanning her, while the other two stood nearby, waiting for her command. As for Draupadi, I needed to look at her ever so carefully. Therefore, when I pulled myself back to my senses, I began to observe her from head to toe. Every part of her body—her eyes, lips, hair and nose—was the finest I had ever seen. Each individual feature of hers was perfect; each feature in itself was enough to make her the world’s most beautiful woman. Though Draupadi seemed to be the most beautiful woman of this era, I can say with conviction that such a phenomenon occurred only once in a thousand years, as it is rare to find beauty of this stature and perfection. Beholding the unsurpassable beauty, this lover of beauty could only stand rooted to the spot, totally dumbstruck. It was only when Draupadi made a sound to clear her throat that I was jolted back to the present. It was only then that I could say that I saw her properly for the first time. She was smiling at me, although I wonder whether she was smiling at me or at my condition. Whatever it was, I smiled back in acknowledgement, but my smile paled in comparison to hers. Her smile, though, was clearly laced with pride; I was not sure whether this pride was because of her beauty or because of having mesmerised a person like me. We had not met formally as yet. No words had been exchanged, nor any introduction made. All that had happened between us was an exchange of smiles. In a way, though, just by exchanging smiles, she had shattered my pride and made me question my notion of possessing an attractive personality.

Could Krishna really be reduced to such a state? No... no, this could not be allowed to happen. My inner voice cautioned me, ‘Before you lose control of this game completely and make a fool of yourself, get hold of yourself,

Krishna! Step out of your trance, dear Krishna! Step away from your ego, which has taken the form of attraction. Embolden the ‘witness’ within you. You are succumbing to Draupadi’s charm and attraction! Are you consciously allowing your personality to be mocked at? Hand over the reins of your mind, intelligence and heart to your ‘witness’. Do something, quick! Otherwise, you will lose everything—your existence as well as your reputation!’ Under normal circumstances, I would not have controlled my ego, mind or intelligence; I would have given them the liberty to lose themselves in the beauty of Draupadi. And I would not have bothered if it were to make me appear a fool. However, at present, I was duty-bound; I had to do what was right, to do what was for the greater good. I had to look for a way to establish peace and harmony between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. I had to avert a potential war between Dhrupad and Drona. This was certainly not the time to be smitten by Draupadi’s beauty. So, within a moment’s span, I had gained control over myself. Now, my personality was completely in the hands of my ‘witness’. My mind and my ego had turned to naught. Within the span of a moment, I had returned to reality. Now, the bewitching arrows of Draupadi’s beauty did not pose danger of any kind. She could flaunt herself as much as she wanted to, try to wound my heart as best as she could, but it would be of no use. The moment the ‘witness’ within me took control of the situation, the magic of my smile spread all over the chamber. This time, my smile and my personality did not fall short of Draupadi’s. I had been needlessly discrediting myself under the influence of my ego.

My focus was now channelled into averting war at any cost. I had not been able to throw Dhrupad off track, but I would have to do it with Draupadi. In order to do this successfully, I had to walk like an acrobat and maintain a fine balance on this tightrope called beauty. Neither could I decide to marry her in haste and nor could I refuse; the latter was simply out of the question. If I refused, Dhrupad would open his doors to the other kings immediately. In such a situation, he could even consider Jarasandha as a prospective son-in-law. Besides, Draupadi’s beauty would compel any person to stoop to any level of violence in an attempt to exact revenge. And this was exactly what I wanted to prevent. I had come here with the sole intent of averting needless violence and destruction. It was a strange situation indeed. On one hand, I was battling hard with my mind to resist Draupadi’s beauty, and on

the other, the onus of shaping the political future of the entire Aryavarta region was on me.

Amidst these nagging thoughts, I made my way well inside the chamber and a little closer to Draupadi. Once the exchange of smiles had stopped, Draupadi too got up from her seat. Before I even realised what was happening, she welcomed me in the traditional manner with an *aarti* (a traditional Indian ritual to welcome a guest) holding a golden platter, laden with lit lamps, in her hands. Looking deep into my eyes with the kind of charm that would torment any man, she completed this ritual. Fortunately, I had handed over the reins to the ‘witness’ within me, at the right time; otherwise, I would have been lying in a heap, defenceless at this enchanting maiden’s feet. But now, her beautiful charm was rendered powerless. It just could not throw off the firm ‘witness’ within me. While my mind was taking comfort in this knowledge, her attempts to ensnare me were far from over. After the *aarti*, she sprinkled *ittar* (perfume made from natural ingredients) on me. Thereafter, a maidservant handed her a plate containing sandalwood paste, while another handed her a garland made of beautiful flowers. Sensing the next step, I extended my forehead a little to help her apply the *tika* (a spot of coloured powder or paste applied on the forehead as a mark of auspiciousness) but neither did she apply the sandalwood paste to my forehead, nor did she garland me. On the contrary, she gave the garland back to the maidservant saying, “Not now, the time for garlanding has not come as yet!”

These were the first words she had spoken, in a tone so sharp that it left me speechless. Her voice was mellifluous no doubt, but her sarcasm was equally biting. It was evident from her mannerisms, that not only was she beautiful but she also had a melodious voice and keen intellect. Embarrassed, I withdrew my slightly extended neck and forehead quickly back to their former positions. Oh goodness! She had humbled even the ‘witness’ within me! It was evident that Nature had armed Draupadi with all weapons imaginable to enslave men. Had the ‘witness’ within me not been firm, I would have succumbed to her charms, within moments. She now invited me to sit on a grand, throne-like seat. Just like a scalded child dreads fire, I, who had been fooled by the trick of the *tilak* and the garland, sat down gingerly on the seat. After I had sat down, she started examining me from head to toe as if I had arrived for an appraisal by her. After a

thorough examination, she flashed her most endearing smile and said, “Whatever I have heard about you, I have found to be true.”

After passing her verdict, she chuckled and fell silent, just as a snake does when it withdraws after delivering a sharp bite, thereby putting me in a spot. However, by now, I had composed myself and had recovered completely from the spell of her charm. I retorted immediately, “I can say the same about you.”

Hearing this, she kept smiling for a while and then, looking fondly at me, she said, “Exactly as you had heard? You seem to be an expert in the art of lying. I’m sure you have found me to be much better than what you had heard.”

Dumbfounded on hearing this, I realised that an ego as huge as this, was not a good sign. However, sensing the precarious situation I was in, I did not reply. But I surely did not like what had happened. Just then, she suddenly commanded her maidservants sharply to leave the chamber. Once they had left, she came closer to me and sat on a reclining seat facing me. Now, we were alone in that huge chamber.

For a while, an awkward silence pervaded the chamber once again. We were simply looking at each other, exchanging smiles. Finally, I broke the silence. To pick up the thread of our conversation, I said, “It was rather unwise to send the maidservants away.”

“Why?” she asked.

I replied, “It will spark curiosity in their minds regarding us. They will spy on us unnecessarily.”

Draupadi said, “The fear arising in your mind with respect to this is very important to me.”

Surprised at this, I asked, “Why?”

She replied, “Because firstly, it is certain that you will stay within your limits and behave decently with me. Secondly, this fear also indicates that you are trying to shield yourself from being swayed by me.”

Hearing her, I felt as if she was toying not just with my brain and ego but with my entire being. Well, I was no less an expert when it came to playing mind games. But what could I do? This was not the time to play games. At present, unfortunately, the smitten Krishna's entire attention was focussed on extinguishing the fire of King Dhrupad's revenge; otherwise, this game was to my liking and the opponent was a fine player too. Nonetheless, after fooling around in this manner for a while, she herself came to the point. Adopting a calm tone, she said, "You must have received my father's proposal."

No sooner did she utter these words, than I became fully alert. I could accept being ensnared by beauty and eloquence; I did not even mind being defeated in a mental game. However, losing an opportunity to transform a raging fire of revenge into love was not acceptable. So, I chose my words with deliberation. I said, "Yes, I have received the proposal of your hand in marriage in exchange for revenge against Drona and Arjuna. But I would like to know your opinion on this matter."

This time, she spoke coyly, "If you wish, you may use terms of endearment with me from now itself."

I fell silent. How was one supposed to talk to her? She left me speechless every time she spoke. She was a master conversationalist and had left me behind even in the art of conversation. Unable to elicit a response from me, she spoke again, "What are you thinking about now?"

I said, "Panchali, you are beautiful as well as intelligent. But I am wondering what has happened to Aryavarta today. Throughout the region, women's honour and pride are being put at stake by mixing relationships with politics. On one hand, there is Jarasandha who wishes to marry his granddaughter Apnarva to Rukmi purely to derive political mileage. On the other hand, Rukmi wanted to please Jarasandha by offering his sister, Rukmini in marriage to Shishupala. Here, your father is firm in his resolve of marrying you off to me, to exact personal vendetta. But marriage should be the union of two people who love each other. It should take place through the selection of a suitable groom and should not be turned into a deal."



I was surprised that even after having heard my serious speech, her expressions remained unchanged. She did not appear grave; on the contrary, she laughed my concern off saying, “But here, the situation is entirely opposite. My father is more interested in accepting you as a son-in-law than giving me away; this way, with your help, he can take revenge on Drona.” After a pause, she continued, flashing a captivating smile, “And thank goodness, you have at least spoken to me with a little less formality.”

I did not want to lose the solemnity of the situation and be dismissed lightly at any cost, for, if the conversation were to deviate from this point, then we would face a mammoth problem. Since I was unable to trick Dhrupad, Draupadi was my last hope. Thus, trying to sound solemn, I said, “But do you want to put your life at stake just for the sake of retribution?”

This was Draupadi, after all. My intention and effort could make only so much of a difference to her. She did not want to take me seriously at all. So, there was no point in trying to lend gravity to the conversation. Once again, she shot an enchanting smile at me and said, “I am not putting my life at stake. On the contrary, I am putting you at stake.”

Feeling completely helpless, all my attempts to make Draupadi understand the futility of revenge were being brushed aside with guileless ease. She successfully thwarted all my endeavours to bring a semblance of seriousness in her thoughts. And what do I say of her eloquence? I had to marshal all my resources to keep pace with her; the manner in which she was answering each of my questions made me feel that it was easier to deal with Dhrupad than her. Dhrupad, at the very outset, had spoken in a blunt manner, so I had nervously pushed the matter into Draupadi’s hands, but she was a step ahead of her father and was talking in an even more direct manner. I was of the belief that because she was a woman, I could flatter and trick her easily. But how the tables had turned! This was the same Krishna, who had tricked many great kings with his silver tongue, and who had flustered packed courtrooms, thanks to his virtuosity with words. He had also charmed a great many *gopis* and even an intelligent princess such as Rukmini. Yet at this point, he stood helpless before this woman! How could I let this happen? Finally, on the verge of defeat, I used the *Brahmastra* which always worked on women. Making a great show of sympathy, I said, “But you know that I am a married man. It would not

seem honourable to make such a beautiful and talented princess as yourself the second queen, instead of the chief queen of Dwarka.”

Nonetheless, this arrow too failed to hit its mark. Instead of seriously considering the implication of what I had just said, she coyly replied, “So what? You may marry ten other women for all I care, but in spite of all these marriages, you will still be mine.”

Seen from a different perspective, her pride was not unwarranted either, for, no one who married Draupadi could ever steer himself away from her. Nevertheless, ego, whether it is right or wrong, is ultimately the ego. As for me, I could not think of a way to tackle this situation. I wanted to postpone discussion on this matter and allow a considerable period of time to elapse; I wanted to give enough time to both the father and daughter to relinquish their obsession with retribution. So, handling the matter carefully was of utmost importance. Thus, I tried to change my strategy and said, “It is not easy to extinguish the fire of rage that follows humiliation, Panchali, because this fire first consumes the one who desires vengeance, and then the enemy. And more often than not, a person gets so consumed by this fire of revenge, that there is hardly any fire left in him to seek revenge.”

On hearing this, Draupadi suddenly turned serious. It appeared that I had hit the bull’s eye, but this was not to be. She replied with the utmost gravity and determination, “Do not worry, O King of Dwarka. The fire of vengeance in me is so severe that it will burn all of Aryavarta to ashes and still not be doused.”

Now, I could not really tell her that this was precisely the fear that had brought me here. This is exactly the problem with the ego; it is not easy to deal with. If attacked from a particular direction, it swerves into another. If attacked from the other direction, it moves towards yet another. Try as you might, it is difficult to pin it down and bring it to a balanced, central point. Let me elaborate upon this with an example. The ego recognises both extremes—overeating as well as observing fasts. But it does not understand the idea of having a regular balanced meal. As you may remember, I had spoken of this in the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna, *“A balanced diet, balanced sleep and balanced exercise is extremely important to establish oneself in Yoga. This Yoga is neither for him who overeats, nor for him who observes*

*complete fast. Yoga, which rids one of woe, is accomplished only by him who is regulated in diet, regulated in sleep and regulated in performing actions.*”<sup>[28]</sup> This is where egotists face defeat; an egotist either becomes completely involved in the world around him, or, fearing consequences, renounces his worldly life. But he is completely ignorant of the art of practising renunciation while enjoying his worldly life. Draupadi’s ego was embroiled in a similar dilemma at present. It was not willing to find a central point of stability. Nonetheless, I was not one to accept defeat. After all, it was a question that concerned millions of lives. So, I tried yet another tactic to convince her and said, “Panchali, you know very well that there is no greater penance than forgiveness. The quality of forgiveness soothes oneself and the other person immediately. Can we not consider forgiving Drona?”

Alas! What can I say? This move had also failed to make an impact on her. On the contrary, she turned furious on hearing this. Her eyes flashed in anger and she began to tremble with fury. And then suddenly, in a loud voice, she proclaimed, “You cannot even imagine the situation when Drona’s evil disciple, Arjuna, had taken my father a prisoner. It is said that, at the time, my father was resting under a banyan tree, when Arjuna had attacked him, all of a sudden. Arjuna aimed an arrow at his crown, which flew and hit the ground. My father was shocked and before he could realise what had happened, another arrow landed at his feet. Taken aback, my father fell down. Before father could comprehend anything, Arjuna and his soldiers swooped down on him like vultures, tied him up, and dragging him ruthlessly, threw him at Drona’s feet. Should I forget all this? How unjust it was! Even the deadliest of enemies gives a warning, allows you time to react and then proceeds to attack. I can never forget this insult to my unarmed father. If you had been there, your blood would have boiled too. Hence, remember, O King of Dwarka! I shall go to any length to avenge my father’s humiliation.”

“Any length?” I asked.

“Yes, any,” she said, having regained her composure. “Even if I have to marry someone like Jarasandha, I shall do it. He will crush the two of them by simply snapping his fingers.”

Shocked to the core on hearing this, I said, “Panchali, you may not know this, but Arjuna has already perished in a fire.”

She replied, “So what if Arjuna is no more; Drona is still alive. My thirst for vengeance will be quenched only after I’ve seen Drona killed!”

I said, “Alright. I have understood this, but don’t you know that Jarasandha is your father’s age?”

She said, “All I know is that he is extremely powerful and that Drona is still alive.”

I said, “Forget about Jarasandha, but as far as I know, this is the result of a personal grudge. Drona alone cannot be blamed.”

Draupadi retorted, “What personal grudge are you referring to? When did this happen?”

I answered, “Draupadi, this matter goes back to the time when your father and Drona were both students at Kripacharya’s ashram, and were really close friends. As a gesture of this friendship, your father, King Dhrupad had promised Drona that he would set up a *gurukul* for him in his kingdom. Many years later, when Drona came here, your father had already become king. Your father made fun of their childhood promise, terming it childishness. Drona found this extremely humiliating and consequently vowed revenge. The event you are referring to is the outcome of that incident.”

Hearing my explanation, Draupadi turned grave and spoke in a solemn tone, “What you are saying could be true, but this happened long before I was born. Besides, even if father had refused to set up a *gurukul* for him, did he deserve to be humiliated in this manner? Did he deserve to be stripped of half his kingdom?”

I was quiet now; I realised that the father-daughter duo would never relent. The onerous task that I had taken upon myself, of averting war, seemed more and more difficult to accomplish. I was worried about Arjuna and his future. On one hand, the Kauravas were after his life, and on the other, this pair of father and daughter would rest only after unleashing a thousand

monsters on him. Now, before the matter could take a turn for the worse, it had to be handled carefully. I had to keep the conversation going, for, a solution was likely to appear sooner or later, only if communication remained open. This time, I decided to encourage her line of thinking. “You are right, Panchali; Drona does not deserve to be forgiven. We shall surely get our revenge. Despite being an *Acharya*, he has marred the glory of *Acharyas*.”

Calming down immediately on hearing these words, Draupadi quickly shot another question at me, “So, should I presume that you have accepted the marriage proposal?”

“No, I did not say that,” I replied. “I have merely agreed to the need for seeking revenge. And in this matter, I shall assist you.”

Draupadi asked, “You mean you are agreeable to revenge, but not to this marriage?”

“I did not say that either,” I replied.

It was my turn to beguile her with my flair for words. She had flustered me in the beginning with her shrewd statements; now, I wanted to see the princess get a taste of my eloquence. It was incredible how vexed she had become by these two statements of mine. Disconcerted by my attitude, she asked, “What do you mean then?”

I said, “I just want to say that I do not object to any of your suggestions, but, before taking a final decision, I want to evaluate several aspects of the situation in depth. I hope you are not in a hurry.”

This time, she smiled. “No, I am not in a hurry, but you should not make us wait too long either. For that matter, if you can save Rukmini from Shishupala, the least I can expect is that you will come and surely save me from Jarasandha.”

Hearing this, I flashed a quick smile; undoubtedly, the smile was the result of relief, for, I had managed to buy time. Now, I only hoped that nothing new would come up for discussion. So, without wasting time and with the promise of meeting her soon, this *rannchod* (deserter) escaped from there

immediately. Oh, my! What a woman she was! I did not know whether to praise her beauty and eloquence, or whether to admire her smile and intelligence. Though I had left her chamber, I found it difficult to shake off the effect she had had on me. Such a gorgeous, eloquent woman with such a bewitching smile...what can I say about her? Her melodious voice was still resounding in my ears. Her beautiful face had been etched in my memory. It was difficult for me to decide whether the time I had spent in her chamber was challenging or enchanting; challenging because only I knew how I had managed to save myself from her captivating beauty, and enchanting because I had had the opportunity to spend time with the most beautiful woman in the world. I had had the chance to admire her beauty, her speech, her body language, her smile, all of it, very closely. Perhaps, after ruminating over every aspect of this meeting, it would be best to call it the 'most challenging yet wonderful' time of my life.

Draupadi had been dealt with, for the time being. Now, I began to worry about the Pandavas. Just the thought of them being in Panchal was sending shivers down my spine. It was evident from the behaviour of both Dhrupad and Draupadi, that if the Pandavas were caught here, it would be impossible for me to save them. So, as soon as I reached my chamber, I decided to discuss this matter with Uddhava. But, here too, the situation presented a challenge. Uddhava, who had been waiting impatiently for me to return, ignored the urgency of the matter and focussed only on teasing me. I felt trapped because a while ago, Draupadi was not taking me seriously and now, Uddhava had made up his mind to torment me. It was rare for me to become serious in life and I would often laugh away others' worries. However, at this point, when the matter was indeed grave, everybody was making fun of it, and Uddhava had truly crossed the limit. He was in such a mischievous mood that forget about realising the seriousness of the matter, he would not even let me talk about the Pandavas. He did not want to discuss the Pandavas at all. On the contrary, he asked me, "Kanhaiya! Will we be returning to Dwarka alone or will we be taking my sister-in-law, Draupadi, along with us? If we are taking Draupadi with us, then let me go ahead and prepare Dwarka to welcome the most beautiful woman in the world."

Now, what could I say in response to this? So, I simply smiled. I could tell that he was in no mood to be serious right now. So, I brought up the matter

again during dinner. I expressed my concern for the Pandavas, explaining to him the urgency to seek them out and warn them of the potential danger. This time, Uddhava listened to me with rapt attention. It was decided that the next day, he and Daruka would set out to look for the Pandavas. Although Panchal was a large kingdom, this task was not difficult for Uddhava. By now, he had become skilled at it.

The very next day, Uddhava and Daruka set out in search of the Pandavas, while I was left alone to deal with the problems in Panchal, which were unique in themselves. In order to keep the doors of communication open, it was essential to meet either Dhrupad or Draupadi almost every other day. However, despite my best efforts, I was fighting a losing battle, and had not yet been able to weaken their resolve for retribution. They were firm in their stance, and not willing to budge at all. Try as I might to veer them away from their goal of retribution, both would eventually return to it. On the other hand, accepting their proposal was out of the question, for, words like retribution and enmity did not exist in my vocabulary. When I had not even considered Jarasandha my enemy till today, there was no question of exacting revenge on Drona. Besides, love, to me, means to surrender without expectations. However, in this case, arrogance had replaced surrender and the expectation was that of vengeance. In all honesty, apart from the raging fire of retribution, Draupadi's ego was another factor because of which I could not accept the proposal. I had no reservations about a relationship when there was love and surrender in it. After all, I had accepted even Kubja's love because of this. But a relationship in which the ego played a greater role than love and surrender was totally unacceptable.

My troubles, however, did not end there. I could not let Draupadi marry any other king either, especially not the wretched Jarasandha. It was a tricky situation, indeed. Neither did I want to accept their proposal, nor did I want to refuse them as that would mean opening the doors to scoundrels such as Jarasandha. Besides, one could not even hope that Draupadi would remain unmarried forever. In other words, each of the three outcomes of this situation appeared equally dangerous. There was a fourth possible outcome too, but that was already out of the question. The problem could be solved instantly if Dhrupad and Draupadi's fire of retribution would calm down on its own. But there was absolutely no hope as far as that was concerned. And now, a new problem was gradually rearing its head—it did not seem

possible to hold off the father-daughter duo any longer. In other words, the situation was going from bad to worse.

‘Well, so be it!’ I thought. In any case, Nature had never been kind enough to toss easy challenges my way. Often, I felt that Nature was busy conjuring up the world’s most daunting problems only for me, strewing them in my path, so that I would be busy grappling with them. However, the greatest difficulty at this point was that the list of problems was not limited to Panchal. I was also worried about the safety of the Pandavas. And besides, there was the concern about Rukmini and Pradyumna too. The problem of Dwarka’s safety and that of the Nagas were also looming large. Indeed, it was well-nigh impossible for me to single-handedly and simultaneously deal with all these problems. I had to deal with them, one at a time. So, at present, I focussed on only one problem, that of Panchal and the Pandavas. I had completely discarded all the other problems from my mind.

You very well know that handling one task at a time had always been my speciality. I was adept at the art of leaving the rest of the tasks and troubles to Nature’s justice. I mean, if I were to take on responsibility for everything, then what would poor Nature do? How would it utilise its time? After all, it needs something to keep itself busy, does it not? An ordinary human being appears to have the capacity to deal with thousands of problems at the same time, unable to surrender even one of his problems to Nature. Therefore, it is the responsibility of a few wise people like me, to keep Nature occupied. Besides, these games had become a routine between Nature and me. Nature would challenge me with new problems, each worse than the previous one, and every time, I would emerge victorious, thereby disappointing it. Nature wished to keep me occupied by sending me one absurd problem after another; but instead of taking all of them head-on, I would leave most of the problems to its justice, thereby keeping Nature busy. Thereafter, I was willing to accept Nature’s wish in such matters, whatever it was. However, this was not the case wherever ‘I’, Krishna, was present. In such situations, I was not willing to bow down to Nature’s wish. In these cases, what occurs ultimately would be as per ‘Krishna’s’ wish.

Nevertheless, these were mere ruminations; and ruminations alone were not going to make things happen as per Krishna’s wish. I had to marshal all my resources and perform a miraculous deed. But my mind, unfortunately, was



not willing to comply. The days were passing by rapidly. Uddhava had not returned either; otherwise, he would have provided some solace to me. Despite several meetings with Dhrupad and Draupadi, neither had I been successful in convincing them, nor had they been able to persuade me to accept their proposal. Of course, I had succeeded in wasting time by deflecting their questions in novel ways. But for how long could this continue? Finally, what I had feared the most, did happen one day. Their patience ran out and the father-daughter duo gave me an ultimatum. Within the next three days, I had to inform them of my final and clear-cut decision. Neither had I been able to beguile them with speeches on non-violence, nor had Draupadi managed to fluster me with her beauty. What could I say? Both had stayed firm on their respective resolves. This meant that there was no way I could keep up the pretence anymore. Within three days, I had to either accept their proposal or refuse to marry Draupadi. While there was no question of accepting the proposal, refusal meant mass destruction in Aryavarta. I had become quite restless; the matter had become incredibly complicated. However, I had not given up yet. I thought, ‘Who knows, when and how Nature may just offer a solution!’ To concede defeat before actually being defeated was certainly not in my nature.

Meanwhile, there was no news from Uddhava. I wondered why he was taking so long to find the Pandavas. Gradually, this started to worry me. Each passing moment was weighing down heavily on me. To make the situation worse, there was no one to talk to either. For, when you share your feelings and open your heart to someone, it surely lightens the burden on your heart. Oh well! I thought it best to talk to myself and ease the burden. ‘What should I say to King Dhrupad and Draupadi—yes or no? What condition were the Pandavas in, at this moment? Did the Kauravas or King Dhrupad have an inkling that the Pandavas were still alive?’ I somehow spent the next two days asking such questions to myself. The next day was the day of trial by fire. For the first time in my life, I could sense failure looming ahead. There was no solution to avert the impending destruction in Aryavarta.

It was afternoon and I was pacing restlessly in my chamber, when I was amazed at what happened. It was not Uddhava, but, Satyaki who suddenly showed up. I reckoned that he had come with news related to Dwarka, and considering everything that was going on, I did not expect the news to be

good. I was right; he had, indeed, brought disappointing news from Dwarka. He informed me that Rukmini was in a stable condition, but they had still not been able to find Pradyumna. They had not been able to find out why he had been kidnapped or who could have done it. Well, at least Rukmini had composed herself to some extent; this could be considered good news under the present circumstances. Besides, for how long could she keep grieving? No matter how great a tragedy is, time is the biggest healer and eventually, it does heal.

But what had happened to Pradyumna? Who could have possibly kidnapped him? If brave and intelligent individuals such as bhaiya and Satyaki and all of Dwarka's spies had not been able to find him, then it was certainly the handiwork of a mighty and clever enemy. It could be Jarasandha or even Satrajit... or it could be that they had joined hands to commit this misdeed. And if this were true, they would soon create Mathura-like conditions in Dwarka. 'O Krishna! Why are you losing your sense of direction? Worry about Dwarka when you reach there. Tomorrow, you have to face Dhrupad and Draupadi.' That was right! I could not even find a way to dodge these two, and here, I was worrying about Dwarka. So, after talking with Satyaki for a while, I cast Dwarka out of my mind. I also decided to retire to bed early, so that I could lie down and contemplate the problem I was going to face the next day. Needless to say, I kept thinking about Panchal all night long. What was their real problem? They wanted to seek vengeance against Drona. Honestly speaking, they had no interest in me; all they wanted was vengeance. If I could show them an effective way to seek retribution and delay the matter, then I could free myself from this situation, and the potential war in Aryavarta could also be averted. Suddenly, my contemplation took a turn in the right direction, and with that, I found the right solution too. I breathed a sigh of relief. I had, indeed, thought of a genius solution to this problem. It had been proven yet again that no matter how grim a problem may seem, if one thinks in the right direction, then a solution does present itself.

Now, I was fully prepared to face both Dhrupad and Draupadi. It was quite late in the night, but with the hope of a solution at hand, I woke up refreshed after a short rest. I got ready just as quickly. Today, the ultimate resolution to the problem called Dhrupad was bound to appear. Their patience had run out, but I had finally found a solution. On the other hand,

Satyaki watched me with keen interest as I dressed up in my finery, in between feeling restless and pacing about the chamber. This time, Dhrishtadyumna and the chief minister arrived well in time to escort me to the palace. I was anyway ready, so I set off with them immediately. They took me directly to the private chamber of the king. Lunch was served there itself, which meant that the conversation was intended to be of a highly personal nature. Well, I had anyway come fully prepared. Meanwhile, I was amazed at the sight of the seating area adjoining the sleeping chamber of the king. It was a huge chamber that could seat about ten to twelve people. And what can I say of its craftsmanship?! It was exquisite, to say the least. The drapes that hung around the chamber, the paintings and the animal hides added to the elegance of the chamber. This time, as I entered the chamber, the king stood up and greeted me warmly. He asked me to take a seat right opposite him. Dhrishtadyumna and the chief minister took seats nearby. However, Draupadi was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she did not want to be part of the discussion pertaining to her marriage. In a way, this suited me well, because in case the matter failed to produce a favourable result, I could always say that Draupadi should be consulted too. Feeling impatient, the king addressed me straightaway, “I hope you have decided to accept my proposal.”

After a number of meetings with Dhrupad, I had come to expect a direct question from him. It was a good thing that, this time, I had arrived armed with a sound strategy; otherwise, the conversation would have ended at this point itself. Despite his directness, I replied in my characteristic style. I said, “Although I have accepted your proposal, I have not really accepted it.”

Stunned, Dhrupad immediately asked, “What do you mean?”

I replied, “Your main priority is to exact revenge on Drona. Draupadi’s marriage is not your problem. She is beautiful as well as talented; anybody would feel blessed to marry her.”

Dhrupad could not clearly decipher my words. The same could be said of the chief minister and Dhrishtadyumna. However, Dhrupad was unable to contain himself. Irritated, he said, “Then why don’t you do yourself this

favour of marrying her, O King of Dwarka? Every day, you bring us new proposals with strange twists and turns.”

I said, “O King! I’m afraid you haven’t understood what I am trying to say.”

He said, “So explain it well to us! For the past one month, you have been leading us on, giving all kinds of excuses. But today, do not give us a new proposal; I just want a direct answer to my proposal in terms of a simple ‘yes’ or a ‘no’.”

Hearing him speak in a frank manner, I felt a little nervous, for, I was not in a position to provide him a straightforward answer this time either. On the contrary, I had to give him a roundabout solution. However, the problem was that for the past one month, this was exactly what I had been doing, trying to avoid giving him a definite answer. So, doing it yet again was not going to be easy. Well, easy or not, I had to attempt it one last time. Besides, when it came to such tricky tasks, I had an armoury of all possible words and sentiments at my disposal. So, I continued the conversation in my unique style. I said, “I accept your proposal of vengeance against Drona. Considering his wicked behaviour towards you, there is no question of letting him get away with it. Moreover, there is nothing wrong in harming the wretched person who, as his *gurudakshina*, demanded the thumb of the person to whom he had not even taught archery.” The fact that I was calling Drona names went down well with Dhrupad. This was my strategy, after all. In any case, if you want to persuade a person to agree to an undesirable proposition, it is essential to first please him and win his confidence. And that was the strategy I used. After gaining Dhrupad’s attention and ensuring that he was willing to listen, I came directly to the main point of discussion. I said, “For us, finding a suitable match for Draupadi is as important as seeking revenge against Drona.”

Before I could complete, Dhrupad cut in immediately, “And you are the most suitable match!”

“I am fortunate that Your Highness thinks so.” I continued, “I want to feel blessed too, to have Draupadi as my wife. I have given this proposal plenty of thought as well. However, the main problem is that Drona is a great archer, as are most of his students. Moreover, he has the support of the

whole of Hastinapur. Unfortunately, I am not skilled in archery. The second problem is that, everyone would want to marry a beauty like Draupadi. In these circumstances, if you marry Draupadi to me without conducting a *swayamvar*, then all of Aryavarta will go against us. And it is quite possible that my enemies such as Jarasandha, Shalva, Punyajana and others might join hands with Drona to exact revenge on me. If that were to happen, it would become impossible for us to defeat Drona. Our revenge, in turn, would become the cause of our defeat. I do not wish to sacrifice your hopes and desires just to gain a suitable bride like Draupadi.”

Hearing this, worry lines began to crease Dhrupad’s forehead. I felt jubilant, for, I had been able to successfully establish the need for conducting a *swayamvar*. And with that, King Dhrupad was finally caught in my trap! He seemed to be racking his brains, but with nothing coming to mind, he became despondent and said, “Does that mean I will never be able to get revenge against Drona?”

His helplessness was a blessing for me, because only a helpless person would be willing to do as you say. In fact, I was ready to offer him assistance ever since I had arrived here; it was the father-daughter duo that had been so adamant in their stance and unwilling to comply, until now. They had been after my life. But now that they were willing to change tracks, I had no shortage of ideas. I assured him immediately saying, “Do not worry, O King, we will not spare the wicked Drona. He will definitely be punished for his cruel actions. Today onwards, you may consider Panchala and Dwarka as one. From now on, the main goal of my life too, will be to seek revenge against Drona. I do strongly wish to marry Draupadi, but as I have already said, I do not want to put my selfish interest before your desire for vengeance.” I took a deep breath before continuing, “With this goal in mind, I have come up with a concrete plan. After about a year’s time, we will host Draupadi’s *swayamvar*, in which we will invite all the kings and princes of Aryavarta. In this *swayamvar*, we will hold an extremely difficult competition in archery, which Drona himself will not be able to win. Obviously, the one who wins this competition will be a much better archer than Drona or any of his students. As you already know, there is no dearth of heroic kings and princes in Aryavarta. Besides, one can readily presume that to marry Draupadi, all of them will put in their best efforts to win this competition. Needless to say, this *swayamvar* will be the

biggest, grandest and most talked about *swayamvar* in Aryavarta. Draupadi will be married to whoever wins this competition. Thereafter, your son-in-law and I will together bring Drona to your feet.”

Having heard my plan fully, Dhrupad jumped with joy. His happiness knew no bounds, but the very next moment, he looked a little dejected. Actually, he felt that a year was too long a wait. He needed a bit more convincing so, I said, “We will need time to invite every king and prince of Aryavarta. Besides, revenge is like wine; the longer you let it sit, the sweeter it will be in the end.” Dhrupad, however, did not seem convinced by my poetic analogy. His mind was still clouded by numerous other doubts. He said, “Do not devise the competition to be so tough that nobody is able to win it. This plan of yours should not take away the opportunity to avenge my humiliation and Draupadi’s chance to get married.”

Dhrupad’s words made perfect sense. There was no way to predict the plight of a person who fell into my trap. Honestly speaking, I even felt amused by what Dhrupad had said, but considering how delicate the situation was, I did not dare laugh. I held back my laughter, but the next moment, I was genuinely worried. I did not want such a well-thought-out plan to fall apart. So, I had to give a strong assurance to Dhrupad without committing on time. I reassured him saying, “If no one wins this competition, then I shall marry Draupadi. And I shall put my life at stake to avenge your insult. I have already told you, your vengeance is as good as mine.”

My words instantly put him at ease and he spoke with immense gratitude, “You have, indeed, disregarded your own interests and have given due importance to my desire for vengeance.”

I replied fervently too, saying, “Have faith in me! You and I are a team now.”

My words sounded like sweet music to his ears, and folding his hands in great humility, Dhrupad spoke, “Now, I am totally dependent on you.”

Indeed, my work was done. Now, the king was completely under my spell; he had even expressed his gratitude to me. Draupadi’s marriage had, indeed, been postponed by a year, and with that, the matter of retribution had also

been postponed for a year or two. It was now time for me to leave. As I got up, I requested him to explain the plan to Draupadi. I told him that I too, would discuss it with her later. Thereafter, we would work out the details of the *swayamvar* ceremony together. On that note, we ended our meeting. I was relieved that at least the reins of Panchal were in my hands, and I could control the situation in this kingdom. Both Dhrupad and Dhrishtadyumna had begun to repose full trust in me; so, all I had to do was win Draupadi's confidence. And now that both father and brother were under my influence, it would not take long for the daughter to follow suit. Well, I was anyway there to do the needful.

With these thoughts running through my mind, I reached my chamber. Satyaki was already waiting for me. Seeing me spend so many days in Panchal, his curiosity regarding Draupadi had increased too. He even questioned me about it as soon as I walked in. Of course, I could not reveal to him all the schemes I had been plotting in the royal palace of Panchal. People would call me insane—which was true, come to think of it. Why else would I worry about all of Aryavarta? Why else would I attempt to maintain a balance of power between the Kauravas and the Pandavas or try to avert war between Dhrupad and Drona? Who other than a lunatic would worry about the entire world and humankind? These were times when kings did not spare a thought for their own subjects; heads of families did not care for their own family members. Then, what was I trying to do, especially at a time when my own family and my own kingdom were besieged by troubles of all sorts? Perhaps I had lost my sanity. Thus, whenever a friend of mine mentioned Draupadi, I would only smile, and not reveal anything. This would, in turn, create misunderstandings. Convinced that I would eventually marry Draupadi, my friends had started taking the matter seriously. Consequently, they would not miss a single opportunity to tease me; in fact, they would always be in search of a chance to tease me. So, while they would enjoy at my expense, I had to unnecessarily suffer their taunts. However, I was willing to become the object of ridicule, as long as peace prevailed in Aryavarta. Indeed, in order to make life beautiful, it is necessary to nurture such a friendship and derive joy out of it. Finding solace in these thoughts, I would convince myself and feel contented. In other words, for the time being, I was not

affected by Satyaki's curiosity at all. This kind of fun and carefree banter is, in fact, to be expected when one is in the company of friends.

To my great relief, I had finally been able to free myself from the problems in Panchal. However, no sooner was I free from one worry, than I was besieged by another. That's right; my anxiety about the Pandavas had returned to hound me. I wondered why Uddhava had still not been able to trace them. The possibility that the Pandavas, Uddhava himself or both were in some kind of trouble continued to niggle at the back of my mind. Really, I used to entangle myself in so many worrisome tasks! However, to be honest, I also felt proud of this quality I possessed, for, I had easily and effortlessly accepted the responsibility of saving all of humankind, leaving the happy and peaceful life of Dwarka behind, especially at a time when my own wife and son were in such great trouble. This is what I mean when I say that there has never been anyone like me, and will probably never be, because to be like me, one needs to have both courage as well as intelligence. And even if one possesses both these qualities, one still needs to have firm commitment and determination to finish the task at hand, under any circumstances. You cannot avert disaster or mass destruction by meditating under a tree or roaming in the forests or by only preaching non-violence. If mere sermons could produce results, then the speeches on non-violence that I had delivered to Dhrupad and Draupadi should have sufficed.

On the other hand, there was still no news of Uddhava and the Pandavas, and with the passage of time, a feeling of unease crept within me. Realising how complicated the situation in Panchal was, Satyaki too, forgot all about Dwarka's troubles. Fortunately, before this anxiety could get the better of us, one morning, Uddhava suddenly returned. He appeared quite pleased too, which was a good sign. His happiness indicated that not only had our mission been successful, but the Pandavas were safe too. Needless to say, all four of us jumped with joy. I wanted to know the full story, so we all huddled in the chamber itself. Uddhava was ready to share the story, and what he told us truly filled our hearts with joy. I sat with my knees crossed, resting one hand on my cheek, soaking up every word he spoke.



First, he explained why he had taken so long to locate the Pandavas. He had been specifically looking for a group of Brahmins, because the Pandavas had disguised themselves as Brahmins. Moreover, Uddhava was searching for them only on the borders of Panchal, because this was the lead that had been given by Parashara Muni. However, neither were the Pandavas disguised as Brahmins and nor were they staying on the borders of Panchal. Having said this, he burst out laughing, as if he had shared a funny anecdote with us. Then he composed himself. Naturally, I could not contain my curiosity for long and asked him, “Where did you find them then? How were they disguised?”

Uddhava replied excitedly, “The Pandavas are undoubtedly destined to be kings. Adjoining the land of the Nagas, at some distance from Panchal, there is a piece of land belonging to the *Rakshasas* (demons). Bhima is presently their ruler and is now hailed as King Vakrodara.”

Indeed, this news was not only pleasant, but surprising too. I was unable to understand the turn of events, and how Bhima had become the king of the *Rakshasas*. Nevertheless, I was happy, because if they were disguised as demons, the Kauravas would never recognise them, and Dhruvad too would never find them. They were definitely safe now. But how had this happened? Sensing my curiosity, Uddhava did not wait long to share the details. Before I could ask, he explained that the Pandavas were initially dressed as Brahmins on their way to Panchal when the demoniac cannibals captured and imprisoned them. They captured Aunt Kunti too. Seeing his mother bound by ropes, the hot-tempered Bhima could not restrain himself; he challenged Hidimb, the King of the *Rakshasas*, to a duel. Now, as you know, Bhima was incomparable when it came to mace-fighting or wrestling. With just two blows of his mace, he killed Hidimb on the spot. Thereafter, according to the customs of the demons, Bhima had to become the new king and also had to marry Hidimba, the sister of the slain king.

Well, my work was done. Here, Dhruvad was under my spell and there, the Pandavas were safe and sound. In other words, the tide had turned in our favour; every bit of news was satisfactory. Uddhava had, indeed, become highly efficient in his work. He was fast becoming mature and responsible. Like Daruka, Uddhava too, had become indispensable. He had informed the Pandavas about my concern for them and also about our journey to

Hastinapur. The Pandavas were overjoyed to hear that at least someone was concerned about their well-being. Actually, my friendship with the Pandavas was not very deep; we had barely met on two occasions. Besides, I would not have gone out of my way just for the sake of friendship. For me, the safety of the Pandavas was a necessity of Hastinapur, and was more important than the friendship we had shared. If the lure of relationships had been so important to me, wouldn't I have set out to look for Pradyumna long ago?

Now, whether or not I was trapped, or wanted to get trapped in attachment, my friends always tried to lure me to it. And that is precisely what they did this time too. I was enjoying my afternoon meal, feeling relieved of my worries about Panchal and the Pandavas, when my friends brought up the topic of Dwarka. According to them, we needed to return to Dwarka and speed up our search for Pradyumna. They felt that I ought to stay with Rukmini for a few days and fulfil my duty towards her. What did they think? Did I not want to be with her? Was I so callous? However, I knew my limits. For me, the command of Nature was more important than my feeble heart. I never allowed any other voice to supersede the voice of my soul. My friends, due to their limited vision, may have believed that Rukmini and Pradyumna's problems were most crucial; however, my infinite vision commanded me not only to solve the problems of Dhrupad, Draupadi and the Pandavas, but also to travel to the land of the Nagas and put an end to the problems of my great-grandfather. Now obviously, I could not discuss the difference between a short-sighted and far-sighted point of view with my friends. Besides, I had to do what I ought to. The matters that seemed to be of priority to me, were, indeed priorities and hence crucial. As for my friends, they could not comprehend why I was spending so much time in Panchal or why I was so hesitant to return to Dwarka. They could think of only one reason for my stay in Panchal—that I was enamoured of Draupadi's beauty.

Well, I could not care less about what they thought, but the problem was that I was becoming an object of ridicule because of this. It was fine until Uddhava was the only one who teased me; I did not mind it even when Satyaki joined him. However, now, they had all ganged up against me, and their fervour refused to subside. I became the butt of their jokes every single day. Satyaki had arrived directly from Dwarka, so he was quite

serious about taking me back to Dwarka. On the other hand, neither was I relenting, nor giving them a definite answer. Moreover, because we shared the same chamber, there was nothing I could do to escape their jibes. Now, being sarcastic and airing their opinions was in their hands but to ignore them was in mine. So, no matter how many comments they passed, I would ignore them all. I would refrain from smiling at any of their wisecracks. Initially, Satyaki was a novice in the art of teasing; it was Uddhava alone who was an expert in this type of diplomatic parlance. So, ultimately, he was the only one I had to tackle. But then, one day, Satyaki passed a decidedly caustic remark; perhaps Uddhava's company was rubbing off on him. But why blame Uddhava? After all, he had learnt this art from me. Well, let me not praise myself at this point. Coming back to Satyaki, one night, while we were resting, he said gravely, "Krishna, I agree it is hard to bear the pain of separation from the world's most beautiful woman after falling in love with her. But for how long can you continue to live in someone else's palace without marrying the princess? You may not be bothered about your reputation, but at least consider how all this would reflect on ours."

The taunt was so effective that before I could stop myself, a chuckle escaped my lips. Needless to say, this poorly-timed laugh landed me in trouble. This not only encouraged Uddhava and Satyaki, but they also thought that they had hit the bull's eye. But how wrong were they to think so! Who would tell them that even if they were to launch a thousand similar arrows from a thousand directions, they would still not hit the target; they would still be unable to understand how Krishna's mind worked. Although they could not read my mind, I had indeed invited trouble by responding to them with a giggle. Well, I had to endure the consequences of it. And what I had feared, ultimately did happen. My careless laughter encouraged Uddhava, and sensing an opportunity, he taunted me in a supposedly grave tone, "Kanhaiya, we must go back to Dwarka immediately. Let's return quickly with the wedding party after making all necessary preparations. Such restlessness is not good; it may be alright for Kanhaiya, but this does not suit the King of Dwarka at all. You should learn to exercise greater self-control."

Although Uddhava's jibe was quite good, this time, I did not laugh; I kept myself in check. After all, I had to learn something from my latest

experience. During these exchanges, Daruka would mostly remain silent; he did not know how to tease. However, he would laugh at their remarks so heartily that his laughter seemed more effective than their comments. To make matters worse, since we were sharing the same chamber, it was my misfortune that I had to endure their sarcastic barbs almost throughout the night. With time, they had become so enthusiastic that they would not even let me sleep at night. In fact, they were outdoing one another, with each passing day. At one point, when they got tired of teasing me, they came up with an altogether new trick to torment me. They would beseech me, “O brother, introduce us to our new sister-in-law at least once. Give us a chance to see the most beautiful woman in the world.” This litany of remarks turned into a daily routine which went on till late into the night. To be honest, I had not been able to entirely ward off the spell that Draupadi had cast on me with her beauty and intelligence. To make it worse, my friends’ teasing was not helping me either; in fact, they were forcing my mind to dwell upon her, unnecessarily fanning the flames of attraction. Similarly, Draupadi was also smitten, and I was not missing out on any opportunity to impress her. Frankly speaking, it pleased me greatly, and in a way, it was gratifying for my ego to know that Draupadi was not immune to my charms. But how was I supposed to tackle my friends who were bent on igniting the flames of attraction between Draupadi and me?

‘Oh well! We will see how the events unfold,’ I thought. Now, with my friends having found a way to entertain themselves by making fun of me, I was not far behind either. I had also found ways to entertain myself. As a matter of fact, I never depended on Nature to provide me moments of joy. On one hand, if I was playing *chaupar* (a kind of board game) with Dhrupad, on the other, I was also playing with Draupadi’s mind. In the meantime, the game of teasing and poking fun at each other also continued between me and my friends. If they were enjoying themselves, making me the butt of their jokes, I found enjoyment in enduring their jibes. When life itself is a game, why not make the most of all its games, big and small, and enjoy them to the fullest? In other words, despite a thousand complications, I would keep myself entertained with all kinds of games while waiting for King Dhrupad and Draupadi to finalise their decision. However, as the days passed by, my restlessness regarding this subject was also growing. For that matter, I could not say for certain that the situation in Panchal was

absolutely under control. I had made the king agree to the idea of a *swayamvar*, but Draupadi was yet to give her consent; it was only after she agreed to it that it could be considered a certainty. Dhrupad had been entrapped due to political reasons. My weakness in archery, my everlasting enmity with Jarasandha and the long list of my enemies in Aryavarta had forced him to acquiesce to my suggestion. However, the main question remained unanswered even now. Were these political reasons enough to convince Draupadi? And to what extent could Dhrupad succeed in convincing her? If Draupadi refused to budge on any one aspect, all my efforts would be rendered futile, and I would have to start from the beginning.

Therefore, after spending a considerable amount of time waiting, I became worried when I did not receive an invitation from the royal palace. No matter what the reason was, the king should not have taken so long to convince Draupadi. Could it be that he had failed to convince her? Could it be that she was against the idea of a *swayamvar*? To me, Draupadi seemed to be much more intelligent than Dhrupad. My biggest concern was that instead of Dhrupad trying to convince her, what if Draupadi succeeded in changing his mind? Another fear bothering me was—had I played with her mind so much that she would not even consider marrying anyone other than me? After all, she did appear to be extremely headstrong. I wondered, ‘What if all my political strategies and manipulation for Aryavarta ended up making me a sacrificial lamb?’

This was quite possible. I remembered that I had even asked her which aspect of mine she liked more—my personality or my bravery? She had laughed and replied, “My heart adores you as a person, and my desire for revenge applauds your bravery. This means that Panchali likes everything about you.” Certainly, I had felt quite pleased on hearing this. My male ego had been gratified immensely. Draupadi was a bit older than Rukmini. She was about twenty-five years old at the time, whereas I was about thirty-four. Now, you might say, ‘When everything seems favourable, why don’t you agree to this marriage, Krishna?’ All right, I will open my heart to you on this. Firstly, I never liked unnecessary violence, and that too, violence sought for the sake of revenge. Secondly, Draupadi’s ego had begun to frighten me. Nature is never kind to a person who harbours such a huge ego. I feared that a time would come when her ego would be badly

shattered. In case of such an eventuality, I did not want to endure the blows of an inflated ego and the repercussions it would ensue. If it were not for these two factors, I would have agreed to marry her a long time ago. Besides, I was a worshipper of love and surrender, not of beauty. I would accept thousands of women like Kubja, but not even one like Draupadi. I had another alternative as well; I could have married Draupadi and later declined to take revenge, and Dhrupad would not have been able to do anything about it. I was a brazen person and would have never got trapped in his clutches after getting married. Entrapments like ‘promises’ and so on had never stood in my way. The war would automatically have been averted. But it was also my responsibility to look after myself, while saving the rest of the world.

Oh well, I have digressed quite a bit. Let me now speak about a positive aspect. I have to admit that Draupadi had inspired me to the extent that I decided to remain fit, attractive and energetic all my life. This is the uniqueness of beauty. Whether you accept beauty or not, whether you relate to it or not, or even if it rejects you, the fact is that once you cross paths with beauty, you inevitably start paying more attention to your health and appearance.

Well, I did not have to wait much longer for a response from the royal palace. Soon, Dhrishtadyumna personally arrived with the invitation. I was anyway eager to go, and the invitation was for dinner that same evening. It did not take long for dusk to set in; time flew by, especially when my friends were busy shooting barbs at me! Dhrishtadyumna arrived on time, and I left with him immediately. We headed directly to the king’s private chamber. Dhrupad appeared quite pleased and greeted me warmly. I could discern from the greeting itself that my proposal had been approved. This time, Draupadi was present as well. Needless to say, she was seated in her characteristically bewitching style. As was the norm between us, we exchanged smiles, while both Dhrishtadyumna and I took our seats. After casual conversation, King Dhrupad came to the point at once. He spoke solemnly, “I have discussed the matter of the *swayamvar* in great detail with Draupadi. Initially, she was against the idea of holding such a ceremony. But after considering its various aspects, she has finally agreed to it.”

I said, “I have always been proud of her intelligence.”

Draupadi laughed at this and said, “I share the same sentiment regarding your wisdom too.”

While we were sharing a light moment, Dhrupad, on the other hand, appeared quite grave and somewhat restless too. It was clear he did not appreciate banter concerning such a serious matter. Thus, he immediately returned to the topic of the *swayamvar* and said, “O King of Dwarka, please elaborate upon your plan for the *swayamvar* so we can get a fair idea of the preparations to be made.”

I replied, “You may pick an auspicious date for the *swayamvar* within a year from now. As soon as you have decided on the date, send an invitation to all the kings of Aryavarta,” I replied.

Dhrupad said, “The royal astrologer has suggested a date in the month of *Chaitra*<sup>[29]</sup>, next year, as an auspicious time to hold the *swayamvar* ceremony.”

I thought to myself, ‘When have these astrologers ever picked auspicious dates as per the demands of time?’ However, this was not the time or the occasion for such clever retorts. So, in all seriousness, I said, “Alright. You can prepare the invitations and send them out to all the kings of Aryavarta.”

Dhrupad asked again, “But what should we write in the invitation?”

I replied, “The invitation should consist of only four sentences. You should write that next year, on the third day of the waxing moon of *Chaitra* month, you will hold the *swayamvar* ceremony of your beautiful and talented daughter, Draupadi. The ceremony will have an archery competition. Whoever wins this competition will also win the hand of Draupadi in marriage. All kings and princes are cordially invited to attend this ceremony. Yours Truly, Dhrupad, The King of Panchal.”

The simple wording of the invitation had impressed not only Dhrupad but also Draupadi, but that was not the end of the story. Dhrupad was keen on finalising all aspects of the *swayamvar* in this meeting itself. He shot another question at me, “Kindly tell us what kind of archery competition you have in mind.”

I said, “This will be decided only a month before the date of the *swayamvar*. If the nature of the competition is discussed right now, it might jeopardise its credibility. It is also possible that the participants might even begin training for it. It is certain though that the competition will be designed to be so challenging that whoever wins it, will be capable enough to drag not one, but ten archers like Drona to your feet.”

Of course, I had said this to please Dhrupad, but my statement misfired. Dhrupad spoke in a worrisome tone, “That is fine but the competition should not be so tough that nobody is able to win it.”

I did not have to bother answering this difficult question; Draupadi intervened to reassure her father and said, “Father, do not worry about it. If such a thing happens, then I will put the *swayamvar* garland around the neck of the King of Dwarka.” The manner in which she said it was so humorous that everyone burst out laughing. I laughed as well, albeit a bit too loudly. At least this way, the matter had been laughed off.

Well, we had now decided most of the aspects of the *swayamvar*. I was also assured that I would be at peace for at least a year, now that the clash between Dhrupad and Drona had been averted for nearly a year. Now, there was no reason for me to stay in Panchal. So, as soon as we were through with dinner, I asked for the king’s permission to leave Panchal. He obliged, but only after I had promised to take up the entire responsibility of the *swayamvar* ceremony. I chortled and said, “Of course, I shall take care of the entire affair; in fact, you need not even say it. I accept full responsibility not only for making the *swayamvar* successful, but also for making it memorable. Rest assured, I shall take care of everything. I will return to Panchal at least one or two months before the *swayamvar*. I will also bring along the blacksmith who will build a special bow for the competition, so that the competition’s secrecy is not compromised.” As I left, I instructed the king to extend the invitation to all four *varnas*,<sup>[30]</sup> and not just the Kshatriyas. We needed the best archer in the whole of Aryavarta, not necessarily the best Kshatriya. Saying this, I was about to leave, when Draupadi coquettishly asked me to meet her before I left the palace.

I responded that I too, wished to see her before I left Panchal.



She smiled and said, “They say that desires meet first and then do the hearts come together.” Unable to come up with a fitting reply, I let the matter rest; instead, I flashed a smile and took leave of her.

Now, even Draupadi was under my spell; indeed, I had control over all of Panchal. I was quite pleased with this development. Basking in this happiness, I entered my chamber. However, seeing me in a pleasant mood did not seem to please my friends. Losing no opportunity, they immediately began teasing me. Well, who could blame them? I was busy with my tasks and plans, whereas they were idle. So, all they could indulge in was cracking jokes and teasing. Seeing me so chuffed, Uddhava shot the first barbed arrow saying, “Looks like the bridegroom has finalised the matter today.”

Encouraged by this, Satyaki said, “Why do only married people receive so many proposals? Nobody even considers bachelors like us for marriage!”

Though extremely irritated, I could not do or say anything to stop their onslaught of barbs. Actually, I was in no mood for jokes or jibes. After all, I had just about freed myself from spinning webs of trickery in Panchal. Consequently, both my mind and body were demanding rest; I wanted to sleep peacefully. Indeed, when one is engrossed in an important task, one does not realise or feel tiredness; it can be felt only once the work is over. And, at the present moment, I was feeling exhausted. Therefore, with folded hands, I implored them to do me a favour by sparing me their cruel jokes and sarcastic comments and allowing me to sleep in peace tonight. However, they were so caught up in their frivolous mood that they did not take my plea seriously. On the contrary, Uddhava responded with yet another comment saying, “Do you really want to sleep or use it as an excuse to dream about Draupadi?” I maintained my solemn demeanour even after this comment. They quickly understood that this time, it was not really advisable to provoke Kanhaiya. So, the matter ended right there.

The next day, to my utter surprise, the chief minister once again arrived with a dinner invitation. The highlight of this dinner was that even my friends were invited. Naturally, they were overjoyed to receive an invitation from the palace, so much so that as soon as the chief minister left, they once again started teasing me. Satyaki took the lead this time. He said, “As it is,

the restriction to not talk about the most beautiful woman in the world was applicable only till last night. Now, this invitation has piqued my curiosity, enough to make my stomach rumble.”

I laughed at this and said, “You had better take care of your rumbling stomach, lest it affects your digestion.”

Satyaki continued, “Tonight, the future son-in-law’s friends have also been invited for dinner. Well, it seems that discussions on this matter have progressed considerably.”

Hearing this, Uddhava could not stop himself from commenting either. He could not help but utter something from that beautiful mouth of his. So, he said, “I just want to know whether we should address you as Krishna or as the King of Dwarka over there, and also, how should we address Draupadi?”

One could gauge the frivolousness of my friends from the fact that despite the question being addressed to me, Satyaki was the one replying. “You are strange, Uddhava! What kind of a question is that? Of course, we would address her as our sister-in-law.”

Smiling at them, I requested with folded hands, “You can call anyone whatever you like, but please do not carry this banter over to the dinner at the royal palace.”

Uddhava said, “Oh! That goes without saying. As bachelors, we may not be experienced in this field, but we are fully aware of the importance of a bridegroom’s reputation, prior to the wedding. We shall not spoil your image in the presence of our sister-in-law, Draupadi.” Well, there was nothing I could do but smile. The remark was rather sweet too, so I simply smiled.

As evening set in, we left for the palace as soon as we were summoned. My friends were especially excited at the thought of meeting the most beautiful woman in all of Aryavarta. Naturally, this time, dinner was served in the dining hall of the palace. The chief minister, Dhrishtadyumna and Draupadi were already present there.

When my friends saw Draupadi, they could not take their eyes off her. They must have not even imagined that they would set their eyes on such a dazzling, wondrous beauty. I introduced them to her formally, although none of them spoke much. Perhaps Draupadi had left them speechless. That was a good thing too, for, at least here I would be safe from their taunts. Soon, the king arrived and, we stood up to greet him. He sat next to Draupadi. Dhrishtadyumna also sat nearby. My friends and I were seated opposite them. The dining hall was huge and majestic. In a short while, gilded platters were placed before us. I looked in amazement at the huge platters and various bowls that were arranged on them. Interestingly, I am commenting on all this because, at this juncture, I was not paying much attention to Draupadi in the presence of my friends, for, these fools could unnecessarily make a mountain out of a molehill. I did not care about myself, but their loose talk could badly affect both Rukmini and Draupadi.

Returning to the meal, the dinner featured various delectable dishes, and special care was taken to include my favourite food items. The royal feast included all kinds of delicacies and preparations along with butter and curd. It was also good to see that this time, King Dhrupad did not drink alone; Satyaki gave him company till the end of the dinner. The rest of us simply had a few sips as a courtesy. King Dhrupad, who was until now engrossed in eating and drinking merrily, repeated his request to me at the end of the meal without a glance at my friends, saying, “You must definitely come here at least two months before the *swayamvar*. I am counting on you.”

Draupadi chuckled and chimed in, “Me too!”

I flashed my evergreen smile at both of them and said, “Please do not worry. I always look after those who repose their trust in me.”

Thus, in an atmosphere of mutual trust, the dinner ended. Needless to say, I was feeling much more content with the outcome of the dinner meet than King Dhrupad or Draupadi. Uddhava and Satyaki, who were quiet during the dinner, resumed their teasing as soon as we reached our chamber. This time, Uddhava spoke first, “Really! You and Draupadi will make the finest couple in all of Aryavarta.”

With the intention of ending the conversation, I replied gravely, “I am aware of that.”

It was Satyaki’s turn now. “But when will the two of you tie the knot?”

I replied, “If you stop pestering me with your jibes, then I may be able to think clearly about this matter.”

Needless to say, this display of extreme seriousness produced a suitable outcome. This time, the teasing session ended right there. In any case, do people really pass such useless comments so late into the night? And so, the rest of the night passed without incident. I now wanted to leave Panchal as quickly as possible. Thus, the next morning, after performing exercise and finishing my daily routine, I sent a guard to Draupadi with a message, requesting to meet her. Even though I was in a hurry to leave Panchal, to be honest, I was quite excited at the thought of meeting Draupadi one more time, perhaps because until now, I had to exercise extreme caution in all my interactions with her. I had never been able to meet her as my natural self. However, now that I had won over the father-daughter duo, our meeting, this time around, was certainly going to be a lot more fun. At the very least, I would behave freely and show her my natural self. Besides, it was she who had asked me to meet her before I left, so obviously, I had to fulfil her wish.

I did not have to wait long though; the messenger soon returned with Draupadi’s invitation for dinner. By evening, the guard came to fetch me. Since I was ready, I left immediately. This dinner was arranged in Draupadi’s chamber. As I entered her chamber, the delightful fragrance of sandalwood greeted me. Dimly lit lamps twinkled all around the chamber lending an ethereal quality to the atmosphere. Draupadi was waiting for me, dressed in pink silk garments. She had never looked so enchanting and enthralling as she did today. She was reclining languorously on her favourite seat, flashing her characteristic smile. I gazed at her, spellbound, and wondered how amazing it would have been had there been an element of surrender in this beauty.

As usual, the meeting began with an exchange of smiles. This exchange was becoming a customary habit between us; in fact, this had become our

way of greeting each other. I was still standing by the door after exchanging smiles, when suddenly, she stood up. Before I could comprehend anything, she came striding towards me, took my hand and led me to a raised, throne-like seat. Then, with a sway of her arm, she indicated to me to take a seat. This gesture of hers disarmed me completely—who was she, a woman or a slayer?

Let me make it clear though that we had not exchanged any words yet. But yes, we sat facing each other, looking into each other's eyes. This did not last long either. In any case, this time, we were all alone in the chamber; for how long could silence hold sway in such seclusion? After a while, she rose, sliced some fruits herself and offered them to me. Believe me, the fruits seemed to have become sweeter with Draupadi's touch. I polished them off within no time, but surprisingly, we had still not exchanged a single word. There was so much to talk about, but perhaps we could not find the right words, this being our final meeting. Suddenly, a whim took over her and she walked towards the window, gazing at the view outside. Her back was facing me. I could not contain myself any longer. So, I broke the silence and asked her, "What are you looking at?"

She said, "I am looking at the path you will take tomorrow when you leave Panchal."

Evidently, she was sad about my departure; in fact, her voice clearly conveyed her unspoken emotions. Honestly, I was saddened too with the thought of leaving her. Despite having met her on only a few occasions, we had become quite close to each other. Nevertheless, to lighten the atmosphere, I changed the direction of the conversation slightly, saying, "Or are you looking at the path I will take when I return to make arrangements for your *swayamvar*?"

Hearing this, she became a bit composed. I could empathise with her state of mind. For one, I had a strong, vibrant personality, whereas she had an impressionable mind. Besides, all that talk about our marriage in the past two months must have certainly influenced her mind. Moreover, this experience was new to her, whereas I was a seasoned player. That was not all, there was another difference between our situations; she was armed with a massive ego, whereas I had a powerful 'witness' in my arsenal. In fact,

there was yet another fundamental difference between us; poor Draupadi was being unreservedly honest with me, whereas I was not only lying to her, but also putting on an act.

Indeed, several moments had passed and the only sound emanating from the chamber was that of silence. Draupadi was still standing near the window. Finally, I could not hold myself back, so I went and stood next to her, looking at the view outside. She seemed to be lost in deep thought. So, I expressed a wish to know what was on her mind. She replied, “O King of Dwarka, I think you are unnecessarily expending so much effort on all this. I don’t think anybody will be able to win such a tough competition.”

Perhaps my proximity had affected her to such an extent that she suddenly seemed to return to her normal self, because after saying this much, she turned to face the door and clapped her hands, flashing her characteristic smile. I turned too, curious to see what she was up to. A few maidservants appeared immediately, carrying a large golden platter that had a garland of fresh flowers on it. Holding my gaze, she picked up the garland and draped it on a mirror placed nearby. For a moment, even I was surprised; what did this gesture mean? However, she was not done yet; she intended to slay me completely. So, after a few moments of silence, she spoke ostentatiously, “You will see, O King of Dwarka! At the end of the *swayamvar*, this garland will be waiting here for you and only you!”

Seeing Draupadi in her element, I assumed my usual self too. With a dash of easy levity, I said, “Take it from me, O Draupadi, in such circumstances, you will find my neck ready and waiting for your garland.”

Hearing this, she laughed heartily. Seeing Draupadi laugh, all of a sudden, in this gloomy atmosphere, made me feel quite happy. It was time for dinner now; the maidservants had already laid the table. Throughout the meal, we were both quiet, but this silence alluded to words only, for our non-verbal communication was at its peak even now. Our focus was not on the meal, but on gazing at each other. After dinner, Draupadi resumed the conversation. With the utmost simplicity, she said, “Do you know, O King of Dwarka, it is not in my nature to trust anyone easily. You are the first person I have placed trust in, and have, therefore, agreed to the *swayamvar*.”

“Trusting me is proof of your sound intelligence,” I said, “And honestly speaking, it is your intelligence that makes you unparalleled in the whole of Aryavarta.”

“My beauty too, sets me apart in the whole of Aryavarta,” she replied proudly.

I simply offered a smile. Draupadi was truly a wonder and her powerful personality was accentuated even more by her volatile moods. One moment, she would be sad and the very next instant, she would become extremely happy and chirpy, just like a bird. Well, it was rather late now, so I asked her permission to leave. Instantly, her eyes welled up with tears. And, with those tearful eyes, she silently gave me permission. To be honest, a feeling of sadness clutched at my heart, and my eyes had welled up too. At this point, there was very little pretence in Krishna’s tears and more of intimacy. Of course, it was a different matter that my intimacy had a different meaning when compared to hers.

Nevertheless, we were scheduled to leave in the morning. The relief on leaving Panchal could be seen clearly on my friends’ faces. We had sent Satyaki back to Dwarka because at present, bhaiya needed him more than I did. On the other hand, I was quite surprised to see that King Dhrupad, his son, and the chief minister not only accompanied us to the border of their kingdom, but also gifted me valuables as a gesture of goodwill. I accepted the gifts graciously, considering them a great honour. On that note, we quickly began our journey to meet the Pandavas. I was excited at the thought of meeting them, so I chose to steer the chariot myself. Needless to say, we were in disguise because the smallest mistake on our part could give away the secret that the Pandavas were alive. This would be extremely favourable for Dhrupad and the Kauravas, but the poor Pandavas would lose their lives.

Well, the kingdom of the *Rakshasas* where the Pandavas were residing, was adjacent to the kingdom of Panchal. So, we reached there in just two days’ time. The kingdom turned out to be nothing more than a dense forest; it was primitive and undeveloped. As for the Pandavas’ palace, it was nothing more than a house made of bamboo and mud. It was quite early in the

morning, so everybody was present in the palace. Needless to say, the Pandavas were delighted to see me.

I went up to Aunt Kunti immediately, touched her feet in deep obeisance and sought her blessings. But she appeared rather dejected. For that matter, the Pandava brothers too, seemed less confident than before, with the exception of King Vakrodara, that is, Bhima, who seemed quite happy. His cheerful disposition had nothing to do with the fact that he was now a king, or that he was married; it was because, being a king, he was now able to eat to his heart's content twice a day. Indeed, a person who can find joy in the smallest things in life is always happy, and presently, Bhima shone as a prime example of this.

The rest of the Pandavas looked so despondent and hopeless that one did not even feel like conversing with them. In a short while, however, we all stepped outside, leaving Aunt Kunti behind. We sat down under the shade of a cluster of four to five trees. So far, we had not spoken much. Naturally, Bhima took the lead and broke the silence. He said that initially, they faced great difficulty in finding food because the *Rakshasas* inhabiting this region were cannibals. However, after he had become their ruler, Bhima put an end to this abominable practice. 'This was the benefit in having a good person become king,' I thought to myself. This was why I had always been in favour of handing over the reins of a kingdom to right-minded individuals.

Well, this topic was soon over, but honestly, this untimely dismay of the Pandavas put me in a strange worry, because I knew for a fact that they would have to endure such adversities for quite some time. There was still a long way to go before the tide could turn. This was not the time for the situation to turn in their favour, and becoming restless ahead of time is always detrimental to success. Moreover, the problem was that a strange kind of silence seemed to have overcome the Pandavas; none of them were voicing their grief or speaking about the reason behind their distress. It was just the misery etched on everyone's face which clearly indicated that the situation was grave.

In the meantime, Aunt Kunti called us inside for lunch, so all of us headed in to gorge on the food. But even after lunch, the gloomy atmosphere remained unchanged and nobody was in a mood for conversation. 'Well,



never mind!’ I thought. With plenty of time in hand, we sprawled in the sitting chamber itself. Soon, it was evening and I realised I could not take this any longer. So, I asked Arjuna to come with me for a stroll. I knew that once he was alone with me, he would pour his heart out. And this was exactly what happened. Finding me alone, he asked me a string of questions and discussed various matters. My effort had borne fruit as all secrets had begun to tumble out. The gist of the matter was that both he and Bhima held Yudhishtira responsible for their present circumstances. According to them, they did not know when Yudhishtira had met King Dhritarashtra and had accepted the proposal to go to Varnavat. Yudhishtira had not taken any of them along for this meeting. Had he taken them, they would have never agreed to this proposal. However, I found it rather silly. The others could have easily rejected the proposal even after Yudhishtira had accepted it. It was four against one. The real problem was that the remaining four brothers never opposed Yudhishtira. Even after so much had transpired, no one was willing to voice their opinion in Yudhishtira’s presence.

Dinner was served in King Vakrodara’s (Bhima’s) palace itself. His kingdom was a settlement of about two thousand *Rakshasas*. Be that as it may, after dinner, I made the five brothers sit with me in a chamber; I needed to speak to them about several matters. Most importantly, they had to be made aware of the reality of their situation. This was the prime purpose of my presence here. I, therefore, began by advising them to always be on their guard. I also made them understand the importance of maintaining the secrecy of their being alive, for, they faced danger now not only from the Kauravas, but also from King Dhrupad, who was out to seek vengeance against Arjuna. In other words, there was danger from two fronts. Given these circumstances, neither was it wise for them to come out of hiding, nor was there any question of them going to Hastinapur. I had not even finished giving them advice, when Bhima interrupted me. He had become livid when I had told them that King Dhrupad considered them his enemy. After hearing the entire story, he became infuriated at Drona. He was of the opinion that Dhrupad was hounding them only because of their *Acharya*. In fact, he was so enraged that he launched into a tirade against Drona. He even said that *Acharya* Drona was terribly wicked at heart. He had sought violence and retribution as *gurudakshina* even though he was a Brahmin and an *Acharya* himself.

Naturally, Yudhishtira and Arjuna did not approve of Bhima's outburst against *Acharya* Drona. However, I did not want to encourage or discuss these matters at present, nor did I want to wait for too long over here, because even though we had disguised ourselves, there was always the danger of being exposed. I had come here only to meet them, assure myself that they were hale and hearty, and give them specific instructions. So, I changed the course of the conversation and said gravely, "If you value my counsel, I suggest you do not leave this place. It is in your best interest to stay right here."

Hearing this, Yudhishtira said immediately, "What are you saying, Krishna? We are now dependent only on you. In this hour of distress, we have no one except you."

I do not know why, but every time Yudhishtira said something, it would irk me. Before I could stop myself, I said, "O Dharmaraj,<sup>[31]</sup> this means that you are placing your trust in me simply because you have no other alternative."

My words alarmed everyone. Realising that the matter was getting out of hand, Arjuna intervened. He clarified, "Bhaiya did not mean this at all. We trust you unreservedly even otherwise."

Not wanting to give importance to any other matter at present, I ignored this and spoke calmly, "Alright! It may take six to eight months, possibly even a year, for Uddhava and I to come to you with a concrete plan. Until then, I request you to stay in hiding here. And if possible, learn to keep your grief and anger in check as quickly as you can."

All of them assured me that they would follow my instructions completely. They also promised me that they would heed my advice. Having elicited this assurance from them, my task here had been fulfilled. Although I would have liked to spend more time with Bhima and Arjuna, I could not bring myself to do so, considering that they could be exposed and this, in turn, could lead to severe consequences. After all, it was their safety that mattered. Nothing was acceptable at the cost of safety. So, we decided to leave the next morning. Everybody retired to bed peacefully, except Bhima,

Arjuna, Uddhava and I. We chatted late into the night, unsure of when the next opportunity would arise for us to have a heart-to-heart talk.

## Chapter 9

### **My Visit to the Kingdom of the Nagas**

The next morning, as the first rays of the sun spread their radiant glow all around, we set out for Nagakoot, the kingdom of the Nagas. This kingdom was also located along the boundary of Panchal. I was excited at the thought of meeting my grandfather and great-grandfather. However, as our journey progressed, my joy began to wane and an unknown fear started to grip me instead. I was certain that Nagakoot was facing a grave problem, which is why I had been summoned urgently. But what could it be? ‘Well, whatever the problem was, it had to be resolved,’ I thought to myself. Was it fair that we continued to enjoy our lives in Dwarka, while our ancestors were left to contend with strife? While this was true, the crisis could be dealt with only once we reached there. So, at present, it was prudent to keep the anxiety to myself; instead, let me describe our journey to you.

These kingdoms were adjacent to each other, but the lack of properly built roads slowed down our journey considerably. However, in spite of that, we had managed to reach the borders of Nagakoot on the third day of our journey. At once, I was filled with great joy at the prospect of meeting my grandfather and great-grandfather. Interestingly, no sooner did we enter the borders of the kingdom, than the weather changed, to match my high spirits. Nature too, seemed to make its benign presence felt everywhere, as we moved ahead with a pleasant feeling within ourselves. Soon, the first showers of the monsoon greeted us. The sounds of thunder reverberated around us, and within no time, dark clouds invaded the clear blue sky, ready to rejuvenate the parched earth beneath with cool showers. Before we knew it, it had started to pour heavily. In a way, monsoon and I had arrived together in Nagakoot. It bore well for us that monsoon had begun only after we had entered the region of the Nagas; otherwise, considering the condition of the roads, our three-day journey would have easily taken ten days. This was proven by the fact that even though it had just started raining, the roads had already turned into slush. Forget the sweet scent of wet earth; a putrid smell had begun to pervade the atmosphere. As we entered Nagakoot, I understood quickly that this was not a developed kingdom. Honestly, Vrindavan and Gokula seemed more developed than this. Indeed, this was the first time I sensed a stark difference in the

standard of living across the various kingdoms of Aryavarta. Prosperity and development are the birthrights of every human being, but in reality, humankind has been deprived of even such basic rights. When would Aryavarta, as a whole, scale new heights of prosperity and progress? Perhaps only when all the kingdoms in Aryavarta stood united. Until then, the difference between developed and backward kingdoms would continue to prevail. And considering the number of kings, their ambitions, and enmity towards each other, I wondered if Aryavarta would ever stand united.

Well, I reined in my thoughts and focussed on the ongoing journey. The sky had opened up with a vengeance and the heavy downpour had effectively slowed us down. As a result, the chariots were now moving at a sluggish crawl. The wheels were half sunk into the wet earth, making it difficult to even move the chariots. Several chariots were already badly stuck in the sludge. So, we had no alternative but to jump down from them and continue our journey on foot. Now, although we had stepped down from our chariots, we soon realised it was not easy to proceed on foot either. The slush sucked in our feet and we would often struggle to prise them out. It was a strange scene indeed. While we were trying our best to plod through the muddy tracks, our convoy of servants behind us was also struggling to move ahead. As the rains bore down on us mercilessly, the stench from the muck also intensified. The ones facing the full fury of the rains were the chariot riders and soldiers. The poor men were struggling to rein in their horses and somehow drag the chariots through. As if all this was not enough, the sky had begun to darken further and the forest appeared dense too. There was no sign of human habitation as far as the eye could see. Considering the speed at which we were moving, it was evident that the journey ahead was going to be a tedious one.

In spite of the difficulties we were facing, I was enjoying myself to the hilt, for, the monsoon had always thrilled and enraptured me. Despite the dismal condition we were in, the generous showers were making me go wild as joy cascaded down my entire being, soaking me to the bone. One could say that although the earth beneath us was creating difficulties for us, the sky was surely merciful. It was a miracle how the two facets of Nature were presently behaving in a paradoxical manner with us. While my entire focus was on enjoying the rains, I let my feet suffer their fate amidst the sludge.

Everybody else, including Uddhava and Daruka, was miserable, because their attention was focussed entirely on the muck and stench around us. It was beyond them to ignore unfavourable circumstances and enjoy the rain; they did not realise that adverse circumstances could bother them only as long as they dwelt upon them. If a person can shift his attention from unfavourable circumstances and instead, focus on the favourable, the impact of negative circumstances reduces immediately. Alas, these people were unaware of the wonderful art of living, and were, therefore, unable to understand the exhilaration I felt on being drenched in the rain.

Nonetheless, we did not have to walk in the slush and mud for long. The palace had probably heard of our arrival and had sent some of its men with palanquins to carry us across. Now, we had climbed up on these palanquins and were freed of the sludge, but the carriers of the palanquins cared neither for the muck nor the stench. They walked with ease in the mud and almost raced through the forest, carrying us on their shoulders. These palanquins were made of bamboo and cloth, with each palanquin being lifted by two men. This experience was unique too. However, even though the palanquin had rid my feet of the mud and grime, it had also taken away the joy of being soaked in the rain. This situation had proved once again that in life, joy and sorrow go hand in hand. The moment sorrow is eliminated, joy goes away too. Despite this, I wonder why human beings spend their entire lives trying to get rid of sorrow—a false pursuit indeed. By doing this, they automatically lose out on the joy they would have obtained.

Indeed, sorrow and joy are constant companions, one being the shadow of the other. Thus, if one is removed, the other automatically gets eliminated. A person can either be a ‘witness’ to both joy and sorrow simultaneously and be happy like me, or focus on joy instead of sorrow, and be happy. However, the one who tries to eliminate sorrow unnecessarily spends his entire life in sadness. In my opinion, such a person is unhappy, because he focusses only on the sorrows in his life. His foolishness, however, does not end there. In an attempt to eliminate his sorrows, he instead keeps adding on to them. Ultimately, he ends up making his whole life miserable. Why does he not consider both joy and sorrow as equal and continue living his life?

Well, the others were free to live their lives in the manner they wished to, but I had ripped apart the veil of unhappiness and had found my path of joy. I stuck my neck out of the palanquin to enjoy the rain. In other words, my feet were saved from the muck, and I had gone back to enjoying the rain. Meanwhile, as we proceeded further into Nagakoot, the lanes were becoming narrower with almost every step. Only a single palanquin could pass through at a time. It was impossible for the chariots to pass through these lanes. Thankfully, I could see that our unique journey was about to end; we were close to habitation now and I could spot a mix of rickety and well-built houses from afar. The forests in this region also appeared quite lush and dense. Essentially, there seemed to be no dearth of natural wealth in this kingdom. Interestingly, one more aspect of this place had specifically caught my eye. The inhabitants of Nagakoot were short in stature, with nearly flat faces and brown eyes. I noticed yet another peculiarity once I had made my way through the settlements. While the men looked strange due to their unique features, the same features made the women look pretty and attractive. Or it could be that true to my nature, I could never see shortcomings in women. Possibly, it was because of these features that this land was called Nagakoot, and its inhabitants were believed to be belonging to the tribe of the Nagas. However, I too belonged to the same clan, but I was extremely good-looking; neither did I have a flat face, nor a short stature. My father also did not appear to be a descendant of the Nagas. This piqued my curiosity and now, I was all the more eager to meet my grandfather and great-grandfather. Perhaps they too did not look like the locals here. Or it could be a case of Nature's *leela* (game) in which anything was possible anywhere, anytime. Or perhaps I had taken after my mother's side of the family.

As news of my arrival spread, people flocked in large numbers to see me, despite the severe rainfall. The crowd swelled in number, even as the rain pounded down hard upon us. In fact, the narrow pathways were soon teeming with people, slowing down our journey all the more. Needless to say, they were welcoming me with great respect and honour; I greeted them affectionately too. Indeed, the love and respect accorded by these innocent people was a sight to behold. I could understand where this admiration and deference came from; after all, I was a descendant of their clan and had come amidst them after having established my own kingdom and having

acquired a formidable reputation across Aryavarta. Therefore, Nagakoot was bound to feel proud of its son's achievements.

Meanwhile, I could barely contain myself on seeing their virtuous and unbridled love for me. How could I be comfortably seated in my palanquin while they were on foot? So, I stepped off the palanquin immediately; seeing me alight from the palanquin, Uddhava and Daruka followed suit. Now, we were walking alongside everyone else towards the royal palace. Impressed by this behaviour of mine, the crowd swelled even more. We had anyway left our chariots far behind but yes, the palanquin bearers continued to follow us, in case we changed our mind.

Seeing the despicable condition of the roads even in the colonies, I had now started to worry about the state of affairs in Nagakoot. The kingdom was in a pitiful state indeed. Foul odour pervaded the air, making it an intrinsic part of the atmosphere and there was muck and grime everywhere. If the first rains had reduced Nagakoot to this state, I could only imagine the pitiable condition the kingdom would be reduced to, by the end of the monsoon season. These inhabitants seemed to lead a life far worse than those of even animals. This set me thinking, 'When my own people were leading such a miserable life, what meaning did Dwarka's prosperity have? Was it possible for all of Aryavarta to ever attain the same grandeur and prosperity as Dwarka?'

Even as I was lost in these thoughts, my eyes fell on a dog lying unconscious on the road, writhing in pain. It was severely wounded and crows were already pecking at its flesh. Several tiny insects were hovering over it and it was moaning in pain. Perhaps it was unconscious due to the extreme pain. A foul smell emanated from its decaying flesh, and people were changing their tracks to avoid it. I could not bear to see the poor animal in pain. At least, it still had some life left in it, and what is more important in this world than life itself? Immediately, I ran towards the dog. The crows flew away as I reached the animal, but the small insects continued to torment it. I chased them away too, with a few swishes of my hand. Then, I picked up the dog, placed it in my lap and bathed it gently. Thereafter, I took a handful of wet mud and applied it all over its body. It was clear from the dog's reaction that this act of mine had brought it considerable relief. Its whimpers and moans had reduced markedly. Perhaps



it had more to do with my affection for the animal than my treatment of its wounds. For that matter, there is no greater medicine in this world than love. True care and sympathy act as the best medicine, whether a person is ill, troubled, harrowed by problems or mired in any other difficulty.

So, I picked up the dog and took it with me to the royal palace. The palace, if it could be called that, was nothing more than a large house made of wood, with a big open ground in front of it. A huge crowd had already gathered there to catch a glimpse of me. I greeted everyone before entering the palace and handed the dog to the gatekeeper. I instructed the gatekeeper to take the dog to a local medical practitioner to tend to it. We were welcomed by the chief minister at the entrance of the palace itself. But because I was covered in filth, I thought it best to go to my chamber first, and engage in pleasantries later. First and foremost, I bathed thoroughly; thereafter, I sprinkled copious amounts of *ittar* all over my body and clothes. You will not believe it, but it was only then that I felt human again. This is the magic of a good refreshing bath; no matter how tired one is, a bath can cure any kind of exhaustion. Similarly, *ittar* has a virtue as well; no matter what state of mind one is in, the scent of *ittar* revitalises it. In other words, I was now fully refreshed with the help of these two excellent cures. However, Uddhava was still reeling after the tedious journey we had undertaken. His tiredness was understandable, for, barring me, none of my friends cared to exercise regularly. Hence, a two- to three-day journey would tire them out considerably.

After the bath, we lay down to rest. Uddhava and Daruka fell asleep immediately, but I was restless. Actually, I was burning with an intense desire to meet my grandfather and great-grandfather. I had received a great deal of love from my maternal grandfather, so I was sure that I would receive just as much affection from my paternal grandfather and great-grandfather. Thus, I asked the guard to call the chief minister, to whom I expressed my wish to meet my grandfather and great-grandfather. However, for some reason, he first took me to meet my grandmother's brother. I did not object because I had to meet him eventually. When I met him, I saw that he had grown very old. His hair was fully white and his face was wrinkled. I touched his feet in obeisance, all the time thinking that if his condition was so poor, then what must be the condition of the others? It was fortunate that I had come here now; otherwise, I would have been too late.

The chief minister later took me to meet my grandfather. He looked even older than my grandmother's brother. He was so happy when the chief minister introduced us that I could see tears welling up in his eyes. I conversed with him for a while and then proceeded to meet my great-grandfather, who had aged the most. It did not seem that his frail body had any strength left in it; he was about a hundred and sixty years old. Nonetheless, he was so warm and loving that he instantly cheered up on knowing that I had come to visit him. I bent down to touch his feet in veneration when he pulled me towards him and embraced me in a warm hug. I felt truly blessed to have met him. I looked at him carefully. His skin seemed to have abandoned his bones years ago; it now resembled wrinkled parchment. My great-grandfather, who held within his heart the purity of Nature and a long tradition of history, had captured my full attention and respect in the first glance itself. His eyes kept welling up with tears as he spoke to me. I had seated myself at his feet and was stroking them gently. The joy I felt in serving him was unique indeed. His guileless warmth had the power to reach into the depths of one's heart and instil peace. Really, had I failed to visit Nagakoot, I would have missed out on one of the greatest experiences of my life. If you think about it, what is it that a human being desires from another human being? He just wants to be loved unconditionally. And ever since I had arrived in Nagakoot, I was receiving nothing but pure love from everyone here. Honestly, ever since I had set foot in this place, I felt as if I had once again turned into the two-year-old Kanhaiya who would play in his mother Yashoda's lap. On the other hand, meeting my great-grandfather had infused me with renewed energy. Nonetheless, after spending some time with him, I had to leave, as it was time for him to rest.

Let me make an important aspect of Nagakoot very clear—grandfather and the other senior men were titular rulers of the kingdom. Since they had all grown old beyond their years, the actual affairs of the kingdom were handled by the chief minister. Grandfather and great-grandfather were free from the daily affairs of the kingdom and offered their opinion only on important matters. Keeping their age in mind, this made perfect sense too. Meanwhile, it was good to see that the chief minister had arranged for a magnificent dinner in our honour. It also pleased me to know that the entire ministry had also been invited to the dinner, for, I too wanted to understand

the circumstances and troubles that were plaguing these people, as quickly as possible. So, after resting awhile, I made my way to the dining hall on time. Uddhava, in the meantime, appeared refreshed after having rested the whole day. So, naturally, I took him along with me. Within no time, the entire council of ministers had assembled, followed by grandfather and great-grandfather. I touched their feet in veneration and introduced them to Uddhava, who shared the same relationship with them as me. He was also their grandson and great-grandson respectively. Before starting the meal, the chief minister introduced me to all the other ministers. I noticed that the assembly chamber, though not very well adorned, was large enough to accommodate approximately thirty people, and at present, it was packed to capacity. After completing formal introductions, great-grandfather began addressing the gathering. He said, "I had given up all hope of meeting you in this lifetime."

I said, "Why do you say that? I have come to you now, haven't I?"

Hearing this, he turned quite emotional. Thereafter, we engaged in casual conversation while everybody congratulated me collectively for having established a magnificent kingdom like Dwarka. However, amidst the exchange of pleasantries and cheer, I was rather sad about the pitiful and underdeveloped state of Nagakoot. I was curious to learn the entire story behind the dismal state of the kingdom and its problems. At the same time, I also had a feeling that although every person seated here had a lot to say, they could not bring themselves to do so. They were wondering how to convey their problems and whether they should even mention them in the first place. However, I certainly did not want to waste this opportunity. I wanted all their problems to be brought to light immediately. Therefore, when I saw that none of them were saying anything, I decided to be blunt. I asked them, "Why is it that this kingdom is so underdeveloped? Father had also told me that there are several other problems plaguing all of you. I would like to hear about all of them in detail so that I can look for appropriate solutions."

The entire chamber fell silent on hearing me. Naturally, nobody wanted to lament their woes to me, perhaps because I had just arrived. In fact, speaking on behalf of everyone, grandfather said, "You have just arrived after completing a long, arduous journey. We can discuss these matters

later.” However, I wanted to know everything in this meeting itself. It did not make sense to postpone the resolution of long-standing problems. So, when I insisted that I should be apprised of all the problems, the chief minister acquiesced and after seeking great-grandfather’s permission, he proceeded to tell me the entire story in detail. He said, “Nagakoot wasn’t always in such a pitiable condition. Even though it was never a developed kingdom, we were somehow happy and self-dependent. Unfortunately, Nagakoot lies adjacent to large kingdoms such as Hastinapur and Panchal, and over the past few years, soldiers from Hastinapur and Panchal have been forcefully entering our kingdom and blatantly abducting our women and taking away our cows. Nowadays, the Naga maidens, frightened by the atrocities of these soldiers, are afraid to even step into the forest. We fail to understand why, in the past few years, these two kingdoms have suddenly taken a liking to the beauty and services of our women.”

Indeed, this was a grave problem. The very honour and pride of the daughters of this land were at stake. And now that he had mentioned it, I suddenly remembered seeing several Naga maidens in the palaces of Panchal and Hastinapur serving as maidservants. The problem was a serious one, but after hearing the entire story, a thousand questions had cropped up in my mind. And I wanted answers to those questions immediately. So, out of curiosity, I asked, “But why don’t you fight these men? It is not as if they are carrying out armed attacks here. Are you not able to fight even a few of their soldiers?”

The chief minister was quick to defend, “What can we do? Not only do they have a strong cavalry, but they also have several high-speed chariots and modern weapons. And they are experts in war as well. So, once they abduct our women and put them in their chariots, we are unable to chase them. We have neither horses nor weapons.”

So, this was the real problem. I had considerable influence in both Hastinapur and Panchal, so I could very well tell them to put an end to this harassment immediately. However, it did not seem appropriate, nor was it a permanent solution to the problem, because everyone, whether a person or a kingdom, ought to have the ability to protect themselves. And those who failed to do so would naturally meet a fate like this. While I was lost in these thoughts, the chief minister continued, “Hastinapur and Panchal have

been attacking us from two directions for a long time now, but Nagakoot is no longer safe from a third direction either. On the other side of Nagakoot lies the kingdom of *Rakshasas* (demons), who are cannibals. They also abduct people from our kingdom, although their attacks have stopped in the last few months.”

I realised that *Rakshasa Raj* must be the kingdom of King Vakrodara. However, now on the orders of Bhima, his subjects had stopped consuming human meat, which is why the attacks had also stopped. However, it was certain that Nagakoot faced threat from all three directions, because Bhima was not a permanent king of the *Rakshasa* kingdom.

I was reflecting on all this, when great-grandfather spoke in a dejected tone, “As if all this was not enough, a new problem has surfaced recently. Ever since the Pandavas have perished in the fire, Duryodhana has become unstoppable, like a raging bull. He has been oppressing the kings that live around Hastinapur, so much so that he has even attacked the kingdom of King Chekitan and annexed it to Hastinapur. Chekitan has fled his kingdom with a handful of soldiers and is absconding ever since. As a result, in order to sustain himself, he too has begun to attack Nagakoot like a hungry wolf, and seize whatever his soldiers can lay their hands on; whether it is women, cows or food.”

I was aghast to hear this. Clearly, Nagakoot was hemmed in on all four sides. The entire kingdom was practically living in the shadow of death. The news of Duryodhana’s attack on Chekitan’s kingdom was even more disturbing. It had only been three months since I had left Hastinapur and Duryodhana had already started showing his true colours. I was all the more worried on hearing this, because Hastinapur and Chekitan’s kingdom were friendly with each other; in fact, they were even related. In spite of that, Duryodhana’s ambitions had spiralled out of control. Agreed, Duryodhana and Shakuni were evil by nature, but were Grandfather Bhishma and King Dhritarashtra also unable to stop them from committing this vile act? Well, so it seemed to be. In that case, this news was indeed alarming. If Duryodhana could attack a friendly king such as Chekitan to fulfil his own ambitions, it meant that in the future, to achieve his goal, he could attack any of his neighbouring kingdoms too. This meant that it had now become

imperative to rein him in. And there was only one way to do this—making the Pandavas powerful and sending them back to Hastinapur.

Nevertheless, these matters pertained to the future and it would take time to implement them. Besides, Nagakoot had nothing to do with any of this. So, it was necessary to first find a solution to the problems here and then solve the others. However, there was only one Krishna, but the problems, too many. Dwarka, Panchal, Hastinapur and Nagakoot were all caught up in some difficulty or the other. That being the case, how could Krishna tackle all these problems simultaneously? So, it was best to deal with the problems one at a time. Since Nagakoot was mired in problems and I was also present in Nagakoot, I decided to first find a solution to this kingdom's problems. And so, I focussed all my attention on Nagakoot. I had understood its problems well and had also reflected upon them. Nagakoot's biggest problem, in my opinion, was its old and worn-out leadership. It was necessary to mobilise the youth of the kingdom and induct them to helm its affairs. In any case, the solution to a problem must be found within the realm of action, for, it is impossible to move even a tiny leaf without acting on it. Thus, after contemplating for a while, I was prepared to give my opinion on the problems of this kingdom. The rest of the people were already waiting for me to say something. So, I immediately put forth my proposal. I said, "The problem here is not as grave as it appears. In my opinion, the biggest problem in Nagakoot is that the youth is not actively participating in the affairs of the kingdom. So, we will first have to create a young leadership. We will have to activate the power of the youth and hand over responsibilities to them. We will have to encourage them by handing them the responsibility of not only protecting the daughters of the kingdom but also developing the kingdom. Actually, the elders and the experienced people should limit themselves to only providing guidance to the youth. Therefore, if you do not have any objection, I will chart out further plans along with the chief minister."

Obviously, there was no question of anyone disapproving or objecting to my idea. As a result, with everyone's consent, I was given the authority to formulate concrete plans and also implement them with the help of the chief minister. The meal, thus, ended on this note. I got down to work immediately. I instructed the chief minister to convene a meeting of Nagakoot's youth on the palace grounds, as soon as possible. Now, it was

bound to take him at least three to four days to organise the meeting; until then, we did not have much to do. In other words, we had ample free time on our hands. Relaxed now, we slept so soundly that we woke up only by next afternoon. Thereafter, we freshened up quickly and set out to explore the kingdom. The rain had stopped and the weather had consequently turned pleasant. Wherever we went, a crowd would gather, wanting to meet and talk to us. I noticed a peculiar feature of this kingdom—its settlements were spread far and wide and were not connected by proper pathways. Nevertheless, let me tell you a secret; the maidens of this kingdom reminded me of the *gopis* of Vrindavan. This was only my first day here and I was already surrounded by Naga maidens. And well, why should I lie, since my childhood days, I had enjoyed being surrounded by charming women. And so, this routine continued for the next three to four days. We would wander all over Nagakoot the entire day, stopping for lunch in at least three to four houses. All over the kingdom, people scrambled over each other to provide us the best possible hospitality. Needless to say, the maidens were the most eager to serve us. Any family that shared their meal with us would consider themselves blessed. Honestly, a person's greatest wealth is mutual love and affection, and there was no dearth of it anywhere in Nagakoot. Within two to three days, I had mingled with the subjects of this kingdom. Revelling in their hospitality, I would join in the fun and often spend some jovial and carefree moments with them, especially with the Naga maidens.

Well, let us leave this aside, for, these were nothing but old habits of Krishna. As for the kingdom itself, I had noticed something special about it, during my daily excursions. The kingdom had abundant greenery, which meant that there was no dearth of fruits and vegetables. In other words, the standard of living in this place could be improved remarkably with only a little bit of effort. Another aspect that struck me was that there were only three main roads leading into Nagakoot, which meant that the soldiers of inimical kingdoms could enter Nagakoot using only these three routes. If we could block these routes with thorny bushes, then entering Nagakoot would become an onerous task for the plunderers. This might solve at least one of Nagakoot's problems. Their second problem was that, despite the region being geographically small, its population was close to twenty thousand. To make matters worse, these people were scattered across the

kingdom. I was pondering all this, because I had become so attached to these innocent people that I wanted to see them happy, prosperous and secure, as soon as possible.

Four days went flitting by, as I engaged in contemplation and partook of their hospitality. Meanwhile, the chief minister had completed preparations for our meeting with the youth. The meeting was scheduled for early next morning. Since it was night already, we did not have to wait too long for the sun to rise. A thousand enthusiastic youths had already gathered in the open ground since morning. Uddhava, Daruka and I had also reached in time for the meeting. The vibrant energy that emanated from each and every young man enthused me as well. A simple, wooden platform had been erected for us, on which I sat, along with Uddhava, the chief minister and a few other ministers. Standing before us were the youth of Nagakoot, bursting with enthusiasm. A resounding applause greeted us when the chief minister introduced me to the crowd at the beginning of the meet; I reciprocated by standing up and waving at the crowd. As you already know, I had always loved addressing large groups of people, whether it was in Vrindavan or Mathura. I had never missed any chance to call a meeting or address a crowd of people, but this address was special. This was the first time that I had got the opportunity to address a massive crowd of a thousand or so young people. Naturally, I got up from my seat and began my address with great enthusiasm. I said, "I am overwhelmed by the love I have received from you all in the last four days. This is the land of my grandfather and great-grandfather; I belong to this land. Hence, I have resolved that I will make my Nagakoot prosperous and secure. Bear in mind that the responsibility of making any kingdom prosperous and secure lies with the youth of that kingdom. Therefore, I want you to take a pledge along with me, that from today onwards, we will shoulder this responsibility together."

The crowd responded with great enthusiasm and repeated the resolve earnestly. Their fervour was a clear indication of unutilised talent which the administration had failed to realise. It made them extremely happy to be accorded so much importance. Clearly, it was a matter of opportunity, not talent. Realising that I had touched a chord, I continued with my address. I said, "First and foremost, I want to discuss with you the matter of security arrangements in this kingdom. As you all are aware, there are three main routes that lead to Nagakoot. We first need to block these paths with thorny



bushes and fences, so that the enemy cannot breach Nagakoot easily. Secondly, we will have to build our own army, and some of the soldiers of the army will have to learn horse riding, as well as the use of modern weapons.”

The youth were exhilarated on hearing my plans; in fact, their fervour worked as a catalyst, boosting my enthusiasm. Meanwhile, seeing the youth of the land express so much eagerness, the chief minister welled up. Sensing the upbeat mood, I continued in the same vein, “In addition to being secure, a kingdom also needs to prosper and thrive. Therefore, it is also our responsibility to fetch fruits and wood from the forest for the entire kingdom. Apart from this, it is also important to broaden pathways and maintain them in immaculate condition. In order to improve the standard of living of the inhabitants, it is also essential to build modern houses on a large scale. It is our good fortune that we are blessed with natural wealth. There is no shortage of fruits and vegetables for food and there is no dearth of wood, stone and mud for constructing houses either. If we work diligently, we can have a well-established settlement within a year or two. Moreover, it will be better if we build this settlement close to the royal palace, for, it will be easier for us to tackle external danger. First of all, the enemy will find it difficult to enter the kingdom through the barrier of thorny fences and even if they do make inroads despite these barriers, they will find it tough to lay siege to such a large, close-knit settlement.”

I was about to conclude my address and was keenly observing the mood of the crowd. I realised that the people were in unanimous agreement with the plan I had envisioned for the kingdom. Nonetheless, as was my wont, I could not help but elicit a response out of them. I suggested, “If you all agree with me, then let the details of the plan be finalised.” A roar of approval rose from the crowd as soon as they heard this. Enthusiasm coursed through the veins of every person standing here, in the open ground. On one hand, there was excitement regarding the tasks, and on the other, were the dreams of an improved standard of living in Nagakoot. With renewed vigour, the youth began to shout slogans in my praise. It was, indeed, a sight to behold; each person visibly moved and excited. Really, the power and vigour of youth are incomparable. Nevertheless, as soon as things quietened down a bit, I stepped down from the platform and selected about fifteen bright and sharp-witted youths, and then made each of them

take charge of groups of twenty-thirty youths. I immediately allocated tasks to these teams. While some were assigned the task of picking fruits and vegetables, others had to collect wood from the forest for construction. Some teams were allocated the work of widening the roads, and some others were assigned the construction of houses. The remaining two hundred and fifty youths had to learn how to wield weapons. All the teams had to report their daily progress either to me, Uddhava or the chief minister.

Having finalised these decisions, we ended the meeting, but the youths were so driven by enthusiasm and fervour that they immediately began outlining a plan of action for their respective teams. Indeed, this is the best quality that young people possess; with the right leadership and guidance, they can create wonders. Not only the chief minister, but the entire council of ministers was pleased with the outcome of the meeting. The eyes of the kingdom's inhabitants now twinkled with the dreams of a new and improved Nagakoot, as the vision of a beautiful future flashed before their eyes.

While the ardour of the young men was understandable, the chief minister too did not lag behind in fervour. To see him so energetic, even at this age, was truly inspiring. He was not less than a hundred and twenty years old, and despite such an advanced age, his health was astonishingly good. Indeed, I felt blessed on meeting him. Inspired by him, I also decided that I would work until the last days of my life. I had always liked to remain energetic and was perpetually in favour of a balanced diet and sleep. Regular exercise was something I anyway enjoyed. Yoga, *pranayama* (breath control) and walking were already a part of my daily routine. And unlike bhaiya, Arjuna, Satyaki and my other friends, I always tried not to stay up late into the night without reason. I had more or less kept myself away from addictions such as liquor; therefore, I did not see any impediment to staying healthy for the rest of my life.

Under my leadership, almost all of Nagakoot's thousand youths had become engaged in performing the assigned tasks. Uddhava and I would also spend time with various teams throughout the day to encourage them. Work was progressing at full speed on all fronts. However, to carry out further work, we required horses and bullock carts to transport goods,

modern tools to construct houses and some weapons. So, I sent Uddhava, Daruka and a few young men of Nagakoot to the kingdom of Panchal to arrange for these items. There was anyway no shortage of wealth because we still had with us King Dhrupad's gifts, accorded as a token of respect. While Uddhava, Daruka and the others left for Panchal, the rest of us enthusiastically got down to our respective tasks. Soon, we could see the pathways getting cleaner and broader by the day. The construction of houses was also under way. Witnessing this progress, my enthusiasm soared to another level and led to a unique idea. I started thinking that the young men were already at work, but for the all-round development of any kingdom, it was necessary for the young women as well to lend a hand in its work. 'So, why not employ women too in the tasks,' I thought to myself. I requested the chief minister to organise a meeting of all the young women of the kingdom. He assured me that he would organise the meeting in the next two days. It was gratifying to know that these days, everybody took my words to be Nature's 'command'. Meanwhile, despite being occupied all the time, I would make sure to spare some time to meet grandfather and great-grandfather. Their health too was improving greatly. Certainly, one of the factors contributing significantly to this improvement in their health, apart from my presence, was the ongoing development work in Nagakoot.

I barely realised how two days had passed, as we remained engrossed in all the work. It was now time for my meeting with the young women of the kingdom, who had already begun to gather in the open ground at the first light of dawn. By the time I reached, the ground was teeming with them. The chief minister and his council of ministers were already present there. As soon as I arrived, the young women greeted me effusively. In fact, the enthusiasm of the young men paled in comparison to the fervour and ardour of the women, as they eagerly waited for me to speak. On the other hand, my excitement too, was at its peak. The enthusiasm of addressing a gathering of women for the first time in life had suffused my entire being, and driven by this feeling, I began my address straightaway, without preamble. I said, "You women seem no less than the young men in terms of competence. For any kingdom to begin its progress, it is essential that the young men and women of that kingdom work hand in hand. It is the duty of a man to work hard, engaging in outdoor labour while a woman's

duty is to ensure that he gets good food, clean clothes and a tidy home when he returns from work. So, tell me, are you all willing to take up this responsibility?"

They all responded with a resounding "Yes!" So far so good, but even in this collective roar of approval, one young woman had specifically caught my attention. She had a dusky complexion and sharp features, and appeared to be especially high-spirited. She stood in the front row of the crowd as well. You will not believe it, but despite the huge crowd and such an important task on hand, our eyes met, followed by an exchange of smiles. Her build and stature also seemed better than that of the other young women. 'O, Krishna, are you going astray again?' My inner voice pointedly asked me. 'Alright, alright, I am back on track!' I replied silently and immediately turned my attention away from this woman, focussing on the address. I continued, "Seeing your excitement has fuelled my ardour too. To begin with, you must all learn how to milk cows and buffaloes. Then you must learn how to churn curd and butter from that milk. That's not all, you must also learn to make various snacks and delicacies using these ingredients because, good food is essential to maintain one's gusto in life. I will train you in all these techniques myself. You should also learn how to stitch clothes and make pots and pans out of clay. I will try and arrange for the best craftsmen to equip you with as many skills as possible. Are you womenfolk willing to learn and undertake all these tasks?"

As expected, a loud affirmative chorus of "Yes, we are!" resonated throughout the ground. Indeed, their energy and spirits were so high that they could breathe life into a corpse. Once everything was decided, I divided the women into similar teams as the men and immediately assigned tasks to them. Now that everything had proceeded smoothly, we concluded the meeting, but the attractive girl's gaze was still fixed on me. It was clear that she was hopelessly infatuated by me. I only hoped that my captivating smile would not cost me dearly. However, the truth was that she had also succeeded in attracting my attention. Surprisingly, she got up all of a sudden, and climbed confidently onto the wooden platform. I was amazed by her level of confidence. 'What a bold girl she was!' I thought. I wondered, 'Does anyone come forward to meet someone directly in this manner?' But once again, she surprised me by proving my assumption wrong.

She had climbed up the dais for sure, but not to meet me; she had come to talk to Majodhar, a distant cousin of my paternal grandfather. Nevertheless, it was interesting to note that although she was conversing with him, her gaze was constantly fixed on me during the entire conversation. In other words, there was more to her actions than what met the eye. Well, I was not one to lag behind either. As was my wont, I too smiled encouragingly at her. She turned out to be Majodhar's granddaughter and her name was Bhadra.

[32]

Although we had met, that was not the end of the story. She now started visiting me daily on some pretext or the other. Now, why would I object to this? There was not much to do out here anyway. So, I rather enjoyed her visits. Meanwhile, Uddhava had returned with all the requisite goods from Panchal. He was quite astonished to see all the young women at work, especially Bhadra, who would always hover around me on some pretext or the other. In fact, he could not help but start teasing me. He commented, "I see that you have begun your *raasleela* as soon as I left. Do you wish to turn Nagakoot into another Vrindavan?" Well, what could I say? I simply smiled. Even I was unaware of my own intentions, so what reply could I possibly give? Besides, those who live in the moment rarely harbour intentions and desires.

Nevertheless, this matter was soon forgotten. Everyone had immersed themselves in work with the utmost concentration. Every ten days or so, five to six houses were being built. The plan was to build at least three to four hundred houses within a year so that the standard of living of every person in Nagakoot could be improved in a year's time. And work was already advancing in full swing in that respect. Now that I had engaged everybody else in work, I had nothing much left to do; thus, without meaning to, my consciousness had fully awakened. And thanks to this, I suddenly had an idea. I sent Uddhava immediately to call Bhima and his chief minister. I clearly told him to inform them that the people of Nagakoot had invited them for counsel. I also told him to instruct Bhima to act as if he did not know me. I had suddenly thought of a plan that I felt could instantly resolve three to four problems of Nagakoot. It would boost the confidence of the people of Nagakoot if the king of the *Rakshasas* himself were to visit their kingdom. If I could facilitate a peace treaty between the two kingdoms, then both of them could join forces to easily ward off any

external threat. Besides, if the relationship between these two kingdoms improved, the Pandavas too, would have another place to visit, which would consequently keep them occupied during their stay here. Therefore, my plan was to hit three targets with one arrow. Now, while my plan was definitely ingenious, its success depended on everything falling into place seamlessly.

While I was lost in my own world, thinking of all these possibilities, Uddhava returned within four days with Bhima, that is, King Vakrodara, and his chief minister. The chief minister of Nagakoot and I accorded them a grand welcome. In fact, Nagakoot's chief minister was quite effusive in his welcome. Meanwhile, as expected, the entire kingdom was curious about *Rakshasa Raj*; consequently, they had all turned up to catch a glimpse of its king. The poor inhabitants of Nagakoot were so afraid of the *Rakshasas* that a visit by the *Rakshasa* king himself was no less than a miracle for them. After the initial pleasantries were over, I took Bhima and Uddhava to the meeting chamber. There was nothing to discuss as such; I only needed to give a few instructions to Bhima. After some casual conversation, I explained to him in detail the treaty between the two kingdoms. I had never imagined that Bhima, who appeared so simple and straightforward, could actually act so well. Indeed, throughout the interaction, in the presence of other people, he had behaved as if he did not know me at all.

I first apprised the ministers of the council, apart from grandfather and great-grandfather, of the cooperation treaty with the *Rakshasas*. They were beside themselves with joy on hearing the news. They had never imagined that the *Rakshasas*, who had been oppressing them, would themselves come forward and make peace with them. In ordinary circumstances, this would have been impossible, but because Bhima was their king now, a treaty was possible. However, only Uddhava and I knew this. For the others, it was nothing short of a miracle. Once everything was finalised, the palace decided to hold a grand celebration the next day, in the open ground, in honour of King Vakrodara. The entire ground was packed with the people of Nagakoot; grandfather and great-grandfather were also present for the ceremony. I had arranged for Bhima to address the people at the end of the ceremony. His speech was just what I had tutored him to say. And he performed this act too with effortless ease. Bhima said in his speech, "We

have agreed to a treaty of cooperation with Nagakoot. Henceforth, our *Rakshasas* will not abduct or trouble any inhabitant of Nagakoot. But this is not all; I also promise that in case of an external attack on this kingdom, we will consider it an attack on ourselves and unhesitatingly tackle them together.”

As soon as the crowd heard this, a wave of happiness swept through it. The entire ground resonated with the sound of their applause. Nobody could believe that the king of *Rakshasas* had become their friend. The ceremony thus ended on this celebratory note. And after enjoying Nagakoot’s hospitality for one more day, King Vakrodara, that is, Bhima, returned to his kingdom. Indeed, my plan had borne fruit and as a consequence, the confidence of the people of Nagakoot had reached its zenith. This, in turn, had an immediate effect on the speed of work as well. The weather, however, was not favourable and frequent rainfall in Nagakoot was hampering the developmental work.

Nevertheless, the people’s enthusiasm and determination to achieve their goal overcame all impediments and hurdles, as they plodded on with their work with diligence and fervour. I had increased my efforts too. Every evening, I had begun to train forty to fifty Naga maidens on how to milk cows. Since the task was not really difficult, they had learnt the skill within three to four days. Thereafter, I also trained them on how to churn butter and make curd from the extracted milk. I noted that Bhadra was the most excited and the quickest of all in learning these skills. Now, once the Naga maidens had learnt the skill of churning butter and making curd from milk, I stood to gain the most from it. Everybody was aware of my fondness for these food items. In fact, they even competed with each other to feed me butter and curd. I think the connection between Kanhaiya and young women transcended several lifetimes, which is why I was blessed with their company wherever life took me.

Bhadra was ahead of everyone when it came to serving me curd and butter. Gradually, she even took over the entire responsibility of bringing curd and butter for me every day. In a way, she was taking great care of my indulgences. Although, the other women were no less enthusiastic; they would clamour day and night to serve me butter and curd with their own hands, and this cowherd boy too, would feel contented and revel in the

feeling of being fed by them. If it was not Vrindavan, then it was Nagakoot, and if there were no *gopis*, then there were the Naga maidens, but this Kanha was always surrounded by young women. Now, should I call it my good fortune or that of the young women? Oh well, I shall not pass any verdict on it; I shall leave it to you to judge for yourself.

Now, let me tell you in detail about the activities that Kanhaiya was occupied with. You will not believe it, but I was enjoying myself thoroughly as I continued to train the young women. And in my enthusiasm, I also began to teach them how to cook various delicacies. 'Krishna, you are truly incredible! Even though you are not educated yourself, you have become the teacher of a *gurukul* of young Naga women,' my inner voice said. Well, these were the very games that I was myself an admirer of. In short, while everyone else was busy working, Kanhaiya, who had assigned them their work, was truly enjoying his present situation. Speaking of the ongoing work in Nagakoot, the tasks were so many that there seemed no end to them. Besides, the rain continued to pour down on us in an unrelenting fury, hampering our work. To be honest, the torrential downpour in Nagakoot had really worn me out, and I was actually waiting for my favourite season—the monsoon—to end.

There is something else too that I want to share with you, but I am trying to find a way to say it, because every time I think about it, I become overwhelmed with emotions. Each and every child of Nagakoot was filled with reverence for me. The amount of respect being accorded to me in this kingdom was beyond imagination. No matter where I went and what I did, I would be welcomed lovingly. Agreed, the work I had done here deserved to be lauded, but I had done similar work in many other kingdoms and quite frequently too. This is why I say that the innocence and sentimentality of these people were remarkable indeed. Honestly speaking, I also felt proud of my dedication towards work. And as you already know, I prefer giving the credit for my achievements to my own actions instead of others, whether it is another human being or God. There are two advantages to this; it helps you maintain faith in your actions and also ensures that you are aware of your responsibilities. And the best part is that you are not unnecessarily dependent on others. So, I felt quite proud of the respect accorded to me and considered myself fully deserving of it.



Coming back to Nagakoot, on one hand, everyone was happy with the speed at which work was progressing, and on the other, the fervour displayed by the youth had pleasantly surprised everyone. Similarly, while the newly bought horses, carts and weapons had inspired confidence in everyone, the treaty with the *Rakshasa Raj* had elevated everybody's confidence to another level. Seeing the joy all around, my enthusiasm soared to the skies. Surpassing all this was the love and admiration from these simple-minded people, which tugged at my heartstrings. Deep within me, I felt the desire to do much more than this for the people of Nagakoot. And with this thought, a new plan was formulated in my mind. I instructed Uddhava to marshall his resources and find Chekitan—whose kingdom had been snatched away by Duryodhana—and bring him to me. I wanted to discuss several matters with him. Uddhava sensed the urgency and immediately set out to look for Chekitan.

Meanwhile, Bhadra continued to visit me every day on some pretext or the other. By now, we had also begun to converse on subjects other than the ongoing work. She would ask me numerous questions about my life in Vrindavan, Mathura and Dwarka. And through these conversations, I realised that Bhadra was a very talented and clever girl in comparison to the rest of the people of Nagakoot. This was probably because she was groomed by her grandfather, Majodhar, whom I was already impressed with. Bhadra was not only taking an active interest in the progress of Nagakoot, but with encouragement from me, she had also begun to try and understand the administrative tasks of Nagakoot under the guidance of her grandfather.

Time was thus passing by and gradually, we could see the results of our hard work. The standard of living of the people of Nagakoot had also started improving. Their joy knew no bounds on having curd and butter added to their meals. Meanwhile, I found myself enjoying the monsoon once again, and would now play the flute almost every day. Needless to say, here too, the melodious notes of my flute spread magic, leaving all the Naga maidens, including Bhadra, enchanted. As a consequence, this flute-playing Kanha was once again surrounded by women. Bhadra, however, was the most impressed and completely infatuated by my flute playing skills. As a result, whether I liked it or not, she was slowly closing the distance between us.

Well, as of now, my attention was focussed entirely on the construction work in Nagakoot. There was no cause for concern as everything was progressing according to the plan. So, as soon as I found some spare time, my mind began contemplating once again and as a result, I suddenly began to worry about Hastinapur. This anxiety turned into restlessness as I waited impatiently for Chekitan. But I knew that once Uddhava was assigned a task, one could consider it as good as done. And soon enough, Uddhava returned with Chekitan in tow. I arranged for his stay in the royal palace itself with full royal honour. Needless to say, the entire kingdom felt proud to host a guest such as King Chekitan. But what augured well for my plan was that, just as I had expected, Chekitan was broken in spirit after Duryodhana's attack. He appeared miserable and despondent. Indeed, what could be more distressing for a king than losing his own kingdom? Clearly, he needed some kind of support. And well, here I was. Everyone in Aryavarta knew I had already killed Kansa, Panchajanya, Shringlava and Kalyavana long before I had established Dwarka. They knew that I had even defeated Jarasandha twice. So, it was not possible that Chekitan was unaware of my prowess. Besides, a drowning man would clutch even at a straw to save himself. So, Chekitan fell under my spell soon enough.

Within a few days of his arrival in Nagakoot, Chekitan was ready for a proper discussion. But I needed to ascertain his present strength before I could offer him any help. On being asked, he informed me that he still had a contingent of five hundred loyal soldiers and that he had also managed to carry more than half of his royal treasury with him while escaping Duryodhana's attack. I felt proud of Chekitan's capability. Even though beaten, he had not allowed himself to be completely defeated. Although he had lost the battle, he had still managed to escape with so many soldiers and more than half his wealth. This, in itself, was proof of his courage and far-sightedness. This information had indeed served as a shot in the arm, for, I knew he could prove very useful for what I had in mind.

Now, you might say, 'All this is fine but what was it that you desired ultimately?' All right then, let me tell you. Duryodhana's unfettered ambitions had become a cause of concern for me, and the conditions in Nagakoot and Chekitan's state were also worrying me greatly. All things considered, I wanted to curb Duryodhana's growing audacity. Therefore, my plan was to form an allied army of Nagakoot, Chekitan's kingdom and

the *Rakshasa Raj*. With my name associated with this joint army, it would be easier to curb Duryodhana's atrocities. I had anyway developed a penchant for politics ever since I had set foot in Mathura. But as you know, after establishing Dwarka, I had never got the opportunity to employ my political acumen and devise strategies. And really, who practises politics in his own kingdom? So, as I sat in contemplation, with all these thoughts coursing through my mind, I devised an intricate political plan. And now, after meeting Chekitan, I sensed that the circumstances were favourable. So, I finalised my idea of a joint army. Keeping this strategy in mind, I sent Uddhava immediately to call *Rakshasa Raj's* King Vakrodara, that is, Bhima, to Nagakoot. Bhima did not have to do much in this plan, except agree with me.

So, the very next day, I convened a joint meeting in the assembly hall of the palace. Grandfather, great-grandfather, Majodhar and the chief minister were invited on behalf of Nagakoot. King Chekitan and King Vakrodara too, were present with their respective chief ministers. Naturally, Uddhava and I were present too. On this day, the palace of Nagakoot became the backdrop of a strange sight. All the enemies were presently seated under one roof. This was nothing short of a miracle in itself. Well now, the miracles of *karma* were bound to occur wherever I was present, weren't they? However, the atmosphere in the assembly hall was certainly tense, which meant there was no question of a dialogue or casual conversation. Clearly, the wounds were still fresh. Thus, to lighten the atmosphere, I formally introduced everybody and continued with the meeting. To ease the volatile atmosphere, I even delivered a formal address. I said, "Even though there is enmity amongst you all, for me, you are all my good friends. In fact, enmity is nothing but another name for glory. However, when we face adverse situations or our lives are at stake, this enmity can only prove to be self-destructive. If you examine carefully, I am a friend to you all; at the same time, Duryodhana is an arch enemy to everyone present here. So, if seen from this point of view, you all are actually friends with each other. Therefore, I have a plan that will not only benefit the three of you but will also be detrimental to Duryodhana. This is why I have called you here today. If you all trust me, then I shall explain my plan to you in detail."

Indeed, did anyone have any reason not to concur with me, especially when it concerned their own benefit and Duryodhana's detriment? In any case, it

is easy to bring defeated people together because they are all in need of support. Their egos are already crushed, so the only thing that matters to them is their own survival. Of course, if Jarasandha, Dhrupad or Duryodhana were in the place of these kings, convincing them would have been much more difficult. That is because, at this point in time, their egos were too strong for them to have bowed down. However, I knew that their egos too would be crushed sooner or later. After all, for how long could the ego remain unscathed? I also knew that in all probability, their egos would crumble in such a way that they would never be in a position to form an alliance with anyone.

Now, let me put these useless thoughts aside and come straight to the point. As soon as I was able to instil trust in them all, I promptly began to describe my plan. I said, "Presently, you are all besieged by some difficulty or the other, and none of you are strong enough to fix your own problems single-handedly. Now, as you all know, Chekitan's kingdom has been usurped by Duryodhana, although it is reassuring to know that Chekitan still has enough soldiers and wealth. What is perturbing is that, how long will any army or wealth be able to support Chekitan without a kingdom? His soldiers will abandon him some day and then, without an army, his wealth will be stolen too."

Hearing this ominous prophecy, Chekitan's forehead creased with worry lines. This was exactly what I had wanted. And before he could think of anything else, I resumed my speech immediately. I said, "Similarly, Nagakoot too has its own problems. The kingdom lacks an experienced king. Grandfather, great-grandfather and Majodhar have all grown very old. They do not even have an organised army. Duryodhana can enslave the entire kingdom within a day if he so wishes. And if that were to happen, all the maidens of Nagakoot would be turned into maidservants and act as adornments in his palace." Needless to say, this made grandfather, Majodhar, the chief minister and great-grandfather terribly anxious. My work had now become easy. I had given both parties enough reason to fear. Now, there was nothing to stop me. So, I continued quickly, "Similarly, *Rakshasa Raj* has its own problems. The *Rakshasas* have power, but no life. They need to buy life in exchange for their power."

Of course, the *Rakshasas* were ruled by the Pandavas. I wanted them to stay in hiding for another year or so, but it did not seem they could sustain living in the *Rakshasa* civilisation for a long time. Except Bhima, I had already seen the restlessness of the remaining Pandava brothers. But if the Pandavas were allowed to roam freely and get suitable food and atmosphere, they would not mind staying here for a year or so. And it was imperative from every perspective that they stayed in hiding until Draupadi's *swayamvar*. Honestly, I was trying to shoot four birds with one stone. Meanwhile, as expected, the atmosphere in the assembly hall had become quite sombre on hearing my address. All the faces wore a worried look. In other words, I had successfully managed to create the environment I desired. It is a well-known fact that it is imperative to instil fear in the mind of a person in order to form any kind of alliance. In fact, success is guaranteed if you add greed to this concoction of fear and uncertainty. Well, now that I had induced fear in everybody's mind, it was time to launch the weapon of greed. Indeed, fear and greed are the only two weapons that can be used to steer people in whichever direction you wish to.

So, once again, I continued with my address. Playing my cards well, I aimed to manipulate them by using greed as the final weapon. I said, "I wish that the three of you come together and form one large kingdom. Nagakoot can be made the centre of this kingdom. This will give Chekitan's soldiers enough ground because of which they will not have to run around from one place to another, fearing Duryodhana. With an arrangement like this, Chekitan's wealth will also remain secure. On the other hand, we can use Chekitan's prowess to put together an additional two thousand soldiers combining forces from both Nagakoot and *Rakshasa Raj*. I believe a trained army of two to three thousand soldiers will be capable enough to protect all three kingdoms from any external threat. Additionally, considering Chekitan's experience as a king, he should be declared the king of this joint kingdom."

My calculations were simple. If given proper training, each *Rakshasa* could effortlessly tackle ten ordinary soldiers. Besides, great warriors such as Bhima, Arjuna and Chekitan, who were part of this combined army, could challenge Duryodhana, if the need arose. As I spoke, I watched the reaction on everyone's face. Chekitan was visibly pleased with the present proposal,

but grandfather and Majodhar could not accept the idea of making Chekitan the ruler of their kingdom.

However, I had not finished my address yet. It was now time to propose what mattered to them the most. So, I continued, “On the other hand, in return for the kingdom, Chekitan will have to expend his wealth for the development of Nagakoot and *Rakshasa Raj*. This wealth will be used not only to purchase modern weapons, but also to build a contemporary palace for Chekitan. Of course, important decisions concerning the new kingdom will be made only after consulting everybody, especially taking into account the experience of grandfather and great-grandfather. Their suggestions will be given special consideration.”

Bhima, that is, King Vakrodara, had to agree with me in any case. King Chekitan was receiving a kingdom in exchange for his wealth along with the honour of being crowned a king once again. Similarly, Nagakoot would flourish under an experienced king, who would not only provide security, but also make the kingdom prosper. The Pandavas too would gain freedom to wander about in Nagakoot and enjoy good food. At the same time, they could spend their time in more civilised surroundings. In other words, they were getting the opportunity to lead a humane existence once again. Everyone was, therefore, bound to happily give their consent to my proposal. Grandfather and great-grandfather appeared satisfied too, because even if Chekitan was crowned king, he was at least bound to consult them before taking any decisions.

Interestingly, my explanations and manipulations brought about a sudden change in the atmosphere. There was cheer and joy all around, dispelling the sombre mood prevailing at the onset of the meeting. Moreover, when I promised that I too would contribute some of my wealth to carry out this great work, their happiness knew no bounds. I then placed most of the wealth I had received from King Dhrupad at my great-grandfather’s feet. With this final gesture of mine, the entire mood changed. In an instant, everybody was on cloud nine, hailing the onset of good times. Meanwhile, for Uddhava, who was well-versed in the art of politics, this was nothing short of a miracle. And why would it not be? This was a miracle, indeed.

I was exuberant, because with this astute strategy, the entire kingdom of Nagakoot would be transformed and would forge ahead on the path of progress. In any case, what could be more satisfying than being able to rebuild the lives of twenty thousand people? On the other hand, I was glad I had come to great-grandfather's aid while there was still time. Seeing Chekitan's experience and enthusiasm, I was confident that he would work wonders in Nagakoot.

Chekitan certainly proved his mettle within a few days itself. His administrative acumen was truly praiseworthy, coupled with the pace of his work. All in all, with Chekitan's arrival, the work in Nagakoot picked up on a war footing, with renewed enthusiasm. While work on Chekitan's royal palace had begun, the ongoing housing construction work also picked up pace. Roads were being paved, and ponds and wells were being cleaned as well. The people had also begun to mingle with each other. The environment was so friendly that one could hardly tell that this was an enforced association of three kingdoms. Now, even the *Rakshasas* had begun to visit Nagakoot; similarly, the people of Nagakoot had started to venture into the *Rakshasa* territory without fear. In short, there was a mood of gaiety all around. Such being the case, could a celebration be far behind, especially with Krishna around? 'Perhaps the poor inhabitants of Nagakoot do not even know what a celebration means,' I thought. So, I announced a three-day state-sponsored festival. Uddhava and I took up the entire responsibility of organising this festival, for which I spent a small portion of the wealth given by King Dhruvad.

The mere mention of a festival triggered a wave of curiosity among the inhabitants of Nagakoot. Obviously, all the preparations were being carried out under the supervision of Uddhava and me. Needless to say, Bhadra and her friends enthusiastically helped us with the preparations. And since the festivities were to commence just a week later, in the midst of all our activities, we did not realise when the day was upon us. The festival was celebrated by not just Chekitan's soldiers and Nagakoot's inhabitants, but also the *Rakshasas*, who participated with tremendous enthusiasm. The celebration that began in the morning and continued till late into the night, included everything from games to dance and music. Close to three thousand youths participated in it. The highlight of the celebration, which left everyone spellbound, including me, was the unique dance performed by

the Naga maidens under Bhadra's supervision. In fact, I was so impressed by their performance that in my enthusiasm, I also performed a little dance along with Bhadra. The merry mood of the people added to the joy and cheer in the air and enthused me greatly, so much so that in my ecstasy, I decided to increase the level of excitement a notch higher by playing the flute for them. Indeed, it seemed as if this celebration had wiped out the exhaustion of not one, but thirty lifetimes put together—not just for me but for everybody else too. Some were now regarding me as a magician, while others viewed me as God.

Of course, it felt good to know that I had carved a niche for myself in the hearts of people across all the kingdoms of Aryavarta. In fact, the rise in their love and respect for me surpassed the rapid rise of my political stature. In any case, I always sought joy and gaiety in everything I did. Therefore, the contentment I would feel on seeing others happy was, indeed, incomparable. The truth is, the pursuit of joy is the only action which leads to an instant outcome—'joy' itself. In activities other than games, festivities, love and art, there is always an underlying hope of a positive outcome. That is why I always say, pure joy can be obtained only from these four activities. In fact, to ensure everlasting joy, I had lived my life as if it were a game. And I could see how happy these people were because of the celebration I had organised. I knew that no matter how far these people progressed in life, the joy they were experiencing on this day would be etched in their minds forever. The very essence of human life lies in performing one's duty and amassing the resultant joy as a form of wealth. Our death asks us only three questions: "Did you shirk away from performing any duty that was required of you in your life? Did you miss out on any opportunity to enjoy your life? Did you love your life immensely?" Truly, all actions other than duty, love and happiness, regardless of whether they were performed with good or bad intentions, eventually prove to be nothing more than 'grave sins'.

Well, my work in Nagakoot was complete. I had stayed in this kingdom for more than five months and during this time, the love I had received from its people was no less than what I had received in Vrindavan. For that matter, by combining these three kingdoms, I had gained a lot personally too, because along with Bhima, Arjuna would also visit Nagakoot on a few occasions. So, I was able to meet both Bhima and Arjuna, which in a way



was beneficial to both parties. On one hand, conversing with Bhima and Arjuna would relieve me of my exhaustion, and on the other, Arjuna would find great solace in my company.

At this point, the work in Nagakoot had picked up momentum on all fronts. The people had also gained an experienced administrator in the form of Chekitan. Besides, enthusiasm and zeal were at their peak in the kingdom. I had trained the people in skills that I had mastered myself. By forging the great alliance, I had also given a new life and security to everyone. So, there seemed no reason now to prolong my stay here. It was now left to Chekitan to carry out his responsibilities and take care of the tasks henceforth; therefore, I decided that it was time now for me to bid farewell to Nagakoot. With immediate effect, Uddhava, Daruka and I began to prepare for our journey back home.

It had only been a day or two since I had decided to leave when my attention was drawn towards yet another duty, an extremely crucial one that had to be discharged before I left. Now tell me, was it not essential to keep a tight rein on Duryodhana's ambition? For that matter, success always makes one enthusiastic and ambitious for more. Thus, I began to wonder, 'Why not pressurise Hastinapur into returning Chekitan's kingdom?' This one thought set into motion a trail of thoughts; was it possible to pressurise Hastinapur? Or was I just taking flights of fancy enthused by my recent successes? My inner voice came to my rescue instantly, 'No, no, Kanhaiya! It is a worthwhile thought and one that is necessary too, because if you want to maintain peace and harmony in this region, you cannot let a mad bull such as Duryodhana roam around unrestrained. Besides, is there anything in this world that is impossible for you to accomplish? So, go ahead and hatch a plot!'

I continued to think along these lines. And as they say, when good intentions are backed by determination, success is bound to follow. And since my intention was to safeguard the greater good of the region, a solution was bound to appear. Very soon, an idea germinated in my mind. I put aside all other tasks and immediately went searching for Uddhava. On finding him, I said, "I want Hastinapur to return Chekitan's kingdom to him!"

Now, this idea of mine was a bolt out of the blue, and naturally, Uddhava was surprised to hear me say something like this. He concurred, “What you say is right, Kanhaiya, but simply wanting it to happen, will not make it happen.”

I said, “If you want something earnestly, it will produce desirable results just by your act of wishing it. Just wait and watch, if Duryodhana does not return Chekitan’s kingdom with folded hands, then I will change my name. All you have to do is go to Hastinapur.”

Staying true to his nature, Uddhava was not one to shy away from a task. So, he agreed to leave immediately. Though he had been eager to return to Dwarka, he was ready to perform his duty in an instant. His only question was, “What should I do there?” Wasting no time, I answered his question immediately. I said, “You will not have to do much. You will simply have to describe Draupadi’s bewitching beauty vividly to Duryodhana, repeatedly painting an enchanting picture of hers so that he begins to dream of her and becomes obsessed about possessing her.”

“This is all fine, but what will it accomplish?” asked Uddhava.

I said, “Do not be so impatient; first, hear me out. Once he starts dreaming of Draupadi, start discussing her *swayamvar* with him. In the course of your conversation, convey to him that the entire responsibility of arranging Draupadi’s *swayamvar* lies with me, that is Krishna, who is so impressed with Duryodhana’s bravery and intelligence that he wants Draupadi to marry someone like him. Therefore, Krishna desires with all his heart that Duryodhana should win this *swayamvar*. Go ahead and tell him that Krishna has specifically sent you to Hastinapur to inform him about the *swayamvar*. Also tell him that the *swayamvar* will have an archery contest under Krishna’s supervision. Krishna has advised Duryodhana to begin honing his archery skills with immediate effect in preparation for the competition. Tell Duryodhana that you will bring him further instructions on this matter in due course of time, because Krishna believes that, except Duryodhana, there is no other prince in all of Aryavarta, who will be a suitable match for a dazzling beauty like Draupadi. Hearing this, Duryodhana will fall into your trap, hook, line and sinker.”

Uddhava was completely taken aback by my instructions. He could not hold back, so interrupting me midway, he asked, “Agreed, Duryodhana will fall for this ploy. But what does this have to do with him returning Chekitan’s kingdom?”

Laughing at his question, I said, “My dear simple-minded Uddhava, after talking to Duryodhana, you will have to tell King Dhritarashtra about the treaty between Chekitan’s kingdom, Nagakoot and *Rakshasa Raj*. He will have to be warned that if all the neighbouring small kingdoms forge an alliance and unite in this way, the day will not be far when it will spell doom for Hastinapur.” Uddhava looked at me in astonishment. He quickly understood that Krishna’s mischievous mind was churning out a dangerous scheme, indeed.

Meanwhile, I had become quite excited while elaborating my plan to Uddhava. Consequently, this time, I spoke with great emphasis, “After that, Uddhava, you must go to Grandfather Bhishma with a message from me. Tell him that in spite of him being present, Duryodhana has usurped Chekitan’s kingdom. The King of Dwarka is highly upset with this. He wants Chekitan’s kingdom to be returned to him without any delay, else Dwarka, along with Chekitan’s kingdom and other friendly kingdoms such as Nagakoot and *Rakshasa Raj*, will be compelled to attack Hastinapur. I am sure Grandfather Bhishma would never want to upset me on a personal level. He will surely pressurise Dhritarashtra. By this time, Duryodhana will be hopelessly under the spell of Draupadi. And when Bhishma and Dhritarashtra confront Duryodhana regarding Chekitan’s kingdom, he will readily concede to their demands, as he will be preoccupied with thoughts of Draupadi and the dream of attaining her. Caught in this vulnerable state of mind, Duryodhana will immediately return the kingdom to Chekitan. Indeed, how could poor Duryodhana, already dreaming about his future bride, be in a position to reject my proposal? Rejecting my proposal would mean shattering his dream of attaining Draupadi. In other words, you will find even someone like Duryodhana only too happy to please the King of Dwarka.”

After hearing the entire plan, Uddhava was dumbstruck. Indeed, it was impossible for this plan to fail. An excited Uddhava became eager to leave for Hastinapur the next morning. Meanwhile, in the stillness of the dark

night, my consciousness came up with another strange ploy. Actually, this little scheme was the result of the affection I felt on visualising Duryodhana's face. Therefore, as Uddhava was just about to leave, I told him, "After finishing all the tasks, do not forget to meet Duryodhana's wife, Bhanumati, before leaving Hastinapur."

Hearing this, Uddhava was stunned. His mind staggered a little, wondering what new and diabolic twist Krishna had thought of now. Bewildered, he asked, "But why?"

I laughed and said, "Because, I want you to instigate her really well. Tell her that Duryodhana is preparing to marry Draupadi. And if a world-renowned beauty like Draupadi were to arrive in Hastinapur as Duryodhana's wife, then it is certain that she would be reduced from being the principal queen to a maidservant."

Hearing this, Uddhava's head started spinning. He began wondering, 'Now, what is this? Why instigate her unnecessarily?' He stood there, scratching his head. Seeing his condition, I burst out laughing and said, "By doing this, the enemy will become weaker. There will be quarrels in his home, arguments outside the home, in addition to the false hope of attaining Draupadi. He will go berserk, and a person who is out of his mind will at least not launch new attacks."

After I had explained to him the other details of the plan, Uddhava set out for Hastinapur, fully prepared. Uddhava possessed a remarkable quality; no matter what task I assigned to him, he could immediately grasp what he had to do. I was now feeling proud of what I had set out to accomplish. Only now was my work in this region truly complete. Peace could not be established in this region just by forming an alliance between Chekitan's kingdom, Nagakoot and *Rakshasa Raj*. It was crucial to rein Duryodhana in. It was interesting that even though I was returning Chekitan his kingdom by playing with the minds of Duryodhana, Dhritarashtra and Grandfather Bhishma, on the face of it, it seemed as if they had to simply accept the request put forth by the King of Dwarka. How it would elevate my own stature in Aryavarta when people across the region heard of this development! It was a point worth thinking about. There would be only one

refrain across the entire Aryavarta region—‘Duryodhana returned the kingdom he had won from Chekitan at the behest of the King of Dwarka’. This fact alone would be enough to prove the influence the King of Dwarka had in this region. In any case, in my opinion, a person has to make an effort himself in order to raise his stature. Expanding the realm of his duties is also solely up to him. Consider my own case, for instance. While an ordinary man limits his duties to his family members at the most, I had extended the realm of my duties to the entire Aryavarta region. Whether it was Vrindavan or Mathura, Nagakoot or Panchal, Dwarka or Hastinapur, I had brought all these kingdoms within my realm of duties because I considered the progress and protection of humanity as my foremost duty, whether that humanity belonged to this planet or any other.

These random thoughts were coursing through my mind because Uddhava had left for Hastinapur, and I had nothing left to do except wait for him. Ever since Chekitan had taken over the reins of the developmental work, I was left with considerable free time. When I told Chekitan about the idea of retrieving his kingdom, he could not believe his ears. He was of the opinion that Duryodhana would never agree to return his kingdom, and Chekitan was right to an extent. After all, I had not revealed my entire plan to him. For that matter, was it ever easy to comprehend Krishna’s ploys? On the other hand, whether Duryodhana fell for my devious plan or not, I was certain that King Dhritarashtra and Grandfather Bhishma would never allow him to attack any other kingdom in future. They would now pressurise him to such an extent that he would not even think of doing so. With Chekitan at the helm of Nagakoot’s administrative affairs, I now had the opportunity to spend most of my time with my grandfather and great-grandfather. Honestly, I could not have felt more blessed. Meeting Bhadra had also become a daily ritual. So, although I did not have any task left to be accomplished, the days were flying by as if they had grown wings.

Now, if I told you why time seemed to fly by, you might say, ‘O Krishna, when will you mend your ways?’ Well, this was the reality. Nagakoot was witnessing a number of changes, but there was one thing that did not change at all—Bhadra kept visiting me every day under some pretext or the other. However, I had to admit that she was taking good care of me. For instance, as soon as she learnt that I loved butter and curd, she was the only one who would unfailingly bring it for me every morning. Not only that,

when I was teaching the Naga maidens how to prepare various delicacies, she was the one who showed the greatest interest. And once she had learnt the skills to prepare them, it was she who brought me all kinds of delicacies. Of course, I revelled in the feeling of being taken care of with so much love and tenderness. For that matter, I did feel the need to be served like this in this unfamiliar kingdom. In a way, she was reducing the burden on the royal palace, because with her around, the palace did not have to worry a great deal about taking care of my needs.

Well, let me steer my thoughts away from Bhadra, and talk about the construction activities. Indeed, with the end of monsoon, the ongoing work had once again gained momentum. The royal palace for Chekitan was also on the verge of completion. The settlements around the palace were developing at a brisk pace as well. The roads too had improved and were more or less in a better condition than before. Indeed, the entire face of Nagakoot had changed gradually. The credit for this rapid development certainly went to Chekitan. It was because of his experienced leadership that work had progressed swiftly. And with this all-round development, there was an air of joy all around. However, an announcement from me did dampen everybody's high spirits. Actually, I needed to return to Dwarka as soon as Uddhava returned, and the moment I conveyed this news to grandfather and great-grandfather, they became dejected. Of course, they knew very well that even though I was their descendant, this definitely was not my permanent home. Sooner or later, I had to leave. But despite this, my great-grandfather became dismayed just at the thought of my departure. In fact, his health had also started deteriorating all of a sudden, so much so that one night I had to sleep in the same chamber as him to comfort him.

That night, my great-grandfather was very ill. In fact, he was so despondent that during the course of our conversation, he had said, "Kanhaiya, I do not think I will live to see you another time. Yama<sup>[33]</sup> will be here any day now, waiting to take me with him." I immediately replied in an attempt to console him, "Why do you worry so? I will return soon to meet you."

Indeed, this was no idle talk and I had meant every word I had said to him. I anyway had to return to Panchal for Draupadi's *swayamvar*, and Nagakoot was just a three-day journey from Panchal. I remember that day very well, when I was gently massaging my great-grandfather's feet, I suddenly

became grave on noticing his sadness. And I wonder what came over me when in that grave demeanour, I lectured him. I said, “To meet or not is something that is best left to the future. Why are you unnecessarily worrying about it today? In any case, death is inevitable for those who take birth. But you are a ‘soul’. This soul is eternal and everlasting. No weapon can cut it, no wind can dry it nor can it be dissolved in water. It cannot be killed even when the body dies. Just as a person discards old garments and wears new ones, the soul discards an old body and assumes a new one. Therefore, my dear great-grandfather, it is entirely pointless to worry about life and death, and meeting and departing. We have been together in a life preceding this one, and even after we die, we may get a chance to be together once again.” After hearing my monologue, great-grandfather had felt much better. I was glad my words of wisdom had not gone in vain, the way they had in the case of Arjuna when I had enunciated the Gita. At the time of speaking with my great-grandfather, the words had simply flown from within me, while in the Bhagavad Gita, I had only repeated this.

Gradually, as the days were passing by, a pall of gloom seemed to have descended upon the people of Nagakoot when they heard about my impending return to Dwarka. Bhadra was devastated on hearing the news of my departure and became almost hysterical. As a matter of fact, the sorrow felt by everyone was justified too. After all, I had developed a close bond with each one of them in a short span of time, especially with Bhadra. However, I was not paying much attention to these matters and was instead waiting for Uddhava to return. I was curious to know how Duryodhana, King Dhritarashtra and Grandfather Bhishma had reacted to what Uddhava had to say. Had they fallen into my trap or not? The wait for Uddhava had stretched too long; he took an entire month to return.

However, it did not matter, for, it was better late than never. The delight on his face was a clear indication that he had been successful in his mission. We headed to our chamber to talk in private. Honestly, seeing his victorious smile, my ego had swelled. ‘Duryodhana returned the kingdom just because the King of Dwarka told him to!’ Krishna was no longer just a king; he had now become the king of kings. Could Krishna’s schemes ever fail? Nay, never! Krishna was not an ordinary strategist, and neither were his powers ordinary. Whatever he desired was meant to happen. Alas, for how long could my ego keep flaring up in this manner? Moreover, I was yet to hear

the complete story from Uddhava, and this made me curious, as I was eager to hear everybody's response and reaction. In other words, my ego stood its ground; it had simply changed its form.

Uddhava was only too eager to reveal everything, and what he narrated was indeed gratifying. He told me that he had stayed with Vidura while in Hastinapur. He began, "When I informed Vidura about the Pandavas, he instantly felt at ease. The story of how Bhima became King Vakrodara was especially interesting to him. In the meantime, I tried to meet Duryodhana once or twice, but it did not seem as if my arrival had pleased him in any way. Frankly speaking, he ignored me completely. On the other hand, I could not talk to him openly either because he was never alone. Dushasana and Shakuni were always by his side. Finally, after trying tirelessly for three to four days, I finally managed to catch him alone. As soon as I informed him about Draupadi's *swayamvar*, he jumped with joy. Interestingly, I did not even need to extol Draupadi's beauty to him; apparently, he had already heard a lot about her. The situation became even more interesting after that. I told him that you would be organising the *swayamvar* and you want him to win the *swayamvar*, because at this point, he was the only one in Aryavarta who is most suited for a beauty like Draupadi. I told him, 'Not only that, Krishna is willing to do whatever he can to ensure that you win Draupadi's hand in marriage, which is why he has especially sent me here, to inform Your Highness.'" I smiled on hearing this as Uddhava continued, "When Duryodhana heard all this, his demeanour changed completely. Suddenly, I became an important person to him. His behaviour towards me changed completely, so much so that he immediately apologised to me for his apathetic behaviour and said, 'I have misunderstood Krishna. He is like a younger brother to me.' And that was not all. He insisted that I accompany him to the palace, where he made me stay in his special guest chamber. Moreover, he even sent a host of servants and maidservants to look after my needs. I even got them to give me a massage daily, and that too twice a day."

Uddhava suddenly blushed deeply. Now, how could any friend of Krishna, who was shameless himself, feel so shy? I immediately egged him on jovially, and said, "Good for you, Uddhava. I am glad you have picked up the habits of a king—even before becoming one!"



Humour aside, it was interesting to know that even Duryodhana had heard of Draupadi's unparalleled beauty. Another thought followed immediately, 'What work did Duryodhana have anyway, other than to keep tabs on young women?' On a serious note, it was worth noting that Draupadi's beauty was already the subject of discussion everywhere. This meant that there would be heavy attendance of kings and princes in the *swayamvar*. However, at this moment, I was becoming all the more curious as Uddhava apprised me of the events that had transpired in Hastinapur. Seeing me so excited, Uddhava continued, "Kanhaiya, the most amusing development is that, since the day I informed Duryodhana about the archery competition, he has been practising archery day and night."

Hearing this, I broke into peals of laughter. Truly, there is no dearth of fools in this world. The carrot I had dangled before Duryodhana was exciting enough for him to perform antics like this. Well, now that the turn of events had become quite interesting, I was curious to know the reaction of the others. I could not be blamed for my excitement as Uddhava was narrating the entire story in an engaging manner. He told me about how Shakuni was repeatedly cautioning Duryodhana. Shakuni was of the opinion that Krishna could never have Duryodhana's best interests at heart; he was sure that there was some political ploy at work here.

I thought to myself, 'Shakuni is, indeed, very clever.' His cautionary warnings to Duryodhana had brought a new twist in the story. Naturally, this made me even more curious. I asked Uddhava immediately, "That is fine, but how did Duryodhana react to Shakuni's advice?"

"Oh, there is nothing to worry," assured Uddhava. "Duryodhana snapped at Shakuni and retorted, 'All the plotting and scheming you indulge in, day and night, is now making you think in one direction only!'"

I roared with laughter on hearing this. Wiping tears of mirth off my face, I said, "The lure of Draupadi, the most beautiful woman in the world, and the dream of attaining her can surely make one lose one's senses."

Hearing this, Uddhava burst out laughing too, and once our spell of laughter ended, he continued, "By the way, King Dhritarashtra and Grandfather Bhishma were alarmed when I told them about returning Chekitan's

kingdom. Grandfather told the king bluntly that even when the King of Dwarka had last visited us, he had been extremely unhappy with us. If we do not pay heed to what he says this time around, and do not return Chekitan's kingdom, then we would lose respect in the eyes of Krishna forever. Not that he would attack Hastinapur; he is, after all, our child. And agreed, he must have said this in a bout of anger, but even so, we must respect his wishes. Besides, his request is certainly justified. Grandfather Bhishma then made it clear to Dhritarashtra that it was his responsibility to convince Duryodhana, as he was the one who had spoilt him."

My curiosity had now reached an altogether new level. And with that, my ego had resurfaced as well. This was certainly the result of all my moves turning out right. So, this time, I asked even more enthusiastically, "What happened next?"

This time, Uddhava replied with a swagger in his voice, "What happened next was exactly what Krishna wanted. For the next three to four days, the king was gripped in a state of anxiety. Finally, he mustered courage and summoned Duryodhana; he told him clearly that it is the King of Dwarka's wish that Chekitan's kingdom should be returned. On hearing this, Duryodhana, to the astonishment of the king, replied humbly, 'I consider it my duty to respect every wish of the King of Dwarka.' Hearing this, poor Shakuni nearly fainted. Grandfather Bhishma and the king too were at their wits' end, trying to decipher the reason behind Duryodhana's eagerness to comply. Indeed, this transformation in Duryodhana's behaviour had astounded everybody, including me."

The King of Dwarka was certainly pleased on hearing all this. Everything had turned out just the way I had envisioned. Well, it was bound to. How could Krishna's plan fail to bring the desired result? That was well-nigh impossible. There is certainly a reason why I am referred to as '*Jai Sri Krishna*'. Well, to be honest, for some reason, I enjoyed visualising Duryodhana in this troubled state. I did not have a valid reason for this, but you could probably put it down to my childishness. Whatever it was, I loved playing with his mind. Perhaps it was because he was so short-tempered. Well, now that I had gleaned all the important bits of information from Uddhava, I was in the mood for some mischief. Hence, I asked Uddhava, "Oh, I had asked you to meet Bhanumati. What about that?"

At this, Uddhava giggled and said, “Fear not, Kanha, for, I have done my part well in instigating Bhanumati against Draupadi.” He continued to laugh and said, “After that, Bhanumati kicked up a storm in Hastinapur. She made Duryodhana’s life so difficult that the poor fellow had all but forgotten how to smile. A couple of times, she even berated Duryodhana in our presence; I enjoyed these scenes the most.” I found this narrative entertaining as well. I could clearly visualise the whole scene. A while later, Uddhava patted my back and said, “Krishna, that was truly splendid. Indeed, by spinning a web of words and emotions, you have trapped them all, and you did all this without moving a muscle. You truly are a brilliant tactician!”

I replied, “Words and emotions are the only formidable weapons I have, which ensure negligible violence and exceptional work.”

Now that my inquisitiveness concerning Hastinapur had been put to rest, my mind caught on to a new whim. I was eager to share the good tidings about his kingdom with Chekitan. So, Uddhava and I set off to find him. We found him busy with the ongoing construction work of his royal palace. I gave him the good news there itself. As expected, as soon as he heard it, he was euphoric; he could not believe his ears. How could Duryodhana return his kingdom so easily? Overwhelmed, he instantly fell at my feet, in the presence of everyone. Indeed, it was to witness this very happiness that I had rushed to deliver the good news. Lifting him, I embraced and congratulated him on the return of his kingdom. Really, it felt great to see Chekitan so ecstatic. At the same time, I felt content with myself for having sought justice for him. The best part was that this self-contentment had completely overshadowed a thousand futile gratifications of my ego that I had indulged in, so far!

Now that all my tasks in Nagakoot were completed, I wanted to return to Dwarka as soon as possible. The journey had anyway stretched much longer than anticipated. But before I could head homewards, I had to attend Chekitan’s re-coronation as well. So, I arranged for two spies to be sent to Hastinapur immediately to inform Duryodhana about the same. I also instructed Uddhava to look after the preparations for our return journey and asked Daruka to assist him. I also gave a hint to Chekitan about my impending journey. Finally, I somehow mustered the courage to deliver this news to great-grandfather. Upon entering his chamber, I was surprised to

see a sizable crowd gathered there. They all seemed to be engaged in a serious discussion. Seated prominently among them were grandfather, Majodhar, the chief minister, Bhadra, and an unknown man. I greeted them all. Then, great-grandfather beckoned me to his side and seated me lovingly beside him. Introducing me to the stranger, he said, "This is your paternal uncle, Gajodhar, who is Bhadra's father. He has come bearing a request for you."

I greeted him immediately and said, "Your wish is my command, dear uncle."

But surprisingly, Uncle Gajodhar was finding it hard to say anything. Perhaps he was hesitant. Finally, great-grandfather spoke on his behalf. He said, "Actually, Krishna, Gajodhar wishes that you marry Bhadra. She has fallen so deeply in love with you that she cannot even imagine living without you." He then took a deep breath and continued, "And, this is our wish too. Firstly, it will bring honour to Nagakoot, and secondly, when it becomes known that a daughter of Nagakoot is the wife of the great King of Dwarka, no one will even dare lock horns with us. And with this, your promise to protect Nagakoot will also be set in stone."

I was stunned, hearing the words of great-grandfather. This was completely unexpected; things had taken an altogether different turn. Perhaps young women falling in love with me was gradually becoming an inseparable part of my personality. My great-grandfather's intent was noble, but I was puzzled why he was requesting me to marry Bhadra. Even so, with all due respect to the elders, I stated humbly, "I am sure you are all aware that I am already married. Besides, Bhadra is my sister by relation. How can I marry her?"

Hearing me, this time, grandfather spoke up in favour of the proposal and said, "That is not a problem at all. For, you are one of us, and, according to Naga customs, it is highly auspicious to marry a girl to her maternal uncle's son."

All this while, Bhadra's gaze was fixed upon me. She was looking at me expectantly, her eyes filled with hope. However, at present, her usual fervour and cheerfulness were noticeably absent from her demeanour. That

was perhaps because an important decision regarding her life hung in the balance. The moment I looked into her eyes, all the moments I had spent with her suddenly flashed before me. Truly, she had taken great care of me during my entire stay in Nagakoot. Moreover, she was a heady mix of beauty, innocence and intelligence. Besides, it was clear from her eyes and expressions that she was in no condition to bear a refusal from me. In any case, I had nothing left to say after what grandfather had said. And it was evident that my refusal would absolutely shatter poor Bhadra's heart. And perhaps, thereafter, she would never be able to smile again. Moreover, I would end up disobeying my great-grandfather. On the other hand, marrying Bhadra would at least resolve Nagakoot's security issues permanently.

All in all, when seen from the perspective of the greater good, marrying Bhadra seemed to be the best thing to do. This way, I could also avoid disrespecting Bhadra's innocent love for me. With all these thoughts coursing through my mind, another thought struck me. Through this marriage, I was also getting a fantastic opportunity to crush Draupadi's ego, for, I was putting off my marriage to her citing the reason that I was a married man, but here, I was willing to marry a Naga maiden. On one hand, I had been evading the offer of marriage from Draupadi, the fabled beauty herself, and on the other, I was accepting a simple Naga maiden's hand in marriage. This was bound to shatter Draupadi's ego to smithereens. She would be compelled to ponder upon the fact that there are other things in life besides beauty and revenge. Moreover, her squashed ego would certainly prove to be a blessing for Aryavarta as it would ensure peace in the region. In other words, even this decision presented an opportunity to do something for the greater good. In any case, I was not the 'doer' in my life; time and circumstances were the doers in my life. My doer was always in favour of the greater good, and this marriage was in the best interest of thousands of people. Bhadra would be ecstatic, Nagakoot would be safe, my great-grandfather would be satisfied and Draupadi's ego would receive a sharp blow.

Indeed, when this single decision could bring so many benefits, I just could not wish otherwise or be unyielding. Where was the scope to refuse? So, I agreed to the marriage at once. As soon as Bhadra heard me say 'yes', she went delirious with joy. Abandoning all decorum, she flew straight into my

arms, in the presence of everyone. Tears started streaming down her cheeks. Honestly, even her embrace felt wonderfully innocent. I instantly fell in love with her uninhibited innocence. I was ready to scale new heights of love and affection, and after this one gesture of hers, it did not take even a moment for me to accept her as my wife.

After seven days, I was married to Bhadra as per the rituals of the Nagas. All of Nagakoot was immersed in joy. The wedding ceremony was also quite grand and lavish. The entire kingdom took part in the festivities with gusto. About two thousand people attended the wedding, which was probably a historic feat in itself. Everyone was happy—the Pandavas appeared exceedingly pleased; grandfather and great-grandfather seemed to be on cloud nine, and the inhabitants of Nagakoot were feeling proud and honoured that their daughter was married to the King of Dwarka. Indeed, it was a historic day for them all. This tiny kingdom, hardly known to anyone until now, would now be known all over Aryavarta only because of me.

Well, the wedding was over, but as soon as it ended, a peculiar thought lodged itself in my mind, ‘Would Draupadi’s gigantic ego be able to accept the fact that she had been rejected by someone who had subsequently married another girl, and that too, a Naga maiden?’ I began to wonder, ‘Was Bhadra just an instrument to hurt the ego of the world’s most beautiful woman?’ Perhaps there was some truth to it. But as far as Bhadra was concerned, she was one step short of going out of her mind; she was in the seventh heaven the moment we were married. And her happiness rubbed off on me too. This wedding had at least given me the opportunity to once again shower happiness on someone, with all my heart.

The enthusiasm was not limited only to Bhadra and the people of Nagakoot. Uddhava too was very excited with my marriage to Bhadra. In fact, he took it upon himself to make all arrangements for our wedding night. It also gave him the excuse to tease me. With his characteristic tongue-in-cheek humour, he said, “Kanha, you had set out with the dream of marrying a world-famous beauty; instead, you have ended up marrying a Naga beauty!” At present, I was in no mood to give free rein to his jokes. But what difference did it make to him? While making preparations for the wedding night, he shot yet another comment at me. “I sure hope this wedding is not just a practice run in a bid to marry the world-famous

beauty. But why would you, a master player, need a practice run, am I right, Kanhaiya?" 'Oh well,' I thought. 'When everybody was so happy, why not let Uddhava have fun too?' So, I remained silent. Bhadra walked in just then and needless to say, Uddhava slipped away quietly. Bhadra was a simple and innocent girl by nature. There was not even a hint of royal arrogance in her demeanour. Her simplicity constantly reminded me of the *gopis* of Vrindavan. Honestly, it was her innocence that I had found the most appealing. Simplicity, ingenuousness, innocence and surrender were those intrinsic qualities of women which would invariably touch my heart.

Nevertheless, this night passed like any other. Now, everything had been well taken care of. My spy had also returned with news of Duryodhana. He informed me that Duryodhana was scheduled to reach Chekitan's capital city after four days. I was eager to seal that commitment too, and head for Dwarka as soon as possible. Somehow, I managed to gain permission from great-grandfather to return to Dwarka and thereafter, I wholeheartedly spent the entire four days with him, grandfather and all the inhabitants of Nagakoot. I also looked after both great-grandfather and grandfather with the utmost care; thus, the four days flew by, in the midst of an outpouring of love. The farewell I received was so heart-warming that I felt blessed indeed. As the chariots began to move, a storm of emotions was unleashed, and sounds of wailing and tears followed our departure from Nagakoot. All the inhabitants, from the young to the elderly, women and men, were reduced to tears. Seeing such an overwhelming outpouring of love from the people, I welled up myself. I had been given a similar farewell by the inhabitants of Vrindavan, when I had left for Mathura. So, did that mean I would never be able to return to Nagakoot as well? Well, whether I was able to return or not, I was certainly carrying with me the satisfaction of having improved the lives of so many people. My true wealth was the satisfaction I felt within and the love that people harboured for me in their hearts. This alone was my personal treasure which neither time nor circumstances could steal from me. Indeed, this was an invaluable treasure of mine that even death could not snatch away from me.

Our cavalcade was now on its way to Chekitan's kingdom to attend his coronation. Obviously, I was eager to reinstate Chekitan on the throne. That was because Duryodhana could not be trusted. In my absence, he could change his mind about returning the kingdom to Chekitan. And I could

never allow that to happen. Hence, I wanted to ensure that the coronation ceremony was completed before I returned to Dwarka. Fortunately, my fears were allayed and Chekitan's coronation took place smoothly, without hindrance. Contrary to expectations, Duryodhana was the very embodiment of cooperation. Indeed, the dreams of attaining a world-famous beauty had turned even a beast into a docile human being. Of course, the inhabitants of Chekitan's kingdom also participated enthusiastically in his coronation ceremony. That was not all, they left no stone unturned in praising and glorifying me as well. Even Chekitan and Duryodhana accorded me great honour, and it is a well-known fact that respect and honour feed the ego. And so, I savoured the feeling of pride too, for having performed my duty diligently. My ego was further inflated on watching Duryodhana behave in a reverential manner towards me. Indeed, as a result of my grand deeds, I had become equivalent to—if not greater than—Nature itself. You could say that although Nature had set deadly traps for me throughout my life, I had cut through each one of them on the strength of my epic deeds, thereby emerging victorious. All in all, I can rightfully say that my deeds were overturning Nature's wish.

Driven by an inflated ego, we set off on our journey towards Dwarka. I was returning to Dwarka after almost a year, seven months of which I had spent in Nagakoot itself. Amazingly though, I had arrived in Nagakoot as a son, and was departing from this kingdom as a son-in-law.



## Chapter 10

### Satrajit's Evil Ploy

Our journey was progressing without hurdles, as our cavalcade was speeding towards Dwarka. With the journey's commencement, I was once again lost in thoughts of Dwarka, and as soon as that happened, I suddenly began to worry about Rukmini. A year had passed since I left Dwarka. How had poor Rukmini coped in this one year? I had not spared a thought for her while travelling to Hastinapur, Panchal or Nagakoot, but now, Rukmini's sorrow was disturbing me greatly. Naturally, I was so engrossed in duties with far-reaching consequences that I had paid scarce attention to this small duty of mine. For that matter, I had not even felt sad about it at the time, because where was the time to fret over it? At that time, my choice had been absolutely clear. However, now that I did not have any great deed to accomplish, I was acutely reminded of my duty towards Rukmini. I was also wondering if there was any news of Pradyumna. What were the conditions in Dwarka at this time? I wondered if Rukmini had been able to cope with her grief. Indeed, I had been unable to stand by her, in her time of need. But what could I have done about it? These are the very complexities of life that make it even more exciting. One feels that one has to do everything at once; oftentimes, a number of duties simultaneously call for attention, but one can attend to only one task at a time. Not only did I understand and accept this complexity of life, but also enjoyed the excitement it offered.

While this line of thinking made perfect sense to me, Rukmini lacked this wisdom. Soon, another thought struck me. What was the opinion of the inhabitants of Dwarka about me? I had not returned even after hearing the news of my son's kidnapping. 'Krishna is so heartless!' they must have thought. And finally, on my return after a year, I had another wife in tow! I thought, 'Oh well! People who enslave their minds with such bigoted thoughts are incapable of thinking beyond this. So be it! What does my life have to do with someone else's thinking and his opinion about me?' I firmly believed that the thoughts people harboured were their own problem, whereas our actions reflect our nature. Therefore, I was definitely not someone to care about such trivial matters or to concern myself with such parochial thinking, nor did I believe in explaining my actions. I was

answerable only to my soul and heeded its voice alone. All my actions stemmed from the conviction of my soul, which guided me to consider the worthiness of each task that came my way. In other words, my soul alone had a say in my actions as well as my reasons for carrying out such actions. No external force or reason could coax me into doing something, nor could any such force or reason dissuade me from doing something. I would feel neither compelled to explain my actions to anyone, nor could anybody's reactions disturb or distract me. I lived only with myself; other people and circumstances were merely instrumental. I never considered them as my own or as strangers; neither did I like nor dislike them.

Oh well, this philosophising has stretched a bit too long. Let me tell you more about the journey. Now, what could have been a more novel aspect of this journey than Bhadra! She was sitting by my side, her face radiating with joy. However, she was completely unaware of my thoughts about Dwarka. In any case, what did she really know about Rukmini or Pradyumna? Consequently, the situation was such that although we were on our first journey as a married couple, we were both lost in our separate worlds. While I was lost in worrying about Dwarka, she was lost in dreaming of Dwarka. And since I did not want to ruin her happiness with my apprehensions, I also played the part of a loving husband. Uddhava was at his solicitous best, taking great care of her. In fact, most of the time, the two of them were engrossed in conversation. And honestly, it was for this very reason that I had handed over the reins of the chariot to Daruka and made Uddhava sit beside her. Even so, I still had a responsibility towards Bhadra. Agreed that I was concerned about Dwarka in my heart of hearts, but that did not justify shattering Bhadra's hopes and desires. So, I would focus my attention on her, but the trouble was, her innocence invariably reminded me of the *gopis* of Vrindavan. I would soon be lost in their thoughts and because of this, Bhadra would once again be deprived of my loving attention. Similarly, when we stopped for the night, it would only be my flute and me. For a while, I would forget everything and lose myself in the melodious tunes of my flute. But even my flute proved ineffective in distracting me from my worries concerning Rukmini.

Well, now that we are on this subject, let me tell you that my actions and my thinking always had a vision. By now, I had discerned at least this

much that, it was impossible for ordinary people to comprehend my actions. Very often, my actions were performed keeping in mind the best interest of the whole of Nature, whereas ordinary people acted in accordance with their self-interest, the interests of their family or prevailing social norms. Just as their actions and worries were beyond my comprehension, my actions and worries were beyond theirs. ‘Well, so be it!’ I thought. Meanwhile, after a continuous journey of seven days, we had reached close to the Shaktimaan mountain ranges, belonging to the Gurjar state. Dwarka was only a three-day journey from here. Needless to say, we were travelling rather swiftly as I was anxious to meet Rukmini; the closer we were advancing towards Dwarka, the stronger was the urge to meet her. Rukmini was, after all, the queen of my dreams, the fruit of a number of years of waiting for her. Indeed, Dwarka too, was the result of the encouragement that her love had provided me. We were both blissfully happy in Dwarka; in due course of time, we had even scaled new peaks in life together. Alas, Nature had ultimately intervened, frowning at our happiness; perhaps it was jealous of our joy. Perhaps this was why it had arranged unavoidable journeys for me, one following another.

But this was not right. Had I ever meddled with Nature’s resplendent moon and glittering stars? I had never tried to turn its starry nights into pitch-black ones. Then why had it deliberately poisoned Rukmini’s life and mine which was filled with so much love? All of a sudden, a surge of anger against Nature welled up within me. My ego had started becoming a bit too selfish—although selfishness is just another term for ego. But could Krishna ever be selfish? Nay, never! This was absolutely unacceptable, for, what would happen to the rest of humankind if I turned selfish? Thus, I instantly composed myself and strengthened the ‘witness’ within me. The moment I did that, my thoughts changed track immediately.

‘Why would Nature poison someone’s life? When had it done so? All it did was present a choice to you. On one hand, there was the opportunity to live happily with Rukmini in Dwarka while ignoring the problems of Aryavarta, and on the other, there was the golden opportunity to instate peace and non-violence in Aryavarta, sacrificing the petty pleasures of your personal life. Krishna, it was you who chose the second alternative.

You were the one who chose to ensure the happiness and welfare of all, instead of merely focussing on your personal life. Has Nature ever become a hindrance in anyone's life? All that it ever does is, help life progress. It does not bind any human being. On the contrary, it gives every individual free rein to exercise his choice. You were the one who made the choice, so, why are you blaming Nature?’

Well, it is true. Humankind has complete freedom and is not bound by shackles. I was free too; I could have chosen to not visit Hastinapur, Panchal or Nagakoot. I could have stayed back in Dwarka, savouring the simple joys of life like regular men. I could have stayed by my dear Rukmini's side. But in my opinion, human life is not just an opportunity to experience happiness, but also a wonderful opportunity to accomplish great deeds. And sometimes, one has to sacrifice personal pleasures in order to perform great deeds. And this was exactly what I had done. Then what was the need to worry about Rukmini? Instead, I thought, why not see this from another perspective? Wittingly or unwittingly, her sacrifice had benefitted Aryavarta. I was able to ensure the safety of the Pandavas. The battle between Dhrupad and Drona had been averted for the time being. Additionally, this sacrifice had also helped the inhabitants of Nagakoot experience heaven-like bliss. At the same time, Duryodhana's evil intentions had also been reined in. With these thoughts, I returned to my normal self, and at the same time, I cut myself loose from the worries of Dwarka, Rukmini and Pradyumna. And with that, I was once again firmly anchored in the ‘witness’ within me.

But how for long could I have stayed like this? All of a sudden, I was besieged by an entirely different set of thoughts. Although I had returned to my normal self, it did not necessarily mean that even Rukmini would have turned normal. She was, after all, an ordinary human too. But then, she was also free to nurture sanguine thoughts. Why couldn't she change her perspective and free herself from worries just like me? Actually, Rukmini, as a person, was quite intelligent and strong. However, at this point, she was helpless too, mired as she was in the complexity of the situation. The gravity of her sorrow at this point in time was unlike anything else. A mother's love was at stake. No matter how resilient and wise a mother is, she just cannot bear to see her child in trouble. Agreed that Rukmini was a thousand times better than ordinary human beings, but she was not

Krishna. Besides, this was not the only distress she was experiencing. The real trauma for her was the news of Draupadi's proposal, and this was because Rukmini had surrendered to her ego. And no matter who surrendered to the ego, whether Rukmini or I, its price had to be paid. My inner voice suddenly reprimanded me, 'This is truly the limit, Krishna! The journey is so beautiful, you have the company of friends and sweet Bhadra's innocence, and here you are ruining it all by constantly worrying!' Suddenly, I woke up! The inner voice continued, 'Krishna, what is happening to you? Why are you worried and despondent? Is there nothing else to Dwarka other than Rukmini's grief and Pradyumna's kidnapping? Has the vast city of Dwarka become devoid of everything else? Is it not your dream city anymore? After a whole year of absence, you are returning to the city that you have created; will you not enjoy its magnificence and splendour? Why don't you think about that? Dwarka has everything!' And so, I lost myself in the beautiful dreams of Dwarka. Oh, how wonderful it would be to meet my friends after a whole year, gaze at the familiar sights of my beloved city, roam around its markets and wander aimlessly on the seashore, among other things! After living a tough life for an entire year, I was finally about to be blessed with a leisurely life that Dwarka so generously provided. And yes, I would be meeting my dear bhaiya too, after a whole year. Since birth, this was the first time we had been away from each other for so long. Really, what fun it would be, once I reached Dwarka. Did you see how everything changes once the line of thought changes direction? I had begun to finally enjoy the journey, because of this change in perspective.

These thoughts and reflections continued throughout the journey and soon, I realised that our cavalcade had reached Dwarka's gateway. And with that, my beloved's grief returned once again to hound me. It was alright to dismiss it when we were travelling, but on reaching Dwarka, dealing with it had become my foremost duty.

Now, I had no other task apart from alleviating Rukmini's sorrow. I was confident that once she embraced Krishna's love, her grief would vanish immediately. Meanwhile, Bhadra looked wide-eyed with wonder on seeing such a magnificent kingdom for the first time, a kingdom as splendid as Dwarka. She was so lost in Dwarka's magnificence that she forgot

everything else. At present, her being was consumed by curiosity akin to that of a child. In the spur of the moment, I took the reins of the chariot in my hands and made Bhadra sit beside me as we entered Dwarka. However, I was surprised to see that there was hardly any activity in the city. In any case, it was afternoon now, and I knew that Dwarka would begin to stir only by evening. Even so, all those who saw me arriving jumped with joy and waved at me in greeting. Their faces clearly reflected happiness, seeing their king return after a year. Needless to say, very soon, the news of my arrival spread like wildfire throughout the city. The people were also quite curious about Bhadra. However, I was most happy when my eyes fell upon Satyaki while heading towards the royal palace. I asked him to climb aboard my chariot. When I introduced him to Bhadra, he was shocked as he gaped at her for a few moments; he had surely not expected a marriage like this. Perhaps he too, had been expecting the world-famous beauty to arrive as my wife.

Now that I had caught hold of Satyaki, I had to make use of the opportunity. I wanted news about Rukmini, Pradyumna and Dwarka as quickly as possible. He too, seemed to be waiting to reply to a query like this. But instead, all he said was, "Nothing is going well." Oh! Instead of satiating my curiosity, Satyaki had fuelled it further. Besides, after his terse reply, he clamped up, unwilling to divulge further information. After probing repeatedly, he revealed that there was still no news of Pradyumna's whereabouts. Now, that was expected, but why was he not willing to say anything else? 'Oh well, never mind! If he is unwilling to disclose anything, so be it,' I thought. But first, I needed to at least make Bhadra comfortable in the palace. I had to introduce her to my parents and grandfather, and ensure that she received their blessings. I had to introduce her to Subhadra too. Then, in the evening, I would go to Rukmini and cajole her into divulging information about the actual situation in Dwarka.

Now, a person may think in good faith and want everything to turn out well, but unknown to him, Nature has entirely different plans for him. Bhadra had received everyone's blessings; she had even made friends with Subhadra. My sister was also delighted to find a friend in her new sister-in-law. With this, I felt at ease as far as Bhadra was concerned. However, once I was through with these tasks, my mind once again began to dwell upon what Satyaki had said. His words seemed to have been shrouded in

mystery. I then thought about asking my grandfather for news about Dwarka. Why ruin precious time spent with Rukmini over such a trivial matter? So, I took Satyaki along and went to see grandfather in his chamber. But when I asked grandfather about the situation in Dwarka, he looked dejected. This worried me greatly. On one hand, Satyaki refused to tell me anything, and on the other, grandfather, upon asking the same question, turned despondent. I realised that the problem was certainly serious and complicated. But what could it be? If Pradyumna was still untraceable, it was not a very serious matter to call for such glumness. Then, another thought struck me. A seasoned administrator such as grandfather could not have become upset about the failure to find Pradyumna. I was certain that the matter was far more serious. So, with great affection, I began to prod grandfather. I asked him a string of questions, and my efforts finally bore fruit. He now seemed ready to speak up.

I braced myself for the worse and was ready to hear what he had to say. I wanted to know whether there was really a reason to be sad or these people were simply making a mountain out of a molehill. However, what grandfather told me about Dwarka was alarming indeed. The situation in Dwarka had spiralled out of control. My absence from Dwarka for a year was enough to disrupt everything. I had never imagined that something like this could happen. The gist of what grandfather told me was that the royal palace was no longer able to rein in the royal staff. They had begun to drink all day long. Not only that, a number of dancing houses and brothels had also opened up in Dwarka. A horde of prostitutes who had come from outside the kingdom had made Dwarka their home and had enslaved many members of the royal staff.

Listening to this dismal news, I was dumbstruck. How had this happened? The royal staff was prohibited from drinking liquor, except on holidays. Moreover, there were restrictions on outsiders entering Dwarka except the Yadavas of Mathura. So, how did these prostitutes gain entry into Dwarka? I was perplexed. Every answer I could imagine was giving rise to a hundred new questions. And the problem was, I was not able to find satisfactory answers to any of my questions. In spite of establishing such a strong administrative foundation in the kingdom, Dwarka had deteriorated to this state, and that too within a year's time. Where was the fervour of the likes of bhaiya and Satyaki? Was grandfather's vast experience of no use?

Finally, I could no longer contain myself, so I asked grandfather directly, “So much has happened and none of you could do anything?”

Grandfather replied rather dejectedly, “Of course, I could have brought it all under control, but Balarama...”

Saying this, he trailed off and once again became silent. Now, what was this? Here I was asking questions to quell my curiosity, but his silence was only making it worse. Why weren't my questions being answered? I was rather vexed. Seeing my condition, this time, Satyaki mustered courage and shed light on the situation. He said, “To be honest, Krishna, Dwarka's condition has now become similar to that of Mathura. The whole kingdom has become hopelessly addicted to liquor and dance. People have stopped paying attention to their work as well. No one is willing to pay taxes to the royal treasury. Instead, that money is being spent on liquor and prostitutes. All prominent posts have been allotted to outsiders. Consequently, the royal staff is now practically beyond our control.” Taking a deep, long breath, Satyaki continued, “And Balarama is the root cause of it all. He has fallen madly in love with a dancing girl and remains in an inebriated state all day long. It is with his consent that outsiders have been appointed to prominent posts; he has also permitted the opening of numerous liquor and prostitute dens across the city.”

Hearing all this, my head began to reel. Bhaiya had always been fond of drinking and dancing girls, but I had never imagined that this fondness would spiral out of control and that he would fall in love with a dancing girl. Even this was understandable, but what I could not come to terms with was his insouciant and reckless behaviour. He had put the entire kingdom at stake to pursue his own desire. I found it hard to believe that bhaiya could behave in such a wanton manner, although I was well aware that liquor and women were a weakness of the Yadava community. It was because of this that I had enforced strict laws to curb such habits. I knew that once the Yadavas became addicted to these habits, they would not think of anything else. Hence, my sole aim in making these elaborate arrangements was to keep them in check. Then how did all this happen? It did not take me long to discern that, at this time, everybody felt helpless in the face of bhaiya's fury and madness. And the truth was that only I could tackle him. It was also clear that liquor and women were the root cause of all these problems.



But unless I pulled bhaiya out of this addiction, it would be pointless to force the common people to quit these habits. In other words, first, I needed to confront bhaiya himself.

Do you not see? I had arrived in Dwarka just a few hours ago, but a mammoth task was already awaiting me. However, what difference did it make to me? Was I one to run away from my duties? I had locked horns with bhaiya a number of times in the past. I also knew from past experiences that bhaiya could only be won over by loving words, not anger. And in any case, the love we shared was special, because of which I did not anticipate much difficulty in steering him away from his addictions. Of course, I would have to employ special tactics to do this, but that was not really a problem.

Now, to stop bhaiya had become both my duty and my deed, for, I could not watch my dream city crumble before my eyes. I asked Satyaki immediately about bhaiya's whereabouts. His reply was completely unexpected. "Balarama is so helplessly infatuated with the dancing girl that he lies drunk at her house for days on end," replied Satyaki morosely. "He has even built a large mansion for her. It has now become a routine with him to stay there, hopelessly drunk, and out of his senses."

Surprised at this, I asked him, "And Revati *bhabhi*?"

Satyaki replied, "She cannot stand up to Balarama. She is beside herself with grief and keeps crying all day long."

Hearing this, I felt as if the ground beneath my feet had slipped away. I thought only Rukmini could go berserk while crying, but Revati's lamentations seemed to surpass even Rukmini's. Immediately, I mounted my chariot and drove off to meet my sister-in-law. I felt it necessary to meet her once before meeting bhaiya. Evening had already set in as I continued to grapple with these problems. However, my duty was calling out to me to pull Dwarka out of this pall of doom that had smothered it. Dwarka had certainly been awaiting my return to grant it a new dawn.

My life was truly a series of arduous struggles. I had returned to Dwarka after a year of hard work; I had thought I would first attend to Rukmini and put an end to her sorrow. I would catch up on the long-overdue rest and

relaxation that I deserved. However, forget resting, I was not even getting the opportunity to drive away Rukmini's grief. Moreover, Nature was once again employing all its devious machinations, working through me to pass on newer forms of grief to my poor wife. First, I had hurt her by not staying back in Dwarka during the birth of our child. To aggravate the situation, our child had been kidnapped. In spite of this, I had been unable to return to Dwarka for an entire year in order to look for him. As if this was not enough, I had returned after a year with a new wife in tow. And even now, after having returned to Dwarka, I was not able to meet her, whereas you all are aware that whenever Rukmini was in pain, it would pierce right through my heart. Indeed, was there anyone else in this world who could carry such pain and sorrow in his heart and yet attend to his duties with a smile on his face? Perhaps that is why I am different from others; I am above them, and that is why I am Krishna, the one who had set out to tackle Dwarka's problems bearing the storm that Rukmini's pain had triggered in his heart.

But how did all this matter anyway? The truth was that, the storm raging in my heart and Rukmini's pain and sorrow was our personal matter. However, Dwarka's problem was obviously a larger issue. It was a question of the lives of thirty thousand Yadavas and their welfare. And I was always very clear about my choice of duties. If I had to choose, I would invariably choose family over a single person, a city over a family, a kingdom over a city, all of Aryavarta over a kingdom and Nature over Aryavarta. At this point, I had to choose between Rukmini and Dwarka. It was a choice between a person and a kingdom. It was not a difficult choice, as the scales tipped heavily in favour of the kingdom.

With these thoughts coursing through my mind, I did not realise that I had reached bhaiya's palace. Despite being perturbed, I maintained my usual demeanour. In fact, I acted as if I was completely oblivious to everything that was happening. I asked the maidservants to call my bhaiya and sister-in-law. Bhaiya, of course, was not there, so naturally, hearing the news of my arrival, my sister-in-law came running to greet me. I bowed to greet her, maintaining my pretence, but Revati could not control herself. The moment she saw me, she broke down, her cries turning into hysterical sobs. I could empathise with her, and that was why I had come to see her. I hugged her immediately and began stroking her head. After a while, when she had somewhat regained her composure, she gave vent to her grief and

frustration and said, “O brother! When you left Dwarka, the happiness that I felt here, also seemed to have trailed after you, out of the kingdom. Not just me, but even Rukmini was plunged into deep sorrow after your departure. In fact, after you left, happiness and peace vanished from the entire kingdom of Dwarka!”

I laughed and replied, “Never mind! Why do you worry? I have returned now. Everything will be alright.” Saying this, I led her into the sitting chamber and seated her opposite me. I then asked all the maidservants to leave, so that I could talk to Revati *bhabhi* in private.

For a while, Revati stayed quiet. She then spoke sadly, “How can everything be alright? It is too late now.”

I laughed once again and said, “To remain sad or to admit failure in life is the sign of the weak. But you, my dear sister-in-law, are a brave person. Uttering such defeatist words is unbecoming of you. Do not worry; I already know of everything there is to know, about bhaiya and Dwarka.”

Hearing this, she questioned me, a bit shocked, “Everything?”

I replied, “Yes, everything, including bhaiya’s infatuation with the dancing girl.”

Hearing this statement of mine, Revati became quite composed; the fact that I was aware of everything was enough to soothe her. She could not possibly hope for anyone except me to clash with or alter the course of this billowing storm called Balarama. On the other hand, as far as I was concerned, I was confident that I was capable enough to change the course of not only Balarama but also Nature itself, if the need arose. And this wasn’t just self-confidence. The belief that I was capable of doing anything I set my mind to, was indeed my true strength. Let me tell you a secret. Belief and capability are not separate from each other. They are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. If there is belief within oneself, then capability will naturally shine forth on the outside.

Nevertheless, to maintain the flow of conversation, I asked my sister-in-law casually, “It’s almost night-time; bhaiya has not returned yet?”

Once again, Revati became dejected, and why wouldn't she? The question was bound to upset her. I was furious with myself for having asked such an inappropriate question. I was hungry, exhausted and deprived of sleep, and probably that was why I had blundered. Now, even though the question was inappropriate, she had to reply. "Lately, he hasn't been coming home for days on end." Saying this, she let out a wail once again.

I realised that I had made a blunder, but what could I do now? So, I changed the course of conversation immediately and asked, "The situation has deteriorated to such an extent and you didn't even try to stop him?"

"O brother, do you think I did not try my best to stop him?" began Revati. "Ever since I heard about his involvement with that debauched dancing girl, we fought with each other every day. I tried countless tactics to stop him from visiting her. I fought with him a thousand times over this, but to no avail. Now, things have taken such an awful turn that he doesn't come home for fifteen days in a row."

I understood very well that my sister-in-law had used the wrong mantra to make bhaiya change his ways. This is invariably the problem with humankind; people are unaware of the cures to their own ailments, whereas, as a rule, a person ought to know at least what ails him. For, who can solve our problems better than we ourselves? However, to do that, one needs to be in one's right senses. And how can you expect sound judgement from those who live in a state of perpetual senselessness? My sister-in-law had also made the same mistake; she had not made use of good sense. As a result, despite being married to bhaiya for so many years, she had still not understood how to deal with him. Well, it did not matter. Now that I was here, I would help her understand. So, I spoke frankly to my sister-in-law, "You chose the wrong method to make bhaiya change his ways. Have you forgotten that bhaiya is the most short-tempered of us all? You should have tried to change him by using love, not anger. But you used wrath, arguments and fights instead, which is why you failed. Meanwhile, grandfather and father also tried to make him change his behaviour by disregarding him and as a result, they too failed. His friends too, tried to shake him out of his addiction by avoiding him, and they were unsuccessful too. But now, you see how I work my magic; just watch how I turn that raging tiger into your pet goat."

Revati broke into a smile on hearing this. Her face lit up with hope and confidence. To see her regain confidence was important for me as well. After all, I needed her in order to accomplish my task. Besides, it is one's own confidence alone that brings about the desired results. But I still had a lot to explain to her and fully prepare her. So, this time, I said very simply, "My dear sister-in-law, please listen to me carefully. Bhaiya needs to be rescued from the clutches of the dancing girl and his addiction to liquor. And this is not just for you or me; it has to be done for the sake of entire Dwarka. However, the mantras required to bring bhaiya back to his normal self are a bit different. First and foremost, please try to understand, bhaiya has not fallen in love with that dancing girl; it is simply lust. And there are two reasons for him to have fallen victim to lust—one, the constant fighting at home, and two, his habit of excessive drinking. Bear in mind that the primary reason why he patronises that woman is that he cannot tolerate the perpetual fights with you at home. Understand this well; he is going there only to get away from you, but you are the only one who is important to him, even today. Please also understand that it is easy to steer a man away from lust but it is incredibly difficult to separate him from someone he loves. And as far as love is concerned, bhaiya cannot love anybody except you and me," I said. "O my silly sister-in-law, he loves us so much that he does not have any more love to give to anyone else. In fact, even if a world-renowned beauty were to entice him, she can at best only awaken his lust, and not his love. She will have to return empty-handed if she expects to win his love. So, if you want to bring him back, then I have a plan for that. But first, give me something to eat, I am starving."

Revati blushed in embarrassment immediately and said, "Oh, I am so sorry, please forgive me, brother; I was so engrossed in my own problems that I did not even ask you for water, let alone food." With that, she rushed back in to make arrangements for my meal. In the meantime, I reclined in the sitting chamber and shut my eyes. There was no time to sleep, but at least I could reduce some of my fatigue this way. I had barely begun to relax, when my sister-in-law returned with four maidservants, carrying two platters full of food. They had taken great care to prepare dishes of my liking. The platters were laden with my favourite dishes and delicacies; there were various types of chutneys too. Had the circumstances been different—that is, if I could go off to sleep right after consuming the meal—

I would have surely polished off both the plates. But I did not know when I would get to sleep, or whether I would get any sleep tonight. Therefore, keeping the demands of time in mind, I thought it best to control myself. Revati was in no mood to eat, but I forced her to partake of my meal. How could she be expected to tackle a raging bull like bhaiya, without first fortifying herself?

After finishing our meal, we returned to the main topic of discussion. I spoke first, “Revati *bhabhi*, by now, you must have realised that you kept fighting with bhaiya needlessly, and to escape these fights, bhaiya gradually became attracted to the dancing girl and solicited her company. In my opinion, peace is a man’s first and last pursuit.”

I do not know what happened, but this time, my sister-in-law became a bit angry as I spoke. A bit vexed, she said, “So, does that mean he should continue visiting the dancing girl, and I should ignore his wayward behaviour and instead shower my love upon him?”

“Of course!” I said, very firmly. “If you really want bhaiya to return to you, you must do this, and not just with him—you must behave in a loving manner with the dancing girl too.”

“That I won’t be able to do!” declared Revati defiantly.

“You will have to do it,” I insisted, “That is because it is a crucial part of my plan.”

Well, as they say, a drowning man will clutch even at a straw. So, finally, her helplessness won over her pride and she agreed to my plan of behaving lovingly towards both of them, albeit grudgingly. I heard her grumbling, “Truly, what dark days have descended upon me! Now, I have to talk lovingly to that witch as well!” Frankly speaking, a person’s ego is the root cause of most of his problems. The height of his foolishness is such that despite having a solution at hand, he prefers to stay entangled in his problems for fear of hurting his ego; whereas the problem is real and the ego illusory. But even so, he remains distressed all his life, because he is incapable of bearing an insult to the illusory ego. Well, now that my sister-in-law had agreed to my proposal, I had to apprise her of the future course of action. With the intention of finalising the plan, I said, “A while later,

we will visit the dancing girl's house. Bhaiya will certainly be there. We might even find them in an inappropriate state. Even so, you must behave affectionately towards both of them. This one act of yours will decide not just your fate, but also that of everyone else in Dwarka."

By now, Revati had composed herself and was prepared to take the bull by the horns. She was well aware of my manoeuvring, so, she could trust me on these matters at least. She seemed ready to leave; perhaps, even a bit restless to go. However, I wanted to delay our departure to coincide with bhaiya's entertainment session with the dancing girl. What is the point in being a spoilsport if there is no sport to be spoiled? Thus, to while away our time, I chatted with Revati about other matters. In the course of our conversation, what she told me about Rukmini was indeed quite worrying. She, in fact, insisted that I should first go and meet her before resolving this problem. However, this was not possible for me. At present, my mind was fully occupied with Dwarka and bhaiya. I could not possibly go to meet Rukmini when my mind was elsewhere. I never liked talking, meeting or doing anything half-heartedly. After bringing bhaiya back on track, I would surely be with Rukmini, with all my heart.

Well, it was now time for us to go. I made my sister-in-law sit beside me in the front seat of my chariot and we set off for the house where bhaiya was living with the dancing girl. Even though I had spent my entire life facing struggles, this particular problem that I was about to tackle, was strange indeed. I could clearly see that Dwarka had changed. The markets appeared lacklustre and most of the people on the roads seemed to be in a drunken stupor. There were more people loitering around the brothels than in the markets. Witnessing all this, you can well imagine the turmoil raging in my heart. Addiction to liquor and dancing girls had already destroyed most of the kingdoms where the Yadavas had a strong presence. I had tried my best to save the inhabitants of Dwarka from both these vices.

But despite this, there seemed to be no difference between the Dwarka of the present and the Mathura of the past. My heart was torn asunder to watch the level of degradation and debauchery my dream city had slipped to. If the Yadavas did not save themselves in time from their addiction to liquor and other vices, then certainly, the day was not far when liquor would become the sole cause of their destruction. However, at present, my

main concern was bhaiya. He was at the root of all this trouble. Once I tackled him, I would bring the rest of Dwarka back on track too.

At present, our chariot was racing in the direction of bhaiya's new house. On the way, I asked Revati to tell me how bhaiya had fallen into the trap laid by that dancing girl. And whatever she told me was far more terrifying than what I could have imagined. For a moment, even a person like me was stupefied. She said, "A few days after you left, Satrajit had returned from his kingdom. And surprisingly, a few days later, he and your brother suddenly started bonding well. Both would sit late into the night, drinking heavily. This gradually became their daily routine. After some days, Satrajit called for a few dancing girls from his kingdom. Among them was an exceptionally beautiful and spirited royal dancer named Teji. Gradually, her dancing and singing cast a spell on Balarama. A few days later, the news of their love affair began doing the rounds of Dwarka and eventually, I heard it too. Naturally, this led to fights between your brother and me. As a consequence, gradually, he stopped coming home for days on end. After that, they began staying together. Until then, only I had been affected by this, but because of Teji's strong hold over Balarama, Satrajit gradually began to control him. He then coaxed Balarama into agreeing to replace key royal officials. Thereafter, liquor houses and brothels were given free rein. And with that, what began as your brother's addiction soon spread its tentacles over the entire kingdom. In other words, the disaster that had first befallen only me, turned into a raging, violent storm that has devastated the entire kingdom of Dwarka."

It became clear to me that Dwarka had fallen victim to Satrajit's conspiracy. I also understood that it was only because of him, that grandfather and father were forced to silently watch this drama. I wondered why these older Yadava leaders could not shake off Satrajit's influence. As for the other Yadavas, who were commoners, well, they were happy as long as they were getting to drink as much as they wished. So, they were bound to fall into that trap. I could make peace with that too, but what had happened to bhaiya's intelligence? How had he fallen into Satrajit's trap? Or perhaps it was not Satrajit's trap, but the trap of beauty that had ensnared bhaiya. I was well aware that it was not in Satrajit's nature to easily forget the Syamantaka gem. I also knew he would surely make a mischievous move, but I just could not imagine that he would set such an elaborate trap, and



that too, so quickly. But on the other hand, when your own pawn is weak, why be surprised if the enemy tricks it? However, it was clear now that Satrajit had no hand in Pradyumna's kidnapping, because if he did have a hand in it, he could have simply carried out a straightforward negotiation. He need not have laid such an intricate trap.

This meant that Satrajit had created all this trouble, only to reclaim the Syamantaka gem. 'But he would never get it back—he had not inherited it from his father!' I thought. But on second thought, I realised that the gem did indeed belong to him, or his father, so to speak. But then, another thought struck me immediately; it was humankind that had the first right to the gem. And who else could serve humankind better than me? So, seen from this perspective, the gem belonged to me. With these thoughts racing through my mind, we finally reached bhaiya's new mansion, which meant I had reached my new *karmabhoomi* (a place where one performs his deeds).

I noticed that the mansion was guarded well from all sides by soldiers. Surprisingly, the mansion was built far away from human habitation. I could spot bhaiya's chariot from afar. The mansion was a two-storied structure. The stairs leading to the upper floor had been built on the outside of the house. Bhaiya must have set up his den on the upper floor and housed his servants on the ground floor. Speaking about the mansion, it could not be termed small by any standards. I was surprised to see that most of the soldiers stationed outside the mansion were new faces. Taking in all this, I was just stepping off the chariot along with my sister-in-law, when an old-time soldier spotted me and blurted, "Oh, it is the King of Dwarka with his sister-in-law!" Hearing this, I immediately instructed the soldiers to stay quiet and hold their positions. However, one soldier, in particular, ignored my orders and started sprinting towards the house to inform bhaiya of our arrival. In an instant, my hand reached for my *chakra* (discus) and I sent it flying towards him. In a trice, the soldier's head was severed from his body and fell with a soft thud to the ground. The remaining soldiers, paralysed with fear, were immobilised, having witnessed this ghastly scene. That was good! And in a way, necessary too! This would surely send a message out to all the new royal staff that the King of Dwarka had arrived, so, either obey him or be prepared to die!

Looking at the strong security cover and the way the new soldiers were stationed, it was clear that bhaiya was confined within Satrajit's sweet prison. And we were here to rescue him from that very trap. Thus, Revati and I clattered up the stairs immediately. Now, there was no question of anyone trying to stop us or outsmart us, for, the decapitated soldier was a grim reminder of the consequences. On reaching the upper floor, I gently nudged open the door of the main chamber. It opened into a large hall that appeared to be lavishly furnished. In the centre was an open space. The seating area was facing the door from which we had entered, enough to accommodate four to six people. In the same seating area, we saw bhaiya lying in a drunken state on the dancing girl's lap. Naturally, their clothes were dishevelled. Surprisingly, even in this state, bhaiya kept guzzling liquor, and it was obvious why—the dancing girl was filling goblet after goblet with liquor, holding it with loving affection to bhaiya's lips.

I had expected to come across a scene like this. However, Revati, unable to bear such a sight, was livid with rage, which was untimely. But before she could spoil my carefully laid out plan, I pulled her outside, reminding her of her promise to not get angry. After my repeated pleas, she finally agreed to maintain her composure and behave in an affectionate manner. Once she agreed, I gave her specific instructions and sent her in alone, while I remained outside. Within the fraction of a second, Revati had reached quite close to both of them. Now everything depended on her ability to stay calm and balanced. However, my sister-in-law, staying true to herself, crept quietly towards them and towered above them, like the very God of death. It was only then that the lovers saw her standing there. Needless to say, her imposing presence scared them out of their wits. The dancing girl, straightening her clothes, fumbled as she stood up immediately. Bhaiya's situation had become even more pathetic. This was the first time I had seen him so flustered. Certainly, Revati's arrival in this manner was entirely unexpected and had caught them both off guard. However, bhaiya, true to his nature, tried to be brazen despite being caught in the act. He somehow tried to steady himself and stand up to face Revati. Of course, he was putting on an act of behaving in a haughty manner, but the show he put on was incredible. In the same arrogant manner, staring hard at her, he asked, "How come you are here? Why have you come?"

We had expected this query, and I had trained Revati for exactly this kind of a situation. She did not disappoint me. Smiling broadly, she planted herself at his feet. Then, in a very loving manner, she said, “Master, where else will I go? I will be present wherever my master is!” Now, bhaiya was entirely unprepared for this behaviour, a wave of embarrassment sweeping over him as he squirmed visibly. He was caught between the sharp edges of two swords—Revati sitting at his feet and Teji standing over his head, her clothes still in disarray. He could not think at all. Had Revati fought with him, he could have shouted at her and told her to go away immediately. But the poor man had no idea how to deal with an affectionate and loving Revati. Seeing bhaiya in this powerless state, Teji tried to escape to her chamber. Noticing this, Revati grabbed her arm at once and stopped her. Then, taking Teji’s hand in hers rather sweetly, Revati addressed her, “Oh, where are you going? My brother-in-law has come, especially to meet you.”

Hearing this, bhaiya, who was already alarmed by everything that was happening, snapped out of his drunken stupor. In a fearful voice, he asked, “Brother-in-law? You mean...?”

This time, Revati replied teasingly, “My, my, look at you, so immersed in Teji’s love that you don’t even remember your own brother. I have only one brother-in-law and that is Krishna.”

That was it! No sooner did bhaiya hear my name, than he snapped back to his senses. He was petrified and in that alarmed state, he stammered, “Whe... whe... where is he?”

I was waiting outside for exactly an opportunity like this. In situations like these, Krishna’s entry had to be dramatic. Stepping into the chamber at once, I replied, “I am right here, bhaiya!” And saying this, I walked up to him and touched his feet in veneration. At once, he recoiled and stepped back.

Teasing him, I said, “What is this, bhaiya? Not only me, but the whole of Dwarka needs your blessings...and here you are, shying away from blessing us.”

Meanwhile, Revati was also in her element. She, too reached out to touch his feet and said, “And I need your blessings as well, my Master.”

It was a strange sight indeed. Revati stood on one side of my frightened bhaiya, while a flustered Teji stood on his other side. And if that was not enough, I was standing right in front of him, my hands resting on my hips, with a ghoulish smile playing on my lips, much like the God of death himself. Flustered, bhaiya looked at all of us, with a bewildered look in his eyes. No one made a sound until finally, Revati broke the silence. She took Balarama’s arm in hers and turning to me, said, “Look at this, brother, nowadays, he does not come home for days on end.”

Hearing this, I elevated our drama to the next stage. I stopped smiling, and clouding my face with anger, I pretended to scold Revati, “You, in fact, are not taking good care of him. My poor brother looks so exhausted. Do you think ruling a kingdom is child’s play? Bhaiya has to attend so many meetings and give his counsel on numerous matters every day. He has to suspend an untold number of employees and appoint new ones in their place. A great number of unforeseen problems crop up day and night. Grandfather has become old now and father anyway does not take much interest in administration, so the weight of all administrative matters rests on bhaiya’s shoulders. And despite this, you have failed to take care of him.”

Still under the haze of liquor, bhaiya was listening to every word I spoke, with unwavering attention. And certainly, each word that I uttered had a sobering effect on him, as if a dam of water had burst and was cascading down his head. His inebriation had already dissipated and now, the poor man was struggling to save face. He stared fixedly at the floor, unable to look up.

However, today, the barbs of my sarcasm were not going to spare him. I continued to scold Revati saying, “Don’t you see that bhaiya is in dire need of rest? You don’t look after him well, and then you go around complaining about him!”

Listening to all this, bhaiya was totally flustered by now. Trying to compose himself, he said, “It is not like that. Be patient, Kanhaiya.”

Ignoring what he said, I addressed him directly, “What do you mean it is not like that?! I can see for myself that Revati has utterly failed in taking care of you!” Then, I looked at Revati and stated dramatically, “Today onwards, you will stay right here in bhaiya’s new house and take good care of him. In fact, I will also stay here from now on, and be of service to bhaiya. What greater service can there be than serving one’s own elder brother?”

As soon I finished saying this, Revati replied, “Yes, this is perfect! Today onwards, I shall be his servant, and so will you.”

Hearing this, bhaiya became even more perturbed and stammered, “Krishna, what is all this silly talk about becoming my servant? You are blowing the matter out of proportion. What you both are thinking is not true. What I mean to say is, I am going to move back to the royal palace, today itself.”

Seeing that bhaiya had made up his mind to return home, Revati’s face lit up instantly. However, we were still far from an assured victory. This glow on Revati’s face was nothing more than pointless excitement that one feels before a victory. To attain complete victory, it was necessary to strike at bhaiya a few more times. So, once again, I changed the course of the conversation and this time, I spoke with the utmost gravity, “Very well then... as you wish. Let us all go to the palace.” Then, turning to Revati, I said, “You take Teji along with you. I will bring bhaiya with me to your palace.”

However, bhaiya could not digest the idea of taking Teji along with us. Exasperated at the situation, he interjected immediately, “But why take her along?”

I replied, “It is absolutely necessary for her to be with Revati so that you can get complete rest. You are not really comprehending what I am saying.”

“It is the two of you who do not understand the situation!” mumbled bhaiya.

But presently, all his grumbling and mumbling fell on deaf ears. I made him sit in my chariot immediately and signalled Revati to escort Teji in bhaiya’s

chariot. As soon as she got my signal, Revati immediately seated Teji next to herself. And before anybody could comprehend what was going on, we were well on our way in our chariots. Bhaiya remained silent throughout the way. What could he say anyway? I could empathise with the poor man's silence. His state was indeed pitiable. But this was not the time to pity him at all. By now, it was well past midnight. However, the growing darkness was not going to hinder my task. Even though bhaiya did not want to talk to me, I wanted to launch a few more attacks on his mind. I began the assault saying, "Bhaiya, it appears that under your leadership, the charm of liquor houses and brothels in Dwarka has increased significantly. It seems as if the charm and glory of the entire marketplace has been collectively channelled into those two places."

Now, what could bhaiya say to this? He merely replied, "Hmm..." and fell silent. But I was in no mood to let him off the hook so easily. I had to irk him enough in order to put him back on track. So, I continued, "Honestly, it is only now that Dwarka has come into its own and can truly be called a kingdom of the Yadavas. It doesn't seem right for a Yadava kingdom to not have liquor houses and brothels at the corner of every other street."

Bhaiya could very well see that I was not going to spare him my taunts, and wisely, he avoided giving any response. In any case, what could he say? By now, we had reached the palace. Before we could step off, Revati's chariot also pulled up right beside us. I let them alight from their chariot first. Revati was now totally under the skin of the new character she was playing. She stepped down from the chariot and with a graceful gesture of her hand, invited Teji and bhaiya to enter the palace. At this loving signal from Revati, both bhaiya and Teji alighted from their chariots reluctantly, followed by me as we entered the palace. Bhaiya was walking with his eyes fixed to the ground; filled with shame, he could not bear to meet my gaze or that of Revati. However, I was not one to quit. I addressed Revati once again, "Please ensure that bhaiya's chamber is tidied up. Sprinkle scented water in his chamber. Bhaiya appears to be quite tired, so, let him and Teji rest there."

Hearing this, bhaiya broke down completely. He somehow managed to blurt out in frustration, "What is the need for Teji in my chamber? I am fine on

my own.”

Hearing this, Revati teased, “But, my lord, I am not capable enough to rid you of your tiredness all alone. You are, after all, one of Aryavarta’s busiest kings!”

Bhaiya did not reply; instead, he headed angrily towards his chamber alone, and slammed the door shut with a bang. His idea was to nip the problem in the bud—keep Teji out so that the problem also remained outside. Meanwhile, the dramatic sequence of events had a profound effect on Teji. Shaken to the core as well as embarrassed, her grace and pompousness had vanished along with the person she had been relying on. I reckoned this was enough for the time being. Thus, we made her stay respectfully in another chamber. It was only then that a victorious smile appeared on my face, followed by a sense of pride as my ego inflated. And why would it not? Ultimately, success and I would always walk arm in arm. This is why I keep saying, once a person placed his faith in me, he could rest assured that he would be taken care of, for, it was impossible for me or my plans to fail.

Oh well, these ruminations about ego and pride can go on endlessly. Meanwhile, the sky had begun to brighten and a new day was beginning to cast its sublime glow. I had not been able to lie down, let alone sleep, the whole night. Waves of exhaustion and sleep lashed out at me, invoking me to take rest. However, my work was not complete yet. It is always advisable to finish off the task that one has begun, for, the slackening of work is likely to cause complications. So far, I had only managed to gain some control over bhaiya; I was yet to gain complete control over him. Moreover, I had to expose Satrajit’s conspiracy. I had to tighten the reins on the liquor houses and brothels once again. A sizable part of the work was yet to be done, and my body was refusing to obey me. However, the significance of human life lies in performing one’s *karma*—actions. Therefore, I considered it my foremost duty to complete the task I had undertaken, at any cost. When the body becomes too tired to continue with its task, one must boost it with the strength of one’s mind. When the mind also begins to tire, one must use the strength of one’s ego to keep it functioning. And when the ego too is worn out, one must pull it all together with the strength of the soul. Indeed, the strength of the soul never depletes, nor is it ever defeated. Besides, why do we forget that carrying out one’s prescribed duty

is, in itself, the ultimate joy. In other words, duty is not a burden; on the contrary, it is an excellent cause for celebration. This is why I never discriminated between duties. I found as much joy in fighting Jarasandha as I did in performing the *raasa* (dance) with *gopis*. Whether I was fleeing after abducting Rukmini or fleeing from Mathura out of fear of Jarasandha, both activities held the same significance and magnitude for me. For me, both were duties performed in accordance with the demands of time. This was the only reason I had never felt sorrowful or considered anything as a ‘difficulty’ in my life. And because I never became exhausted, I had never failed either. Even at this point, I was making my body work using the strength of my soul. Do not ever assume the strength of the soul to be a small amount of energy; it has all of Nature’s power vested in it. As I surrendered my body to the strength of my soul, I began to feel fully rejuvenated once again.

It was early morning now and my next duty was calling out to me. Leaving Revati behind, I set off directly for the royal palace. I woke up Uddhava and Satyaki quickly and asked them to call our entire group of friends, including Daruka and Bhadraka. In a short while, all our friends gathered in the assembly hall of the palace. Obviously, to be woken up and summoned for a meeting so early in the morning was puzzling to everyone. Well, it certainly was an emergency. Without further ado, I briefed them about the current situation in Dwarka saying, “Actually, Satrajit wants to hold sway over Dwarka with his devious manoeuvres. And it is our misfortune that he has used bhaiya as a pawn in his evil strategy. Although bhaiya is now more or less under my influence, it is important to immediately dismiss all new royal officials appointed by Satrajit. And because this has created a feeling of insecurity among our original, trustworthy men, our hold on Dwarka’s administration has slackened considerably. So, first and foremost, we have to prepare dismissal letters for the new staff recruited by bhaiya, and also notify the former workers dismissed by him for no reason, to return to work. I am aware that these dismissal and reappointment letters would hold water only if issued by bhaiya himself, for, all the dismissals and appointments had been issued under his orders only. Thus, if someone else were to issue this notification, Satrajit might try to sow seeds of discontent between bhaiya and me. He could incite bhaiya saying, ‘Look, how Krishna has dismissed all the men you have appointed, as soon as he returned.’ And



this is exactly what I do not want. Therefore, no matter what the cost, we have to tackle this problem, but only after bhaiya's consent. And as far as bhaiya is concerned, I will get him to agree. All of you start preparing lists of those who have been appointed and dismissed by bhaiya, as soon as possible."

Indeed, how long was it going to take my friends to understand the gravity of the situation? They busied themselves with their respective tasks immediately. Amazingly, by afternoon, the full list was ready. Now, it was necessary to get bhaiya's consent on these letters. So, I took the letters and rushed to bhaiya's palace. Entering his palace, I was greeted by a strange sight. Revati was pacing up and down the garden, looking restless. I was anyway curious to know the current state of affairs, because the future strategy depended entirely on bhaiya's present behaviour. On enquiring, Revati informed me that neither bhaiya nor Teji had stepped out of their respective chambers. I was very happy to hear this. It meant that the situation was entirely under control. I told Revati rather gleefully that this was exactly what I had wanted. This clearly meant that both of them were so embarrassed of their actions that they could not muster the courage to step out of their chambers and face anyone.

"So, what will happen now?" asked Revati.

"Only that which Krishna desires will happen!" I said. "We shall make them feel so embarrassed that we ultimately achieve our desired goal."

I then revealed the next steps of the strategy to Revati, and thereafter, we both went and stood quietly outside bhaiya's chamber. Revati knocked on the door. As expected, there was no reply from him. I was pretty sure that bhaiya was wide awake, and so, I whispered my next instruction in Revati's ears. She knocked on the door once again, this time saying, "O my lord, please wake up. It does not befit a king to remain asleep for so long. It is a rule of politics that to maintain a strong hold over the kingdom, one should always be awake and alert. Besides, it is already lunchtime now and I have prepared all your favourite dishes myself."

My mantras were not the hollow ones taken from scriptures; rather, they would always emerge straight from my soul, potent and always hitting the

nail on its head. This was why they would always produce the desired results. What are mantras anyway, other than empty words strung together? However, these words create an impact only when they emerge from one's own soul. Think about it—how can words emerging from someone else's soul help us? Keep in mind that we normally use verbal language only for two purposes, either to express emotions or to influence people. I, for one, had never been able to understand how words taken from scriptures or mantras spoken by others can bring us bountiful rains or dilute people's influence over us. Surprisingly, many people depend on scriptures to also make their married life successful. Consider this, if we want to make our marriage successful, we will have to use the mantras that we ourselves have created and use them at the right time. This is why I say, if you want to make your marriage a success, then there is just one mantra for it—build love and trust. In the same manner, there is only one mantra for success in life—perform work of the finest quality with a selfless spirit. Try to understand this taking the current situation as an example. Do you think a *pundit* would have succeeded in bringing bhaiya out of his chamber, by merely reciting mantras or by reading scriptures? It would be impossible indeed! But I knew that bhaiya could tolerate everything except hunger. Thus, I used the mantra of food, baiting him by mentioning his favourite food, so he was bound to step out of his chamber. Actually, a mantra is an illusory web of words which one uses to achieve desired results. That is why mantras should always be fresh and instantaneous; they can never be old or stale. And, I was a master at using the right mantra at the right time. I knew that in addition to the dancing girls and liquor, hunger was bhaiya's other weakness. In fact, Satrajit had also used bhaiya's weaknesses of dance and liquor as a mantra to lead him astray. Similarly, I had used bhaiya's weakness for food as a mantra to make him step out of his chamber.

It was impossible for my mantra to fail, for, bhaiya immediately opened the door. And as soon as he did, he saw me standing beside Revati. And the moment his eyes met mine, his hunger pangs vanished into thin air. His expression clearly showed that he regretted having opened the door. However, there was nothing he could do now; the deed was done. I knew very well that had he suspected I was standing outside, he would never have opened the door. He would rather have stayed hungry for an entire week. Although he possessed the two mantras—love and anger—to control Revati

*bhabhi*, he did not have an answer to my taunts and caustic barbs. In fact, my personality had become unique because of this very trait of mine. I possessed mantras for everybody, but nobody had even a single mantra which they could use on me. To put it simply, I was a disease without a cure. I was capable of making anyone do anything, at any time, just by using the right mantra, but nobody could make me do anything they wanted. This is the mark of a successful human being. And, indeed, it is difficult to find anyone more successful than me in the entire history of mankind.

Well, returning to *bhaiya*, he was terribly embarrassed. He stood with one hand resting on the door of his chamber and his head hanging down. Well, I had not come here to save him from embarrassment. Rather, I had come to give him a few more shocks. *Revati* and I began our attack by first touching his feet in veneration. This behaviour of ours certainly pained him greatly. Well, it did not matter; we would make him happy now. I asked *Revati* immediately to fetch food for both of us. I was feeling ravenous myself. As a matter of fact, no other ailments can torment a person more than hunger, sleep and lethargy. So, first and foremost, we ate to our heart's content. In fact, I did not trouble *bhaiya* with even a single sarcastic comment while he ate. But everything fell apart once we finished our meal. *Bhaiya* regained some of his composure and I began to feel drowsy. This was only natural; I had travelled a great distance to reach *Dwarka*, and had not slept a wink since my return, a day and a half ago. However, at present, time demanded action. At present, it was necessary to dismiss, with immediate effect, all the officials *Satrajit* and *Teji* had appointed. And I never acted against the demands of 'time'. I had always surrendered everything I owned, to time. The mind, the heart and the ego will take you down the path of failure, but it is only by listening to the call of 'time' that can a man truly lead a successful life filled with happiness. Therefore, like a knowledgeable and wise person, I immediately shook off my drowsiness and engaged myself in duty. At present, there was no one in the chamber except *Revati*, *bhaiya* and I. After polishing off the meal, *bhaiya* was certainly in a condition to participate in a conversation, whereas I did not know where to begin the conversation. I wondered who needed to be dismissed first—*Teji* or the royal staff.

I thought it best to first break Teji's spell over bhaiya, for, only then would he understand the present circumstances. If Satrajit had caused this entire problem, then it should not be forgotten that Teji was his main weapon. 'All right then; let us begin with Teji,' I thought. However, even now, it did not seem as if I could speak to bhaiya in a straightforward manner. Even now, I needed to broach the subject in an indirect manner, and what could be a better weapon for it than sarcasm? It is always prudent to use a weapon one is proficient in, and which the opponent does not know how to wield. So, I shot my first arrow, saying, "I'm amazed that even my sister-in-law Teji has not woken up yet."

Hearing me refer to Teji as my sister-in-law, bhaiya was speechless for a moment. However, he composed himself immediately and replied, "So, why have you not woken her up then?"

"A sister-in-law is akin to a mother," I answered. "How could I dare wake her up?"

Hearing me refer to Teji as my sister-in-law, and now as my mother, disturbed bhaiya greatly. Almost stammering, he said, "What is this 'sister-in-law'... 'mother'... 'sister-in-law'? She is certainly not your sister-in-law or mother."

I replied, "Well, if she is not, she will be, soon enough. Revati and I have decided to get you and Teji married."

Hearing this, Revati interjected, "I was just wondering, why don't we carry out this auspicious deed today itself."

This discussion had flustered bhaiya. Seeing that my trick was working, I immediately addressed Revati, "Oh, why are you still standing here? Go on and wake up my new sister-in-law, Teji. If we can perform the wedding ceremony quickly, then we can arrange for a grand celebration at the royal palace tonight."

Spurred by this, Revati hurried off to wake Teji up. On the other hand, bhaiya resignedly put his hand to his head, and plonked himself down on a couch nearby. He sat scratching his head, wondering if I had lost my sanity. To be honest, I was enjoying myself thoroughly, shooting barbs of sarcasm

at bhaiya. All his defences began to crumble, one by one. It was also certain that bhaiya was highly annoyed by my antics, but what did I care? He could not possibly argue with me. Why would he needlessly invite a few more taunts? 'Alright then, if he is refusing to say anything, let me instead say something sweet to him,' I thought. And so, in the most dramatic tone, I instantly said, "You need not worry at all. I have thought of everything. Dancing and liquor have long been the interests of the greatest of kings. But has any king actually married a dancing girl? Has any king ever been such a lover? Just wait and see! No sooner you marry Teji, than the stories of your love will spread all over Aryavarta. You will become famous. Everyone will say that a king who married a dancing girl must indeed be very large-hearted. You will be the subject of discussion everywhere."

When bhaiya heard me say all this, he became subdued and replied in a low voice, "What are you talking about, Kanhaiya? Will this bring fame or infamy?"

This time, I said very sarcastically, "That depends on each individual's judgement."

Hearing this, he glanced at me from the corner of his eyes with a look that seemed to say, 'You take me for a fool, is it?' However, he did not say anything. In the meantime, Revati returned empty-handed, but sensing the opportunity, she too made a snide remark. Looking at bhaiya, she said with great humility, "I am unable to wake up Dwarka's new queen. Can you please go and wake her up yourself? As such, queens do not stir from their sleep unless woken up by the king himself."

Bhaiya had somehow tolerated my sarcasm but was unable to tolerate Revati's barb. He had just been waiting for an opportunity like this. And suddenly, he lost his composure and thundered angrily, "She is no queen! And I am certainly not going to wake her up. You all go and wake her up and send her away from here!"

I was overjoyed to hear bhaiya say this, for, a dangerous love affair had finally come to an end. Meanwhile, hearing bhaiya say all this, Revati was beside herself with joy; her happiness, indeed, knew no bounds. I decided then that it would be unfair to continue attacking bhaiya and Teji.

Therefore, I brought up the subject of the royal officials. In a grave manner, I told bhaiya, “Oh, I forgot to mention the main reason for my visit. I fail to understand why outsiders have been appointed to significant government posts.”

This time, bhaiya piped up promptly, “Oh... so you had come here to understand why those royal officials had been appointed, in addition to discussing the idea of my marriage with Teji?”

It seemed that as soon as Teji’s matter was resolved, bhaiya’s intelligence had reawakened itself. This was the first time in all these days that he had launched a counter-attack. Trading scathing repartees was not really his style, but perhaps this sarcastic comment had been prompted by the situation he was in. Even so, I had to control the situation. I could not let bhaiya gain the upper hand. At the same time, I had to ensure he did not realise my true intentions. I needed to maintain the seriousness of the matter as well. So, I replied with the utmost gravity, “Bhaiya, you misunderstand me. Actually, the decision to get the two of you married was for your own benefit, whereas the matter of the royal staff pertains to Dwarka as an entity.”

At any rate, bhaiya seemed to have regained his composure to some extent after launching a counter-attack on me. Indeed, when a person who is constantly at the receiving end, gets even a slight opportunity to strike back, he certainly feels satisfied at having gained a tiny victory over his opponent. And this satisfaction had an effect on bhaiya’s behaviour as well. This time, he too took on a serious tone to explain the appointments of the royal officials to me. He said, “Actually, everyone in Dwarka is related to each other. Because of this, the chief officers face a lot of difficulty in disciplining their subordinates. Therefore, to maintain a robust administration, all the principal officials were called in from other kingdoms.”

Surprised at this, I asked, “But who told you that?”

“Satrajit did. He has a lot of experience,” said bhaiya innocently.

Really, bhaiya was so gullible. In fact, it was this very innocence which I adored greatly in him. However, this was not the time to shower affection

on him. This was the time to lift the veil off Satrajit's conspiracy. So, I told bhaiya about Satrajit's plot in detail. I threw light on Satrajit's intent behind the appointment of the officials. And when I revealed to him that Satrajit had exploited his weakness by using Teji to achieve his goal, bhaiya lost his cool. Boiling with rage, he roared, "I will tonsure that Teji, seat her backwards on a donkey and parade her down the streets of Dwarka before kicking her out! If I don't, then I will change my name!"

This is the real problem with humankind. In the span of a moment, people swing from one extreme to the other, like a pendulum. I pacified bhaiya and explained to him that doing so would only lead to our own disgrace. Besides, I asked him, isn't the one who gets trapped as much at fault as the one who sets the trap? I was of the view that expelling Teji from Dwarka would be enough, and my naïve brother accepted my advice. Sensing that the conditions were now favourable, I made him agree to all other matters, one after the other. Thereafter, he also agreed to dismiss the new officials and reinstate former ones. One thing tugged at my heart still; bhaiya had become quite distressed during the course of our discussion. I could clearly see remorse reflecting on his face. He had fallen prey to a dangerous ailment called guilt. In a despondent tone, he even said to me, "Kanhaiya, had you not returned at the right time and revealed Satrajit's evil plot to me, he would have, through evil machinations, swallowed up the whole of Dwarka. It's a good thing you came at the right time."

There, now, do you see where things had gone wrong? It was certainly unhealthy to allow feelings of guilt and downheartedness to linger for long. So, I made light of the situation and said, "But how could I not have come at the right time? It is in my nature to be present exactly when and where I am needed."

We were conversing in this manner when bhaiya suddenly became furious. And in that enraged state of mind, he said, "That devil Satrajit! I will never let him set foot inside Dwarka again!"

Now, this was a new problem that had surfaced. Although bhaiya's rage was a sign that he had returned to his normal self, whatever had to happen had happened. What was the point in regretting it now? It was a good thing that the lesson was learnt before it was too late; it would be good enough if

the mistake was not repeated. So, I explained to him again, “We cannot do that. Even today, Satrajit’s influence among the Yadavas is incomparable. We can never be hostile towards him directly. If we do that, Dwarka will fall apart automatically.”

Now, I do not know how much of it bhaiya had understood, but my advice certainly silenced him. I often wonder why man is incapable of not knowing when and how to strike the right balance. Like a pendulum, he keeps swinging from one extreme to the other. Until the day before, Satrajit was like a god to bhaiya, and now, the same Satrajit had turned into a devil. But in reality, Satrajit was just an influential and ambitious Yadava leader; he was no more than that, either in the past or in the present.

By now, it was evening, so I took bhaiya straight to the royal palace. My friends were already busy with the task of dismissing and reinstating the royal officials. It was sad to see that poor bhaiya was unable to look anyone in the eye due to his overpowering feeling of shame. It did not matter. He had to undergo at least some amount of punishment for having committed a terrible mistake. As for me, I focussed on the work at hand, instead of focussing on my downcast brother. By night, we had sent out letters to the discharged officials as well as the reappointed ones. While the dismissed officials were stripped of their powers, a wave of happiness coursed through the reinstated officials. You would not believe it, but by next afternoon, we had chased away all of Satrajit’s appointed officials as well as Teji from Dwarka.

With this, Satrajit’s carefully orchestrated plan had been foiled before he could create further trouble. Now, although Dwarka had been saved from Satrajit, it still needed to be rescued from its own Yadavas. All the newly opened liquor houses and brothels had to be shut down. To be honest, there was no use in cursing Satrajit. Due to their addiction to dancing girls and liquor, the Yadavas did not really need an enemy from outside the kingdom to come and destroy them. Nevertheless, the auspicious task of closing down the liquor houses and brothels was carried out under bhaiya’s supervision. They had been opened with bhaiya’s encouragement, and with bhaiya closing them down himself, the wayward Yadavas would get a clear message that none of this would be tolerated in Dwarka anymore. I was pleased that once again, only the liquor houses and brothels sponsored by



the royal palace were the ones that remained in Dwarka. In this manner, I had passed the test in performing one more *karma* of life. Truly, if you perform your duties by immersing yourself in them with a sense of responsibility, then your actions are destined to succeed.

## Chapter 11

### **A Dawn of New Beginnings**

Two days had elapsed since my return to Dwarka. This was the third day, and it was almost midnight now. My body had stopped functioning due to exhaustion. Sleep was overpowering my eyes, but alas, even now, I was not destined to get any sleep. I had barely finished one duty when another was already waiting on the threshold, beckoning me over. I had to meet my dearer-than-life Rukmini. I had to comfort her, provide solace to her and soothe her wounded heart. The poor girl had been enduring hardships for the past one year. To add to her woes, though I had returned after a full year, I was going to meet her only on the third day of my arrival. I was certain that Rukmini was extremely upset and cajoling her would feel like being in the midst of a great war.

Never mind! Performing deeds and enduring struggles had become an inseparable part of my life. I turned my chariot immediately in the direction of my palace. And as soon as I reached the palace, I walked straight towards Rukmini's chamber. Indeed, my capacity to perform my tasks would be put to the test now, for, I was already at the peak of exhaustion, and the arduous task of bringing Rukmini back to normalcy was also staring me in the face. Besides, it did not seem that my regular tactics would pacify her at this point. I had to first console her, partake in her sorrow, and then, through my affection and tenderness, allay her misery. And after that, I had to bring her back to her cheerful self. Indeed, Rukmini was not only the centre of my existence, but my very life itself. Nothing else held more importance to me than bringing my Rukmini back to her usual, cheerful self. Thus, I entered the chamber with the resolve that I would not rest even for a moment without placating her first.

But I was in for a rude shock. Rukmini's maidservants stopped me from entering her chamber. I was being treated like a stranger in my own palace! The queen was resting, they told me; although they did apologise profusely for their impudence. They said they were helpless and that I should forgive them, for, they were simply following the orders of their queen. Now, why would I get angry over this? On the contrary, I was impressed by their strong sense of duty. Nevertheless, I knew very well that Rukmini was

awake; there was no question of her being asleep. However, this was a good development in a way. I knew that by giving strict instructions to her maidservants to block my entry into her chamber, Rukmini's anger must have surely subsided to some extent. And anger is governed by only one law—it dissipates only when it is vented.

Well, I appealed to the maidservants and managed to gain entry into Rukmini's chamber. She was lying in bed with her face turned away. I knew very well that she was only pretending to be asleep. Having received the news of my arrival, the poor girl must have been waiting for me for the past three days. She must have hardly slept in these three days. Certainly, my skills as a lover would be tested to the extreme now. 'But why should I think like this?' I asked myself. I was an optimist; I should instead think that I am getting the opportunity to prove my capability by winning over a displeased Rukmini. Of course, Rukmini and I would often play this game of sulking and placating; it was also true that I had gained mastery in the art of pacifying her and was far better at it than she was at sulking. However, I could not forget the fact that it was Radha who had made me an expert in this art. Rukmini would get upset for a valid reason, but Radha would become upset for no reason whatsoever.

The only problem was that this game was far more serious than simply sulking and placating. This time, Rukmini had not one but a thousand valid reasons to be angry with me. She was already bearing the anguish of the kidnapping of our son. Moreover, I was meeting her after an entire year and had arrived with a new wife in tow. This was going to be a trial by fire of the love between a husband and a wife or rather, between two lovers. First, I had to quell her anger, then chase her sorrows away; thereafter, I had to calm her down with the help of philosophical insight. After that, I had to nurse her to drive away her fatigue, and then reignite her faith by giving her all the love I could. To drive away Rukmini's sorrow was not in the power of a lover or a husband. At this point, she needed a person who could play the role of a father, son, brother, *guru* and friend. And a true lover is the one who can successfully fulfil all these roles when time demands. And I had no doubts whatsoever that I was a true lover. Emboldened by this confidence, I went up to her and sat by her side. However, this did not make any difference to her; she continued to pretend to be asleep. I waited for a moment and then mustering up courage, I began to stroke her head. For a

while, she did not react, then suddenly she brushed off my hand. I took this positively as well. I thought, well, at least she had started to react. I was anyway the epitome of shamelessness; I continued to stroke her head. But this time, she flung my hand away immediately. Well, that did not bother me at all; I began stroking her head once again. And this time too, she pushed my hand away. This game of ours continued for quite some time. But for how long could she continue to fend off someone as brazen as me? Finally, she was tired and gave up trying to brush off my hand. Consequently, I could now stroke her head without being shunned, and with that, my true love for her had achieved its first victory.

However, she still remained unresponsive with her back towards me. It was sad to see that she was dressed quite ordinarily too. I had never seen her in ordinary clothes at night. Perhaps this too was one of her ways of displaying her anger. Nonetheless, after a while, I slid down and began stroking her legs. This went on for quite some time but she did not react.

I was glad that I had made some progress. However, it was also true that although I was successful, the rate of success was quite slow indeed. But then, I was in no hurry either, for, when did a *karmaveer* ever shirk action? I continued with my endeavour for some more time, but to no avail. Finally, I decided that I had had enough. It was time to change tactics to make a breakthrough; after all, I too had not slept for the past three days. Although Rukmini's anger had definitely abated a little, it was certain that further progress could not be made without talking to her. And to initiate a conversation, it was necessary to use my *Brahmastra*. So, releasing my *Brahmastra*, I began to massage her feet. Shocked at this, she sat up instantly and said, "What are you doing, my Master?"

I knew that my *Brahmastra* could never fail. And the result was right in front of me; Rukmini, who had been lying in bed with her face turned away from me all this while, was now sitting up and facing me. After a whole year, I was getting to see her face, the face of my love, my life. But I was pained by what I saw. Her eyes were swollen and her body had become frail. Her expressions, face, eyes, body and her clothes gave compelling testimony to the woes that had befallen her. My heart sank on seeing her in this state. My beloved Rukmini's condition had become so pitiable. Had I abducted the princess of Kundinpur to make her endure such pain? These

thoughts gradually engulfed me and I felt miserable. But, I composed myself immediately. What could I have done in a situation like this? I was a disciplined soldier sent on an assignment by Nature. If I had my way, I would have eliminated the sorrows of even the animals around me, and this was my very own Rukmini. She was far more precious to me than even my own life. My heart was filled with so much love that I wished to bestow it upon every miserable soul. If I could, I would use my two hands to bring heaven itself down on earth. But how much can a puny human accomplish? I was already doing much more than an average human being. However, I never gave rein to my ego to take control of my actions. Because actions born out of ego form a different world altogether. If you act out of arrogance or ego, you will have to suffer its consequences.

Coming back to Rukmini, I could not look into her eyes for long; she had turned to stone. However, she had surely glanced at me, although fleetingly, as this game between us continued. But her look was devoid of emotions. To be honest, on seeing her condition, I felt quite weak myself, as if there was a chink in my armour. Even so, I mustered all my courage and embraced her. As soon as I hugged her, she broke down in my arms, sobbing uncontrollably. And then she wrapped herself around me and held on so tightly that it felt as if she had been waiting for this very moment for the past whole year. Her sobbing was relentless. I too wanted her to cry her heart out, for, I knew that the more she cried, the quicker she would calm down. So, I did nothing to stop her.

After a while, as soon as her sobs weakened a little, I laid her down with her head on my lap and started stroking her head lovingly. However, this brought on a fresh bout of tears. It did not matter. Crying was cathartic for her as it would help wash away the pent-up grief and anger that had kept accumulating within her for over a year. But for how long could this continue too? Gradually, her sobs began to subside. I got up quickly and brought her some water to drink. Now, although her crying had subsided, her anger had most certainly not. She refused to drink the water. Naturally, she would use every little opportunity to express her anger and vent it. As for me, I was already prepared for such a situation. I once again launched a small-sized *Brahmastra*. I pushed away my own glass of water saying, "Alright then, if you will not have water, then I will also go to sleep thirsty."

Hearing this, she snatched the glass from my hand and gulped down the water in one go. Thereafter, I also quenched my thirst. And in this way, I was able to gradually gain control over Rukmini. I knew that in all probability, she had not eaten in the past two to three days. I also knew that if I directly asked her to eat, she would immediately refuse. At the same time, I knew that considering her present state of health, it was absolutely necessary for her to eat at once. Therefore, I spoke in a low voice, “Dwarka was in such a state of mismanagement that for the past three days, I have neither been able to sleep, nor eat a morsel of food. I am starving terribly, but never mind.”

As expected, on hearing this, Rukmini got up immediately to make arrangements, although I was not hungry in the least. Driven by anxiety, I had only been eating since the time I had arrived in Dwarka; sometimes with bhaiya and sometimes at the royal palace. However, this meal would be unique, for, I was about to dine—in fact, be fed—by the love of my life. After a while, Rukmini, along with four maidservants, arrived with a platter laden with my favourite foods. But I was not about to eat like this. My intent behind asking for food was entirely different. So, I lovingly made Rukmini sit next to me and spoke in a tender tone, “Not like this. You will have to eat with me; otherwise, I will not touch a single morsel of food. I have returned after an entire year. Will you not share a meal with me?”

Poor girl, what could she do now? She was trapped. After all, she did love me dearly. And being the artful sweet talker that I was, I was taking advantage of her innocence and pure love for me, using it to trick her into giving in to me. Thus, I began stroking her head and feeding her bit by bit. She did not protest, and I found this behaviour of hers quite endearing. I was happy that she was gradually returning to her normal self. Her anger had also abated to a large extent. I knew this because she had begun to feed me now. Success was advancing towards Krishna, albeit slowly, one step at a time. After finishing the meal, she lay down on the bed once again. I sat right next to her and began to stroke her head once more. There was so much I wanted to say, so much I wanted to talk to her about, but what could I do? An eloquent speaker like me was strangely at a loss for words today. Nevertheless, after a short spell of silence, I mustered up the courage and spoke up. I said, “Do you know, my love, you are dearer to me than my own life. A single teardrop from your eyes can weigh down heavily on my

entire life. It was the magic of your love that has transformed this cowherd boy into the King of Dwarka. And I know that in exchange for this, all that you have received from me in the past year is pain and sorrow. I am your culprit; I am willing to accept any punishment you wish to give me.” Saying this, I hung my head in apology and stood up melodramatically.

Perhaps she found this style of mine endearing, for, she smiled a bit. Seeing her smile, it felt as if I had conquered a kingdom. Mustering up courage, I immediately took her hand and led her to the outer chamber. It was way past midnight, but the mood for conversation had set in only now, and it seemed perfect. I made her sit next to me. Now why wait anymore, I thought. So, bursting with enthusiasm, I immediately took her hand in mine and embraced her. This time, she did not protest in the least. Sensing the opportunity, I thought of explaining things to her. And since she was not going to say anything right now, it was for me to take the initiative. It was also certain that until I opened my heart to her and explained everything, she would not be placated entirely. At the same time, it was also true that I could not be at peace without restoring her to normalcy. Besides, I also knew that her level of intelligence was quite high, so I would have to converse with her on the same level. It was no use beating around the bush just to appease her. It would not work with an intelligent woman like Rukmini. Therefore, I spoke gravely, “Rukmini, you are dearer to me than my own life. I knew we were expecting a child and in spite of that, I left for Hastinapur. Later, even when I heard that our son had been kidnapped, I still did not return. This would certainly break the heart of an ordinary woman, but definitely not that of a wise and educated woman like you.”

After saying this, I became quiet. It was necessary to give her some time to prepare for what I was about to explain to her. A good sign was that she was listening to me with a serious and sincere look on her face, grasping all that I was telling her. Not only had she paid close attention to whatever I had said, but she was also scrutinising my expressions. Now that I had her complete attention and saw that she was willing to listen, it did not take me long to put the matter to rest. It is only with wise and serious-minded people that problems can be spoken about and resolved. With hope rising, my confidence was also restored. So, with renewed confidence, I continued talking. Stroking her head gently, I said, “But my love, what could I do? Had I not become your culprit, I would have become one in Nature’s eyes.

Pradyumna is as much my son as yours. Who knows what condition he must be in at present? Believe me, my dear; I am as distraught as you, if not more, over the kidnapping of our son.”

Hearing the name of our son, a fresh spate of tears began to flow down Rukmini’s cheeks. Perhaps these were the remainder of her tears, anxious to spill out as soon as possible. This was why it did not take long for them to abate. And as soon as she composed herself to some extent, I put my arms around her, held her close and continued, “Believe me, Rukmini, not only am I aware of my duty towards my family, but I also want to fulfil it faithfully. But as you know, when Pradyumna was about to arrive in this world, it was imperative for me to attend Yudhishtira’s coronation ceremony. And I need not tell someone like you who is so knowledgeable about politics, how important it was for me to go there. Once I had dealt with that, I felt the need to meet my great-grandfather who was on his deathbed, and to save his entire kingdom of Nagakoot. After resolving Nagakoot’s problems, when I managed to return to Dwarka, I heard that bhaiya had fallen in love with a dancing girl. It did not take me long to detect Satrajit’s conspiracy and how it was slowly tightening its noose around Dwarka. Let me ask you this; would it have been right on my part to ignore the problems of so many people for the sake of my attachment towards my son? Is our son our only family? Aren’t the people of this entire world our children? Do you want to confine your Krishna to thinking only about our family? Or do you want to see his compassion spread across the entire world?”

Indeed, it was appreciable how Rukmini listened with rapt attention to each and every word of mine. She was not just listening for the sake of it but was also trying to understand the import of my words. For a while, she even closed her eyes and meditated on what I had said. Thereafter, she looked into my eyes with an exceptionally calm expression and said, “I have more or less understood what you have said. I shall pray to God to give you enough strength to protect the entire world. But what I cannot fathom is, why did you have to marry Bhadra and bring her home as my *sautan* (the ‘other’ woman in a husband’s life)? Whom have you protected by marrying Bhadra?”



I replied, “Trust me, Rukmini, this wedding too was for the greater good. If you consider her to be your younger sister instead of a *sautan*, then even this sorrow of yours will disappear gradually.”

Now, she had calmed down considerably, and a calm mind can bring about such an amazing transformation in a person within the span of a moment! When I had entered her chamber, Rukmini had appeared like a worn-out aged woman, but once I worked the magic of my love and persuasion, she was transformed back into a beautiful young girl.

It was almost dawn by the time our conversation ended. We were both exhausted. There was so much to talk about. But at present, neither of us were in a position to say or listen to anything anymore. So, we both went off to sleep peacefully. With that, I had won my final battle as well. Now, should I say that winning was in my nature or should I credit it to my infinite capabilities? Was it a skill or a special trait of mine? Was it my diligence or deservedness? Or was it all of these combined? Whatever it was, one had to admit that victory was gradually becoming my destiny.

The next day, I woke up only by evening. The entire morning and afternoon were spent in deep slumber. However, sleeping off the entire day did not seem enough to make up for the weariness of ten to twelve days of continuous travel, followed by three nights of standing vigil for Dwarka. The feeling of exhaustion had still not left me. But the sight that greeted me on waking up was truly incredible—Rukmini was rubbing my feet lovingly. The unexpected had happened; her anger had been completely won over. I pulled her towards me immediately and hugged her tight. We were lovebirds once again. But love cannot fulfil all of life’s needs. Naturally, I was ravenous on waking up so, Rukmini immediately left to prepare a meal for me. I also got up to carry out my daily routine and ablutions. Needless to say, I was in the seventh heaven for the sole reason that I had managed to bring back my Rukmini to her usual, cheerful self.

I allowed myself to be swept away by beautiful dreams and thoughts. As no significant or crucial task vied for my attention, I could now surely spend a few peaceful days in my city of dreams, Dwarka. Though my earnest desire was to live my entire life in peace, was Nature ever going to allow me to live peacefully for long? I had long since given up harbouring such futile

hopes. Instead, I would find contentment in every opportunity that came my way. I was quite intelligent; considering the life I had led so far, I had, in my own way, discovered a way of living amidst all the struggles. In other words, I had accepted the fact that my life was fraught with struggles, and that I had to seek and derive happiness from this very life.

To my delight, while I was adrift in these thoughts, Rukmini had already arrived with two maidservants carrying food. But I was in for a surprise. Even Rukmini was becoming an expert in doing the unexpected, the proof of which was that my second wife, Bhadra was standing right beside her! I had been so engrossed in my work that I had completely forgotten about Bhadra. Before I could get over this surprise, there was another in store for me. Rukmini lovingly ran her hand over Bhadra's head and said, "I brought Bhadra here as soon as I woke up. I have found a younger sister and a good friend in her. I have decided that she will stay here with us until her own palace is built."

I had not expected such positive behaviour from Rukmini within a day's time. What made me feel at peace was that Bhadra was also quite happy. It was clear that she too felt blessed on having found an elder sister in Rukmini. Everything around the King of Dwarka was now in order. The proof of it was that he was now fed by not one, but two queens. The King of Dwarka was now truly living a grand life. Really, it had taken only a moment for my life to swing from one extreme to the other. Only the day before, my beloved Rukmini had stationed guards to keep me from entering my own chamber and now, I was fortunate enough to have two queens feeding me.

However, I was still feeling a bit tired, and it was night already, so I went to sleep early. To eat right after waking up, and to go back to sleep right after eating was a unique experience in itself. You will not believe it, but this routine went on for two days, and only then was I able to rid myself of the weariness I felt from lack of sleep. Having slept my fatigue away, I was now fully refreshed. So, I went for a walk on the seashore and exercised as well. It was only now that I had been able to resume my actual daily routine.

I now thought of visiting the royal palace to get an update on the latest activities. Although I had set everything right, I knew I would feel satisfied only after witnessing the proceedings for myself. I, therefore, sought Rukmini's permission to go to the palace with Bhadra. Naturally, I wanted to introduce her formally to my parents and receive their blessings; besides, I wanted to acquaint them with the state of affairs in Nagakoot and tell them about how my paternal grandfather and great-grandfather were doing. I wanted them to know what miracles their darling son had performed in Nagakoot, because ever since I had returned, I had not been able to spend time with them. All I had done was introduce my new bride to them and then rush off to solve the problems that Dwarka was grappling with. Of course, Bhadra had probably apprised them of several matters, but hearing it all from me would be different. Meanwhile, Rukmini did not take long to read my mind. I was just about to leave with Bhadra when Rukmini, who was indeed in her element, said laughingly, "It is the king's duty to go to the palace. However, this *daasi* (maidservant) harbours a small desire in her heart that you will dine with her, and if possible, spend the night too, with her."

Patting her cheek, I said, "Do you even need to say it, silly woman? Bhadra will probably return early, and I will most certainly be back by evening."

When the love of my life was at her best, wouldn't her lover be at his best too? Rukmini's positive behaviour had infused wonderful energy in me. Truly, if your lover understands and supports you, it can fill you with unlimited energy. On the contrary, if the same person behaves foolishly, then life becomes hell.

Lost in these thoughts, I did not even realise when we had reached the palace. I took Bhadra straight to my parents. She had already told them everything and consequently, they were very proud of their darling son's deeds. Moreover, they were quite happy to have Bhadra as a daughter-in-law. After all, she hailed from our own family. Nevertheless, I took my parents' blessings, sent Bhadra back to Rukmini's palace and headed straight to the palace courtroom. Everyone was already present there, including bhaiya. His presence surprised me pleasantly; it was a positive sign indeed. The palace's affairs were now back in order. And when bhaiya himself was working diligently, there was no question of things going awry.

As a result, there was no significant task left to be carried out there. However, now that I was there, I thought of at least instructing them on building a palace for Bhadra; otherwise, people would say that the King of Dwarka had arrived for sure, but did not take up any real work.

To be honest, I was not in the mood for any work now. This was probably due to the exhaustion of the past one year. After all, I was human too, and like everybody else, I also felt the need to rest physically and mentally. And like all other duties, it was also my duty to fulfil this need of mine. So, by afternoon, I returned to my palace. Seeing me return so early, both Rukmini and Bhadra were overjoyed. Seeing my queens happy brought a sense of joy to me as well. Spurred by this joyous mood, I suggested that we go to the seashore and also have our meal there itself. My decision excited both of them and they pranced away happily in order to make arrangements.

Indeed, only I knew how content I felt on seeing a chirpy Rukmini. Initially, she was a source of attraction for me. Later, she had become my source of inspiration, and now, she was my very lifeline. All I wanted was to see her at her cheerful best. But what could I do? I was so caught up in ensuring the welfare of all that I could not give her undivided attention. However, since I had no work at this point, all my attention was focussed solely on my first priority—Rukmini. It was important for us to share a few moments of love and happiness together. Rukmini badly needed not only love but also rest and relaxation, and that too not just physically, but mentally too. And at present, it was my sole duty to fulfil her needs.

By evening, both my queens readied themselves and reached my chamber well in time. To my delight, as soon as the door opened, Rukmini surprised me yet again. Both were dressed in yellow silk saris. As soon as I was greeted by this vision, I sprung up from where I was sitting. Not only that, I stood transfixed on seeing them. I loved to see Rukmini in a yellow sari and to be honest, it suited her beautifully too. It was good to know that she had dressed as per my liking, but the fact that she had also dressed up Bhadra according to my taste, was certainly surprising. I could not stop gaping at the two of them. For a cowherd boy who used to run after *gopis*, the sight of two bedecked queens was nothing short of a miracle. Seeing me stunned, Rukmini broke into a jubilant smile and said, “Are you the only one who can befuddle people with your deeds? I am your wife, and in the time that I

have lived with you, I have also learnt to do things that can amaze you.” I was anyway an admirer of the unexpected behaviour of humans. If a person behaves exactly as you expect him to, would his personality ever be interesting? If you ask me, it is this unexpected behaviour that is proof of a person’s sense of awareness. Needless to say, Rukmini had won my heart by springing a pleasant surprise on me.

On that joyous note, we set off for the seashore. I was riding the chariot with Rukmini seated to my right and Bhadra to my left. Bhadra truly felt blessed at having received Rukmini’s love and affection. She was also bubbling with confidence. Meanwhile, the people of Dwarka did not miss the opportunity to watch me ride by, alongside my queens. Some appeared happy, some were surprised, while a few others gaped at us in amazement.

We had now reached the seashore. Once there, we began strolling around for quite some time. Needless to say, Bhadra was euphoric on catching sight of the sea; she had not seen even a river previously in her life! I was also overjoyed to be here, for, an entire year had passed since I had been to the seafront. And as for Rukmini, she was only happy to have me by her side. The sun set in the midst of our happy ambling. We then sauntered over to a grove of coconut trees and sat down to chat. Bhadra did not speak much. And after talking for some time, I fell silent too. I simply sat there, engrossed in gazing at the ocean. However, Rukmini was at her chirpiest best. Consequently, there were not one but two sounds falling on my ears at the moment—Rukmini’s voice and the sound of the waves. Bhadra’s laughter would also fall on my ears from time to time, especially when Rukmini heaped praises on me with her sarcastic statements. The queen of my dreams was truly elated today. Actually, she was quite chirpy and mischievous by nature; she just had to be in the right mood. And today, she appeared much happier than when she had first set foot in Dwarka. Watching her in this mood took my breath away.

Soon, the servants had brought in our meal. Rukmini had herself made arrangements for it this evening; all my favourite foods and delicacies were included in the meal. The three of us shared the meal, basking in the warm glow of love and happiness. After dinner, Rukmini requested me to play the flute. Even though I was eager to play it myself, I decided to tease Rukmini and turned down her request because she was asking me to play it.

So, it was only after much cajoling and flattering that I agreed to play the flute. After all, I had learnt this trick from Rukmini herself, because whenever I tried to placate her when she was sulking, she would dig in her heels and not give in easily. But this was my first experience of being coaxed in such a manner. And I was convinced that being difficult does have its own charm.

Being persuaded had its own fun, but Rukmini's joy, and the mood it had created, was truly unique. Soon, I was so immersed in the melody of my flute that I continued playing it until late into the night. Both Rukmini and Bhadra, who were already madly in love with me, were enraptured, lost in the soulful notes of my flute. Now, let me tell you a secret; I would revel in the way women fell easily for my charms. This was the reason I not only took great care of the way I dressed, but also made it a habit to apply *ittar* as part of my daily routine. An added adornment to my enigmatic personality was the mischievous smile I always wore. And if this was not enough, I was also an accomplished flute player and dancer. All in all, I was well equipped with all the weapons needed to mesmerise womenfolk. And dazzling my sweethearts by making good use of my flamboyance and charm, gave me joy that was beyond description. From every perspective, the immense happiness I experienced at this point was unique, an excellent balm to soothe both the body and the mind. Flowing with the tide of this emotion, I decided there itself to visit Prabhasa for a week along with my friends and queens, away from the troubles of Dwarka and the palace; a paradise where we would have nothing but good food and dance, exercise and rest. No sooner did my enamoured queens hear this idea of mine, than they jumped for joy. And so, we returned to the palace happily discussing our upcoming trip to Prabhasa. Rukmini and Bhadra massaged my feet until late in the night and taking pleasure in such a wonderful service, I, the King of Dwarka, did not even realise when I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, I woke up with the intention of informing bhaiya and my friends about the trip to Prabhasa. Excited with this thought, I got ready immediately and headed out to share the plan with them. Naturally, everyone who heard about the plan was thrilled. In the past one year, everybody had to endure great difficulties, but now, it was time for a break. After all, enjoying oneself and getting enough rest are crucial if one wants to work efficiently. Since the past one year, everyone had either been busy

with their work or had been enduring pain and sorrow. And now that we had decided to go, nobody wanted to wait anymore. So, we decided to leave for Prabhasa three days later. Rukmini took on the responsibility of arranging food for the journey. Bhaiya and Satyaki busied themselves right away in procuring liquor for themselves. There were twelve of us going on this journey, yet we were taking twenty servants along with us. This, in itself, indicated the grand preparations that were under way for a regal getaway. Since Prabhasa was a dense forest and did not have accommodation, we were carrying tents along with us to camp in the forest.

Amidst great enthusiasm, we finally set out on our journey on the fourth day. To add to the fun and revelry, my mischievous sister, Subhadra, played truant and climbed onto my chariot along with my two wives. But since I was riding the chariot, she purposely sat right next to me. Needless to say, Rukmini and Bhadra were compelled to sit on the back seat. Oh well, how could she miss out on making mischief at the first opportunity she got? Our chariot led the procession and interestingly enough, it was our chariot that made the maximum noise, resounding with fun, laughter and mischief. The three women had an unspoken understanding and were bent on making fun of Krishna. Well, so be it! Let me now tell you about Prabhasa. It was part of the kingdom of Dwarka. Behind the city of Dwarka, there was a path that led to those forests and this morning, our chariots were racing along that very path. There were no settlements in Prabhasa; the forest was inhabited with wild animals. By evening, we had already reached our destination amidst much fun and frolic. We set up camp in a clearing amongst the woods. The servants began pitching the tents, while the rest of us strolled around. I was truly happy, for, I had managed to bring bhaiya and Revati along with us. It was necessary for them to spend such moments of joy and peace together. For that matter, this trip to Prabhasa was opportune as well as necessary for the rest of us too.

Now that we were well settled in our new environment, all that we focussed on was losing ourselves in merrymaking every single night of our stay in Prabhasa. We would choose a suitable spot adjoining a cluster of trees for a gathering. I would pick the spot in the morning itself and inform the servants about it. Throughout the day, they would not only make arrangements for the seating, but would also keep our food and beverages ready. Torches would also be lit everywhere. Bhaiya and Satyaki would

bring out the liquor, and amidst animated conversations, all of them would soon join forces to pull my leg. If I wished to divert their attention away from me, I had to either play the flute or perform a dance. One might say that in a way I had turned into their royal performing artist who would be pressed into service every evening. During the day, however, my routine would be different. You will not believe it, but even in the midst of all this fun and frolic, I exercised on all five days that we spent in Prabhasa. I performed both *yoga* and *pranayama* regularly. Taking a stroll twice every day was already a part of my daily routine. Exercise is that magic which relieves a man from exhaustion and infuses him with energy. I had always considered time as the most valuable asset in life; therefore, I had a special talent for making good use of it. We are not like the moon or the stars that have a lifespan of thousands of years. We have a lifespan of a mere hundred or a hundred and fifty years. And if you fail to understand the value of time even in this short period, then you can consider your life wasted. This was why I had made good use of the five days spent at Prabhasa by exercising regularly. On the other hand, Revati, Subhadra, Bhadra and Rukmini had formed their own group. Whenever they got the chance, they would sit together and invariably indulge in gossip.

Bhaiya and Satyaki would eagerly wait for the sun to set, to indulge in food and drink. In short, everybody truly enjoyed these five days in their own way. All of them felt relaxed as they had rested well. It was a much-needed break from administrative work and duties. Nobody wanted to return home. But well, we had to. It was amazing how much we enjoyed every moment of the trip even though we did not have the royal comfort of palaces and were instead staying in tents. That was because ‘joy’ is a state of mind, not of the body. Needless to say, this getaway helped greatly in normalising my relationship with Rukmini, and that of bhaiya’s with Revati. That was not all; this trip also brought Bhadra closer to both Rukmini and Subhadra. In other words, the vacation had proved extremely beneficial for everybody. My experiment had been successful.

Now that we had returned to Dwarka thoroughly rejuvenated, let me talk about its state of affairs. The evil shadow of Satrajit and his sinister ploys had become a thing of the past for Dwarka. Now, bhaiya had also begun to take a keen interest in matters of the state. Despite all this, one could not say that everything was back to normal in Dwarka. Satrajit had already



caused considerable damage in the kingdom. Indeed, the intrinsic nature of the Yadavas had not changed at all; they were still inclined to procrastinate and shirk work. Every evening, they would make a beeline for the liquor houses and brothels. They were so incorrigible that even I, who had always been against all kinds of restrictions in this wonderful human life, had to impose restrictions on the Yadavas' addiction for liquor and women. This is enough to gauge the extent to which this vice had firmly entrenched itself in these Yadavas. In such a situation, for how long could I have kept myself away from Dwarka's troubles? The basic problem here was the lethargic attitude of the Yadavas, and their addiction to liquor and women fuelled it further. To curb that, I had already imposed heavy restrictions. But for how long could any kind of restriction prove to be effective? *Acharya* Sandipani was absolutely right when he had said that any kind of physical restriction is worthless. What is important is the wisdom which can transform the mind itself. However, it was not possible to bring about this mental transformation in Dwarka. The addiction to liquor and women had completely overwhelmed their psyche. Besides, the Yadavas of Dwarka were more under bhaiya's influence than mine; that was especially the case with the menfolk. This was probably due to bhaiya's own love for liquor and dance. And since I was the one imposing official rules and regulations curbing their interests, it was natural for me to become less popular in my own kingdom. Nonetheless, one had to admit that bhaiya's renewed focus on the administrative affairs had surely helped in providing legislative support to rein in the Yadavas' love for liquor and women. As a consequence, for the time being, this problem had more or less come under control with a little bit of effort.

In any case, this was not the problem of Mathura or Dwarka alone; all the kingdoms with a large population of Yadavas were facing similar problems and were in a distressed state. However, I was doing whatever I could to contain this disease that had entrenched itself firmly in my kingdom. At present, the main cause of my worry was Dwarka's financial condition, caused by a slump in business. My absence from Dwarka for a year had taken its toll and had wiped out all the good work. Trade had come to a complete standstill. Of course, Satrajit's withdrawal from the business had also played a major role in this development, because he was the most successful Yadava businessman in Dwarka. That was not all; he also

exerted considerable influence over all the wealthy Yadavas. Therefore, his withdrawal from the business had resulted in the others losing interest too. The royal treasury too was not as robust as when I had last seen it, because royal taxes were directly dependent on flourishing businesses and the hard work put in by the common people. In short, at present, the entire burden of Dwarka's administrative cost was being borne by the Syamantaka gem alone. And for how long could such a large city be run on the support of one gem alone? So, these days, I was preoccupied with this problem, which was taking up most of my time.

But how did it matter to me? I was a *karmaveer*. So, I immediately busied myself with *karma*—actions. To bring Dwarka's business back on track, I convened a meeting of all the prominent businessmen of the kingdom. In the meeting, I proposed various new ideas for their businesses and also boosted their morale. On the other hand, I had several meetings with the common Yadavas too, to inspire them to work hard as well. I did not want the prosperity of Dwarka to suffer at any cost. I had already seen the empty royal treasury of Mathura and was well aware of its adverse effects. My intelligence, capability and concern for Dwarka had their own place, but the real problem was that all of us were required to work together, to put Dwarka on the path of prosperity once again. Pondering over all this, I would become a little despondent. Frankly speaking, I would often be gripped by an abject fear seeing the indolent nature and misdeeds of the Yadavas. Would my dream of making the Yadavas prosperous or seeing them happy in Dwarka be shattered? Had I made a mistake by working so hard for them or by stealing the Syamantaka gem for them?

These questions could only be answered in the future. So, I thought, why not leave matters pertaining to the future to time and free myself of worry? Working towards my goal was in my hands, which I was already doing. As for the future of the Yadavas, well, their deeds would determine it. Speaking of the future, it had just occurred to me that I had not yet seen Dwarka's *gurukul*. The future of any kingdom is dependent upon its next generation and this was why I had dreamt of establishing the best *gurukul* in Dwarka. I decided to take a look at the *gurukul*, however, it seemed as if these Yadavas had taken a vow to mar all my efforts. Surrounded by trees and built with painstaking attention to detail, the *gurukul* had been constructed a

little away from the city. The structure was so magnificent that one could easily fall in love with it by merely seeing its exterior beauty.

The twelve *Acharyas*, both the juniors and the senior ones, had all been nominated. The students had to arrive only during the day and return to their own homes by evening. In other words, there was no need for the students to stay back in the *gurukul*. Despite this convenience, there were barely any students here. Indeed, these sons of the Yadavas could not tolerate any hindrance to their freedom and debauched way of living. So, how could they cope with or adjust to even minimum discipline? Perhaps the sons were following in the footsteps of their fathers. Already worried about Dwarka's future due to the Yadavas' vices, I was plunged into a deep abyss of despair on seeing the condition of the *gurukul*. Indeed, it pained and disturbed me greatly to see this. I immediately convened a meeting of the ministers and stressed upon the need to encourage and coax the children to attend the *gurukul*. It was decided to provide various incentives to pupils to lure them to attend the *gurukul*. We discussed in detail all possible ways of increasing the number of attendees in the *gurukul*. Dwarka was the only kingdom in Aryavarta where even ordinary children were fortunate enough to receive education at a *gurukul*. In spite of this, seeing the absolute disinterest in education was certainly disheartening. These people were bent on ruining even this new, unique and noble experiment of mine. Perhaps only a blow from Nature could reform these Yadavas. Krishna alone was proving to be ineffective for them. Just think, education that was available only to princes and was the birthright of only the elite, had been made available to the children of the common people, because of my initiative. However, their indifference despite all my efforts, spoke volumes of their indolence. In other words, on the face of it, everything seemed fine in Dwarka at this point in time, but seen from a far-sighted perspective, the kingdom's future was shrouded in darkness. My life was strange indeed. If it was not a great deed, then some small task or the other would continue to keep me busy. Perhaps my life had become synonymous with '*karma*'. But the speciality of Dwarka and its Yadavas was that here, even the common man was more relaxed than the king. I wondered whether this could be called the good fortune of the subjects or the misfortune of the King of Dwarka.

Well, when one is running a kingdom, such unpleasant matters do rear their ugly heads from time to time. However, I had fulfilled my duty, and now it was up to them to take care of their own future. So, apart from worrying about Dwarka's future, I had to admit that at present, I was enjoying myself thoroughly in my kingdom. I did not have to take care of any major administrative task. In fact, on some days, my 'working day' at the royal palace lasted just half a *prahar* (a unit of time that is three hours long). As far as my deeds and actions were concerned, I loved them anyway. I would treat even the smallest of deeds as worship and would perform them all diligently. For me, performing my *karma* was akin to worship and I never believed in any worship other than this. But despite all my duties, I was extremely happy to be able to spare time for myself. I had kept my daily routine well in order, devoting time for exercise and enjoyment. There was not much to do except relax and enjoy life. This was exactly the kind of life I had imagined living in Dwarka. Indeed, I was now able to take strolls along the seashore twice every day. After all, it was only after an entire year that I could enjoy the privilege of being on the seashore. Sometimes, Rukmini or Bhadra would accompany me, and at other times, Satyaki or Uddhava would give me company. Sometimes, I would go for a stroll all by myself. Returning to Dwarka was beneficial in other ways too. I was once again able to exercise quite regularly because now I had plenty of time on my hands. And as you are already aware, I very well knew the art of using time wisely. I strongly believed that a good opportunity available to us at present may not necessarily be available in the future. Therefore, along with the rest of my regular activities, I would also partake of *Chhappan Bhog* once, every day. My principle was to eat fearlessly and exercise tirelessly. I had more or less kept myself away from vices such as liquor. On the other hand, bhaiya's lifestyle was in complete contrast to mine. He was overly fond of both drinking as well as eating, but did not like to trouble his body with exercise. But without exercising regularly, one can never enjoy life beyond a point. This was why bhaiya had started ageing early and appeared ten years older, even though he was only two years older to me.

I was presently enjoying life in every possible way. Since there was not much work to do, after finishing my daily routine, Rukmini and I would often play *chaupar* after meals. Bhadra did not know how to play this game, but yes, she would derive enjoyment just watching the two of us play.

Really, Rukmini's cheerfulness and Bhadra's innocence had infused so much vibrancy into my life. As for Bhadra, she was untouched by traits such as possessiveness, selfishness, obstinacy and envy. She never felt smug about the fact that she was a queen. I felt truly blessed to be married to such an embodiment of innocence. Well, now let me reveal one more aspect about myself. You already know of my love for bathing; I was used to taking a refreshing bath at least twice every day. These days, I had made it my routine to have Rukmini and Bhadra anoint my whole body with sandalwood paste after my bath. I also loved to bathe in the pool and stay immersed in it for long periods of time. You will not believe it, but I would often spend hours in the pool with Rukmini and Bhadra. These days, the King of Dwarka was truly living a grand life.

However, for how long could I continue like this? All good things do come to an end, and after all, I was a true *karmaveer*. So, when I could not think of any other activity, I began to learn combat wrestling. That was not all; suddenly, I also started paying attention to archery and mace fighting and had started training in them. I had always been quite weak in both these skills. One could say that with ample time on my hands, I was trying to become an experienced king by learning to wield the mace and the bow and arrow. With sustained practice, I was gradually turning into quite an expert at both these skills. Soon, I could even shoot arrows from a speeding chariot with great accuracy. Rukmini would often accompany me during these training sessions, and would always encourage me in these activities.

Besides, Rukmini had always wanted me to become an expert at archery. She was of the firm belief that a good king should also be an accomplished archer. And with her enthusiastic support for my hobby, the outcome of my training was bound to be exceptional. Within a few months of practice, I had become rather good at archery. To be honest, I used my archery skills mostly to impress Rukmini because she had always been my fountain of inspiration and also someone who was knowledgeable about the subject. Besides, it had become a habit of mine to constantly impress her. These days, it had become a daily routine for me to go to the forest along with Rukmini. She would be the one riding the chariot. Her joy would know no bounds whenever my arrow hit a bird in flight from a speeding chariot. She would immediately clap her hands in glee. However, if I missed my mark, she would become unhappy. Sometimes, Bhadra would also accompany us.

Although she did not have much interest in archery, she would accompany us to spend time with me. Meanwhile, I too was extremely happy with this new addition to my daily routine.

Indeed, providence had been kind to me... but for how long? This time, my own friends inadvertently became my biggest foes, marring my happiness. A single jibe from Uddhava and Satyaki was enough to stem the flow of bliss in my life. It so happened that one day we were strolling along the seashore. Rukmini and Bhadra were with me and for some reason, so were Uddhava and Satyaki. As we were all walking together, Satyaki suddenly made an inane reference to Draupadi's beauty. He then went on to give an exaggerated and detailed account of her beauty. Since the topic of the conversation itself was inappropriate, I was listening to it quietly. Besides, these rascals left no scope for me to say anything in defence. Of course, I did keep a close watch on Rukmini's expressions during the entire discussion. I could clearly make out that in her heart of hearts she had turned green with envy on hearing an account of Draupadi's beauty. Now, jealousy is evidence of poor self-confidence; in fact, it is the most warped form of the ego. It does not offer any benefit; instead, it makes you suffer unnecessarily. But this was Rukmini's own problem. My problem was about to begin with its consequence. Strolling by the oceanfront was one of my favourite pastimes. However, instead of providing enjoyment, this activity was now slowly becoming torturous for me. My condition was strange indeed. Usually fond of talking, I had become totally silent now. All I did in the name of activity was to keep my ears tuned to what Uddhava and Satyaki were saying. My eyes were focussed on Rukmini's expressions while my poor feet trundled in a mechanical manner. In other words, at present, there was no coordination between the parts of my own body. Now, with Satyaki's continuous onslaught, how could Uddhava be left behind in adding fuel to the fire? Satyaki had only let loose a tiny scorpion, but Uddhava released a mighty serpent. He outdid Satyaki in the art of storytelling. He said, "Do you know, Rukmini, all the kings of Aryavarta are now desperate to marry Draupadi! An extremely difficult archery competition has been organised for her *swayamvar*. Ever since this news has spread across Aryavarta, all the kings and princes who are pining to make her their queen have begun intensive training in archery. And, shall I

tell you another secret? Draupadi's *swayamvar* is being organised entirely under the watchful eye of our very own Kanhaiya!"

That was it! I could just as well have said goodbye to all hopes of salvation. When Rukmini heard this, her face instantly wore a despondent look. A wave of jealousy seared through her, charring her entire being in its wake. However, she immediately collected herself and tried to behave normally. But she was not an accomplished actor like me. I had already seen what I needed to. We had returned from our stroll, but the demon that had been let loose earlier had followed me home too. For most part of the evening, Rukmini spoke sparingly. Although she continued to behave normally, she was still unable to fully conceal her jealousy. In contrast to her, Bhadra was her usual self, blissfully unaware of what had just happened as she had not understood much from the conversation between Satyaki, Uddhava and Rukmini. Many a time, unnecessary wisdom or intelligence can also become a cause for trouble. This was precisely what had happened in Rukmini's case. The simple-minded Bhadra was better off compared to her; at least she was happy.

Nonetheless, I slept off these thoughts and the next morning, prepared to leave for the forest for my archery practice. After all, this was our routine. However, Rukmini was not ready yet; not only that, she refused to come along. I could see that Rukmini had taken Uddhava and Satyaki's jokes to heart. She had excused herself saying she was unwell, but I knew her only too well to gauge the real reason behind her refusal to accompany me. Besides, I was the kind of lover who could tell what was going on in his beloved's heart simply by the way her heart beat. However, at present, with her refusing to accompany me, I also lost interest in going to the forest. As it is, I did not have much interest in weapons. But for some strange reason, I felt like teaching her a lesson—or to put it better—teasing her. And in order to do that, it was important that I left for the forest. When did I ever turn my back on duty? And when the duty held the promise of pleasure and enjoyment, there was no question of withdrawing oneself from it. So, not only did I get ready to go to the forest, but while leaving, I said to her teasingly, "Alright, if you are not feeling well, I will go alone today. But it is necessary that I continue my archery practice at all costs." Saying this, I left for the forest with much enthusiasm without sparing her a glance. This became my ritual for the next three to four days. She would refuse to

accompany me on some pretext or the other, whereas I would act enthusiastically and continue going to the forest for my practice sessions.

However, my plan backfired. I did not derive great fun in teasing her; on the contrary, my attempts to tease her had saddened her even more. Consequently, Rukmini, who had just recovered from her grief to return to her normal self, once again began to remain aloof. How did this happen? I merely wanted to tease her, not become the cause of her sorrow. Finally, with no solution in sight, I surrendered myself to a dispirited Rukmini. That day onwards, I not only stopped going to the forest but also ended my practice of archery. In this way, a single joke by Uddhava and Satyaki had put a stop to my archery lessons. The wicked duo had together put an end to a king's desire of becoming an accomplished archer.

In the course of all these activities and developments, nearly six to seven months had elapsed since my return to Dwarka. Needless to say, during this entire period, I had received much-needed rest and enjoyment. Everything was going well in Dwarka too. Discipline had also been restored. But then, good times never last. There were only three months to go for Draupadi's *swayamvar*. Consequently, my mind was occupied with the grand task, and my contemplation was mostly engaged in planning Draupadi's *swayamvar*. Indeed, to maintain peace in Aryavarta, it was imperative that the *swayamvar* be conducted as per my plan.

While I was pre-occupied with the *swayamvar*, Rukmini's attitude towards me remained unchanged. In an attempt to appease her, I had also stopped my archery practice, but Rukmini had not yet stepped out of her despondency. Although she was trying her best to appear normal, fear gnawed at her from within, affecting her health. It pained me to see her in this state, but there was little I could do to alleviate her sadness, because the root cause of her trouble was her ego. And the sorrow triggered by the ego cannot be alleviated without destroying the ego itself. It was clear that Rukmini had become insecure because of Draupadi's beauty. In this regard, she had never found my intentions to be trustworthy. To add to it, my enthusiasm regarding my archery practice had made her even more restless. And as if this was not enough, the reins of the *swayamvar* were entirely in my hands. All of this had convinced her that I had already made plans to marry Draupadi. She was of the firm belief that once I married a woman as



beautiful and impressive as Draupadi, I would no longer pay attention to her, and she would be reduced to being a mere maidservant, in spite of being the queen of Dwarka.

Now, if you consider this situation, she was not entirely wrong in thinking so because Rukmini's thinking stemmed from her parochial mindset. Ordinary people are ignorant of the ways of extraordinary individuals. Rukmini must have certainly thought that if Krishna could become infatuated with women such as Kubja and the *gopis* of Vrindavan, he could easily become enamoured of Draupadi's beauty. Oh well! According to her intelligence and logic, she was right in thinking so. However, the result of mulling over these thoughts was that, she had now begun to think about Pradyumna on a regular basis. Now, an intelligent person like me was unable to fathom the connection between the jealousy caused by Draupadi and the memories of Pradyumna. However, I possessed a unique trait that whenever something was unclear to me, I would become extremely cautious. I was of the opinion that if something is beyond one's understanding, it is an indication that the other person is not behaving naturally. This clearly means that the other person has begun to play games with your mind. So, I began to listen with great care to whatever Rukmini was saying, but still could not understand what was going on.

It was only a matter of a few days; I did not have to wait long. Unable to hold herself back, Rukmini finally spoke her heart out. She wanted me to set out in search of Pradyumna. She wanted to use this as an excuse to keep me away from Draupadi's *swayamvar*. Her plan had become crystal clear to me. However, I did not reveal to her that I had understood her strategy. Instead, I tried reasoning with her in order to chase away her sorrow; after all, she was my beloved. Even though I could not fulfil her irrational desire, I could at least make her realise the illogical nature of such a desire.

Finding the opportune moment, I became the ardent lover while retiring to bed the following night. Placing her head tenderly on my lap and stroking it lovingly, I began with the intention of making her understand, "To be honest, Rukmini, even I miss Pradyumna terribly. After all, he is our first child. Besides, I have not even seen him. And as far as searching him out is concerned, where should I look for him? This work belongs to our spies. And in spite of searching for him tirelessly for a year and a half, they

haven't been able to locate his whereabouts. If there is some information about the kidnapper, no matter how great a demon or king he is, I will immediately wage war on him and bring Pradyumna back. However, at present, there is no definite direction in which I can begin looking for him. And when your action lacks direction, it is better to accept the circumstances. I have, therefore, forgotten Pradyumna, and it is better that you forget him too."

Now, since my argument was direct and clear, Rukmini understood it; she even became quiet. However, she was unable to return to her normal self because her real pain was not Pradyumna, but Draupadi, who was still standing resolutely before her, in her anxious mind. And her constraint was that she could not talk to me about this subject. We had set a certain level of exchange between us and there was no question of slipping from that level. I also feigned ignorance and carried on as normally as possible. In short, our relationship was based on prudence and honesty. She had brought up the subject of Pradyumna and I had shown her the impracticality of looking for him.

Consequently, she too maintained the level of our mutual behaviour and refrained from asking questions in return. In fact, there was nothing that could compel her to ask me questions or interject when I talked to her. So, the matter ended right there. However, her uneasiness persisted, because at this moment, she was trying to coax me indirectly into doing her bidding. Now, this was a problem that she herself had created and there was nothing I could do about it.

Amidst all these complications, one day, a messenger arrived from Panchal, carrying an invitation from King Dhrupad for Draupadi's *swayamvar*. Even though the *swayamvar* was still two months away, considering its significance, this time period was barely enough. The messenger had also brought a personal letter from the king in which he had requested me to come to Panchal as quickly as possible. Since I valued the importance of time, I also knew that the future of the whole of Aryavarta depended upon this *swayamvar*. With the arrival of the messenger, I shifted my contemplation from Rukmini and focussed it on Draupadi's *swayamvar*. Indeed, it was a huge challenge for me to conduct this *swayamvar* according to the plan I had in mind. And I already knew that this

*swayamvar* would test my diligence to the extreme. So, whether I liked it or not, my mind was preoccupied with the *swayamvar*. In short, I considered it my duty to ensure that Draupadi did not marry Jarasandha or any other wicked or powerful king. I knew that in case of such an eventuality, it would be impossible to avert a war between Hastinapur and that king, for the only condition of this marriage was to seek retribution from Drona. Under these circumstances, the Pandavas would have to come out of their hiding place and protect their *Acharya*. The Kauravas too, would find it impossible to distance themselves from this war. Most importantly, presently, these people were not so evolved so as to distinguish between a noble and an evil *guru* and leave Drona to face the consequences of his actions. Besides, several other kingdoms were also well-wishers of Hastinapur. And how can I forget Karna, who was also a well-wisher. On the other hand, Jarasandha had the support of almost all the kings of Aryavarta. In other words, this would result in the ‘war of wars’. There would be massive destruction. No, no! As long as I was present, I could not let such massive devastation take place. I was determined to perform this great deed in order to justify my human birth. I did not want to lose this grand opportunity that had come my way, at any cost.

Therefore, I wholeheartedly offered myself to the task of organising and managing Draupadi’s *swayamvar*. But in order to take care of such an important task, I had to reach Panchal at least a month prior to the ceremony. This meant that I needed to leave for Panchal after twenty days. That was not a problem as it was a physical activity. However, the bigger challenge was to prepare myself mentally for such an onerous task. It was necessary to employ my mind, intelligence and consciousness, and become completely immersed in the task of conducting Draupadi’s *swayamvar*. To organise this *swayamvar* according to my desire and in the presence of so many reputed kings of Aryavarta certainly demanded the highest level of concentration, although, no one could match up to me when it came to concentrating on a particular task. Indeed, concentration is governed by a single principle—forget everything else except the task at hand. So, in the span of a moment, I discarded all thoughts of Dwarka, Rukmini and everything else. Now, I was fully ready to tackle this momentous task.

Meanwhile, the invitation for the *swayamvar* had brought with it a trail of uninvited trouble. The invitation alone had increased Rukmini’s restlessness

by a thousand times, so much so that just after a few days of receiving the invitation, she made a final attempt to hoodwink me. That night, she had dressed in my favourite sari. She had even prepared my favourite *Chhappan Bhog*. In other words, she was well equipped with all the weapons necessary to please and persuade me. On the other hand, in my innocence, I was completely unaware of her deadly intentions; on the contrary, I was delighted by her behaviour, thinking that she had had a change of heart. I was quite clever, but never cautious when it came to personal relationships. It is simple... one has to be shrewd when dealing with outsiders, but with friends and family, the fun lies in being innocent. And in my innocence, I was overjoyed to see Rukmini in a happy state of mind after so many days. Indeed, what could make me happier than a cheerful Rukmini? I was beaming with joy, and the smile that broke out on my face on seeing her don my favourite yellow silk sari was indescribable. Besides, she even fed me *Chhappan Bhog*. I gobbled it all up; after so many days, the lover was receiving the love of his beloved. So, how could he possibly control himself? After the sumptuous meal, I immediately felt lazy. I had almost begun to lie down on the bed when Rukmini began to massage my feet. I felt extremely content on seeing this sudden change in her. I thought to myself, 'Well, at least I will no longer have to worry about Rukmini while trying to accomplish the dangerous task of the *swayamvar*.' Of course, this was my thinking, but Rukmini had planned something serious. After some time, while still massaging my feet, she said in a worried tone, "My lord, you seem quite tired today."

I was startled to hear this, because I was not tired at all. Still, I remained positive, thinking that it was probably her love for me, which was making it seem to her that I was tired. So, I took her hand in mine lovingly and said, "What are you saying, my love? I have only been resting in Dwarka for the past eight months."

A bit saddened, she said, "No! I think you are in dire need of rest." Now, what was this all about? However, before I could think or respond, she continued, "I was thinking, why not send bhaiya as Dwarka's representative to Draupadi's *swayamvar*? Why do you have to trouble yourself unnecessarily every time?"

It was only now that I could decipher the secret behind her yellow silk sari, the *Chhappan Bhog*, and the loving massage she gave me. Her real aim was to somehow stop me from attending Draupadi's *swayamvar*. Honestly, I felt like laughing at her naïve attempts, but I controlled my laughter and spoke with the utmost gravity, "My dear, what you are saying is true. But I have taken the entire responsibility of the *swayamvar* upon myself. Only I am aware of what needs to be done and when it needs to be done. King Dhrupad has placed his trust in me. You know quite well that I am not one to rest until I complete every task of the person who places his trust in me, regardless of the circumstances."

Now, what could Rukmini possibly say in reply to this? However, she had not thrown away her weapons entirely and picking up the gauntlet once again, she made a final attempt. She said, "Alright. In that case, take bhaiya along with you. This will lighten your load a little."

Rukmini's line of thinking was correct. If bhaiya were to accompany me, then perhaps, it would not be easy for me to marry Draupadi, for, bhaiya would certainly object to the marriage. However, I knew precisely whom to take along with me and where and when. Do you think I would make a mistake here? To be honest, Rukmini's fear surprised me. This was surely a sign that she did not trust me. On the other hand, I was chuckling inwardly, amused by the whole affair, though I maintained a serious expression. That was not all, with the same grave expression, I gave her a practical answer, "My dear, you are well aware that under the present circumstances, it is not advisable for both bhaiya and me to be away from Dwarka at the same time."

Rukmini herself was knowledgeable about official matters and politics. So, there was no question of her raising unnecessary concerns. In a way, she had no recourse but to keep quiet in the face of my logical answers. I felt relieved that I had successfully quelled all her attempts, but seeing no way out, she made a final attempt. Using her *Brahmastra*, she said, "But my lord, I am pregnant. Don't you think that you should avoid going to the *swayamvar* for my sake and that of our unborn child? What if this child of ours also meets the same fate as Pradyumna?"

Oh! She seemed to be prepared with a series of traps. Well, so what? I was born with the unique talent of being able to snap free of traps. And this time around, I gave her a rather lengthy philosophical lecture in order to silence her. I said, “My dear, your pregnancy is wonderful news, not just for us, but for the whole of Dwarka as well. However, to worry about the future of the child in the present is meaningless. Besides, I cannot let clouds of war hover over the whole of Aryavarta for the sake of my child; I can never be so selfish. You very well know that such petty attachment can never prevent me from performing my duty.” It was only then that Rukmini seemed to have mentally accepted defeat. Her fears were not allayed but she had accepted that all her attempts to evade them were useless. Come to think of it, even Bhadra was pregnant at present. Perhaps, this time, on returning to Dwarka, I would get to see not one, but two newborn babies. However, this matter belonged to the future, and hence it was best left to the future.

So, while on one hand, these familial problems were troubling me, on the other, I was preparing to leave for Panchal. Seeing the enthusiasm with which I was preparing for my journey, naturally, Rukmini became more and more distressed. According to me, her insecurity was gradually turning into a problem with no solution. I diverted my attention away from her and focussed entirely on Draupadi’s *swayamvar*. In the midst of all this, finally, the day of my departure arrived. I was taking Uddhava and Satyaki along with me. Additionally, fifty soldiers and servants were accompanying us. Grandfather, my parents, bhaiya, my friends and many other distinguished people had accompanied us to the gates of Dwarka to bid us farewell. The sight of so many people gathered in the wee hours of the morning was really encouraging, but here too, the trouble was that while Bhadra bid me a loving farewell, Rukmini’s love was lost somewhere in her worries of Draupadi. Really, she was fretting unnecessarily over this. I always wondered why a person is unable to forsake his ego despite undergoing so many problems because of it. Even if Rukmini’s worst fear turned out to be true, that is, if Draupadi were to come to Dwarka as my queen, then Bhadra was likely to be in a position worse than Rukmini. Yet Bhadra did not show the slightest hint of sadness, because her ego was weak. However, Rukmini did come to see me off, albeit half-heartedly. Thus, with the blessings of the family and the people of Dwarka, we commenced our journey to Panchal on

a positive note...a momentous journey that held the promise to tilt the scales of power in the whole of Aryavarta.

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- [1]. A practice in ancient India of choosing a husband from a list of suitors
  - [2]. Bhagvad Puran, Part – 10, Chapter – 56, Verse – 12
  - [3]. *Yojanas*: ancient unit of measurement of distance. 1 *yojana* is approximately 12 km or 8 miles
  - [4]. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Chapter – 55, Verse – 102-108
  - [5]. Shrimad Bhagvad Gita, Chapter – 3, Verse – 20
  - [6]. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Chapter – 52, Verse – 25-31; Vishnu Puran, Part – 5, Chapter – 23, Verse – 9-10
  - [7]. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Chapter – 56, Verse – 1-9
  - [8]. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Chapter – 57, Verse – 31-33
  - [9]. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Chapter – 57, Verse – 34-36
  - [10]. Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Chapter – 3, Verse – 26
  - [11]. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Chapter – 56, Verse – 18-19; Garg Samhita, Dwarka Khand, Chapter – 2, Verse – 9-10
  - [12]. Shrimad Bhagvad Gita, Chapter – 18, Verse – 65
  - [13]. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Chapter – 58, Verse – 80
  - [14]. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Chapter – 58, Verse – 81
  - [15]. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Chapter – 58, Verse – 79
  - [16]. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Chapter – 58, Verse – 83
  - [17]. An auspicious day for new beginnings such as a marriage
  - [18]. Bhagavad Puran, Part – 10, Chapter – 52, Verse – 26-43
  - [19]. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Chapter – 59, Verse – 44; Bhagavad Puran, Part – 10, Chapter – 54, Verse – 55; Garg Samhita, Dwarka Khand, Chapter – 6, Verse – 6-9; Vishnu Puran, Part – 5, Chapter – 26, Verse – 6
  - [20]. Bhagvad Puran, Part – 10, Chapter – 54, Verse – 34-35; Garg Samhita, Dwarka Khand, Chapter – 7, Verse – 27-29; Vishnu Puran, Part – 5, Chapter – 26, Verse – 9-10
  - [21]. Shrimad Bhagvad Gita, Chapter – 3, Verse – 6
  - [22]. Mahabharat, Aadi Parv, Jatugrah Parv, Chapter – 142, Verse – 1-3
  - [23]. *Tilak*: A spot of coloured powder or paste applied on the forehead as a mark of auspiciousness
  - [24]. *Aarti*: A ceremony in which lights made from camphor-soaked wicks are offered to pay obeisance to a person or deity
  - [25]. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Chapter – 60, Verse – 37; Bhagavat Puran, Part – 10, Chapter – 55, Verse – 2; Garg Samhita, Dwarka Khand, Chapter – 8, Verse – 23; Vishnu Puran, Part – 5, Chapter – 26, Verse – 12
  - [26]. Mahabharat, Aadi Parv, Jatugrah Parv, Chapter – 155, Verse – 5-10
  - [27]. *Gunja*: Bright red and black bead-like seeds
  - [28]. Shrimad Bhagvad Gita, Chapter – 6, Verse – 16-17

- [29]. The first month of the Hindu calendar
- [30]. Varna refers to the Hindu caste system, which is classified into four types: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra
- [31]. Dharmaraj: A righteous king.
- [32]. Bhagvad Puran, Part – 10, Chapter – 58, Verse – 56-57
- [33]. Yama: Yama or Yamarāja is the [god of death](#), belonging to an early stratum of [Vedic mythology](#).