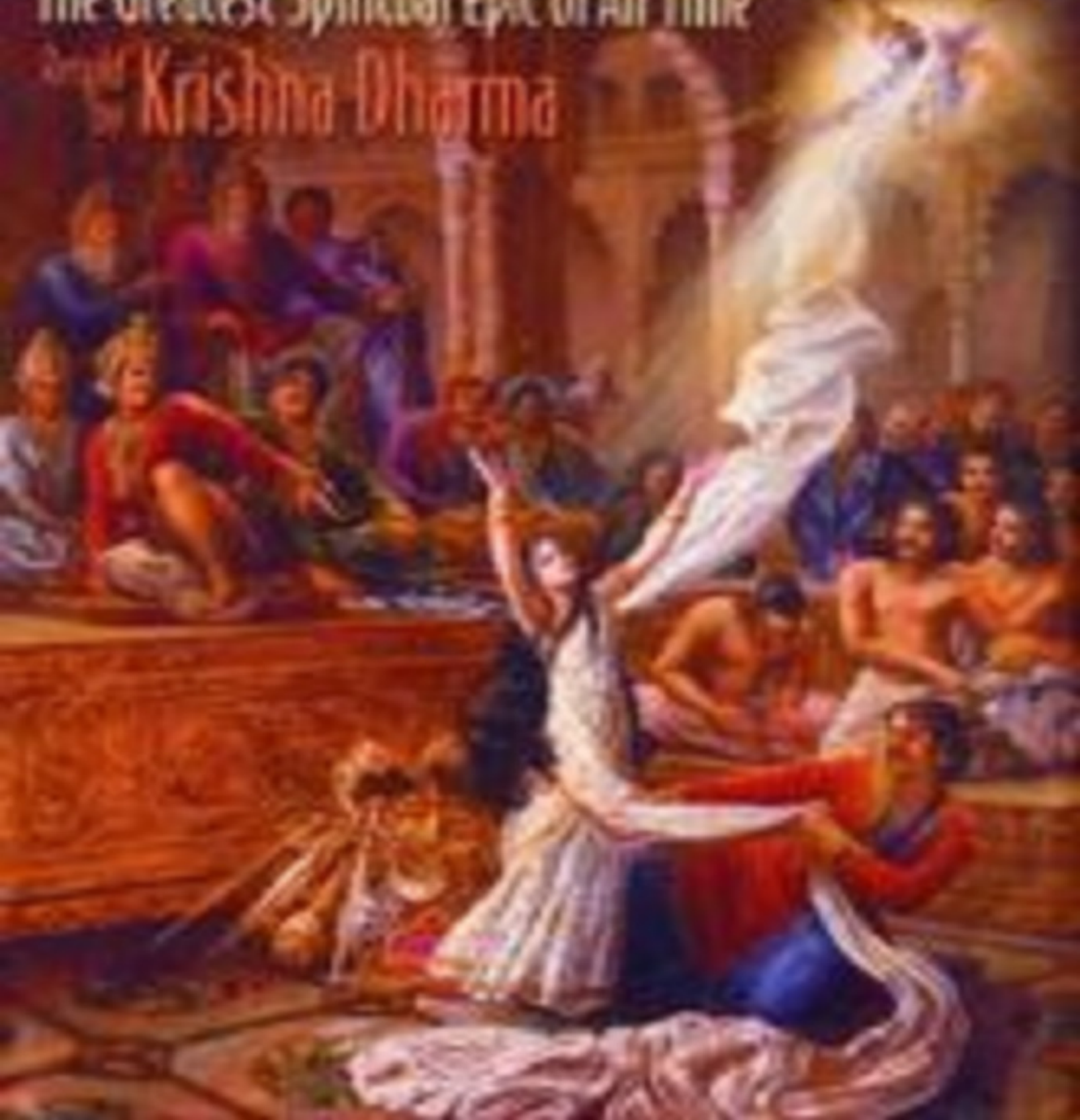


MAHABHARATA

The Greatest Spiritual Epic of All Time

and
Krishna Dharma



CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[Part One: The Die is Cast.](#)

- [1. Birth of the Kuru Elders](#)
- [2. Pandu Cursed and Blessed](#)
- [3. The Pandavas Come to Hastinapura](#)
- [4. Duryodhana Begins His Evil Schemes](#)
- [5. The Martial Exhibition](#)
- [6. The Kauravas' Hatred Grows](#)
- [7. The Pandavas Sent Away](#)
- [8. Ghatotkacha Born and Baka Slain](#)
- [9. The Gandharva Angaraparna](#)
- [10. Draupadi's Svayamvara](#)
- [11. The Pandavas Wed Draupadi](#)
- [12. Dhritarastra Gives Half the Kingdom](#)
- [13. Arjuna's Pilgrimage](#)
- [14. Burning the Khandava Forest](#)
- [15. The Celestial Hall](#)
- [16. Mighty Jarasandha](#)
- [17. The Rajasuya Sacrifice](#)
- [18. Duryodhana's Envy](#)
- [19. The Dice Game](#)
- [20. Draupadi Dragged to the Assembly](#)
- [21. The Pandavas Exiled](#)
- [22. Into the Forest](#)
- [23. Dhritarastra's Anxiety](#)
- [24. Yudhisthira's Moral Instructions](#)

- [25. Arjuna Goes to Heaven](#)
- [26. To Badarika Ashram](#)
- [27. Bhima Meets Hanuman](#)
- [28. Kuvera Offended](#)
- [29. Arjuna Returns](#)
- [30. Krishna Visits the Pandavas](#)
- [31. The Fight with the Gandharvas](#)
- [32. Sage Durvasa](#)
- [33. Jayadratha Kidnaps Draupadi](#)
- [34. The Lake of Death](#)
- [35. Into Virata](#)
- [36. Draupadi Again Insulted](#)
- [37. The Kurus Attack Virata](#)
- [38. Arjuna Encounters the Kurus](#)
- [39. The Battle at Virata](#)
- [40. Out of Exile](#)
- [41. The Kings Choose Sides](#)
- [42. Dhrtarastra's Message](#)
- [43. Anxiety for the Blind King](#)
- [44. Panic Among the Kauravas](#)
- [45. The Pandavas Consult Krisjna](#)
- [46. Krsna's Peace Mission](#)
- [47. Duryodhana's Obstinacy](#)
- [48. To Kurukshetra](#)

[Part Two: Deliverance.](#)

- [1. The Armies Prepare](#)
- [2. Shikhandi's Destiny](#)

- [3. Into Position](#)
- [4. The Bhagavad-gita](#)
- [5. The War Begins](#)
- [6. Yudhisthira's Fear](#)
- [7. Bhishma Wreaks Havoc](#)
- [8. The Rakshasas Show Their Power](#)
- [9. Bhishma's Vow](#)
- [10. Krishna Protects His Devotee](#)
- [11. Yudhisthira Approaches Bhishma](#)
- [12. The Fall of Bhishma](#)
- [13. Drona in Command](#)
- [14. "Yudhisthira Will Be Captured"](#)
- [15. Abhimanyu's Incomparable Power](#)
- [16. Arjuna's Great Vow](#)
- [17. Arjuna Slaughters the Kauravas](#)
- [18. Krishna's Mystic Power](#)
- [19. The Kauravas Rally](#)
- [20. The Night Battle](#)
- [21. Dhristadyumna Encounters Drona](#)
- [22. The Narayana Weapon](#)
- [23. Karna in Command](#)
- [24. Karna's Prowess](#)
- [25. Arjuna Encounters Karna](#)
- [26. Salva Leads the Kauravas](#)
- [27. Bhima Fights Duryodhana](#)
- [28. Massacre by Night](#)
- [29. Ashvatthama Punished](#)
- [30. Yudhisthira's Sorrow](#)

[31. Bhishma's Instructions](#)

[32. Krishna Returns to Dwaraka](#)

[33. Yudhisthira's Ashvamedha Sacrifice](#)

[34. Vidura Instructs Dhritarastra](#)

[35. The Pandavas Retire](#)

[Appendix 1: Karna's Birth](#)

[Appendix 2: Karna Cursed](#)

[Appendix 3: Bhishma's Heavenly Origin](#)

[Appendix 4: Questions Posed by Dharma to Yudhisthira](#)

[Appendix 5: Brief Biographies of Main Characters](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[About the Author](#)

Introduction

I expect that most people taking the time to read this introduction are newcomers to the text. For those already familiar with the story, no introduction is needed. They will want to immediately enter the deep waters of *Mahabharata*, waters that are at once soothing and stimulating to both heart and mind. If this is your first reading, however, although it is a clich  , I have to say, "Welcome to the wonderful world of the *Mahabharata*."

Welcome to a world where gods and heroes walk the earth, where virtuous kings lead the people, where our lifetimes are seen as simply one step along an eternal path leading to worlds of unending bliss. Here is a story that will enthrall you and at the same time deliver profound lessons about every aspect of life. It was first composed in Sanskrit some five thousand years ago by Vyasadeva, a mystic residing in the Himalayas. Its central theme is the true story of the lives of five powerful rulers, the Pandavas. Woven throughout the story are other tales. We meet sages, warrior kings, and a host of other colorful personalities. Among them is Krishna, a divine incarnation and, as you will discover, the pivotal character in the book. It is due to Krishna's presence that the work is revered as a sacred text. It does, in fact, contain the Bhagavad-gita, which Krishna spoke and which has become a spiritual treatise still read daily by millions of people (as indeed is the *Mahabharata* itself).

My rendition is not an academic one, nor is it unabridged. Rather, I have written it in a dramatic style in an attempt to bring my readers into the action and to help them experience the majestic mood of ancient Vedic times. In my experience, even readers who strongly desire to read the *Mahabharata* find themselves unable to go through the lengthy texts of unabridged scholarly translations that are available. I have therefore attempted to make the text as accessible as possible to all kinds of readers, but without sacrificing any of the essential details of the story. I have remained faithful to the translations to which I had access, and I believe my book is as authentic a rendition as you are likely to find.

I will not delay your reading further. I have written a note at the end giving more background information, and you will also find glossaries and appendices delineating the *Mahabharata*'s many characters. Now I will leave you to immerse yourself in the great ocean of the Mahabharata. All I can add

is that the book has captivated me with its sublime message, making my life richer and fuller. I pray that it may give you as much pleasure as it has given me in my many readings.

dharme charthe cha kame cha
mokshe cha bharatarshabha
yad ihasti tad anyatrayan
nehasti na tat kvachit

"In the realm of *dharmā*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*, (ethics, economic development, pleasure, and liberation), whatever is found in this epic may be found elsewhere, but what is not found here will be impossible to find anywhere else." *Mahabharata*, Adi Parva 56.33)

Krishna Dharma September, 1998 and December 2005

Part One: The Die is Cast

Chapter One. Birth of the Kuru Elders

Ambika peered curiously into the mirror as her maidservants finished adorning her in preparation for the nuptial bed. She had lost none of her beauty despite months of mourning. Her skin was flawless and as white as milk. Curling jet-black hair framed her oval face and bow-like eyebrows arched over her black eyes, which resembled two lotus petals. No wonder Vichitravirya had been so enamored of her, rarely leaving her side. While he was alive her maidservants had adorned her each evening, in case her lord had desired to approach her. As Ambika again put on her ornaments and fine dress her mind drifted sadly back to the days with her husband. After having lain in that great hero's powerful arms, how strange to now be preparing to meet another man!

Ambika balked at the prospect and grew increasingly restless. She dismissed the maidservants as they fussed around her. She needed to be alone to think. When her husband had died so untimely she had wanted to ascend his funeral pyre and follow him to the heavens. She could not imagine living without him. But Satyawati, the queen mother, had restrained her—she still had a duty to perform. Despite the fact that they had enjoyed so much pleasure together, after seven years of marriage they had not produced a child. Without leaving an heir the king was guilty of neglecting a prime duty. How then would he be able to reach the higher regions?

Satyavati had convinced Ambika and her co-wife Ambalika to stay and fulfill their husband's duty and thereby secure the welfare of his soul. The scriptures allowed that in times of emergency a man's elder brother could conceive children in his wife if he was unable. This was such an emergency. Ambika felt more peaceful. Her union with Bhishma would not be a betrayal of the love she felt for her husband, but a service to him and to the kingdom. She stopped her restless pacing and lay down on the ivory bed in bashful anticipation. Bhishma was a powerful and righteous man. Who better to sire the future king? She should ensure that he felt completely honored by her.

There was a knock at the door. Ambika looked up shyly. The door opened and a tall man entered. Ambika's blood turned cold. This was not Bhishma. There in her bedchamber stood a wizened, ugly and filthy ascetic.

His matted locks hung about his gaunt face and he stared at her with fierce eyes. His teeth were only slightly less black than his complexion. Around his waist was a soiled loin cloth, his only garment. His hairy body was encrusted with dirt. Without any delay he came toward her and sat by her side. She recoiled from the foul stench emanating from his body. Who was he? She knew of no brother-in-law other than Bhishma. She prayed to the gods that she might lose consciousness, for how could she endure this fearful man's touch? As he put his hands on her dress she closed her eyes, barely able to repress her urge to scream.

* * *

Satyavati blamed herself. If it had not been for her father's greed, Hastinapura would not be in such a precarious situation now. Here sat the powerful Bhishma, son of the goddess Ganga. There was no greater hero on earth. As the eldest son of the righteous King Shantanu, he was the natural heir to Hastinapura's throne, but the kingdom's good fortune had been thwarted by her foolish father on her behalf.

She could still vividly picture the fateful events. It had seemed like any other day. She was sitting by the river's edge, waiting to ferry travelers across. Her father, leader of the fishermen, had given her that duty so she would gain the religious merits born of service to travelers. On this particular day the emperor of the world, the mighty Shantanu, had been hunting in the nearby forests and was seduced by the alluring fragrance that emanated from her body. Having sought out the source of that celestial scent, he had become bewitched by her beauty. From his gaze it was obvious he desired to marry her. Upon hearing that she was still unmarried, he had hurried to her father's house to ask for her hand.

When she herself had arrived home, she saw Shantanu leaving their humble hut in dismay. Her father had stipulated that he could only marry her if he promised the throne to her son. But the emperor already had a qualified son in Devavrata, who he had already consecrated as the prince regent. The king was not prepared, simply for his own pleasure, to wrong his worthy and beloved son. Thus he left, struggling to contain his heart's aching desire.

Satyavati too had pined for many days, praying to the gods to arrange her union with the king. Then one day, unknown to Shantanu, Devavrata

appeared at their hut to solicit her hand on the emperor's behalf. Her father repeated his condition and Devavrata agreed. He would never ascend Hastinapura's throne; the crown could go to Satyawati's children. Still her father hesitated. He had heard enough about court intrigues to know that if Devavrata relinquished the throne still his children might feel cheated and oppose Satyawati's son. The fisher-king voiced his doubts. Hearing them, Devavrata uttered a terrible vow. He would never accept a wife but would maintain life-long celibacy. In order to secure his father's happiness, he said, he was ready to renounce all personal enjoyment. Satyawati recalled how when Devavrata made that vow, flowers had rained from the sky and a thunderous voice had sounded from the heavens: "From this day his name shall be Bhishma, one of a great vow."

Satyavati looked at Bhishma now as he sat respectfully before her. She spoke his name and he looked up, ready to execute her command. Maybe she could yet convince him. He had always been obedient to her, even more so since Shantanu's death.

"My dear Bhishma, please think again," the queen said as she pulled her fine silk sari over her plaited hair. "You made your vow simply to secure the interests of your father and me. I now absolve you of that vow. You have always been fixed in virtue. Please consider our present situation. Just as you made your vow to serve your elders, you should now serve them by acting for the welfare of our line. Surely this is your duty. Ascend Hastinapura's throne and beget powerful sons to secure this ancient kingdom's future."

Bhishma shook his head in exasperation. "Mother, please do not ask me to stray from the path of truth. It can never be as you suggest. The sun may renounce its splendor, water its wetness and the sky its sound, but I will never renounce truth."

Bhishma asked Satyawati to consider the deeper cause of the unexpected emergency facing the kingdom. It was due to all-powerful destiny. How else could it have come to pass that although she had borne two powerful sons, both had died without producing an heir to the throne? All the kings on earth had paid tribute to Satyawati's eldest son, Chitrangada. His reputation for prowess in battle and unwavering virtue had reached the heavens. It was thus that the mighty king of the Gandharvas, who bore the same name, became envious upon hearing his glories. The jealous Gandharva could not tolerate another famous and powerful Chitrangada. He came to

earth and challenged his rival to battle. The battle raged for years but in the end the valorous son of Satyavati was slain and the proud Gandharva returned triumphant to the heavens.

Then the powerful Vichitravirya ascended the throne, but died from an illness after only seven years of ruling. Neither he nor his brother left a child.

Bhishma rose and looked out of the latticed window. A full moon illuminated the palace gardens, casting a silver light across the broad sandstone paths where Vichitravirya had loved to walk with his queens. He turned back to Satyavati and continued, "Mother, we cannot thwart Providence by acting immorally. In all circumstances a virtuous man acts in obedience to God's will. Auspiciousness and victory always attend virtue, while grief is the sure result of unrighteousness. Therefore, I cannot abandon my vow."

Satyavati sat silently. Bhishma's adherence to truth and virtue was unshakeable. He had spoken well. She bowed her head as he went on, "In any event, Mother, it seems destiny has provided us with a solution quite in keeping with religion. If the great sage Vyasadeva produces offspring upon the queens, we shall be saved. Let us pray that everything goes well."

Satyavati nodded. It was she who had summoned the powerful rishi Vyasadeva, her first-born son. It had taken some courage for her to reveal how she had given birth to that sage even in her maidenhood. Out of fear of public censure she had hidden this fact for years, but she still remembered how the celestial rishi Parasara had one day come onto her boat and begotten the great Vyasadeva in her womb. Parasara had told her that Providence had destined her for greatness. He was giving her an illustrious son who would play an important part in that great destiny. Parasara had then granted her the boon of keeping her maidenhood even after union with him—and it was he who had blessed her with the celestial fragrance which had captivated Shantanu.

Satyavati crossed the mosaic floor to the golden water pitcher on a nearby table. Her throat was dry with anxiety. She poured herself a cup of the cool water and then returned to her silk covered seat. Hundreds of bright oil lamps lit up the great hall where she sat. Along the high walls hung fine paintings of her ancestors, going back to the mighty King Kuru. All of them had been powerful emperors of the globe. Surely the Kuru dynasty would not

end now. The queen said, "I have been praying for the kingdom ever since my sons' demise. I have faith that Vyasadeva will prove a shelter to us all. But seeing the adverse fate afflicting us, I still cannot help but be fearful."

Satyavati felt deeply for the kingdom and for Shantanu's line. She still acted out of her love for the departed monarch. It was certainly providential that Parasara had given her Vyasadeva as her son. Vyasadeva had grown to maturity immediately upon his birth and had left her, saying, "Dear Mother, should you ever be in difficulty simply think of me. I shall come to you at once from wherever I may be."

As Bhishma and Satyavati spoke, Ambika's door opened and Vyasadeva emerged. Bhishma bowed at his feet and Satyavati quickly asked, "Will the princess bear an accomplished son?"

Raising his hand in blessing as Bhishma stood up, the sage replied to Satyavati, "The queen will bear a son who will be as strong as ten thousand elephants. He will be vastly intelligent, wise and prosperous. He will have a hundred sons. But, pious lady, for the fault of his mother he will be born blind."

Satyavati was shocked. "How can one who is blind become a king of the Kuru race?" she asked.

Vyasadeva explained that he had gone to Ambika prepared to beget a son worthy in every way, but the queen had closed her eyes in fear when she saw him. When agreeing to produce an heir to the throne, the sage had stipulated that the queen must accept him in his unpleasant condition. Satyavati had summoned him from the Himalayas and he had come to her directly from his practice of harsh asceticism. He kept himself unwashed and unkempt as a part of his ascetic vows. He said, "I would have come to the queen in a handsome form decked with jewels if she had first accepted a religious vow for one full year. But you asked that she conceive immediately. Therefore I stated my conditions in place of the religious vow."

Satyavati cursed herself for her impatience. She had not wanted to wait. Without an heir to the throne the kingdom was in constant danger. In a land without a monarch even the rains would not fall regularly and the gods would not be propitious. Therefore she had begged Vyasadeva to approach the queen at once. Now this! A blind son. How could he ever become the king?

"You must give another child to the Kuru race," she implored.
"Please approach the other queen, Ambalika."

Vyasadeva looked upon his worried mother with compassion. He soothed her fears. He promised he would soon return again to beget another child. She need only summon him when Ambalika was prepared to receive him. Vyasadeva then disappeared from the spot. Satyavati turned and spoke to Bhishma. "This is what I feared. I must now ask Ambalika to receive the sage. I pray that she will be more successful than her sister."

* * *

Within a month, Vyasadeva was called back. Once again he came from his austerities and appeared in a repulsive condition. Satyavati led him to Ambalika's bedchamber and the sage at once entered. Even though she had been warned by her sister what to expect, the princess was still struck with horror when the grim ascetic approached her. She turned pale with fright, although she kept her eyes open as she conceived. Vyasadeva then said to her, "As you have turned pale upon seeing me, so your son shall also be pale. He will therefore be named Pandu, the 'pale one'." The rishi then left the room. He met his mother outside and she asked about the child. Vyasadeva replied to her that a greatly powerful boy would be born but he would be pale.

Satyavati looked querulously at the sage. The child would be pale? What did that mean? Something was still not right. And in any event, even if everything was fine with this child, with only one qualified prince the kingdom would still be in a precarious position. Vyasadeva should try once more. She asked him to again approach Ambika. This time the princess, knowing what to expect, would keep her eyes open. Vyasadeva smiled and replied, "Be it so. I shall return again shortly after she has delivered her first child."

In due course of time Ambika gave birth to a blind child who was named Dhritarastra. Ambalika delivered a pale child who was nevertheless effulgent and endowed with many auspicious marks on his body, and who was named Pandu in accord with Vyasadeva's words. Soon after, the sage again came to the palace in order to approach Ambika for a second time.

The queen was alarmed at the prospect of meeting again with the

terrible-looking rishi. The thought was unbearable. She went to a maidservant who was an intimate friend and asked that she take her place. Giving the servant her own ornaments and adorning her with the finest robes, she had her wait in the bedchamber for the sage.

Although he knew everything, the rishi entered the chamber as before. As soon as she saw the exalted sage the maidservant rose up respectfully. She bowed at his feet and had him sit down comfortably. After washing his feet, the girl offered him varieties of delicious food. Vyasadeva was pleased. After laying with the girl, he said, "Dear child, you shall be a maidservant no longer. Your son from our union will be wise, fortunate and the foremost of all intelligent men upon this earth."

Again Satyavati was waiting outside the bedchamber. Vyasadeva told her, "The queen deceived me and sent instead her servant. That simple girl received me with all respect. She will therefore bear an auspicious child. I shall now go and continue my asceticism. I will return when you need me again, but, my dear mother, I will not beget any more children." Vyasadeva vanished, leaving Bhishma and Satyavati reflecting on his words.

In due course the maidservant gave birth to a child named Vidura, who later became the chief minister and advisor of the Kuru house. He was raised alongside his two brothers, and the three boys grew up like resplendent gods. Everyone was satisfied that the kingdom was secure. Happiness and prosperity were everywhere as the gods showered their blessings. Bhishma ruled as regent while the boys grew up.

Although Dhritarastra was the eldest, his blindness disqualified him from becoming the king. Nor could Vidura assume the throne, as he was born of a servant girl. But Pandu was a worthy monarch in every way; and when he came of age, he was installed on the Kuru throne. Pandu excelled all men in martial arts, and he soon became skilled in the Vedic science of leadership and diplomacy.

All three brothers were given the best education and were raised with affection by Bhishma. As predicted by Vyasadeva, Dhritarastra displayed immense bodily strength and Vidura was naturally wise even from childhood. His devotion to religion and morality could not be matched by anyone. When he reached maturity, even the learned Bhishma would seek his counsel. It was thus that one day Bhishma approached Vidura and said, "O wise one, we

should take steps to ensure that our noble line does not again face extinction. The two princes are ready for marriage. I have heard that there are three princesses worthy of being allied to our house. Tell me your thoughts on this, gentle Vidura."

Bhishma said that there was a princess in the Yadu kingdom named Kunti, another named Gandhari, who was a daughter of the mountain king Suvala, and a third princess named Madri, in the southern land of Madra. He suggested that two of these girls could be sought for Pandu and the other for Dhritarastra.

Vidura folded his hands and replied, "My lord, you are our father, protector and preceptor. You should do whatever you feel is proper for the welfare of our dynasty."

Bhishma sat in thought. He had heard that Gandhari had received a boon from Shiva, who had said she would have one hundred sons. Surely she would make a good wife for Dhritarastra, who had also been blessed in a similar way by Vyasadeva. A hundred sons from that powerful prince would be a great asset to the kingdom and would ensure the perpetuation of the Kuru dynasty. Bhishma at once arranged for messengers to go to Suvala and ask for the hand of Gandhari.

When King Suvala heard Bhishma's request, he was hesitant. How could his daughter marry a blind prince? But Suvala reflected on the possibility. Dhritarastra belonged to the glorious Kuru house. They had ruled the world for thousands of years. Considering the fame, nobility and virtue of the Kurus, Suvala assented to the marriage. He had his son Shakuni bring Gandhari to Hastinapura. When the princess heard that she was to marry the blind Dhritarastra, she took a cloth and bound her own eyes, not wanting to be in any way superior to her lord.

Shakuni gave away his beautiful sister to Dhritarastra along with many gifts sent by Suvala. After being duly respected by Bhishma, he then mounted his golden chariot and returned to his kingdom. Gandhari became immediately devoted to her husband. She pleased him in every way by her attentions, she never even referred to other men in her speech, and a silk cloth always covered her eyes.

With Dhritarastra married, Bhishma turned his mind to Pandu's marriage. He had heard that the princess Kunti would soon select a husband

at a special ceremony known as a swayam-vara. That princess was famous for her beauty and womanly qualifications, and she belonged to the noble Yadu race, from whom had come many great heroes. Bhishma told Pandu to leave at once for the swayam-vara and try to win Kunti's hand.

The king mounted a great dark stallion and rode swiftly to the kingdom of Kuntibhoja, the father of Kunti. Like a proud lion, he strode into the swayam-vara arena. When the many other kings assembled there saw Pandu, broad-chested and with eyes like a furious bull, they considered him to be a second Indra. He outshone all the other monarchs like the sun rising in the morning and obscuring the stars. When Kunti saw the powerful Hastinapura monarch gazing at her, her mind became agitated. There could be no one else for her. Trembling with emotion, she walked slowly toward him and shyly placed the nuptial garland around his neck.

Although many kings and princes desired Kunti's hand, and even though a swayam-vara would almost always end in a fight, everyone abandoned any thought of competing with the mighty Pandu for the princess. Mounting upon their steeds and chariots, they simply returned the way they had come. King Kuntibhoja came down from the royal platform into the arena, his face bright with delight. What better match was there for his daughter? The king immediately arranged for the wedding ceremony, and he presented Pandu with gifts of great wealth.

After a few days the couple left for Hastinapura, accompanied by a large retinue bearing many colorful pennants that waved in the breeze. The soldiers beat drums and blew loudly upon their conchshells as they proceeded toward Pandu's capital. Seated with Kunti upon a shining golden chariot and surrounded by brahmins offering benedictions, Pandu entered Hastinapura in state.

Bhishma was overjoyed to see Pandu married to the gentle and beautiful princess, but he also felt that the king needed another queen. Although Gandhari had received the benediction that she would bear a hundred sons, Kunti had no such boon. Bhishma wanted to ensure that the virtuous monarch was blessed with powerful sons. He went personally to the kingdom of Madra to seek the hand of Madri for Pandu. She was under her brother's, King Shalya's, protection.

Shalya received with all honor Bhishma and his retinue of ministers,

brahmins and rishis. He brought Ganga's son into his palace and offered him a seat of white ivory studded with precious gems. Then the king bathed his feet and offered him respectful worship. His reception completed, Bhishma said to King Shalya, "Mighty monarch, you should know that I am here to seek a maiden. I have heard that you have an illustrious and chaste sister and I would choose her for King Pandu. Please tell me if you approve of this arrangement."

King Shalya replied that he would be greatly honoured to be allied with the Kurus. There was, however, an ancient custom in his family that no girl could be given in marriage unless the suitor offered a tribute.

Bhishma had already heard of this custom, which dated back to the great Brahma himself. He had come prepared and replied to Shalya, "There is no fault in this custom as it has the approval of the self-born creator, Lord Brahma. Therefore, please accept the gifts I have brought in exchange for the princess."

Bhishma's men then carried in heaps of gold coins, pearls, corals and gems of various colors, and set them before Shalya. Bhishma also presented the king with hundreds of elephants, horses and chariots.

Shalya received all the wealth with a delighted heart. He gave Madri to Bhishma, who soon returned to Hastinapura and performed the wedding ceremony.

Pandu established each of his wives in their own splendid palaces and gave himself up to enjoyment with them both. He sported in the palace groves and gardens, appearing like a celestial with two beautiful consorts.

Chapter Two. Pandu Cursed And Blessed

Although he possessed all material opulence, Pandu was by nature disinterested in sensual pleasure. After enjoying with his two wives for only a short while, his mind turned to more important matters. Although the Kuru dynasty had for many thousands of years been emperors of the globe and had upheld religious codes, their hold over other kings had begun to slip with the death of Shantanu and his two sons. Some of the kings had become arrogant, exceeding their own boundaries and antagonizing weaker kings.

Pandu felt impelled to take action. Going before Bhishma, he said, "My lord, our dynasty's greatness has suffered diminution. The world is straying from the path of righteousness established by our ancestors. Irreligion is rising. It is my duty to our noble house, and indeed to the Supreme Lord himself, to go out and check the offenders."

Bhishma smiled. Here indeed was a worthy descendent of the great Bharata, after whom the very earth had been named. He replied, "Your desire befits our line and is praiseworthy in every way. Take blessings from the brahmins and leave with an army. May victory attend you!"

Pandu quickly assembled a vast force consisting of infantry, horsemen, elephants and chariots. As he left Hastinapura he looked like the king of the gods surrounded by his celestial army. Pandu marched to the east and defeated the king of the Dasarhas, who was becoming averse to Hastinapura's rule. Moving south toward Maghada, where the powerful King Dirgha was assailing many surrounding countries, Pandu attacked the proud king at his capital, Rajgriha, and killed him.

After that Pandu subjugated several other warlike kings. He ranged across the globe like a fire, his far-reaching arrows and the splendor of his weapons resembling brilliant flames. As his fame spread, monarchs submitted without resistance. Soon all the world's kings recognized him as the most powerful ruler on earth. They bowed to him with joined palms and offered tribute of various kinds.

After this one-year campaign, Pandu returned to his capital with the wealth he had obtained. All the Kurus, with Bhishma at their head, came out to greet him. They viewed with delight the train of elephants, oxen, camels, horses and chariots, all laden with riches and stretching farther than the eye

could see. Pandu presented to the Kuru elders precious stones, pearls, coral, gold and silver piled in heaps, along with millions of cows, horses and other animals. He showed them innumerable costly blankets, rugs and skins from the rare black renku deer.

Pandu bowed at Bhishma's feet as he presented all this wealth, and Bhishma tearfully embraced the young king. Surrounded by brahmins uttering prayers and benedictions, the two men then mounted a golden chariot and proceeded to the royal palace, heralded by a fanfare of trumpets, conches and kettledrums.

Pandu ensured that his two brothers were each given much wealth. He had little personal interest in wealth, being more attracted to forests and plains than luxurious palace life. He loved to mount his stallion and ride out on long hunting expeditions. A few months after returning to Hastinapura, he decided to make his permanent residence in a forest among the Himalayan Mountains. Taking his two wives with him, he left his magnificent palace and moved to a simple dwelling on the mountainside. The local people would see the monarch roaming the woods with his wives. Encased in beautiful blazing armor and armed with bows and swords, he resembled a god wandering on earth.

Dhritarastra officiated as the king in Hastinapura on behalf of his younger brother. At his command, the forest people would supply Pandu with every object of enjoyment. Pandu had mastered his senses, so although he gracefully accepted their gifts, he continued to live simply.

One day Pandu went out hunting. He saw a couple of large deer mating. They bolted when they saw the king, but he quickly fired five swift arrows after them. As the golden-feathered shafts pierced the male deer, it fell down crying. To the king's surprise the dying deer began to speak in a pained voice.

"Oh, how shameful! Even degraded men who are slaves to their senses never act so cruelly. No man's judgment can ever prevail against scriptural ordinance. How then have you, the king and a descendent of the noble Bharata race, acted in this way, so in conflict with Vedic direction?"

Pandu stood before the deer, which was weeping bitterly, and replied, "As a king it is my duty to hunt. I must control the forest, making it safe for the rishis. At the same time, I am able to practice the kingly art of weaponry.

Why, even great sages in the past have killed deer in the forest by offering them in sacrifice. O deer, why then do you reprove me?"

The deer replied that it did not condemn Pandu for injuring it, but for not taking into consideration that it was mating. The animal then told Pandu that it was a rishi named Kindama. He had assumed the form of a deer to mate with his wife in the woods. The rishi had no dwelling and could not unite publicly with his wife in a human form. He had therefore transformed himself and his wife into deer. The king had killed him just as he was about to beget a child in his wife's womb.

Kindama continued, "No creature should be attacked at the moment of intercourse. Your act was cruel and sinful, and is liable to lead you to hell. It is especially reproachful as you are a king and are meant to chastise the wicked and protect the tenets of religion."

Pandu gazed at Kindama in shocked silence. The sage had spoken correctly. It had certainly been sinful to shoot at the deer as it mated. How had he allowed himself to be so overcome with passion? And what would come from having killed a rishi? This was a calamity. The king gazed downward, sunk in shame and regret.

Seeing Pandu's crestfallen condition, Kindama said, "You need not fear the sin of killing a brahmin, as you did not know my true identity. But as you killed me when I was indulging in pleasure, so too shall you meet your death at such a time."

The rishi wanted to free Pandu from his sin. By cursing the king, Kindama knew that Pandu would immediately receive the reaction for his misdeed and thus not have to suffer after death. Struggling to speak as his lifeblood ebbed away, Kindama uttered his fearful imprecation.

"When next you approach your wife out of desire, you will immediately fall dead. O King, as I was plunged into grief when I was happy, you shall also meet with grief at such a time."

The deer then gave up its life. Pandu stood for some moments unable to move. As he gazed at the deer's dead body hot tears ran down his cheeks. Gathering his wits, he returned to his hut. He immediately told his wives what had happened. Afflicted by sorrow, the king cried aloud with his two queens. He condemned himself again and again. Holding his head and lamenting, Pandu spoke in an anguished voice: "I have heard that my father,

although born of a virtuous man, was himself a slave of lust and died as a result. Having been begotten in the wife of a lustful king, I too have become afflicted with lust. I have become devoted to sin. My life is simply spent in killing innocent creatures. The gods have forsaken me and I stand cursed."

Pandu resolved to live a life of austerity. He declared that from that moment he would accept a vow of celibacy, as Bhishma had done. He would seek salvation by renouncing all sexual pleasure, the great impediment to spiritual understanding. Pandu spoke to his horrified wives, "I shall shave my head and cover my body with dust. Sorrow and joy will be equal to me. I will entirely renounce anger and I devote myself to the good of all creatures. I will accept no gifts and obtain my food by begging. In this way, I shall transcend the dualities of this world and rise to the highest regions, where the Lord himself resides."

The king asked his wives to return to the capital and inform his elders of the turn of events. They should gratify the brahmins on his behalf, giving them much wealth. For his part, he would immediately retire into the wilderness and leave society forever.

Kunti and Madri were torn by grief. They could not face the prospect of separation from their husband. In piteous voices they begged that he allow them to follow his path. Both queens were prepared to accept whatever austerities he accepted. On behalf of them both, Kunti said, "Let us together accept the order of vanaprastha, retirement in the forest. We shall be happy practising asceticism with you. If you leave us today, we shall not bear our lives any longer."

Seeing their distressed condition Pandu relented, but he made it clear that he intended to perform the strictest austerities. His wives were not deterred. They wished only to be with him wherever he went.

Pandu resolved to embark on his ascetic life immediately. He would not return to the city. He removed all his royal ornaments and gave them, along with his riches, to the forest brahmins. Then he said to his attendants, "Go back to Hastinapura and inform Bhishma of everything that has occurred."

The royal attendants, accompanied by the brahmins, left sorrowfully for Hastinapura. The citizens lamented loudly when they learned of Pandu's plight. Dhritarastra was especially afflicted. Thinking of Pandu living so

austerely in the forest, he could no longer derive pleasure from the comforts of his beds, servants and royal opulence. He continually wept and brooded over Pandu.

* * *

After his attendants had left, Pandu made his way into the forest with his wives. They walked steadily north for many days and finally arrived at Saptasrota, the hundred-peaked mountain. There the king constructed a wooden hut and began to engage in severe penance. Many rishis, Siddhas and Charanas lived in that region and Pandu soon endeared himself to them by his qualities of humility, self-control and devotion to his elders and to God. They would frequently visit his hut to converse with him.

With his mind fixed only on salvation, Pandu lived simply at Saptasrota. He ate only fruits and roots and drank clear water from mountain springs. His two wives accepted the same vows he had taken, and thus all three lived joyfully on the mountain like celestials descended from the higher regions.

Gradually over time Pandu thought more about his situation. One day he spoke to the rishis, revealing his fears. "O greatly learned ones, I have heard that a sonless man cannot attain heaven. By having sons one pays his debts to his ancestors. If I die without issue, my forefathers will surely perish, as the sraddha offerings will cease. I am thus filled with apprehension because I cannot beget children."

Pandu sighed in anxiety. He would often perform the sraddha ceremony for the welfare of his departed ancestors. The Vedas state that such food offerings made to the gods on their behalf ensure their continued happiness in heaven. The monarch was concerned. What would happen when he died? Who would continue the offerings to his forefathers and, indeed, to himself? He folded his palms in supplication. "Great sages, see my afflicted state and be merciful. I beg you to beget children in my wives, just as Vyasadeva begot myself and my brothers."

Smiling, one of the rishis replied, "By our ascetic powers we have seen that you will undoubtedly have children like the gods themselves. Indeed, your progeny will fulfill the purpose of the celestials. All this we can clearly see. Therefore you should certainly act in such a way as to somehow

produce children. Consult first with your wives and then decide what should be done."

Pandu reflected on the rishi's words. It seemed the sages were amenable to his suggestion. He went to Kunti and spoke with her in private. "O lady of sweet smiles, I desire offspring, but due to my vicious behavior I have lost my power of procreation. In such instances the scriptures sanction that some other worthy man may beget children on my behalf. Please, therefore, accept another man and conceive a child for me."

Pandu pointed out that even he and his brothers had been conceived in this way. Kunti should thus accept a qualified brahmin, who was superior to him, in order to have a child.

The noble Kunti did not like Pandu's suggestion. She looked down and spoke softly in reply, "O virtuous one, please do not request this of me. I am your lawful wife, ever devoted to you. I shall certainly not accept another's embrace, even in my imagination. O King, embrace me to beget offspring. I shall ascend to heaven with you. Who is superior to you?"

Kunti recited to her husband an ancient history she had heard. There was once a powerful king who had died without issue. His lamenting wife had embraced his dead body and by the arrangement of the gods she conceived children. Three qualified sons were born of her union with her dead husband. Kunti asked Pandu to emulate that king.

Pandu shook his head. "I do not possess such power. Our only recourse is the rishis. One of those great sages should conceive with you. I see no other way."

The king assured her that no sin was attached to such an act. It was his responsibility, as he was commanding her as her husband, and she should not hesitate to comply with his request. Pandu tried in many ways to convince his wife.

At last, Kunti, seeing her husband's determination, said to him, "I shall tell you of a boon I received while in my maidenhood, which may yet prove to be our deliverance. When I was a girl in my father's house, he would engage me in serving guests. One day the powerful mystic Durvasa arrived. By my service and constant attention to all his needs I greatly pleased that rishi. As he was leaving he called me aside and said, 'Gentle maiden, I shall confer upon you a boon. Listen as I recite a mantra. This mantra, uttered by

you, will summon any of the celestials you desire. Whether agreeable or not they will then be obliged to do your bidding."

Kunti already had experience of the mantra's power. As soon as she had uttered it once and thought of Surya, that blazing deity had appeared before her. He had then conceived a son. Kunti therefore knew that she could summon other gods to produce further children. She had not wanted to reveal this secret, being reluctant to unite even with the gods in place of her own husband. But this was an emergency. It seemed that the time to make good use of Durvasa's mantra had come.

Pandu, who had known nothing about the boon, was overjoyed upon hearing Kunti's words. This was surely the Lord's arrangement. Sons from the gods would be far superior to any born of earthly men.

Kunti asked her husband which of the deities she should call. Pandu thought for some moments and then said to his wife, "O beautiful lady, you should call the great Dharma, god of justice. He will never pollute us with sin and his son will undoubtedly be qualified in every way."

Kunti assented to Pandu's request. She sat in meditation and thought of Dharma, reciting the mantra Durvasa had given her. Within moments the deity appeared, riding on a resplendent chariot. Shining like the sun, he smiled and said to Kunti, "What should I do for you?"

Awed by the god's splendor, Kunti replied in a trembling voice, "I desire a child by your illustrious self."

Dharma at once united with her in his spiritual form and then disappeared. Kunti conceived and in due course gave birth. During the eighth month of the year, at noon on a full moon day, when the auspicious star Jyestha was in the ascendant, she brought forth a lustrous son. As soon as he was born a celestial voice was heard in the sky: "This child will be the best and most virtuous of men. He will be devoted to truth, highly powerful and famous throughout the three worlds. Known as Yudhishthira, this boy will rule the earth."

Pandu was overjoyed. The gods had not forsaken him after all! Here was a child worthy of his great dynasty. He no longer had to be anxious.

Then he began to consider the situation. He saw that by Durvasa's boon Kunti could obtain more powerful sons, born of the gods themselves,

who would ensure the Kuru's welfare and become great leaders in the world. Pandu approached Kunti again, a year after Yudhishthira's birth, and said, "The wise have declared that a ruler should possess strength as well as righteousness. Therefore, please invoke the wind-god, Vayu, the strongest of the gods. By him we shall get a son who will be the most powerful man upon this earth."

Kunti folded her palms and bowed in assent. She again sat in meditation, this time calling for Vayu. In moments the god appeared, riding a huge deer. In a voice that sounded like thunderclouds, the effulgent god said with a smile, "O Kunti, what do you desire from me?"

Kunti was bashful as she replied, "O best of the celestials, please give me a son who will possess immense bodily strength, and who will be capable of humbling the pride of all."

The god agreed, and by his yogic power he approached Kunti and conceived a child within her womb. When Vayu's child took his birth a voice was again heard from the sky, saying, "This child will be the best of all those endowed with strength and power."

Pandu and Kunti were even more joyful to see their second son, whom they named Bhima. Along with Madri, and in the company of the rishis and Siddhas, they lovingly raised their children in the remote and beautiful woodlands on the mountainside.

Some months after Bhima's birth, Kunti was sitting near the edge of a mountain cliff with Bhima asleep on her lap. Suddenly a tiger roared nearby. She jumped up in fear and the baby rolled from her lap over the cliff edge. Struck with horror, Pandu quickly descended the cliff. When he reached the bottom he saw the child lying unharmed amid a pile of rocky fragments. The baby had landed upon a large rock and had smashed it to pieces. In amazement Pandu gently lifted his child and took him back to Kunti.

Even with two sons, Pandu continued to reflect on the future of his dynasty. He thought, "Success in this world depends upon exertion, but exertion is always subordinate to destiny. Yet even destiny is controlled by the will of the Supreme Lord. How then can I obtain a son who will be the best of all those devoted to the Lord?"

Pandu thought of Indra, the king of the gods and a famous devotee of the Lord. Indra had formerly performed a thousand sacrifices for Lord

Vishnu's pleasure, and he possessed immeasurable might, prowess and glory. From him would surely come a son who would be superior to all.

Pandu consulted with the rishis and was advised that he and Kunti should practice an ascetic vow for one year to please Indra. At the end of that period Kunti should summon the god with her mantra.

The monarch and his wife then accepted a vow of standing on one leg from sunrise till sunset, taking neither food nor water. They kept their minds absorbed in meditation and prayer for one complete year, with an aim to please Indra. At the end of the year Indra spoke to Pandu in his meditation. "I have become pleased with you, O King. I shall give you a son who will protect religion and chastise the wicked. He will delight his friends and relatives and slay his foes. Indeed, this boy will be the best of men."

Following Pandu's request, Kunti again chanted her mantra. Indra appeared immediately, his bodily luster lighting up the whole region. By the power of the thousand-eyed Indra, Kunti conceived, and in time a dark-complexioned child was born. For the third time the heavenly voice was heard, resounding over the mountainside: "O Kunti, this child will be equal in strength to Indra and indeed Shiva himself. He shall be called Arjuna and he will spread your fame everywhere. He will subjugate many powerful kings and greatly increase the prosperity of your dynasty. Agni, Shiva and Indra will all be gratified by this boy's service. He shall have no equal in prowess and will be famous throughout the three worlds."

Overhearing this as well as other prophecies regarding Arjuna's future greatness, the rishis on that mountain were filled with joy. They uttered blessings while the celestial drums reverberated and showers of flowers fell from the sky. Many gods and heavenly sages appeared before Kunti and offered the child benediction. Only the ascetic rishis could see them as they appeared in their ethereal forms, standing in chariots and on mountain peaks. That wonderful sight astonished the rishis and they stood with folded palms.

Pandu was delighted. He now had three matchless sons. Seeing the wonderful result of Durvasa's boon, he decided to ask Kunti to use the mantra a fourth time and summon yet another powerful god. When he approached her again, however, Kunti refused. "O learned man, even in times of emergency it is never sanctioned by scripture for a woman to have

intercourse with more than three men. Have you forgotten the ordinance? I would become debased if I again conceived by another."

The king fell silent. Kunti was right. He decided not to ask for any more sons and continued to live peacefully in the forest with his two wives. Their three sons grew luxuriantly in their care.

Then one day Madri approached Pandu privately. "My lord, I do not complain that you treat me less favorably than Kunti. Even though I am of a higher birth, I still have no complaint. My one grief is that you have no sons by me."

Madri found her position unbearable. No princesses in her line had ever gone without issue. Kunti had three sons. Madri had heard that Dhritarastra's wife, Gandhari, had given birth to a hundred sons in Hastinapura. Yet she, the lawful wife of a great hero, was childless. She asked Pandu to request Kunti to teach her the mantra. Madri explained that she was too shy to ask her directly, since Kunti was her rival.

Pandu looked with compassion at his younger wife. "Dearest lady, I had already been considering this myself. I was reluctant to ask you because I was not sure how you might feel. Now that I know your mind, I shall certainly speak with Kunti. I do not think she will refuse."

The monarch approached Kunti immediately. He told her of Madri's sorrow and asked her to be gracious to her co-wife. Pandu made it clear that he also desired more sons to secure more fully the good of his race, including that of himself and indeed Kunti.

Kunti assented to her husband's request and told Madri, "I shall recite the mantra for your benefit. Please think of some deity from whom you desire offspring."

Madri thought carefully. Most probably Kunti would allow her to use the mantra only once. If she summoned the inseparable twin Ashvini gods, she would get two sons at once. Even as she thought of the two gods they appeared before her, aglow with celestial splendor. Bashfully, she asked that they unite with her to conceive children and they immediately agreed. They begot upon Madri two boys of incomparable beauty who were named Nakula and Sahadeva. Upon their birth the divine voice said, "These virtuous and accomplished sons will transcend in energy and beauty even their celestial fathers."

With five godly sons Pandu felt that the future success of his dynasty was assured. The rishis performed all the rites of passage for the boys and they grew up swiftly. After just one year they appeared as if they were five years old. Pandu was overwhelmed with happiness at seeing his sons' extraordinary strength, beauty, energy and wisdom. All the boys became favorites of the rishis and they sported like five Gandharvas descended to earth.

Pandu's sons all became fearless bowmen who were capable, even in their early youth, of facing furious mountain lions. The rishis schooled them in every facet of Vedic knowledge. They were astonished to see the boys growing so rapidly, like lotuses blooming in a lake. Pandu and his wives offered prayers of thanks to Lord Vishnu for their great fortune, and they went on living in the Himalayan region, raising their children with affection.

Chapter Three. The Pandavas Come to Hastinapura

In Hastinapura, Dhritarastra had performed five sacrifices with the wealth Pandu had given him. He gave charity to hundreds of thousands of brahmins and satisfied the gods with his offerings. The kingdom flourished and the citizens had everything they desired. They were devoted to virtue, sacrifice and truth. Bearing love and affection for one another, they grew in prosperity. Hastinapura was filled with countless palaces and mansions. There were golden arches and crystal fountains everywhere. Between broad, paved highways lay beautiful gardens and the air was filled with the sweet fragrance of blossoming trees. The clatter of horses' hooves and chariot wheels resounded everywhere, mixing with the sound of trumpeting elephants and the blare of conchshells marking the beginning of sacrificial performances. Holy chants uttered by numerous brahmins emanated from tall and exquisitely constructed temple buildings, which graced the city in their thousands. Hastinapura appeared like Indra's celestial capital, and each day dozens of feudal kings would arrive bringing tribute.

Assisted by Bhishma, Dhritarastra ruled the kingdom on Pandu's behalf. After Pandu's curse and his subsequent retirement, Dhritarastra, despite his blindness, was installed as monarch. He thought sadly of his brother and missed him greatly, but in his absence he competently managed all the affairs of state.

It once came to pass that Vyasadeva arrived hungry and thirsty at Dhritarastra's palace. Gandhari attended to him conscientiously. Vyasadeva was pleased with the girl and blessed her, "You shall soon have one hundred sons as powerful as your husband." In due course of time Gandhari conceived. For two years she bore the embryo within her womb, becoming increasingly anxious. Then one day news reached her that Kunti had given birth in the forest to a boy as effulgent as the morning sun. Out of frustration and anger at her own excessively long gestation, she violently struck her womb. She then brought forth a hard mass of flesh that resembled an iron ball. As her nurses informed her of the stillbirth, she was afflicted by grief and thought of Vyasadeva and his boon.

At once the sage appeared before her and said, "What have you done?"

Gandhari told him how she had become overwhelmed with envy and

frustration when she had heard of Kunti giving birth to Yudhisthira. With tears in her eyes she said, "I struck my womb and this lump of flesh came out. What then was the meaning of your boon?"

Vyasadeva replied that his words could never prove false. He asked the servants to bring one hundred one pots filled with ghee. He sprinkled cool water on the lump of flesh and it gradually divided into one hundred and one parts, each the size of a thumb. These were placed in the pots which were sealed and placed in a concealed spot. Vyasadeva instructed that the pots should be opened only after two more years had passed. He then departed for his lonely mountain ashram.

Exactly after the two years had elapsed the pots were opened one by one. From the first came a child who was named Duryodhana. At the moment he was brought out of the pot the sound of braying asses and screaming vultures was heard. Jackals howled and the wind blew fiercely. Without any apparent cause, fires sprang up all around the city and raged in all directions.

The frightened King Dhritarastra summoned the brahmins, as well as Bhishma, Vidura and other ministers and counselors. He asked them the meaning of the omens. The king said, "The eldest of the princes is undoubtedly Yudhisthira and he should inherit the kingdom. I do not dispute that. But will my own son become the king after him? O wise ones, please tell me what is right and lawful."

As Dhritarastra spoke the terrible sounds began again from all sides. Hearing this, Vidura replied to the king, "When these omens are seen at the birth of a child, it is evident that he will be the exterminator of his race. Our prosperity and future depend upon his being abandoned. Do not hesitate, O King. This child must be cast away at once."

Vidura told Dhritarastra that he would still have many other sons. There would be no sin in abandoning this child, as the scriptures clearly state that an individual can be abandoned for the sake of a family. Indeed, a family can be abandoned for the sake of a village, a village for the sake of a city and the world itself can be abandoned for the sake of the soul.

Dhritarastra was unable to accept Vidura's counsel. He looked away from Vidura and said nothing in reply. As the nurse stood by holding the baby, the king waved her toward Gandhari and the child was handed to her. Bhishma and Vidura looked at one another but said nothing. Dhritarastra was

the monarch; his word was final.

Over the course of the next month, all the pots were opened and one hundred boys and one girl were brought out. All the boys bore the signs of being great warriors and rulers. The king and queen rejoiced in their good fortune. Dismissing the evil omens, they dwelt contentedly in Hastinapura, attended by Bhishma and Vidura.

* * *

On Saptasrota Mountain, spring had arrived. Surrounded by his five youthful sons, Pandu felt young again. He sported with the boys in the hills, scaling rock faces and challenging lions in their caves. They dived and played in mountain pools and climbed tall trees. Wrestling and laughing together, they rolled about the soft grassy slopes.

One evening Pandu went into the woods with Madri to fetch roots and fruits for their evening meal. As they strolled, they saw countless varieties of blossoming trees and bushes. The air was heavy with scent and the sounds of cuckoos and other birds filled the air. Black bees swarmed about the many-colored flowers that surrounded lakes overgrown with lotuses. The celestial atmosphere awoke romance in Pandu's heart. He gazed at the beautiful Madri, his mind influenced by Cupid. It was a hot day and Madri was clad in a long silk robe. In the bright sunshine, Pandu could see the outline of her exquisite form, which resembled that of a goddess. The soft breeze made her dress cling to her body, revealing her slender waist and firm, round breasts.

Pandu could not suppress his desire. He had kept himself in check for twelve years and had not dared to contemplate embracing his wives. Kindama's curse was always uppermost in his mind and he had resigned himself to practising celibacy with the determination of a rishi. It seemed ages ago when he had been able to enjoy conjugal love with his wives. Now Pandu again felt those stirrings moving his heart. His mind was confounded and he moved closer to Madri, gently placing his hand on her arm.

Madri at once understood what was in Pandu's heart. His amorous touch electrified her, but she was bewildered by conflicting feelings. How was he suddenly approaching her in this way? Out of fear of the curse he had carefully avoided any physical contact with either her or Kunti for a long

time. Although she herself had longed for his embrace, she had scrupulously avoided any situation that might entice her husband. She did not even apply cosmetics or perfumes. But as the powerful Pandu embraced her, she felt her resolve weaken. Delight and fear seized her heart at once. As her emotions clashed, her mind was petrified. What about the curse! If Pandu did not stop, he would doubtlessly be destroyed. She had to prevent him.

Madri tried to push her husband away. Pandu smiled, incited further by her protests. His mighty arms, deeply tanned and marked with scars from his bowstring, closed around her like serpents. Overpowered by desire, he could not even hear her as she reminded him about the curse. He pressed her lips with his and dropped down to a grassy slope with the beautiful queen held tightly in his arms. Lifting her robes, he pushed himself firmly against her soft body. Madri's struggles only inflamed his passion more.

As if impelled by the lord of death himself, the monarch entirely abandoned reason under the influence of lust. No thought of Kindama's curse entered his mind as he lost himself in enjoyment with his fair-skinned wife. Even as he tried to consummate the act with Madri, the rishi's words took effect. Pandu's chest was seized with a terrible pain and a shocked look crossed his face. His body stiffened and went slack.

As Pandu's lifeless body fell from hers, Madri let out a wail of sorrow. Her worst fears had been realized. Despite all her protests she had not been able to prevent her husband's death. The distraught queen repeatedly embraced her dead husband and lamented loudly.

Kunti heard Madri's cries and ran over to where she lay. As Kunti approached, the tearful Madri told her to come alone, without the children. Kunti quickly sent the boys back to the ashram, then rushed to Pandu's side. She dropped to the ground, realizing at once what had happened. Kunti cried out piteously, "My lord!" Tears welled into her eyes as she turned to Madri. "Noble lady, how have you allowed this to happen? I was always so careful to protect our lord from this very danger. How did he embrace you, knowing of the rishi's curse? Why did you tempt him when you were alone together? He was always grave in our company as he thought of Kindama's words. How did he become so careless?"

Madri wept, unable to reply. Kunti tossed about on the ground next to her. The two beautiful ladies embraced their husband's dead body and shed

profuse tears. Kunti again addressed Madri. "O princess of Madra, you are surely more fortunate than I, for you saw our lord's face light up with joy as he approached you in this lonely place."

Gathering her senses, Madri replied, "Sister, with tears in my eyes I tried to resist him, yet he could not control himself. He seemed bent on fulfilling the rishi's curse."

Kunti prayed for strength. Somehow this was God's arrangement. The ways of Providence were always mysterious. But what should be done now? What was her duty? She gently stroked the head of her younger co-wife and said, "There is only one recourse for me. Please allow me to ascend to heaven with our lord. Rise up and raise our children. Give me the body and, tightly embracing it, I shall enter fire."

Madri shook her head. She pleaded with Kunti, "The monarch died as he approached me for intercourse. His desire was not satiated. Should it not be I who goes to the region of the dead to gratify him? I am still clasping him even now and will not allow him to go without me. O queen, please let me go!"

Madri felt incapable of bringing up the children by herself. Kunti would be a far better mother. Madri had seen her gentle dealings with the boys. She would surely treat them all equally. Madri begged Kunti's permission to enter the fire with Pandu. "The king sought me with desire. Grant me leave to fulfill that desire. You would be doing me the greatest good. Although heartbroken at the thought of leaving them, I shall leave my sons in your care without any fear."

Kunti looked compassionately upon Madri as she lay with her arms around Pandu, bathing him with her tears. The noble Kunti's heart was torn. Although as the elder wife it was her privilege to choose to follow the king to the next world, how could she deny Madri? It was to her that Pandu had been attracted. If Madri were to live, she would live with the memory of that brief and terrible moment all her life. Guilt would consume her, along with the anguish of being unable to fulfill her lord's last desire. Although she longed to follow her husband, Kunti could not be so cruel to her co-wife. She touched Madri gently and said, "So be it." Kunti then went with a heavy heart toward the ashram.

When the boys heard of their father's death they were struck with

grief. They ran crying to where he lay and fell to the ground, like powerful lions rolling on the earth. Madri blessed them tearfully and told them that she would be ascending the pyre with her husband. She asked her two sons to remain with Kunti and to serve her steadfastly. The boys were too shocked to reply. They watched as the rishis built a pyre next to the king's body, then, reciting mantras, placed his body upon it. They asked Yudhisthira to step forward. The prince, blinded by tears, set fire to the pyre and stood back. As the flames rose, Madri folded her palms and then threw herself onto her lord's body, holding tight as the fire consumed them both. Within minutes both she and Pandu were gone.

For some time Kunti could say or do nothing. She stood staring at the dying embers of the pyre, surrounded by the five boys. Finally she drew a deep breath and went slowly over to the rishis. In a broken voice she asked, "What is my duty now?"

The rishis advised Kunti to return to Hastinapura with her boys as soon as possible. They also told her they would accompany her, carrying the remains of Pandu and Madri with them.

The large number of rishis, Siddhas and Charanas formed a procession, walking ahead of Kunti and her sons. By their mystical powers, they all arrived at Hastinapura within a short time. Kunti then presented herself at the northern gate and messengers ran swiftly to inform the king.

Upon hearing of her arrival, Dhritarastra, Bhishma, Satyawati and all the other Kuru elders hurried to the gate, followed by a large number of citizens, who had heard that an assembly of celestials had arrived. Everyone was struck with wonder to see the brilliant rishis surrounded by Siddhas and Charanas. People came out in the thousands to see those divine beings.

Dhritarastra, along with his one hundred sons, bowed before the rishis. Bhishma and the others also offered their respects to the sages and, after offering them seats, sat before them on silk mats spread out on the ground. When the crowd was finally settled, Bhishma went forward and worshipped the rishis by bathing their feet and offering them the sacred *arghya*. He answered their enquiries about the kingdom's welfare, saying that everything was well.

Then one of the leading rishis stood up and addressed the Kuru elders. "The virtuous monarch went to the Saptasrota mountain to observe the

vow of celibacy. Somehow by the Lord's inscrutable plan and the arrangement of the gods, his five sons were born."

The rishi introduced each of Pandu's sons and revealed the identities of their divine fathers. He told them how the boys had been trained in Vedic knowledge and had grown to youthhood in the company of rishis and Siddhas. Glancing around the large concourse of men who had assembled outside the city, the rishi said, "Steadily adhering to virtue, and leaving behind him these children, Pandu has ascended to the higher worlds. The chaste Madri has gone with him. Now his sons should be accepted as the kingdom's rightful heirs."

The rishi pointed to a bier lying nearby, covered with a white cloth. "Here are the remains of Pandu and his wife. Perform the funeral rites and accept his sons as if they were your own. We shall now depart."

When the rishi stopped speaking he, along with all the other rishis and celestial beings, vanished. In astonishment the citizens returned to their homes. Bhishma then led Kunti and the boys into the city and arranged for their accommodation in a royal palace. Dhritarastra ordered the funeral rites to be performed and declared a state of mourning in the city for twelve full days.

The Kurus were distracted with grief over Pandu's loss. All the citizens had dearly loved Pandu and they loudly lamented. Pandu's five sons, known as the Pandavas, lay on the bare ground for twelve days, giving full vent to their grief. They did not accept royal comforts or beds, and they wept along with the Kuru elders.

At the end of the mourning period, the Kurus performed Pandu's shraddha ceremony. They distributed vast amounts of food and wealth to the brahmins on behalf of the departed souls. Then life returned to normal in Hastinapura and Pandu's sons took their place in the royal family.

It was at that time that Vyasa chose to again appear in the city. He spoke privately to the bereaved and sorrowful Satyawati. "Dear Mother, fearful and terrible times lie ahead. The dark age of Kali now approaches. Sin increases day by day. Soon, by the evil acts of the Kurus, your race will be destroyed and a great havoc will be wrought in the world."

Vyasa advised his mother to immediately retire to the forest rather than staying to witness the pain and horror that would soon follow. She

should devote herself to yoga practice and meditation.

After Vyasa left, Satyawati reflected on his words. She decided to follow his advice. She told her two daughters-in-law of her intentions, and asked Pandu's heartbroken mother, Ambalika, to accompany her. The two royal ladies soon left for the forest to dedicate themselves to asceticism. In time they gave up their bodies and went joyfully to the higher regions. Ambika remained at Hastinapura with her son, Dhritarastra.

Chapter Four. Duryodhana Begins his Evil Schemes

The Pandavas began to enjoy life in Hastinapura. They sported with the hundred sons of Dhritarastra, who became known as the Kauravas. Pandu's sons excelled the Kauravas in all areas: in strength, knowledge and prowess with weaponry. Bhima was especially powerful and he took delight in defeating the Kauravas in sport. They could not equal him in anything. The exuberant Bhima possessed the indefatigable power of his divine father. At wrestling and fighting he was unapproachable and could easily hold off the attacks of any number of Kauravas. Out of a boyish sense of fun he would often play practical jokes on them, laughing when they became angered and tried futilely to get back at him.

Duryodhana in particular found Bhima's antics and power intolerable. As the eldest son of the blind king, Duryodhana had enjoyed the most prestige in the Kuru house. The Kuru elders had carefully raised him and trained him in the kingly arts, thinking of him as the potential future world emperor. Mindful of the omens seen at his birth, the elders were especially careful to teach him moral codes. The prince was both powerful and capable in all areas of weaponry and politics, and was accustomed to being the center of attention in the royal palace since his birth. When the Pandavas arrived, however, all that changed. Pandu's sons were gentle, modest and devoted to their elders. They soon became dear to Bhishma, Vidura and the other senior Kurus. Their behavior was a welcome change from that of Duryodhana and his brothers, who tended to be self-centered and proud, and often quite arrogant. Duryodhana quickly became envious of his five cousins. His envy grew up like a fire fed with oil when he saw Bhima's pranks.

After another day of humiliation at Bhima's hands, Duryodhana felt he could take no more. He spoke with Dushashana, the next eldest of the hundred Kauravas. "Dear brother, this Bhima is a constant thorn in our sides. He challenges all hundred of us at once and throws us about like pieces of straw. We cannot better him at anything. Why, even at eating he humbles us by consuming as much as twenty of us put together. Something has to be done to check his pride."

Duryodhana's eyes narrowed as he spoke. His intentions were vicious. The prince was inclined to wicked acts, and his uncle Shakuni, who

had taken up residence in Hastinapura, had spurred him on. Although he had shown no outward signs of his feelings, the Gandhara prince had been offended by Bhishma's decision to give his sister to the blind Dhritarastra rather than to Pandu. Now he sought revenge. He involved himself in court intrigues in order to find a way to avenge himself against Bhishma. Hurting the Pandavas, who were obviously dear to Bhishma, seemed one good way. And, of course, he would simultaneously be advancing the cause of his sister's sons. Duryodhana was a willing accomplice. The prince saw his scheming uncle as a mentor. When Duryodhana had come to him complaining about Bhima it did not take much to convince him to do something terrible to the Pandava.

Duryodhana revealed his plan to Dushashana. "Tomorrow I shall feed Bhima an enormous poisoned feast. When he falls unconscious after eating I shall bind his limbs and toss him into the Ganges. With Bhima gone the other brothers are helpless. We can easily deal with them. Thus my claim to the throne will be unchallenged."

Dushashana smiled in agreement. He too found Bhima's behavior intolerable and, like Duryodhana, had also found his own status in the Kuru house diminish since the Pandavas' arrival. He put his arm around his brother and the two of them made their way back to their palace, laughing together as they walked the forest path.

The next morning Duryodhana suggested that all the princes go to the river for some water sports. Soon they mounted their shining chariots, which resembled cities and had great wheels that rumbled like thunderclouds as they headed out, sending up clouds of dust. Upon arriving on the riverbank, the mighty youths dismounted from their cars, laughing and joking, and entered the large pleasure house Dhritarastra had built for them.

The elegant mansion was built of white marble and it stood seven storeys high. Many-colored pennants flew from tall golden flagstaffs on its roof. There were dozens of rooms offering every kind of luxury. Each room was tastefully decorated with tapestries, fine paintings, and ivory and coral furnishings that were studded with gems and covered with golden cushions. Royal musicians and dancers stood by, ready to entertain the princes, and a hundred of the king's select force of bodyguards stood ready to protect them.

Once inside Duryodhana invited everyone to enjoy the great feast

he had arranged for them. He led them through the mansion and out into the central gardens. The boys looked with pleasure upon the large ponds filled with red and blue lotuses and surrounded by soft, grassy banks. Crystal waterfalls made tinkling sounds that blended with the singing of brightly colored exotic birds. The heady scent of numerous blossoms filled the air. Fine cushions had been arranged in lines on the grass and many servants stood by, waiting to serve the feast.

Duryodhana chose the seat next to Bhima. He ordered the servants to bring the food. The dishes were exquisite. Duryodhana had personally mixed the poison with the food he had brought to Bhima. He then offered him the plate, feigning love and feeding him with his own hand. The guileless Bhima suspected nothing and he cheerfully consumed his normal amount. Duryodhana rejoiced within as Bhima hungrily swallowed the poisoned cakes, pies, creams, drinks and other preparations.

When the feast was over, Duryodhana suggested they all go down to the river for sport. The boys raced to the river in great joy. They wrestled and rolled about on the ground, tossing each other into the clear blue water of the river. As usual, Bhima was the most energetic. The poison did not appear to have affected him. The prince, who stood head and shoulders above his peers, was a matchless wrestler. Anyone who approached him quickly found themselves sailing through the air and landing in the water. Bhima would then dive in and create huge waves by thrashing his arms. The playful Bhima then dunked the other princes under the waters.

Late in the afternoon the boys began to tire. They came out of the water and dressed themselves in white robes, adorned with gold ornaments. Then they wearily made their way back to the mansion to spend the night.

Bhima had consumed enough poison to kill a hundred men, but it was not until evening that the wind-god's son began to feel its effects. As night fell he felt so drowsy that he decided to lay down by the river and rest. Gradually he lapsed into a deep sleep.

When the other princes had gone back to the mansion, Duryodhana saw his opportunity. He had thought that the poison had failed, but seeing Bhima finally falling unconscious he rubbed his hands in glee. Along with Dushashana, he bound Bhima's arms and legs with strong cords. Looking furtively around, the brothers quickly rolled the comatose prince into the

river.

Bhima sank to the bottom of the river and was carried by underwater currents. The celestial abode of the divine serpent beings, the Nagas, could be reached through the Ganges, and Bhima was swept along a mystical path right into their midst. At once the snakes began to bite the human suddenly arrived among them. Their virulent poison proved to be the antidote to the plant poison Duryodhana had administered. Bhima slowly came back to his senses as the effect of the poison wore off. He woke to find himself on a strange riverbank, surrounded by large serpents baring their fangs.

Bhima burst the cords binding his limbs. He picked up the snakes and dashed them to the ground. He pressed some into the earth with his feet and hurled others to a distance. Seeing him render dozens of snakes unconscious, the others fled away in terror.

The Nagas went quickly to their king, Vasuki. With fearful voices they said, "Lord, a human fell among us, bound with cords. Perhaps he had been poisoned, for he was unconscious. When we bit him he regained his senses and overpowered us. You should go to him at once."

Vasuki assumed a human form, rose from his bejeweled throne, and walked gracefully out of his palace. Arka, a Naga chief, went with him. Arka had long ago lived upon the earth in human society. He was Kunti's great grandfather and he immediately recognized Bhima as his great-grandson. Smiling, he introduced himself and embraced the prince.

Seeing this, Vasuki was pleased and said to Arka, "What service can we render this boy? Let us give him an abundance of gems and gold."

Arka looked at the powerful Bhima and replied, "I think this prince would be best served by us if we let him partake of our rasa."

Vasuki agreed. Bringing Bhima back to his palace, he arranged for pots of the ambrosial rasa to be brought for him. This drink was distilled from celestial herbs and by drinking even one pot a man would become permanently endowed with the vigor and strength of a thousand elephants. The Nagas placed a number of pots in front of Bhima and invited him to drink. Bhima sat facing the east and, as he always did before eating or drinking, offered prayers to the Lord. He then lifted one of the large pots of rasa and quaffed it down in one gulp.

The Nagas watched in silent amazement as Bhima drank eight pots of the divine elixir, each in a single draft. Even the most powerful among them would not have been capable of such a feat. After Bhima had satisfied himself with the rasa, he again felt drowsy. Vasuki offered him a large, silk covered bed and the prince lay down. He remained in deep sleep for eight days as his body assimilated the rasa. On the ninth day he awoke, feeling strong beyond measure. The Nagas told him that the rasa had given him the strength of ten thousand elephants. He would now be invincible in battle. Vasuki told Bhima to bathe in the nearby sacred waters of the Mandakini, then dress himself in the robes the Naga king had brought for him. He should then quickly return to his home as his kinsfolk were in much anxiety about him.

After he had bathed and eaten the celestial foods the Nagas provided, Bhima, dressed in white silks and gold ornaments, was led to the river. They entered with Bhima and within moments they brought him out of the water near the place where he had been pushed in. Filled with wonder, Bhima ran back to Hastinapura.

In the city Kunti saw her sons arrive back without Bhima. The other princes were surprised that he was not already there. They had assumed he must have gone ahead without them. Duryodhana and Dushashana feigned concern, but secretly they rejoiced, thinking Bhima to be dead.

The virtuous-minded Yudhishthira believed that others were as honest as him. Suspecting nothing, he told his mother, "We searched for Bhima in the gardens and mansion for a long time. We went into the woods and called out for him. Finally we concluded he must have already left."

Yudhishthira became fearful. Perhaps Bhima had been killed. Kunti shared his fears and she asked him again to go to the mansion with his brothers and search for the missing Bhima. When her sons left, she summoned Vidura and said, "Wise one, I am afraid for Bhima's safety. He did not return with the others. I often see an evil look in Duryodhana's eye. I know he is filled with malice toward Bhima. Perhaps he has killed him."

Kunti hoped Vidura would give her solace. His words were always deeply considered and comforting. Vidura did not disappoint her. He replied, "Do not think in this way, gentle lady. The great rishi Vyasadeva foretold that your sons would be long-lived. His words can never be false. Nor indeed can

those of the gods, who have predicted a great future for all your sons."

Still, Vidura remembered the omens surrounding Duryodhana's birth. He warned Kunti to be on her guard. The evil-minded prince might try anything.

For eight days Kunti and her sons waited anxiously for any news of Bhima. It was almost intolerable. Then early on the ninth day they saw him running toward them, his white silks flowing in the wind. He came straight to Kunti and bowed at her feet. Her tears fell freely as she reached down to touch and bless him. As he rose, each of his brothers embraced him warmly. Thanking the Lord for his safe return they eagerly asked where he had been.

Bhima knew everything about the circumstances by which he had come to be in the river. When he had found himself bound with cords he had suspected the envious Duryodhana. Vasuki had confirmed his suspicions. The Naga king could see everything by virtue of his celestial vision. Bhima related the whole story to his brothers—how he had gone to the Naga kingdom and been given the rasa. The brothers could understand that even though the Kauravas had plotted Bhima's death, somehow by the arrangement of Providence he had become most fortunate.

Yudhishthira was shocked to learn of his cousins' antagonism. He considered the situation carefully. If their elders were informed of what had occurred, then there would be open enmity between the princes. Duryodhana would certainly try to dispose of them as quickly as possible. And the Pandavas' position was not strong. Their father was dead and Dhritarastra was the king. He doted on Duryodhana and his other sons, and it was unlikely he would side against his own sons, to protect his nephews. Yudhishthira ordered his brothers to remain silent. They should tell no one about what had occurred.

Kunti, however, confided in Vidura. He advised her to follow Yudhishthira's suggestion. Thus the Pandavas said nothing, but from that day forward they became vigilant, always watching the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana and Dushashana.

Besides Gandhari's one hundred sons, Dhritarastra had conceived another son by a servant maid who had waited on him during his wife's lengthy pregnancy. Unlike his half-brothers, this boy, Yuyutsu, felt no envy or antagonism toward the Pandavas. One day he secretly informed

Yudhisthira that Duryodhana, who had been deeply disappointed to see that his plan to kill Bhima had failed, had again cooked a large quantity of the deadly datura poison into Bhima's enormous meal.

Bhima laughed when he heard the news. Having drunk the Nagas' celestial elixir, he had no fear of Duryodhana. He sat down before him and cheerfully consumed the entire quantity of poisoned food. Duryodhana was amazed to see that Bhima was not in the least affected. He gazed at the Pandava with open hatred.

Although the Kaurava princes detested the Pandavas, Bhishma and Vidura loved them and would spend much time with the five virtuous and gentle princes. Bhishma had been especially fatherly toward them since the time they had arrived from the forest. He had been fond of Pandu; now he felt the same fondness for Pandu's sons. The boys reciprocated his love, and served him in various ways.

The Pandavas were also favored by their military teacher, Kripa. Kripa was the noble-minded son of a brahmin who had adopted the warrior's profession. He told the princes his history. His father, a rishi named Gautama, had been engaged in fierce austerities and weaponry practice, for which he had an affinity. Gautama's asceticism and martial skills were so great that even Indra feared the rishi might exceed him in power and usurp his position in heaven. That anxious god therefore sent a beautiful Apsara, a heavenly nymph, to divert Gautama from his asceticism. When the rishi saw the semi-clad Apsara before him, he lost control of his mind and semen fell from his body. It landed in a clump of heath, and from it two children were born, a boy and a girl. Gautama fled after seeing the Apsara, not realizing that he had miraculously sired the children. Soon after he left, some of the king's soldiers found the two babies and brought them into Hastinapura.

Some time later, Gautama, understanding everything by his mystic power, came to the city and explained to the king what had happened. The rishi taught his son all his military skills and in time Kripa became the teacher of the princes.

Bhishma was pleased with Kripa's teaching. The boys were becoming highly adept at weaponry. But he wanted them to learn the secrets of the celestial weapons as well so that they would be unmatched in warfare. Kripa did not have this knowledge in full. Bhishma had therefore been

searching for a suitable teacher to take the princes further in military science. None he had seen had impressed him as qualified to train the princes.

Then one day the boys ran to Bhishma with a strange tale to tell. They had been out playing ball in the woods. The ball fell into a deep, dry well and the princes could not recover it. As they stood by the well looking at one another in embarrassment, a dark man approached them. He was a brahmin, appearing emaciated and poor, but with a bright effulgence and glowing eyes. The princes surrounded the brahmin and asked if he could help them. Smiling a little, the brahmin said, "Shame upon your prowess as warriors. What use is your skill in arms if you cannot even retrieve a lost ball? If you give me a meal I'll recover the ball, as well as this ring of mine."

He then took off his ring and threw it into the well. Yudhishthira said to him, "O brahmin, if you can recover the ball and the ring, then, with Kripa's permission, we shall ensure you are maintained for your whole life."

The brahmin took a handful of long grasses and said, "Watch as I invest these grasses with the power of weapons. With these I shall pierce the ball and bring it to the surface." He chanted mantras and threw the grasses one by one into the well. The first one pierced the ball and each subsequent blade he threw stuck into the last one to form a long chain. The brahmin then pulled the ball out of the well.

The princes were astonished. "This is truly wonderful, but let us now see you raise the ring."

The brahmin borrowed one of the princes' bows and shot a single sharp-pointed arrow into the well. With it, he brought up the ring, caught on the arrow's head. The princes crowded around him and asked him to reveal his identity. They had never seen such skill. The brahmin told them to go to Bhishma and describe what they had seen. He would know his identity. The brahmin said he would wait there until they returned.

Thus the boys ran back to the city and told Bhishma everything. When he heard the tale his eyes shone with joy. Surely this could only be Drona, the disciple of his own martial teacher, Parasurama. Bhishma had heard much about Drona from the rishis. This was certainly providential. The princes could have no better teacher. Bhishma went in person with the boys to see the brahmin. Finding as he had suspected that it was Drona, Bhishma immediately offered him the position of a royal teacher. Drona accepted and

went to Hastinapura with Bhishma.

When they were back in the city Bhishma had Drona tell everyone of his history. Drona looked around at the eager-faced princes. They wanted to know everything about this unusual brahmin. He was the son of Bharadvaja, the all-powerful rishi who had dwelt for thousands of years in the deep forest and who, not long ago, had finally ascended to heaven. Although a brahmin, Drona was inclined toward martial arts. While living in his father's hermitage he had learned the science of arms from Agnivesha, another powerful rishi. He had also received knowledge of the celestial weapons from the great Parasurama. Despite having such great learning, however, Drona remained a poverty-stricken brahmin. He could hardly maintain his family. Thus he had been on his way to Hastinapura hoping to be engaged as the princes' teacher.

Bhishma said, "Reside here in the city. You shall enjoy every luxury along with the Kurus. Indeed the Kurus are at your command. Whatever wealth, kingdoms and followers belong to our house are also yours. O best of brahmins, it is our good fortune you have arrived here."

Drona was given a large, well-furnished house, stocked with everything enjoyable and attended by many servants. He then brought his wife and son to Hastinapura to live among the Kurus with him, and he accepted both the Pandavas and Kauravas as his disciples.

Drona taught the princes everything he knew about weaponry. The boys practiced every day from dawn till dusk. As the news of his martial school spread, princes from other kingdoms also came to learn from the famous Drona. The Vrishnis, the Andhakas and other famous and powerful dynasties sent their princes to Drona and he accepted them all as his pupils. Soon Drona had thousands of students.

Among all the boys Arjuna excelled at his lessons. He remained always at Drona's side, eager to learn any little skill or extra tips. His ability, speed, perseverance and determination were unequalled by the other princes. Arjuna became foremost; Drona felt none could match his skills.

Out of his natural fatherly affection, Drona also wished to impart extra lessons to his own son, Ashvatthama. He gave all the princes narrow-mouthed water pots and asked them to fill them at the river, but to his own son he gave a wide-mouthed pot so he could return first and receive extra teaching. Arjuna realized Drona's intentions and he filled his own pot with a

celestial water weapon, and thus returned before Ashvatthama. Drona smiled when he saw Arjuna's determination. His desire to learn from his preceptor was beyond compare. Arjuna always carefully worshipped Drona and was attentive to his every command. Because of his devotion to studies and his guru, he became Drona's favorite student.

Once Arjuna was eating his meal at night. Suddenly the lamp blew out. It was pitch black. Arjuna continued to eat as if nothing had happened. As he did so, he realized that simply by habit he was able to place the food in his mouth, although he could see nothing in the darkness. He then began to practice with his bow and arrows in the night, aiming at invisible targets. When Drona saw this dedication he was overjoyed. He told Arjuna, "I shall make you unmatched upon the earth. No warrior shall be your equal."

Drona then taught Arjuna how to fight on horseback, on an elephant, from chariots and on the ground. He showed him all the skills of fighting with clubs, swords, lances, spears and darts, as well as many other types of weapons. Drona also taught him how to contend with any number of warriors fighting at once. As Drona promised, his skill soon became without compare on earth.

* * *

One day, a prince of the Nishada tribe of forest dwellers asked Drona to teach him. His name was Ekalavya. Drona replied that his school was only for kings and princes. Ekalavya went away dismayed. Strongly desiring greatness in martial sciences, he practiced alone in the woods. He built an effigy of Drona and worshipped him daily, praying to him for skills at weaponry. Gradually he became an expert archer. Once, as he was practicing, a dog began to bark loudly and disturb him. Immediately he released seven arrows, even without seeing the dog, and sealed the animal's mouth.

It so happened that Arjuna and his brothers were in the woods at the time and they saw the dog, its mouth closed with arrows. They marvelled at this and wondered who was responsible for such a feat. Soon they came upon Ekalavya and, seeing the dark-skinned Nishada, smeared with filth, his hair matted, they asked him who he was. He replied, "I am Ekalavya of the Nishadas, a disciple of Drona. I practice alone in these woods with a desire to become the best of archers."

Arjuna's brow furrowed with perplexity. How was this possible? This boy posed himself as a disciple of Drona, even though rejected by him. It was against all religious principles. No one could claim to be a disciple of a guru unless accepted as such by that teacher. And Ekalavya had even flouted his so-called guru's order. Drona had told Ekalavya that he could not be his student. The Nishadha clearly had no devotion to Drona, despite his outward show of dedication, as he did not accept Drona's order. How then could he be allowed to present himself as Drona's disciple—and practically his best one at that? His skills were astonishing, but they had been gained by disobedience. Arjuna went at once to his guru to inform him.

After bowing at Drona's feet, Arjuna said, "Master, embracing me to your bosom you told me that I shall be the best of all your students. By your grace this has become true. But I see you have another disciple, the mighty Nishada prince Ekalavya, whose skills approach mine. The warrior practices alone in the forest, worshipping your holy feet. Has he become my equal?"

Drona was immediately perturbed. He remembered dismissing Ekalavya and he could understand Arjuna's intimations and anxiety. After thinking for some moments he replied, "Come with me, child. We shall see today what caliber of disciple is this prince."

Drona went at once with Arjuna into the woods. When Ekalavya saw them approach he fell to the ground and touched Drona's feet. Then he stood before Drona with folded palms, saying, "My lord, I am your disciple. Please order me as you will."

Drona looked with surprise at Ekalavya and at his own effigy nearby. He recalled the day the forest prince had come to him and been turned away. Drona was angered that he was now claiming to be his student. The Kuru preceptor had not desired to impart any martial skills to Ekalavya. Generally the lower caste tribespeople lacked the virtuous qualities of royalty, and they did not follow the Vedic religion. To give a low-class man great martial power could be dangerous. Drona had been especially concerned about Ekalavya, as the Nishadha tribe did not cooperate with the Kuru's virtuous rule. Drona would not accept any princes into his school if they belonged to races antagonistic to the Kurus.

Drona stood thinking for some time. His first assessment of Ekalavya had obviously been correct. The Nishadha had shown himself to be lacking in

virtue by falsely posing as his disciple. Clearly he desired only to be great, known as a student of the famous teacher, but not to actually obey him.

Smiling a little, Drona said to the Nishada, "O hero, if you really wish to be my disciple then you must give me my fee, the traditional gift of dakshine. The disciple should be prepared to give anything to his guru. Therefore I ask you to give me your right thumb."

Drona knew that this was asking a lot from Ekalavya. The loss of his thumb would impair his skill at bowmanship. But if he wanted to be known as Drona's disciple, he could not refuse. Drona also wanted to show that one cannot please his teacher and achieve perfection by dishonest means. By taking Ekalavya's thumb, he was also removing any threat he or his race might pose to the Kurus.

Drona looked expectantly at the Nishadha prince. Ekalavya immediately took out his hunting knife. Although he had been unable to accept Drona's first order, the prince did not want to be considered at fault for failing to give dakshine to his guru. And he knew that all his knowledge and skills would be lost if he refused Drona's request. Without the least hesitation, he cut off his thumb and handed it to Drona.

Drona took the thumb and thanked the prince. Raising his hand in blessing he turned and walked quickly away, followed by a relieved Arjuna. With his firm action, Drona had clearly upheld religious principles.

Chapter Five. The Martial Exhibition

Among Drona's pupils, Bhima and Duryodhana, deadly rivals, both became matchless in mace fighting. Yudhisthira was the greatest spearman and chariot fighter, Nakula and Sahadeva were the best swordsmen and Ashvatthama showed the greatest ability at mystical weapons. Arjuna, however, excelled everyone in all respects. He became an atiratha, a warrior capable of fighting sixty thousand other warriors simultaneously. This only increased the envy Dhritarastra's sons felt toward him, as well as toward his brother, the mighty Bhima.

One day, Drona decided to test his students' abilities. He placed an artificial bird high in a tree. Calling together all the princes, he said to each of them, "Take your bows and aim for the bird's eye. One by one I shall call you forward to shoot."

The first to be called was Yudhisthira. When he had placed an arrow on his bow and aimed, Drona said, "O prince, tell me what you see."

Yudhisthira replied that he saw his brothers, Drona, the tree and the bird. Drona asked him again and again what he saw and each time received the same reply. Drona then reproached him and told him to stand down without firing his arrow. "You will not be able to hit the mark," he said with annoyance.

Duryodhana was the next to be called. When he was ready to fire Drona asked him the same question. The prince replied as Yudhisthira had replied, and again Drona told him to stand down. Each prince was called and each responded to Drona similarly and was not allowed to shoot at the bird.

Finally Arjuna was called. When he was prepared to shoot and was standing with his bow drawn in a semicircle, Drona said, "Tell me what you see. Can you see myself, your brothers and the tree?"

Arjuna replied, "I see only the bird. I cannot see you or my brothers, nor the tree."

Drona was pleased. He waited a moment and asked, "If you see the bird, then please describe it to me."

Arjuna responded, "I see only the bird's head. I cannot see its body."

Drona's bodily hair stood on end. He said, "Shoot!"

Arjuna released his arrow and it struck the wooden bird in the eye, sending it tumbling to the ground. With tears of joy Drona embraced his disciple as Duryodhana and his brothers looked on in frustration.

Some time after that Drona went with the princes to the Ganges to bathe. As he entered the water a fierce crocodile seized him. Although capable of freeing himself, Drona cried out, "Boys! Come quickly! Kill this beast and rescue me!"

The princes were confounded with sorrow at seeing their teacher held by the crocodile. They froze in fear—all except Arjuna. He instantly fired five arrows that struck the reptile under the water and cut it to pieces. Its mouth fell open and released Drona's leg.

Drona came to the riverbank and took Arjuna aside. He said to him, "I wish to give you the greatest of weapons. Take from me the knowledge of the Brahmastra, the irresistible missile endowed with Brahma's power. This weapon should only be used against supernatural foes, for if released against others it may destroy the very world." Drona then told Arjuna that no one would ever become superior to him with a bow. He was now invincible.

Seeing that the princes had become expert in arms and warfare, Drona went to Dhritarastra and said, "My lord, your sons have completed their education. With your permission they may now display their proficiency. Let me therefore arrange an exhibition."

Dhritarastra thanked Drona for instructing the princes and said, "I envy those who are able to witness the prowess of my sons. I shall attend the display with Vidura who will be my eyes. With his assistance please make the preparations, O best of brahmins."

Drona and Vidura went outside of the city and selected a large, flat piece of land. After sanctifying the spot with prayers and offerings to the gods, Drona had skilled architects construct a great stadium. It had a vast central area and platforms rising on all four sides. Wealthy merchants sponsored the installation of thousands of beautiful seats carved from wood and inlaid with ivory and pearls. Rows of golden thrones encrusted with coral and gems were built on the royal platform. The stadium's sides reached up to the sky and were adorned with tall white flagstaffs bearing colored pennants that fluttered in the breeze.

On an auspicious day determined by the royal astrologers, the

citizens entered the stadium eager to see the princes display their power. Bhishma and Vidura, leading Dhritarastra by the arm, walked at the head of the procession. Drona and Kripa immediately followed them, along with other members of the royal party such as Bahlika, Somadatta and other kings visiting from surrounding kingdoms. The royal ladies came out of the city dressed in dazzling robes and ornaments, accompanied by numerous maids-in-waiting. The ladies ascended the royal platforms like goddesses ascending the holy Mount Meru.

Crowds of citizens of all four castes thronged into the stadium and marvelled at its beauty. Large sections were built of pure gold studded with priceless vaidurya gems. It was decorated with countless garlands of bright flowers and strings of pearls. The sound of people filling the stadium was like the surging ocean. Trumpets were blown and drums beaten, mixing with the blasts of thousands of conches and the excited talk of the people.

When everyone was seated, Drona entered the arena with his son Ashvatthama. He wore white robes and white garlands, and his body was smeared white with sandalwood paste. His hair and beard were also white, and with his powerful son he looked like the moon accompanied by Mars. The noise of the crowd subsided as Drona entered. Drona then had a large number of brahmins perform auspicious rites in the arena. The mantras echoed around the stadium. Expert musicians simultaneously played their instruments, creating a sound that pleased and calmed the audience, who sat in expectation.

The princes then entered the arena, headed by Yudhisthira and striding like proud and mighty lions. They were clad in brilliant armor and equipped with every kind of weapon. Drona ordered them to show off their different skills. Beginning with Yudhisthira, the princes stepped forward one by one. They mounted swift horses and rode them expertly, wheeling about the arena and hitting both still and moving targets with arrows engraved with their respective names.

Thousands of arrows sped in all directions, and some of the citizens ducked in fear. Others were fearless, their eyes wide with wonder. Sounds of "Excellent! Well done!" resounded through the stadium. The princes' weaponry skills, horseback riding and chariot driving were breathtaking. After displaying all these skills, they pulled out their gleaming blue swords and rushed, shouting, at one another. They thrust and parried, adroitly

dodging each others' attacks. The people saw with delight the grace, speed and strength of all the princes.

Drona then had Bhima and Duryodhana step forward to display mace fighting. The two heroes glared at each other and bellowed like furious bulls. Holding aloft massive iron maces they circled, each with his gaze riveted on the other. As Vidura described the scene to Dhritarastra, and Kunti to Gandhari, the two princes aimed terrific blows at each other. Their maces collided with thunderous crashes, sending showers of sparks into the air.

The crowd became divided. Some supported Bhima while others supported Duryodhana. Shouts of "Behold the mighty Bhima!" and "Just see the powerful Duryodhana!" filled the stadium. Drona realized that the fight was becoming too earnest, and he also saw that the people were becoming too excited. He told his son to step between the roaring rivals and stop them. Ashvatthama obeyed his father and, moving quickly forward, managed to separate the two princes.

When Bhima and Duryodhana had stood down, still glaring at each other, Drona stepped into the middle of the arena. He stopped the musicians and spoke in a voice that resounded like thunder. "Behold now Arjuna's abilities. He is dearer to me than my own son. This son of Indra is incomparable at every kind of martial skill."

As Drona spoke Arjuna entered the arena. Clad in golden armor, with a large golden quiver of arrows on his back, the lustrous prince appeared like a cloud reflecting the rays of the evening sun and illumined by a rainbow and flashes of lightning. The invincible warrior walked with the gait of a lion, and as he glanced about the arena, he terrified all those upon whom his eyes fell.

A cry of joy went up from the audience. People blew conches and played musical instruments. "This handsome youth is Kunti's third son, and he is the best of all virtuous men and the most powerful," some people said. "He is the son of the mighty Indra and the best protector of the Kuru race," others added. All kinds of praises were heard from the crowd. Hearing these, Kunti felt milk flow from her breasts. Along with her tears it completely drenched her bosom.

Dhritarastra asked Vidura why the people were shouting so joyously. When Vidura told him that it was because Arjuna had appeared, Dhritarastra said, "How blessed I am by Kunti's three sons. They are like three sacrificial

fires and Kunti is like the sacred fuel."

But Dhritarastra burned secretly within himself. Why had the people not cheered his own sons in this way? Was not Duryodhana Arjuna's equal? If only he could see what was happening.

Vidura described the scene to the blind king. Arjuna displayed one celestial weapon after another. With the Agneya weapon he produced fire; with the Varuna weapon he produced volumes of water; with the Vayavya weapon he caused a great wind to blow; and with the Parjanya weapon he created a huge downpour of rain. Arjuna created land with the Bhouma weapon and with the Parvatya weapon he made a hill appear in the arena. Then, by invoking the antardhana weapon, he made all those things disappear.

As the citizens gasped, the prince displayed all kinds of mystical powers. One moment he appeared as tall as a massive palm tree and in the next he became as small as a thumb. In an instant he went from standing on his chariot to standing on the ground a distance from his chariot. Drona had a mechanical iron boar run swiftly across the arena and Arjuna shot five arrows into its mouth as if they were one shaft. He shot twenty arrows into the hollow of a cow's horn swinging on a rope around a pole. After showing his skill with a bow, Arjuna took out his sword and mace, demonstrating many dexterous moves with them both.

The exhibition was almost over. The music had stopped and the crowd's excitement had cooled. Suddenly they heard at the stadium gate the sound of someone slapping his arms with great force and roaring like an enraged elephant. Obviously some hugely powerful man had arrived. The people looked around for the source of the sounds. "Are the mountains cracking asunder? Is the earth itself splitting apart?" Others thought that some jealous god had come there wishing to display his might.

Drona jumped up and stood surrounded by the five Pandavas, resembling the moon surrounded by bright stars. Duryodhana stood with his hundred brothers like Indra with the celestials. Everyone looked toward the gate. Marching straight toward them was a warrior who resembled the blazing sun. He had a brilliant coat-of-mail that appeared to be a natural part of his body, and he was adorned with earrings that shone like fire. The earth resounded with his steps and he seemed like a moving hill. The crowd was

motionless. They stared at the new arrival. Who was this?

The handsome youth strode straight up to Drona. He bowed somewhat indifferently before him, then offered his respects to Kripa. Turning again to Drona, he spoke in a voice that could be heard in every part of the stadium. "I am Karna. With your permission, good brahmin, I shall show skills equal to those of Arjuna. Indeed, I shall excel all the feats displayed by Kunti's son. Watch them and be amazed."

The crowd stood up together as if lifted by some instrument. They roared and cheered. Arjuna felt abashed and angry. He clenched and unclenched his fists, which were covered with iguana-skin finger protectors. His eyes seemed on fire as he glared at Karna.

Drona nodded his assent and Karna moved to the center of the arena. At once he began to show his skills. He matched every feat Arjuna had displayed and the crowd shouted their approval. When he had finished, Duryodhana went over and warmly embraced him. Here was someone who could stand against the haughty Arjuna. The Pandava prince had been the center of attention for too long. Here was his equal.

Duryodhana laughingly said to Karna, "You are welcome, mighty hero. By good fortune you have come here today. Tell me, what can I do for your pleasure? I and the Kuru kingdom are at your command."

Duryodhana had seen Arjuna's anger. He smiled at the Pandava as Karna replied, "By your words I already consider my desire fulfilled. I only wish for your undying friendship. But I have one request: please allow me to engage in single combat with Arjuna."

Arjuna stiffened and grasped his bow. The minute he had seen the obviously arrogant Karna he had felt an intense rivalry. Maybe he would get the chance to end it right now.

Duryodhana laughed. "Enjoy with me the good things of life, O hero," he replied. "Together we shall reside in happiness."

Arjuna had heard enough. He interrupted Duryodhana in a thunderous voice. "Karna, the path of the unwelcome intruder or the uninvited speaker shall now be yours."

Karna smoldered like a glowing ember. "Arjuna, this arena is not meant for you alone. It is open to all heroes, including those superior to you.

Why do you argue with words alone? Those who are strong do not waste words. Speak with your arrows and I shall sever your head before your guru's eyes."

Arjuna turned to Drona who nodded slightly. Fixing his gaze on Karna, the Pandava advanced for combat. Duryodhana embraced Karna who went before Arjuna, his weapons at the ready. Suddenly the sky was filled with heavy clouds and bright flashes of lightning. Indra's great rainbow appeared overhead. The clouds above Karna, however, dispersed, and the sun shone brightly, lighting up his form. Dhritarashtra's sons stood behind Karna, while Drona, Kripa and Bhishma stood behind Arjuna.

In the terraces the crowd became divided. The royal ladies also could not choose between the two heroes. As they faced each other, Kunti was immediately filled with horror and she fainted on the spot. Vidura was surprised to see this and raised her gently, sprinkling her face with cool water. He asked her what was wrong, but Kunti said nothing. She sat holding her head. How could she tell anyone the secret she had kept hidden for so long? Trembling with fear she looked at the arena and, feeling helpless, prayed silently.

Just as the two warriors were about to duel, Kripa, who knew all the rules of combat, stepped forward and asked, "This son of Pandu is the child of Kunti and a descendent of the royal Kuru race. Let us hear from his opponent what is his lineage and race. Once he knows this, Partha may decide whether or not to fight." Kripa looked at Karna. Duels were fought only among equals.

Karna blushed and said nothing. It was clear that he was not from a royal line. Seeing his discomfiture, Duryodhana spoke out. "Nobility does not depend only upon birth. Those who are heroes and leaders of soldiers may also claim nobility, even if not born in royal lines. But if Arjuna will duel only with another king, then I shall immediately give Karna a kingdom."

Without delay Duryodhana arranged for a ceremony right there in the arena. He sent someone to fetch sanctified water and sprinkled it upon Karna's head. "You shall become the king of Anga." The crowd cheered as brahmins chanted the appropriate mantras and offered Karna rice, flowers and holy water. Karna sat upon a golden seat and was fanned with yak-tail whisks. He was deeply moved by Duryodhana's gesture of friendship and

said in a choked voice, "What can I ever do to repay you? I shall always be at your command."

Duryodhana replied, "Your friendship alone is all I desire."

The two men embraced each other, and the citizens became even more excited. Then, just as the duel between Karna and Arjuna seemed about to commence, another man suddenly ran into the arena. He was trembling with age and supported himself on a staff. Perspiring and with his cloth hanging loosely from his body, he moved quickly toward Karna. At once Karna got down from his seat and placed his head, still wet from the coronation, at the man's feet. He stood up and said to the inquisitive Duryodhana, "This is my father, Adhiratha."

Adhiratha had been present in the crowd and wanted to congratulate his son upon his coronation. He was a charioteer and was instantly recognized as such by both his dress and his name. He embraced his son tightly and shed tears of happiness.

Seeing all this Bhima jeered, "O son of a charioteer, you do not deserve death at Arjuna's hands. You had best take up the whip and guide a chariot. Indeed, you no more deserve the kingship of Anga than a dog deserves the sacrificial offerings of ghee meant for the gods."

Karna looked down in embarrassment. Duryodhana rose up in anger from the midst of his brothers, like an infuriated elephant rising out of a lake full of lotuses. "Bhima, you should not speak such words. How can someone like this be of inferior birth? A hero's first quality is his strength and prowess. We have all seen Karna's power today."

Duryodhana then named different gods and heroes whose births had been unusual. Drona himself was said to be born from a pot, Kripa from a piece of heath and the great god Karttikeya from a clump of reeds. Even the Pandavas' birth was mysterious. "Can a deer bring forth a lion? Look at this man, his natural coat of armor and his marks of auspiciousness. I do not consider him to be a charioteer at all."

Duryodhana gazed defiantly at the Pandavas. "If anyone dislikes my having crowned Karna, then let him step forward and bend his bow in combat."

The crowd was roused by Duryodhana's heroic speech. They cheered

and sat expectantly. Now there would surely be a great duel between two mighty heroes. But during Duryodhana's speech the sun had set. The dispute would have to be settled another day. Duryodhana took Karna by the hand and led him out of the arena, which was now lit by countless lamps. The Pandavas also left, along with Drona, Kripa and Bhishma. Then the citizens returned to their homes. Some of them named Arjuna and some Karna, while others pointed to Duryodhana, as the victor of the day.

Kunti thanked the Lord within herself. As she watched Karna leave the arena her mind went back to the day of his birth. She had only wanted to test Durvasa's boon. She had no idea the mantra would prove so powerful. Kunti remembered how she had been lying on her couch watching the brilliant sun rise over the Ganges. What if she could call the sun-god to her? The mantra had come to mind and almost at once the blazing Surya was standing before her. Kunti had been amazed, then horrified when he told her that he could not leave without giving her a child. "I am yet a maiden," she protested. "What will everyone say?" Surya smiled. By his power she would conceive a son and still remain a maiden.

And so it had happened. The god left and in due course the boy was born. Kunti had marvelled at the baby's natural golden armor and earrings, the same armor and earrings she had seen on Karna as he marched into the arena. She recalled how that armor had shone in the morning sun as the boy floated away in his basket on the river. Kunti wept again as she recalled how she could not tell anyone she had given birth and how, blinded by tears, she had pushed the baby out into the flowing river. Adhiratha must have found the basket and raised her son. As Karna strode off with Duryodhana, Kunti led Gandhari back to the palace.

Chapter Six. The Kaurava's Hatred Grows

It was time for the princes to leave Drona's school. To complete their training they had to pay their guru's fees by offering him dakshina. Traditionally, the guru himself determined the dakshina. Drona assembled the princes and said, "There is only one thing I want. You should take King Drupada prisoner. Then bring him before me as your captive."

The princes replied, "So be it." They knew of their guru's enmity with the king. Drupada and Drona had lived together as children under the Rishi Agniveshya. Drupada had promised that when he inherited his kingdom he would bestow half of it on his dear friend Drona. Later, when they had both grown to maturity, Drona went to Drupada and reminded him of their friendship and the promise. Seeing the penniless Drona standing before him, Drupada had said, "O luckless brahmin, how do you consider me as your friend now? Past friendships are meaningless. Only equals can be friends. I am a great king and you are an indigent brahmin. Do not try to invoke a long-dead relationship."

Drupada had then laughed at Drona and offered him a little charity. Deeply insulted, Drona had left Panchala, Drupada's vast kingdom, his mind fixed on revenge. The time for that vengeance had arrived. Drona looked about at his accomplished students and knew that Drupada would soon regret his arrogance.

The princes mounted their chariots and sped toward Panchala. Accompanied by a large force of horsemen, they soon arrived at Drupada's capital, Kampilya. Duryodhana and his brothers vied with one another to lead the attack. They rushed toward the city gates with weapons raised. Sending up loud cries, they burst into Kampilya along its main highway while the terrified citizens hid in their houses.

Outside the city Drona waited with the Pandavas. Arjuna had suggested to his brothers that they not accompany the Kauravas. "They will not be able to overpower the mighty Drupada," Arjuna had said. "We should make our attack after theirs has been repulsed."

Drupada heard the attacking Kauravas crashing through his city and came straight out of his palace, mounted on his huge, white chariot. Roaring with joy at the chance for battle, he charged at the head of his army to defend

the city. He showered his enemies with forceful arrows. His speed and lightness of motion were such that the Kauravas thought they were facing many Drupadas. He careered fearlessly in his chariot and entered their midst, his bow constantly drawn to a circle and his searing shafts flying in all directions.

The Panchalas sounded thousands of conches, trumpets and drums, creating a noise that sounded like the roar of a tremendous lion. Drupada struck the Kuru princes with his arrows and sent them reeling. Seeing their king in the forefront of battle, the citizens came out of their houses to hurl clubs, maces and other missiles at the Kurus. The princes were surrounded by thousands of assailants and they felt oppressed and overwhelmed. They fled howling from the city with the Panchalas in pursuit.

The Pandavas laughed. Arjuna said scornfully to Yudhishthira, "Here come the proud Kauravas, put to flight by Drupada. They are strong in words only. It is time for us to fight. You stay here. I shall go with the others."

Yudhishthira remained behind with Drona. His four brothers sped toward Kampilya. Bhima bounded along with mace held aloft, while Arjuna raced behind him on a chariot with Nakula and Sahadeva on either side. The Panchalas were waiting for them and had blocked the city gates with a row of elephants. Bhima struck at them with his club. With their heads smashed and covered in blood, the elephants fell to the ground like cliffs broken off by thunderbolts. Bhima spun like a furious tornado amid the Panchala warriors. Elephants, chariots and infantrymen fell in the thousands. The Pandava hero drove the hostile force back as a herdsman drives cattle.

Arjuna, keen to please his preceptor, released volleys of arrows at the immense Panchala forces. His straight-flying shafts came in an endless stream and sped unerringly at the enemy warriors. Arjuna resembled the all-devouring fire that appears at the end of an aeon. Protected on either side by the twins, he felled thousands of fighters.

Drupada raced to the head of his troops and they rallied with lion-like roars. Led by their king, they mounted a powerful counterattack against the Pandavas. Arrows, darts, spears and clubs rained down on the four brothers. Arjuna repelled all their missiles with his arrows. The Panchalas enraged him with their furious attack and he fought with redoubled energy. His foes could not mark any interval between his pulling an arrow from his quiver and

bending his bow to fire it. All they saw was a constant stream of shafts speeding toward them. The mighty Panchala warriors shouted praises at Arjuna for his prowess.

Along with his commander-in-chief Satyajit, Drupada personally rushed toward Arjuna. Like the king, Satyajit was a warrior capable of contending with thousands of other warriors at once. He struck Arjuna with a hundred fierce arrows and sent up a great roar. Not tolerating the attack, Arjuna pierced Satyajit with ten arrows and simultaneously cut his bow to pieces with three more shafts. Seeing this wonderful feat, the other warriors cheered. Satyajit grasped another bow and immediately pierced Arjuna's steeds as well as his charioteer. Arjuna again split Satyajit's bow, then killed his horses and smashed his chariot to pieces.

Drupada came quickly to his commander's assistance. A powerful exchange of arrows and other missiles followed between the king and Arjuna. Gradually Arjuna overpowered Drupada. He shattered the king's bow, tore off his armor, felled his flagstaff and killed his horses. Seeing Drupada confounded, Arjuna threw down his own bow and took up a huge scimitar. He leapt down from his chariot and jumped onto Drupada's, seizing him and holding the sword to his throat.

Bhima had meanwhile been wreaking havoc among Drupada's troops. Arjuna shouted to him to withdraw. They had achieved their aim and captured Drupada. The troops saw their king's plight and fled in fear. Arjuna then dragged Drupada onto his own chariot and rode back toward Drona.

When Drona saw the captive king, he smiled. "So, mighty king, do you now desire to revive our old friendship? It seems your kingdom and wealth have become mine."

Drupada squirmed and blushed deeply. He looked down as Drona continued, "You need not fear for your life for I am a brahmin and it is my duty to be ever forgiving. Indeed, I have always cherished an affection for you since we were children."

Drona then ordered Arjuna to release Drupada. The king listened in silence as Drona continued. "I still desire your friendship, Drupada, but how can one who is not a king be a king's friend? Therefore I have decided to allow you to keep half your kingdom. I shall take the other half."

Drupada was in no position to argue. He knew that Drona's martial

power far exceeded his own—especially as he now had the mighty Kurus as disciples. There would be no question of defeating him in battle. Drupada nodded in assent. "You are a truly noble soul to act in this way, Drona," he replied, summoning all his patience. "Great personalities like yourself are always magnanimous. I, too, desire your friendship. Let us live peacefully, each ruling his own half of the Panchala kingdom."

Drupada had brahmins perform appropriate rituals and bestowed the northern half of his kingdom upon Drona, who then left with the Pandavas for Hastinapura. Drupada burned with humiliation. Somehow he had to avenge his honor. Absorbed in thought, the king returned to his palace.

As they returned to Hastinapura, Drona rode on Arjuna's chariot and spoke to him affectionately. He loved this prince as dearly as his own son, and he knew there was nothing Arjuna would not do for him. Drona said, "O hero, you are now the best of all bowmen in this world. Although you have repaid me by defeating Drupada, I will ask one more thing from you as dakshina. You must fight with me when I come to fight with you."

Arjuna was surprised. How could he ever fight with his teacher? Still, he replied without hesitating, "It shall be so. I am always your servant."

* * *

The Kurus had heard of a wonderful occurrence in Mathura, the city where Kunti had been born. Kunti had a brother named Vasudeva who had been imprisoned by the wicked King Kamsa. This powerful monarch had been viciously terrorizing brahmins and other kings. Hearing a divine prophesy that Vasudeva's eighth child would kill him, Kamsa imprisoned both Vasudeva and his wife Devaki. He then killed their first six children at birth. But somehow, despite Kamsa's vigilance, the seventh and eighth children, Balarama and Krishna, had escaped death. By some mystical arrangement Krishna had been carried away from Mathura and raised in Vrindavana, a small village of cowherds, by its leader, Nanda. The great Rishis said that Krishna was in fact the Supreme Lord and that it had been by his own divine arrangement he had gone to Vrindavana. The Kurus were amazed to hear from the sages that God himself had appeared in the neighboring kingdom of the Yadus.

When he became a youth, Krishna had returned to Mathura and

killed Kamsa with his bare hands. This tremendous deed astonished all those who saw it and confirmed for them Krishna's divine identity. Kamsa had struck fear even into the gods' hearts. There had been no earthly king capable of standing against him. But the young Krishna, still only a boy, and his brother, Balarama, had overpowered Kamsa's troops and generals, finally killing the king along with his evil ministers. The two brothers then became chiefs of the Yadu dynasty. They maintained a friendship with the Kurus in Hastinapura, taking a special interest in the welfare of their Aunt Kunti and her five fatherless sons.

Balarama, also said by the Rishis to be a manifestation of the Supreme Godhead, became famous as a peerless mace fighter. At Drona's request, he agreed to train Bhima and Duryodhana in the skills of handling a mace. Thus Balarama spent time in Hastinapura. While there, he learned of the fierce rivalry and envy the Kauravas felt toward their cousins. When Krishna heard this, he became concerned for Kunti and her sons. Therefore he asked one of his advisors, Akrura, to visit Hastinapura and assess the situation, and to see if he could be of any help.

The Kurus received Akrura in friendship. Kunti was overjoyed to see him. She inquired about her kinsmen and friends in Mathura. Kunti especially wanted to know everything about Krishna, whom she accepted as the Supreme Lord. "Does my nephew Krishna think of me and my sons?" she asked. "Does he know how I am suffering in the midst of my enemies, like a doe in the midst of wolves?"

Akrura asked her to tell him more about the situation in the city and she began explaining everything. Kunti knew that Duryodhana and his brothers were always intriguing against her sons. The Kauravas could not tolerate the Pandavas' superior prowess. The humiliation they had recently received at Kampilya had made them even keener to dispose of Pandu's sons. Kunti spoke to Akrura with tears in her eyes, "Will Krishna come here to console me? I always pray to that all-powerful protector of the universe. Indeed, I see no other shelter for myself and my sons."

Kunti cried out to Krishna in front of Akrura. He gently reassured her that Krishna was often speaking about her and had sent him to analyze the situation. Both Akrura and Vidura comforted Kunti and reminded her about her sons' extraordinary birth. The Pandava boys were expansions of the gods. There was no way the evil Kaurava princes could overcome them.

Akrura remained in Hastinapura for several months. Then, when he felt he had understood the situation fully, he decided it was time to return to Mathura. Before leaving, however, he met with Dhritarastra to offer some advice. Ultimately the blind king was responsible for his sons' acts and he could certainly check their behavior if he chose. Akrura said, "My dear King, you have obtained the throne only because your brother Pandu passed away prematurely. Therefore Pandu's sons have first claim on the throne. You should not discriminate against them in favor of your own sons."

Akrura also advised Dhritarastra to rule the kingdom strictly according to moral principles. He should treat all his subjects equally, what to speak of the Pandavas, his own nephews and heirs to the throne. Over-attachment for one's close relatives is simply born of ignorance. Every creature in the world is born alone and dies alone. He experiences the results of his own good and evil deeds and in the end leaves the present body to accept another. The belief that one person is the relation of another is nothing more than illusion.

Dhritarastra listened in silence as Akrura spoke. He understood the implications of his words. Akrura had made it clear that the Pandavas' cause was righteous and that by opposing them he would reap only grief. Dhritarastra sat silently as Akrura concluded, "By favoring your own sons, O lord of the earth, you are acting out of ignorance. How then can you hope for any good result? Ignorance always leads to sorrow. Therefore, act virtuously and deal with Pandu's sons as they rightfully deserve."

Dhritarastra sighed, "Wise Akrura, your words are like the immortal nectar of the gods. I could go on hearing them forever. You have surely spoken the truth. But just as a person on the verge of death cannot be saved by nectar, so your instructions do not stay in my heart."

Dhritarastra admitted that he was prejudiced by affection for his sons. He told Akrura that he felt helpless to overcome that affection. Like Kunti, the king also understood Krishna's position. "Surely everything moves according to the will of the Supreme Lord. No man can influence the Lord's will. Now he has appeared to relieve the earth's burden and that will surely happen. What then can I do? Destiny is surely all-powerful."

Dhritarastra had heard the sages describe how Krishna's mission was to destroy the large number of demonic kings occupying the earth. Pandu had

managed to check them, but since his retirement they had formed alliances and built huge armies, posing a constant threat to world security.

Akrura could understand that Dhritarastra was set upon a course that would lead to his ruin. By favoring his own sons over the Pandavas, the king would ultimately ignite a conflict between them that would result in the destruction of the Kuru race. Akrura felt there was nothing more he could do. Dhritarastra refused to accept responsibility for his acts. Taking his leave from the king, Akrura made his way back to Mathura.

When Akrura was gone, Dhritarastra pondered on his words. It was true that Pandu's sons were the rightful heirs to the kingdom. That could not be denied. It was especially clear that the eldest of them, Yudhisthira, was qualified to be the king. The king had seen how the prince was noted for his honesty, patience, kindness and unswerving adherence to duty. Along with his brothers, he was a firm favorite of the people. The citizens had loved Pandu and it seemed to them that he was living among them as his sons. Everywhere people spoke of their desire to see Yudhisthira installed as the king. Dhritarastra had heard of their talks: "Now we have a qualified prince. Why should the blind Dhritarastra remain king? Let us place the pious Yudhisthira on the throne. He will surely be a righteous and benevolent ruler."

Dhritarastra consulted with Bhishma, Vidura and the brahmins. They all decided that Yudhisthira should be installed as prince regent. The ceremony was soon performed and the people rejoiced.

Duryodhana, however, seethed with indignation. How had his father bypassed him to make Yudhisthira prince regent? When Bhima sneered at his distress, making it even more unbearable, he went with Karna and Dushashana to discuss with Shakuni a way to eradicate the Pandavas.

Shakuni's eyes narrowed as Duryodhana and the others vented their rage. He pressed his fingertips together to think. "The only answer," he said finally, "is to get the Pandavas out of Hastinapura to a place where they can be killed without interference. We should somehow contrive to have them burned to death, making it seem like an accident."

Duryodhana smiled, but Karna was not so sure. He did not like Shakuni's devious ways. "Only cowards resort to deceit and underhanded methods. Powerful men favor open combat. If the Pandavas are our enemies,

then let us march out to the battlefield and settle this dispute."

Shakuni's lips tightened. Then he smiled slightly. "My child, you are powerful but foolish. It seems you have forgotten Bhima's superhuman strength. And do you not remember the incident at Kampilya? All of the Kaurava princes, with you by their side, could not overpower Drupada. But with only four fighting, the Pandavas were successful. It is unlikely that we will win in a confrontation with those five brothers. Take heed of my words."

Reminded of Kampilya, Karna was embarrassed. He let out an angry shout. They had been taken by surprise there. Drupada had been stronger than they expected. The Pandavas had the advantage, confronting Drupada after having witnessed his actual power. Next time, if the Pandavas confronted the Kauravas directly, things would be different. Karna shook his head and left the room. "Do what you will, but I cannot be a party to such cowardice."

The cunning Shakuni had carefully assessed the situation. He pressed Duryodhana to approach his father and ask for the Pandavas to be sent away. He knew that Dhritarastra would not refuse his son anything. Duryodhana nodded slowly. He trusted Shakuni's judgment. Together they worked out the details of their plan. Then Duryodhana went to see the king.

* * *

Dhritarastra knew well of his sons' hatred for the Pandavas. He knew that Yudhisthira's installation as the heir-apparent had been a bitter blow to Duryodhana. The king thought about what he could do for his sons. He had spoken with Shakuni. His brother-in-law, knowing that Dhritarastra never acted without counsel, had suggested that he seek advice from Shakuni's brahmin friend, Kanika. This brahmin, Shakuni had said, was an expert in statecraft and politics. Shakuni then personally brought Kanika to see Dhritarastra.

Kanika told Dhritarastra that he should feel no compunction about rooting out his enemies before they harmed him. "If you see the Pandavas as your enemies, then you should destroy them without hesitation by any means possible." Kanika cautioned that because they were stronger than the king's own sons, a direct confrontation would probably fail. Better to employ some devious means. In the meantime the king should continue to appear as the Pandavas' well-wisher. Then as soon as an opportunity arose, he should

strike.

Dhritarastra thanked the brahmin for his advice and dismissed him. He sat alone in his chamber for some time. The thought of killing Pandu's sons distressed him. Perhaps there was some way they could be removed from Hastinapura. While they were present his own sons would never be happy. Duryodhana complained constantly about his cousins. Now the monarchy was about to pass back to Pandu's line. Dhritarastra had enjoyed his opportunity to occupy Hastinapura's throne as the world emperor. Although the firstborn son, and thus the first in line for the throne, he had thought his blindness had forever denied him the chance to be king. But in the years since Pandu's departure he had become accustomed to holding the reins of power. It would not be easy to let go.

As Dhritarastra sat in his darkened room, Duryodhana came to see him. He heard his son's heavy steps approaching and his sighs as he sat before him. Dhritarastra gently greeted the prince and asked what ailed him.

"I am hearing ill news of the kingdom, Father. The citizens are growing restless. They want you to soon hand over the throne to the Pandavas. 'Why should we have the blind king now that Yudhisthira is grown?' are the words they utter. They care not for you or for myself."

Duryodhana stood up sharply and began to pace, his gold ornaments jangling. As he strode about, he punched his hand with his clenched fist.

"Soon we shall become dependent upon the Pandavas. They will be the kings and after them their sons will inherit the throne. Thus our line will be plunged into misfortune. We shall become powerless and lose the honor we have long enjoyed. What could be more painful for us? I have been considering how to deliver us. Listen as I explain my idea."

Duryodhana first suggested the Pandavas be sent to a distant city. On the pretext of sending them on holiday, they could be sent to Varanavata, where a splendid festival honoring Shiva would soon be celebrated. The town was noted for its attractions. The Pandavas would surely be pleased to visit it. Once they left Hastinapura, perhaps they would never return.

Dhritarastra immediately understood what was on his son's mind. How could he possibly agree? "Pandur was always virtuous," he said. "He did not care for wealth. My pious brother was devoted to me. He gave me everything, including this wide and prosperous kingdom. How could I hurt

his sons?"

Besides that consideration, said Dhritarastra, the people love the Pandavas. They would be angered if the Kurus sent them away. Perhaps they would rise up against their leaders and remove them by force. And certainly Bhishma and the other senior Kurus would favor the Pandavas.

Duryodhana was ready for this objection. Before sending the Pandavas away, the Kurus should try to win over the people by various means. By bestowing wealth and honors on them they would gain their love and trust. Then, in the Pandavas' absence, it would be possible for Duryodhana to become king. The prince went on, "Once my position is established in Hastinapura, Kunti and her sons could even return. Do not fear for their welfare."

Dhritarastra sat up and leaned toward his son. "This very thought has been on my mind, but I have not spoken it because it is a sinful thought. I am still doubtful. How do you propose that we deal with Bhishma, Vidura, Drona and Kripa? They love the Pandavas as if they were their own sons."

Duryodhana smiled. "Bhishma will remain neutral, as he always does. Drona's son is my staunch supporter. His father will never go against him. Drona has married Kripa's sister. Therefore Kripa's support is assured. Vidura is the only one we cannot trust—he will certainly side with the Pandavas—but what harm can he alone do to us?"

Duryodhana implored his father to agree. If the Pandavas were allowed to remain in Hastinapura, he would not be able to live. His heart was burning and he lived in constant anxiety.

Dhritarastra was torn. He sat sighing for some moments. Finally, he gave his assent. Everything lay in the hands of Providence. What could he, a mere mortal filled with desire and fears, do against destiny? The king called his servants and retired for the night.

Chapter Seven. The Pandavas sent away

During the weeks that followed, Duryodhana and his brothers slowly began to win over the people. They distributed wealth and honors liberally and provided the citizens with all kinds of amenities and pleasures. At the same time, Dhritarastra's ministers spoke continuously in the court about Varanavata, as they had been instructed by the king. The Pandavas heard them describe the city's attractions. "The festival of Pasupata is starting soon. The procession has no equal anywhere in the world. The decorations, gems, jewels and entertainments delight the heart."

The young princes were attracted. When Dhritarastra saw that their curiosity had been aroused, he said, "I have been hearing a lot about Varanavata of late. It occurred to me that you boys would derive much pleasure from visiting that city. Why not make a state visit? Bestow charity on the people and take your leisure. After enjoying yourselves there, you may return here whenever you please."

Yudhishthira looked carefully at the blind monarch. Why did he not ask his own sons to go to Varanavata? Yudhishthira had seen the unusual kindness that Duryodhana had been displaying toward the people lately, and he knew that he was hatching a plot. But he felt helpless. He decided it would be better to do as the king suggested for the time being. Their position was not strong. The Pandavas had few friends or supporters and the king's sons were constantly inclined to harm them in any way they could. Perhaps a time away from Hastinapura would help.

A date was set for the Pandava's departure. Duryodhana could hardly conceal his joy. He immediately began to make plans, summoning his confidential counselor, Purochana. Taking him by the hand, the prince said, "This world and all its wealth is as much yours as it is mine. You should act so it will be protected. You are my most trustworthy supporter. I am completely dependent on you. Listen as I tell you what must be done, and done secretly. Do not repeat to anyone what I shall now say to you."

Duryodhana asked Purochana to go at once to Varanavata. Using skilled and trusted artisans, he should construct a spacious mansion for the Pandavas. It should be elegant and full of rich furnishings, but made entirely of flammable materials. "Mix ghee and oil with earth and a large quantity of lac. Plaster the walls with it and then paint over it carefully. Then scent the

house so no one will suspect anything."

The prince also instructed Purochana to leave pots of ghee and oil in the house. He wanted to ensure that the building would burn to ashes within minutes. Duryodhana then revealed to Purochana the whole plan he had made with Shakuni. Purochana should meet the Pandavas as soon as they arrived in Varanavata. He should then show them to their quarters, making sure they knew that the house had been built for them on the king's orders. Purochana should live with them to help allay their suspicions. Then, when they were least suspecting it, he should set fire to the house while they slept.

Duryodhana squeezed his minister's hand. "Everything depends upon you, Purochana. Know that I shall reward you with unlimited wealth if you do me this favor. Leave immediately, for the Pandavas will be there soon."

Purochana promised to do everything he had been asked. Gathering a number of men, he left immediately for Varanavata on a swift chariot drawn by asses. They began work on the house the moment they arrived.

On the day of their departure, the Pandavas went before their elders and bowed down in respect. They touched Bhishma and Dhritarastra's feet, and embraced their equals with love. Taking leave of the ladies, they walked respectfully around them with folded palms. Then they mounted their fine, golden chariots. The citizens crowded around them as they made preparations to leave, then followed the chariots as they slowly made their way out of the city. The young princes felt sorrow at leaving their homes and loved ones. Seeing their grief, some of the people spoke out. One brahmin said, "King Dhritarastra does not have equal vision. He favors his sons over these virtuous princes. Pandu's sons will never commit any sin. They are blameless and pure and do not deserve to be sent away." Some of the people censured Bhishma for allowing it to happen, while others condemned the blind king and his son. Many of them declared that they would go with the Pandavas to Varanavata rather than remain with the cruel-minded monarch.

Yudhisthira checked them. "The king is our father, our preceptor and our superior. He is always worthy of our worship and should be obeyed without question. This is the eternal injunction of scripture and we should abide by it with a peaceful mind." When the time came, he said, they could render his brothers and him service in another way. The citizens then circumambulated the chariots and departed, tears flooding their eyes.

When the Pandavas reached the edge of the city, Vidura met them. Vidura had learned of Duryodhana's scheme through his palace spies. He wanted to warn Yudhisthira without anyone else understanding his message. Going before the prince who was still in the people's midst, he spoke to him in the language of the forest tribes people.

Speaking cryptically, Vidura said, "One who knows there are sharp weapons capable of cutting the body although not made of metal is not injured by them. He survives who understands that the consumer of wood and straw does not reach the dwellers of a hole in the forest. Always stay alert. One who keeps his senses under control can never be overcome by any enemy."

Vidura spoke for some minutes and Yudhisthira, who was versed in many languages, understood his meaning, although the message was not understandable by others. When Vidura finished, Yudhisthira replied, "I understand." Vidura smiled, then walked respectfully around the princes. Bidding them farewell, he left for his own house.

On the road to Varanavata, Kunti asked Yudhisthira what Vidura had said. Yudhisthira replied that Vidura had told him that their house in Varanavata would be burned down. He had also told the prince that the means of escape would be revealed to him. "The learned Vidura then said that he who is self-controlled wins sovereignty of the earth."

When the citizens of Varanavata heard that the famous Pandava brothers were approaching their city, they came out in thousands to greet the princes. The people saw Yudhisthira leading his brothers, like Indra leading the celestials. They worshipped and welcomed the princes and led them into their city to the accompaniment of trumpets, drums and conchshells. Cheers filled the air as the brothers proceeded slowly along the road. Reaching the city's main concourse, they got down from their chariots and went first to meet the brahmins. Then they met with the city officials, then the warriors, the trades people and finally the workers and servant classes.

After the greetings were over, the Pandavas were received as guests of one of the city's chief officials. Remembering Vidura's warning and unsure of what to expect, they remained there for ten days. Then Purochana told them that their own residence was ready. He personally led the princes and Kunti to the house he had named 'The Blessed Dwelling'. As they entered the

house Yudhisthira said quietly to Bhima, "From the odors I detect here it is evident that this house has been made of lac and other materials soaked in ghee and oil. Without doubt Purochana intends to burn us to death in this place. It is just as Vidura told me. Duryodhana has obviously entrusted Purochana with the job of killing us."

Bhima replied, "Then why should we live in this death-trap? Let us return to where we have already been staying."

Yudhisthira did not think Bhima's idea wise. "If we let Purochana realize we suspect him, then he may try anything in order to kill us. Obviously he is without scruples and is determined to do the will of the ruthless Duryodhana. We should not give him any indication that we are aware of his wicked intentions."

When Purochana left the brothers spoke openly together. Yudhisthira said they should dig a tunnel under the house in order to escape when the time came. That was what Vidura had instructed. Bhima and Arjuna wondered why they should live in fear of Duryodhana. Why not challenge him outright? Bhima was especially angry, remembering the times when Duryodhana had tried to poison him. He slapped his biceps and said menacingly, "Just order me, dear brother, and I shall immediately crush the Kauravas with my bare hands."

Placating his furious brother Yudhisthira said, "No, we should not challenge the Kauravas at this time. Our position was in no way equal to theirs. They are one hundred and we are five. They have rank, power, friends, allies and wealth. Dhritarashtra will never abandon his sons, and Bhishma and Drona will always stand by the king. We cannot confront the Kurus directly."

The twins suggested that they immediately fly from Varanavata. Yudhisthira again disagreed. "Once he knows we are running in fear, Duryodhana will use spies and agents to find us and kill us by any devious means possible."

Yudhisthira decided their best hope lay in living in the lac house seemingly unaware of the danger. Remaining constantly alert, they should prepare an escape tunnel under the house. They should also spend their days hunting in the woods and looking for a route that would take them away from the city. When Purochana set light to the house, they could escape without anyone knowing. Duryodhana would think them dead and would not then

pursue them.

His brothers agreed. They searched the house for a place to dig the tunnel. As they were looking, a man came to the house and introduced himself as a friend of Vidura. He told Yudhisthira that he was a skilled miner and had been sent there by Vidura, who had informed him that on a new moon night, Purochana planned to set light to their house.

Yudhisthira looked at the man carefully. Was this yet another of Duryodhana's deceptions? The miner reassured him by mentioning the incident when Vidura had spoken to him in the tribal dialect. Yudhisthira then welcomed him warmly and replied, "We are ever protected by the virtuous Vidura. It is our good fortune that you have come here. The wicked and sinful Duryodhana has had this house constructed from all sorts of flammable materials. Using wealth and allies he pursues us relentlessly."

The miner said he would begin construction of a subterranean passage immediately. He began to dig from the center of the house and carefully covered the hole with planks and a large rug.

As the miner worked, the Pandavas spent their days wandering in the surrounding woods. They soon ascertained a route leading away from Varanavata through the forest. While living in the house the brothers gave Purochana the appearance of being peaceful and happy so as not to arouse his suspicions, but at night they slept with weapons at the ready, one of them always remaining alert in case Purochana made an unexpected move. No one but the miner knew of their plans.

Some months passed in this way. Purochana was satisfied, thinking the Pandavas unaware of his intentions. When Yudhisthira saw that the minister suspected nothing and trusted them completely, he said to his brothers, "Let us pre-empt Purochana before he can enact his plan. I think we should ourselves set light to the house and make our escape."

The tunnel was complete. Yudhisthira considered that their best hope lay in deceiving Duryodhana into thinking his plan had succeeded. That would allow the brothers to escape without being pursued. They would then have time to consider their next move. After discussing all the angles, the brothers decided they would set fire to the house the next night.

The following day a festival was being celebrated in Varanavata. Kunti distributed food and wealth to the brahmins, and many poor people

came to the Pandavas' mansion to beg charity. By the arrangement of Providence, a tribeswoman also arrived with her five sons. The servants Kunti had placed in charge of distributing the food sat the woman and her sons down, then brought them food and a large quantity of wine. Gradually they became drunk and fell asleep where they had been eating. The servants, unable to rouse them, decided to leave them there for the night, although the Pandavas were unaware of this.

Outside as night fell, a storm blew up. The Pandavas sat together in their room waiting until they were sure that Purochana, who occupied the room by the door of the house, was asleep. Yudhishthira then instructed Bhima to set the house on fire. Bhima then took a torch and lit the door and several other places, as his brothers and Kunti made their way along the tunnel. He followed them quickly, and in moments the whole house was ablaze.

Hearing the roar of the fire, the citizens of Varanavata all came out and saw with horror the blazing mansion. They were aware of the rivalry between Duryodhana and the Pandavas and they immediately guessed what had happened. "This is undoubtedly Duryodhana's doing," they said. "He has employed his evil minister to destroy the innocent and unsuspecting sons of Pandu. Fie upon that wicked man, whose understanding is so crooked!"

The bewailing people of the city surrounded the burning mansion and remained throughout the night. When morning came they threw water onto the embers and searched the burnt-out ruins. They found the remains of Purochana and also of the tribes woman and her sons. Concluding that the Pandavas were dead they lamented loudly, censuring Duryodhana and his father. Some of them even condemned Bhishma, Drona and the other Kuru elders for allowing such a terrible thing to happen.

The miner, who was present among the citizens, ensured that the searchers did not find the tunnel. Thus no one in Varanavata even guessed that the Pandavas were alive, and that they were at that time making their way through the forest. The city leaders then sent messengers to Hastinapura with the news of the Pandavas' death.

When Dhritarastra heard the messengers from Varanavata he cried out in grief. "Alas, my brother Pandu has died again today because his heroic sons and their illustrious mother have been killed. What a cruel destiny! How can I face life without my gentle nephews?"

Dhritarastra ordered that the royal brahmins go immediately to Varanavata to perform the funeral rites for Kunti and her sons. Along with Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and the other elders, the king went to the Ganges to offer sacred water to the departed souls. As they stood in the river they cried out, "O Yudhishthira! O Bhima! O Arjuna!" Others called out the names of Kunti and the twins. Thousands of grieving citizens came out of Hastinapura to offer oblations. Sounds of wailing and sorrow filled the air. Bhishma was particularly afflicted as he remembered the young princes, who had always been like sons to him. Only Vidura did not lament, as he knew the truth. But still, he did not speak about it to anyone. He knew he could not risk telling even Bhishma, who was always loyal to the king and Hastinapura.

* * *

The Pandavas and Kunti emerged from their tunnel some distance from Varanavata. As their eyes became accustomed to the darkness they proceeded in the direction they had already charted. Tired and afraid, they found it difficult to hurry. Seeing this, the tireless Bhima lifted them all onto his huge and powerful frame. To everyone's astonishment, he placed his mother on his shoulders, the twins on his two sides and Yudhishthira and Arjuna on each arm, then ran through the forest, knocking down trees and treading down bushes and brambles.

At dawn they arrived at the Ganges, where another of Vidura's emissaries met them. This man was sitting in a boat and he called out to the Pandavas as they stood measuring the depth of the river with a stone tied to a creeper. Startled, the brothers looked around. Yudhishthira approached the man in the boat, who told them that he been instructed by Vidura to wait there for them. He had been there every night for months, carefully watching for signs of the brothers. The man assured Yudhishthira of his credentials by repeating to him the conversation the prince had had with Vidura as he had departed from Hastinapura. Explaining that he had come to ferry them across the river and help them on their way, the man said, "Vidura has sent his embrace and said that you will surely be victorious over your enemies. He said that you should remain always alert and depend upon the Lord, by whose arrangement auspiciousness will always attend you. Get into this boat quickly and I shall take you far from here."

Propelled by an engine and sails, the boat moved swiftly through the

flowing river toward the south. The Pandavas journeyed for some hours and were finally set down on the opposite bank near a broad path leading into the woods. The boatman wished them success and departed, taking with him a message of thanks for Vidura.

The brothers continued south. They soon entered a dense forest. Feeling tired and hungry, they sat down. Yudhisthira said in an anguished voice, "What could be more painful? Here we are lost in some deep and fearful forest. We do not know if the sinful Purochana has somehow survived and informed Duryodhana of our escape. What dangers lay ahead for us now?"

Kunti was exhausted and could walk no further. She sat on a tree root, glancing around fearfully. Her sons searched about for a way to go deeper into the jungle. It appeared virtually impregnable with its huge trees and bushes enmeshed in a tight network of creepers. The cries of birds and animals filled the air. Yudhisthira gazed into the forest and said to Bhima, "Mighty son of Vayu, you must again carry us into these dreadful woods. I can see no other way for us to continue."

Bhima bowed his head in respect to his elder brother. Once again he placed his mother and four brothers on his body. When they were all holding on tightly, he ran straight into the forest. He bounded high into the air and broke trees with his feet, clearing a path as he progressed. Tall flowering trees fell on all sides with great cracking sounds, sending up showers of blossoms. Forest animals fled in all directions as the prince crashed through the woods. He seemed like an angry elephant king charging through the jungle. So swift was his movement that Kunti and her sons almost fainted. Still carrying the five of them, Bhima also swam the streams and lakes that crossed his path.

As evening fell they stopped for the night under the shelter of a large banyan tree. Bhima set down his mother and brothers and they fell to the ground overwhelmed by fatigue, hunger and thirst. Kunti asked Bhima to bring her some water. He replied, "I hear the sweet singing of waterfowl not far from here. Undoubtedly there is a lake nearby."

The unflagging Bhima went at once toward the sound and soon found the lake. After bathing and drinking deeply, he soaked his upper garment and went back to the banyan tree. But by the time he returned his

mother and brothers had fallen into a deep sleep. Seeing them lying on the bare ground, Bhima lamented to himself. "What more painful sight could there be? Here are my five brothers, who could not even sleep in Varanavata on the costliest of beds, sleeping now on the cold earth. My gentle mother, as delicate and resplendent as the filament of a lotus flower, lies exhausted on the hard forest floor."

Bhima wrang his hands in anguish and frustration. If only the Kauravas were present before him now. They would regret their treachery. It was only by the grace of God that Yudhishthira did not command him to kill them all. Bhima looked at his sleeping elder brother. Surely he deserved to rule the entire earth. He never abandoned virtue or gave way to anger. Only because of this were the Kauravas still alive.

Bhima sighed and looked around. They had traveled many miles through the forest. Perhaps there was a town or village not far away. He would remain awake guarding his brothers and in the morning they could continue. The prince sat on a root of the banyan tree with his mind and senses alert to danger.

Not far from where the brothers had stopped was a massive sal tree on which lived a Rakshasa named Hidimba. He had slept through the day and was just awakening as the Pandavas were falling asleep. Yawning and stretching his enormous arms, he sniffed the night air. At once he detected the scent of humans nearby. He sat up quickly and called out to his sister, who lived on the same tree. "Hidimbi! Wake up. I smell human flesh. It has been a long time since we tasted our favorite food. My mouth is already watering. Quickly find the humans and, after killing them, bring them here. Tearing their necks with my long fangs I shall quaff their hot, foaming blood. Both of us shall eat our fill and then dance happily in many ways."

The Rakshasa woman shook her long, orange hair and opened her blood-red eyes. She cackled and looked at the long claws protruding from her black fingers. Hidimbi and her brother had often slain and eaten hapless travelers. Swinging down from the branch she went silently through the trees, following the scent. In a few minutes she arrived at the spot where the Pandavas lay. The Rakshasi saw the invincible Bhima seated nearby. As soon as her eyes fell upon him, her heart was moved by desire. With his golden skin and lion-like shoulders the prince looked like a god. His neck resembled a conchshell and his eyes were like large lotus petals.

Hidimbi decided immediately that he should be her husband. If she killed him, she and her brother would enjoy the brief pleasure of eating his flesh; but if she united with him, her pleasure would be far greater. Deciding to ignore her brother's order, Hidimbi assumed the form of a beautiful woman. Decorated with celestial ornaments and clothed in crimson silks, she walked slowly up to Bhima. With a bashful smile she said, "Best of men, who are you and what brings you to this dark and dangerous forest? Who are these godlike men laying on the ground, and who is that woman of transcendent beauty lying with them?"

Bhima looked at her in surprise. Was she the forest deity? What was such a beautiful woman doing alone at night in such a place? He examined her carefully as she continued to speak. "This forest belongs to my brother Hidimba, a powerful man-eating Rakshasa. With the intention of eating your flesh he sent me here to kill you."

She raised her hand as Bhima suddenly stood up. "Do not fear. I have been smitten with desire upon seeing you, who are as handsome as a god. Please accept me as your wife, for I am being victimized by Cupid's shafts."

Hidimbi told Bhima that she would save him from her brother. She would carry him through the sky and far away from Hidimba. Then they could enjoy together in a celestial mountain region.

Bhima sat down again. He shook his head. "How do you expect me to abandon my sleeping mother and brothers simply to gratify my lust?"

Hidimbi looked down at the sleeping Pandavas and Kunti. "Wake them up. I shall carry you all away from this place."

Bhima shook his head again. "I shall not wake my mother and brothers out of fear of any Rakshasa. There is no Rakshasa, Yaksha or Gandharva able to withstand my strength. O lady of beautiful form, you may stay or go as you please. Or if you like you may send your man-eating brother to me. I shall deal with him."

As they were speaking together, Hidimba was becoming impatient. Where was his foolish sister? Why had she not returned? The Rakshasa jumped down from his tree and moved toward the human scent.

Hidimbi sensed her brother's approach and she became alarmed. She pleaded with Bhima. "Please do not argue with me. My brother is coming. Do

not tarry here and become his meal. Wake up the others and allow me to rescue all of you."

Bhima simply smiled. "This cannibal presents no problem to me. I shall kill him here before your very eyes. Do not consider me an ordinary human being. My two arms are like the trunks of mighty elephants and my thighs resemble iron clubs. My prowess is no less than Indra himself. I fear nothing."

Hidimbi was still doubtful. She had seen the Rakshasa giants prove their superiority over men on many occasions. They were more on a level with the celestials than with humans. It was an extremely rare human who could overpower a Rakshasa.

Bhima looked over Hidimbi's shoulder and saw her brother approaching. He was as dark as a rain cloud and he had hideous features. His ears were shaped like arrows and the shock of red hair on his head stood erect. His powerful body, clad in a loin cloth, was covered in wiry red hair. The Rakshasa was as tall as a tree and had broad shoulders. His arms, thick like tree trunks, reached down to his knees. His huge mouth was open, revealing rows of fearful fangs. He opened his crimson eyes in surprise as he saw his sister standing in a human form next to Bhima. Seeing her so beautifully bedecked with celestial ornaments, Hidimba immediately understood that she had become lustful toward the human. He spoke angrily.

"Who is so foolish as to create obstacles for me when I am hungry? Why, sister, have you become so senseless that you do not fear my anger? Fie upon you, O unchaste woman! Simply out of lust you are ready to do me an injury and sacrifice the honor of our race. I shall kill you along with these humans."

Pressing his teeth together, Hidimba ran at his sister with upraised arms. Bhima stood up at once and stepped forward. His voice boomed out. "Stop! How dare you awaken my peacefully sleeping brothers? Nor should you attack this innocent woman. Wicked-minded one, your sister is not in control of herself. She has been brought under Cupid's control. Therefore, she should not be punished."

Bhima smiled scornfully at the cannibal. Challenging him to a fight, the prince said, "Today you shall reach the land of the dead. I will pound your head to pieces. Your sister shall see me drag your mountain-like frame even

as a lion drags an elephant. Hawks, vultures and jackals will then gleefully tear apart your corpse. Today this forest shall be rendered safe for all travelers."

Hidimba flared up. He laughed at the human's impudence. Advancing toward Bhima, the cannibal yelled, "What use is this boasting? First accomplish all this and then speak. You think yourself strong but you shall learn the truth today. For now your brothers may sleep peacefully. First I shall kill you, the foul-mouthed one. After drinking your blood I will then slay the others."

The Rakshasa rushed at Bhima with his arms outstretched. Bhima immediately seized the giant's arms and, not wanting to disturb his sleeping brothers, dragged him away a full fifty metres, even as a lion might drag a small deer.

Hidimba broke free from Bhima's hold and wrapped his arms around him. He tightened his grasp and tried to crush him to death. Bhima was unharmed. Even while held in the Rakshasa's powerful grip, Bhima pulled him still further away so that his terrible cries might not disturb the others. He then burst free from Hidimba and clasped him in turn. The two fighters displayed their might as they lifted and hurled each other violently. They crashed about like two great elephants fighting for supremacy. Huge trees were smashed and splintered. The noise awoke the other princes and their mother. They sat up and looked around. They were astonished to see the extraordinarily beautiful Hidimbi. Kunti addressed her with gentle words.

"O celestial maiden, who are you? To whom do you belong? Why have you come to this forest? Are you the forest deity or an Apsara? Please tell me everything."

Hidimbi explained who she was and how she had come to be standing there. Pointing to the combatants, she said, "I have chosen your golden-hued and immensely powerful son as my husband. Greatly angered by this, my brother has attacked him. See now how they struggle together, man and Rakshasa, filling the forest with their roars."

Yudhishthira and the other Pandavas stood up hastily and looked across at Bhima. He was pounding Hidimba with his fists, making a sound like thunder claps. The Rakshasa pressed forward and reached for Bhima's neck with his large hands. As they grappled, a dust cloud rose and covered

them. They appeared like two cliffs enveloped in mist.

Arjuna ran over and, with a smile on his lips, said to his brother, "O mighty-armed one, why did you not wake me? I can see that you are growing tired fighting this terrible Rakshasa. Rest now and I shall kill him. Nakula and Sahadeva will protect our mother."

Arjuna was taunting his brother only to incite his anger, and his words had the desired effect. Bhima blazed up with fury and replied, "You need only be a spectator, dear brother. Have no fear. Now that this evil cannibal has entered my clutches he shall not escape with his life."

Arjuna urged Bhima to make haste. Twilight was approaching and the Rakshasa's strength would be doubled. Bhima should kill him at once before he was able to use mystic powers and illusions to fight.

Bhima summoned his father Vayu's latent power. With a roar he lifted the Rakshasa above his head. Spinning him around, Bhima said, "Wretched cannibal, you have led a life of sin. Your existence has been in vain. Therefore you deserve an unholy death. Now I shall slay you like the beast you are, thereby freeing this forest from its thorny plant."

Bhima whirled the Rakshasa one hundred times and dashed him to the ground. Hidimba let out a terrible roar that reverberated around the forest like a massive drum. Now Hidimba was only semi-conscious. Bhima lifted him again and, by smashing him onto the trunk of a large sal tree, broke his back in two. He then stood up and smiled at his brothers, who by then had gathered around him. They embraced him and, looking at the lifeless form of the giant Rakshasa, congratulated him for his incredible feat.

Chapter Eight. Ghatotkacha Born and Baka Slain

Soon after Bhima had killed Hidimba, the sun rose and the brothers could see paths through the forest. They decided to continue south. They were bound to come to a town at some point.

As they walked with Kunti between them, Hidimbi followed behind. Bhima became concerned and said, "The Rakshasas are known to avenge themselves on their enemies. They use deceptions and illusions. Therefore, O Hidimbi, you shall go the way your brother has gone."

Bhima turned menacingly toward Hidimbi. He did not fear her in the least, but wished only to scare her away before she tried any trickery. But Yudhisthira stopped his younger brother. "Bhima, you should never kill a woman even in anger. Attaining virtue is always a higher duty than protecting one's body. Besides this, what harm can this woman do to us? You have already slain her more powerful brother."

Hidimbi folded her palms to Yudhisthira and thanked him. She approached Kunti and said with tears in her eyes, "Noble lady, you know well the suffering of a woman afflicted by desire. The god of love has pierced me with his shafts and I am consumed by desire for your son Bhima. If he does not accept me as his wife, I will not be able to live. Do not doubt this."

Hidimbi begged Kunti to be merciful and allow her to marry Bhima. She would carry all of them to a celestial region where they could rest for some time. There she could sport alone with Bhima. Hidimbi promised Kunti that she would always be available to serve the Pandavas. They had only to think of her and she would appear before them at once. Kneeling before Kunti, Hidimbi said, "Please do not kill me by saying no. My request is in accord with virtue and indeed saving one's life by any means is always considered virtuous by the wise. Virtue itself protects and sustains life; therefore grant me my desire, for it is not sinful."

Yudhisthira smiled. He was impressed by Hidimbi's knowledge of religion. She would be a good wife for Bhima, whom he had noted was catching her sidelong glances. Yudhisthira said, "You have spoken well. O highly attractive lady, it must be as you say. You shall become Bhima's wife. Remaining with him by day, you may sport with him as you please. At night, however, he should always be returned to our presence."

Hidimbi's face blossomed with happiness. She looked at Bhima with eyes full of love. The prince smiled at her and said, "I agree to this union, but I shall make one condition. As soon as you obtain a son I shall depart and leave you alone. My brothers and I have much to achieve in order to win back our father's kingdom."

Hidimbi agreed. Then, assuming a large form, she carried them all to a high mountain lake called Salivahana. In that beautiful woodland region the brothers constructed a wooden hut on the lake shore. There they lived peacefully. Hidimbi took Bhima with her during the daytime. She soared through the sky to celestial places and showed Bhima numerous exquisite gardens frequented by Siddhas and Gandharvas. There they lay together on the sandy banks of crystal streams covered with blue and red lotuses. Hidimbi also took him to the land of the Guhakas, situated on the shore of the divine Manasa lake. Bhima saw beautiful towns full of shining mansions and palaces and groves of blossoming trees and heavenly flowers, whose fragrance completely enchanted the mind.

Hidimbi was as dazzling as a goddess. She adorned herself with fine gems and gold ornaments and she constantly poured forth sweet song. She captivated Bhima and the seven months they enjoyed together seemed to pass as quickly as if it were seven days. At the end of the seven months she gave birth to a son named Ghatotkacha. Within days of his birth the boy grew to youthhood and he took on the terrible form of a Rakshasa. His huge body was fearsome, with knotted muscles, a head as bald as a pot, terrible red eyes, a long pointed nose and ears like sharp arrows. His chest was broad and he stood as tall as a palm tree.

Although a Rakshasa by nature, Ghatotkacha was inclined to virtue and he became a great favorite of the Pandavas. He was devoted to their service and they looked on him as a younger brother. Taught by the Pandavas, the boy quickly became proficient at weaponry and fighting. After a couple of months he asked permission from his parents to leave for the northern regions where Yakshas and Rakshasas dwell. He promised the Pandavas that they need only think of him and he would return to render them any service they required. After touching the feet of his mother and of all the Pandavas, he rose up to the sky and departed.

The time had come for Bhima to leave Hidimbi. She embraced the Pandava tearfully and asked if she would ever again see him. Bhima assured

her that in the future, after he and his brothers had overcome their obstacles and were free from danger, they could be reunited.

Leaving Hidimbi in their mountain dwelling, the Pandavas and Kunti resumed their travels. They disguised themselves as ascetics by matting their hair and wearing tree-bark garments. Bhima carried his mother as they traveled through many different lands. Going from forest to forest they passed through the countries of the Matsyas, the Trigartas and the Panchalas. No one recognised them. They proceeded slowly, unsure of what to expect and awaiting the Lord's indication as to what they should do next. While travelling they studied the Vedic scriptures together and all five brothers imbibed the science of morality and many other subjects described in the Vedas.

One day as they sat in the forest by their sacred fire, Vyasadeva came to see them. After being received with due worship, the rishi sat down and said, "I have been aware of the Kauravas' unjust behavior toward you. Although I see both the Kauravas and yourselves equally, I feel a greater affection for you brothers due to your misfortune. I have therefore come here wishing to do you some good."

Vyasadeva informed them of a nearby village called Ekachakra. He instructed them to live there for some time, saying that he would come again to give them further directions. The rishi then reassured the sorrowing Kunti. Her sons would in time rule the world. The virtuous Yudhisthira, protected by his powerful brothers, would certainly become king. Soon he would perform the great Rajasuya sacrifice, establishing himself as the emperor of the entire globe.

The sage personally led them to Ekachakra. He brought them to a brahmin's house where they were received as guests. Vyasadeva then took his leave, telling them again that he would return to them before long.

The Pandavas surveyed their new abode. The little village of Ekachakra was situated amid beautiful woodlands. The brahmin had kindly given the brothers two rooms in his house for their residence. He had taken a vow that he would always receive any travelers who came to his door. By day they went about the village begging for food and, due to their gentleness and humility, they soon became dear to the people there. Everyone accepted them as wandering ascetics staying briefly in the village and they gladly gave them

alms.

Every night the brothers offered their mother whatever alms they had collected. She would then prepare their meal. Half of the food was given to Bhima, and the rest was divided among the other four brothers and Kunti.

When the brothers went out begging, a different one of them would remain behind each day to protect Kunti. One particular day it was Bhima's turn to stay back. He was sitting with his mother when they heard loud crying in the house. Hearing the piteous lamentations, Kunti's heart was moved and she spoke to Bhima. "My dear Bhima, due to this brahmin's kindness we are living here peacefully with no fear of Duryodhana and his brothers. I am always thinking how we might repay this gentle brahmin. A virtuous man should return the good done to him with an even greater good. Perhaps now our chance has come."

Kunti could understand that the brahmin had fallen into some great distress. Bhima told her to ascertain the cause. He would then try to remove it, no matter how difficult a task it may prove to be.

Kunti slipped quietly into the inner apartments where the brahmin lived with his family. She stood unnoticed by the door while the brahmin and his wife and children sat with downcast faces. As Kunti watched, the brahmin said to his wife, "Fie upon this wretched life which affords one only misery. To live is to experience nothing but disease and pain. Pursuing in turn religion, wealth and pleasure, one endeavors much but receives little happiness. Everything should lead to salvation, but that is an impossible goal to achieve. Those who desire riches suffer, while those who have riches suffer even more. Alas, why do I live?"

Kunti listened in silence as the brahmin continued to condemn himself and his misfortune. He spoke of a terrible danger that had befallen them. His wife wept as he censured her, blaming their present predicament upon her wish to remain in the village due to affection for her dead relatives. The brahmin held his head in anguish. "How can I abandon you to save my own life? Your parents gave you to me. It is my duty to protect you. You have always served me and borne my children. I can in no way let you go. Nor can I abandon my only son or daughter. I shall go. Or maybe we should all die together."

The brahmin fell to the ground sobbing. His wife lifted him gently

and said, "This lamentation does not befit a learned man like yourself. No one should lament inevitable death. Nor shall you or our children die. I shall go. Indeed, a woman's highest duty lies in sacrificing her life to serve her husband. Undoubtedly such an act will confer upon me regions of eternal bliss."

Kunti was curious. The brahmin's wife continued to implore her husband to allow her to die. She said that neither she nor her children could possibly survive in his absence. If she were left a widow, she would become a prey to dishonorable men, who would seek her just as crows descend upon a piece of meat left on the ground. How then could she protect their two young children and keep them on the path of truth and virtue? She folded her hands and begged her husband for permission to leave. He could then accept another wife, while she would earn undying religious merits by her final service.

The brahmin sat with his head in his hands and made no reply. Then his daughter began to speak. "Father, why are you sorrowful when you have me? Allow me to go and thus save yourself. It is a child's duty to save the parent. This is why the wise have called one's child putra, one who delivers the parents from hell. My duty to my forefathers is to bear a son to offer them the sacred sraddha, but by the grace of Providence I may now serve my forefathers by saving my father. O Father, you will one day have to abandon me. Therefore do not hesitate to do so now."

The girl wept along with her parents. The brahmin's small son then said in broken speech, "None of you should cry. Send me and I shall kill the cannibal Rakshasa in a moment." The boy smiled and brandished a piece of long grass as if it were a weapon.

Although they were grief-stricken, they all laughed at the young boy's words. Kunti took the sudden change of mood as an opportunity to inquire about the cause of their distress. Could she do anything to help? The brahmin replied that no human being could remove their grief. A powerful Rakshasa named Baka protected the country where they lived from enemies. He had long terrorized the people, who found no protection from their weak king. The Rakshasa used to come whenever he wanted and kill them for his food. Finally the people went to Baka and proposed that if he would stop attacking them at will, then each week one of them would go to him with a large cartload of food. In turn he should protect them from attackers. The

cannibal agreed, but he demanded that he also eat the man who delivered his food.

The brahmin told Kunti that the turn of each man in their country came only after many years. Tomorrow it was his turn. He did not know what to do. He could not leave his young family alone, nor could he send them to their deaths. Therefore they would all go to meet the demon. Perhaps Baka would show compassion and spare them. Or they would all be devoured at once.

Kunti said, "I see a means by which you may be delivered from this fear. Although you have but two children, I have five sons. Therefore let one of them go with the Rakshasa's tribute."

The brahmin was shocked. "I can never cause the death of a guest and a brahmin to save my own life. Even the most sinful man would not do this. Rather, one should sacrifice himself and his children for the sake of a brahmin."

Kunti was grave. "I am of the same opinion that brahmins should always be protected, but you need not fear for my son. The Rakshasa will not be able to kill him. He is powerful and knows the science of mantras."

Kunti told the brahmin that she had already seen her son kill a powerful Rakshasa. Baka would prove no problem to him. She asked the brahmin not to disclose to anyone else what she had told him. If others learned of her son's powers, they would harass him for his knowledge and the power of the mantras would be diminished if they were given to others.

The brahmin looked carefully at Kunti's expression. She was obviously speaking the truth. Her son must surely possess some extraordinary powers. With tears in his eyes he assented to her suggestion.

Kunti went to Bhima and told him everything. She asked him to go to Baka. Bhima agreed at once. His eyes lit up at the thought that he would be able to exercise his strength, while at the same time show their gratitude to the gentle brahmin and his family.

Just as Kunti and Bhima finished speaking, the other Pandavas returned. Yudhishthira caught Bhima's eye and sensed at once that his younger brother was contemplating something wonderful. He sat by his mother and asked quietly, "What does Bhima have on his mind? It seems he is about to

do some extraordinary deed. Is it something you have ordered, or is it some plan of his own?"

Kunti told her son what had transpired. When Yudhishthira learned that Bhima was about to go out to meet Baka, he became alarmed. "Mother, you have made this brahmin a rash promise! Surely it is never sanctioned to sacrifice one's own son for that of another. All my hopes of overpowering Dhritarastra's sons and regaining the kingdom depend upon Bhima's power."

Kunti smiled slightly and reassured Yudhishthira. She reminded him of Bhima's superhuman prowess—how even as an infant he had crushed a great rock to powder, how he had easily carried all of them through the forest while running at the speed of the wind, how he had slain the immensely strong Hidimba. "It was not out of foolishness that I made my offer to the brahmin. It is always a ruler's duty to protect the brahmins. By this act we will achieve two things: we will reward the brahmin's kindness toward us, and we will earn much religious merit." Kunti told her son that she had been wondering how to repay the brahmin for some time. This opportunity was obviously the Lord's arrangement for them.

Yudhishthira pondered Kunti's words. Looking across at the smiling Bhima, he replied, "You have spoken well. Your decision is well considered. Because of your compassion toward the brahmin, Bhima will surely kill the demon Baka, but you must ensure that no one comes to know that it was him."

Yudhishthira was not sure if the Kauravas knew that he and his brothers were still alive. Their spies would soon inform them of Baka's death. They may well suspect that it was Bhima who had killed him. Few other men were capable of killing such a powerful Rakshasa.

That night while the village slept Bhima quietly left the brahmin's house. He drove the cart loaded with food toward the forest where Baka dwelt. The aroma of the food was overpowering. After living for so long on meager forest fare and whatever alms the brothers were able to collect, Bhima was ravenous. He began to eat the food from the cart. On his way into the forest, he shouted Baka's name.

The Rakshasa heard Bhima's approach and became inflamed with anger. He ran toward the Pandava, yelling, "I am Baka!"

Bhima saw him emerge from among the trees. The earth resounded

with his footsteps and his shouts were deafening. He had a huge body, red eyes, red beard and red hair. His mouth opened from ear to ear, and his forehead was furrowed into three lines as he looked upon Bhima eating his food. Baka stopped near the cart and thundered, "Who is this fool who desires to be dispatched at once to death's abode by eating in my presence the food intended for me?"

Bhima glanced derisively at the Rakshasa and smiled. He ignored his challenge and continued eating.

Baka roared in fury. He rushed at Bhima with his arms upraised. Still the Pandava continued to eat. Baka brought his two fists down upon Bhima's back with the force of a thunderbolt. Without flinching in the least, Bhima went on eating. He did not even look at the Rakshasa. Baka roared again and tore up a huge tree. As he whirled it above his head, Bhima stood up and washed his hands from the pitcher of water on the cart. Then he leapt down from the cart and faced the infuriated demon.

Baka hurled the tree at Bhima with all his strength. Bhima smilingly caught it in his left hand and threw it back. The Rakshasa uprooted one tree after another and hurled them at Bhima, who caught each of them and sent them back. Soon the whole area was cleared of trees. Screaming out his own name again and again, Baka threw himself upon Bhima and seized him. Bhima also gripped the demon with his own powerful arms. The two dragged each other violently, each trying to kick the other's legs out from underneath him. They fell to the ground, still locked in one another's arms. They rolled about, making the ground tremble. Bhima tightened his grip. He repeatedly smashed the demon's head with his own forehead.

Gradually, Baka tired. Bhima pulled free of his grasp and pounded the demon with his fists. He pressed down on Baka's chest with his knees and struck him crushing blows that shook the earth. Baka fell unconscious and Bhima rolled him onto his stomach. Placing one knee on his back, he seized his neck with one hand and his waist-cloth with the other. With great force Bhima broke the demon's back in two. As he died Baka vomited blood and let out a fearful yell that filled the forest.

Hearing him scream, Baka's friends and relatives came out of their houses. They looked with horror at his mountainous form lying in a pool of blood. Bhima reassured the terrified Rakshasas that he was not going to

attack them. "This one has been killed due to his excessive fondness for human flesh. Give up killing men. Otherwise this fate awaits you all."

The Rakshasas immediately assented saying, "It shall be so." Then they ran from that place, leaving Bhima with Baka's body. From that time on the people of Ekachakra noticed that the Rakshasas became peaceable toward them.

Bhima lifted Baka's corpse and placed it on the cart. Unseen by anyone, he deposited it by the town gates and then returned to the brahmin's house. His mother and brothers were relieved to see him, and he described to them all that had happened.

Chapter Nine. The Gandharva Angaraparna

When the sun rose the people of Ekachakra found Baka's dead body. They were astonished to see it lying there in a twisted mess, its mouth and eyes wide open. The citizens' hair stood on end and their mouths fell open in amazement. Thousands of people assembled, all asking who had killed him. Gradually they realized that it had been the brahmin's turn to take food to the demon the previous night. A noisy crowd soon gathered outside the brahmin's house. While the Pandavas remained inside, the brahmin addressed the people.

"Yesterday as I sat by the roadside weeping at the thought of my plight, a brahmin came by. When he found out the cause of my distress, he promised to deliver me and the town from this constant danger. Learned in the incantations that invoke celestial weapons, the brahmin assured me he would take the food to Baka on my behalf and kill him. He must have succeeded in this inconceivable feat, because Baka now lies dead."

The people looked at one another in wonder. Then they laughed and shouted in joy. They declared a festival to celebrate the Rakshasa's death.

The Pandavas continued to live at the brahmin's house as Vyasadeva had instructed them. It had been months since the sage had last spoken with them. They expected his return at any time, and they passed their days in begging alms and studying the Vedic scriptures.

One day a wandering ascetic came to the brahmin's house and accepted his invitation to stay for a few days. After he had been duly worshipped and fed by the brahmin and his family, the ascetic told stories from his travels. The Pandavas listened along with the brahmin's family. They heard about a great svayamvara ceremony soon to be held in Kampilya for Draupadi, King Drupada's daughter. This princess, the ascetic said, was not born of a woman but had been born, along with her brother Dhristadyumna, from the sacrificial fire.

The Pandavas were intrigued. They asked, "Please tell us how it is possible that Draupadi and her brother could appear from the fire. We desire to hear everything you know."

The ascetic first told them about Drona. The sage Bharadvaja had once seen Gritachi, a divinely beautiful Apsara, and as a result he had

dropped his vital seed. He caught his seed in a pot and from that seed Drona was born. As a child, Drona had been friends with Drupada, who had come to study at Bharadvaja's hermitage.

Some time after Drupada left the hermitage, Drona heard that the invincible brahmin-warrior Parasurama was retiring to the forest and was giving away all his possessions. Drona approached him and asked for charity. Parasurama replied, "Having once won this wide earth from the ruling class, I am now without wealth. I have already given it to the brahmins. Now I possess only my body and my weapons. Which of these would you prefer, O brahmin?"

Drona asked Parasurama for his celestial weapons, along with the knowledge to use them. The rishi bestowed his weapons upon Drona, who then left to again see his friend Drupada. By then, Drupada had become the king of Panchala.

The Pandavas listened as the ascetic told them what they had already heard from Drona himself—how Drupada had insulted his friend most terribly. Not knowing that it was the Pandavas who were listening, the ascetic told them how the Pandavas at Drona's command had then overpowered Drupada.

After being humiliated by Drona and losing half his kingdom, Drupada thought only of revenge. He knew he could never defeat Drona in battle, so he had gone to the forest to seek out a powerful brahmin. He knew that only a brahmin's spiritual power could match Drona's strength.

After some time Drupada came across two brahmin brothers named Yaja and Upayaja, descendents of Kasyapa, a powerful son of the great god Brahma. The king worshipped and served the two brahmins for some time, then asked for their assistance. He approached the younger of the two, Upayaja, first, knowing him to be the more powerful. Drupada asked him to conduct a sacrifice that would give the king a son capable of killing Drona. Drupada offered him ten thousand cows as payment, but the brahmin replied, "I shall not perform any act directed toward material gain, either for myself or for another."

The disappointed Drupada continued serving Upayaja in the hope that he might relent. Finally after a full year had passed the brahmin took pity on him and said, "I once saw my elder brother take up and eat a fruit from the

ground without considering whether or not it was clean. When we were both boys studying in our guru's house I often saw him eat the remnants of other people's food. One who has no regard for purity in one thing will not have such regard in another. Therefore approach him, for he will surely perform your sacrifice."

The brahmin's words proved true and Yaja agreed to Drupada's proposal. The brahmin, realizing what difficult a task the king had requested, engaged his younger brother to assist him. Although Upayaja had no personal desire to perform Drupada's sacrifice, he could not refuse his elder brother's request. Thus the two brahmins went to Kampilya to perform a fire sacrifice intended to propitiate the gods headed by Lord Vishnu. Thus Drupada would be able to get a son capable of killing Drona.

As the sacrifice commenced, the king again spoke with Yaja. Remembering the day he had been overpowered by Arjuna, he asked the priest if, as well as a son, he might obtain a beautiful daughter whom he could offer to Arjuna as his wife. Drupada thought that if Arjuna became his son-in-law, his happiness would be complete. Yaja replied, "It shall be so," and Drupada joyfully sat down by the sacrificial fire with his queen.

As the ritual neared completion Yaja called for Drupada's wife. "Come quickly, good queen. A son and daughter have now come for you."

The queen replied, "O brahmin, I am not pure. My mouth is filled with saffron and my body is smeared with perfumes. I am not ready to receive the sacrificial ghee."

Yaja replied, "Whether or not you are ready the object of this sacrifice, which I have prepared and Upayaja has sanctified, cannot be thwarted."

Yaja had then poured the oblation into the fire. Immediately there arose from the flames a god-like boy. He was encased in brilliant golden armor and he shone like fire. He wore a bright crown on his head and held a long bow and a sword. That youth was terrible to behold and he rose from the fire roaring. Stepping clear of the flames, he mounted the king's chariot and immediately rode about, displaying all kinds of skill.

The people of Kampilya had shouted with joy upon seeing this boy who would fulfill the king's desire and kill his enemy. As their cries of happiness resounded a celestial woman appeared from the fire. Her

complexion was dark and her smiling eyes were shaped like lotus petals. Her long and curling hair was bluish in color and it fell down her back as she emerged from the flames. She had rising breasts and tapering thighs. At the end of her graceful fingers were nails that shone like bright copper. Her body emanated the sweet fragrance of blue lotuses which could be perceived at a distance of two miles. That divine woman captivated the mind of every man who saw her. She had no equal even among the gods or the Gandharvas.

The ascetic then told his attentive audience how a heavenly voice had spoken from the skies as soon as the boy and girl had appeared. Booming like thunder it had said, "This dark-skinned beauty will be the best of all women and she will cause the destruction of the world's warriors. The boy shall be called Dhristadyumna and he shall slay Drona."

Drona heard about this prophesy, but, considering destiny to be supreme, he nevertheless agreed to train Drupada's son in martial arts. The noble Drona did this to repay Drupada for taking half his kingdom.

The ascetic stopped. Having heard that Dhristadyumna would kill their beloved teacher, the Pandavas felt as if their hearts had been pierced. Kunti saw their perplexity and, after they had retired for the night, said to Yudhishthira, "We have lived here for many months. I think it would be wise to leave now. You are all restless. I also sense that you desire to go to Panchala for Draupadi's svayamvara."

Kunti had seen her sons' eyes open wide when the ascetic had described Draupadi's celestial beauty. Therefore she suggested that they leave the next day for Panchala. All five brothers agreed to her proposal, and the following morning they made their farewells to the brahmin and his family. Walking in a line with Kunti in their middle, they then headed toward Panchala, traveling again through the forest.

On the first evening of their journey, as they sat around their fire, Vyasadeva arrived. Upon seeing him, the Pandavas prostrated themselves at his feet. They then stood with their palms folded as Vyasadeva offered them blessings. When everyone was seated, Vyasadeva said, "O conquerors of foes, are you following the path of virtue enjoined in the scriptures? Do you worship the brahmins? I hope you always honor those worthy of your respect."

The rishi spoke for some time, giving the attentive princes various

instructions. At the end of his discourse, Vyasadeva told them they should try to win the hand of the princess of Panchala. Her father was setting an archery test in order to find her a qualified husband. Arjuna should enter the contest.

Vyasadeva then stood up to leave and, after again receiving obeisances from the Pandavas, vanished into the woods.

Reassured by Vyasadeva's directions, the brothers continued their journey the next day with joyous hearts. They walked day and night, eager to arrive at Panchala in time for the svayamvara. It was just after nightfall several days later when they came upon the gently flowing waters of the Ganges. Arjuna was leading the party with a torch in his hand to light their way. They all bowed respectfully to the sacred river before walking along her banks, searching for a place to cross.

Suddenly, from out of the darkness, they heard a loud voice. "Halt! Who dares approach this river at such a time? The night belongs to Yakshas, Gandharvas and Rakshasas. Only during the first portion of night, the twilight time, are other beings allowed to bathe. You appear to be human beings, therefore return the way you have come."

A shining figure emerged from the waters, rose into the air, and descended onto a golden chariot. Claspng a huge bow he continued to address them in a thunderous voice, "I am the Gandharva Angaraparna, friend of Kuvera, treasurer of the gods. I am bathing here. Not even the gods or demons would dare come to this river when I am bathing. How then have you humans been so bold? Leave quickly or I will kill you. I fear no one."

Arjuna could not tolerate the Gandharva's haughty speech. "You wretch! Rivers and mountains are never barred to anyone at any time. There is no such thing as a special time when we are not allowed to approach this sacred river, nor do we care for your threats. Only the weak would fear someone like you. Make way, because we are now going to bathe in this river."

Angaraparna seemed to blaze with anger. He drew his bow and immediately shot a hundred arrows at the brothers. Arjuna moved with blinding speed and struck down all those shafts simply with the torch he was holding. He laughed at the Gandharva. "Do not attempt to frighten those skilled in warfare. Your weapons simply vanish like froth on the ocean when hurled at more powerful opponents. O sky-ranger, I know you are superior to

men in prowess. Therefore I shall use a celestial missile against you. The fire-weapon I will now discharge was first given to Bharadvaja by the celestial sage Brihaspati. Bharadvaja then gave it to Agniveshya, who gave it to my preceptor Drona. Drona gave it to me. Guard yourself from its power if you can."

Chanting the incantations to invoke the Agneyastra, Arjuna imbued his torch with its tremendous power. Angrily he threw it at Angaraparna and his chariot was immediately destroyed, burnt black. The Gandharva fainted from the missile's force and fell headlong from the smoking chariot. Arjuna seized him by his hair, which was adorned with garlands of flowers, and dragged him before Yudhisthira.

Suddenly a celestial woman rushed out of the water and approached Yudhisthira. Folding her palms she said, "Exalted one, I am Kumbhinashi, Angaraparna's wife. Please bestow your mercy upon me and set him free. I seek your protection."

The Gandharva came to his senses and sat up before Yudhisthira, who said to him, "O Gandharva, who would slay one who has been vanquished in battle, who stands deprived of his fame, who is unable to protect himself, and who is protected by a woman? You may go."

Angaraparna stood and offered his respects to Yudhisthira. He spoke with humility. "My pride has been crushed by your younger brother. My celestial chariot lies burnt to ashes. I had been known as Chitraratha, 'one of the beautiful chariot' but from now on I shall call myself Dagdharatha, 'he of the burnt chariot'."

Angaraparna thanked Arjuna for not killing him, even though able. In return for Arjuna's mercy, Angaraparna offered him the divine knowledge possessed by the Gandharvas along with a team of celestial horses. Smiling, Angaraparna said, "This knowledge, known as Chakshushi, will give you the ability to see anything within the three worlds, along with that thing's intrinsic nature. It is this knowledge that gives the Gandharvas the powers that make them superior to men."

Angaraparna waved his hand toward the riverbank and the Pandavas saw there a group of lustrous white steeds. "These are the horses I wish to give you. They will go anywhere at their owner's will. They are said to be a portion of Indra's thunderbolt and will always unfailingly fulfill your desire."

Arjuna said, "O Gandharva, if you desire to give your knowledge and these horses in return for your life, then I shall not accept them. It was my duty to release you on my brother's order. I cannot accept charity, for that is never the duty of the ruling class."

Angaraparna smiled again. "This need not be charity. O best of the Bharata race, I desire to learn from you how to throw the fire weapon which you used to overpower me."

Arjuna agreed to this exchange, but said he first wanted to know why the Gandharva had challenged him and his brothers, although they were all virtuous men, learned in the Vedas and born in a noble line of kings.

The Gandharva replied, "Listen Arjuna, I have heard from Narada Rishi of your ancestors' great accomplishments. I also know your fathers personally because Dharma, Vayu, Indra, the Ashvinis and even Pandu all reside in heaven. Although I knew you are all high-souled, virtuous, powerful and obedient to your vows, I nevertheless censured you. No man, possessed of strength and arms, ought to tolerate a confrontation in front of his wife. I was overpowered by wrath."

Angaraparna went on to explain why Arjuna had been able to defeat him although he was a celestial. "Because you have been observing a vow of celibacy your power became insurmountable. If a warrior engaged in satisfying his desires fights with the Gandharvas at night, he will not escape with his life."

Angaraparna said that even a warrior who is not celibate could defeat a powerful enemy if accompanied by a brahmin priest. The Gandharva concluded, "Men with learned and self-controlled priests can conquer the earth and acquire every good fortune, finally attaining even heaven itself. Therefore, O descendent of Tapati, you should seek out a qualified priest as your guide."

Arjuna was listening carefully. He was curious that Angaraparna addressed him as a descendent of Tapati. He asked, "As the sons of Kunti we are known as the Kaunteyas. Why did you address us as Tapatyas? I have not heard this before."

It was a long story. Angaraparna invited the brothers to sit comfortably on the river bank while he recited the history of their distant ancestor, Tapati, daughter of the sun-god. Tapati had descended from the

heavens and married Samvarana, an early king in the Pandavas' line. The Gandharva narrated this history, along with many other incidental stories. He spoke for much of the night and the enthralled brothers could see the first faint glow of dawn when he finished his narration. Arjuna then said to him, "O Gandharva, you know everything and can see everything by your divine sight. Please tell us where we can find a brahmin who knows the Vedas and can become our priest."

Angaraparna replied that not far from there was a forest ashram called Utkachaka. A brahmin named Dhaumya, the younger brother of the famous Rishi Devala, resided there. They should approach him and ask that he become their preceptor.

Seeing the Gandharva's friendship toward them and grateful for his advice, Arjuna gave him the mantra by which he could call the Agneyastra. In return Angaraparna again offered him the horses. Arjuna replied, "I will not take anything from you now. I do not desire your knowledge and we cannot take the horses at present. O best of the Gandharvas, your friendship is sufficient. Perhaps if a time comes when we need these steeds, we shall then take them."

Angaraparna and the Pandavas saluted one another respectfully and took their leave. The Gandharva and his wife disappeared into the sky, leaving the Pandavas to continue on their journey.

After Angaraparna left, the Pandavas went north along the bank of the Ganges, toward where the Gandharva had indicated they would find Dhaumya's ashram. The sun had risen, and they could now see many rishis bathing in the river, wearing a single piece of cloth and with their matted locks tied in knots on their heads. The brothers could hear the sages reciting sacred hymns from the Vedas—some in praise of the sun-god Surya, some worshipping Shiva, the mighty destroyer, and others praying to the supremely powerful Lord Vishnu. The Pandavas took their own baths in the Ganges. Using the sacred clay from the river bank, they daubed their bodies with markings that showed them to be Vaishnavas, devotees of Vishnu. Kunti entered the water fully clothed and then changed her dress in a secluded place. She thought constantly of Krishna, praying that He would help them through their difficulties.

The sages told the brothers where to find Dhaumya's hermitage. They

then approached Dhaumya and fell at his feet. Yudhisthira said, "O greatly learned one, we are Pandu's sons, traveling with our mother Kunti. On the Gandharvas' advice we seek your shelter. Please become our guide and protector. We are your servants."

The effulgent Dhaumya smiled and bade them be seated. His disciples brought them offerings of wild fruits and water. As he looked upon the five young princes and the gentle Kunti, the rishi felt affection rise in his heart. He could see that they worshipped Vishnu, his own deity, and this too attracted him. He therefore consented to become their priest. The Pandavas were overjoyed and felt as if their wealth and kingdom had already been regained and Draupadi won. Dhaumya then formally accepted them as disciples by initiating them with Vedic mantras.

The many sages in Dhaumya's ashram offered the princes their blessings. Seeing such godlike boys, the rishis felt that the brothers, by their own accomplishments, would soon become rulers of the earth. Accompanied by Dhaumya, the Pandavas continued on their journey to Panchala.

Chapter Ten. Draupadi's Swayamvara

After a few days journey the forest paths brought the Pandavas and Dhaumya onto the road leading to Panchala. As they made their way along that broad stone highway, they met a group of brahmins. The brahmins asked, "Who are you and where are you going?" Yudhisthira replied that they were five brahmacharis, celibate students, who had come from Ekachakra along with their teacher. The brahmins then exhorted the brothers to attend Draupadi's svayamvara. "Accompany us. We are going straight there. The magnanimous King Drupada will be distributing vast wealth to the brahmins on his divine daughter's behalf."

Again the Pandavas heard of the extraordinary birth and beauty of Draupadi, as well as details of her impending svayamvara. All of Kampilya would be celebrating. There would be actors, singers, dancers and expert reciters of the ancient Vedic histories. Powerful wrestlers would compete, and athletes would give wonderful displays. Food and drink of the best quality would be served in abundance. And at the end of the celebration Draupadi would then select a husband from among the kings and princes, who had been assembling from all parts of the world. The brahmins told the

Pandavas that they had heard that Drupada had set a most difficult task for the man who would win his daughter's hand. The kings who were coming to compete would also be distributing much charity to the brahmins in hopes of invoking auspiciousness for themselves and obtaining victory at the svayamvara.

The brahmins laughed as they spoke. They pointed to the simple cloth the Pandavas were wearing. "It seems you boys could use some new cloth. Follow us. Having received all that you require, you may return with us or go wherever you will." Inviting the five brothers to travel with them, the brahmins continued, "Who knows? The princess may even select one of you boys, all as handsome as the celestials." They pointed to Bhima. "This godlike youth has a body like a thunderbolt. Surely he will win much wealth if he enters the wrestling competitions."

Yudhisthira smiled. "We shall all accompany you to Kampilya. Pray lead the way!"

The party proceeded. They traveled by day and at night stopped in roadside woods or on lakeshores. With their gentle speech and amiable behavior the Pandavas endeared themselves to whomever they met, but no one recognized them. As they reached the outskirts of the city they came to a small village. Walking from house to house to find accommodations, they were soon admitted by a potter and his family. The brothers settled there and lived by begging, just as they had done in Ekachakra. They learned from the villagers that the svayamvara was to take place in a few days. The king had set a stiff test for winning Draupadi. A small target had been placed on top of a tall pole. Beneath it was a rotating plate with one small hole in it. An arrow had to be shot through that hole at the moment it was aligned with the target. The king had also determined that a particular bow should be used, one which an ordinary man could barely lift. Only an extraordinary warrior would be able to pass the test and win the divine Draupadi's hand.

Arjuna was enlivened. He prayed to Krishna that he might have the chance to try for the princess. From Vyasadeva's words it seemed she was destined to be the wife of one of them, and by such a union the brothers would gain the friendship and alliance of the powerful Drupada. That would probably prove useful in the future. Arjuna eagerly awaited the svayamvara.

* * *

Drupada had made lavish preparations for the ceremony. A huge stadium had been constructed. In its massive sandstone walls were one hundred gates, each one inlaid with gold and precious gems. Each gate was wide enough to admit crowds passing through. Within the stadium were gently sloping terraces made of coral and lapis lazuli. At the front of these terraces were hundreds of jewel-encrusted thrones arranged for the many monarchs in attendance. All around the stadium the king had built white mansions for their residence. The buildings were many-storied and looked like the cloud-kissing peaks of Mount Kailasha. The windows of those mansions were covered with gold lattices and the walls studded with diamonds and emeralds. Costly rugs were spread on their marble floors.

When the day of the svayamvara arrived, the kings were invited into the stadium. They came through the northern gate and took their seats on the golden thrones. As the monarchs entered, thousands of trumpets blared and kettledrums resounded throughout the stadium. Many rishis, all of them shining like the sun, entered through the eastern gate. The terraces, adorned with countless wreaths and garlands, were filled with Panchala's citizens. As they flooded into the stadium the colorfully dressed people made a sound like the roar of the ocean. The scent of black aloe and frankincense wafted throughout the stadium as everyone settled into their places.

The Pandavas entered with the brahmins and took their place in their midst, unnoticed by anyone. They looked around the arena. At the head of all the assembled kings sat Duryodhana and his brothers, resembling a blazing planet surrounded by a hundred bright stars. Bhima felt his anger rising but Yudhishthira checked him with a glance. They could not risk being discovered—yet.

The ceremony had begun. Actors and dancers were entertaining the crowd. Brahmins were performing fire sacrifices. Drupada was distributing charity. All of this continued for fifteen days and, with each day, the attendance swelled. The Pandavas were astonished to see Drupada's affluence. The Panchala king was distributing heaps of gold and gems to the brahmins. Although dressed as brahmins, the Pandavas did not go forward to collect charity, but remained in their places, awaiting the day when Draupadi would appear.

On the sixteenth day the princess, dressed in robes of shining yellow silk and adorned with brilliant ornaments, entered the arena. In her hands she

held a golden dish containing the nuptial garland, which she would place around the neck of the man who successfully passed the test her father had set. Gentle music from the flute, tabor and vina played as Draupadi walked toward her seat next to her father. Seeing her beauty, the kings and princes suddenly stood up and brandished their weapons. They boasted to one another in loud voices: "I shall win this princess!" "None can equal my strength and prowess!" "Draupadi will be mine!"

That host of princes seemed like an agitated ocean as they rose and boasted of their power. Afflicted by the god of love and glaring at one another in jealousy, they slapped their arms and held aloft their bows and swords, looking like so many Himalayan elephants maddened by desire while in rut.

The celestial chariots of the gods—led by the guardians of the four quarters of the universe, Yamaraja, Indra, Kuvera and Vayu—settled above the arena. Siddhas, Charanas, Nagas, Rudras, Daityas, Danavas and Guhakas assembled in the canopy of the sky, curious to witness Drupada's sacrifice and the selection of Draupadi's husband. The great rishis, headed by Narada, Angira and Parvatya, stood in the sky among the gods, appearing like so many suns.

When the five Pandava brothers saw Draupadi's dark and lovely face, they felt their hearts pierced as if by darts. They stood up from their seats and gazed at her exquisite form as she moved gracefully to her father's side. On the opposite side of the arena were the Yadavas from Mathura. Sitting in their midst, Krishna noticed the Pandavas' stand. He looked closely at the five brothers and, turning to Balarama, said, "In my opinion, those five men over there are the Pandavas." Krishna indicated the brothers with a slight nod of His head. "I heard a rumor that my cousins survived the fire in Varanavata. This now seems true. What is Your opinion, Rama?"

Balarama carefully observed each of the five brothers. There was no doubt. They were Kunti's sons. He turned and smiled at Krishna, who returned his smile, but they remained silent about their discovery.

By now, all the princes were gazing only at Draupadi and her father. None of them noticed the Pandavas in their midst. Drupada waved to them and, biting their lips in anger and envy toward one another, they sat down. As celestial flowers fell from the sky, the sound of countless conches and

kettledrums filled the stadium. Draupadi's brother Dhristadyumna stood up like a golden flagstaff raised in honor of Indra. The stadium fell silent as he announced the names of all the kings and princes present. He first named the princes from Hastinapura, then those from Mathura, then all those attending from hundreds of other countries and provinces.

Dhristadyumna held his sister's arm and said in a voice that rumbled like thunder, "This princess will be won today by he who can hit the mark." The prince pointed to the huge bow lying on a golden table. "There is the bow and the arrows you must use. Truly do I say that whoever shoots an arrow through the device and into the target will win Draupadi's hand. Only one of noble birth and great prowess will be capable of this feat."

Dhristadyumna sat down near his father. Drupada instructed his priest to kindle the sacrificial fire for the svayamvara ceremony. The sounds of thousands of brahmins reciting Vedic prayers filled the arena. The king looked around at the assembled princes. He was not impressed. None of these proud monarchs looked like a suitable match for his daughter. The king thought of Arjuna. If only that prince were still alive. He had heard a rumor that the Pandavas had escaped the fire, but where were they now? Only someone of Arjuna's ability could pass this test. Drupada had deliberately devised such a test in hopes that the Pandava might appear. Yaja had promised him he would obtain a daughter from his sacrifice who would become Arjuna's wife. How could the rishi's words prove false? Drupada looked on anxiously as each king and prince was called to try the test.

With their crowns and golden earrings glinting in the bright sunshine, the kings and princes strode up one by one to the bow. It was only with considerable effort that they were able to even lift the massive weapon from the table. Having somehow managed that, and finally getting it upright, they then had to bend and string it. Those kings could not manage the task even in their imaginations. The bow would bend slightly, then spring back with great force. The would-be suitors were thrown to the ground, their bodies bruised and their crowns and garlands scattered. As they each took their turn and were, in turn, humiliated, they returned to their fine golden thrones, straightening their shining ornaments as they walked. Panting for breath, their romantic ardor dispelled, the princes sat, silently shaking their heads.

Karna's turn came. Seeing him march toward the bow like a golden mountain entering the arena, the Pandavas considered that the target had been

struck and the princess won. As he approached the bow, however, Draupadi stood up and said in a loud voice, "I shall not accept a charioteer's son as my husband."

Knowing that Karna was the son of Adhiratha, leader of the suta caste who generally acted as chariot drivers, Draupadi exercised her prerogative and denied him the opportunity to attempt the test.

Karna blushed deeply and laughed in vexation. Glancing at the sun, he turned and strode back to his seat. He ground his teeth and wrung his hands in anger, but said nothing.

The powerful king of the Chedis, Sishupala, was next. With great effort he bent the bow into a semi-circle, then lost his grip as he tried to string it. He was thrown onto his back and lay there exhausted for several moments before returning to his seat, defeated. Then Jarasandha, lord of the Magadha country and scourge even of the gods, took his turn. He bent the bow and held it in one hand while trying to string it with the other. Again the bow resisted and he was thrown to his knees.

Sneering at the other monarchs' weakness, Duryodhana strode up. A silence fell upon the assembly as the king of Hastinapura bowed to Draupadi. The king nodded slightly and Duryodhana lifted the bow. He strung it deftly and placed on its string one of the golden-shafted arrows. Taking careful aim he loosed the arrow. It sped upwards and passed cleanly through the rotating hole but missed the target by a hair's breadth. The prince angrily threw down the bow and returned to his seat.

Knowing that it was Draupadi's destiny to marry Arjuna, none of the Yadava kings, including Krishna and Rama, attempted the test. They simply watched and laughed as the bow hurled each of the princes to the ground. They breathed a sigh of relief when Duryodhana's arrow whistled past the target. That wicked man did not deserve a prize like Draupadi. But where was Arjuna? Only Krishna and Balarama felt no apprehension. They looked across at the brahmins' compound.

Now all the kings had tried and failed. Draupadi was still holding the bright red garland on its golden dish. Dhristadyumna called for any last contestants. Arjuna looked at Dhaumya who smiled and nodded. The prince stood up and walked into the center of the arena. The assembled brahmins roared in joy and waved their deerskins. Maybe a simple brahmin would

succeed where even the proud, mighty kings of the earth could not. And if any brahmin could succeed, it would be this one. Arjuna looked like a dark cloud as he advanced toward the bow. He moved like a lion.

Not all the brahmins agreed. Some of the elder brahmins were doubtful. Fearing that Arjuna would humiliate the brahmin class by this rash act, they spoke out loudly. "How can one untrained in arms and lacking strength succeed where even the lords of this world have failed? Stop that youth! It is merely out of childish impetuosity or vanity that he is attempting this impossible task. We shall all be made to look ridiculous."

Other brahmins demurred. "Just look more closely at this boy. His arms and thighs resemble the trunks of mighty elephants. His shoulders are broad and he appears as powerful as a maddened lion. He may well succeed. Surely he would not have gone forward if he lacked energy and power."

Some of them described the power of brahmins. Whether possessed of physical strength or not, brahmins were always powerful by virtue of their spiritual strength. No brahmin should ever be disregarded. Once all the earth's warriors had been annihilated by Parasurama, who was a brahmin. The great Rishi Agastya had drunk the entire ocean. There was nothing a brahmin could not achieve. This youth should not be checked. "Yes! Let him go forward," shouted one of them. "He will easily string the bow and strike down the target."

The elders replied, "So be it," and again took their seats.

Arjuna reached the center of the arena and, after bowing to the king, spoke in a voice that echoed around the stadium. "Is it permissible for a brahmin to attempt this test?"

Drupada looked curiously at the brahmin, then gave his assent. "It is never disgraceful for rulers to be subordinated by the power of brahmins," the king replied. "Indeed, they are protected by that power even as Vishnu protects the gods."

Arjuna turned to the bow and, folding his palms, bowed low before it. Within his mind he prayed to Krishna. Having walked respectfully around the bow three times, he took it up in his right hand. In moments he had strung it and placed a golden arrow on the string. A complete hush fell over the stadium as Arjuna stood absolutely still with the bow drawn to a full circle. He knelt and aimed upwards at the target. Suddenly he released the arrow and

it shot up with blinding speed. Passing cleanly through the hole it struck the target in its center. As the target clattered to the ground with the arrow sticking from it, the stadium erupted. The people rose to their feet and cheered, while musicians played innumerable instruments. Drums, trumpets and conches resounded and bards immediately composed poems glorifying Arjuna's achievement. The gods praised Arjuna and sent down showers of celestial flowers. The brahmins rose in a body, waving their garments and water pots and leaping about in joy. But the kings and princes were seized with shame and they uttered exclamations of grief and despair. Drupada, his eyes expanded in happiness, gazed in wonder as the mysterious brahmin walked toward the royal dais. Who was he? Could it actually be Arjuna? The king noticed the other monarchs becoming agitated. There was clearly going to be a fight. Drupada turned to his chief minister and commanded that his army stand ready. He then told Draupadi to accept the brahmin as her husband.

The princess looked at Arjuna as he approached the dais. She was immediately attracted by this god-like youth with the gentle demeanor. Maybe he was Arjuna, as Yaja had promised. Even if he were not, there was certainly no shame in marrying him. He was a brahmin and brahmins were always considered superior to the ruling class, or kshatriyas. And, although he appeared to be a brahmin, he was especially powerful and obviously self-controlled. This union was surely sanctified by the presence of Krishna, the all-powerful Lord of the creation. Draupadi approached Kunti's son and joyfully placed the garland around his neck.

Seeing Draupadi actually accept the brahmin further infuriated the kings. Yudhisthira decided it was time to leave. He rose up with his brothers and walked toward the stadium gates. Arjuna followed behind with Draupadi. The brahmins cheered and praised him as he walked past.

From amid the enraged kings, Duryodhana called out, "How does this Drupada dare offend us in this way? He has passed over all the lords of the earth to bestow his daughter upon a poor and unqualified brahmin. brahmins should never be allowed to compete in a svayamvara, which is meant only for the royal order. It seems Drupada invited us here only to insult us."

The kings roared in agreement. Some of them waved their weapons. Sishupala then said, "The Panchala king is so proud that he thinks none of us

his equal. He deserves to be punished at once. Let us act so that other svayamvaras do not end in a similar way."

The kings stood up with their weapons at the ready. They glared at Drupada and moved in a body toward him. Seeing the overwhelming odds, Drupada backed away.

Yudhisthira was observing the scene from the gate. Realizing that Drupada, now his father-in-law, was in danger, he ordered Bhima and Arjuna to assist him. The brothers quickly ran up to the dais and placed themselves between Drupada and the other kings. Arjuna still held the sacrificial bow. Bhima tore up a tree from the side of the arena and brandished it menacingly. The two princes looked like Indra and Yamaraja standing against the massed force of Daityas and Danavas. The hundreds of kings stood back warily as they looked at the two heroes facing them.

Krishna remained unmoved. Watching the two Pandavas preparing to fight, He turned to Balarama and said quietly, "Any doubts there may have been about the identity of these princes should now be gone. None but Bhima could have torn up that sal tree and who but Arjuna could have struck down the target? O Sankarshana, these are surely the Pandavas."

Balarama looked at Bhima and Arjuna as they prepared to ward off the maddened kings. "This is certainly true," he smiled. "It is fortunate indeed that our aunt and her young sons have escaped from the fire in Varanavata."

Many brahmins ran forward to support the two Pandavas. They waved their water pots and deerskins, crying out, "Fear not! We shall fight these arrogant monarchs."

Arjuna smiled and gently restrained them. "Stand aside and watch," he said. "With my sharp arrows I shall stop them just as so many snakes are checked by the power of mantras."

Karna advanced to the head of the kings. He shouted, "Although the royal order should not attack brahmins, it is permissible if those brahmins stand ready for battle."

Karna stopped at a distance from Arjuna and shot arrows at him. Arjuna, who was supplied with a large number of shafts by Drupada's soldiers, immediately countered all of Karna's arrows with his own. King Shalya of Madras fought with Bhima and they appeared like two huge

elephants colliding together. Duryodhana and the other kings contended lightly with the other brahmins who still challenged them. They easily held off the ascetic sages, but did not injure them.

Arjuna sent a number of swift arrows at Karna. They pierced his limbs and stunned him with their force. Karna looked upon his opponent with surprise. He had not expected such dexterity and martial power. Guarding himself more carefully, he replied with hundreds of straight-flying shafts, but Arjuna again knocked down all his arrows before they reached him. Seeing his expertise, the other kings cheered him on. This infuriated Karna. He released thousands of arrows. They filled the air like a flock of golden birds. Still Arjuna countered them, invoking celestial weapons and creating a mass of arrows that sped toward Karna.

The two combatants fought with astonishing skill. As they battled they called out to one another in the language of heroes: "Behold the strength of my arms!" "Guard yourself, if you can." "See how I counter your moves!" "Stand ready, for I shall release even more deadly weapons!"

The other kings stood by and watched open-mouthed, praising both warriors as they displayed their skills.

Karna soon realized he was not to gain the upper hand in the fight, so he stopped his attack and addressed Arjuna in a loud voice. "O best of brahmins, I am pleased with your prowess. Are you the science of arms personified? Perhaps you are Parasurama or Indra, or maybe even the infallible Lord Vishnu. When I am angered there are none who can fight with me but these personalities — or the son of Kunti, Arjuna."

Arjuna smiled. "I am neither Indra nor Parasurama. Nor am I any god or divine being. Know me to be a simple brahmin who has become proficient in arms by his guru's grace. Having mastered both earthly and celestial weapons, I stand here ready to vanquish you in battle."

Karna lowered his weapons and became pensive. This was no ordinary brahmin. It would be better to desist from the fight. A brahmin's spiritual power was always greater than a kshatriya's martial power. The great king Vishvamitra, even though well-versed in every divine weapon, could not overpower Vasishta Rishi, and the brahmin Parasurama single-handedly defeated all the kings of the earth. Karna bowed to the mysterious brahmin and turned away from the battle.

Elsewhere, Bhima and Shalya were still engaged in a fierce hand-to-hand combat. Locked together, they stamped and rolled about the arena like a pair of maddened elephants fighting for supremacy. Their roars and the sound of their blows filled the stadium. Sometimes pushing, sometimes dragging and sometimes throwing the other down, they fought with unflagging energy. They struck each other with the force of thunderbolts, laughing loudly as they fought. Suddenly Bhima lifted Shalya high above his head and whirled him around. He threw the king to a distance and left him lying stunned. Remembering him to be Madri's brother, Bhima did not continue his attack upon Shalya.

The kings were amazed to see both Karna and Shalya matched by the two brahmins. They looked in awe upon Bhima and Arjuna, who stood together ready for further assaults. "Surely these two are not brahmins. Who could fight with Karna except Drona or Arjuna? Who could throw down Shalya other than the mighty Balarama or Bhima? None could face Duryodhana except the unconquerable Krishna. Let us establish their lineage before we continue."

The other kings agreed. It was not wise to fight with brahmins, even if they were offensive; but if these two proved to belong to another class, then the fight could continue with full force.

Seeing the kings hesitating, Krishna came forward and spoke to them. "O monarchs, the maiden has been fairly and wonderfully won by the brahmin. There is no need for further fighting. Let us not blight this sacred occasion by unnecessary bloodshed, especially by assaulting the brahmins."

With gentle words and arguments Krishna succeeded in dissuading the kings from further aggression. Gradually they put away their weapons and left the arena. As they went out they talked together in amazement, wondering who the two mighty-armed brahmins might be.

Chapter Eleven. The Pandavas Wed Draupadi

Bhima and Arjuna, both bruised and bloody from the battle with the kings, turned and walked toward the stadium's southern gate. They were surrounded by brahmins, who joyfully praised them. With difficulty the two brothers pushed their way through the crowd and out of the arena, appearing like the sun and the moon emerging from behind clouds. Some way from the stadium the other Pandavas and Draupadi were waiting for them. Seeing them returning safely from the fight, they embraced the two heroes and together they proceeded to the potter's house.

At the house Kunti, who had not accompanied her sons to the svayamvara for fear of discovery, felt herself trembling with anxiety. It was past sunset and her sons had still not returned. What could have delayed them? Perhaps the Kauravas had recognized them and had them killed, or maybe the Rakshasas had come together to avenge the killing of Hidimba and Baka. Kunti remembered Vyasadeva's assurances. Could the great sage have been wrong?

As Kunti sat in the still evening air lost in thoughts of affection for her children, Arjuna suddenly entered the hut and called out, "Mother, we have returned bringing excellent alms. Just see the wonderful jewel we have obtained today!"

Filled with relief and happiness to hear her son's voice, Kunti called back, "Share among yourselves whatever you have acquired." She looked up and saw Arjuna enter her room accompanied by Draupadi, who immediately bowed low at her feet. The princess had discovered the identity of the brothers and was joyful to know Arjuna had won her. She greeted the venerable Kuru queen with appropriate words of respect.

When Kunti saw the white-robed princess bowing before her, she gasped in horror. "What have I said? How can you all share this woman?" Kunti caught the still smiling Draupadi by the hand and went out to see Yudhisthira. "My words have never been false. Indeed, I cannot utter untruth. When Arjuna said he had brought alms I had no idea he meant this princess and I replied, 'Share it among yourselves.' It must therefore be so. What then should be done?"

Kunti felt her religious principles threatened. She valued truth above

all else. Even in jest she never lied. Fearful that her virtue had suffered a diminution, she looked anxiously at Yudhishthira. "Tell me, dear son, how my words may prove true and at the same time this princess may not be touched by sin." It was virtually unheard of for a woman to marry more than one man. Marrying five men was unthinkable.

Yudhishthira looked thoughtful. He consoled his mother and assured her that neither she nor Draupadi would be touched by sin. He turned to Arjuna and said, "Dear Phalguni, you have won this maiden. It is therefore proper that you marry her with due ritual. Kindle the sacred fire and accept her hand with the blessings of the brahmins."

Arjuna was surprised. "O King, do not hurl me onto the path of the wicked. Your command is not consistent with virtue, in my view. How could I accept this princess in your presence while you remain unmarried? Surely you should accept her hand. Then, if you so command, Bhima may marry her and only then myself and the twins."

Hearing Arjuna's respectful words, the other Pandavas glanced at Draupadi. They had all expected that she would become Arjuna's wife, but as they looked at her, the Panchala princess returned their glances. All the brothers felt their hearts invaded by love. They had never seen such a maiden. It was as if she had been personally fashioned by the Creator himself. She was as resplendent as the Goddess Lakshmi, Vishnu's eternal consort.

Yudhishthira could understand his brothers' minds. He recalled Vyasadeva's words. Even though he had advised Arjuna to try to win Draupadi's hand, the sage had seemed to intimate that Draupadi should become the wife of them all. Although rare, such an act need not be unrighteous if sanctioned by an authority like Vyasadeva, especially when performed in order to preserve some other, higher religious purpose. If Draupadi became the wife of only one of them, it would most certainly create rivalry and dissension among them. And Kunti's words would also become false. This seemed to be a divine arrangement. Making up his mind, Yudhishthira said, "We shall all marry the blessed Draupadi."

Upon hearing Yudhishthira's words, all the brothers smiled broadly. Yudhishthira was equal to their father Pandu. His authority was final, his word to them non-different from an order given by the Supreme Lord himself. Draupadi must surely become their wife. They all now glanced openly at her,

and she looked down shyly. As they pondered the import of Yudhisthira's command, the potter came to inform them that they had visitors: Krishna and Balarama were at the door.

The two Yadava heroes entered the room and saw Yudhisthira seated on the floor surrounded by his brothers. With his powerful shoulders and well-developed arms, the handsome prince resembled Indra sitting amid the principal gods. Krishna folded His palms and said, "I am Krishna and this is Baladeva, my elder brother." The Pandavas were delighted to see their cousins. They stood up at once and Krishna touched Yudhisthira's feet in respect. He embraced Bhima and Arjuna and received the twins' respect. Both Krishna and Balarama also touched Kunti's feet as she shed tears of happiness upon seeing them.

After they had all exchanged appropriate greetings according to their status, the Pandavas gazed at Krishna. They marveled at how, although He was the Supreme Lord of the entire creation, He had accepted the role of a human being and was now their relative and friend. Krishna enquired after their welfare. Yudhisthira replied, "We are all well, Krishna, but tell me, how did you manage to trace us?"

Krishna smiled, "Fire is always visible even when covered. Who but the Pandavas could have performed such feats at the svayamvara? O conquerors of foes, by sheer good fortune you have escaped from the fire. By the same good fortune have Duryodhana's sinful plans come to nothing. Be blessed. May you grow in prosperity as a fire in a cave gradually grows and spreads itself around."

Krishna then said he had best leave before he drew attention to the brothers and gave away their disguise. He and Balarama stood and left quietly. The Pandavas sat for some time thinking about Krishna. They were heartened by his show of support and encouragement. They felt sure they would soon be restored to their proper position in Hastinapura.

Unknown to the brothers, Dhristadyumna had also followed them back and was now lying concealed near the hut. He watched in surprise as Krishna and Balarama came and went. Who were these brahmins that the two all-powerful Lords felt the need to visit? They must not be ordinary ascetics. Dhristadyumna cautiously moved closer and peered through the window. Kunti was instructing Draupadi how to prepare the Pandavas' meal. She told

the princess that after having offered the food to the Lord and giving a portion to the brahmins, she should divide what was left into two parts. She should then give one-half to Bhima and divide the rest between the other four brothers and themselves.

Dhristadyumna watched as his sister cheerfully did as she was instructed, giving half of the food to the huge-bodied youth who had thrown Shalya down in the arena, and distributing the remainder to the others. After they had all eaten they lay down to sleep on beds of deerskins spread over soft grass, their heads pointing toward the south. Kunti lay across the line of their heads and Draupadi lay at their feet. Dhristadyumna saw her smiling in great happiness as she accepted her new, apparently humble, position. As they lay there the brothers began to speak together. From his position at the window the prince heard them talking about celestial weapons, chariots, elephants, bows, arrows and swords. They discussed the battle with the kings in the stadium, laughing as they described how Bhima and Arjuna had routed the bellicose monarchs.

The prince had seen and heard enough. It was obvious that these men were powerful warriors. Surely they were royalty in disguise. Dhristadyumna quietly left and went back to his capital to inform his father of everything he had witnessed.

* * *

Back in Panchala, King Drupada was anxious. His beloved daughter was gone but he did not know who had taken her. He pondered on the day's events. Who was that man who had hit the target? Was he really a brahmin? Maybe it had been simply by luck that he had succeeded in the test. Perhaps he was a vaishya or even a shudra, casting Drupada's noble line into disrepute. Or maybe he was a great hero of the royal order. Then why would he have disguised himself as a brahmin? Perhaps he was actually Arjuna, somehow survived from the terrible fire at Varanavata. Surely that was too much to hope.

As the king sat absorbed in thought, his son entered his chamber. After bowing at his father's feet the prince described everything he had seen. Dhristadyumna was convinced it was the Pandavas who had won Draupadi, and he happily explained how he had followed them to a hut on the city's

outskirts, how Krishna and Balarama had visited, and how he had heard them speak the language of warriors.

"The two brahmins who fought in the hall left and joined three others. They appear to be brothers. In their midst was a lady who shone like fire. I believe she is their mother. They spoke together in voices as deep as black thunderclouds. There is no doubt that these men are neither shudras nor vaisyas. They are certainly of the royal order. In my opinion they are the Pandavas, who are living in disguise since escaping Varanavata."

Drupada was extremely pleased by his son's words. As soon as dawn broke, he called for his priest and asked him to go to the potter's hut to ascertain the brahmins' identities. The priest left at once and, arriving at the hut, applauded the Pandavas for their prowess. Then he said, "O worshipable ones, the great King Drupada desires to know your names. Please tell me your family name and race. Are you by any chance the Pandavas? It was ever the king's wish that his daughter be united with Arjuna. If this has transpired, then nothing could be more conducive to our fame and virtue."

Yudhisthira turned to his brothers and said, "Bring water and wash this brahmin's feet. He is worthy of our worship. Because he is Drupada's royal priest, we should especially respect him."

Bhima immediately did as his elder brother had directed. He had the priest sit comfortably, then offered him arghya. Yudhisthira then said, "O brahmin, the king fixed a certain price for gaining his daughter. She was not given freely. Therefore he has nothing to say about the lineage of the man who has passed his test. All his questions about our family and race have been answered by the stringing of the bow and the striking down of the target."

Yudhisthira smiled. He assured him that Drupada need have no regrets. His long-cherished desire would soon be fulfilled. Draupadi was clearly endowed with the auspicious marks of one who would be married to kings. The Pandava continued, "What man of low birth or one unaccomplished in arms could have shot down the mark? It was done fairly and there is no one who can now undo that act. The king should not grieve."

As Yudhisthira spoke, another messenger arrived to tell them that a great feast had been prepared in the city. He asked the Pandavas to please come with him to the king's palace where the wedding ceremony could be

properly performed.

Yudhishthira assented and the messenger showed the brothers to a couple of golden chariots that Drupada had sent. After placing Kunti and Draupadi on one of them, they mounted the other and all of them left for Kampilya. The white steeds drawing the chariots soon brought them to Drupada's palace. As the Pandavas dismounted the king's ministers greeted them and led them to the hall where the feast was waiting. Headed by Yudhishthira, the brothers entered the vast chamber. Costly rugs covered the floor and many long tables lined the walls, which were studded with countless gems. On one table the king had placed various items associated with brahminical life—sacrificial paraphernalia, holy books and garlands. On another were items used by the vaishya class—farming implements, ropes, seeds and the like. On yet another were weapons, armor, shields, rockets and other instruments of war, and expensive cloths, gold ornaments and other fine things of different types.

Everyone gazed at the brothers as they strode into the hall. Seeing those powerful men clad in black deerskins—each with the gait of a sportive lion, broad shoulders, long and well-muscled arms resembling serpents, eyes like furious bulls—the king and his relatives, ministers and attendants were gladdened. Without hesitation the heroes, in order of age, fearlessly sat upon seats of gold furnished with silk and provided with footstools. At once well-dressed servants and maids fetched many kinds of delicious foods on gold and silver plates. The brothers dined with pleasure on the rich preparations brought before them—food worthy of kings.

When the meal was over they rose and went to the table containing the weapons and royal items. They carefully examined all the pieces, discussing them among themselves. To Drupada and his sons and counselors it was obvious that the brothers belonged to the royal order.

Drupada approached Yudhishthira and said, "Sir, are we to know you as brahmins or kshatriyas of the royal order? Are you vaishyas? Or even shudras? Perhaps you are celestials who have assumed the disguise of brahmins and are roaming the earth. Please truly tell us. Truth becomes monarchs even more than sacrifice or charity. Once we have ascertained the order to which you belong, we can arrange an appropriate wedding ceremony."

Yudhisthira looked at the king and smiled. He spoke in a voice as deep as the rumbling of clouds. "O King, you may dispel your doubts and be cheerful. There is no doubt that your desire has been fulfilled. We five are royalty, the sons of the illustrious Pandu. I am Yudhisthira. Your daughter was won by Arjuna who, along with Bhima, fought with the other kings. She is like a lotus that has been transplanted from one clear lake to another. With Draupadi in the ladies' chamber is Kunti, our mother."

Yudhisthira folded his palms and said that he had told the king everything that needed to be told. Surrounded by his brothers, he added, "You are our revered elder and superior. We now take shelter of you. Tell us, what should be done?"

Tears flowed from Drupada's eyes and he was unable to speak. He stood for some moments with all his limbs trembling. Finally he managed with great effort to suppress his joy. He said, "I cannot express my happiness in words. Today my birth stands fulfilled and my dreams are realized. This is indeed an auspicious day. Tell me, how did you all escape from the fire at Varanavata?"

Drupada and his two sons, Dhristadyumna and Shikhandi, listened as Yudhisthira narrated the story. When he had finished they censured Duryodhana and his weak father. Drupada gave every assurance to Yudhisthira, vowing that he would somehow restore him to his rightful position as king in Hastinapura. He gave the brothers accommodations in his own palace and treated them with all respect.

The following day Drupada again spoke to Yudhisthira. "O mighty-armed one, today is a day marked by favorable stars. Let Arjuna take my daughter's hand with all due rites."

Yudhisthira replied, "If my younger brother is to marry today, then I shall also have to accept a bride, for that is the religious ordinance."

Drupada nodded understandingly. "Then you must accept the hand of Draupadi in the sacred marriage ceremony. Or give her to whichever of your brothers as pleases you."

Yudhisthira said, "The princess shall become the wife of us all. Our mother has ordered this. It was Dhananjaya who won your jewel of a daughter, but the rule among us is that we share equally any jewels we obtain. Therefore Draupadi may accept each of us, one after another,

according to age."

Drupada stepped back, his eyes opening wide with surprise. "I have heard that a man may accept many wives, but never that a woman may accept more than one husband. You are famed for your virtue, Yudhisthira. How then can you approve an act so contrary to tradition and indeed scriptural injunction?"

The king was surrounded by his sons and ministers and they all listened carefully as the Pandava prince replied. He told them that morality was subtle and its application depended upon circumstances. One therefore had to follow the authorities. His mother had ordered them all to marry the princess and that order had found acceptance in Yudhisthira's mind, which had never entertained thought of sin in his life. The prince was certain there would be no sin if Draupadi married all five brothers.

Drupada was still not convinced. He wanted more time to think. It was entirely unprecedented that a woman could marry many men at the same time. He asked Yudhisthira if they could discuss the matter further with Kunti, Dhristadyumna and the learned brahmins in his court. Yudhisthira agreed and sat in the king's council chamber for the discussion.

They had only been speaking a short while when the palace attendants announced Vyasadeva's arrival. As the sage was shown in, everyone present offered their respectful obeisances at his feet. Vyasadeva greeted them in return and offered blessings to Drupada and the Pandavas. After they had taken their seats, Drupada asked, "Illustrious one, is it possible for one woman to marry many men without being defiled by sin? Please tell me truly."

Vyasadeva replied that such a practice was certainly opposed to both the direction of the Vedas and tradition. Although practiced in former ages it had long become obsolete. The sage looked at Drupada and Yudhisthira and asked both of them for their opinions. Drupada revealed his doubts. He could not see any way by which the five brothers could all become Draupadi's husband. It would mean that the elder brother would be approaching his junior's wife. According to scripture, that would be the same as approaching his daughter.

Yudhisthira replied that his heart, which could never turn to sin, felt no misgivings about the proposed marriage. He cited a historical example of

a brahmin girl named Jatila who had married seven rishis at once. There was also the case of the famous ascetics known as the Prachetas. They too, being brothers, had accepted one woman as their shared wife. These examples were found in the Vedas and were not considered sinful. In certain circumstances even established rules may be broken in order to preserve a higher religious principle.

Kunti agreed with her son and asked the sage how she could be saved from untruth. Vyasadeva replied, "Gentle lady, you shall certainly be saved from sin. This is eternal virtue."

The sage turned to Drupada and said, "I wish to speak with you in confidence." Vyasadeva rose and took hold of Drupada's hand. They went into the king's chamber while everyone waited outside. When they were alone Vyasadeva explained to the king why the marriage conformed with virtue. The ascetic told Drupada that Draupadi had been the daughter of a rishi in a previous life. She had prayed to Shiva for a husband. In her prayer she asked the deity five times for a powerful husband. Shiva had replied, "Since you have asked me five times, in your next birth you shall have five husbands." Shiva could not possibly ordain a sinful act.

Vyasadeva further explained that the princess was an expansion of the Goddess Lakshmi. She had appeared from the sacrificial fire in order to become the Pandavas' wife, who themselves had all been gods in their past lives. In fact, the sage explained, all the brothers had been incarnations of Indra in different millenniums.

Vyasadeva bestowed upon the king the divine sight to see the Pandavas as they had been in previous lives. In his inner vision Drupada saw the blazing form of Indra that each brother had possessed—their celestial bodies adorned with golden crowns and garlands.

Struck with wonder, Drupada folded his palms and said to the sage, "Great Rishi, there is nothing outside your knowledge or capabilities. My mind is now satisfied. What the celestials have ordained must always come to pass. We are all instruments in the hands of destiny. Let my daughter accept all five brothers as her husbands."

The king and the sage rejoined the others and informed them of Drupada's change of heart. Vyasadeva said, "Today the moon has entered the auspicious constellation of Pushya. The first ceremony should be performed

at once and Yudhisthira can accept Draupadi's hand."

Drupada ordered his ministers and priests to make all the arrangements. A sacred fire was lit in the vast inner courtyard of the king's palace. Rows of pennants bearing the emblems of the gods lined the sacrificial arena, which was full of brahmins chanting hymns. A beautiful altar was constructed from coral and gold, bedecked with sparkling jewels. Fragrant garlands were draped everywhere and the aroma of costly incenses wafted throughout the courtyard.

The king with his relatives and friends took their places in the compound, which lay next to a large lake of lotuses. Citizens of all classes assembled in the courtyard to observe the ceremony—brahmins with their heads covered by simple cloths, wealthy merchants shielding themselves from the bright sunshine with decorated parasols, and shudras in their brightest clothes. All watched as the five brothers, dressed in silk robes and adorned with shining gold earrings, entered the compound like mighty bulls entering their pen. Dhaumya walked at their head. His bodily luster was as brilliant as the sun. He sat by the fire and offered libations of ghee. As the flames rose he chanted mantras invoking the presence of Vishnu and the principal deities. Then he called Yudhisthira to come forward and accept Draupadi's hand. The dark-complexioned princess, clad in bright yellow silks and decorated with many precious jewels, her long curling hair adorned with flowers, stood to receive Yudhisthira. The bride and groom took each other's hand and walked around the sacred fire three times, sealing their union.

On the days following Yudhisthira's wedding, each of the brothers married the Panchala princess. Vyasadeva informed the king that by the gods' arrangement, his daughter regained her virginity each day after a marriage and before the next marriage took place. When all five weddings had been sanctified, Drupada sat before the sacred fire and gave the brothers charity. To each of them he gifted one hundred golden chariots drawn by four excellent steeds, one hundred mature elephants and one hundred maidservants adorned with ornaments and flower garlands. He also gave them large amounts of gold, various precious stones and many valuable robes. Like so many celestials the brothers began passing their days in joy in Panchala, the king's capital. For his part, having formed an alliance with the Pandavas, Drupada did not fear even the gods in heaven.

After arriving back at Mathura, Krishna arranged for vast amounts of

wealth to be sent as a gift to the Pandavas. Great heaps of unworked gold bricks and piles of precious stones, including numbers of priceless vaidurya gems, soon arrived at Kampilya and were offered to the brothers. Costly carpets, robes, blankets and skins were placed before them in piles. Krishna also sent them thousands of maidservants—all young, beautiful and highly accomplished. Well-trained elephants and horses, as well as hundreds of chariots, were also presented.

Out of love for Krishna, Yudhisthira graciously accepted the wealth and sent back a message of gratitude. Secure in the knowledge of Krishna's friendship and blessings, all the brothers felt their good fortune assured in every way.

Chapter Twelve. Dhritarastra Gives Half the Kingdom

As the kings left the svayamvara for their respective countries, they marveled at what they had seen. The illustrious Pandavas were alive! Arjuna had shot down the target and won the princess, and Bhima had faced the kings with complete fearlessness and thrown down the mighty Shalya. The kings censured Bhishma and Dhritarastra for having allowed the Pandavas to be persecuted and deprived of their rightful kingdom.

Hearing of this turn of events Duryodhana heaved a disconsolate sigh. As he made his way back to Hastinapura, he pondered on the situation. How had his cousins escaped the fire? Now they were more powerful than ever. Allied with Drupada and Krishna, they were a force to be reckoned with. And their own prowess was obviously exceptional. Just two brothers had successfully taken Draupadi from the midst of hundreds of kings. Even the invincible Karna had been more than matched. Hot tears ran down Duryodhana's cheeks. By his side Dushashana said consolingly, "Do not grieve, brother. It was only because the Pandavas disguised themselves that they managed to win Draupadi. They took us all by surprise. Clearly destiny is supreme and human effort is useless. Despite our exertions, the Pandavas are alive and flourishing ."

Duryodhana frowned. "This is all the fault of the useless Purochana. He let us down badly. At least he perished in the fire."

The Kauravas entered their capital sorrowful and ashamed. They were also anxious. Drupada was a powerful enemy. As Duryodhana entered his palace Vidura met him. Hearing the news from Panchala, Vidura's face lit up with delight. Despite Duryodhana's machinations, the Pandavas were thriving! Surely the Lord was protecting those virtuous princes.

Vidura went at once to Dhritarastra and said, "By good fortune the Kurus have been successful and are prospering."

The blind king replied joyfully, "What luck! What luck!" Not knowing that Vidura was referring to the Pandavas, he thought that perhaps Duryodhana had won Draupadi. He immediately ordered ornaments to be made for Draupadi and asked that she and Duryodhana be brought into the palace in great pomp. Then Vidura informed him of the facts: Draupadi had chosen the Pandavas for her lords, and now the five heroes were strongly

allied with Drupada and his many relatives and friends. Dhritarastra sat forward in surprise, reaching out for Vidura's hand. "This is wonderful news. Those boys are dearer to me than they were to Pandu. My affection for them is now greater than it ever was. Their success and good fortune is mine also."

Vidura smiled. "O King, may these feelings remain for one hundred summers." He then left to give the good news to Bhishma.

The king was left alone with Duryodhana and Karna. Both had remained silent as Vidura had spoken, but as soon as he left they jumped to their feet, loudly criticizing him.

Clasping his sword in its ornate scabbard by his side, Duryodhana said, "Father! How are you considering our enemies' success to be your good fortune? That is foolish. We need to weaken the Pandavas and deprive them of their fortune, not rejoice in it. Otherwise they will surely swallow us all with our kinsmen, armies, friends and wealth." Karna growled in agreement and both he and Duryodhana stood in front of the king, waiting for his reply.

Dhritarastra was silent for some time. Finally, wringing his hands he said, "I desire exactly as you desire. However, I did not want to reveal my feelings to Vidura. He should not even know what I am thinking by my demeanor. Therefore I praised the Pandavas in his presence."

The king asked Duryodhana how he and Karna planned to handle the situation. The prince replied that they should employ every diplomatic and devious means to bring about the Pandavas' downfall. He suggested that spies be employed to create disunity between the five brothers, or that Drupada and his ministers be swayed from supporting the Pandavas by tempting them with wealth. Perhaps Draupadi could be turned against them if beautiful women were used to seduce the brothers. Or maybe Bhima could be secretly killed; he was the mainstay of the Pandavas' power and without him they could easily be overpowered.

Duryodhana concluded, "Use whatever means you deem best, Father. Somehow we must bring the Pandavas under our control without delay. Their strength increases with every passing day."

The Kaurava prince turned to Karna and asked him for his opinion. Karna raised a clenched fist. His voice boomed out in reply. "Duryodhana, in my view your suggestions are not well considered. I do not think that any intrigues will succeed against the Pandavas. You have already tried and failed

in this way on various occasions. It will surely fail again."

Karna pointed out that the Pandavas had formerly been living near them in Hastinapura. They had been mere children, without allies or friends, and still Duryodhana's scheming had not been successful. Now the brothers were grown up, had secured powerful allies, and most importantly, were on their guard against the Kauravas. They would detect and thwart any plan Duryodhana set in motion. Nor would the Kauravas be able to break Draupadi's affection for her husbands. She chose them when they appeared as poor brahmins. How would she reject them now they were prosperous? Nor would the virtuous Drupada abandon them for the sake of wealth—even if the Kauravas offered him their entire kingdom.

Karna's eyes flashed as he spoke. His natural golden armor gleamed in the shafts of sunlight that shone through the palace windows. He turned to the king and continued, "O sire, here is what I think we should do. Before the brothers are fully established let us strike them down on the battlefield. We must challenge them before Drupada has time to assemble his allies to fight alongside them, and before Krishna and Balarama can bring the mighty Yadava hosts from Mathura."

Karna went on to praise strength and prowess as the cardinal virtues in kshatriyas. He disliked Duryodhana and Shakuni's treacherous methods and would rather settle the issue in an honest trial of arms. That was the only noble way to tackle the Pandavas. The other three means of diplomacy—conciliation, bribery or dissension—would all prove useless. The Kurus should immediately gather an army and march on Drupada's capital, crushing both him and the Pandavas at the same time. Then the world would be theirs to command, freed of thorns.

Dhritarastra praised Karna for his courageous speech. Turning his face toward the king of Anga, he said, "Such words, full of heroism and power, surely befit you, heroic one, but let us consult Bhishma, Drona and Vidura before taking any action. These men will always counsel what is in our best interests."

Dhritarastra summoned his counselors. One by one Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and Vidura arrived and sat upon the golden seats around the king's throne. When they were all settled in their places, the king told them the views of both Duryodhana and Karna and asked for their opinions. Bhishma

spoke first. "O Dhritarastra, I can never consent to a quarrel with the Pandavas. Pandu's sons and your sons are equally dear to me. They deserve my protection equally. The Pandavas should be given half the kingdom. Of this there is no doubt. As much as you feel this kingdom to be your property, so too do the Pandavas feel it to be theirs. If it is not their birthright, then how can it ever be yours? Indeed, their claim comes before yours. Therefore conclude a treaty and hand over half of this kingdom to them. Do this for your own good."

Bhishma then explained what would happen if they declined to make peace with the Pandavas. The Kauravas would be covered with dishonor. All virtuous men would censure them. Having lost their reputation, their existence would become useless. Bhishma looked around the council chamber as he spoke. "It is fortunate for us that Kunti's sons still live. It is fortunate that Kunti herself still lives. And it is fortunate that the sinful Purochana met his end. From the day I heard that Kunti and her sons had perished in the fire, I could not face any living creature."

Bhishma asked Dhritarastra if he knew how the citizens felt. They had blamed the Pandavas' death on the king. That the brothers had survived would repair his reputation. Dhritarastra should now take advantage of that good fortune and make amends with the Pandavas by awarding them their kingdom. They were virtuous, united, and ever protected by the Supreme Lord. Even Indra with all the gods could not deprive them of their rights. "If you desire justice, the welfare of all, and my pleasure, then give half the kingdom to these boys."

Bhishma sat down, looking across at Duryodhana who breathed heavily and ground his teeth. The prince stared at the floor as Drona stood up to speak. "O sire, it is said that counselors should always speak what is right, true and conducive to the king's welfare and fame. My opinion then is the same as Bhishma's. Return the kingdom to the Pandavas. Send a messenger skilled in diplomacy to Drupada, along with many gifts, and tell him how the alliance of his house with the house of Kuru has enhanced your power and dignity. O King, this will undoubtedly be in your best interests."

Drona advised that Drupada be told how happy both Dhritarastra and his son have become by all that has happened. The Pandavas should be brought back in state to Hastinapura. They should then be installed in their paternal kingdom. This was the people's desire. The Pandavas are no less

Dhritarastra's sons than his own offspring. He should treat them equally.

When Drona finished speaking Karna sprang from his seat. He could take no more. Breathing heavily, his brow furrowed, he thundered, "How surprising that these two so-called ministers should tender such advice! Although you have supported them, O King, they do not look to your good. While concealing the wickedness in their hearts they speak words purporting to be in your interests."

Karna fumed. Bhishma and Drona's advice was useless. A man's happiness and distress depend upon destiny alone. Another person's acts could in no way affect anyone. Everything was fixed by fate. If in the course of destiny Dhritarastra had acquired the throne, then who could oppose that? Why should they fear the Pandavas? Dhritarastra had become king by fate's arrangement and if fate decreed it, then he would remain in that position, no matter what anyone said or did.

Karna looked angrily at both Bhishma and Drona as he concluded his speech. "These two have spoken out of fear of, or favoritism toward, the Pandavas. O King, judge for yourself the motives of your ministers, then do what you feel is right."

Dhritarastra remained silent, but Drona again spoke out. "Karna, you have spoken only out of envy of the Pandavas. Due to your attachment for Duryodhana you desire only to injure the Pandavas. You should know that what I have said is certainly for the benefit of this house. If we act otherwise, then in my opinion the Kurus will be exterminated."

Vidura had been observing the situation closely. Now it was his turn to speak. He could see by Dhritarastra's demeanor and silence that he was uncertain. The intelligent minister stood and addressed the king. "O sire, after careful consideration I cannot think of anyone who are better friends to you than Bhishma and Drona. They have spoken what is for your certain good, but you do not accept their advice. The foolish Karna may disagree with them, but their words are meant only for your welfare. It has never been seen that they gave you bad advice at any time. They are experienced, wise and learned in scripture. Neither of them are in any way less than Rama, the great son of Dasaratha. They regard your sons and the Pandavas with equal eyes. Why then do you disregard their counsel?"

Vidura then gave his own views of the situation. Dhritarastra's

partiality toward his own sons would lead to his downfall. The Pandavas were powerful and fixed in virtue. They could not be overcome by force. Indeed, they were capable of withstanding even the gods in battle. Besides the mighty Drupada, they had Krishna and Balarama as allies. There was no doubt that wherever there was Krishna there would be victory.

Standing before Dhritarastra, Vidura spoke firmly. "Wash away, O King, the stain of ill repute brought about by the incident at Varanavata. Please the citizens of this state. Do what is just and proper and give to the Pandavas what is rightfully theirs. If you listen to the sinful advice of Duryodhana, Shakuni and Karna, your kingdom and fortune will surely be annihilated."

Dhritarastra remained silent for some minutes. As much as he desired the advancement of his own sons over that of the Pandavas, he could not deny the truth of Vidura's words. Placing his hand upon his sceptre he said, "The learned Bhishma, the Rishi Drona and your illustrious self, Vidura, have all spoken the truth about what is good for me. The Pandavas are certainly my sons and are entitled to this kingdom. Go, Vidura, and bring them here along with their mother. Bring too the celestial beauty, Draupadi. By good fortune the Pandavas live. By good fortune have they obtained Drupada's daughter as their wife. By good fortune our strength has now increased, and by good fortune the wicked Purochana is dead."

Dhritarastra dismissed the assembly. Duryodhana and Karna stormed out, closely followed by Dushashana and the other Kaurava princes. Vidura left and made preparations to go immediately to Kampilya, while the blind king was led back to his chambers by his servants.

* * *

Early the next morning Vidura departed for the Panchala kingdom. He took with him numerous jewels and various kinds of wealth for Drupada, the Pandavas and Draupadi. A large contingent from Dhritarastra's army accompanied him as he made his way along the smooth forest roads. Vidura had heard that Krishna had gone to Kampilya to visit the Pandavas, and he felt excited at the prospect of seeing that all-powerful personality, as well as his beloved nephews.

When he arrived at Kampilya, Drupada received him with honor and the Pandavas were overjoyed to see him. They greeted him with tears in their

eyes and touched his feet. The old minister embraced each of the brothers warmly. Krishna then came forward and bowed before Vidura, who embraced Him, feeling a surge of ecstatic love. He gazed at Krishna for some moments and the Yadava smiled affectionately at him. Vidura then offered Draupadi brilliant golden ornaments studded with diamonds and rubies, and Drupada a heap of shining gems.

When they were all seated in Drupada's council chamber, Vidura said, "O King, along with your sons and ministers please hear the message I bring from Dhritarastra. He and his sons and ministers have repeatedly asked after your welfare. Your beloved friend Drona has mentally embraced you and sent his warmest greetings. All the Kuru elders are overjoyed at our new alliance. They feel as if they have acquired a new kingdom. Knowing all this, O sire, please permit the Pandavas to go to Hastinapura. The Kurus long to see them again."

Vidura described how much the people in Hastinapura were anxious to see the brothers return with their new bride. He hoped the Pandavas themselves desired to again see their own home. Would Drupada allow them to enter their own city in state?

Drupada smiled. "Wise Vidura, it is surely proper for these boys to return to their ancestral kingdom, but it is not proper for me to tell them to leave. Let them decide for themselves. Let us also consult Krishna, for He is always interested in what is best for the Pandavas."

Yudhisthira stepped forward and said that he and his brothers were now dependent upon Drupada. They would do whatever the king commanded. Krishna said, "In my view the Pandavas should go to Hastinapura, but we should all abide by Drupada's opinion, for the king is learned in all aspects of virtue."

Drupada agreed with Krishna. "These princes are now as dear to me as they are to Vasudeva. No one is more their well-wisher than Krishna and He will only counsel what is for their own good. Let them depart for Hastinapura."

Soon they were ready to leave. The Pandavas made their fond farewells to Drupada and his sons. The old king and his wife shed tears as their daughter mounted the chariot with Kunti. They stood with the other Kuru elders outside the palace as the Pandavas proceeded slowly down the

royal highway toward the city gate. Krishna went with them on His own splendid golden chariot, and with great pleasure they all journeyed together to Hastinapura. They entered the city like a line of celestials entering Amaravati, Indra's splendid city.

The citizens thronged the streets. Everyone longed to see the Pandavas again. They crowded around the brothers as the procession moved slowly along the main road toward Dhritarastra's palace. The Pandavas could hear people's exclamations. "The best of men, Yudhishthira, has returned at last! That exalted soul knows the precepts of virtue. He regards us as if we were his nearest relatives. Today it seems that Pandu himself, beloved of the people, has come back from the forest. If we have ever given charity, if we have ever performed sacrifice, if we have any ascetic merits—then let the Pandavas live here for one hundred years."

The brothers smiled and raised their hands in blessings. Their eyes streamed with tears as they again saw their city and its people. Soon they saw Dhritarastra and Bhishma, who had come out on the road to meet them. The king and his minister embraced the Pandavas, who in turn greeted their elders with due reverence, touching their feet and bowing before them with folded hands. Yudhishthira then enquired after the welfare of the kingdom and its people and was told that everything was flourishing. Gradually the party moved into Dhritarastra's palace. After been worshipped by the Kuru elders, Krishna followed behind them.

Duryodhana's wife, Dushala, met Draupadi and Kunti and accompanied them into Gandhari's quarters. As Gandhari embraced Draupadi she thought of the prophetic voice that had spoken when Draupadi first stepped out of the fire. It was said that she would be the death of the world's kshatriyas. The blindfolded queen had developed a powerful inner vision due to her austerities. She could understand that Draupadi was destined to cause her sons' destruction. Still, Gandhari felt no malice toward Draupadi. She had resigned herself to the eventuality of fate. Duryodhana was wicked and selfish. His brothers followed him blindly. Surely they would reap their rightful reward. All-powerful Providence controlled everything. Men were simply instruments of destiny, driven by desire and hate. The queen blessed Draupadi and then warmly greeted her old friend Kunti.

In Dhritarastra's council chamber the king spoke before the Pandavas in a trembling voice. "It is with joy that I sit here today with Pandu's sons.

The gods have surely been merciful to the Kurus in that these five heroic brothers still live. So that no further disputes may arise between us, I want to give the Pandavas half the kingdom. Yudhisthira my child, go to Khandavaprastha; this shall be your half of the kingdom. Live there peacefully."

Bhishma and Vidura looked at one another but said nothing. Krishna, who was sitting upon a splendid seat of gold and jewels, and who appeared like the sun illuminating the assembly, smiled when he heard the king's proposal. He knew the region the king was so generously offering to the Pandavas. Khandavaprastha was a vast area, and it was certainly half the kingdom, but it was nothing but jungle and desert. There were no cities, not even any settlements. Although it had once been the site of the Kurus' capital, a rishi had long ago cursed that land when he felt offended by a Kuru king. It was now a wasteland.

Yudhisthira looked respectfully at Dhritarastra. He felt no anger or resentment at the unfairness of the settlement. His elders represented the Supreme; their orders should be followed without question. The prince looked across at Krishna, who was still smiling. Yudhisthira was sure with His assistance they would be able to make the Khandava region habitable land. With palms folded the Pandava acknowledged Dhritarastra's gift. "It shall be so, my lord."

The next day the king arranged for Yudhisthira's coronation. With all pomp and ceremony the prince became king of Khandavaprastha, with Vyasadeva appearing in time to perform the rituals.

After the coronation the Pandavas arranged to depart. Having worshipped the gods and taken their leave from the Kuru elders, they left with Krishna at the head of their procession. The sage Vyasadeva also accompanied them as they journeyed to the northern region of Khandava. With his assistance the brothers selected a tract of land upon which to found a city. He performed the appropriate Vedic rites to invoke the gods' presence. Then Krishna sat with the rishi and summoned Indra. The deity appeared, blazing like fire. He bowed before Krishna and asked, "What shall I do for you, my lord?" Krishna asked him to construct a city for the Pandavas. He told Indra to sprinkle his heavenly nectar across the land so that it would again become rich and fertile. Saying, "So be it," Indra called for Vishvakarma, the architect of the gods. After being instructed by Indra he

began work on the city.

All around the site granite walls rose to the skies. Vishvakarma constructed white palaces and mansions, whose windows looked like the divine eagle Garuda's outstretched wings. Massive dark gates that resembled clouds protected the city. No weapon could assail them. Deadly darts and other missiles were placed along the tops of the defensive ramparts. The turrets were filled with powerful men, all highly trained in warfare and with all weapons at their disposal. The city was then surrounded by delightful woods full of blossoming and fragrant trees. Everywhere were lakes crowded with swans and lotus flowers. The city streets were wide and well-designed, with pleasant groves and gardens between them. Pleasure houses stood in the vast public concourses and there were countless temples dedicated to Vishnu and the gods. The Pandavas' own palace appeared like the heavenly Mount Meru. Fully opulent, it stood in the center of the city surrounded by garrisons of warriors.

Soon brahmins began to be attracted to the city, which had become known as Indraprastha. They opened institutions wherein they taught the Vedic sciences. Vaishyas also began to arrive, hoping to earn money by selling their goods. Gradually craftsmen and artisans arrived and within a short time the city was populated with pious citizens. It resembled Amaravati in the heavens. Ruled with justice and compassion by Yudhisthira and his brothers, Indraprastha's people had everything they desired. They came to regard the Pandavas as affectionate fathers.

Out of friendship for the Pandavas, Krishna remained in the city for some days. Arjuna and Krishna were especially close and they spent much time together. Draupadi would also take every opportunity to serve Krishna, and she became very dear to Him.

* * *

A few days after Krishna's departure the celestial seer Narada came to Indraprastha. Seeing the well-known rishi, dressed in a black deerskin and with his golden hair knotted on his head, Yudhisthira got off his throne and offered him obeisance. He then presented Narada with a fine golden seat encrusted with jewels and personally offered him the sacred arghya. King Yudhisthira washed the rishi's feet and welcomed him with gentle words. At

Yudhisthira's command, Draupadi came before the sage and stood with folded palms. Narada offered the beautiful queen blessings and then dismissed her.

When Draupadi had returned to her quarters, Narada said, "This illustrious princess is the wedded wife of all of you. You must establish a rule so that no dissension may arise between you over her. Listen as I tell you the ancient history of two celebrated Asuras named Sunda and Upasunda."

The two Asuras belonged to the powerful race of Danavas, the celestial demons. They were both sons of Nikumbha, a deadly enemy of the gods. The brothers were like one person divided into two. They lived together, ate together and moved about together. They always entertained the same purpose and were always equal to one another in both happiness and distress. By virtue of their long practice of rigid austerity, Sunda and Upasunda became extremely powerful. Having received a boon from Brahma that they could only die at each other's hands, they felt free to terrorize the universe. The gods could not check them. Finally, Brahma devised a way to destroy them. He created a woman of indescribable beauty, whom he named Tilottama. On Brahma's order this Apsara went before the two brothers one day when they were intoxicated. Seeing her faultless form moving gracefully before them, both brothers immediately desired her. They began to argue. "This woman shall be my wife and your sister!" "No, brother, I saw her first. She is mine!" The argument became heated and soon they fell upon one another with their fierce weapons. At last they simultaneously smashed one another with their huge clubs and both fell to the ground dead.

Narada concluded, "Thus those two Asuras, although ever united and inspired with the same desires, killed one another for the sake of a woman. You should make an agreement so that no such quarrel may arise among yourselves."

The Pandavas consulted one another in the rishi's presence. Finally they agreed that they would each spend a certain amount of time with Draupadi. If any of them saw another when he was alone with her, there would be a severe consequence; the offender would have to go to the forest for one year and have no contact with Draupadi during that time.

After the Pandavas had made this rule, Narada took his leave, disappearing before their eyes. Carefully keeping their agreement, the

brothers continued to live peacefully at Indraprastha.

Chapter Thirteen. Arjuna's Pilgrimage

It was more than a year since Narada Rishi's visit. The Pandavas' power and influence had increased and they had brought many other kings under their sway. They ruled with one aim: to keep the people on a path of piety and truth. By their own example they showed how happiness follows a life of virtue. In everything they did they accepted the guidance of spiritually advanced brahmins. Indraprastha flourished and became more than the equal of Hastinapura in the world's eyes. Due to his unswerving adherence to virtue, Yudhisthira became known as Dharmaraja, the king of religion.

Draupadi pleased her five husbands with her feminine graces and expert attentions. According to their agreement, each of the brothers was allotted time in which to be alone with her. One day it so happened that while Draupadi was alone with Yudhisthira, a brahmin came to the Pandavas' palace. Standing by the gate, he cried out, "O King, wicked and despicable men are robbing a brahmin's wealth. Alas, how can it be that in the kingdom of the virtuous Pandavas the brahmins are not protected? A king who takes his taxes but fails to protect the people is considered the most sinful of men. Therefore, great hero, deliver me at once from this burning anguish."

In anger and grief the brahmin repeatedly cried out. Arjuna heard his cries and called down, "Do not fear." He went quickly to fetch his weapons in order to punish the thieves, but discovered that Yudhisthira was alone with Draupadi in the room that held the weapons chest. Arjuna hesitated. How could he intrude upon his elder brother, especially as they had made their agreement? But here was an afflicted brahmin. If he did not protect him, then Yudhisthira's fame would perish and he would be tainted by sin. Arjuna could not stand by and watch his brother be accused of irreligion. He had to get the weapons, even though it meant he would be exiled to the forest. He felt that even if he died in the forest it would be preferable to neglecting his duty.

Arjuna resolved to enter the chamber. He had no choice. After knocking on the door and receiving Yudhisthira's permission he walked in. Looking straight ahead of him, he strode quickly toward the weapons. Yudhisthira smiled to see his younger brother. He knew Arjuna must have an important reason for entering. Arjuna then explained the situation, took his bow and ran out of the palace. Taking the brahmin and mounting his chariot, he pursued the robbers at speed. When he saw them in the distance, Arjuna

released his infallible arrows, striking down the thieves as they made off with the brahmin's cows. Having dealt swift justice to the thieves, Arjuna restored the property to the grateful brahmin and returned to the city.

Yudhisthira greeted his brother warmly as he entered the palace. Along with his other brothers he applauded Arjuna for saving the brahmin. Arjuna bowed before Yudhisthira and said, "My lord, please give me permission to observe the vow as we have agreed. I shall leave for the forest at once."

Yudhisthira's stared at his younger brother in disbelief. What was he saying? In a voice trembling with grief he immediately replied, "Why should you go? Sinless Arjuna, if I am your authority, then heed my words. I was not in the least disturbed by your entering the room. You do not need to leave for the forest."

Yudhisthira looked tearfully at his handsome, curly-haired brother. How could he face separation from this virtuous and gentle soul? He explained to Arjuna how scripture sanctioned a younger brother entering a room where his elder brother sat with his wife. It was only when the elder brother intruded upon the younger that it was condemned. Arjuna had entered the room only in pursuance of duty and in service to Yudhisthira.

But Arjuna was adamant. "My lord, I have heard from you that virtue must be practiced without hesitation or quibble. I shall not waver from truth. Truth is my weapon and virtue my strength. Grant me permission to leave and I shall proceed to the forest today."

Despite the other Pandavas' repeated pleas, Arjuna could not be swayed. Finally Yudhisthira relented and gave his permission. Although it would be painful to think of his younger brother in exile for so long, it must somehow be the arrangement of Providence. Surely the Lord had some inscrutable purpose that would ultimately prove to their benefit. He watched sadly as Arjuna left the city accompanied by brahmins chanting sacred hymns and by servants carrying wealth for him to distribute as charity while he traveled.

The young prince went on foot toward the north. He had decided to first follow the Ganges' course toward the Himalayas, then proceed eastward to the coast. Following the coastline in a great circle, he would finally return to Indraprastha.

Arjuna traveled at a leisurely pace. He saw charming woodlands, lakes and gardens. There were countless hermitages along the banks of the Ganges where sages lived, and each evening Arjuna would stop and recite prayers in their company. He would also listen as the sages narrated tales from the ancient scriptures about the pastimes of the Supreme Lord in his many incarnations. Arjuna often thought of his cousin and dear friend Krishna as he walked. He hoped to visit him toward the end of his exile. The Pandava listened as the sages described how Krishna was the unborn original Personality of Godhead, appearing on earth to destroy demonic men and to establish the eternal religion, pure love of God.

As he traveled Arjuna also performed fire sacrifices to please Vishnu and the gods. One evening, just as the brahmins were kindling the sacred fire, Arjuna entered the Ganges in order to bathe. He was just about to leave the river when he suddenly felt himself being drawn underwater by an unseen force. Despite his efforts to free himself, he was dragged deeply into the river. He then found himself mystically transported to a celestial palace. Arjuna looked around and saw a sacred fire burning in the room he had entered. The prince immediately sat before the fire and offered libations of ghee into the flames, fearlessly reciting the mantras.

Just as Arjuna was completing his evening rituals in that strange place, a beautiful girl entered the room. She glanced coyly at Arjuna and smiled. He recognized her at once to be a maiden belonging to the celestial Naga race. Arjuna understood what had happened. The Nagas have the power to transfer humans to their own heavenly dimension of existence. Obviously this girl had become attracted to him and had drawn him down to her abode. He smiled back and said, "Beautiful maiden, you have been bold indeed. Who are you and where is this divine region?"

The girl replied that she was the daughter of a Naga king named Kauravya. Her name was Ulupi. "When you entered the river for your bath I was moving through the waters in my ethereal form. I was struck by Cupid's arrow as soon as I saw your godlike beauty. O descendent of Kuru, I am yet unmarried. Therefore accept me as your wife, give yourself up to me and gratify me today."

Arjuna said that he was bound by a vow of celibacy for one year. He could not therefore accept her as his wife. Still, as she was a Naga, he knew she must have already known this by her celestial intelligence. She would not

have asked him to marry her if her request did not somehow conform to the codes of virtue. Indeed, the scriptures enjoined that a kshatriya should never refuse a maiden who supplicated herself to him.

Arjuna asked her how he could satisfy her desire while at the same time maintain his truthfulness. Ulupi replied, "I know of your vow, O hero. You and your brothers made a rule in regard to Draupadi. This is well known to the gods. But that rule pertained only to your wife. It is her with whom you must not consort for the next year. There will be no sin in accepting another woman."

Filled with desire for the powerful Pandava hero, Ulupi beseeched him to accept her. She explained that such an act would be his highest duty under the present circumstances. The Naga princess knew that Arjuna would act only when impelled by virtuous motives. She told him that if he did not take her as his wife, she would destroy herself. Thus he would be saving her life by accepting her. That was certainly a greater virtue than observing celibacy. Even if his piety suffered a slight loss by his going with her, he would gain greater merits by having saved the life of a helpless woman who had approached him for shelter.

Arjuna thought carefully. He decided that the Naga maiden was speaking the truth and that he would not be acting wrongly to accept her as his wife. He smiled and nodded in assent. Ulupi quickly fetched two celestial garlands which she and Arjuna duly exchanged to signify their acceptance of one another. Having sealed their union according to scriptural injunctions, Arjuna then spent the night with her in Kauravya's palace. Ulupi waited upon him and offered him every kind of celestial food and drink. They then lay together on a golden bed in the heavenly mansion and conceived a child.

In the morning Arjuna rose just before sunrise. Ulupi brought him back through the Ganges to the place where he had bathed the night before. Before leaving him, Ulupi blessed Arjuna, "You shall be invincible in water. Every aquatic creature will be vanquished by you in a fight."

After telling Arjuna that she would return to him later when he was back in his own kingdom, Ulupi vanished into the Ganges waters, leaving Arjuna to be greeted by his followers. The ascetic brahmins had seen by their own divine sight how the prince had been taken to the region of the Nagas. They met him as he returned and offered him their blessings. Arjuna related

to them everything that had happened.

The party continued on to the Himalayas and soon arrived at the Bhrigu Mountain where the famous Vashista Rishi had once had his hermitage. Many brahmins lived on that hill and Arjuna distributed much charity to them. After bathing in a sacred lake on the Bhrigu Mountain he walked on, visiting numerous other holy sites. Arjuna went toward the east, gradually descending from the Himalayan range. He reached the forest of Naimisharanya, said by the sages to be the very hub of the universe. From there he crossed over the rivers Nanda, Upananda and the famous Kaushika, where the great Rishi Vishvamitra had performed asceticism for thousands of years in ancient days.

Desiring to increase his piety, Arjuna traveled from one pilgrimage site to another along with his retinue. He performed many sacrificial ceremonies and gave much charity. When he reached the border of the kingdom of Kalinga on the eastern coast, he bade farewell to most of his followers and entered the kingdom with only a few attendants. Arjuna journeyed through forests, woodlands and numerous towns and villages. He passed the great Mount Mahendra and arrived finally in Manipur, where he visited King Chitravahana in his city of Manalur. The king had an attractive daughter named Chitrangada. Arjuna saw her one day in the palace gardens and was struck with desire. He approached the king and asked for his daughter's hand in marriage.

Chitravahana replied that he would be delighted to see his daughter wed an illustrious heir of the Kuru race. Arjuna was famous throughout the world as a hero without equal. But the king had one condition. Years ago his ancestors had prayed to Shiva for a child. The deity had granted their request, saying, "You shall have a child, and from now on all of your descendents will have a child—but one child only—to continue your race."

Chitravahana had only a daughter. If Arjuna begot a son with his daughter, he must leave the boy to become the next king of Manipur. Arjuna happily accepted the condition and was married to the princess with all due ceremony. He remained in the city for three months. When he saw that Chitrangada had conceived, he took his leave from her and the king, setting out again on his travels. Before leaving he promised Chitrangada that he would return and bring her to his home in Indraprastha.

Arjuna then made his way south along the coast. When he reached the southern coast he found a large community of Rishis. He asked them to point out the local pilgrimage sites, and the Rishis informed him that there were five sacred lakes in that region, which could not be approached because they were infested with crocodiles. These lakes could confer great merits upon anyone who bathed in them, but as soon as a man entered the water he would be carried away by one of the powerful reptiles.

Arjuna saw an opportunity to serve the ascetics. He remembered his boon from Ulupi. Going to the lake named Agastya—after the famous Rishi who had once lived there—he dived into the water. A great crocodile immediately seized Arjuna's leg. Feeling the divine strength conferred by Ulupi, he grasped hold of the animal and pulled it out of the water. Arjuna dashed the creature onto the shore. It suddenly became limp and a beautiful celestial maiden came out of its body. Seeing the wonderful sight, Arjuna asked, "Who are you, most beautiful one? Why have you committed such sins in this lake, carrying away holy ascetics?"

The maiden stood before Arjuna with folded palms. "O mighty hero, I am the Apsara named Varga, ever beloved of Kuvera."

Varga explained that she had once been going with four of her friends to see Kuvera. As they traveled through a heavenly woodland region they saw a brahmin meditating in a lonely place. He was extremely handsome and he lit up the woods with his bodily luster. The five Apsaras playfully tried to disturb his meditation. They danced and sang before him, trying to tempt him away from his ascetic practices. Although unmoved by lust, the brahmin was angered by their behavior. He then cursed them, "As you attack me now without compunction, you five shall become crocodiles, whose business is attacking others." The maidens at once came to their senses. Showing contrition, they begged the brahmin for mercy. He relented and told them that a powerful man would soon deliver them from their crocodile bodies. At that moment the great sage Narada Rishi arrived there and told them to enter the five sacred lakes on Bharata's southern coast. Soon Arjuna would come and release them from their bondage.

Varga bowed before the Pandava and thanked him for delivering her. She then asked him to save her four friends, who lived in each of the four other lakes. Arjuna smiled and went quickly to each holy lake. He pulled out all the other crocodiles and each time he watched as a maiden of shining

beauty came out of the fierce reptilian body. The five Apsaras came together and, after offering Arjuna their respects, rose up to the heavens. Having made the lakes safe again, Arjuna took his leave from the Rishis and proceeded on his journey.

* * *

Arjuna traveled up Bharata's western coast until he arrived at Prabhasa. In the sea near Prabhasa, Krishna had constructed a city called Dwaraka. Arjuna could see the splendid fortress city from a distance, shining like the sun on the horizon. It could only be reached by passing along a heavily guarded bridge. When he reached the bridge Arjuna sent word of his arrival to Krishna, who immediately came out of the city to see His dear friend. They embraced with joy. News of Arjuna's exile from Indraprastha had already reached Dwaraka and Krishna had been expecting him to arrive before the year was up. He knew that Arjuna was interested in gaining the hand of his sister Subhadra. Arjuna had heard much about the princess from Gada, Krishna's cousin who had studied under Drona along with the Pandavas. Gada had described her as being incomparably beautiful and endowed with every womanly qualification. Just by hearing the descriptions, Arjuna's heart had become attracted. He had resolved even then to somehow win her as his wife. And that would forge an alliance between the Pandavas and their beloved lord, Krishna.

Arjuna told Krishna about his travels to the holy places and the Vrishni hero replied, "This is all good. Your piety and virtue are ever increasing."

The Pandava prince turned quickly to the subject of Subhadra. He asked Krishna how she might be won. Krishna smiled. "This princess is worthy of you in every way, O tiger among men, but who knows what would be her decision at a svayamvara? For a hero the surest way to win a maiden is to carry her away by force. This is always the way of the powerful, and it is sanctioned by holy scripture."

Krishna added that his brother Balarama was intent on seeing her married to Duryodhana, even though no one else in Dwaraka was very keen on this suggestion. Krishna especially did not like the idea. He would much prefer Arjuna to take his sister's hand. But Balarama was the city father and

Krishna's elder brother and Krishna did not want to go against his wishes. He told Arjuna to be patient. They would devise a plan. In the meanwhile, they could spend some time together. Arjuna still had four months remaining of his exile. He could spend it at Dwaraka.

Krishna suggested that Arjuna keep his identity concealed. If he entered the city openly, he would not get a chance to see Subhadra. She lived in Balarama's palace and was never seen in public. Her first appearance would be at her marriage. If Arjuna went into the city dressed as a renunciate, however, Balarama would doubtlessly invite him for meals. Krishna knew that his elder brother was fond of entertaining ascetics and sages, and also that he always arranged for Subhadra to serve them so that she might be blessed and increase her virtue. Arjuna should therefore disguise himself as a renunciate, a member of the sannyasa order. No one would recognize him if he matted his hair and kept his beard, especially when he was dressed in the saffron robes of a sannyasi. Then he could live in Dwaraka during the coming months, and await an opportunity to win the beautiful Subhadra. The rainy season was just upon them and it was customary for wandering ascetics to stay in cities till the rains had passed.

Krishna went back into his city and Arjuna waited a few more days outside before entering. Krishna's plan had sounded good. The Pandava wanted a chance to see Subhadra and also for her to see him. Pious, he did not want to steal her against her desire. If she were not attracted to him, he would leave her in peace. He tied his hair in a knot above his head and put on the dress of a renunciate. Taking up the triple-rodded staff traditionally carried by Vaishnava sannyasis, worshippers of Vishnu in the renounced order, Arjuna entered Dwaraka. The unsuspecting gatekeepers allowed the ascetic to pass, folding their palms in respect as he walked by. Arjuna made his way along the huge golden bridge that spanned the ocean to the city. At intervals the bridge opened out onto spacious platforms where well-armed soldiers stood guard. None of them recognized Arjuna as he passed.

When Arjuna reached the city he was stunned by its opulence. Symmetrically arranged around the city center were sixteen thousand white palaces, one for each of Krishna's sixteen thousand queens. Each palace was bedecked with gold and jewels and each rivalled the celestial Mount Meru in its size and opulence. Magnificent temples rose up on all sides and the sounds of sacred chants could be heard everywhere. Beautiful music filled the air and

billows of fragrant incense wafted on the breeze. Shining chariots and great elephants moved here and there. Attractively dressed citizens strolled about the wide avenues, which were inlaid with emeralds and interspersed with gardens stocked with celestial flowers. In the midst of the delightful gardens jeweled fountains stood in lotus-filled lakes. Trees bearing blossoms of every color stood along the roadsides. All around the city a massive fortified wall, a full one hundred miles long, rose up from the sea. Arjuna gazed about in wonder as he made his way to the brahmins' quarter of the city.

Krishna had arranged that his friend be given a large house for his residence. He told him that he would inform Balarama of the arrival of a Vaishnava sannyasi, and that Arjuna could expect to soon be invited to Balarama's palace where he would see Subhadra. Arjuna felt as if he had ascended to Indra's abode in the heavens. The gods were even seen frequenting Dwaraka and it seemed as if its residents were celebrating a never-ending festival.

As Krishna had expected, Balarama arranged for Arjuna to be brought to His palace and offered varieties of delicious food. He had his sister Subhadra serve the sannyasi so that she might receive his blessings. The princess stole Arjuna's mind away. She was everything he had heard she was. Subhadra was as beautiful as Vishnu's divine consort Lakshmi. With her blue silk garments, gold earrings and ornaments, and long curling black hair, she could capture the hearts even of the celestials. She moved about with grace and poise as she served the ascetic.

Arjuna tried not to stare at her as he accepted the golden dishes she placed before him, but the princess caught his glance and saw the sparkle in his eyes. She looked more carefully at the sannyasi. He did not resemble the other ascetics Balarama had brought to the house. This ascetic looked more like a prince. Beneath his thin cotton cloth Subhadra could see his broad and powerful shoulders. As he accepted the dishes she offered, she noticed his long, well-muscled arms, which resembled a pair of five-hooded serpents. She could see that behind his beard the young sannyasi was extremely handsome. His dark eyes pierced hers and she felt her heart move. It was obvious he desired her. Perhaps he was looking for a bride. She knew that Balarama was trying to arrange her marriage to Duryodhana, but the young sage seemed a better prospect than that conceited Kuru prince. Subhadra wondered who this ascetic might be.

Over the coming weeks Balarama invited Arjuna to his palace on numerous occasions. Each time Subhadra served him, and their attraction for one another grew. One day in confidence Krishna spoke with his sister on the subject of her marriage. She told him of her feelings for the strange sannyasi and Krishna smiled. He asked her how she felt about Duryodhana. The princess's features twisted disdainfully. Then Krishna mentioned Arjuna's name, telling her that the Pandava was desirous of becoming her husband. Indeed, he had come to Dwaraka to seek her hand. Subhadra looked at him intently. Suddenly she realized what he was saying. The handsome ascetic was Arjuna. Why had she not guessed? The so-called sannyasi, who walked like a powerful lion and spoke with a voice resembling a thundercloud, could only be a great ruler.

Subhadra was suddenly excited. If only she could become the wife of that famous Kuru hero. But Krishna cautioned her to remain quiet about his identity. If Balarama learned the truth there would be trouble. She should be patient. Arjuna would surely find a way to marry her.

It was almost the end of the monsoon season. Balarama invited the sannyasi to his palace for a final visit. Again Subhadra served him. By glances and smiles she made her feelings clear to the Pandava. Arjuna's heart pounded. He could hardly eat. He prayed that he would soon get a chance to take the princess as his bride.

When the meal was over Balarama gave gold and jewels to the sannyasi and sent him home. Arjuna left with his mind in turmoil. He had to somehow gain Subhadra's hand. During the last weeks of the rainy season his mind remained fixed on the princess. Finally the rains ended and it was time for Arjuna to leave Dwaraka. Krishna came to see him and told him that there would be a festival on the Raivataka hill, which skirted the mainland coastline around Dwaraka. All of the Yadus would attend. The beautiful Subhadra would also be there. Krishna suggested that this might be the time for which Arjuna had been waiting.

Arjuna's eyes lit up as Krishna, sitting next to him on the couch, explained his plan. "O best of men, I do not see any way you can obtain Subhadra other than by kidnapping her from the midst of her friends and relatives. The festival will provide an opportunity for you, as the powerful heroes of the Yadu dynasty will be at ease and not expecting trouble."

The festival was to be held in a few days and Krishna arranged for swift messengers to ride to nearby Indraprastha. Arjuna wanted to obtain Yudhisthira's permission before snatching away Subhadra. Such an act would likely arouse the anger of the mighty Balarama, and might even precipitate a fight between the Pandavas and the Yadus, but Krishna told him not to fear. He would pacify Balarama when the time came. "I will convince my irascible brother of the propriety and excellence of an alliance with your house, Partha. You need only take the maiden and make off with her with all speed."

When Yudhisthira's permission arrived, Arjuna prepared himself to kidnap the princess. On the day of the festival, Subhadra came out of the city surrounded by her relatives. All the great personalities of Dwaraka were present—King Ugrasena, Akrura, Gada, Sarana, Babhru, Satyaki, Uddhava and many others—and they resembled an assembly of the gods. The Gandharvas also appeared and they played sweet celestial music as Apsaras danced. Dwaraka's citizens came out on their golden chariots and on the backs of great elephants. Above them hovered the aerial cars of the Siddhas and Charanas, uttering auspicious Vedic hymns in praise of Krishna and Balarama, who shone in the midst of the assembly like the sun and the moon. From the sky the gods showered celestial flowers and played their heavenly instruments.

As evening approached, Arjuna came unnoticed out of the city. He had changed his dress and put on armor. His year of exile was over and he had cut his hair and resumed his normal appearance. Krishna met him and gave him a chariot drawn by Saibya and Sugriva, two of Krishna's celestial steeds. As the Yadus sported and enjoyed themselves in the fragrant woodlands on the Raivataka, Arjuna mounted his chariot. Then he saw Subhadra surrounded by her friends and maidservants standing near a temple of Vishnu. Without delay Arjuna spurred the horses and rushed toward the princess.

Subhadra looked up in surprise as she heard the clatter of the fast approaching chariot. Holding the reins was Arjuna, with a great bow slung on his back and a sword hanging from his belt. Subhadra's heart leapt. The prince was heading straight for her. In less than a minute he had taken hold of her hand and pulled her onto the chariot. Before anyone could react he raced away to the north, back to Indraprastha.

As they realized what had happened the Yadus became incensed.

How dare anyone kidnap their princess before their eyes? Who could have been so bold? Some of them said it was Arjuna from Indraprastha. The Yadu warriors ran about in all directions, trying to find their weapons and chariots. In Dwaraka the chief officer of the court stood in the central square of the city and blew his golden trumpet. It was a call to arms. A council of war was hastily assembled in the Yadu court. As the ministers and generals quickly took their places in the Sudharma assembly hall, Balarama spoke. His angry voice echoed around the hall. "Why has Arjuna insulted us in this way? Did he not consider us worthy of a peaceful approach? He has stolen Subhadra without even speaking to any of us. Surely this means war!"

Balarama glared around the assembly with eyes reddened with fury. The thousands of Yadu warriors present rose like so many fires blazing up when fed with oil. "Bring my armor!" "Fetch my weapons!" "Yoke my chariot and I shall give chase to the insolent Pandava!"

Amidst the uproar, only Krishna remained unmoved, seated upon his beautiful, jewel-encrusted throne at the head of the assembly. Seeing this, Balarama again spoke. With his pure white complexion, blue robes and wildflower garlands, he resembled a white mountain covered with blossoms. His voice again echoed around the hall. "Stop! Senseless men, what are you doing while Krishna remains silent? Cease your roaring and let us hear what is on his mind before we act. His words are always our surest guide."

Balarama looked across at his brother. "O Janardana, Arjuna is Your friend, but it appears that he has insulted us. By snatching away my sister he has placed his foot upon my head. How shall I bear it? I will rid the earth of the Kurus by myself today. I will never brook an insult from them lightly!"

The whole assembly erupted again as Balarama spoke, roaring in approval. Krishna only smiled. As the sound died down He said, "I do not feel that Arjuna has insulted us. Indeed, my feelings are that he has enhanced our glory. Partha knows that we would not accept payment or gifts for our princess. What man on earth would sell his child to another? Nor would Arjuna accept the maiden as a gift, as if she were an animal. He has therefore selected the method always favored by powerful heroes."

The hall remained silent as Krishna continued to speak. He said he considered an alliance with the Pandavas, and especially with Arjuna, as proper. Arjuna had been born in the noble Bharata race. He was the son of the

illustrious Kunti, from their own house. No man on earth was capable of vanquishing Arjuna in battle. He was now proceeding on Krishna's own chariot and would be difficult to check. Subhadra and Arjuna were a good match. Better that they send swift messengers to bring him back in peace and arrange for a proper wedding. That would avoid the likely disgrace of being defeated by Arjuna and would enhance the alliance forged by the marriage. After all, there was now no question of Subhadra being accepted by another man.

Having concluded his speech, Krishna looked around the assembly. Some of the the Yadus voiced doubts, but Krishna answered them all expertly. Gradually the mood changed. The Yadu heroes looked at one another in affirmation of Krishna's words. His points were good. Arjuna was the world's greatest warrior and his dynasty ruled the world. His marriage to Subhadra was the arrangement of Providence for the good of the Yadus. They immediately sent messengers after Arjuna. He was brought back and received with honor. The city was decked out in flags and festoons and a great ceremony took place. Arjuna accepted Subhadra's hand before the sacred fire with the blessings of the Rishis. Then he remained in the city for a few more days. Finally, taking permission from Balarama and Krishna, he returned home. After a year away Arjuna longed to see his brothers again and introduce Subhadra to them.

Chapter Fourteen. Burning The Khandava Forest

The Yadus bestowed vast amounts of wealth on Arjuna, and he left Dwaraka accompanied by a long train of chariots and elephants as well as hundreds of thousands of cows decorated with silk and gold. Subhadra rode with him on a fine golden chariot drawn by tall white steeds. They soon arrived at Indraprastha and Arjuna went straight to Yudhisthira. He clasped his feet and then worshipped him according to the Vedic injunctions. Arjuna then worshipped Dhaumya and the other Rishis in the royal court. When the ceremonies were complete his other brothers embraced him with tears in their eyes and asked him to relate to them all his adventures.

After spending time with his brothers, Arjuna went to see Draupadi. As he entered her chamber, she turned away from him and said, "Arjuna, what brings you here? You should go and be with your new bride. That daughter of the Satvata race must be missing you." Draupadi sat with her back to Arjuna. He was her favorite among the Pandavas and she feared he might come to prefer Subhadra. The Pandava repeatedly begged her forgiveness and assured her that his love for her was in no way diminished. Draupadi spoke in strained voice. "A second tie always relaxes the first one, no matter how strong it may have been."

Arjuna tried to console the beautiful Draupadi, but she remained silent, always looking away from him. Seeing that he could not win her over, he left her chamber and went to Subhadra. He asked her to dress herself as a cowherd girl. He wanted to remind Draupadi that Subhadra was the sister of Krishna, Draupadi's beloved lord. Krishna had begun his life as a cowherd boy in a small village. By having Subhadra appear as a cowherd girl Arjuna hoped that Draupadi's natural affection for Krishna would be awakened and directed toward his sister.

The Yadu princess was brought into Draupadi's chamber attired in simple red silk. The servant girls who showed her in said, "This maiden has asked if she could become your servant." Subhadra immediately bowed before Draupadi and said, "I am here to do your bidding."

Draupadi had never seen Subhadra and did not realize who she was, but seeing her humble demeanor and being reminded of Krishna by Subhadra's rustic dress, Draupadi's heart melted. She raised her hands and blessed her, saying, "May you become the wife of a hero and the mother of a

hero. May you be without a rival."

Subhadra replied, "May it be so." She then introduced herself. "I am Subhadra, Krishna's sister." Draupadi smiled and embraced her co-wife. Her jealousy and anger were dissipated by Subhadra's gentleness. She asked Subhadra to tell her everything about Dwaraka and Krishna. They spoke together for hours. Then Draupadi took Subhadra by the hand and led her to meet Kunti. The two Pandava queens soon became close friends and would spend much time together, discussing the activities of Krishna and his associates.

A few days after Arjuna's return, Krishna and Balarama came to Indraprastha. Accompanied by his sons and ministers and riding at the head of a great army, Krishna entered the Pandavas' city where Nakula and Sahadeva greeted him at the gates. As they proceeded in state down the main highway, thousands of citizens stood along the roadside. They cheered and worshipped Krishna and his elder brother as they moved slowly toward Yudhisthira's palace. The Yadus gazed around them at the city. The roads were immaculately swept and sprinkled with perfumed water. Fences draped with bright garlands ran down the sides of the wide avenues. On the tops of tall white mansions flew countless flags and standards. The sweet scent of burning aloes filled the air and the sound of musical instruments could be heard.

Krishna and Balarama entered the Pandavas' palace and went before Yudhisthira and his brothers. Yudhisthira worshipped Balarama with all due ceremony and embraced Krishna with affection. Krishna offered his respects and worship to Yudhisthira and Bhima, then took his seat in the assembly hall. Many important personalities from Dwaraka also took their places in the hall, including Akrura, Uddhava, Satyaki, Kritavarma, Sarana and Krishna's sons Pradyumna, Samba and Aniruddha.

Krishna then gave Arjuna all the bridal gifts for Subhadra that her relatives in Dwaraka had sent. He gave heaps of gold bricks and precious gems to Yudhisthira. Krishna also presented the king with one thousand chariots adorned with rows of golden bells, each of them yoked to four steeds driven by well-trained charioteers, ten thousand milk-bearing cows, one thousand moonlike white horses with golden harnesses, and a thousand white mules with black manes, which could run at the speed of the wind. As well as this, Balarama gave Arjuna as a wedding gift one thousand elephants, each

resembling a hill and decked with golden ornaments and bells. Innumerable other items were offered to the Pandavas, being brought before them by Krishna's servants. Placed outside the hall, the wealth given by the Yadavas looked like a sea stretching in all directions.

Yudhisthira graciously accepted the gifts and then arranged for all the Yadavas to be accommodated in his palace. They and the Pandavas passed many days together in happiness, and when it came time for them to leave, the Pandavas in turn presented them with brilliant gems as gifts. With Balarama at their head, the Yadus headed back to Dwaraka, but Krishna decided to remain behind to spend some time alone with Arjuna.

One day Arjuna suggested, "Krishna, the days are hot. Let us go for some time to the banks of the Yamuna. We have constructed many fine pleasure houses there."

Krishna agreed to his proposal and they set off. They soon arrived at a charming spot amid groves of tall trees. High white mansions stood along the riverbanks, looking like a city of the gods. Krishna and Arjuna entered one of the houses where they were served varieties of exquisitely flavoured food and drinks. They lay down upon golden couches spread with silk covers. After relaxing for some time they decided to go for a walk in the woods. The two heroes wandered along the riverbank, discussing martial arts and past battles they had each fought.

Having walked for a distance, they sat down upon an ivory bench that had been placed near the edge of a dense forest. As they continued to talk a brahmin suddenly emerged from the woods. They looked at him in surprise. He resembled an old sal tree with a complexion like molten gold. His beard and hair were bright yellow and he shone like the morning sun. His two eyes were like lotus leaves, and his body was well formed and powerful. As the brahmin approached them, blazing like fire, Krishna and Arjuna stood up and awaited his order.

In a resonant voice the brahmin said, "I know you two to be the foremost of all men. I myself am a voracious brahmin who eats much. I have therefore approached you in order to beg my food and to be gratified by you."

Both Krishna and Arjuna folded their palms and asked the brahmin what food he would like. The brahmin replied, "I do not eat ordinary food. Know me to be Agni, the fire-god. Give me food that suits me. Please help

me devour this Khandava forest." He indicated the jungle by which they were standing. Although he had already made many attempts to consume the forest, Indra had repeatedly thwarted his efforts. This was because Indra's friend, the Naga Takshaka, lived in the forest. Whenever Agni blazed up and began to cover the forest, Indra would send torrents of rain to stop him. The fire-god continued, "Both of you are experts in arms. By your prowess you will be able to prevent Indra from stopping me. Thus I shall consume this great forest. O heroes, this is the food I desire to have from you."

Krishna and Arjuna looked at each other in surprise. They assured Agni that they would do everything in their power to help him, but they were curious as to why he wanted to consume this particular forest. The god explained that the Khandava forest contained numerous varieties of medicinal herbs. He needed the herbs because he was suffering a malady due to having eaten excessive amounts of ghee. There had been a great sacrifice performed by a king named Swetaki in which so much ghee was offered into the fire that Agni became ill. Brahma then told him that he could be cured if he ate the herbs in the Khandava forest. When Agni failed in his attempts to consume the forest, Brahma told him that he would succeed if he could gain the assistance of Krishna and Arjuna.

Brahma had said, "In a previous incarnation, these two men were in fact the ancient and infallible deities Nara and Narayana. They have appeared on the earth to accomplish the celestials' purpose. Therefore, ask for their help."

Agni concluded, "I now depend upon you two. I must eat this forest. Brahma has also informed me that the living beings within the forest are sinful and should be destroyed. Therefore do not harbor any doubts. This act is sanctioned by authority."

Arjuna replied, "I possess many celestial weapons, but I have no bow capable of bearing their power. If I am to achieve the task you have set, I will require an inexhaustible quiver of arrows and a chariot drawn by celestial steeds. If you can provide all this, then we will surely accomplish your desire."

Agni meditated upon Varuna, god of the nether worlds, and the deity immediately appeared and said, "What shall I do for you?"

Agni knew that Varuna kept many celestial weapons in the depths of

the ocean. Therefore he asked him to present Arjuna with the celestial bow known as the Gandiva, as well as two inexhaustible quivers of arrows. Agni also asked that Varuna bring forth a chariot belonging to Soma, the moon-god. Varuna agreed and caused all those things to appear at that spot.

Arjuna looked with wonder at the Gandiva bow. It appeared like a rainbow embedded with celestial gems. As tall as a man, it was flawless. The Pandava took up the shining bow and forcefully twanged its string. A sound like the crash of thunder resounded throughout the forest, terrifying all the creatures. Holding the bow, the joyful Arjuna next approached the huge, golden chariot. It was filled with varieties of celestial weapons as well as the two inexhaustible quivers Agni had requested. The chariot was yoked with golden harnesses to silvery steeds from the land of the Gandharvas. These horses were capable of going anywhere within all the worlds and could move with the speed of the wind or the mind. Above the chariot flew a banner bearing an image of Hanuman, Rama's great monkey servant. Hanuman seemed to be burning everything that fell within his gaze. Other flags flew on the chariot bearing images of fierce beasts. All the creatures roared terribly from their standards.

Arjuna folded his palms and walked respectfully around the chariot and then mounted it like a virtuous man ascending to heaven. He put on the suit of celestial armor that lay there. As he stood with the Gandiva in his hand, he resembled the sun shining from behind an evening cloud. He then drove the chariot around, smiling as he heard the loud rumble of its wheels.

Varuna also gave Krishna a club called Kaumodaki, which roared loudly when wheeled about and which could crush even Daityas and Danavas. Krishna then mounted Arjuna's chariot, saying that he would become the driver.

Arjuna again addressed Agni, "O fire-god, we are now ready to satisfy your request. Armed with the Gandiva and assisted by Krishna, I am able to withstand the entire host of gods united with the Asuras—what then to speak of Indra! Therefore, blaze up as much as you like and surround this forest."

Agni immediately expanded himself around the forest and began to consume it with his seven kinds of flames. He took on the fearful appearance he assumes at the end of an aeon when he destroys all things. Krishna then

began to drive the chariot around the forest. It moved with such speed that it appeared to be continuously present on every side of the forest. Whenever Arjuna saw a creature trying to escape from the conflagration he immediately shot it down. Being slain in the presence of Krishna, the Supreme Deity, all the creatures dying in that forest assumed spiritual forms and ascended to the highest regions of transcendence.

The roar of the fire could be heard for miles. Red, orange and blue flames shot high into the sky. The lakes and ponds in the forest were boiled dry and the rocks melted. No creature was able to escape from the blazing Khandava forest and their screams mixed with the crackling of the fire. It blazed up to such an extent that it caused fear even to the celestials, who went in a body to Indra and said anxiously, "Lord of the immortals, why does Agni burn all creatures below? Has the time come for the world's destruction?"

Indra looked himself to see what was happening on the earth. Feeling concern for his friend Takshaka, he set out at once to stop the fire. He sent down torrents of rain, which fell in columns as thick as tree trunks. But the rain was turned to steam by the heat of the fire even before it reached the forest below. Indra then became angry and amassed huge clouds over the forest which doubled the volume of rain. With its flames and smoke rising up, and with lightning and sheets of water falling from the sky, the forest became terrifying.

Arjuna saw Indra's attempt to put out the fire and he sent hundreds of thousands of arrows in a tight network over the forest. That net of arrows acted as a vast umbrella and completely checked the falling rain.

The Naga king Takshaka was not present in the Khandava, but both his wife and son were caught in the blaze. They flew swiftly upwards and were seen by Arjuna. He instantly fired an arrow that severed the snake lady's head. He then trained another arrow upon Takshaka's son, Ashvasena. Seeing this, Indra raised a violent wind around Arjuna that temporarily deprived him of his senses. Ashvasena escaped and disappeared into the sky.

As he regained his senses, Arjuna became angry with Indra. He shouted a challenge to the god and covered the sky with his arrows. Indra too became angry with Arjuna and released his tremendous thunderbolt weapon. Without delay Arjuna invoked the Vayavya weapon which dispersed the huge black clouds. That powerful wind weapon completely dispelled the

energy of Indra's thunderbolts and lightning flashes. The sky became clear and a gentle breeze began to blow. Agni blazed up even more, fanned by the breeze and fed with the fat of bodies burning in the forest. He filled the sky with his roars.

Indra summoned many other celestials to fight with Arjuna. Hosts of powerful heavenly fighters appeared and began to send their weapons at both him and Krishna. Blazing iron balls, bullets, rocks and countless arrows shot toward them. Arjuna countered all the missiles with his arrows—at the same time he cut down his assailants, who fell screaming into the fire. Arjuna was unconquerable as he stood on the battlefield releasing his deadly arrows, with Krishna skilfully guiding the chariot.

Indra then mounted his celestial elephant, Airavata, and rushed down upon Arjuna and Krishna, shouting, "These two are killed." He raised his personal weapon known as the Vajra and urged on his elephant. Seeing Indra advance the other principal gods followed him. Yamaraja took up his death-dealing club, Kuvera his mace and Varuna his noose. The commander of the celestial army, Skanda, raised his Shakti weapon, and Surya came with his brilliant dart. The other gods charged behind Indra with their own weapons raised. The Vishvadevas, Sadhyas, Rudras, Vasus and Marutas all advanced in a body toward Arjuna and Krishna, who stood fearlessly below.

Even though they exerted themselves with full force, however, the celestials were unable to overpower Krishna and Arjuna. Struck by Arjuna's mystical arrows, the gods were forced to retreat. Indra smiled. He was pleased with Arjuna who was, after all, his son, and he also understood Krishna's position. Indra knew that no one could overcome Krishna or anyone supported by him. Obviously Krishna desired that Agni consume the forest and, at the same time, he was enhancing the fame and glory of His friend Arjuna.

Then, desiring to test Arjuna's power further, Indra sent down a thick shower of boulders. Arjuna quickly reduced the stones to dust with his swift arrows. Indra then tore off the peak of a massive mountain and hurled it at Arjuna. Not disturbed in the least, Arjuna cut the flying mountain peak into a thousand pieces that rained down upon the forest below.

Indra was gladdened by Arjuna's prowess. He ordered the celestials to withdraw and, as he did so, an invisible voice was heard in the sky: "Indra,

your friend Takshaka is not in the forest at present. Nor will it be possible for you to defeat in battle Arjuna and Krishna. These two are Nara and Narayana, the immortal and invincible Rishis. They are worthy of even the gods' worship. Desist from the battle, for the burning of the Khandava has been ordained by fate."

Having heard that voice, which they knew belonged to the universal creator Brahma, the gods retired to their own abodes. For fifteen days Agni continued to consume the forest along with its inhabitants. As the forest was destroyed, hordes of Rakshasas, Danavas and Nagas rushed out in fear. Arjuna cut them down with volleys of arrows. None could even look at him as he stood releasing his searing shafts. Gradually the forest was reduced to ashes and Agni was gratified.

There was a leader of the Asura race named Maya, who had been dwelling in the Khandava. Having hid himself underground, he now rushed out of the forest and tried to escape. Agni chased the Asura and Krishna raised His discus weapon, Sudarshana, ready to kill him. The intelligent Maya ran to Arjuna and fell at his feet. "Arjuna, I seek your protection. Save me! I supplicate myself before you."

Arjuna raised his hand and replied, "Do not fear." He could not refuse to protect anyone who sought his shelter. He turned toward Krishna and asked Him to spare the Asura's life. Krishna lowered his weapon and Agni also stood back.

As the flames in the forest died down, Indra again appeared before Arjuna and Krishna. Agni stood next to him as he said, "O Partha, O Keshava, you have achieved that which could not be achieved by any celestial. Please ask from me any boon you desire. I am very much pleased."

Arjuna asked Indra for all his celestial weapons. Indra smiled and replied that he would indeed give him the weapons—but not yet. When Shiva would give Arjuna his Pasupata weapon, then Indra would bring him to heaven and give him all the fire and wind weapons. That time would come in the future.

Krishna then asked that his friendship with Arjuna might last forever and Indra said, "It shall be so."

Finally, Agni said, "I also wish to give you a boon. Just as I pervade this universe, so by my power will you be able to go anywhere you desire

within the universe." The gods then returned to the heavens.

As Krishna and Arjuna made their way back to their mansion, Maya approached them. He bowed at Arjuna's feet and said, "O son of Kunti, you have saved me from the angry Krishna and the hungry Agni. Tell me what I can do for you in return."

Arjuna replied, "I cannot take anything from you to repay me. This is my firm principle. I act only out of duty. It was my duty to save you and therefore you bear me no obligation. Go in peace."

Maya praised Arjuna's virtue, but he insisted upon doing something for the Pandava. "I simply wish to please you, Partha. You need not see it as repayment."

Arjuna again said that he could not accept anything from Maya. "I do not want to frustrate your desire. If you want to please me, then do something for Krishna. That will be more pleasing to me than anything else."

Maya turned and looked expectantly at Krishna. After reflecting for a moment he said, "You are the architect of the celestial demons. If you wish to please me, then build a splendid assembly hall for Yudhishthira. The like of this hall should not be found anywhere in the world. It should contain the features of celestial architecture and be impossible for anyone else to emulate."

The Asura's skills were well known to Krishna. Maya had constructed many wondrous edifices in the higher planets for the Daityas and Danavas. Maya then assented to Krishna's request and accompanied him and Arjuna back to Indraprastha, where he was introduced to Yudhishthira. The eldest Pandava marveled as Arjuna narrated the story of how the Khandava forest was burnt. He received Maya with honor and discussed the hall with him. After much thought Maya drew up a design. He then began to consider where to find the necessary materials for constructing the celestial hall. He told the Pandavas that he needed to go to the Himalayas. "I have left there a large quantity of diamonds and other precious stones of every description, including those not found on this earth. I shall go to fetch them."

Maya explained that Vrishaparva, king of the Danavas, had formerly engaged him to construct sacrificial altars for the Asuras. He had gathered all kinds of celestial materials which he had stored at Vrishaparva's house high up on the Mainaka mountain. There was also a great club with which

Vrishaparva had once withstood the gods in battle. Maya would bring that club, equal to one hundred thousand ordinary clubs, and give it to Bhima. He would also fetch from the depths of a lake on Mainaka the large celestial conch shell known as Devadatta for Arjuna. If Arjuna blew that conch on the battlefield, it would shatter his opponents' hearts.

Having gained Yudhisthira's permission, the Asura left quickly for the north. He found all his wealth guarded by Yakshas and Rakshasas, and with their assistance he brought it back to Indraprastha. After presenting the club to Bhima and the conch shell to Arjuna, he commenced work.

Chapter Fifteen. The Celestial Hall

Soon after Maya began his work on the hall, Krishna approached Yudhisthira and asked his permission to return to Dwaraka. He had been away for months and now desired to again see his relatives. Yudhisthira gave his permission reluctantly, knowing he would miss his beloved friend. Krishna then said his farewells, first going to Kunti and touching her feet in respect.

Shedding tears, Kunti embraced Krishna and said, "My dear Keshava, you are the Supreme Soul of this universe. You are always kindly disposed toward everyone but you especially protect your devotees. From the day Akrura arrived in Hastinapura I knew you were thinking of the welfare of my sons and myself. I am confident that whatever difficulties we experience are all arranged by Providence for our ultimate good."

Krishna smiled at Kunti and then left her, promising he would return before long. He then went to see his sister Subhadra and bid her an affectionate farewell. After that Krishna went to Draupadi, who cried at the thought of his departure. Like her husbands and mother-in-law, Draupadi thought constantly of Krishna. She bowed at his feet and worshipped him, praying that he might soon return.

After performing the due rites of departure, and after offering charity to the brahmins, Krishna mounted his chariot along with Satyaki, who had remained with him in Indraprastha to learn archery from Arjuna. Surrounded by the five Pandavas, Krishna looked like Indra surrounded by the gods. He proceeded slowly along the royal highway toward the city gate. Thousands of citizens lined the streets shouting and waving as Krishna departed in his chariot, drawn by Saibya and Sugriva and bearing the sign of Garuda. Yudhisthira mounted the chariot and personally took the reins. Arjuna stood on the chariot fanning Krishna with a golden handled chamara whisk. Bhima held a white parasol over Krishna's head and Nakula and Sahadeva walked ahead on either side of his chariot, clearing the way.

The Pandavas accompanied Krishna out of the city for four miles. Krishna then told them to return home. He bowed to Yudhisthira, who tearfully raised him and said with affection, "My dear Krishna, I do not know what kind of pious activities we must have performed in previous lives so that you are now so gracious toward us. Even highly renounced yogis and

mystics attain a sight of you only with great difficulty. Yet we are householders engaged in politics and worldly affairs. I do not understand why you are so kind to us."

After replying with sweet words, Krishna asked Yudhisthira if he could leave for Dwaraka. Yudhisthira assented and with great difficulty Krishna persuaded the Pandavas not to follow him. He told them that he would always be ready to assist them whenever they needed him. They need only think of him. Krishna then urged his horses onwards and the five brothers stood together gazing at his chariot as it disappeared into the distance. They then slowly returned to Indraprastha, their minds absorbed in thoughts of their friend from Dwaraka.

* * *

A few days after Krishna left, Maya, having completed all his designs and plans, began his actual construction. On an auspicious day marked by favorable stars the Asura measured out a piece of land five thousand cubits square. Before commencing work, he distributed charity to thousands of brahmins. He arranged for them to be fed with the finest of foods and gave them wealth, invoking their blessings before he began.

Maya then erected thousands of golden pillars upon which he constructed a fabulous assembly hall. After fourteen months his work was completed. The hall appeared like a mass of new clouds rising in the sky, and its celestial effulgence seemed to darken the sun's rays. It was spacious, cool, delightful and highly opulent. With its golden walls and archways inlaid with celestial gems, and its crystal stairways worked with coral, the hall surpassed even the Yadus' Sudharma hall. In its center was a beautiful artificial pond filled with lotuses and lilies whose stalks were made of brilliant gems, along with other flowers and leaves made of gold and silver. On its clear waters there were also real lotuses in full blossom. Swans, karandavas and chakravarkas swam about on its surface and golden-colored turtles played on its bottom. The sides of the pond were set with costly marble slabs studded with pearls, and all around it were celestial flowers moving in a gentle breeze. The hall was adorned with gardens full of ever-blossoming trees, and the air was filled with a delicious fragrance.

Maya arranged for eight thousand powerful Rakshasas, known as Kinkaras, to guard that hall. Keeping themselves invisible, the well-armed

Rakshasas, who had massive bodies and fearful faces, arrow-shaped ears and blood-red eyes, stationed themselves all around the hall, ever alert to danger. The Asura then reported to Yudhishthira that the hall was ready for occupation.

Yudhishthira consulted with the brahmins and selected an auspicious day to enter the hall. He fed and gave charity to thousands of brahmins and, along with his brothers, worshipped Vishnu and the gods. A ceremony was arranged and actors, bards, singers and wrestlers exhibited their skill for the Pandavas' pleasure. A feast was then distributed to all of Indraprastha's citizens. Precisely at noon the Pandavas, followed by crowds of rishis, entered their hall through the enormous golden doors at its eastern entrance. They took their places on the jewel-encrusted thrones at the head of the main hall. Around them sat the rishis and many kings who had been invited from other countries. In that assembly were seen numerous famous rishis such as Asita, Devala, Vyasadeva, Maitreya, Parvata, Markandeya, Jaimini, Bhṛigu and hundreds of others. All the virtuous sages had their mind and senses under full control and they looked like so many full moons shining amid the assembly.

The Pandavas listened respectfully as the rishis recited Vedic histories to invoke auspiciousness. The kings in attendance then stepped forward one by one to make offerings to Yudhishthira and to worship him with all honor. Chitrasena, the Gandharva leader, arrived with the Apsaras. Along with the Charanas, who had descended from the heavens, they entertained the assembly with celestial music and dance. Worshipped and entertained by such beings, Yudhishthira resembled Brahma seated in his own hall on the highest planet in the universe.

Suddenly, the Pandavas saw Narada Rishi appear by his mystical power. Dressed in a black deerskin, with his golden hair knotted on top of his head, he seemed like a brilliant sun rising in the hall. Yudhishthira and his brothers immediately stood in respect. They bowed low to Narada, who was accompanied by Parijata, Raivata and Sumukha, three other powerful sages. Yudhishthira offered all the rishis seats and they sat peacefully as the Pandavas worshipped them with sacred offerings as well as with precious gems and jewels. Gratified, the sages were joyous to behold the wonderful assembly hall.

Narada said, "O King, is your wealth being spent properly for

protecting the people? Is your mind fixed in virtue? Are you enjoying the pleasures of life? I trust you do not sacrifice religion for the sake of profit, nor profit for the sake of religion, nor indeed both religion and profit for the sake of pleasure, which easily tempts men."

Narada continued to question Yudhisthira on a variety of subjects, his questions effectively constituting a number of instructions on the art of kingship. Yudhisthira sat with folded palms and listened attentively. The entire assembly remained silent as Narada, the foremost of the rishis, spoke. His knowledge and wisdom were famed throughout the universe. Narada was fully acquainted with every aspect of the Vedic teachings, and he was renowned as a great devotee and servant of the Supreme Lord. He knew the Lord's desire, and his movements and actions were always arranged to assist the divine plan. The Pandavas were reverent as he instructed them. The whole aim of the monarch, Narada explained, was to keep his people on the path of progressive spiritual life, helping them advance toward life's ultimate goal of emancipation, while ensuring that they were protected and had all their material needs provided.

As Narada finished his instructions, Yudhisthira thanked him and said, "Great sage, you have asked me if my study of scripture, my wealth and my marriage are all successful. Please tell me how I can succeed in these things."

Narada, who had ended his speech with those three questions, replied, "Scriptural knowledge is successful when it results in humility and good conduct, wealth is successful when it is both enjoyed and given away in charity, and marriage is successful when the wife is enjoyed and bears offspring."

Concluding his instructions, the rishi said, "Be sure, great king, that you are always free of the five evils which assail men: excessive sleep, fear, anger, weakness of mind and procrastination."

Yudhisthira again bowed to Narada and took hold of his feet, saying, "I shall surely do all that you have said. My knowledge has been increased by your wise words."

Yudhisthira replied in detail to all of Narada's questions. When he finished the sage blessed him by saying, "That king who properly performs his duties will pass his days in happiness and at the end of his life he surely

ascends to the regions of heavenly happiness."

Yudhisthira became curious to learn from Narada about the assembly halls possessed by the gods. He wondered if there were any equal to the one Maya had built for him. In the presence of the many kings and sages in his hall Yudhisthira asked, "O great rishi, you can travel with the speed of the mind and go anywhere within the universe. Please tell me of all the assembly halls you have seen. Do any of them equal mine?"

The Pandava asked Narada to describe in detail the other halls as well as who was to be found in them. Who waited upon Indra in his hall and who upon Yamaraja? Which fortunate souls attended Brahma in his hall? Yudhisthira's enquiry was pointed. He wanted to know where his ancestors, the great kings of the past, had gone. He was especially eager to hear of his father, Pandu. Had Pandu attained the highest heaven? Yudhisthira waited expectantly for Narada to reply.

Narada described the great halls belonging to all the principal gods, beginning with that of Indra. Indra's hall is one hundred and fifty yojanas long, more than a thousand miles, and a hundred yojanas wide, and it shines with the splendor of the sun. It is capable of dispelling grief, fatigue, fear and weakness. Indra sits there in a magnificent, ethereal form adorned with a brilliant crown and bracelets, and wearing effulgent white robes. He is decorated with celestial garlands of many hues. By his side sits personified Beauty, Fame and Glory. Narada named all the rishis and other personalities who wait upon the king of the gods. Faith, Intelligence and Learning are all present in his court, as are Sacrifice, Charity, Religion, Profit and Pleasure. But there was only one earthly king from the past, the royal sage Harischandra.

Narada went on to describe Yamaraja's hall. His hall is a full hundred yojanas square and is delightful in every way. No pain of any kind exists within that hall and it contains every object of desire, both celestial and human. It could travel anywhere in the universe according to its owner's will. Time and Death personified sit on either side of Yamaraja, and countless rishis surround him. Gandharvas and Apsaras entertain the occupants of the hall with music and dance. The scent of divine perfumes fills the air. Narada named the personalities who wait upon Yamaraja, which included all the monarchs in Yudhisthira's line, ending with Pandu.

Narada then described Varuna's hall, and then that of Kuvera, the lord of wealth. Both those halls were opulent beyond imagination, being filled with gold and gems, and inhabited by numerous gods and rishis and their shining consorts. Narada told Yudhisthira about Brahma's hall. The actual form of that mystical hall cannot be ascertained as it can assume various indescribable forms from moment to moment. The hall is made of celestial gems that constantly change hue, and it appears to be suspended in the firmament by its own power. The self-effulgent hall knows no deterioration and it continuously increases the happiness of its occupants. Brahma sits there surrounded by the personified forms of Mind, Space, Knowledge, Sound, Touch, Form, Taste, Scent, Nature, all the elements and the Prime Causes of the universe. Present also are the Sun, Moon, all the stars and constellations, Joy, Renunciation, Asceticism, Understanding, Patience, Wisdom, Forgiveness, Fortune and all the Vedas.

Yudhisthira and his brothers sat in rapt attention as Narada spoke about the immeasurable splendor and opulence of Brahma's hall. He named all the chief progenitors and all the principal gods and goddesses who waited upon Brahma.

When Narada stopped speaking, Yudhisthira began to question him further. He wanted to know why only Harischandra, out of all the great kings of the past, had attained to Indra's abode. He also wanted Narada to tell him about his meeting with Pandu. What did Pandu say to the sage? How was he faring now in Yamaraja's assembly?

Narada explained that Harischandra had reached Indra's planet because he had performed the great Rajasuya sacrifice. That sacrifice involved subjugating all other kings and distributing charity to hundreds of thousands of brahmins, and it had set Harischandra apart from the other kings. Narada then told Yudhisthira that Pandu had given him a message for his son. If Yudhisthira could also perform the Rajasuya, then both he and Pandu could reach Indra's kingdom. Pandu felt that his sons were now capable of performing such an incomparable sacrifice. If they were successful, then father and sons would be reunited in heaven.

Both Narada and Pandu understood that the gods had their own purposes to fulfill through Yudhisthira's performance of the Rajasuya. It was part of a divine plan meant to free the world of demonic influences. There were presently many evil kings and kshatriyas inhabiting the earth. Before

beginning the sacrifice, Yudhishthira would need to overpower them. Only then would he be able to perform the Rajasuya, and only then would he be able to establish piety and virtue throughout the world. Narada looked around at the five brothers who sat humbly before him. He knew they were dear to Krishna, who wanted to use them as instruments to fulfill His own desire to re-establish religion upon the earth.

Narada concluded, "Therefore you should perform the Rajasuya sacrifice. The celestials have ordained it. I shall return when the sacrifice begins. Now I am going to Dwaraka, for I desire to see Krishna, under whose will this entire universe is moving."

Narada stood up to leave and Yudhishthira requested him to ask Krishna to again visit Indraprastha. Narada agreed and the Pandavas bowed before him and his companions. The rishis then disappeared into the sky by their mystic power.

* * *

After Narada's departure, the Pandavas continued to live peacefully at Indraprastha, but Yudhishthira was contemplating how he might perform the Rajasuya sacrifice. He knew that it required vast wealth. It also necessitated his being able to establish his indisputable power over all other kings. How would it ever be possible? There were certain kings who would never accept him as their emperor—the mighty Jarasandha of Magadha, for example. Jarasandha was sinful, and he had already conquered all the districts surrounding his kingdom. Yudhishthira had heard that Jarasandha imprisoned the kings he defeated, with the intention to sacrifice them to Shiva. Jarasandha was ambitious. He already had designs on the emperor's seat, and he was not an easy opponent to defeat. Yudhishthira realized that he would only be able to perform the Rajasuya with Krishna's help.

Yudhishthira's kingdom was flourishing under his leadership, and his citizens were devoted to piety. They had everything they desired. The Pandavas saw the citizens as family. Yudhishthira was more than a father to them, and no one in the kingdom entertained any hostile feelings toward him. Gradually he became known as Ajatasatru, "one without an enemy." And due to his religious leadership the gods were also pleased, and thus the kingdom was not afflicted by fire, disease or other natural disturbances.

Still thinking about the sacrifice, Yudhishthira called an assembly of ministers and advisors. When they were all seated in the great council chamber of the Pandavas' hall, which was called the Mayasabha, Yudhishthira began to address them, his voice resounding like a drum. "I wish to perform the Rajasuya. Having been asked to do so by the great sage Narada, I can understand that the gods must surely desire it. I do not want dominion over this earth for myself, but I wish to fulfill the gods' purpose, and especially that of the Supreme Lord."

Yudhishthira also considered that if he invited Krishna to the sacrifice, he could arrange that he be honored as the chief person present. That would establish the Lord's fame and position all over the world. Krishna was superior to even the greatest gods, such as Brahma and Shiva. Yudhishthira expected those gods to attend his sacrifice, so if people saw them worshipping Krishna as supreme, then his position above those deities would be established.

Then Dhaumya spoke. "O King, you are worthy to become the emperor of this world. Therefore perform this sacrifice and establish yourself as such. We shall light the six fires and chant the sacred mantras. But first you must gain the acquiescence of the worlds' monarchs. After that you will surely become the undisputed king of this wide earth."

Having gained the permission of his priest and counselors, Yudhishthira discussed the means by which he might proceed. They all agreed that he should immediately consult Krishna. Krishna would certainly provide infallible advice. Yudhishthira then thought of Krishna all the more intensely, praying that he might soon come to his assistance.

Chapter Sixteen. Mighty Jarasandha

After leaving Indraprastha, Krishna had traveled quickly back to Dwaraka. As he entered the city his relatives, friends, and countless citizens greeted him. After approaching King Ugrasena to offer respects, Krishna saluted Balarama and then went to see his wives and sons. Finally he entered the palace of his principal queen, Rukmini, to rest.

During the coming months he heard about the Pandavas' incomparable assembly hall. He also heard that Subhadra's first son had been born, named Abhimanyu. Krishna was joyful to hear that the Pandavas were flourishing and he began to desire to see them again.

Each day Krishna went to the Sudharma assembly hall to meet with the citizens. Vishvakarma, the architect of the gods, had constructed this hall, and it had the special quality of freeing those who entered it from the six kinds of material sufferings: hunger, thirst, lamentation, illusion, old age and death. When Krishna entered the hall, he would bow before King Ugrasena, then take his seat on a bejeweled golden throne. Although not Dwaraka's king, Krishna was nevertheless respected as the most important person present. The city's inhabitants understood his divine status. They regarded him as their natural leader, especially after he had personally deposed the previous king, Kamsa, Ugrasena's cruel son, and freed them from his reign of terror.

Once everyone was settled in the hall, jesters, dancers and musicians were called out to entertain the Yadavas. Brahmins recited Vedic texts or chanted hymns and prayers, and one could hear the sounds of mridanga drums, flutes and bells around the hall, as well as blasts from numerous conch shells. Krishna and Balarama enjoyed the various performances, and they resembled the sun and moon amid so many shining planets.

One day, soon after Krishna had received news of the opening of the Mayasabha, a stranger arrived at the Sudharma hall. Krishna gave him permission to enter and he stepped forward with folded palms. The man introduced himself as a king from a distant territory—one that Jarasandha had conquered. He explained how the Magadha king had become more and more aggressive, how he imprisoned the thousands of kings he conquered, and how he kept them in a wretched condition until he was ready to kill them. He had managed to escape and had come as a messenger on the other kings' behalf.

"Krishna, O unlimited one, we beg you to deliver us from our miserable condition. Jarasandha is as powerful as ten thousand elephants. He has been able to imprison us just as a lion captures a flock of sheep. You are the most powerful person and are always kindly disposed to those who seek your shelter. Therefore, please act for our good fortune."

It was well known that Krishna had fought and defeated Jarasandha many times, but the evil monarch had somehow escaped with his life. Jarasandha hated Krishna for his killing of Kamsa, who was both Jarasandha's friend and his son-in-law. In an attempt to avenge Kamsa, Jarasandha had marched against the Yadus again and again at the front of a vast army, but each time his army had been destroyed and he had returned in shame to his kingdom to rebuild his forces, still burning with hatred for Krishna.

Krishna looked compassionately at the messenger. As he was about to reply, Narada Rishi suddenly entered the hall. The sage came before Krishna, who immediately rose with his ministers to offer his heartfelt obeisances.

Krishna offered the sage a seat and personally worshipped him with arghya. He then said, "O sage among the gods, it is fortunate indeed that we see you here today. You are able to travel freely throughout the worlds and therefore you know everything. Please tell us how the Pandavas are faring at present and what are Yudhisthira's plans?"

Krishna's question was significant. By His mystic power He understood that Yudhisthira desired to perform the Rajasuya sacrifice, which would entail conquering Jarasandha.

Narada replied, "My dear Lord, I know that nothing is beyond your knowledge, yet still you act like an ordinary man and question me. I can therefore tell you that Yudhisthira is as well established in his kingdom as Indra is in Amaravati. He now desires to perform the great Rajasuya sacrifice, and he is making the necessary preparations. Even now he is praying that you will go to Indraprastha and assist him. Indeed, he has asked me to come and invite you."

Krishna thanked Narada for the information and turned to His chief advisor Uddhava. "What should be done?"

Uddhava replied, "It seems that you can achieve two things at once.

By going to Indraprastha you will both enable your cousin to perform the sacrifice and bring about Jarasandha's destruction. Jarasandha has now amassed such a large army that the only way we can defeat him is in a one-on-one encounter. Only one person is capable of facing him in hand-to-hand combat: Bhima. If Bhima approaches Jarasandha disguised as a brahmin, then he can beg from him a fight. Jarasandha is famous for never refusing a brahmin's request. My dear Krishna, You should accompany Bhima to Magadha. He will certainly be successful in the fight if you are there to guide him."

The assembly voiced their approval. The Yadus had already been planning how to kill the belligerent Jarasandha. This seemed like a good solution. Krishna therefore agreed to go to Indraprastha. Reassuring the imprisoned kings' messenger, he took permission to depart from King Ugrasena and his father Vasudeva, then rose and left the assembly.

Krishna decided to travel in state with all his family members to Indraprastha, so he had arranged the Yadus in a long procession around him. Amid the sounds of bugles, drums, trumpets and conch shells, the party left Dwaraka on thousands of golden chariots adorned with jewels, silks and flags. Soldiers armed with swords and lances and mounted upon great black horses protected them on all sides. The noble ladies proceeded in their palanquins; behind them, bulls, mules and asses carried supplies and paraphernalia for the long journey. Krishna and Rukmini traveled in the center of the procession on a chariot driven by Daruka and Jaitra, His two personal servants.

The party passed through the provinces of Anartha, Sauvira and Kurukshetra. They crossed the rivers Drishadvati and Sarasvati and then passed through the districts of Panchala and Matsya. Finally they arrived at the outskirts of Indraprastha and sent an advance party to inform the Pandavas that they would soon arrive.

When Yudhisthira heard that Krishna had arrived, he cried out in joy. Along with his brothers he immediately ran out of the city to greet Him. He ordered the royal musicians to play and learned brahmins to recite sacred hymns from the Vedas. The Pandavas then embraced Krishna with affection and led Him into Indraprastha. Krishna saw that the city was festively decorated with festoons, streamers and colorful garlands. Thousands of citizens crowded in the streets as He passed by with the Pandavas on His way

to their palace. The procession of Yadavas following Him moved with difficulty through the thick crowds. Indraprastha's chief citizens and leaders led them all to the royal quarters.

After Krishna had rested and refreshed himself, and his family had been settled, Yudhisthira approached him to discuss the Rajasuya. "My dear Krishna, I desire to perform this sacrifice but I wonder if I shall be successful. Please tell me what is best for me. I know you will never speak out of any motive other than for my welfare. Therefore I shall depend entirely upon your words in deciding my course of action."

Yudhisthira sat in his hall surrounded by his brothers. An iridescent glow from the thousands of celestial gems set in the walls lit up their faces as they looked at Krishna, awaiting his advice. In the expectant silence of the hall the soft murmur of brahmins chanting hymns could be heard drifting in from nearby temples.

Krishna sat peacefully with his hands in his lap. Maidservants adorned with bright gold ornaments fanned him gently with chamaras and fans made of peacock feathers. Turning to Yudhisthira, He said, "You are fit in every way to perform the Rajasuya sacrifice and become the world emperor, but you will first have to overthrow the powerful Jarasandha, who has formed a near invincible alliance with numerous other monarchs. He has extended his influence and control throughout the middle portion of the earth and has designs on the rest. He is the biggest stumbling block to your plans."

Krishna then listed the names of the many kings subservient to Jarasandha. All were Krishna's enemies, and he and Balarama had defeated many of them in various battles over the years. Now they had come together under Jarasandha's leadership. With these kings united, their armies would be impossible to defeat. "What then do you think should be done, O descendent of Kuru? How will you overpower Jarasandha?"

Bhima leapt to his feet. "It would not be wise to send out an army to oppose Jarasandha in his own province. We should challenge him to single combat. I have the strength to defeat him, and you, Krishna, are expert in policy. Arjuna always brings victory. Therefore let us three go to Magadha and challenge him. I am confident of success."

Krishna replied, "This is my thought also. Indeed, the wise Uddhava advised me in the same way. I for one am prepared to accompany Bhima and

Arjuna to Magadha to bring about the sinful Jarasandha's death."

Yudhisthira was uncertain. He moved uneasily on his throne. "How can I allow you to go on my behalf?" he asked. "How too can I risk the lives of Bhima and Arjuna? They are my eyes and you are my mind, Krishna. Bereft of any of you I could not possibly continue to live. Do not go. I think that even Yamaraja would not be able to face Jarasandha. Pray desist from this determination to fight with him. I shall give up my desire to perform the Rajasuya. It seems an impossible goal."

Yudhisthira's voice was pleading. His love for Krishna overpowered any thought of Krishna's divinity and unassailable position.

Arjuna then spoke. "We are born in a race famed for its valor and prowess. How can we, like weak men, shrink back in fear of an enemy? We are kshatriyas. Our duty is to fight and—if necessary—lay down our lives in battle. There can be no higher act for us than to fight Jarasandha and try to rescue the imprisoned kings. If we do not go, men shall revile us as worthless. Such dishonor would be worse than death."

Krishna agreed. "Arjuna has shown the mood of one born in the Bharata race. We do not know when death will overtake us, nor have we heard that immortality has been obtained by desisting from battle. The wise have decreed that one should, by taking recourse in strength and policy, confront his enemies. Let us therefore encounter Jarasandha. Either we shall kill him or, being ourselves killed, ascend to heaven."

Yudhisthira then became curious to know more of Jarasandha's history. Krishna explained that he been born to King Brihadratha, a powerful ruler of Magadha, when a rishi had blessed the king to attain a son. The rishi had given Brihadratha a charmed mango to give to his senior queen, but the king divided it into two so that both his queens might conceive. Both wives then gave birth to only half a child. The sorrowing queens threw the two halves into the forest, where a Rakshasa woman named Jara had picked them up. She put them together and the child suddenly came to life with a roar. Jara returned the baby to the king, who named him Jarasandha, or "one who was joined by Jara."

Krishna added, "The time has now come to destroy this Jarasandha. Without a doubt Bhima will defeat him in single combat. Jarasandha will not refuse to fight. Therefore, Yudhisthira, grant us your permission to depart."

Yudhisthira assented to Krishna's desire. "Seeing your mind set upon this purpose, O Keshava, I consider Jarasandha already killed and all the imprisoned kings released. You will certainly lead Bhima and Arjuna to victory over that evil monarch. O Krishna, what cannot be accomplished by one who has you as his guide?"

The three heroes decided to set off immediately. They dressed themselves as snatakas, students just finishing their education and seeking charity. Leaving Indraprastha they resembled the sun, moon and fire-god joined together. Their wrath toward Jarasandha inflamed, their bodies appeared to blaze. When the people saw the three of them resolutely heading out, they considered Jarasandha already killed.

They traveled east for many days. At last they came to the Goratha hill, from where they could see Jarasandha's capital, Girivraja. Sitting amid forest land, the city was beautiful with its lakes and grazing cattle. Fine mansions and palaces shone from the city center, and five large hills covered with blossoming trees surrounded it. Krishna told the two Pandavas that Manu, the father of mankind, had long ago personally developed this region.

The largest of the five hills, Chaityaka, protected the city's main gate. The three heroes ascended this hill and began to tear down its peak with their bare hands. They hurled boulders and created a landslide. At the foot of the hill was a massive drum made from the skin of a Rakshasa that Jarasandha had slain. Having been struck once, the drum would vibrate for a full month, and Jarasandha had it continually sounded to warn anyone who even thought of attacking the city. Arjuna and Krishna smashed the drum to pieces.

Climbing down the hill they clambered over the wall surrounding the city to gain entrance. The guards stood back in surprise as the three apparent brahmins made their unusual entrance. Bhima led them along the streets toward the king's palace. They saw numerous, attractive well-stocked shops. As they walked past the flower vendors, they snatched garlands and put them on. They strode into Jarasandha's palace and made their way to the central courtyard, where the king was performing a sacrifice.

Girivraja's brahmins had been witnessing fearful omens portending calamity. Thus they had advised the king to fast and to perform sacrifice to ward off evil. As Jarasandha sat before the blazing fire, he saw three powerful men, dressed as snatakas and adorned with garlands, approaching

him. Accepting them as brahmins he immediately rose to greet them, saying, "You are welcome."

Krishna told the king that his two friends were observing a vow and would not speak until midnight. At that time, they would tell him the purpose of their visit. Krishna knew that the king had himself made a vow that he would give to any brahmin whatever he asked, even if he came at midnight. Jarasandha had them quartered in his palace and said he would visit them at midnight.

That night, Jarasandha entered their room and worshipped his three guests with proper ceremonies, offering them gifts of milk-bearing cows.

But his guests refused his worship and gifts. Krishna said, "O King, we have come seeking a special kind of charity from you, who are famous for giving the brahmins whatever they want. For a great man there is no charity that cannot be given. Even the body may be sacrificed for a proper cause. Therefore, please grant us our request."

Jarasandha looked at them closely. With their colorful robes and bright garlands they did not look like any brahmins he had ever seen. But as they had come to him in that guise and were asking charity he could not refuse. He said, "I will give you whatever you may ask. However, you three do not appear to be brahmins, dressed as you are and decorated with flowers. Your long arms, smeared with fragrant sandal paste, resemble tree trunks. Your hands carry scars from a bowstring. You tore down the peak of the Chaityaka hill and entered the city as enemies do, avoiding the gate. You have also refused my worship. Such behavior befits an enemy. I think you are kshatriyas. Tell me honestly, for truth is the ornament even of kings."

Krishna returned the king's icy stare with a smile. "Your observations are accurate. We are not brahmins. Kshatriyas as well as brahmins may follow the snataka vow. And you have surmised correctly that we are enemies. Thus we have entered your city violently and declined your worship. We have come to beg from you a duel."

Jarasandha was surprised. "I do not recall ever having done you any harm. Indeed, I am innocent of any crime. One who assails an innocent man receives sinful reactions that will send him to hell. I always observe the duties of my order, protecting the people and rendering them no harm. Why then do you see me as an enemy?"

Angry, Krishna replied, "We represent one who desires to uphold the dignity of a royal line and establish religion throughout the world. How do you consider yourself religious when you have imprisoned so many kings? You even intend to offer them as human sacrifices to Rudra. To treat these kings as if they were beasts—who could do such a thing except someone as sinful as yourself? You will certainly reap the results of your sinful acts, for the law of karma is infallible. Although you consider yourself without an equal, we will soon crush your pride. We wish to free the captive kings. Know me to be Krishna and these two to be Bhima and Arjuna. Follow now your kshatriya duty and fight with us today. Either free the kings or go to Yamaraja's abode."

Jarasandha laughed. "I should have guessed. My old enemy Krishna, come in disguise to try to kill me after failing so many times. What sin have I committed by capturing kings for Shiva's pleasure? I defeated all of them fairly in battle. Therefore it is my prerogative to do with them whatever I please. I will not release them out of fear of you or these other two. I will fight, either by placing my troops in battle array, or by standing alone against the three of you. Or, if you prefer, I will fight whichever one of you most desires death at my hands."

Krishna looked at his two friends. "It is your choice, Jarasandha. Select any one of us for single combat and let that settle our dispute."

As Krishna had rightly understood, Jarasandha wanted to fight with Bhima. He considered Krishna and Arjuna no match for his strength. Only Bhima seemed powerful enough.

Bhima smiled grimly and clenched his fists. He furrowed his brows and glared at Jarasandha. They agreed to meet at sunrise and the king left to make preparations for the fight.

Jarasandha had brahmins utter auspicious Vedic hymns over him, and he smeared his body with sacred unguents that had been offered to the gods. He then placed his son upon the throne and bound his hair in a tight knot. Removing his royal robes, he donned only a loin cloth. As the sun rose he went out of the city along with Bhima, for whom Krishna had performed the propitiatory ceremonies to invoke the gods. The king had two massive clubs fetched from his armory. The two fighters took hold of the clubs and entered a large roped-off arena just outside the city gates. They appeared like

two mighty lions staring at each other in fury. At a signal given by a brahmin, they rushed at each other, shaking the earth with their steps.

The two powerful heroes roared as they came together. They each swung huge blows, creating fearful sounds and a shower of sparks as their maces met. Wheeling and dodging, they resembled two dancers on a stage. Onlookers were dazzled by their expertise with the club. They smashed one another with all their strength but neither gave way. Each was as powerful as ten thousand elephants and they merely laughed as the mace struck them. Soon both clubs were shattered and they threw them aside, continuing the fight with their bare hands.

They seized each other's necks and dragged one another around the arena. Each looked for an opportunity to throw his opponent down. Bhima grabbed his enemy and tried to crush him with his arms. Jarasandha broke free and swung out his leg, trying to unbalance Bhima. Sometimes they raised their arms, sometimes dropped them and sometimes held them close. Lifting their fists they aimed blows at particular parts of their opponent's body, and then suddenly brought them down somewhere else. The arena resounded with their shouts and the sounds of their slaps and punches. Both were expert wrestlers, and again they exhibited many wonderful movements. They clasped each other's arms and waists and pressed with great force. Roaring like clouds they fought relentlessly like a pair of maddened elephants.

By now a large crowd had formed around the arena. Citizens of every class came to see the fight, and they gasped in astonishment as the two men grappled. The sound coming from the arena resembled claps of thunder or a falling cliff. The earth shook violently as they rolled about, locked together. Neither showed any sign of fatigue as the fight continued throughout the day and up until sunset. As darkness fell, the fight was stopped until the next morning. Jarasandha invited Bhima and his two friends back to his palace and entertained them as honored guests. Even though they were enemies, Jarasandha felt duty bound to respect them.

The next morning the fight resumed. Again it continued for the entire day without either fighter gaining an advantage. And as evening fell they again returned to the king's palace.

The fight went on for twenty-eight days. Bhima began to feel it

would never end. There seemed to be no way to overpower Jarasandha. The king too felt respect for his opponent. Jarasandha had never before been equalled in single combat, but it appeared that the Pandava was invincible. On the twenty-eighth day, Krishna considered how Bhima might end the fight. Since the Rakshasi had joined Jarasandha at birth, Krishna knew that he would be weak along that join. Bhima should tear him in two. When Bhima was able to see him, Krishna picked up a twig and split it right down the middle. Bhima took the hint. Finding an opportunity, he threw Jarasandha to the ground and stood on one his legs. He quickly took hold of the other leg and pushed it forward. With a tremendous roar, he tore Jarasandha in two from the anus to the head.

The king died with a scream that echoed throughout his entire city. The citizens were shocked by the cry and they rushed to see what had happened. They found Bhima standing over the two halves of the slain monarch. As all the citizens cried out "Alas!" Krishna and Arjuna came forward to embrace Bhima. The three of them then went back to the city and ordered Jarasandha's son, Jayatsena, to release the imprisoned kings from the mountain fortress where they were held. The kings came down to the city and offered their respects and worship to Krishna.

As Krishna and the two Pandavas sat within Jarasandha's palace, all of the many thousands of captive kings bowed before them. On behalf of all of them one king addressed Krishna, "My Lord, we can understand that our sufferings at Jarasandha's hands is the result of our own past sinful activities. We can now realize that Jarasandha's humiliation of us was actually providential, for it has forced us to give up our false prestige. We were proud of our strength and positions, and we simply engaged in fighting other kings for supremacy and wealth, thereby causing the death of so many people. Now we are in a helpless and wretched condition and can only depend upon you. This is our great fortune."

Krishna accepted their worship and arranged for them to be given food and clothing. He then told them to return to their kingdoms and accept Yudhishthira as the world's emperor. Soon the Pandavas would perform the Rajasuya sacrifice, and they should all attend.

Jayatsena also agreed to accept Yudhishthira's authority, and after being properly installed by Krishna as the king of Magadha, he arranged transport back to Indraprastha for Krishna and the Pandavas. Upon their

arrival, Krishna went to Yudhisthira and said, "O best of kings, by good fortune Jarasandha has been killed and the imprisoned kings freed. Both Bhima and Arjuna are unharmed."

Yudhisthira joyfully embraced his two younger brothers and Krishna. "By your grace, dear Krishna, anything can be achieved," he said. "Indeed, it is only by your power that anyone else can exhibit power. We are kings and rulers only as long as you permit; yet although you are the unlimited Supreme, devoid of mundane desire and hatred, you still appear as an ordinary human being."

Krishna smiled and asked Yudhisthira for permission to depart. Yudhisthira then set a date to begin the Rajasuya and Krishna agreed to return at that time. First, however, the Pandavas would have to subjugate the other monarchs of the earth. Having bid farewell to Kunti and Draupadi, Krishna mounted his chariot and headed back to Dwaraka.

After Krishna had departed, Arjuna said to Yudhisthira, "O King, I possess the Gandiva bow and inexhaustible quivers of arrows, as well as the prowess to use them in your service. I would like to go out and make the kings of the world pay you tribute. Allow me to go north and conquer all those kingdoms."

Yudhisthira replied, "You have my permission, Dhananjaya. Leave on an auspicious day after receiving the brahmins' blessings. You will doubtlessly gain victory over all."

Arjuna gathered a large number of troops and soon left for the north. Bhima, surrounded by a similar number of men, went east, while Sahadeva went south and Nakula west.

Yudhisthira was thrilled at the prospect of soon being able to perform the Rajasuya. So many things would thus be achieved. His noble father would be raised to the highest heaven, the world would be placed firmly on the path of religion and, most of all, Krishna would be honored above all others as the Supreme Person. Soon the king was consulting Dhaumya and other exalted brahmins in his kingdom regarding the preparations for the sacrifice, and Vyasadeva arrived to further advise the king.

Chapter Seventeen. The Rajasuya Sacrifice

Arjuna was becoming successful in his conquests. He first overpowered the king of the Kulindas, then the Anastas, then the Kalkuttas. He defeated the many kings on the island continent of Sakala, then encountered King Bhagadatta, a powerful warrior. The battle with Bhagadatta lasted eight days, but finally when the king found himself overpowered, he agreed to accept Yudhishthira's rule.

Arjuna continued toward the north. He reached the mountains and vanquished the many barbarian tribes. Arriving in Kashmir, he subdued the region's kshatriyas, then passed over the Himalayas. To the north of the mountains lay the land inhabited by the Kimpurushas, semi-celestial beings born of Yaksha women. Incensed at the approach of a human army, they fought a fierce battle, but finally Arjuna subdued them. The Pandava then conquered the land of the Guhakas, another tribe of celestial fighters, followed by a region inhabited by Gandharvas.

Finally Arjuna arrived in Harivarsha, the land where the Northern Kurus dwelt. At the border, a number of powerful, large-bodied guards stopped him and said, "Arjuna, no human can enter this land. If you try you will perish along with your army. Even if you were able to enter, you would not see anything, because human eyes cannot see this land or its residents. Go back. There is nothing to be conquered here. Your conquests are already sufficient. We are pleased with you and will happily offer you a gift. What would you like?"

Arjuna bowed respectfully to the divine beings and said, "I desire Yudhishthira's imperial dignity. If you accept him as the emperor of this wide earth, then please give something as a tribute."

The Northern Kurus immediately offered Arjuna a large number of celestial clothes and ornaments, saying, "We know you and your brothers to be great servants of the Supreme Lord. Go now with our blessings. May you always gain victory."

Taking all the wealth he had won, Arjuna returned to Indraprastha and reported his success to Yudhishthira.

Bhima had in the meanwhile marched to the east with a powerful army. He first encountered the Panchalas who happily accepted Yudhishthira's

rule. Then he overcame in battle the Gandakas, Videhas and Dasharnas. One by one Bhima subdued the many kings in the east. When he reached Chedi he was received graciously by its king, Sishupala, who enquired, "My dear Pandava, what are you bent upon doing?"

Bhima told him about the Rajasuya and Sishupala smiled. He agreed to attend and offer tribute to Yudhisthira. Although he had an old enmity with Krishna, he respected the Pandavas as righteous and powerful rulers. The king offered Bhima his hospitality for some days, then the Pandava continued on his way.

Bhima overpowered the kingdoms of Kumara, Koshala and Ayodhya. He reached the wetlands at the foot of the Himalayas and subjugated all the kings in that area. Moving on from there, Bhima encountered the mighty races of the Matsyas and the Malavas. Such noble kshatriyas had never known defeat, and out of pride in their strength and reputation, they felt obliged to resist Bhima's request that they surrender to Yudhisthira, although they bore the Pandavas no enmity. Eventually, however, Bhima vanquished them in battle.

Either by diplomacy or force, Bhima subjugated dozens of kings. Many of them then joined him as he marched on, bringing tribute to offer to Yudhisthira in Indraprastha. Those kings who did not surrender were slain by the Pandava. Others gave him profuse wealth. Bhima amassed enormous quantities of gold, silver, gems, valuable cloth, sandalwood, blankets, carpets, coral and ivory, all of which he packed on the backs of a long train of elephants and asses. Bhima even subjugated the powerful Karna, ruler of Anga, as well as all the other kings in the region who were loyal to him and Duryodhana. After conquering many barbarian tribes he finally returned to Indraprastha and offered everything he had acquired to Yudhisthira.

On his expeditions to the south Sahadeva had defeated many kings including Surasena, Adiraja and Dantavakra. He reached Kuntibhoja's kingdom and his grandfather received him with great affection. From there he went on to conquer the kingdoms of Jambaka, Sheka and Avanti. After crossing the Narmada River he arrived at Bhojakota where he fought a long battle with King Bhishmaka. Although Bhishmaka was favorable to the Pandavas and had been happy to see his daughter Rukmini become Krishna's principal queen, he wanted to test the Pandavas' power. After two days fighting, he admitted defeat at Sahadeva's hands.

Like his other brothers, Sahadeva subdued numerous kingdoms by both diplomacy and force. When he came to Mahismati, he encountered King Nila, who was a friend of the fire-god Agni. As Sahadeva stood in battle against the king, it appeared as if he and his entire army were on fire. Flames sprang from the earth and surrounded them on all sides. Thousands of soldiers and chariots were reduced to ashes. Sahadeva saw even his own life threatened as the fire swept toward him. He could understand that Agni was assailing him. The Pandava quickly dismounted from his chariot and knelt in prayer to the fire-god. "O exalted one, you are the mouth of the gods into which all oblations are placed. You sanctify everything, from you the Vedas have sprung and you are sacrifice itself. O greatest of gods, please endow me with your energy. O bearer of all sacrificial offerings, do not place obstacles before Yudhisthira's sacrifice."

As Sahadeva prayed, the flames gradually died down. Agni then appeared in person before him and said, "O descendent of Kuru, rise up. I was only trying you. I understand your purposes and those of your brother, Dharmaraja. I always protect this city, but I shall help you to accomplish your aims."

Agni then went to King Nila and told him to receive Sahadeva with honor and offer Yudhisthira tribute. The king explained how his beautiful daughter had won Agni's heart, and now they were married. Thus he protected the city. On his order, however, the king would gladly accept Yudhisthira's rule.

Sahadeva moved on to conquer various cannibal races, including one powerful tribe known as the Kalamukhas. They were a cross between Rakshasas and humans. He also fought a long battle with the Vanaras at Kiskindhya, headed by Mainda and Dvidida, until they finally agreed to accept Yudhisthira's righteous rule. The tribes of Nishadhas, Yavanas, Pandyas, Dravidas, Andhas, Talavanas and many others were all subjugated. At last, he returned to Indraprastha with vast amounts of wealth.

In the west Nakula conquered the hilly countries, followed by the deserts. The Mattamayurakas, Shivis, Trigartas, Amvashtas and Karnatas were all subdued. He reached Madras where his uncle Shalya received him affectionately and gave him great wealth for the sacrifice. Then he went on to conquer the Mleccha and Yavana tribes on the west coast. Having fully established Yudhisthira's supremacy in that direction, he too returned to

Indraprastha.

Yudhisthira joyfully received all his brothers back from their expeditions. None now stood in opposition to his authority. His treasury was also so full that it could not be emptied even in a hundred years.

* * *

It was almost time for the Rajasuya. Krishna, as promised, returned to Indraprastha accompanied by his wives and relatives. The great Yadu and Vrishni army also arrived with him, and as they entered the city they filled it with the rattle of chariot wheels and the blast of conchshells. The already inexhaustible ocean of gems the Pandavas possessed was filled to overflowing when Krishna presented his gifts.

When Krishna and his relatives had all been properly received, Yudhisthira sat with him in his assembly hall and said, "O Krishna, it is for you alone that this vast earth has been brought under my sway. Indeed, only by your grace has this been possible. I wish now to devote all my wealth to the brahmins and to Agni, the carrier of sacrificial offerings. Please grant me permission to perform the Rajasuya sacrifice."

Krishna praised Yudhisthira's many virtues. "You deserve the imperial dignity without any doubt. Perform the sacrifice. If it is successful, I shall consider it my own success. I am always seeking your good and will do whatever I can to assist. Appoint me in some office and I shall obey your commands."

Yudhisthira asked Vyasadeva to take charge of the sacrifice. Thus Vyasadeva himself became the chief priest. Then he appointed Yajnavalkya, Soshama, Paila and Dhaumya rishis as his assistants. Together they constructed the six sacrificial altars in the vast compound marked out at a sacred place near the city.

Yudhisthira had arranged for the construction of mansions to house the thousands of kings in attendance, as well as quarters for the other classes of men. Innumerable brahmins streamed into Indraprastha, and each was received with gifts of wealth and offered comfortable accommodation.

When the party from Hastinapura, headed by Dhritarashtra and Bhishma, arrived, Yudhisthira personally received them with love. He bowed

at his elders' feet and said, "All my wealth and my dominions are yours. Please command me as you desire."

Bhishma, Drona and Kripa lifted Yudhisthira from his obeisance and embraced him. They shed tears of happiness to see his opulence and success. From their first hearing that Yudhisthira was planning the sacrifice they had been overjoyed. Even Dhritarastra was happy, sending word of his approval to Yudhisthira. After all, the Pandavas were enhancing the glory of the Kuru dynasty, firmly establishing them as world emperors—a position which had been lost since Pandu's demise.

Holding Yudhisthira by his shoulders, Bhishma said, "It is fortunate indeed that we see you today ready to perform the great Rajasuya sacrifice. Surely this is by the Supreme Lord's grace. You are a fit person to acquire the imperial dignity. Please allow us to be your servants and give to us some post in the sacrifice."

After consulting with Vyasadeva, Yudhisthira asked Bhishma and Drona to oversee the organization for the sacrifice. Dushashana was put in charge of food distribution, while Ashvatthama was solicited to look after the brahmins. Duryodhana was appointed to receive all the gifts that were brought for Yudhisthira, and Vidura became the master of the treasury. Krishna, with a desire to gain their blessings, personally undertook the task of washing the brahmins' feet as they arrived.

The sacrificial arena was soon crowded with effulgent rishis chanting hymns from the Sama Veda. Among the sages assisting the sacrifice were Bharadvaja, Gautama, Asita, Vasistha, Vishvamitra, Parasurama, Kasyapa and many others who had descended from the higher regions of the universe. The celestials, seated upon their shining chariots, came in person as the offerings of ghee were poured into the fires with utensils made entirely of gold. Before everyone's eyes, the gods, headed by Brahma, Shiva and Indra, took their places in the arena. The gold platforms around the sacrificial arena, being crowded with celestials and rishis, looked as beautiful as the sky studded with innumerable stars.

Narada Rishi attended the sacrifice and he gazed in wonder at all the personalities in attendance. Amid the thousands of kings he saw Krishna shining like the brilliant sun. Narada marvelled at how the original Supreme Person was present on earth in human form. The rishi knew that Krishna

must be working out some divine plan.

After many days, Yudhishthira was crowned as emperor. On the final day of the sacrifice, the brahmins prepared the juice of the soma plant to offer to the great personalities in attendance. First they would be worshipped with due ritual, then invited to partake of the divine beverage. Bhishma said to Yudhishthira, "You should now select the most important person at this assembly and worship him with arghya. The guru, the priest, the relative, the snataka, the friend and the king—these six all deserve this worship. Therefore worship all these kings and brahmins, starting with whoever you consider foremost."

Yudhishthira asked his counselors who they felt was fit to receive the worship. There was some uncertainty. Some suggested Brahma, while others Shiva and some Vyasadeva. Yudhishthira then asked Bhishma, "O Kuru chief, who do you consider to be the best of all those present here today? Who should receive the first worship, the agra-puja?"

Bhishma replied, "As the sun shines among all luminous objects, so Krishna shines among all kings. He is without doubt the most worthy of the first offering."

Yudhishthira agreed fully, as did Sahadeva, who, on Bhishma's command, stood up and announced to the assembly, "Emperor Yudhishthira would like to offer the agra-puja to Krishna. Even though the principal gods are present, they are all subordinate to Krishna. He is the ultimate goal of all yogis and ascetics who aim for self-realization. But what need is there for me to speak of His glories? All you exalted personalities are well aware of Krishna's position. Indeed, Krishna is the Supersoul of all. Therefore, by satisfying him we will satisfy all created beings."

Sahadeva continued to glorify Krishna for several more minutes. When he stopped speaking, the rishis, celestials and assembled kings resoundingly approved.

Seeing his decision confirmed by the brahmins and gods, Yudhishthira began to worship Krishna. Tears ran from his eyes and showers of flowers fell from the sky as he offered Krishna the arghya and the soma-rasa. Everyone cheered and stood in respect as Krishna was worshipped.

But a few monarchs had not agreed. Sishupala in particular was outraged, and he remained seated while the offering was made to Krishna. He

was seething. Krishna was his sworn enemy. Sishupala had once been about to marry the beautiful Rukmini, but Krishna had kidnapped her on her wedding day and married her himself. From that day forward, his enmity toward Krishna had only increased. This offering of honor was too much to tolerate. He suddenly leapt to his feet and began to shout angrily. "Surely destiny is supreme. Otherwise how could this injustice have occurred? How could those present have been influenced by the words of a foolish boy? I cannot agree with Sahadeva's statements. There are many personalities here much more worthy of the worship than Krishna. The great rishis, the gods and all the earth's kings are present. Krishna is not even a king. He is nothing but the son of a cowherd man. We cannot even ascertain his caste or social position. He seems to care nothing for Vedic injunctions and principles. How then can he be worshipped in this assembly?"

Sishupala frowned. His coppery eyes challenged those in the assembly. "Krishna is neither the eldest, the wisest nor the most powerful person present. There are many others present more qualified than Krishna in every way. Yudhisthira could have worshipped any one of them before selecting Krishna."

Placing his hand on the long sword hanging from his belt, the Chedi king furiously concluded, "We have paid tribute to Yudhisthira thinking him to be virtuous. That was clearly a mistake. He has insulted us today by worshipping Krishna, who most unrighteously had Jarasandha killed. Now we can see what sort of men are Yudhisthira and his brothers, as well as Bhishma, who has approved of this madness."

Sishupala turned to address Krishna. "As for you, Krishna, why have you allowed yourself to be worshipped like this? You are exactly like a dog that has stolen the offerings of ghee meant for a sacrifice and is licking them up in solitude. As a wife is to an impotent man, or a beautiful sight to a blind man, so is this worship to you, who are not even a king."

Sishupala strode toward the gate of the arena, followed by several other kings who were in agreement. Other kings rose in anger upon hearing Sishupala's words. Some left the assembly censuring the Chedi king, while others took up their swords and shields in order to fight with him.

Bhishma at once stood up and justified the selection of Krishna. He spoke fearlessly, checking Sishupala as he walked away. "He who does not

approve of the worship of Krishna, who is the oldest person in the universe, deserves no respect at all. King of Chedi, we do not worship Krishna out of material motivations. Many times I have heard from those advanced in knowledge that Krishna is the Supreme Person, in whom the universe itself is established. Foolish men like you can never understand this."

Bhishma gave numerous reasons why Krishna should be worshipped. He described the many wonderful feats Krishna had achieved. Even as a child he had slain the many powerful demons Kamsa had sent to kill Him. In the end he had even killed Kamsa himself. Once Krishna had lifted a great hill with one hand and held it for a full week. Bhishma challenged any king to match Krishna's prowess in battle, or any wealthy man to display more riches. No one could show more knowledge or wisdom than Krishna. In every way Krishna was possessed of superlative opulence.

When Bhishma stopped speaking Sahadeva rose and lifted his left foot. He was angry, and his voice boomed, "If there is any man here who feels Krishna should not be worshipped, then let him step forward. I shall place my left foot on his head. Who will give me a reply?"

As Sahadeva spoke the sky reverberated with voices crying, "Excellent! Well spoken!" and showers of flowers fell on his head.

Narada then spoke. "Those men who will not worship Krishna should be considered dead even though breathing. They should not even be gazed upon."

Sishupala became even angrier. He turned toward his supporters and shouted, "Here I am ready to lead you. What needs to be considered? Let us stand in battle against the Yadus and the Pandavas."

Many kings had been agitated by Sishupala's speech. They now gathered around the Chedi king. Weapons clashed as they were drawn and armor clanked as the monarchs threw it on. Sishupala continued to stir his supporters, "Let us act quickly so that this sacrifice may not be concluded successfully. Everyone should know that we did not agree to Krishna being worshipped."

Yudhisthira's supporters also prepared themselves for battle. The great assembly looked like the ocean rising at the full moon. Yudhisthira was alarmed to see his sacrifice about to be spoiled, even as it had almost reached its conclusion. He turned anxiously to Bhishma and said, "Grandsire, these

kings are seized by wrath and seem bent upon battle. What should I do to avoid my sacrifice being spoiled and my subjects harmed?"

Bhishma laughed and replied in a voice that Sishupala could hear clearly. "O best of Kurus, have no fear that Sishupala can create any disturbance in Krishna's presence. He and his supporters are like a pack of dogs barking at a sleeping lion. Only as long as Madhava does not act can they exhibit their valor. He is the creator and destroyer of all beings in the universe. Sishupala has very little intelligence. He will surely take all these kings with him to Death's abode. It seems that Krishna now desires to take back to himself the power he gave to Sishupala. That is why the Chedi king's intelligence has become so perverse."

Sishupala could not tolerate Bhishma's words and he screamed in response, "Most infamous wretch of your race, are you not afraid to speak such words in front of all these kings? With you as their leader the Kurus are like blind men being led by another blind man. You have simply given us pain by describing the deeds of the powerless cowherd Krishna. Arrogant and foolish as you are, it is a wonder that your tongue does not split into a hundred parts."

Sishupala railed on, insulting both Bhishma and Krishna. In his opinion, the so-called wonderful deeds Bhishma had described were nothing. Anyone could have done them. What was so amazing about lifting a small hill for a few days, or killing a few inferior demons. "You wretch, although you pose as virtuous and learned, we can see your real nature. You are sinful and ignorant. Only because you are impotent have you taken your famous vow of celibacy. You deserve to die at the hands of these kings."

Hearing his noble grandfather insulted so grievously, Bhima became enraged. His large eyes, resembling lotus petals, expanded even further in anger, and they turned coppery-red. His brow wrinkled into three lines and he ground his teeth. He stood up, appearing like Death preparing to swallow every creature at the end of the yuga. But Bhishma caught him by the hand and restrained him. He appeased Bhima with gentle words. Like the ocean unable to transgress its shores, Bhima felt unable to disobey the Kuru elder. He sat down again, glaring at Sishupala.

Sishupala laughed. "Release him, Bhishma. Let all these kings see him burnt down by my prowess as an insect is destroyed by fire."

Bhima again started up, but Bhishma stopped him with a glance. Fixing Sishupala with his angry eyes, he then began to narrate the Chedi monarch's history. Sishupala had been born with three eyes and four arms. As soon as he took birth he screamed and brayed like an ass. An invisible voice from the heavens prophesied that he would grow up powerful and fearless, but that one day a great hero would kill him. When Sishupala's mother had asked the voice who that hero would be, it replied that the child's extra arms and third eye would disappear when he was placed upon the lap of the person who would one day kill him. This came to pass when young Sishupala was placed upon Krishna's lap.

Horried when she realized that Krishna would kill her son, Sishupala's mother had begged, "Please grant me a boon, Krishna. Pardon my son for any offence he may give you. I desire his welfare and long life."

Krishna replied, "Blessed lady, even when Sishupala deserves to be killed I will forgive him. Indeed, I shall tolerate one hundred offenses from him."

Bhishma concluded, "This wretch is thus destined to be killed by Krishna. His time has come. Therefore he roars like this, caring nothing for the infallible and unknowable Krishna or us. A man on the verge of death loses his senses and will say anything."

Sishupala again attacked Bhishma, delivering another harsh speech. Bhishma waited for him to finish and replied calmly, "O King, cease your ranting. There will never be an end to arguments, for words may always be answered with words. Here is Govinda. Let anyone who opposes him stand now before him in battle. Thus you will attain liberation, your soul entering his transcendental body."

Sishupala roared like an enraged lion. Then Krishna spoke so that everyone could hear. "This cruel-hearted man is my aunt's son, yet he always wishes me and My relatives ill. Once when I was away from Dwaraka he came and set fire to my city. He killed many citizens and took away many more in chains. This wretch even stole saintly Akrura's wife.

"On another occasion, cunningly disguising himself, he ravished the princess of Vishala, who was the intended bride of the Kurusha king. Obviously desiring a speedy death, he even tried to possess the chaste Rukmini. I have tolerated these and numerous other insults at his hands, only

because I made a promise to my aunt. But I promised to bear only one hundred insults. That number has now become full. I shall therefore slay Sishupala now in your presence."

Having heard Krishna's words, the kings reproached Sishupala, but he merely laughed and said, "Krishna, how do you speak of Rukmini, who was intended for me but whom you stole by slyness and deceit? You cannot call yourself a man. Do whatever you will! Whether you are angry or friendly, what harm can you do me?"

As Sishupala spoke, Krishna thought of His discus weapon, the Sudarshana chakra. It immediately appeared in his hand and Krishna raised it above his head. Releasing the chakra he said, "I have kept my promise to my aunt. Sishupala's offenses have now exceeded the number specified and now I will kill him."

The chakra left Krishna's hand and streaked toward Sishupala even as he continued his tirade. The king tried desperately to draw his sword to fend off the chakra, but the powerful disc weapon was too swift. It caught him on the neck and immediately severed his head from his body. The mighty king fell like a cliff struck by a thunderbolt. As he dropped to the ground, a brilliant light was seen to leave his body and enter into Krishna. Rain fell from a cloudless, thundering sky, and the earth trembled. No one spoke. Sishupala's supporters were angry, but dared say nothing.

The rishis, however, were pleased by Krishna's act and praised him for it. Gradually the assembly became peaceful again. Yudhisthira ordered his brothers to perform Sishupala's funeral ceremony without delay. He then installed Sishupala's son as king of Chedi and the last ceremonies were performed to complete the Rajasuya. Along with Draupadi, Yudhisthira took the final ritualistic bath in the sacred Yamuna and the sacrifice was over.

After some days the kings departed for their own kingdoms. The Pandavas accompanied them to the outskirts of Indraprastha, then bid them farewell. Yudhisthira begged Krishna to stay longer, however, and he consented, although he sent his party back to Dwaraka, while he and his queens remained behind.

During his stay in Indraprastha, Draupadi personally served Krishna and he developed much affection for the Pandava queen. One day when she had served him some fruits, He began paring them with a knife. Suddenly the

knife slipped and he nicked His finger. Blood flowed from the cut and seeing this, Draupadi immediately tore a piece from her fine sari and handed it to him to bandage His finger. Taking the cloth Krishna smiled and said, "O gentle lady, I will surely repay this gift of your sari." Draupadi looked down modestly and thanked Krishna, who wrapped his finger with the strip of silk. He then stood up and left the room.

Chapter Eighteen. Duryodhana's Envy

Duryodhana had also decided to stay on for a while in Indraprastha with Shakuni. The prince burned from envy of the Pandavas' success. They had far exceeded him in their power and influence. Duryodhana could not stand the fact that Yudhishthira was now the emperor of the world, a position he felt should belong to him. He gazed with astonishment at the unlimited wealth piled in Yudhishthira's treasury. The Kaurava had never seen such opulence.

The Mayasabha especially intrigued Duryodhana, and he wanted to take a closer look. Thus he and Shakuni examined the hall. The Kaurava saw celestial designs that he had never seen anywhere else. He was amazed by the workmanship and splendor of the palace. It was as if he had gone to the heavenly planets. Bright gems sparkled on all sides of the spacious hall, and Duryodhana could feel a cool breeze that carried a mixture of celestial fragrances. Ivory and gold seats stood by the side of lotus-filled lakes. The walls were inlaid with exquisite carvings depicting the gods and their consorts.

Duryodhana slowly made his way through the hall, his many golden ornaments jangling together as he walked. As he saw Maya's intricate and wonderful workmanship he became even more jealous. He snapped angrily at the palace servants walking in front of him. With his golden-helmeted head held high, he walked casually, trying not to show any signs of being impressed.

Gradually he came to the large crystal pond at the center of the palace. The water was perfectly clear and still. At first glance it appeared to be a continuation of the marble floor leading up to it, and Duryodhana made that mistake. Fully clothed and with his eyes wide open he walked straight into the water. The Pandavas were standing on a golden balcony above the pond. Seeing Duryodhana falling in with his arms and legs akimbo, Bhima laughed aloud. Some of Krishna's queens were also present and they too laughed.

The Kaurava prince hauled himself out of the lake, helped by Shakuni. He did not even look at the Pandavas or Krishna and his queens. Their laughter was unbearable. Yudhishthira saw Duryodhana's

embarrassment and told his brothers not to laugh. Krishna smiled but said nothing as Yudhisthira arranged for dry clothes to be brought and offered to the angry prince. Duryodhana quickly put them on and continued his tour, trying hard to conceal his feelings. Everything was intolerable to him—the magnificence of the palace, the incomparable beauty of the queens who moved about within it, and particularly Draupadi. Duryodhana was still fuming from his failure to win the Panchala princess. She was a jewel among women. She too had laughed when he had fallen into the lake.

The Kaurava ground his teeth in agony. As he rounded a bend he again fell victim to the deceptive designs of the palace. A door had been fashioned in such a way as to appear open when it was actually closed. Not realising this Duryodhana walked straight into it, recoiling in pain as his helmeted head crashed against the clear crystal. The stunned prince then avoided another door because he thought it was closed when it was actually open. The palace attendants were struggling to restrain their laughter. Humiliated and angry, the prince stormed out.

Yudhisthira felt sorry to see Duryodhana's pain. He tried to console him in various ways, but Duryodhana just laughed, striving to hide his actual feelings. He bade the Pandavas farewell and left for Hastinapura followed by his large retinue, his mind bent upon revenge.

Then Krishna also decided to return home. As he was departing he spoke affectionately to Yudhisthira. "O King, cherish all your subjects with ceaseless vigilance and patience. As the cloud is to all creatures, or the large tree to the birds, so should you become the refuge to your dependants."

After Krishna's departure the Pandavas approached Vyasadeva, who had not yet left. Yudhisthira asked him if the sacrifice had been successful. The rishi replied, "O Kuru child, this sacrifice will yield great results for thirteen years. You shall be the undisputed emperor of this wide earth, but at the end of that period you will be the cause of a war which will rid the world of kshatriyas."

Yudhisthira was alarmed. Seeing his expression, Vyasadeva said, "Do not be aggrieved. No one can overcome the influence of time. Everything is arranged by the Supreme for the ultimate good of all. This war will be Duryodhana's fault, not yours. I shall now go to the mountains, but you will see me again in times of need."

The rishi then stood up and left, surrounded by all the other sages. When they were gone Yudhisthira spoke to his brothers. "The sage's words cannot prove false, but I do not wish to be the cause of suffering in the world. From this day on I shall not speak a harsh word to anyone. I shall always practice virtue and shall see no difference between my own sons and those of others, and I shall follow my elders' commands without the least hesitation. In this way I shall avoid disagreements, for they are the cause of war."

Yudhisthira continued to think about Vyasadeva's words. It seemed that the Lord's plan was unfolding. Although the Pandavas had asserted their rule over the world, it was still a fact that many impious kings were exploiting the earth's resources. Yudhisthira saw at the sacrifice that many had supported Sishupala against Krishna, although they were afraid to oppose Him openly. Who knew what evil schemes Duryodhana and his brothers would dream up? All of this was no doubt Krishna's arrangement to rid the world of ungodly elements. Yudhisthira remained immersed in thought of Krishna and His mysterious plans.

* * *

As he made his way back to Hastinapura, Duryodhana sat brooding and miserable in his chariot. Shakuni asked, "What ails you, King? Why are you sighing again and again?"

The prince looked distractedly at Shakuni. "I am filled with jealousy to see the world under the Pandavas' sway. Having witnessed their astounding sacrifice and seeing them shine like gods in heaven, my heart burns day and night. I am drying up like a shallow pool in the summer sun."

Duryodhana gazed out of his chariot at the rolling countryside with its well-tilled fields and blossoming orchards. Groups of villagers stood and watched as the royal procession moved along the road. The prince continued, "When Krishna killed Sishupala no kings dared to speak. They were all awed by the Pandavas' might, or else how could they have tolerated such an injustice?"

Duryodhana wrung his hands. "I cannot tolerate it. I shall therefore enter fire, drown myself or swallow poison. What man who possesses any prowess at all can bear to see his enemies prosper? How can I ever equal their power and opulence? Who can help me achieve such influence? Fate is

supreme and men's exertions useless. All my efforts to destroy the Pandavas have failed. Instead, they flourish like lotuses in a lake. Therefore I should die! Know that I am in the grip of grief, Uncle, and please inform my father."

Shakuni moved closer to his nephew. "Do not envy the Pandavas, my son. They are receiving what is rightfully theirs, due to their own deeds. They have their half of the kingdom, and with Krishna's help and Drupada's alliance they have grown rich. What is there to be sorry about?"

The Gandhara ruler smiled as he spoke. His eyes narrowed slightly and he fingered his jeweled rings. "Your cousins have conquered the world and now possess limitless wealth. Why do you grieve? This wealth can now become yours. You said there are none to help you, but I do not agree. You have one hundred brothers, the greatly powerful Drona, Karna and the invincible chariot-warrior, Kripa. And my brothers, along with the mighty Somadatta, stand ready at your command. Take the earth and rule it without a rival."

Duryodhana stared at his uncle. He sat up straight on the leather-upholstered seat. Perhaps his uncle was right. The Kauravas' strength was hard to rival. Drona, Bhishma, Kripa, Karna—who could face these men when they stood together in battle? Duryodhana spoke eagerly, "O King, if you think it wise, then I shall conquer the Pandavas. This whole world shall be mine, along with the magnificent Mayasabha."

Shakuni slowly shook his head. He played with the set of dice he carried with him everywhere. "Do not be rash. There are many ways to overcome an enemy apart from battle. We cannot conquer in battle the Pandavas, especially when they are united with Krishna. Not even Indra with all the celestials could overpower them. I was thinking of another way by which they can be defeated."

Shakuni suggested that they challenge Yudhisthira to a game of dice. He knew Yudhisthira was fond of playing, and also that he was not expert. At dice Shakuni had no equal anywhere in the world. "Without a doubt Yudhisthira will accept your challenge," Shakuni continued, his arm resting on Duryodhana's shoulder. "He cannot resist the game, and with a little encouragement, he will surely gamble away all his possessions. Thus I will win for you his entire kingdom and wealth."

As they entered Hastinapura, Duryodhana suggested that they go at

once to Dhritarastra and get his permission for the plan. Arriving before the blind king, Shakuni said, "O great monarch, here is your son Duryodhana. He is pale and emaciated with grief. You should ask him the cause and try to find a remedy."

Dhritarastra was surprised. "Why are you sad, my son? You have at your disposal everything enjoyable, no less than the gods. Vast wealth, the best of clothes, the finest food, beautiful women—all these await your pleasure. How then have you become depressed?"

Duryodhana at once admitted that he was consumed by jealousy of the Pandavas. Even though he had wealth, his enemy's wealth was superior. The Kaurava then described to his father what he had seen in Indraprastha. "During the sacrifice, Yudhishthira was given so much tribute that it became necessary to turn some of it away. He had been offered millions of elephants, horses, cows and camels. Heaps of gems and golden ornaments were stacked up like mountains. The Pandava provided thirty servant maids for each of 88,000 snataka brahmins. He arranged to feed one hundred thousand brahmins at a time during the sacrifice and when they were fed conches were blown. O Father, I heard those conches sounding all through the sacrifice."

Duryodhana told the king how he had even seen the gods at the Rajasuya. Samudra, the ocean deity, had personally offered Yudhishthira celestial ambrosia drawn from the depths of the sea. This beverage is superior even to the soma-rasa that Indra enjoys. It was impossible for Duryodhana to describe to his blind father all that he had seen. His words came with difficulty and his heart burned with the fire of envy.

Dhritarastra remained silent. Then Shakuni spoke: "O King, I know a means by which your son may win all this wealth for himself. I propose that you invite Yudhishthira to a game of dice. No one can defeat me at dice. I will win easily. In this way we shall acquire all that Yudhishthira possesses."

Duryodhana leaned forward. "Father, please grant us your permission to carry this out. Let us conquer our enemies and enjoy this earth."

Dhritarastra was uncertain. "Let me consult the wise Vidura. He will only advise us for our own good."

"Vidura will certainly block our plan," Duryodhana replied. "And if he does, then I shall take my own life. Then you and Vidura may live here happily. What need do you have for me anyway?"

Dhritarastra was pained. Duryodhana was his most dear son. How could he ever refuse his requests? The king decided he would talk with Vidura and convince him. He then ordered that a palatial hall be constructed for the match. It should have a thousand pillars and a thousand gates. Covering two square miles it should be set with countless gems. When it was complete they could invite the Pandavas for the game.

Dhritarastra was still uneasy. He knew the evils of gambling. He called for Vidura and said, "I have decided to invite the Pandavas for a friendly game of dice with my sons. They can gamble a little and thus sport together. I am building a fine hall for their pleasure."

Vidura frowned. "I do not approve of this, O King. Gambling always brings with it dispute and fighting. You should be careful that no dissension arises between your sons and the Pandavas, for that may cause destruction."

Dhritarastra tried to reassure his brother. "When you, me, Bhishma and Drona are here, what evil can befall us? In any event, destiny is supreme. Whatever has been ordained by the supreme power will come to pass. What can our efforts do to avert it? I have already arranged for this gambling match for my son's pleasure. Please do not try to change my mind."

Vidura sighed. "Fate is surely all-powerful, O King, but we nevertheless receive the results of our own acts. We have free will. The supreme power simply reciprocates with our desires. It is the consequences of our acts that are inevitable, not the acts themselves. My lord, consider carefully your motives in allowing this gambling match."

Dhritarastra remained silent and Vidura slowly left his chamber with a heavy heart. He could understand that Kali-yuga, the dark age of quarrel and suffering, was beginning. The gambling match would certainly set in motion events that would lead to the annihilation of the world's rulers. Vidura remembered the Rajasuya and the kings who had supported Sishupala against Krishna. He was apprehensive, but he felt helpless. Although the king was not a fool, his covetous and mean-minded son controlled him. Vidura's counsel, although meant for the good of all, was falling on deaf ears.

* * *

During the coming weeks, as the hall was being built, Dhritarastra

reflected on Vidura's words. He disliked ignoring his brother's advice, because he knew Vidura never gave faulty counsel. The impending dice match was undoubtedly fraught with danger. If it led to a battle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, that would be a disaster.

The king decided to try once more to change his son's mind. Sitting alone with him in his chamber, he said, "Dear son, there is no need to gamble with your cousins. Vidura does not approve of it and I do not like it either. Gambling inevitably leads to dissension. Everything we now have could be ruined. If you desire wealth equal to that of the Pandavas, then let us perform a sacrifice similar to theirs. Then the world's kings will bring you tribute as they did Yudhisthira. Why must you take Yudhisthira's wealth from him? Yudhisthira is gentle. He will never attack you or cause you pain. Give up your envy and do not grieve. Enjoy life with all the good things you already possess."

Duryodhana would not accept his father's advice. He told him about the incidents in the Mayasabha—how the Pandavas, and especially Draupadi, had laughed at him. As he remembered it again his anger was inflamed. In a choked voice he described the incidents to his father. "Seeing what I thought to be a door, but which was really a solid piece of crystal, I walked straight into it and smashed my head. As I stood with my brains swimming, the twins came up and supported me. Sahadeva led me by the hand, smiling and saying repeatedly, 'This is the door, O King.' I felt like dying then and there."

The Kaurava prince also gave more details about the Pandavas' wealth. The Kauravas could never equal that wealth even if they performed one hundred sacrifices. Duryodhana had never even heard of many of the shining gems he had seen at Yudhisthira's palace. For weeks an endless line of kings and chieftains arrived at Indraprastha, each bringing huge amounts of tribute in an attempt to excel the others in charity. Seeing all the gold, gems, weapons, animals, clothes, rugs, silks, skins, serving maids, perfumes and incenses, Duryodhana was shocked. When he saw Samudra fetch Varuna's massive golden conch, which Krishna then used to bathe Yudhisthira in the final sacrificial ablution, the Kaurava prince all but lost his senses.

Dhritarastra listened in silence as his son continued. "The Pandavas have even spread their dominion to the far northern regions of Harivarsha where no man can go. The residents of that land gave them hundreds of

celestial conches, and I heard them being blown during the sacrifice. The tremendous sound made my bodily hair stand erect. Weaker kings fainted upon hearing the noise."

Duryodhana's voice became increasingly urgent as he pleaded with his father. "I cannot live as long as the Pandavas possess such incomparable opulence. If they are allowed to flourish it will only be a matter of time until they overpower the Kauravas. They are our enemies. It is only right that we should attack them and take their wealth. This is the kshatriya code. Either I will gain control of the earth or I will die. This gambling match is the safest and surest way to achieve my ends."

Dhritarastra thought for some moments, and then replied, "I hate such enmity, especially when you bear it towards those who are powerful. Such hostility brings about a change of feelings and is thus itself a painful weapon, although not made of steel. Do you realize that what you are suggesting will certainly cause a fearful war?"

Duryodhana paced impatiently in front of his blind father. "What violence is there in a simple dice game? If Yudhisthira chooses to gamble and lose his wealth, then how can anyone blame us? We have nothing to lose. Shakuni will win every game. O Father, please grant me permission to invite the Pandavas for this match."

The king rose from his seat and called for his servants. As they led him away he said, "Your words do not find favor with me, Duryodhana, but do what you will. You will surely repent your rashness later, for deeds fraught with impiety never bring prosperity. I shall ask Vidura to invite the Pandavas."

Some time later the king heard that the hall had been completed. He called for Vidura and said, "Please leave at once for Indraprastha and bring Yudhisthira and his brothers. Invite them for a friendly game of dice with their cousins in our new hall."

Vidura tried one last time to dissuade the king. "This match will bring about the destruction of our race. Clearly your son wants the Pandavas' wealth and has contrived this means to take it. Dissension among our family members will cause our ruin. O King, stop it now while you have the chance."

But Dhritarastra had already made up his mind. "Brother, everything

lies in the hands of destiny. If destiny so wills it, then we will not be harmed; and if by the course of fate we are to suffer, then what can be done? Everything happens according to Providence. Therefore please go to Indraprastha and return with Kunti's invincible sons."

Vidura looked despairingly at the blind monarch. It was hopeless to try to change his mind. His attachment for Duryodhana was too strong. Even though he could obviously see the results of acquiescing to his son, Dhritarastra still did not refuse him. Fearing the worst, Vidura left the palace and prepared for his journey.

Chapter Nineteen. The Dice Game

After the Rajasuya, Indraprastha had become unlimitedly opulent. The roads, streets and lanes were sprinkled daily with perfumed water. Huge white mansions stood along the sides of the wide avenues. Jeweled gates and arches, golden waterpots at their sides, stood at the city's crossroads. All the citizens were dressed in colorful silks and adorned with garlands and gold ornaments, and they felt secure under the Pandavas' rule. Every day, more and more kings were arriving in Indraprastha from other countries, coming to pay tribute.

Yudhishthira sat in the Mayasabha with his brothers. When they were not engaged in affairs of state, they enjoyed hearing spiritual instructions from the brahmins. As they were seated one day listening to the rishis recounting ancient Vedic histories, a guard arrived to announce Vidura's arrival. Yudhishthira immediately stood up to receive him. He loved Vidura, who had always shown them so much care from childhood. With tears in his eyes Yudhishthira bowed at his uncle's feet. As he rose he saw Vidura's expression and said, "Your mind seems disturbed. Do you come in peace? Is the king well? Are his sons obedient to their old father and the people obedient to his rule?"

Taking his seat close to the Pandavas, Vidura replied, "The illustrious monarch and his relatives are well. Surrounded by his sons and ministers he reigns like Indra. But he is bent upon his own aggrandizement. The king ordered me to first enquire after your welfare and then to inform you that he has constructed a hall equal to yours. He wishes you to come and see it and to enjoy a game of dice with your cousins."

Yudhishthira glanced across at his brothers and then back to Vidura. He was immediately apprehensive. "O uncle, if we gamble, we shall probably fight. How can I possibly consent to the king's proposal? What do you think I should do?"

"Gambling is the root of all misery," Vidura said. "I tried to dissuade Dhritarastra, but he could not hear my advice. Thus he has sent me here to bring you to Hastinapura. It seems that Duryodhana desires a game in which Shakuni will match his skills with yours. The blind king has granted his permission and he now wishes you to come at once."

Knowing that it was Dhritarastra who had sent the invitation, Yudhisthira felt obliged to go. He had vowed never to refuse his elders' orders. Even though he was now emperor of the world, Dhritarastra was a respectable superior. He said, "I have no desire to gamble, but if I am challenged I will not be able to refuse, because the kshatriya code is to always accept a challenge. Surely this world moves according to the will of supreme Providence. All-powerful fate deprives us of our reason and we move according to its dictates as if bound by a rope. I will come to Hastinapura on King Dhritarastra's command."

Yudhisthira knew that Shakuni was a gifted dice player. The Gandhara monarch was familiar with every secret of the game. It was even said that he had a pair of charmed dice made from his father's bones. But Yudhisthira also knew that he could only win if the Lord ordained it. No one moved independently of the Lord's desire. If the Lord desired that Yudhisthira lose his wealth, then what could he do? He simply had to accept it as part of a divine scheme meant ultimately for his own good. He ordered his brothers to make themselves ready to travel.

* * *

The party left the following day. With the brahmins walking before him, Yudhisthira proceeded on a golden chariot, followed by his brothers. Attired in royal robes and golden ornaments, they entered Dhritarastra's palace, where they were greeted by the king and his sons, along with Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Kripa and the other kings whom Dhritarastra had invited. They were then shown to beautifully furnished rooms where they settled for the evening. After going through their daily physical exercises and their religious rites, they were offered the best of food. Dancers and singers entertained them as they ate. Then, after brahmins had blessed them, they retired for the night.

The women from Indraprastha entered the ladies' quarters. All of Dhritarastra's daughters-in-law were filled with envy to see their beauty and prosperity. After exchanging greetings with the Kaurava women, Draupadi and the other Pandava queens rested for the night on ivory beds covered with soft mattresses and spread with pure white silk.

In the morning the Pandavas were brought to the new assembly hall.

Amid the sound of drums and other instruments, they took their places on jeweled seats covered with costly rugs. The hall was crowded with kings from many provinces, with Dhritarastra sitting at their head. Duryodhana and Shakuni sat opposite the Pandavas, both smiling. When Yudhishthira was settled, the assembly became silent and Shakuni said, "We have all been waiting for you, O Emperor. The hall is full and we are eager to play dice."

Yudhishthira answered, "There is no prowess to be found in deceitful dice playing. Indeed, it is bereft of morality. Why then do you wish us to play?"

Shakuni raised his eyebrows. "We do not wish to be deceitful, Yudhishthira. It is simply a friendly match. We can fix the stakes so that no one is injured."

"The great Rishi Devala has instructed me that one should not engage in playing with a professional gamester," Yudhishthira replied. "My dear Shakuni, do not try to take from me the wealth with which I wish to serve the brahmins. Even enemies should not be vanquished by desperate stakes in deceitful play. And I have no desire to win more wealth by gambling, so why should I play with you?"

Shakuni laughed. "O King, obviously one plays at dice to win something. If you are afraid of me, or if you feel I have dishonest motives, then do not play."

Yudhishthira looked up at the Kuru elders. They were all sitting silently. Both Bhishma and Vidura sat with their heads down. After Vidura, Bhishma had also tried unsuccessfully to dissuade the king from allowing the match, and he had attended it reluctantly. Dhritarastra sat on his splendid throne, listening carefully to the discussion.

Yudhishthira said, "O Shakuni, when challenged I never refuse. This is my vow. Fate is all-powerful. We are all under the sway of destiny, and whatever is ordained will surely come to pass. With whom can I play in this assembly? Who can stake equally with me?"

Yudhishthira knew that Shakuni, although more skilled at the game, could not match his wealth and was thus not a suitable opponent for him. But Duryodhana said quickly, "I shall supply gems, gold and other wealth. Let Shakuni cast the dice on my behalf."

Yudhisthira raised his eyebrows. It was exactly as he had feared. Obviously this was no friendly match. He raised his objections in a firm voice. "I have never heard that one man plays while another stakes, Duryodhana. This is not within the rules of the game."

Yudhisthira again looked at the elders, but none of them spoke. Duryodhana laughed and repeated that if Yudhisthira was afraid then he need not play. Shakuni smiled and rolled the dice in his hands. The sound of the dice striking together rose above the silence in the hall. Seeing Dhritarashtra's complicity, Yudhisthira said, "If it is your desire, Duryodhana, then let the play begin."

The Pandava took a priceless string of pearls from his neck. "Here is my stake, O King. With what shall you wager against me?"

Duryodhana replied, "I have wealth counted in the millions and tens of millions but I am not proud of it. I shall equal all that you stake. Throw the dice, Shakuni, and let us see who wins."

Shakuni called out a number and threw the dice. As the dice came to a stop on the number he had called, he cried out, "See, I have won!"

Yudhisthira looked at Duryodhana and said, "In a game contrived only for my defeat you have won by unfair means, O King. Do you feel happy? Let the game continue. I have many beautiful jars each filled with a thousand gold coins. These shall be my next stake." Yudhisthira cast the dice and called his number, but they fell differently. Shakuni again took up the dice. He closed his eyes and held them tight, then called for an eight. The dice rolled across the polished wooden board and came to a stop on eight.

Shakuni pointed to the dice like an excited child. "See, I have won again." His laughing voice echoed round the hall.

Yudhisthira remained impassive. He had little chance of defeating Shakuni at the game. The Gandhara king had practically made dice his life and soul. He could practically command the dice. Backed by Duryodhana's resources he would also be impossible to overcome at staking. Yudhisthira said, "I shall stake my sacred, victorious and splendid chariot, equal to one thousand other chariots. It is made of refined gold and covered with tiger skins. Its wheels resound like thunder when it is driven, it is adorned with a thousand bells, and it is drawn by eight steeds as white as moonbeams and swifter than the wind itself."

It was Shakuni's turn to cast first again. He called out his number and the dice fell exactly as he desired. "I win!" His voice mixed with the laughter of Duryodhana and his brothers. They taunted Yudhisthira, "What will you stake next, O Emperor?"

Yudhisthira sat surrounded by his brothers. All of them glared at Duryodhana. Arjuna reached over and touched Yudhisthira's shoulder. He shook his head slightly as his elder brother turned toward him, but Yudhisthira said, "I have one hundred thousand serving girls who are all young and richly adorned with costly garments and gold ornaments, and who are all skilled in the sixty-four arts of service, especially dancing and singing. At my command, they wait upon celestials, brahmins and kings. These shall be my next stake."

"Consider it matched," said Duryodhana with a smile. Once again Yudhisthira failed to throw the number he called, but Shakuni rolled the dice with consummate skill and won the throw. "Ha, I win again!" he cried.

On the royal podium Dhritarastra leaned forward and eagerly asked Vidura, "What was the stake? What has been won?" Vidura moved uneasily. He could not tolerate seeing the Pandavas being robbed by such deceitful means. He watched in pain as Yudhisthira lost throw after throw. The Pandava staked thousands of elephants, chariots, celestial horses and countless other draught animals. He put up hundreds of thousands of soldiers with all their weapons and armory. Yudhisthira staked precious stones, gold and other valuable metals as he became gripped by the fever of the game. All that could be heard was Yudhisthira calling out the stake, Shakuni crying out, "I have won!" and then the Kauravas' loud laughter.

Bhima wrung his powerful hands together and breathed hot breaths. From the time that Duryodhana had tried to poison him, he had longed to face the Kaurava prince in an open and fair fight. This kind of devious and cowardly antagonism was unbearable. Without Yudhisthira's order, however, he could say or do nothing. Arjuna also longed to string his bow and challenge his guileful cousins to open combat, but he too felt constrained by Yudhisthira. He could only watch in agony as the sneering Duryodhana and his brothers humiliated them.

Vidura could tolerate no more. He stood up suddenly and spoke loudly to Dhritarastra, "O King, listen carefully. I shall say something that

will be disagreeable to you as medicine is to a dying man. When the sinful wretch Duryodhana was born and he cried like a jackal, I told you then to reject him. You did not heed my advice, although it was clear he would cause the destruction of our house. Can you not now see that prophesy coming to pass?"

The game stopped. Everyone looked toward Vidura. Duryodhana scowled, but his father remained silent. Vidura continued, "Hear the ancient advice of Sukra, the celestial rishi. Those who seek to collect honey from a high place become so absorbed in their aim that they do not see the drop that awaits them. Ascending to dangerous heights they fall and perish. Your son, maddened by gambling, is the collector of honey. Creating hostilities with the powerful Pandavas, he does not see the fall which awaits him."

Vidura looked straight at the blind king as he spoke. He reminded him of how the evil king Kamsa had been rejected and slain by his own people in order to save their dynasty. Similarly, the Kauravas should reject Duryodhana. The king should order Arjuna to kill him at once. "In this way purchase these peacocks, the Pandavas, at the cost of this crow. Do not sink into an ocean of grief for the sake of one crooked family member. There was once a bird that vomited gold. A foolish king obtained this bird and out of greed killed it in order to enjoy the gold more quickly. Thus he destroyed both his present and future happiness. O Dhritarastra, do not imitate that king by persecuting the Pandavas for the sake of their wealth. Instead, be like the flower-seller who cherishes his trees with affection and thus picks flowers from them continuously."

Vidura warned the king of the consequences of forming an enmity with the Pandavas. Not even the celestials could face them in battle. "If the gambling continues there will be war wherein the Kauravas and all their allies will be destroyed. You will be the cause of this war, O King, because you alone have the power to stop your son. Still you remain silent. Plainly you are enjoying your son's success. A man who follows another's heart even against his own better judgment sinks into affliction, like a man going to sea in a boat guided by a child. Do not follow a wretch into the terrible fire that has blazed forth. When Ajatashatru and his brothers are robbed of their kingdom and become angry, who will be your refuge in that hour of confusion? Why do you seek the Pandavas' wealth? You can earn as much as you like without gambling. Win instead these tigers among men who are worth more than any

amount of wealth! Send Shakuni back to Gandhara. Do not wage a war that will destroy you to your roots."

Duryodhana could take no more. He leapt to his feet. Seeing that his father remained silent, he rebuked Vidura harshly. "Now we can see your true nature. Rejecting those who maintain you, you side with the enemy. O Vidura, there is no greater sin than injuring one's supporter. How do you not fear this sin? You are shameless, ungrateful and disobedient to your elders. Why do you accuse me? Where is my fault? As water flows downwards, so I act how my nature dictates. I have received my nature from the Supreme. He controls all men's actions. You may go wherever you please. We cannot shelter enemies or those who are envious of their own protectors. An unchaste wife, however well treated, always forsakes her husband."

Vidura shook his head in despair. He again addressed Dhritarastra. "O King, tell me honestly what you think of those who reject the advice I have given? Surely a king's heart is unsteady. They grant protection one moment, then strike with weapons the next."

Vidura turned toward Duryodhana. "You consider me foolish, Duryodhana, but consider instead him to be a fool who ignores a well-wisher's advice. There are plenty of sinful men in this world who will speak agreeable words, but one who speaks what is disagreeable but beneficial is rare. Such a man is a king's true friend who, without considering what is agreeable or not, speaks and acts only according to virtue."

Duryodhana laughed derisively. "Fie on old Vidura! What good can he do for us?"

Ignoring Duryodhana's rebuke, Vidura pointed to the Pandavas. "Here are five enraged serpents with venom in their eyes. Do not rouse them further. O great King, drink that which is drunk by the honest and shunned by the dishonest: humility. Humility is a bitter, pungent, burning, and revolting medicine, but drink it deeply and regain your sobriety. I bow to you and wish you well. Act swiftly to avert the calamity that has arrived at our door."

Vidura took his seat near Dhritarastra, but still the blind king remained silent. Duryodhana laughed and turned back to the game. He told Shakuni to continue and the Gandhara king asked Yudhishthira, "O King, you have lost much wealth. Tell me, do you still have more which you can stake?"

Yudhisthira replied, "I have gold counted in tens of thousands, millions, tens of millions, billions, hundreds of billions and even more. All of this I shall stake here now. Throw again."

Shakuni smiled and cast the dice. As if charmed, they fell upon whatever number he called. Again and again his voice rose above the silence in the hall. "I have won!" Yudhisthira played like a man possessed. He seemed intent on losing everything. He staked all of his innumerable cows, horses, goats, sheep and other animals. Having lost his entire wealth, he then staked his kingdom itself. That too was lost and Shakuni said, "It appears that you have lost everything, O King."

Yudhisthira's head hung down and sweat covered his face. Surely it was time to end the game, but something within him impelled him to continue. He thought of Krishna. If only he was present, he would certainly save the situation. But Krishna was the supreme controller of everything. Perhaps he may still arrange for him to get back all that he had lost. Yet what was there left to stake? Yudhisthira looked at his brothers.

The hall remained silent as Yudhisthira replied to Shakuni, "Here is the youthful and fair-complexioned Nakula, adorned with gold and jewels and shining like a celestial. This mighty-armed prince shall be my next stake."

Moments later Shakuni's voice was heard again, "Lo, I have won him."

Yudhisthira breathed heavily. By his side Bhima and Arjuna both clenched their fists in silent fury as Yudhisthira turned toward Sahadeva. "This handsome prince Sahadeva administers justice exactly like Yamaraja and has acquired a reputation for learning in this world. Although he does not deserve to be staked, still I shall play with such a dear object as my stake."

The dice were rolled and the monotonous voice rang out again, "See, I have won him also."

Shakuni looked at Yudhisthira with cunning in his eyes. "It seems that Bhima and Arjuna are more dear to you than Madri's sons, for they have not yet been staked."

Yudhisthira's eyes turned red with anger. "Fool! Disregarding morality you sinfully try to create disunion among us who are all of one

heart."

Shakuni, not wanting the game to end, replied hastily, "O King, in the excitement of play a gambler may say things that he would never otherwise utter. I bow to you. You are senior to me in every way. Let us now continue."

Yudhisthira looked at Arjuna. Surely Krishna would not allow his own dear friend to be lost. "He who takes us like a boat to the other shore of battle, who is ever victorious over foes and who is the greatest hero in this world—with that prince as my stake do I now play."

Duryodhana leaned forward eagerly as Shakuni threw the dice. Karna sat silently next to him. He was happy to see his friend winning the game, but he would have preferred a fair fight with the Pandavas on the battlefield. Dushashana and the other brothers of Duryodhana rubbed their hands in glee as the dice stopped and Shakuni cried, "I have won!"

Shakuni gathered up the dice and looked at Yudhisthira, who sat downcast and shocked. "We have now won this foremost of bowmen, O King. Stake the powerful Bhima, the only wealth you have left."

Yudhisthira shook his head. There was no turning back. Slowly he replied, "Although he does not deserve to be staked, I now play with this prince, who is our leader, who fights like the thunder-wielder Indra. This illustrious hero with the lion-like neck, arched eyebrows and expansive eyes, who cannot tolerate an insult, whose prowess is unmatched in this world, and who grinds all foes—he is now staked. Roll the dice."

Bhima looked at Duryodhana with narrowed eyes. He would have seized the sneering prince by the neck right then and there, but without Yudhisthira's permission he remained still. The dice rolled inexorably onto the number called by Shakuni. Bhima was lost.

Laughing again, Shakuni said, "Well, King, you have lost your gold, your jewels, your animals, your kingdom and even your brothers. Is there anything still remaining that you can stake?"

Yudhisthira looked up at Shakuni. "I alone am left, the eldest of my brothers and beloved by them all. If you win me, then I shall do whatever a slave is obliged to do."

Shakuni released the dice and called out, "You are won!" He turned

to all the kings in the assembly and proudly boasted how he had won the Pandavas one by one. Then he smiled at Yudhisthira and said, "You have lost even yourself, an act worthy of a sinful man. When you still have wealth, you should not stake yourself. You still have one stake dear to you. Bet Draupadi, the princess of Panchala, and with her win yourself back."

Yudhisthira gazed blankly ahead. His thoughts were in turmoil. How could he stake Draupadi? But there was nothing else left. His kingdom was gone and he had cast his brothers and even himself into slavery. That had been a terrible mistake. How had he let himself get so carried away? Now Draupadi was his only chance to turn things round. He had to bet her. What else could he do? What shelter did she now have anyway? All her husbands were lost. Confused and praying fervently to Krishna, the Pandava looked up at the laughing Shakuni.

"I shall now stake she who is neither short nor tall, neither lean nor corpulent, who has bluish-black curly hair and whose eyes resemble the leaves of an autumn lotus. That princess whose fragrance is like a lily and who is as beautiful as the goddess Lakshmi, who possesses every accomplishment, who is the last to take rest and the first to rise due to caring for us all, and who is such that anyone would desire her—she shall be my final stake."

Yudhisthira's brothers were horrified. How could the emperor do this? The Kuru elders loudly called out, "Fie! Fie!" The whole assembly became agitated and the pious kings present there began to grieve with tears flowing from their eyes. Bhishma, Drona and Kripa were all covered in perspiration. Vidura sat sighing like a snake. But Dhritarastra, glad at heart, was unable to conceal his emotions and he asked repeatedly, "Is the stake won?"

Shakuni's face was flushed with excitement. Once more the dice obeyed his command and he shouted, "She is won! She is won!" Duryodhana and Karna laughed and slapped their hands together. Mocking the anguished Yudhisthira, Shakuni jeeringly repeated again and again, "You still have one stake dear to you. Bet her, O Yudhisthira," rolling the dice as he spoke.

Duryodhana turned to Vidura. "Come, O Vidura. Bring Draupadi, the Pandavas' dear wife. Let her be forced to sweep the chambers. Let the unfortunate woman now live with the serving maids."

Vidura retorted, "Wicked man, you do not see that by such words you are tying a noose around your neck. Do you not realize that being but a deer, you are provoking the anger of so many tigers? You have placed on your head five venomous snakes. Do not agitate them further or you will soon go to Yamaraja's abode."

Vidura looked around the assembly as he continued. "Draupadi cannot be considered a slave because Yudhishthira lost her after losing himself. He was therefore not in a position to stake the princess. Like the bamboo that bears fruit on the point of death, the foolish Duryodhana wins treasures at dice. Completely intoxicated, he does not see the terrors that this game will bring."

Vidura went before Dhritarastra. "You should check your son now, O King. Only low-class men utter painful words that offend others. Kunti's sons never use the kind of harsh speech in which Duryodhana indulges. Learned men always condemn such behavior. Stones may float and boats may sink, but this foolish prince will never heed good advice. He does not see that dishonesty is one of the fearful gates to hell through which he is leading his brothers and the entire Kuru race. He will certainly be the cause of our destruction."

Duryodhana laughed. "Fie on Vidura," he sneered. Looking around he saw the chief servant of the palace and he called out to him, "Pratikamin, bring Draupadi here. You have nothing to fear from the Pandavas. It is only Vidura who raves in fear."

The Pandavas sat with their heads bowed. In the presence of Dhritarastra, Bhishma and Drona, Yudhishthira remained silent, as they had done. He was stupefied with sorrow. His attachment for gambling had brought about utter ruination. Now, before everyone's eyes, the chaste Draupadi was about to be humiliated. Yet what could he do? With the sole exception of Vidura, his elders were saying nothing. If they, and especially Dhritarastra, approved of Duryodhana's acts, then he was helpless. He had never transgressed their orders. To him, his superiors were as good as God. He accepted their commands as coming directly from the Supreme Lord. The terrible events unfolding must somehow be the Lord's arrangement. Seeing Yudhishthira sitting silently, his brothers also remained passive, although they yearned to stop Duryodhana from his intention to insult Draupadi.

Chapter Twenty. Draupadi Dragged to the Assembly

The pratikamin went quickly to the ladies' chambers. Standing before Draupadi, he said in a trembling voice, "O Queen, maddened by dice, your husband has lost you to Duryodhana. Therefore come with me to Dhritarastra's assembly, where you will be engaged in some menial work."

Draupadi stood up swiftly and dismissed the maid who had been tending her hair. Surprised, she said, "O pratikamin, how can this be true? Who would stake his own wife in a gambling match? Surely the king was intoxicated. Could he find nothing else to stake?"

"When he had already lost all his wealth, including his brothers and even himself, he staked you, O blessed princess."

Draupadi became angry, but she shrewdly asked the servant, "Go back to the hall, pratikamin, and ask that gambler who has lost even himself if he was still my lord when I was staked. When I know the answer to this, I shall go with a sorrowful heart."

The servant assented to Draupadi's request and returned to the hall. Seeing him return alone, Duryodhana yelled, "Where now is the Panchala princess, foolish man?"

"She has sent me back with a question, O King," the pratikamin replied. "Draupadi has asked if Yudhishthira was her lord when he staked her in the game? Did he lose himself first or her?"

Yudhishthira said nothing. He slowly shook his head from side to side, as if demented or deprived of his reason.

Duryodhana smiled and said, "Let Draupadi come here and ask her question directly to Yudhishthira. We shall all hear his reply."

The pratikamin again left the hall. Tears fell from his eyes as he approached Draupadi's room for the second time. He stood before the queen unable to speak. She asked him what Yudhishthira had said in reply. With difficulty the servant said, "O princess, the assembly is summoning you. It seems the destruction of the Kurus is close at hand. When the weak-brained Duryodhana wishes to take you before the assembly, he will surely no longer be able to protect his prosperity."

Draupadi looked with compassion upon the distressed servant. "The

great ordainer of the world has ordained this without doubt. Happiness and misery come in turn to both the wise and the unwise. Morality is said, however, to be the highest object in this world. If we preserve morality, it will pour blessings upon us. Let not that morality now abandon the Kurus. Go back, good sir, and speak these words to the virtuous Kuru elders. I am ready to obey whatever command those moral-minded men may give, for they are conversant with all the precepts of virtue."

The servant folded his palms and bowed his head. He turned and left the queen's chamber and went again to the hall. Standing before Dhritarastra, he repeated Draupadi's words. No one replied. Seeing now Duryodhana's eagerness and Dhritarastra's complicity, they all sat with downcast faces. Yudhisthira then said to the servant, "Go to the bitterly weeping Panchali and tell her that she should appear here, even though she is in seclusion and attired in only a single cloth. This is Duryodhana's command."

The Pandavas looked up at the Kuru elders who, even after hearing Yudhisthira's words, all remained silent. The brothers could not determine what to do. They were ready to challenge Duryodhana and his one hundred brothers to a fight, but seeing Yudhisthira still silent, they did not move. Bhima, however, could barely contain himself, and Arjuna, breathing like a serpent, seemed to be on fire.

Duryodhana laughed, enjoying every moment of his victory. He again addressed the pratikamin. "Go and fetch the princess. She now has Yudhisthira's order."

The servant looked perplexed. He was always obedient to Duryodhana but he feared Draupadi's anger. He spoke hesitantly, "What shall I say to the queen for a third time?"

Duryodhana snorted angrily. He turned to Dushashana. "Brother, this foolish servant is afraid of Bhima. Go and bring Draupadi here. What can the Pandavas do now they are dependent on our will?"

Dushashana immediately rose and went straight to Draupadi like a dog entering a lion's den. He said, "Come, princess, we have won you honestly. Cast aside your modesty and go before your new master Duryodhana. O beautiful lady, now you must accept the Kauravas as your lords."

Draupadi stood up, weeping loudly. She covered her pale face with

her hands and ran toward Gandhari's chambers. Dushashana roared in anger and ran after her. He grabbed hold of her long, wavy hair and forcibly pulled her along with him. As he dragged Draupadi by her bluish locks, the shameless prince recalled how that same hair had been sprinkled with the sanctified water of the Rajasuya. Ignoring her plaintive cries, he pulled her out into the palace passageways. Draupadi spoke to him in a low voice. "O rude one, wretch, you should not take me before the assembly. How can I appear there in my present condition, dressed only in a single cloth."

Dushashana laughed. "It does not matter, O Panchali, whether you are attired in one cloth or naked. We have won you and you must now live among our servant women as best you can."

The Kaurava then dragged the wailing Draupadi into the assembly hall. She prayed piteously to Krishna and Arjuna. Dushashana threw her before Duryodhana, where she fell with her cloth in disarray and her hair dishevelled. The Kuru elders could hardly look at her. Bhishma, Drona and Vidura were unable to maintain their composure and they wept openly. Dhritarastra asked, "What is happening now? Is the Panchala princess here?"

Then Draupadi rose up like a flame and addressed the assembly in an angry voice. "All in this assembly are learned in scripture and devoted to sacrifice. Some are my elders and gurus. How can I stand before them in this state? The high-souled son of Dharma is bound by the subtle rules of morality. Only those with clear vision can understand those rules. I am therefore unable to admit even an atom of fault in my husband."

Draupadi looked toward Dhritarastra, her eyes filled with tears. By his side she saw Bhishma, Drona and Vidura, their faces torn by anguish. Everyone remained silent as she continued to reprimand them. "How do you all say nothing as this wretch drags me into the hall? Surely then you are all of the same mind. Shame on you! The Kurus' high morality has been destroyed by this act. Drona, Bhishma, Vidura and the king have lost their greatness, for none of them condemn this most vile deed."

Draupadi fell to the floor of the hall, crying in helplessness and distress. The slender-waisted princess glanced at her enraged husbands. They were incensed to see her in such a state, and her glance inflamed them even more. Even the loss of their kingdom and wealth did not pain them as much as Draupadi's glance, filled as it was with modesty and anger.

When Dushashana saw Draupadi look at her husbands, however, he again dragged her toward the Kurus. "Slave, slave," he shouted. Duryodhana, Karna and Shakuni all applauded Dushashana and laughed along with him. Apart from those three, everyone else in the hall was afflicted with sorrow to see the princess treated in this way.

Shaking his head, Bhishma fought back tears and said to Draupadi, "Blessed lady, knowing that one who has no wealth of his own cannot stake that belonging to others, but knowing also that wives are always at the command of their husbands, I am unable to answer the point you raised. The ways of morality are subtle. Yudhisthira can abandon the whole world full of wealth, but he will never sacrifice morality. The Pandava knew well that Shakuni could not be defeated at dice, yet still he played. He has staked and lost both himself and you, princess. Therefore I am confused upon this matter."

Bhishma looked up at Dhritarastra, but the king remained silent. Draupadi spoke again, "Yudhisthira was summoned to this assembly by the king, and although he does not possess skill at dice, he was made to play with a skilful, wicked and deceitful gambler. How then can he be said to have staked anything voluntarily? He has been deprived of his senses by the contrivances of sinful men acting together. This act lacks all propriety and will be condemned by all wise men. Here in this hall are many leaders of the Bharata race. Let them reflect on my words and answer my question."

Dushashana began to harshly insult Draupadi. She wept grievously and looked toward her helpless husbands. Bhima was afflicted beyond all endurance. Finally, giving vent to his anger, he said to Yudhisthira, "Gamblers have in their houses many loose women but they never stake even those women at dice. They always remain kind toward them. You have staked and lost all of our gems, jewels, gold, armors, animals, weapons and whatever other wealth we possessed, including our very selves. Even at this my anger was not excited. But I consider your gambling with Draupadi abominable. Having obtained us as her husbands, this innocent girl does not deserve to suffer in this way. Only because of you is she now being persecuted by these low, despicable, cruel and mean-minded Kurus. Although you are my lord, I can hardly control my anger toward you."

Bhima turned his massive shoulders toward the twins. "I shall burn Yudhisthira's hands. Sahadeva, bring fire."

Arjuna quickly caught hold of his brother. "Bhima, do not speak in this way. You have never uttered such words before. Your morality has certainly been destroyed by these cruel foes. Do not fulfill our enemies' wishes. Practice the highest virtue and remain obedient to your elder brother. Remembering a kshatriya's duties, he has played today only on the king's command and against his own desire. Such an act will surely make him famous."

Bhima calmed himself. Checked by Arjuna's reproach, he looked down in shame. "You are right, Dhananjaya. Our brother has surely acted in accordance with duty. Had I not known this, I would long ago have snatched his arms and burnt them in a blazing fire." Both brothers looked at Yudhisthira in his distress. They knew he felt obliged by the presence of Dhritarastra and Bhishma. If those two elders did not speak out against what was happening, then Yudhisthira would not object to the proceedings.

Duryodhana's hearty laughter rang out again. He was relishing his cousins' discomfort. He was especially enjoying Draupadi's distress, remembering how she had laughed at him in the Mayasabha.

Draupadi buried her head in her hands and wept. Her husbands glared furiously at the insolent Duryodhana, but still the Kuru elders remained silent.

Suddenly, Dhritarastra's son Vikarna stood up and spoke out. "O kings, answer Draupadi's question. If we do not decide a matter referred to us in the royal assembly, then we shall descend into hell. Dhritarastra, Bhishma, Vidura—you are the eldest of the Kurus, yet you say nothing. Why are Drona and Kripa silent? Let the kings who have assembled here from all directions put aside their feelings and give Draupadi a proper reply."

Vikarna looked around the assembly, but still no one spoke. He repeatedly asked that Draupadi's question be answered. Had she been won or not? Was she now the Kauravas' slave?

The silence in the great hall was broken only by Draupadi's sobs. After another agonizing minute had passed, Vikarna said, "If no one will respond, then I shall say what I consider just and proper. O best of men, it is said that there are four vices to which kings are prone: hunting, drinking, womanizing and gambling. The man addicted to these vices lives by forsaking virtue. Therefore, that which is performed by one under the sway of

any of these sins cannot be taken seriously. Madly under the influence of gambling, and urged on by the sinful Shakuni, Yudhisthira staked this princess. She belongs to all the Pandavas and was lost after Yudhisthira had already lost himself. Nor was Yudhisthira playing the game willingly. Rather, the king invited him here to oblige him to play an unfair match. Considering all this, I say that Draupadi has not been won."

As Vikarna sat down, the assembly was in an uproar. Practically everyone applauded him and censured Shakuni.

Karna at once leapt up and waved his powerful arms about to silence the assembly. His angry voice boomed. "Vikarna, I have observed many improper things in this assembly, and your words are an example of one of them. Like fire springing from a log, your anger will simply consume you. All the great personalities among the Kurus are silent. Obviously this means they consider Drupada's daughter fairly won. You are immature. Therefore you rail in anger and speak like a fool even though you do not know the laws of morality. Yudhisthira has staked and lost her as a fair bet."

Karna, like Duryodhana, still remembered his humiliation when Draupadi refused to allow him to compete in her svayamvara. The pain of that refusal still rankled. He smirked at the distressed princess. She was now getting what she deserved. Karna turned to the assembly and argued that there was no sin in bringing Draupadi into the hall in her present state. After all, she had already accepted five husbands. What kind of moral woman was she? In his opinion, she was unchaste. He pointed to Draupadi as he spoke. "For such a woman there is nothing wrong even if she is brought naked into an assembly. Indeed, she now belongs to the Kauravas and must obey our command. Dushashana, take off her robes. And remove also the Pandavas' royal dress, too. They are no longer kings."

Bound by morality, the Pandavas slowly removed their upper garments and threw them down. They sat silently as Dushashana approached the wailing Draupadi. The Kaurava took hold of the end of her cloth and pulled on it forcefully. Draupadi held her sari tightly in an attempt to protect herself, but it was useless. Her strength was nothing compared to Dushashana's. She looked again at her five husbands. It was obvious they could not help her. As Dushashana pulled harder, she looked around the hall like a frightened deer assailed by a lion. There was only one person now who could save her – Krishna. The Supreme Personality saw everything and was

always her shelter. Draupadi fixed her mind on Krishna, threw up her hands and cried, "O Govinda! O Keshava! O beloved of the gopis and Lord of Vrndavana! O Janardana, You destroy all afflictions. I am sinking into the Kuru ocean. O Lord, soul of the universe, creator of the world! Save me now. I am distressed and losing my senses in this evil assembly!"

From where he sat in Dwaraka, Krishna heard Draupadi's piteous cries. Those around him were surprised to see him jump up from his seat and run swiftly out of his palace. He immediately expanded himself by his inconceivable power and went at once to Hastinapura. By his mystic potency he entered the assembly hall. Without being seen by anyone he provided Draupadi with an unlimited supply of cloth to cover her. Dushashana pulled and pulled at her sari, and as he did so the princess spun around—but he could not disrobe her. There seemed to be no end to her sari. The astonished prince pulled with even more strength, but Draupadi remained covered. Soon a large heap of cloth lay piled on the floor.

Seeing this wonderful event, all the kings praised Draupadi and censured Dushashana. The prince was exhausted from his futile attempt to undress the Pandavas' wife. He sat down, perspiring heavily. Bhima leapt up and raised his arms. "Kings of the world," he thundered, "listen to my words! I shall now make a vow unlike any that has been made before. Nor shall such a vow be made in future. If I do not forcefully tear open the breast of this sinful wretch on the battlefield and drink his blood, then may I not obtain the path of my ancestors."

Hearing Bhima's terrible words, the kings applauded him and again censured Dushashana. A clamor arose. Krishna's miraculous rescue of Draupadi had broken the tense atmosphere in the hall. Shouts of "Shame, shame!" filled the air.

Vidura once more brought silence to the assembly. He turned to Dhritarastra and Bhishma. "O learned men, you do not answer Draupadi's question and thus in this assembly we transgress religion. A distressed person comes to an assembly of good men like a man feeling the heat of a blazing fire. The assembly should extinguish that fire and cool him with truth and morality. The troubled man asks about his rights according to morality and he is entitled to an answer. O kings, Vikarna has offered one answer to Draupadi's question according to his own knowledge and judgment. Now you should also reply."

Bhishma, Drona and Kripa looked expectantly at Dhritarastra. They were unable to tolerate any more from Duryodhana. Still the blind king maintained his silence. Vidura continued, "One who knows the rules of morality yet sits in an assembly without properly answering a question receives a sinful reaction. Listen as I recount the ancient history of Prahlada and the son of a rishi named Angirasha."

Vidura described how Prahlada's son, Virochana, had once quarreled with a rishi named Sudhanva for the sake of a bride. They had both gone to Prahlada and asked, "Which of us is superior? Answer us truthfully."

Prahlada looked at both of them but said nothing. Sudhanva became angry and said, "If you do not answer or if you answer falsely, then your head will break into a hundred pieces."

Trembling with fear, Prahlada then consulted the celestial sage Kashyapa. "O exalted one, tell me what regions are obtained by one who, being asked a question, does not reply or answers falsely."

Kashyapa said, "He who knows but does not answer out of lust, anger or fear is bound by Varuna's thousand nooses. He who is called as witness but who speaks falsely is similarly punished. After one full year, one noose is loosened, and this continues for a thousand years. Therefore one should speak the truth, as he knows it. If virtue, pierced by sin, goes to an assembly, it is the duty of every man there to remove the dart. If they fail to do so, then that same dart will pierce them. In an assembly where a censurable act is not rebuked, every member of that assembly is afflicted by sin. Grief will overcome them all in due course."

After hearing Kashyapa's words, Prahlada said to his son, "Sudhanva is undoubtedly your superior, as much as his father Angirasha is mine."

Sudhanva immediately blessed Prahlada, "As you have spoken the truth without being moved by affection for your son, may he live for one hundred years."

Vidura concluded, "Hearing this great instruction about religion, let all those present deliberate on what should be done. Draupadi should be given an answer."

Still there was silence in the hall. Seeing the Kuru elders saying nothing, and considering this tacit approval of her condition, Karna spoke to

Dushashana. "Take the servant-woman to the inner apartments."

Dushashana again grabbed Draupadi's hair and began to drag the helpless princess, who was trembling and crying piteously to her husbands. Pulling herself free from his grasp, she addressed the assembly in tearful words. "Wait a little, worst of men. I have not as yet offered my respects to my superiors. Forgive me. It was not my fault as this low wretch, this disgrace of the Kurus, forcibly dragged me here. The morality of the Kuru house has been lost forever today. Never before have we heard of a married woman being brought in this state before an assembly. She who was never before seen even by the wind or the sun has now been exposed before all men. Indeed I am being publicly persecuted by wicked men."

Dhritarastra listened with his head bowed as she went on. "What could be more distressing for me than that? Although I am high-born and chaste, the Pandavas' wife and Krishna's friend, I am nevertheless dragged into this assembly. Where is the religion of all these kings? O Kauravas, answer me truthfully. Am I, Dharmaraja's lawful wife, born in the same order to which he belongs, to be considered a servant woman or not? I shall be obedient to your command. O Kurus, this despicable destroyer of Kuru fame is cruelly dragging me. I cannot tolerate it any longer. Tell me what I should do and I will happily obey you."

Bhishma shed tears as Draupadi spoke. He looked at her with compassion and said, "Blessed lady, I have said that the ways of religion are subtle. Even wise men find it hard to understand them. Sometimes what a great and powerful man calls religion is accepted as such, even though it may not normally be so. What a weak man says, no matter how moral it may seem, is generally disregarded. From the importance of the matter you have raised, its intricacy and subtlety, I find myself unable to answer you."

Bhishma stopped and looked around at the silent assembly. Turning back to Draupadi he continued, "It is certain that as the Kurus have become slaves of greed and folly, our race will soon be destroyed. O Panchali, that even under today's circumstances you would turn to religion shows how worthy you are and adds glory to our house. Your husbands are equally praiseworthy. They do not deviate from virtue in such difficulty. The Kauravas, however, sit with downcast faces. They look as if they are dead. I do not think they are going to answer you. You should ask your question of Yudhishthira. He alone should say whether or not you have been won."

Draupadi wept like a female osprey. Still the kings remained silent. They appeared to be afraid of Duryodhana's power. The Kaurava prince continued to smile, even after hearing Bhishma's words. Rising, he said to Draupadi, "O Panchali, I agree with Bhishma. The answer to your question depends upon your husband. Let the illustrious Yudhisthira, resembling Indra himself and ever devoted to virtue, state whether or not he acted rightly. If he declares himself to have gambled you away falsely, because he was no longer your lord at the time, I shall free you. I will also free his brothers if he makes the same declaration about them. Let Yudhisthira tell us first, however, that he lost his discrimination. After Yudhisthira has spoken, beautiful lady, then you should accept either us or the Pandavas as your lords. All the Kurus here are floating in the sea of your affliction. They are naturally magnanimous. Therefore, looking at your unfortunate husbands, they are unable to answer your question."

Again the assembly erupted. Many kings applauded Duryodhana's words. Others cried out, "Alas!" and "Oh!" But each now turned to look at Yudhisthira, eager to hear what he would reply.

As the hum of voices gradually died down, Bhima stood suddenly. His voice filled the hall. "If the high-souled Dharmaraja were not our lord and guru, then we would not pardon the Kuru race. But he is the lord of all our religious and ascetic merits. Indeed, he is the lord of our lives. If he considers us won, then we are won. If it were not so then who is there among mortal creatures on this earth who could escape with their life after touching the hair of the Panchala princess? Look at my two arms. They are maces of steel. Having come within their grasp, who could escape? Not even Indra himself! Bound by the ties of virtue, and by the reverence due our elder brother—and because I am being repeatedly urged by Arjuna to remain silent—I do nothing. If but once commanded by Yudhisthira I would, by means of my slaps alone, kill Dhritarastra's sinful sons as a lion kills a flock of small animals."

Hearing Bhima speak, Bhishma, Drona and Vidura said with alarm, "Be peaceful, O Bhima. All things are possible for you."

Karna then jumped up from his seat. "It seems that Vidura, Bhishma and Drona are independent," he exclaimed, his face red with anger. "They always censure their master and never wish for his prosperity. I shall say what is right in this case. The slave, the son and the wife are always

dependent. Whatever they possess belongs to their master. Draupadi, you are the wife of a slave who is now incapable of possessing anything of his own. Go then to the king's inner quarters and serve his relatives. Select another husband who will not lose you at gambling. Your husbands are all slaves and cannot be your masters any longer. Obviously Yudhisthira considers that life and manhood are useless, as he has offered Drupada's daughter as a stake in the presence of this assembly."

Bhima glowered at Karna. Breathing heavily, it seemed he was about to leap forward at any moment. Still, he remained obedient to Yudhisthira. Bound by virtue he did nothing. Looking around as if to burn everything with his blazing eyes, he turned to Yudhisthira and said, "My lord, I cannot become angry at the words of the suta's son since we are now slaves. O King, could our enemies ever have spoken in this way in my presence if you had not staked this princess?"

Yudhisthira sat silently, seemingly stunned. Duryodhana laughed and said, "Come, O King, tell us the truth. Is Draupadi won or not?"

Reveling in his cousins' anguish, Duryodhana smiled at Karna. To further insult and incite Bhima, the Kaurava prince then uncovered his right thigh, which resembled the trunk of an elephant, and showed it to Draupadi. "Sit here upon the lap of your new lord, O princess. What have you to do with the Pandavas now?"

Bhima could take no more. He exploded. "Hear this, you wretch! If I do not break that thigh in battle, then let me not attain the regions of my ancestors." Fire emanated from every part of Bhima's body as he spoke, and his heavy chest rose and fell like the ocean.

Vidura jumped up and addressed the assembly. "O kings, observe the danger we are now in from Bhima. A calamity threatens to overtake our race. This has been sent by destiny. Dhritarastra's sons have gambled deceitfully. Now they quarrel over a woman. This kingdom's prosperity is at an end. Alas! The Kurus have given way to iniquity. This entire assembly is now polluted by sin. O kings, take to heart the precept I shall declare: having first lost himself, Yudhisthira was unable to lose Panchali. She cannot be considered a slave."

Duryodhana looked at the agonized Pandavas. "I am willing to abide by the decision of Bhima, Arjuna and the twins. Let them declare that

Yudhisthira is no longer their master and I will free Draupadi."

Arjuna retorted, "Yudhisthira was certainly our lord and master before he began to play. Having lost himself, let the Kurus decide whose master he is now."

As Arjuna spoke a jackal suddenly cried out in Dhritarastra's nearby sacrificial chamber. Asses brayed in response and fearful birds cried in all quarters of the sky. Seized by anxiety, Bhishma and Drona cried out, "All peace!" Vidura urged the king to do something before total disaster overtook them.

Dhritarastra at last accepted that things had gone too far. He had remained silent long enough. Raising his hand he silenced the assembly, which was in chaos because of the evil omens. The blind king said, "O wicked-minded Duryodhana, wretch, you are already as good as dead now that you have insulted a wife of the Kuru chiefs in this way, especially the Pandavas' wife, Draupadi."

Dhritarastra knew that they now faced grave danger. If he did not appease the Pandavas, then united with the invincible Krishna, they would wreak a terrible vengeance upon the Kauravas. The king attempted to console Draupadi. "O Panchali, please ask from me any favor you may desire. Chaste and always devoted to virtue, you are the foremost of all my daughters-in-law."

Draupadi looked up at Dhritarastra, who had said nothing while she was being persecuted. She knew he had relented only out of fear. Still, this was her opportunity to rectify the situation. She bowed before the king and said, "O best of the Bharata race, if you desire to do me good then free Yudhisthira from slavery. He is the father of my son, Prativindya. Let not people speak of that boy, born and raised as a royal prince, as if he were the son of a slave."

Dhritarastra replied, "Blessed girl, it shall be so. Ask for another favor. I am not satisfied by giving you only one boon."

"Then also free Bhima, Arjuna and the twins, along with their chariots and weapons."

Dhritarastra again granted the favor without hesitation. Then he asked Draupadi to request a third boon. This time the princess said, "O King,

greed destroys virtue. I dare not ask a third favor. Indeed, the scriptures ordain that a kshatriya woman may ask no more than two boons. My husbands, being freed from slavery, will be able to obtain prosperity by their own virtuous acts."

Karna broke out laughing. "Just see how these great heroes have been saved by a woman. When they were sinking in a boatless ocean of distress, this beautiful princess became the boat of their salvation. I have never heard of such a thing before today."

Bhima flared, but again Arjuna checked him. "Desist, brother. Great men never care for the harsh words uttered by inferior men. Even if able to retaliate, they do not take seriously acts of hostility, preferring instead to remember even a little good that their enemies may have done them."

Bhima was hardly pacified by Arjuna's words. He spoke in a low voice to Yudhisthira. "I shall at once kill all these foes. What need is there for further discussion? O lord, you may then rule the earth without a rival."

Bhima repeatedly cast angry glances at the Kauravas, even as a lion looks at a herd of small animals. Arjuna restrained him with appealing looks, placing his hand on his brother's heaving shoulder. Smoke, sparks and flames issued from Bhima's ears, mouth and nostrils as he fought to restrain himself. With his furrowed brows and red eyes he appeared like Yamaraja at the time of universal destruction. Yudhisthira embraced him and said, "Be peaceful, brother." He then turned to Dhritarastra, "O King, you are our lord. Command us what we should do now."

Dhritarastra replied, "Go in peace, Ajatasatru. You are full of humility and you always wait upon your elders. Therefore you are wise. The wise do not remember an enemy's hostility. Instead, they see only the good in them. Only the worst of men use harsh words in a quarrel, while superior men do not react when provoked. Knowing their own feelings, they can understand the feelings of others. Therefore they always act with compassion, even toward their enemies."

Dhritarastra then begged Yudhisthira to forget Duryodhana's harshness and to try instead to remember whatever kindness the king and his wife Gandhari had shown him. He told Yudhisthira that he had allowed the gambling match in order to examine the strengths and weaknesses of his children and the Pandavas. The king concluded, "In you, Yudhisthira, is

virtue; in Bhima, prowess; in Arjuna, patience; and in the twins there is pure reverence for and service toward superiors. Go then, all of you, and live in peace. Return to your own kingdom and keep your wealth. Let there be brotherly love between yourselves and my sons. Be ever fixed in virtue."

The Pandavas bowed before the king and then left. They ascended their chariots with Draupadi and started for Indraprastha. The assembly broke up and all the kings retired to the palatial mansions provided for them by Dhritarastra. As they left the hall, some of them praised Yudhisthira and others Duryodhana. The blind king was led away by Vidura. As he recalled the heinous wrong committed by his sons toward the Pandavas, and especially toward their wife, he became gripped by fear. Giving them their property could hardly repair the damage that was done by the insult to Draupadi. Bhima would certainly never forget his vows and, at the first opportunity, would doubtlessly take his revenge. Sighing, the Kuru monarch entered his chambers and began his evening prayers.

Chapter Twenty-one. The Pandavas Exiled

After everyone had left the gambling match, Dushashana said to Duryodhana, "O great hero, that old man gave everything back that we strived so hard to acquire. The Pandavas have been sent back to their kingdom and we are back where we started."

The two brothers consulted Karna and Shakuni. They condemned the blind king for his softness. How could he have been so foolish as to show kindness to such powerful enemies? That was a serious mistake. Unless they acted quickly to reverse the situation, they would soon face great danger. Their spies had already reported how the five brothers were proceeding toward Indraprastha. Bhima was whirling his massive mace, Arjuna was repeatedly twanging the Gandiva, Nakula and Sahadeva were waving their great swords, and Yudhisthira held aloft his spear. It was clear that they were ready to fight.

On Shakuni's suggestion, Duryodhana again approached his father. Their only hope, Shakuni said, was another gambling match. This time, the Kauravas should win something. The Gandhara monarch revealed his plan and Duryodhana immediately went to Dhritarastra's chambers.

Duryodhana found the king seated on a golden couch. Sitting at his feet he said, "Father, we must recall the Pandavas for another game before it is too late. We have stirred to anger a number of venomous serpents. How can we possibly expect them to tolerate the insult we offered to their wife? A powerful enemy must be destroyed by any means. We have started something which we cannot now stop."

Duryodhana told his father that if the Pandavas could somehow be sent away, then it would give him time to find allies and build his strength. Using the Pandavas' vast wealth, he could make his position unassailable. First, however, Yudhisthira and his brothers had to be removed from the scene. Duryodhana described the plan Shakuni and he had contrived. The king should call the Pandavas back for one final game of dice. It was clear that they and the Kauravas would not be able to co-exist peacefully. Therefore, whoever lost the dice game should live in the forest in exile for thirteen years. During the final year, they could emerge from the forest but had to remain incognito. If they were discovered, then they would have to again go into the forest for a second twelve years. Such would be the stakes

for this final game.

Dhritarastra remained silent after his son had stopped speaking. It was true that the Pandavas were now a real threat. Who could gauge the outcome of a war between those powerful brothers and his own sons? But another gambling match? What would Vidura and Bhishma say? It would probably be wiser to let things stand as they were for the present. Yudhishthira was virtuous and would keep his brothers in check.

Seeing his father's hesitation, Duryodhana implored him. The king felt himself weakening. It was almost impossible for him to refuse his son. And if Duryodhana were to win the final match, as seemed likely, then the Kauravas would become the undisputed rulers of the earth. He himself would sit at their head. Even though Yudhishthira was the world's emperor, if he agreed to the stakes and lost he would certainly feel honor-bound to enter the forest. Considering that everything lay in the hands of fate, the king agreed to Duryodhana's proposal. He ordered that the Pandavas should be brought back to play one last game in which everything would be settled.

When they learned of this, the other Kuru elders objected strongly, but Dhritarastra would not listen. He ignored their counsel and messengers were sent from Hastinapura to find the Pandavas.

Seeing her husband's blind acceptance of Duryodhana's dark plans, Gandhari became anxious. She had been mortified to learn of Draupadi's ordeal in the assembly hall. It seemed that Duryodhana lacked all moral scruples. How could the king support him? How could he possibly have sat in silence as the gentle Pandava queen was so harshly abused? When Dhritarastra was alone, the blindfolded queen approached him. "Do you not recall Vidura's advice when Duryodhana was born? He warned us that if we did not cast aside that disgrace of our race, he would surely cause our destruction. It seems this is now coming to pass. O ruler of men, do not for your own fault sink into an ocean of calamity. Do not accept the counsel of wicked-minded persons who are but boys. Who would rekindle a great fire after it has been extinguished? Who could be so foolish as to again provoke Kunti's peaceful sons?"

The king remained impassive. Gandhari was wise and thought always of his welfare and the good of the Kuru house, but her advice now was like a bitter medicine he could not swallow. He looked away as she

continued, "You alone have caused the disaster we now face. Lead your sons on the right path. Do not watch them rush towards death. Abandon Duryodhana now. The affection you bear for him will destroy this kingdom. Let your mind, guided by wise counsel, follow its natural inclination toward peace and virtue. Surely you know that prosperity acquired through wickedness is soon lost, while that gained through honest means takes root and descends from generation to generation."

Dhritarastra sighed and stood up to leave. "If it is time for the destruction of our race then, what can I do? If it is God's will, then let it take place without hindrance. How can I influence events ordained by destiny? Let the Pandavas return and again gamble with my sons."

The queen said nothing more. It was hopeless. Surely the end of the Kurus was nigh, since no one could sway the king from his folly. She called for her servants and was led back to her quarters.

* * *

The Pandavas had gone a considerable distance from Hastinapura when to their surprise they saw a group of messengers from Hastinapura, headed by the pratikamin, approaching them. Yudhisthira dismounted from his chariot and the servant stepped forward and said, "Yudhisthira, your uncle has ordered, 'O best of the Bharatas, the assembly awaits you again. Come back for one final game of dice.'"

Yudhisthira could immediately understand Dhritarastra's intention. He turned to his brothers and said, "All creatures receive the good or evil fruits of their work as ordained by the Supreme. Whether I play another dice game or not, the fruits of my past activities are unavoidable. Although I know the Kauravas wish to destroy me, I cannot ignore the summons. A living creature made of gold had never before been seen, yet Rama allowed himself to be fooled by a golden deer. When calamity approaches, men's minds become confused. Surely the path of religion is subtle and highly difficult to ascertain."

Yudhisthira turned and retraced his steps back to Hastinapura. He was fearful. Despite his best efforts to follow the orders of his elders and avoid conflict, still a war seemed inevitable. To refuse Dhritarastra's summons would only bring the conflict into the open more quickly. But what

would be the result of another dice game with Duryodhana?

The five brothers soon arrived back at Hastinapura. To the consternation of their friends and well-wishers, they again entered Dhritarastra's great hall. Although he knew full well that he had no chance of success, Yudhishthira sat down to play dice with Shakuni one last time. When the Pandavas were again seated in the hall, Shakuni said, "Yudhishthira, the old king has returned your wealth. That is well. Now let us play with a stake of greater value. If we are defeated, we shall accept exile in the forest. We will wear deerskins and remain there for twelve years. During the thirteenth year we will live in a city, town or village. If you should discover us, however, we shall be exiled in the forest for another twelve years. If you are defeated, you and your brothers, along with Draupadi, will accept the same conditions."

Shakuni's mouth curved into a sinister smile. The dice in his hand clacked as he explained the stakes. Whichever side was the loser would be expected to surrender their kingdom to the winner. The kingdom would be returned when the thirteen-year period was over.

As the stakes were described, all those in the hall cried out, "Alas! Shame upon Duryodhana's friends that they do not warn him of the danger he brings upon himself!" Some of them turned to Dhritarastra and said, "Whether or not Duryodhana understands his foolishness, you should order him to stop. He will bring down only death and destruction. Check him at once. This is your duty."

Dhritarastra said nothing and Yudhishthira replied, "O King, how can one like me who always observes a kshatriya's duty refuse your challenge? Everyone knows this about me. Besides, it is Dhritarastra, my father and guru, who orders me to play. What can I do but accept the stakes?"

The game began. Everyone in the hall sat breathless as it moved toward its inevitable conclusion. Finally, Shakuni's "I have won!" echoed round the hall again. The Kuru elders cried out, "Alas! Shame! This ancient house is doomed!"

Duryodhana laughed and ordered that deerskins be brought immediately for the Pandavas. When the brothers had put on the ascetic garb and were preparing to leave for the forest, Dushashana spoke in great happiness. "Now Duryodhana's unopposed and absolute sovereignty shall

begin. The Pandavas stand vanquished. Indeed they are miserable. Whether or not we have acted sinfully does not matter. It is clear that the gods have bestowed their grace upon us, for today we have defeated our enemies. Kunti's sons are deprived of happiness and kingdom forever. Those who laughed at Duryodhana shall now abandon their royal robes and armor and go to the forest possessing nothing."

Relishing the moment to the full, Dushashana continued to taunt the Pandavas with cruel words. Seeing the five brothers in their black deerskins resembling five powerful rishis, he said, "Although the Pandavas look like wise men installed in a sacrifice, they should now be considered unworthy to perform any sacrifice."

Dushashana then turned toward Draupadi. "King Drupada did not act well when he bestowed this princess upon the Pandavas, who are impotent men. O Draupadi, what joy will you get from serving your husbands in the forest? Select a better husband from among the Kauravas so that this calamity may not overwhelm you. Do not waste any more time waiting upon the Pandavas."

Bhima rushed toward Dushashana like a Himalayan lion might rush toward a jackal. "You crooked wretch, you rave in words uttered only by the sinful. You have won today only by Shakuni's skill, yet still you dare to boast. As you pierce our hearts with words as sharp as arrows, so shall I pierce your heart in battle to remind you of your words today. Then I shall send you to Yamaraja's abode along with your followers."

Giving up all shame Dushashana laughed and danced around in the Kuru's midst, taunting Bhima by singing, "O cow, O cow."

Bhima restrained himself with difficulty by fixing his mind on virtue. He spoke again to the sneering Dushashana. "Wretch, how do you dare to use such harsh words, having won by foul means? I shall surely tear open your chest and drink your life-blood in battle, or I will never attain to the regions of bliss. My anger shall be pacified only when I have slain all of Dhritarastra's sons."

Yudhishthira headed for the door, followed by his brothers and Draupadi. In great joy Duryodhana walked alongside Bhima, mimicking his powerful lion-like gait. Half turning toward him, Bhima said, "Do not think that by this you have gained any victory over me. I will be back to kill you

and all your followers. Neither of us will forget what has happened today."

Dhritarastra was still silent. Bhishma, Vidura, Drona and Kripa, all of whom were shedding tears to see the Pandavas go into exile, called out, "Fie! Fie!" They looked helplessly at the blind king.

Before the Pandavas left the hall, they stopped before the king and Bhima spoke again. "I shall kill Duryodhana and all his brothers, O King. Arjuna will slay Karna, and Sahadeva will kill the evil Shakuni. My words will be made good by the gods. When I have beaten Duryodhana to the ground with my mace, I will then place my foot on his head."

Arjuna added, "The promises of superior men are not empty words. You will see all this come to pass on the fourteenth year. As Bhima directs, I will kill Karna, who is malicious, jealous, harsh-speeched and vain. I will also slay all kings who foolishly stand against me in battle. If my vow is not carried out, then so shall the Himalayas be moved, or the sun's rays become cool. I will not fail. This will come to pass in fourteen years if Duryodhana does not return our kingdom."

Arjuna felt sure that Duryodhana would never return their kingdom. The war was inevitable. All the brothers knew it. As Arjuna finished speaking, Sahadeva, sighing like a snake, his eyes red with anger, said, "Shakuni, you have destroyed the fame of your race. What you call dice are actually pointed arrows aimed at your heart. If you have anything left to do in this life, do it now, for I shall certainly kill you in battle when we return from the forest."

Nakula also vowed to rid the earth of Duryodhana's followers. Having made their promises, the brothers turned toward Dhritarastra. Yudhishthira said, "I bid you farewell, O King, and also you, O Kuru elders. I shall see you all again upon my return. I bow to you and ask your blessings."

The elders were too ashamed to reply. They prayed for the Pandavas' welfare. Then, after a moment, Vidura spoke. "Your mother, the revered Kunti, is a royal princess and should not be made to go to the forest. She is delicate and old. Let that blessed lady remain in my house while you are gone."

Yudhishthira agreed, saying, "You are our uncle and as good as our father. Let it be as you say. We are all obedient to you. Without doubt you are our most respected guru. Please command us what else should be done."

"O Yudhisthira, best of the Bharata race," Vidura replied, "do not feel pained by this turn of events. There is no shame in being defeated by sinful means. You five brothers will reside happily in the forest, enjoying each other's company along with the virtuous Draupadi. You have already received many instructions from rishis and saints. This exile will be a further opportunity to receive spiritual training. The learned Dhaumya and the godly rishi Narada will instruct you as you lead a simple forest life. You will benefit by your withdrawal from worldly affairs and wealth."

Vidura wished them well, praying that they would return safely. He blessed them that they might obtain benedictions from the principal gods: victory from Indra, patience from Yamaraja, charity from Kuvera, sense control from Varuna, strength from Vayu, forbearance from the earth and energy from the sun-god. Finally Vidura said, "Leave then with our permission, O son of Kunti. None can accuse you of ever having acted sinfully. Farewell."

Yudhisthira thanked his uncle for his blessings and bowed low before him, Bhishma and Drona. Each of his brothers then offered their respects to the Kuru elders, who in turn blessed them. They then made their way out of the hall.

Before following her husbands, Draupadi approached Kunti to ask her leave. As she entered the inner chambers a loud cry went up from all the ladies there. They were plunged in grief to see the Panchala princess about to enter the forest. Draupadi saluted and embraced them all according to their status. She bowed before Kunti, who lifted her up and embraced her.

With tears in her eyes, Kunti said, "O child, do not grieve for this great calamity which has overtaken you. The hearts of good women are never moved by the inevitable influence of destiny. Knowing all your duties, you should follow your husbands with a happy heart and continue to render them service. You are chaste and accomplished, and you adorn the ancient Kuru race. It is fortunate indeed for the Kurus that they were not burnt by your wrath. O sinless one, go now in safety, blessed by my prayers. Protected by your own virtue, you will soon obtain good fortune."

Kunti's voice was choked. She had never been separated from her sons before. How could she face thirteen years away from them? Sobbing loudly, she asked Draupadi, "My child, take particular care of Sahadeva. That

gentle boy holds a special place in my heart."

Draupadi replied, "So be it," and, still wearing a single cloth, her hair disheveled, she left the inner apartments in tears. Kunti followed close behind. As she came out she saw her sons, shorn of their royal robes and clad in deerskins. Rejoicing foes and pitying friends surrounded them. Overwhelmed by motherly affection, Kunti embraced them and said with difficulty, "You are all virtuous and well-behaved. You are devoted to the Lord and ever engaged in the service of your superiors. How then has this calamity overcome you? I do not see whose sin has fallen upon you. Surely it is due to your having taken birth in my womb that you now face this reversal despite your numerous excellent qualities."

Kunti lamented loudly for her sons. How would they survive in the wilderness? She decided that Madri had been the more fortunate wife. She had already attained liberation. Surely she had foreseen this terrible disaster and had entered Pandu's funeral fire in relief. If Kunti had known that this was to happen, she would never have brought her sons from the mountains to Hastinapura.

Kunti let out an anguished cry. "O great creator! Have you forgotten to ordain my death? Surely that is why I am still living although faced with such tragedy. O my sons, I obtained you after so much difficulty. How can I leave you now? I shall accompany you to the forest."

Folding her hands, she prayed aloud to Krishna, "O Krishna, O you who dwell in Dwaraka, where are you? Why do you not save me and my sons, the best of men? Those who are wise say that you always protect those who think of you. Why is this now proving false?"

Kunti then censured the Kuru elders who could stand by and watch as her virtuous sons were exiled to the forest. Weeping, she turned to Sahadeva. "O my son, you should not go. Stay behind and earn the fruit of the virtue of serving the mother. Let your pious brothers fulfill the terms of the vow."

The Pandavas were pained to see their mother grieving. They consoled her as best they could, then took their leave. Vidura gently took Kunti by the hand and led her toward his house. Gandhari and the other ladies of the royal house also wept, covering their faces with their lotus-like hands.

With difficulty the brothers made their way along Hastinapura's

crowded streets. The news of their exile had spread quickly, and the streets were filled with grieving citizens. Led by Dhaumya, they left the city and the people they loved, unable to say anything to anyone.

Chapter Twenty-two. Into the Forest

When the Pandavas were gone, Dhritarastra became prey to anxiety. Thinking of the dangers awaiting his sons he could not enjoy peace of mind. He brooded in his rooms for some time and then called for Vidura. When his brother arrived the king timidly asked, "I desire to hear how Yudhisthira and his brothers left the city. How did Draupadi proceed? What was the exalted Dhaumya doing as they left the city?"

Vidura replied, "Yudhisthira walked with his face covered by a cloth. Bhima flexed his mighty muscles and Arjuna scattered sands as they walked. Sahadeva smeared his face with dirt and Nakula covered his body with ashes. The lotus-eyed Draupadi followed them, her face bathed in tears and her hair disheveled. Dhaumya walked before them, carrying kusha grass and uttering fearful mantras from the Sama Veda relating to Yamaraja."

Intrigued by this description, Dhritarastra enquired further, "Tell me why they assumed these various guises."

"Although your sons persecuted him and deprived him of his kingdom by foul means, the wise Dharmaraja has not deviated from the path of virtue. Thus he covered his face, thinking, 'I may consume innocent citizens by looking at them with eyes made fearsome by anger.' Bhima strode forth from the city repeatedly stretching his arms and thinking how none could equal him in strength. He desires to do to his enemies acts worthy of those arms. Arjuna, who is capable of drawing his bow with both hands, scattered sands to symbolize the countless arrows he will let loose in battle. Sahadeva smeared his face thinking, 'None should recognise me in this hour of calamity. The incomparably handsome Nakula covered himself with ashes thinking, 'I should not steal the hearts of women as I walk exposed along the public highway.'"

Hearing of Bhima and Arjuna's fury, the blind king became even more fearful. What would become of Duryodhana and his brothers now? Dhritarastra listened with growing concern as Vidura continued his description.

"The chaste Draupadi, attired in a single piece of cloth, her hair bedraggled due to Dushashana's touch, went along saying, 'The wives of those who reduced me to this plight will, in fourteen years from now, lament as I am lamenting. Bereft of their husbands and sons, they will enter the city by this road, having offered oblations of water to their dead relatives at the river.'

"O Dhritarastra, the learned and self-controlled Dhaumya, holding blades of kusha pointed south, uttered the Sama Veda, thinking, 'When all the Kauravas are killed their priests will sing these same mantras.'"

Vidura told the king how Hastinapura's citizens were condemning the Kuru chiefs and wailing with sorrow. As the brothers left everyone saw many evil omens. Lightning flashed from a cloudless sky and the earth trembled. The sun was eclipsed and meteors fell. Jackals yelped from all directions, and vultures and ravens shrieked from the temples of the gods. "All these signs portend the destruction of our race, O King. This is the result of your evil desires." Vidura looked at Dhritarastra, who sat silently wringing his hands.

Just at that moment the great rishi Narada suddenly appeared, surrounded by other powerful sages. He stood before Dhritarastra and said gravely, "On the fourteenth year from now, for Duryodhana's fault, Bhima and Arjuna will destroy the Kauravas."

After saying this, Narada rose upwards into the sky with the other rishis and disappeared. The Kurus were gripped by fear. Narada's words could not prove false. Seeing war as inevitable, Duryodhana, Karna and Shakuni approached Drona to offer him command of the army. Drona said, "The brahmins have said that the Pandavas are of divine origin and cannot be killed. Out of fear of those heroes, however, you have sought my shelter and I cannot refuse. Destiny is supreme. I shall do everything in my power to protect you, even though the Pandavas are allied with Drupada, whose son was born to kill me. Thus I too must be about to die. O Kurus, enjoy while you can. Offer sacrifice and give charity freely. At the end of fourteen years, calamity will overtake us all."

Drona spoke in Dhritarastra's hearing. The old king found himself more and more anxious as he thought of the injustice for which he had been responsible. Now his son had everything he wanted, but how long could it last? Enmity with the Pandavas would be dangerous even for the gods.

Dhritarastra's thoughts went back to the day Duryodhana was born. Why had he not then listened to Vidura's advice? Even then his affection for his son had overpowered his judgment and reason. Now he was about to face the consequences for his sentimental weakness. The king called for his secretary Sanjaya, who, although a charioteer and shudra by birth, was Vyasadeva's disciple and his own friend. Sanjaya had often consoled Dhritarastra with his wisdom. When he arrived he saw the king sitting with his head bowed, sighing repeatedly. With a wry smile the charioteer said, "O King, you have now obtained the whole earth and all its wealth. Why then do you grieve?"

Dhritarastra shook his head. "What do they not have to grieve for who will have to meet in battle those foremost of fighters, the Pandavas?"

Sanjaya spoke frankly. "This is your own fault. You have created a hostility that will destroy the world. Although Bhishma, Drona and Vidura condemned Duryodhana's behavior, your wicked son had the beloved and virtuous Draupadi dragged into the assembly hall and cruelly insulted. Why did you not check him? Surely the gods deprive that man of his reason to whom they have ordained defeat and disgrace. He sees everything in a strange light. When destruction is at hand, his mind is polluted by sin and evil then appears as good. That which is improper appears proper, while that which is proper appears otherwise."

Sitting alone with his secretary, Dhritarastra listened sorrowfully to his words, which he knew were moral and true. The king held his head as Sanjaya continued.

"By dragging the chaste and ascetic Panchali into the hall, the Kauravas, wretches that they are, have brought upon themselves wholesale destruction. Who else but Duryodhana and his wicked allies could have so abused Drupada's divinely born daughter, dragging her into the hall when she was in her season and covered with blood? There she saw her husbands, robbed of their wealth, kingdom and even their dress, and forced into slavery. Bound by ties of virtue they were unable to exert their prowess. But, O King, the time will soon come when we shall see their power displayed."

Dhritarastra's voice faltered as he replied. "O Sanjaya, Draupadi's pained glances can consume the whole world. What chance is there for even one of my sons to survive? All the Kuru women, headed by Gandhari, sent up a frightful wail when Dushashana seized Draupadi. Even now they weep

along with my subjects. Enraged at Draupadi's persecution, the brahmins refused to perform their fire sacrifices. We see fearful omens all around the kingdom. It seems our destruction is near at hand. Surely this is the influence of all-powerful destiny."

After speaking in this way for some time, the king dismissed Sanjaya and sat alone in his chamber throughout the night, the gambling match replaying in his mind again and again.

* * *

The Pandavas had left Hastinapura by the northern gate, accompanied by a number of servants. As they were leaving the city crowds looked on and openly criticized the Kuru elders.

"When the wicked Duryodhana aspires to this kingdom we are all lost. Our wealth, families, homes and even our selves are gone. Ruled by that sinful, malicious, avaricious man, who is aided only by other sinful men, we are doomed. How can we find any happiness? Let us follow these virtuous heroes to the forest."

A few citizens approached Yudhisthira. "Where will you go leaving us behind? We are distressed to learn of your defeat by deceitful means. Take us with you. We do not wish to meet with destruction by living in the kingdom of a sinful king. By such association sin will pollute us, whereas by associating with you, we will be uplifted to the highest level of virtue."

Yudhisthira folded his palms and replied, "We are indeed blessed, as the people, with the brahmins at their head, credit us with merits we do not possess. I, with all my brothers, would ask you to do one thing for the sake of the love you bear us. The king along with our grandfather Bhishma, the wise Vidura, our mother Kunti and our friends are in Hastinapura. Please stay here and cherish them. Only this will satisfy me."

The citizens cried out in pain. Sorrowfully they unwillingly retraced their steps back into the city, thinking only of the Pandavas.

When the citizens were gone, the Pandavas ascended their chariots and moved toward the north. At dusk they arrived on the bank of the Ganges and found the great banyan tree known as Pramana. They decided to spend the night there and thus dismounted their chariots and bathed in the Ganges.

As darkness fell, the many brahmins who had followed the brothers lit their sacred fires, which cast an orange glow into the black night. Those holy rishis sitting around the fire chanting Vedic mantras in melodic tones soothed the Pandavas. Surrounded by such self-realized souls, Yudhisthira and his brothers shone resplendent like celestials in the heavens.

In the morning the brothers prepared to enter the forest. They sat before the sacred fire and offered prayers to the gods to invoke auspiciousness. Then they asked the brahmins to bless them and allow them to leave. Yudhisthira spoke sorrowfully. "We were robbed of our kingdom, wealth and everything else we possessed. O best of men, we will not be able to maintain you, as is our duty. In the forest we will have to subsist on fruits and wild roots. The forest is also filled with dangerous beasts and serpents. Please therefore return to Hastinapura. The suffering of brahmins can overwhelm even the gods, what to speak of ourselves. I do not wish to be the cause of your privations, O most holy ones."

The brahmins' leader, Shaunaka, replied, "O King, we will go with you. Do not be anxious about how we will survive. We shall procure our own food and take great delight in an ascetic life. By our prayers and meditations we shall do you good, and we shall keep you entertained with recitations from sacred scripture."

"I do not doubt that it must be as you say," replied Yudhisthira. "I am always pleased in the company of brahmins. But now I am destitute. My brothers are anguished on my account and I see myself as reproachable. How shall I now see you, who do not deserve to suffer, subsist on food you have procured? Alas! Fie upon Dhritarastra's wicked sons."

Yudhisthira wept with his head in his hands. In Indraprastha he had maintained tens of thousands of brahmins. Now he could not provide food for even a few.

Seeing the king feeling so dejected, Shaunaka consoled him by speaking from the Vedas. "A thousand causes of grief and fear overwhelm the ignorant day by day, but they never overwhelm the learned. O King, intelligent men like you are never cast into illusion. Reverses cannot bewilder you, who well knows the eternal truths of the Vedas. Bring that wisdom to mind now."

Shaunaka explained how the root of suffering is attachment to matter.

As a fire in the hollow of a tree consumes the whole tree to its roots, so a small attachment, if nurtured, can destroy a man. One who has renounced attachment, even though living in the world, becomes free from evil passions and the suffering they produce.

Yudhisthira listened attentively, taking delight in the knowledge he had heard so many times. He never tired of hearing it. Shaunaka told him that the desire for wealth and opulence, which could never be alleviated, is man's worst enemy. The highest happiness comes from contentment, while the struggle for wealth, fame, followers and the association of loved ones is the cause of bondage and ultimately pain.

"Therefore you should not covet anything. Do not desire to accumulate wealth even for virtuous purposes. It is better never to have touched mud than to wash it off after being covered in it. If you wish to acquire virtue, then free yourself from all desires for wealth."

Yudhisthira was puzzled. "O Rishi, I do not desire anything for myself. I only wish to have enough wealth to support the brahmins. What use is there in leading a householder's life if one cannot cherish and support one's dependents? Is it not the duty of a householder to maintain both his family members and the brahmacharis and renunciants? So too should a householder welcome guests and travelers. This is said to be the path to religious merit. What is your opinion, O learned brahmin?"

"Alas, this world is full of contradictions," Shaunaka replied. "That which makes the good and honest ashamed pleases the wicked. Moved by ignorance and passion men act simply to gratify their stomachs and sex organs. When the senses come in contact with their objects a desire springs up in the heart to enjoy those objects. Blinded by desire, men become absorbed in following the dictates of the senses, which they mistake for real happiness."

Shaunaka explained that even pious men might be overpowered by desire when associating with the world and its enjoyable objects. Yudhisthira had already achieved success in his householder life. Now, without attachment or material desire, he should concentrate on his practice of yoga and austerity in order to attain full spiritual success. By his spiritual power he would then be able to support the brahmins.

Yudhisthira thanked the rishi for his instructions, which he said he

would follow. Then, still desiring to find the means by which he could maintain those ascetics who wished to accompany him into the forest, the king asked Dhaumya's advice. "O great sage, I cannot abandon the brahmins, but at the same time, I have no power to provide for them. What should I do?"

Dhaumya reflected on Yudhisthira's question for some minutes and then replied, "Long ago all created beings were afflicted by hunger. Thereupon Surya took compassion upon them. Drawing up water with his rays he stayed over the earth. Then the moon, by his cooling powers, converted the resultant vapors into clouds. Then rain fell, and by the combination of sun and rain food was brought forth from the earth. Thus all beings are actually supported by the sun. Take shelter of the sun-god, O king, and you will be able to fulfill your purposes."

Dhaumya explained to Yudhisthira how the great kings of the past had all protected and delivered their subjects by virtue of their own ascetic meditation and vows. The king immediately understood. In order to secure the means to support the brahmins, he should worship the sun-god with an ascetic vow. Thus he asked the sage what means he should follow.

Dhaumya instructed Yudhisthira in the 108 names of the sun, as well as the Vedic prayers he should recite. Then Yudhisthira entered the Ganges, stood facing the sun, and offered numerous prayers and worship to its deity. He took neither food nor water for several days, and controlled his breathing through the process of pranayama-yoga. Renouncing sleep, the king continuously praised the sun-god from the waters of the Ganges.

Three days later the blazing sun-god appeared before Yudhisthira and said, "I am pleased with your prayers and austerities, O king. You shall get all you desire. I shall provide you with food for the twelve years of your exile in the forest."

The god gave to Yudhisthira a large copper plate with the following instruction: "When Panchali has cooked a meal she should place the food on this dish. That food will then be inexhaustible in quantity until the time when she herself eats. You can thus feed any number of men from this plate."

The god then rose into the sky and vanished, adding, "You will regain your kingdom in fourteen years from now."

Yudhisthira came out of the river with the plate and took hold of

Dhaumya's feet in worship. With great happiness he embraced his brothers and then handed the mystical plate to Draupadi. She immediately cooked a meal and placed it upon the dish. After offering the food to the Lord with appropriate prayers, she served the brahmins. To her amazement and delight she saw that as she served from the plate, the food was immediately replenished. It was only when she took her own meal after serving her husbands that she saw the dish finally empty.

When they had eaten, the Pandavas, blessed by auspicious rites and Vedic prayers, set out for the forest of Kamyaka, accompanied by hundreds of brahmins.

Chapter Twenty-three. Dhritarastra's Anxiety

In Hastinapura Dhritarastra was becoming increasingly sorrowful. Needing solace, he called for Vidura and said, "Dear brother, your intelligence is no less than that of the great Bhargava. You are acquainted with all the subtleties of dharma. You regard all the Kurus equally; tell me therefore what is good for me and for them. Now that things have taken this course, what should we do? How can we again secure the citizens' faith and love? And especially, how can we avoid total annihilation of our race?"

Vidura replied, "O King, religion, as well as economic development and sense pleasure, depend upon virtue. A kingdom's success also rests upon virtue. Therefore you should cherish and love both your own sons and those of Pandu. You destroyed virtue when you allowed your sons, headed by Shakuni, to play dice with Yudhisthira. The only way you can now atone for this evil and win praise in this world is to return the Pandavas their kingdom. Be satisfied with what is rightfully yours and do not covet others' possessions."

Dhritarastra shifted uncomfortably in his seat. This was not the advice he wanted to hear. He was more interested in knowing how the Kauravas could secure their present position. Destiny had conferred upon them sovereignty of the entire earth. Now they needed to strengthen their position in order to rule it successfully. What help would it be to concede the kingdom to their most powerful enemies? Dhritarastra felt his anger rise as Vidura continued.

"O descendent of Bharata, I once told you to abandon Duryodhana. Had you listened to me then you would not be repenting now. You can still do it. Cast aside Duryodhana and bring Yudhisthira back as the monarch. Let your sons and their followers wait upon the Pandavas. Have Dushashana apologize to Draupadi in the open court, and he should also beg Bhima's pardon. This will be good for all of us and it will also save the kingdom from destruction. What else can I advise you at such a time?"

Dhritarastra's anger boiled over. It seemed that Vidura always sided with the Pandavas and never favored him or his sons. Placing his hand on his jeweled scepter, he said, "Vidura, you speak only to please the Pandavas and do not care to please me. I do not approve of your words. How do you expect me to abandon my own flesh and blood for another's sake? Although the

Pandavas are as good as my sons, Duryodhana has sprung from my body. You ask me to leave my own body aside in order to favor another's. Although I hold you in great esteem, today I find your words crooked. I therefore reject them. You may stay here or go away as you please. I no longer require your advice. However well an unchaste wife is treated, she always forsakes her husband."

Dhritarastra rose suddenly and stalked off into his inner chambers. Vidura shook his head sadly and said, "This race is doomed." He decided to follow the Pandavas into the forest and made preparations for his departure.

* * *

Leaving aside their chariots and carrying only their weapons, the Pandavas had begun to travel in a westerly direction, going from forest to forest. They passed through Kurukshetra and crossed over the rivers Yamuna, Drishadvati and Sarasvati. Finally, on the banks of the Sarasvati, they saw the great Kamyaka forest. Many ascetics lined the river bank performing sacrifice and austerities. The Pandavas entered the Kamyaka and built thatched huts in which to live. In the company of the brahmins they began to devote their time to sacrifice and scriptural study.

One evening, as they sat by the sacred fire listening to brahmins recite Vedic histories, the brothers heard a chariot approaching. They looked up and saw Vidura coming toward them. Surprised, Yudhishthira said to Bhima, "Why is Vidura here? Has he been sent to fetch us for yet another game of dice? Does the mean-minded Shakuni wish to take from us even our weapons?"

The Pandavas rose from the fire and greeted Vidura with all respects. They settled him in their midst and after inquiring about his welfare, Yudhishthira offered him refreshments and a place to rest. The following day, Vidura related to the brothers what had transpired in Hastinapura.

"O Ajatasatru, I told the king what was beneficial for him, but he did not care to listen. As the unchaste wife of a noble man can never be brought back to virtue, so the king will not take to the right path. He will never meet with good fortune. As water falling upon a lotus leaf rolls off, so my counsel had no effect on him. He has sent me away with harsh words."

The Pandavas consoled Vidura, and he said, "I shall now tell you what, in my opinion, will be conducive to your ultimate success. You should bide your time patiently and find ways to increase your strength. Perform asceticism and worship the Supreme Lord. This will help you gain power. Always speak the truth and be kind to your dependants and followers. Share your food with them and never boast in their presence. This conduct increases the prosperity of kings."

Yudhisthira thanked Vidura for his advice, which he said he would follow. Then another chariot was heard approaching. This time it was Sanjaya coming toward them. Dhritarastra's charioteer bowed before Yudhisthira and was graciously received with kind words of welcome. When he was comfortably seated, he explained to Yudhisthira why he had come.

"Having dispatched Vidura with cruel words, the king is consumed by repentance and sorrow. This morning he entered the assembly hall and fell senseless to the floor. When he regained consciousness he said to the assembled kings, 'My brother Vidura is like the god of justice, Yamaraja. Remembering him, my heart burns with anguish and grief.'"

Sanjaya continued, "The king told me to fetch Vidura back to Hastinapura. He said, 'Go quickly, Sanjaya, and see whether my brother, whom I angrily sent away with harsh words, lives or not. He has never done me the slightest wrong. Rather he has suffered at my hands. Bring him here soon before I give up my life.'"

Sanjaya turned to Vidura. "Please return to the city and revive the king. This is his order."

Even though Dhritarastra seemed quite unable to heed his good advice, Vidura decided to return. He felt duty bound and he knew that Dhritarastra was intelligent, despite his foolish behavior. Vidura thought that if he was near the king and able to offer counsel, then at least there would be a chance he would come to his senses.

After taking Yudhisthira's permission, Vidura returned to Hastinapura and went to see Dhritarastra who was overjoyed to see him. The king said, "O virtuous and sinless one, by good fortune have I got you back. I could not sleep last night, thinking I was lost."

Vidura replied that he had forgiven Dhritarastra his insult. "You are my guru and worthy of my highest respect. I came here swiftly when Sanjaya

told me of your desire. O King, it is only natural that any virtuous man feels inclined toward helping the distressed. Both your sons and those of Pandu are equally dear to me, but because the Pandavas are now in distress I feel compassion more for them."

With apologetic words the two brothers continued speaking together for some while, happy to be reunited.

* * *

Duryodhana, however, was not pleased to see Vidura return. He summoned Shakuni, Karna and Dushashana and said, "The intelligent Vidura has returned. He is always inclined toward the Pandavas. Before he manages to convince the king to bring the Pandavas back, let us consider what should be done. If I ever again see the Pandavas flourish, I shall not be able to maintain my life."

Shakuni laughed. "What folly are you speaking? The Pandavas have already left for the forest. They will be gone for the next thirteen years. They agreed to accept the wager and will never deviate from truth. Even if your father does ask them to return, they would not agree to do so until their exile has expired. Anyway, we do not need to be afraid. We need only to pretend that we agree with your father and await an opportunity to overcome them again."

Dushashana applauded Shakuni's words. "I like your advice, uncle."

Duryodhana was still uneasy and seeing this Karna said, "O king, we are all your friends and well-wishers. We shall always support you against the Pandavas. You have nothing to fear. But I agree with Shakuni. The brothers will not break their vow. If somehow they do return, then we can find some means to again defeat them."

Duryodhana turned away from his counselors. He stood and looked out the tall window at the beautiful palace gardens. His breath was short and heavy, as if he had just exerted himself. He covered his face with his hands and shook his head. How could he be happy as long as the Pandavas lived?

Karna said, "I know what you are thinking, my friend. I share your feelings. We must root out the Pandavas once and for all. The dice game has not settled the issue, because the Pandavas still live."

Karna's handsome face contorted with anger as he thought of Arjuna, his old rival. He longed to face him in battle. Thirteen years was a long time to wait. Striding back and forth, Karna went on passionately. "Here is my honest opinion, O king. Let us don our armor and take up weapons, mounting our chariots and going in force to the forest. We will find the Pandavas and kill them. This is a good time, while they are destitute and weakened by sorrow. They have no power and no influence. We will easily defeat them."

Everyone was stirred by Karna's strong words. His was the right solution. Without hesitation Duryodhana arranged for a large force to accompany him. Soon, with Karna and his brothers by his side, he set out for the forest.

On their way out of the city, however, they met Vyasadeva. The sage had seen Duryodhana's plan by his spiritual vision. He ordered Duryodhana to return to the palace. The prince felt chastened, but he dared not defy the Rishi's order, fearing the power of his curse.

Vyasadeva then went to see Dhritarastra. When he had been properly received and worshipped, he said, "O greatly wise Dhritarastra, listen as I tell you what is best for the Kurus. I am not at all pleased that the Pandavas have been sent to the forest through dishonest means. If you do not return their kingdom, then, at the end of the thirteen years, they will not have forgotten their enmity. Without doubt they will kill the Kauravas."

Vyasadeva sat upon an elevated seat in the Kuru assembly. He looked at the king, who sat surrounded by his ministers and counselors. They all listened respectfully as the sage continued. "Your foolish son now desires to slay the Pandavas. You should check him. If he tries to kill those heroes in the forest, he will lose his own life. O king, Duryodhana regards the Pandavas with such envy that unless you interfere in his schemes, he will cause the Kuru race to be destroyed."

The king shifted uncomfortably as Vyasadeva spoke. At the end of the day the whole situation was his fault. Obviously it was not about to improve in any way. He bowed his head as the sage went on. "Listen carefully, O king. You should send Duryodhana to the forest to serve the Pandavas. He will then be out of harm's way while doing himself good. Perhaps the virtuous Pandavas will even come to like him, although I am doubtful. The nature a man acquires at birth stays with him all his life. It

seems impossible that Duryodhana would ever be able to humble himself before the Pandavas or indeed before anyone else."

The sage looked around the assembly. "What do Bhishma, Drona and Vidura think? What is your view, O King? You should do the right thing immediately, otherwise your happiness will be destroyed."

Dhritarastra lifted a hand adorned with gleaming rings and placed it against his forehead. Sighing, he replied, "O illustrious one, I did not like this gambling business from the beginning. I think I was forced to give my consent by irresistible destiny. Neither Bhishma, Drona, Vidura, nor Queen Gandhari, liked the dice game. I have no doubt that it happened under the Lord's deluding potency, maya. I knew all this at the time, but due to paternal love I was unable to abandon the envious Duryodhana."

Vyasadeva spoke consolingly. "I understand how you feel. The son is always a man's most dear object. But why do you not also see the Pandavas as your sons? They are suffering distress. Why do you not feel compassion for them now? I am now addressing you as my own son. I feel the same love for my other two sons, Pandu and Vidura. You have one hundred and one sons and Pandu has only five. When I think of Pandu's sons I wonder only how I may help them. O best of men, if you wish to keep all the Kurus alive, then order Duryodhana to make peace with the Pandavas."

Dhritarastra slowly shook his head, his brilliant crown catching the sun rays pouring through the windows. "O wise rishi, it is exactly as you say. I know it well, as do all these kings. I have already heard the same advice from Bhishma, Vidura and Drona. Somehow, I cannot follow that advice. Please therefore be gracious to the Kurus and instruct my wicked son to take the righteous path."

Vyasadeva, who could see past, present and future, said, "Soon the illustrious rishi Maitreya will visit after having visited the Pandavas. He will admonish your son for the sake of the Kuru's welfare. Follow his advice without hesitation. Otherwise he will curse your son." Vyasadeva then stood and left the assembly.

As Vyasadeva predicted, Maitreya soon arrived. The itinerant ascetic, who wore matted locks and carried only a staff and a water pot, was received with all respect by Dhritarastra and his sons. They worshipped him with offerings of arghya and other rites. Dhritarastra then offered him a jewelled

seat in the assembly. When the sage was seated comfortably the king asked, "O great one, was your journey from the forest pleasant? Are the heroes, the five Pandava brothers, living there happily? Will they spend the full thirteen years there? How will the brotherly affection between my sons and nephews be restored?"

The dark skinned Maitreya, glowing with a spiritual aura, was silent for some moments. He looked slowly around the assembly and said, "While on a pilgrimage I came to the Kamyaka forest and met Yudhishthira and his brothers. They now wear deerskins and have matted their hair with the tree sap. Surrounded by rishis they live austerely, constantly hearing Vedic recitations. I heard from them of the grave errors Duryodhana committed and of the terrible danger that you now face as a result. Therefore, I have come here to offer some advice. My affection for you is great and I always wish you well."

The sage asked how it was possible that the king was overlooking Duryodhana's evil acts. How could both Dhritarastra and Bhishma have allowed him to create such enmity with the Pandavas?

"You are the monarch, Dhritarastra," the Rishi said solemnly. "You are thus able to punish wrong-doers. For having allowed wicked acts to be perpetrated in your own assembly hall, O King, you have been condemned by the sages. Do you not fear the consequences?"

Maitreya turned toward Duryodhana, who scowled at his words. The sage spoke softly. "Hear me well, O mighty-armed hero. I utter words meant only for your good, as well as that of the Kurus, the Pandavas and indeed the whole world. Do not quarrel with the Pandavas. They are all as powerful as thousands of mighty elephants. They are virtuous and possessed of great prowess. With his bare hands, Bhima has slain three colossal Rakshasas, enemies of the celestials who were capable of assuming any form at will. He killed these three—Hidimba, Baka and Kirmira—as easily as a tiger kills small deer. Do you remember how that same Bhima killed, in single combat, the invincible Jarasandha? Who is foolish enough to create enmity with such heroes, having as they do Krishna, Drupada and Drupada's sons as their allies? Take my advice, dear child, and make peace with them. Do not bring this danger upon yourself."

Duryodhana looked away and made no reply. He exposed his thigh

and slapped it loudly, then hung his head. Stretching his leg as if bored, he rubbed the ground with his foot.

When he saw Duryodhana's impudence, Maitreya's eyes turned red with anger. He touched holy water and, holding the sacred thread hanging from his shoulder, said in a voice like thunder, "Insolent one, since you slight my words and pay no heed to my advice you shall soon reap the result. In the great war which will spring from the wrongs you have perpetrated, Bhima will smash your thigh with his mace."

Dhritarastra immediately became alarmed. He sought to console and gratify Maitreya with gentle words, asking him to be merciful toward Duryodhana. "O great sage, he is young and feckless. Do not take him seriously."

Maitreya said that if Duryodhana made peace with the Pandavas, the curse would be lifted. Otherwise it would not be reversed.

Dhritarastra felt a little relieved, having managed to mitigate Maitreya's curse. He then said, "O rishi, we have heard how Bhima destroyed Hidimba and Baka, but not Kirmira. Who was this demon? What was his strength and how was he killed? We wish to know everything."

Maitreya replied, "I will not speak any further to this assembly because Duryodhana has rejected my words. Vidura knows well the history of Kirmira." With that the sage rose and went out of the assembly, quickly leaving the city.

When the offended sage was gone, Dhritarastra asked Vidura to relate the story. Vidura replied, "O king, I heard this story from Yudhisthira when I spoke to him in the forest. Having left Hastinapura the Pandavas traveled for three days and nights, finally arriving at the Kamyaka forest. As they moved through this forest during the fearful hours of the night they encountered a terrible Rakshasa with flaming eyes. He stood as tall as a tree and held a blazing torch. With arms and legs outstretched like the branches of a huge tree, he blocked the Pandavas' path. He had eight fangs protruding from his wide-open mouth, and his eyes were the color of copper. His flaming red hair stood erect and he resembled a mass of clouds charged with lightning and adorned by a flock of cranes. Roaring like thunder he spread the Rakshasa illusion and confounded the Pandavas' senses."

The assembly listened spellbound as Vidura told the story. "Birds

and other creatures dropped down everywhere simply from hearing the demon's awful cries. Deer, buffaloes, leopards and bears fled terrified in all directions. The forest itself seemed to be moving due to all the fleeing creatures. A violent wind blew up and dust clouds swirled. Even as grief is the greatest enemy of the five senses, so that Rakshasa appeared to the five Pandavas. Spying the brothers from a distance, clad in their deerskins and carrying weapons, the Rakshasa obstructed their path like the Mainaka mountain. When Draupadi saw the horrifying creature, she closed her eyes and stood amid her husbands like an agitated river amid five hills. Dhaumya at once uttered Vedic mantras to counter the demon's illusions, whereupon the wind ceased and the dust settled. Seeing his power checked, the Rakshasa widened his eyes in anger and he resembled Death himself.

"Yudhishthira addressed him sternly. 'Who are you? What do you want of us?'

"The Rakshasa replied, 'I am Kirmira, the brother of Baka. I live comfortably in this uninhabited forest. I eat all men foolish enough to come here. Who are you that have come today to become my food?'

"'We are the five sons of Pandu,' Yudhishthira answered. 'We have been exiled from our kingdom and desire to spend our time in this forest, which is your dominion.'

"When their identity was disclosed, the Rakshasa bellowed in joy. 'Ha! What good luck. Fate has today fulfilled my long-cherished desire. I have wandered around in the hope of finding Bhima, my brother's killer. Now he stands here before me at the dead of night, when my power is greatest, and when I am hungry. Disguised as a brahmin this wretch slew my brother and stole his sister. I shall now wreak my vengeance on him. I will kill him and offer his blood to Baka's departed soul. In this way, I shall be freed of my debt to my brother. I shall devour Bhima, digesting him even as Agastya digested the Asura Vatapi.'

"Yudhishthira rebuked the Rakshasa. 'This can never be.' The mighty Bhima at once tore up a huge tree and stripped it of its branches, while in the twinkling of an eye Arjuna strung his bow and stood with an arrow at the ready. Bhima checked his brother and advanced alone to face the demon. Tightening his waist cloth, he shouted an angry challenge. 'Stay and fight, wretched one!' Armed with the tree he rushed toward him. As Indra hurls his

thunderbolt Bhima brought down the tree with force upon the Rakshasa's head. The tree smashed to pieces but the demon remained unmoved. He hurled his flaming brand at Bhima and it flew toward him like a streak of lightning. Bhima dropped quickly to the ground and turned the torch away with his left foot.

"Roaring terribly the Rakshasa himself tore up a great tree and rushed at Bhima like Yamaraja bearing his death-dealing staff. The two combatants pulled up tree after tree and hurled and smashed them together as they fought. The battle resembled the fight of old between Vali and Sugriva. Soon a large area of the forest had been stripped of trees. The angry demon then lifted and hurled a massive rock at Bhima, who caught the boulder and tossed it back. Kirmira rushed at Bhima with outstretched arms, even as Rahu goes to devour the sun. They grappled together, rolling about on the earth like a couple of infuriated bulls locked in mortal combat.

"The fight was fierce and hard, lasting for almost an hour. Bhima, proud of his strength, was conscious of Draupadi watching him. Then he remembered Duryodhana's insults toward the princess. Looking at the demon as if he were the Kaurava, Bhima's anger swelled. He seized the Rakshasa like one maddened elephant seizing another. Kirmira also seized the Pandava, but Bhima lifted him and threw him down violently. He then took hold of the demon by the waist and began to shake him as trees are shaken by the wind. Even as he was being shaken, the demon reached up and with all his strength grasped hold of Bhima by the neck. Bhima repeatedly lifted and smashed the Rakshasa down, even as the demon gripped him with hands like steel vices.

"The earth shook and the forest echoed with the sound of Kirmira's body striking the ground. He roared fearfully like a discordant trumpet. Bhima lifted him and whirled him around with tremendous power. Seeing that the Rakshasa had fallen unconscious, Bhima threw him to the ground. He placed his knees on his chest and strangled him. As the demon died, Bhima said, 'O sinful wretch, you need no longer wipe away the tears of Baka and Hidimba's relatives, for now you will be joining those dead demons.'

"Leaving Kirmira's body lying on the path, devoid of clothes and ornaments, Bhima rejoined his brothers. They gathered round him and praised him. Again placing Draupadi in the center of their party, they entered deeper into the forest."

The assembly was amazed to hear this story. Vidura concluded, "This is what I heard from Yudhishthira. When I was passing through the forest I saw for myself the Rakshasa's body after being smashed by Bhima's blows."

Dhritarastra sighed and said nothing. He was becoming increasingly anxious. Bhima had promised to kill all his sons. Who or what could ever prevent him from fulfilling his promise? The king's heart burned as he slowly made his way to his chambers.

Chapter Twenty-four. Yudhishthira's moral instructions

When Krishna heard the news that the Pandavas had been exiled, he decided to go and see them in the forest. He invited Balarama, Dhristadyumna, Shikhandi and many other kings to accompany him, along with Subhadra and her son, and together they rode to the Kamyaka forest. Seeing Yudhishthira and his brothers dressed in deerskins and stripped of their kingdom, both Balarama and Krishna were enraged.

Krishna said, "I cannot tolerate this injustice. The earth shall drink the blood of Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni and that fourth one, Dushashana. After we kill them and their followers, we will install Dharmaraja on the throne. Those cunning men deserve to be slain. This is quite in accord with the eternal morality."

Krishna's anger blazed. He seemed about to consume the entire creation. Arjuna quickly sought to pacify him by recollecting his many wonderful deeds.

"O Krishna, the great Rishi Vyasadeva has told me that you are the cause of creation, the mover of all minds and the beginning and end of all things. All asceticism rests in you, who are the embodiment of all sacrifice and the eternal Supreme Person. All the gods depend upon you and you are the origin of the universal creator Brahma. O mighty-armed Keshava, You have appeared many times on earth in different incarnations."

Accepting Krishna as the cause of even the almighty Vishnu, Arjuna described the various Vishnu-avatars who had appeared in past ages. "O Krishna, as Narasimha You slew the mighty Asura Hiranyakasipu; as Aditi's son, Vamana, You spanned the entire universe with three steps. O soul of all beings, covering the heavens, You dwell in the body of the sun and imbue him with Your own effulgence."

Arjuna went on to describe Krishna's activities in His present appearance. "You have killed numerous demonic kings who were fierce enemies of even the gods. O Janardana, you have manifested here on earth the sacred and eternal city Dwaraka, which abounds in opulence and is always crowded with rishis. Envy, untruth, malice and cruelty are absent in you, who are always the well-wishing friend of all creatures. Narada has told

me that at the end of the yuga all things, mobile and immobile, will enter your body. O Krishna, there is no limit to your glories. I have spoken of only a minute part."

As he spoke, Arjuna felt himself becoming overpowered by transcendental ecstasy. His voice choked up and he was unable to continue. Pleased and pacified by Arjuna's expression of love, Krishna said, "You are mine and I am yours. All that is mine is yours. He who hates you also hates me, and he who follows you also follows me. Formerly you were Nara and I was Narayana. Though individuals, we are as one. No one can understand our oneness and difference."

Draupadi, her beauty enhanced by her soft deerskin clothes, came forward with folded palms and said to Krishna. "O irrepressible one, all the great rishis have described you as the Supreme Person. The entire universe exists in you and you are the refuge of all ascetics and sages. Even as children sport with their toys, so do you sport with the celestials. Those seeking your protection are never overcome by calamity. O slayer of demons, how is it then that one like me, the wife of the Pandavas, the sister of Dhristadyumna and Your friend, could have been so insulted by the Kauravas?"

Draupadi's dark eyes filled with tears as she spoke. Subhadra also wept as she stood with her arm around Draupadi's shoulder. As she recalled the dice game Draupadi became angry. "Why, Krishna, did my five powerful husbands sit silently while I was humiliated by wicked men of no importance? Fie upon Bhima's arms and Arjuna's celebrated Gandiva, for they could not protect a woman in distress, not even their own wife. Fie upon Bhishma and Dhritarastra! Although I am their daughter-in-law they were prepared to see me a slave."

Draupadi hid her face with her hands, which resembled lotus buds. Her shoulders shook as she wept. Regaining her composure after a few moments, she took a deep breath and concluded, "O Krishna, You are my only shelter. I deserve your protection for four reasons: due to our family relationship, our friendship, the respect you bear for me and the fact that you are my Lord."

Krishna replied, "Fair lady, you will see the wives of those with whom you are angry weep as you now weep when their husbands lie dead on

the battlefield, their bodies covered with arrows and weltering in blood. Do not grieve. I shall do for the Pandavas whatever lies within my power. You shall be the queen of kings. I speak the truth. The heavens may fall and the Himalayas move, the earth may be rent and the ocean dry up, but know for certain, O Draupadi, that my words will never prove false."

Draupadi was solaced by Krishna's words. She did not doubt that he acted only for her ultimate welfare. The princess glanced across at Arjuna, who said, "O doe-eyed lady, do not weep. What Krishna has said will come to pass. It cannot be otherwise."

Standing by his sister's side Dhristadyumna declared, "I shall slay Drona, our brother Shikhandi will kill Bhishma, Bhima will kill Duryodhana and Arjuna will kill Karna, who offered you such unbearable offense in the sabha. Dear sister, with Rama and Krishna's assistance even Indra cannot conquer us. What then can be said of Dhritarastra's sons?"

All present now turned again toward Krishna. Looking at Yudhisthira, Krishna said, "Lord of the earth, had I not been otherwise engaged at the time, I would have personally come to prevent the gambling match. By pointing out the evils associated with gambling I would have gained the support of Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and Bahlika. Between us we would surely have swayed the blind king from his crooked purpose."

The brahmins present gathered around to hear Krishna speak and he glanced at them with affection. "Illicit sex, gambling, hunting and intoxication are the four evils which beset men and deprive them of their prosperity. Gambling is particularly marked by the destruction of property, by misfortune and by the squandering of wealth. It leads only to harsh words and enmity."

Krishna said he would have pointed this out to Dhritarastra and if the king did not listen, he would have used force to bring him to his senses. "And if anyone had supported the king in his ignorance, I would have destroyed them all. All this would surely have taken place, O King, if I had not been away from Dwaraka at the time. It was only upon my return that Satyaki informed me of the events in Hastinapura. Immediately upon receiving the news I came here. My heart is pained to see you now, overtaken by calamity and sunk into misfortune."

Yudhisthira asked Krishna where he had been during the gambling

match. Krishna explained that he had gone to do battle with a king named Shalva, a friend of Sishupala. When Shalva heard that Krishna had killed Sishupala, he went to Dwaraka and attacked the city while Krishna was in Indraprastha. Shalva owned a great airship that resembled a flying city. He had received this wonderful airship as a gift from Shiva. In battle he used it as a base from which to attack his foes. Raining down weapons of every kind, he had challenged Krishna, not realizing he was absent from Dwaraka. After wreaking havoc in Dwaraka, he had returned to his own city.

Because Yudhisthira was interested, Krishna described in detail the fight that had taken place between Shalva and Dwaraka's warriors. He then told the Pandava how, after returning to Dwaraka and hearing of Shalva's attack, He had gone personally to fight him. A terrible battle ensued. Shalva had acquired great mystic power through performing asceticism. While he was fighting with Krishna, he created an illusion and seemingly killed Krishna's father Vasudeva right on the battlefield. By his mystic power Shalva also sent showers of arrows, clubs, winged darts, lances, thunderbolts, bullets, rockets, swords, axes and other weapons down upon Krishna and his forces. In the end, Krishna killed Shalva and destroyed his airship with the Sudarshana chakra.

Krishna concluded his narration. "That is why, Yudhisthira, I was unable to come to Hastinapura. The dice match took place just after I had slain Shalva and was engaged in restoring Dwaraka back to its former condition. If I had come, Duryodhana would not now be alive and the gambling match would never have taken place. What can I do now? It is difficult to stem the tide when the dam is broken."

Krishna stood up to leave, saying he could do nothing for the Pandavas until the end of the thirteen years. He knew that Yudhisthira and his brothers were too virtuous to break their word. They would doubtlessly remain in the forest for the full period. Krishna therefore told them that he would return to see them at the end of their exile. If Duryodhana did not return their kingdom, he said, then he knew there would be a battle in which the Kaurava and his followers would be annihilated.

The Pandavas bade Krishna and his party farewell, and Arjuna especially bid an affectionate goodbye to Subhadra and their young son Abhimanyu. Closely followed by Dhristadyumna and the other monarchs, Krishna left the forest on His golden chariot, which shone like the sun. As the

thunderous sound of the chariot wheels died away into the distance, Yudhisthira ordered his brothers to make ready for their own departure. He wanted to enter more deeply into the Kamyaka forest and find a suitable place where they might spend their exile.

Still accompanied by hundreds of brahmins, the brothers made their way into the forest. After some time they came to a great lake called Dwaitavana. Swans, chakravarkas and other graceful birds swam in its waters and the lake edges were crowded with red, blue and white lotuses, which were so fragrant that the air was heavy with their perfume. Numerous fruit trees, loaded with golden fruits, grew all around the lake. Peacocks, chakoras, cuckoos and other birds, all singing beautiful songs, played in the trees. The brothers also saw many Siddhas and Charanas sporting in the woods and on the lakeshore, and numberless rishis sitting motionless at the water's edge, their minds fixed on the supreme Brahman.

Yudhisthira was delighted. The area was beautiful. They would live there. The brothers rested beneath a large banyan tree, looking like five great elephants sitting by the side of a mountain. Dhaumya then performed sacred rituals to sanctify the place where they would build their cottages, and then they began construction.

Living in that forest, the Pandavas resembled a number of Indras amid the celestials. They served the rishis and brahmins by offering them excellent fruits and roots. Dhaumya and other priests would perform daily sacrificial rites in honor of the gods and the Pandavas' ancestors. They thought constantly of Krishna and passed their time hearing the brahmins recite Vedic texts.

Soon after their arrival at Dwaitavana, the ageless rishi Markandeya visited them. It was said that Markandeya had lived since the dawn of creation and knew of everything that had occurred in the history of the universe. He greeted the Pandavas with affection and accepted their worship. The rishi, whose body was effulgent with spiritual light and who appeared to be a youth of sixteen, smiled to see them. They reminded him of Rama and Lakshman, who had been exiled to the forest hundreds of thousands of years previously. The sage had also visited them.

Since arriving in the forest, Yudhisthira's grief at what he had caused was beginning to engulf him. Seeing Markandeya smiling, he asked, "O

illustrious one, all these ascetics here are sorry to see our plight. How is it that you alone smile with delight?"

"I am not delighted, my child. Rather, I am amazed at how much your situation resembles the life of Dasaratha's son, Rama. He too suffered due to his unfailing truthfulness, and he too lived in the forest, exiled for some years. I remember seeing him thousands of years ago wandering Mount Rishyamukha with his bow. Like you, Rama was high-souled and innocent, and like you, he lived in the forest out of filial obedience to his father. This is why I smile. No matter how powerful we may be, we cannot avoid calamities brought by destiny. No one, therefore, should ever act unrighteously, thinking, 'I am powerful.'"

Markandeya then assured Yudhisthira that, like Rama, he too would regain his kingdom from the Kauravas when his period of exile was over. After promising to come again while they were in the forest, he headed to the north.

* * *

While the Pandavas dwelt at Dwaitavana the air was constantly filled with the sound of Vedic recitations. The entire region became as holy as Brahma's abode. The sound of mantras from the Yajur, Rig and Sama Vedas, charming and delightful to the mind, were mingled with the mighty twangs of the Pandavas' bowstrings. They honed their martial skills by hunting dangerous forest animals. In accordance with scriptural codes, they maintained the population of tigers, boar, buffaloes and other beasts in the Kamyaka forest, protecting the Rishis from attack as they engaged in meditation and sacrifice.

Yudhisthira loved the company of brahmins. Now that he lived in their midst, his mind felt serene and his grief dissipated. All the world's greatest Rishis had come to Dwaitavana to be with him—Narada, Vyasadeva, Vashista, Bhrgu, Angira, Kashyapa and others—and they all worshipped Yudhisthira as the celestial sages worship Indra in heaven. Yudhisthira also returned their worship and spent his time discussing with them about spiritual topics. He was actually starting to enjoy forest life. In many ways he found it preferable to the onerous and often harsh duties of being a king. The gentle son of Dharma was happy to live a simple life of spirituality, but he always

kept in mind his God-given duty as a kshatriya. That responsibility could not be whimsically abandoned—even if unpleasant, duty must always be done for the Lord's pleasure. It was thus with mixed feelings that Yudhisthira dwelt in the forest, awaiting the day when he could again resume his duties as a ruler.

Draupadi, however, was still sorrowful. She found the course of events that led up to their exile difficult, and she burned with the humiliation they had all received at Duryodhana's hands. Sitting alone one evening with Yudhisthira, she revealed her feelings. "O King, when I think of the wicked Duryodhana and his followers living happily in Hastinapura, after having sent you to the forest, my heart burns. Without doubt he is delighting in our misfortune. When you set out for the forest all the Kurus cried except the wretched Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni and that vicious Dushashana."

Draupadi again found herself weeping. She remembered her parting words with Kunti and Gandhari. Both of them had grieved at her humiliation. How long would it be before she was avenged and the wrong-doers punished?

"Seeing you seated here on this grass mat, and remembering your ivory throne encrusted with jewels, I feel such anguish that I can hardly look at you. Your body is smeared with mud from the riverbank when once it was daubed with the finest sandalwood paste. You once wore costly silk garments: now you wear deerskins and tree bark. How can I bear to see my other husbands, who were once waited upon by numerous servants, now scouring the forest for food?"

Draupadi's sorrow suddenly turned to anger. "All this is due to the evil schemes of sinful men. O King, does your plight not arouse anger in you? Why are you so peaceful? Look at Bhima, glancing at you again and again. Constrained only by his love for you, he does not rise up and destroy the Kauravas. Honoring your promise he sits containing his anger. Look too at Arjuna. He understands Bhima's mind and is forever pacifying him. By the power of Arjuna's bow thousands of kings were obliged to wait upon the brahmins at your Rajasuya. Now that same Arjuna has become grief stricken. Does this not make you angry? And look at Madri's youthful sons. They are as dear to you as they are to your mother Kunti. Now they are forced to live the hard lives of ascetics. Does this not make you angry?"

Yudhisthira listened impassively to his wife, carefully taking in her words. She was surely entitled to her anger and frustration. He knew that, and felt wholly responsible. The king remained silent as his wife continued.

"I cannot understand why you have not risen up to destroy the Kauravas. Surely after all that has happened such a response would be in accord with morality. Is your discrimination failing? It is always appropriate for a kshatriya to show anger when sin is committed, and sin has surely been committed by the Kauravas. How can you sit here as if you forgive them? If a king cannot distinguish between the time to be angry and the time to forgive, then he is lost."

The beautiful Draupadi looked intently into Yudhisthira's eyes as she went on, "I also know the scripture. Scripture states that Duryodhana and his brothers deserve to be punished. Scripture states that the humble and ever-forgiving person is always neglected, while he who is powerful and assails others at the proper time is respected as a king."

Yudhisthira looked with compassion upon his wife. She had suffered so much, and if anything stirred his heart, it was her suffering, for which he felt he had been the cause. His heart still burned when he thought of how she was dragged into the assembly hall. The pain of that moment would stay with him for the rest of his life. But this was not the time to make war. Draupadi could not understand the entire situation. He replied gently, "Intelligent lady, through anger we may sometimes gain wealth, but anger ultimately destroys mankind. Real prosperity crowns one who conquers anger and brings adveRishity to one whom anger controls. Anger is the root of all destruction. An angry man commits sin blindly. An angry man will kill even his preceptor and insult his elders. He cannot distinguish between right and wrong. There is nothing an angry man might not say or do, even to the point of sending himself to Death's abode. Knowing this, I will not indulge in anger, Draupadi. Rather, I will strive to control it."

Draupadi listened respectfully. She knew her husband's grasp of religion and morality was unsurpassed. He was capable of instructing even the gods. Sitting on a simple mat of kusha grass, Yudhisthira continued.

"When a weak man is oppressed by one more powerful, he should not display anger—lest he bring about his own destruction. There are no blessed regions in the hereafter for those who destroy themselves. Thus the

weak should always control their anger. Only fools praise anger, considering it equivalent to energy. The wise keep anger at a distance. The man consumed by anger does not easily acquire generosity, dignity, courage, skill or the other attributes possessed by men of character. The wise consider him a man of character who restrains his wrath. The pious always praise such a man because they understand that the forgiving man is always victorious. One who represses his anger even when antagonized rejoices in the next world. For this it is said that a wise man, whether strong or weak and even if in difficulty, should always forgive his persecutor."

By now Yudhisthira's brothers had gathered and were listening. Yudhisthira went on describing the glories of forgiveness. "If there were not forgiving persons in this world chaos would soon prevail. If kings and other superiors give way to anger, the distressed people would quickly meet with ruin. If inferiors do not tolerate their superiors' admonishments, sin will take root and destroy mankind. I shall cite you the verse spoken in ancient times by the rishi Kashyapa: 'Forgiveness is virtue, forgiveness is sacrifice and forgiveness is the Vedas. Forgiveness is purity and penance; it is truth, piety, religion, and the holy Narayana. Through forgiveness the universe is sustained, and by practising forgiveness a man can attain to everlasting regions of bliss.'

"How then can I renounce forgiveness, gentle lady, in which is established spirituality, truth, wisdom and the three worlds? Both this world and the next belong to the forgiving person. Therefore forgiveness is considered the highest virtue."

Yudhisthira smiled at his wife. "Bhishma, Drona, Vidura, Kripa and the other Kuru elders desire peace. Vyasadeva and the other rishis also praise peace, Panchali. Therefore let us first try for a peaceful settlement. If Dhritarastra yields to temptation and does not return our kingdom, then the Bharata race will be destroyed. But let me not be the cause, princess. Forgiveness and humility, both of which are unknown to Duryodhana, are the qualities of the self-controlled. They constitute eternal virtue. I shall therefore adopt them."

Draupadi was still doubtful. If virtue conferred victory and success on a man, then how could Yudhisthira have undergone such a calamity? He had never strayed from virtue at any time. Even during the gambling match he acted only with virtuous intentions. Now he was cast into misfortune,

while the sinful Duryodhana enjoyed prosperity. The princess said, "It seems to me, O King, that although you always protect virtue, virtue has not protected you. Even the celestials know that you live only by virtue. I am sure you would abandon your brothers and me before abandoning virtue. You serve the brahmins with everything you possess. You never disregarded your elders, equals or even inferiors. Although you conquered the earth, you did not become proud. You have performed great sacrifices and given unlimited charity. Even now while living a life of hardship in this forest, your virtue has suffered no diminishment."

Draupadi looked her husband in the eyes as she made her point. "Despite all this, still your intelligence was perverted by destiny and you gambled away everything—your wealth, kingdom, brothers, even me. How could one like you, who are simple, gentle, modest, liberal and truthful, be drawn to gambling? Gambling is a vice. I just cannot understand how it is possible."

Although Draupadi understood that everything was under the control of the Supreme Lord, she felt her faith challenged by Yudhishthira's seemingly inexplicable situation.

"Surely, O King, all creatures are made to act by the Lord, even as a puppet is moved by its controller. No one can pass a moment independently. God ordains our happiness and distress in accord with the results of our past actions. Everyone depends upon the Lord. He brings us together and uses us as instruments to fulfill each other's karma. It thus seems to me that it is the Lord who has brought about your calamity. But how has He sanctioned such injustice, so contrary to the ways of virtue and truth? And if He is not to blame, then it means that the controlling principle is who has the most power. If actions are not bound with God-given consequences, then I lament for those who are not powerful."

Yudhishthira could see that his wife was bewildered by grief and sorrow. "O gentle lady born from sacrifice, although your speech is sweet and well articulated, it is atheistic. None should ever perform virtue with a desire to gain its fruits. Such a sinful trader of virtue will never reap the results. I practice virtue only because I desire to follow the Vedas and satisfy the Lord. The Vedas state that he who doubts virtue will be born among the brutes. He who doubts religion, virtue, and the words of the rishis is excluded from the regions of immortality and bliss. Such a person is considered lower than a

thief."

Draupadi bowed her head as her husband continued. "O thin-waisted lady, you have seen with your own eyes the results of virtue in such immortal sages as Markandeya, Vyasadeva, Maitreya and the celestial sage Narada. All these shining and ever-blissful rishis describe virtue as the foremost duty. If the pieties practiced by the virtuous bore no fruit, then this world would long ago have been covered by darkness. None would have pursued liberation nor cared to acquire knowledge or even wealth. All men would have lived like beasts and the world would be thrown into confusion."

The brahmins, who had by now also come to hear Yudhisthira's speech, nodded in agreement. Darkness had set in and fires now burned in the great clearing where they sat. Draupadi could hear the flames crackling as well as the sounds of crickets as Yudhisthira continued. "Do not doubt virtue because you do not see its results, Panchali. Without doubt the fruits will manifest in time, as will the fruits of sin. The fruits of true virtue are eternal and indestructible, leading one to the highest regions of happiness. Therefore do not speak ill of God. Try to understand the Supreme Being and his desires. O Draupadi, always bow to him. This will be for your own good."

Tears fell from Draupadi's eyes. She knew her husband's words were true. Surely God was infallible and always the well-wishing friend of all living beings. But who could understand God? His activities were inscrutable. No one can understand his plans. The apparent reversal of the virtuous Pandavas—and even that the reversal had seemingly come through Yudhisthira's own inexplicable actions—was incomprehensible and quite incredible.

Draupadi sighed. "I accept what you have said, O best of men. The Lord is certainly bestowing upon all beings the fruits of their own work. Even if some sudden calamity or good fortune befalls us, we must understand it to be the results of some action in a former life. But besides destiny there is exertion. A man who does not exert himself will eventually be ruined. I feel you should exert yourself now to recover your kingdom. Even if you fail you will at least have satisfied everyone that you did all that human endeavor can accomplish. Although the results are not in our hands, we should still perform our work. The wise always condemn inaction. Why then do you remain inactive? This is my doubt."

Draupadi fell silent. Then stirred by her words Bhima felt impelled to speak. He too was angry and found the forest almost unbearable. It was not the austerity he minded but the thought of Duryodhana and his brothers enjoying their ill-gotten gains. Why did Yudhishthira suffer in silence? Draupadi was right. It was time for them to act. Bhima burst out, "O Yudhishthira, what do you hope to gain by living like an ascetic? You are not a yogi but a king. You should walk the path of kings. Duryodhana robbed you of your kingdom. He is like a weak, offal-eating jackal stealing the prey of lions. How do you tolerate it? How can you abandon the wealth that was both our source of virtue and pleasure, in exchange for this trifling virtue called 'keeping your promise'? Surely you fail to see what is of true value."

Yudhishthira remained calm while Bhima vented his long pent-up anger. The forest reverberated with his words, his voice as deep and powerful as a kettledrum. "O king, it was only due to your carelessness that we lost our kingdom. Only to please you did we allow Duryodhana and his brothers to wrest from us our wealth and afflict us with such pain. On your command we now pain our friends and enliven our enemies. Surely it was folly that we did not kill the Kauravas then and there. Instead we have meekly come to the forest—an act worthy only of weak men. Krishna does not approve, nor does Arjuna, the twins or myself. O King, has your despair led you to lose your manliness on the plea of virtue? Only cowards cherish despair, being unable to win back what they have lost."

Bhima argued that so-called virtue which produced calamity was not virtue at all. What use was virtue for its own sake? Kings should practice virtue to make their kingdoms prosperous and to achieve pleasure. All three things—virtue, profit and pleasure—should be pursued equally. None of them should be sought at the cost of the others. "Have you lost sight of your proper duty? You are a powerful warrior supported by other powerful men. Use that power to regain your rightful kingdom. When you have established your rule, then acquire religious merit by ruling piously and giving charity to the brahmins. By giving up this promise to stay in the forest you will be casting aside an inferior principle for the greater good."

Bhima softened, "The brahmins and the people want you to rule them. They all despise Duryodhana. You are capable of taking back your kingdom, and you have Arjuna and myself to help you. Who can withstand us in battle? Let us use strategy and strength to win back what is ours. This is

our duty."

Yudhisthira remained silent for some moments as he summoned patience. He looked up at Bhima. "O descendent of Bharata, I cannot reproach you for giving me pain with your arrow-like words. It is true that due to my folly I have brought this calamity upon us. I knew I could not defeat Shakuni at dice, yet I allowed myself to be drawn into the game. I should have exerted greater control over myself. O Bhima, the mind cannot be controlled when it comes under the influence of manliness, pride and prowess. I do not censure you for what you have said, but I do consider what has happened to us to be preordained."

Yudhisthira made it clear that he would not break his promise. "Do you recall the conditions of the final dice game? Shakuni said, 'He who loses this game shall go to the forest and remain there for thirteen years. The winner shall take his kingdom and return it when the forest term has expired.' I then uttered, 'So be it.'"

Yudhisthira hung his head and fell silent as he remembered that day. What had overcome him? He had thought he was acting only for virtue, but as a result all his loved ones had suffered. Still, he was resolute. No matter how painful their present situation, there was no turning back. He would not abandon his promise. The agreement would be kept.

Yudhisthira was firm. "How then, O Bhima, shall I now falsify my word for the sake of wealth? To me nothing is greater than truth. For a respectable person it is better to die than to transgress his word. Let us pass our days here in peace. Better days will come. A farmer scatters seeds and awaits the harvest. In the same way, virtue and truth always bring results in time. Do not doubt this principle."

Bhima was not convinced. His heart was too full of anger. He had not even been able to sleep since coming to the forest. Neither could he face the prospect of waiting so many years before he could vent his rage on the Kauravas. What virtue had they ever observed? Why then should Yudhisthira treat them as honorable? Did he think they respected his virtue and adherence to truth? They saw him as weak and were laughing at him. If only Yudhisthira would see sense and order them to gear up for battle. Bhima tried again to convince him.

"O great King, how can any mortal make a promise that is dependent

on the passage of time? No one knows when his life will end. We have now been in the forest for thirteen months. Let that be our thirteen years. Indeed the Vedas state that in certain circumstances a month can substitute for a year. Let us go now and crush our enemies. Even if we were to go to hell on that day, that hell will feel like heaven. Although only Draupadi and I have revealed our hearts to you on this matter, Arjuna, the twins, Kunti, and our many allies share the same feelings. Only because they seek to please you do they remain silent. It is only weakness that forces you to adhere to your pledge, dear brother. No one is praising you for your kindly disposition toward our enemies."

Bhima stood silhouetted by the fire. His huge frame resembled a blazing mountain. "O king, although remaining fixed in virtue, you still cannot see the truth, like an ignorant man who has memorized the Vedas without knowing their meaning. You are a kshatriya, yet you act like a brahmin. A king's duties are fraught with crookedness and cunning. You know this well."

Bhima had another concern: how would they be able to live incognito for the thirteenth year? They were known throughout the world, and Duryodhana had many supporters. Numerous kings who had been subjugated by the Pandavas at the time of the Rajasuya now backed the Kauravas. Duryodhana would have his spies looking for them everywhere. Bound by Yudhishthira's promise, they would be living in the forest forever. Force would be the only way out, sooner or later. Bhima implored Yudhishthira, "Please give the order for battle, O hero. There is no higher duty for a kshatriya. If there be any sin in this course, then you can counteract it later by sacrifice and charity."

Yudhishthira sighed again, but did not speak. Bhima was overcome by passion, he thought, and not thinking carefully. Could he not understand that the Supreme Lord had somehow ordained their suffering? All they could do now was follow their religious duties as prescribed by God, leaving the results in his hands. They could not please the Lord by abandoning religion, and to please God was always everyone's prime duty. Surely Bhima knew that.

But there was another consideration. Yudhishthira calmly explained his mind to Bhima. "O mighty-armed hero, when a man performs sinful deeds depending upon his own power, such deeds become only a source of

pain for him; but if he reflects carefully before action, he will attain success. Listen as I tell you what is likely to happen if we follow your suggestion, born as it is of pride and mental unrest."

Yudhisthira then listed the many kings allied with Duryodhana. There was Bhishma, Drona and Kripa—out of obligation they would certainly side with Duryodhana. Then there was Ashvatthama, Karna, Bahlika, Bhurishravas and Duryodhana's brothers. There were hundreds of other kings who would fight alongside the Kauravas because the Pandavas had previously defeated them. Duryodhana's treasury was full, especially as he now had control of Indraprastha. He could easily and quickly amass a vast army. On the other hand, the Pandavas had no position, no wealth, no army and only a few allies.

Yudhisthira continued in grave tones. "Duryodhana's forces are virtually unassailable. The Kuru chiefs are masters of the celestial weapons. I doubt that even Indra and all the gods could vanquish them. I especially fear Karna, who is impetuous, angry, invincible, accomplished in every weapon and encased in impenetrable armor."

Yudhisthira remembered how Karna had been born with a natural coat of armor on his body. Although he appeared to be a charioteer's son, it was obvious that his origin was in some way divine. For some reason he harbored a deep envy of Arjuna. One day, Yudhisthira knew, Karna and Arjuna would wage a great battle to settle their enmity. The skirmish at Draupadi's svayamvara had been nothing. Karna had not wanted to exert himself against what he thought was a brahmin, but if he displayed his full power, then who could be sure that Arjuna would be able to defeat him.

"Thinking of Karna and the danger he poses, I cannot sleep at night. Without overcoming him, as well as all the other heroes I have mentioned, we will not be able to defeat Duryodhana. O best of men, consider all this carefully."

Hearing his brother's admonition, Bhima became pensive. Yudhisthira was right, of course, and he could not argue with him. Although Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and the other kings in Hastinapura had always been their friends and well-wishers, it was different now. If it came to war they would surely side with the Kauravas. The thought of fighting against those invincible heroes was daunting, especially because he felt so much affection

for them. Bhima sat down, silenced.

As the Pandavas sat together, Vyasadeva appeared out of the forest. They quickly stood up and bowed before the Rishi. After taking a seat among them, the Rishi said to Yudhisthira, "O mighty-armed one, I have divined your thoughts. I wish to help you, and therefore I have come. I will destroy the fever in your mind by telling you how to defeat Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Karna, Duryodhana, and all his followers. Listen carefully."

Vyasadeva then took Yudhisthira aside and spoke to him in private. He taught him the mystical skill called Pratismriti, and then instructed him to teach the same skill to Arjuna. This skill allowed the practitioner to travel great distances in a short time. Thus Arjuna could go to the Himalayas, approach the gods, and receive from them their special weapons.

"Due to his asceticism and prowess, he is quite capable of approaching the celestials," Vyasadeva said. "Indeed, he is Narayana's eternal associate. Indra, Rudra and all the principal gods will surely bestow their weapons upon Arjuna, and he will perform tremendous deeds by receiving them."

After giving Yudhisthira the Pratismriti mantras, Vyasadeva left. Just before leaving, he also told Yudhisthira to move to a different forest. Otherwise the brothers might disturb the animal population in the Dwaitavana by hunting them excessively. Having lived there more than a year, they had killed many deer, tigers, boar and other wild animals. Accompanied by the brahmins whom they were supporting, Yudhisthira and his brothers moved to another part of the great Kamyaka forest, this time on the banks of the river Sarasvati.

Chapter Twenty-five. Arjuna Goes to Heaven

When the Brahmins determined an auspicious day, Yudhiṣṭhira taught Arjuna the Pratismriti mantras. The king had delayed teaching him as he knew that Arjuna would leave for the Himalayas as soon as he had the knowledge. It would be difficult to live without him. But it was Vyasadeva's desire that he go, so Yudhiṣṭhira knew the separation could not be avoided forever. Ultimately, it was probably their only chance to be successful in recovering their kingdom.

Taking Arjuna aside, Yudhiṣṭhira held him by the hands and said, "O descendant of Bharata, the four divisions of the science of arms are held by Bhishma, Droṇa, Kripa, Karṇa and Ashvatthama. They have all received divine instructions and know how to use every sort of weapon. Having been honored, gratified and supported by Duryodhana, they always seek to do him good. We should not doubt that they will support him in battle. The whole world is now under Duryodhana's sway, and he is our avowed enemy. You are our sole refuge. Depending on you we shall regain our kingdom from Duryodhana. Listen now as I tell you what should

be done.”

Yudhiṣṭhira then informed Arjuna of Vyasadeva’s instructions. He told him that he should leave as soon as possible for the Himālayas and, by meditating on the mantras he was now going to repeat, he should seek the gods’ audience in order to receive their weapons. “Allow me to initiate you today, O virtuous one, and go at once to propitiate Indra. Being pleased with you I am sure Indra will give you his weapons and, by his order, so will the other gods.”

Arjuna fully controlled his mind and senses. Then, with due rites, Yudhiṣṭhira bestowed the Pratismriti mantras on him. When he was finished Yudhiṣṭhira stood up, with tears pricking his eyes as he thought of Arjuna’s separation. “Now go, dear brother.”

With his arms and hands clad in iguana skin gauntlets and gloves, and his body covered in golden mail, Arjuna took up his Gaṇḍiva bow and his two inexhaustible quivers and stood ready to depart. Brahmins and Siddhas uttered blessings upon him and, not knowing how long he would be gone, he bade an

affectionate farewell to his brothers.

As Arjuna was about to depart, Draupadi came before him and said, “O mighty-armed Dhananjaya, may all that the noble Kunti desired at your birth, and all that you yourself desire, be accomplished. May none of us ever take birth again in this terrible kshatriya order. I offer my respects to the ascetic Brahmins, who are detached from this miserable world. My heart still burns with Duryodhana’s insult, but today I grieve even more because you are departing. In your absence we will spend our time thinking only of you. There will be no joy without you. All our hopes rest in you, O hero. May the Lord and all His energies protect you at all times, and may success be yours. Go now and attain your goal.”

Arjuna smiled at Draupadī, circumambulated his brothers and Dhaumya, and then began running swiftly along the path, frightening creatures along the way with his speed. By chanting the mantras Yudhiṣṭhira had given him, he felt himself travelling over mountains and forests at the speed of mind. By the end of the first day he arrived at the great Mandara

mountain. Arjuna stopped and looked around. The mountain was beautiful with its bluish stone rising up into the clouds. It was covered with blossoming trees, their many-colored flowers creating rich tableaux and their scent captivating his mind. The sound of peacocks, cranes and cuckoos filled the air, and he could see Siddhas and Cāraṇas sporting on the mountain slopes. Arjuna decided to climb the mountain and begin his austerities there.

Upon reaching a plateau high on the mountain, he suddenly heard a voice resounding in the sky. “Stop!” Arjuna looked around and saw an ascetic sitting at the foot of a tree. The tawny-colored Brahmin had a brilliant aura. His lean body was covered in deerskin and his matted locks hung down to his shoulders. The ascetic said, “O child, who are you? You appear to be a kshatriya. Do you not know that this is the abode of peaceful Brahmins who are free from anger? Even to have been able to reach this spot indicates that you already attained a high state of purity. Now perfect your life. You have no need of weapons here. Throw them away.”

Arjuna made it clear that he had no plans to renounce his weapons. “I need my weapons to serve my elder brother Yudhiṣṭhira, who has been wrongfully deprived of his kingdom. O Brahmin, I will not cast them aside.”

Seeing Arjuna’s dedication to duty, the ascetic replied, “O slayer of foes, I am pleased with you. Know me to be Śakra, king of the gods. Ask me for a boon.”

Arjuna was overjoyed. Here was Indra! With folded hands he said, “O exalted one, the boon I desire is that you bestow all your weapons upon me.”

Indra smiled. “O Dhanañjaya, I can grant you life in the celestial regions of bliss. Ask for this. Why do you desire only my weapons?”

“How could I incur the world’s condemnation by not avenging myself on the enemy and by abandoning my brothers in the forest?” Arjuna’s anger rose as he remembered Duryodhana’s treachery.

Indra spoke gently. “O child, when you meet Shiva, I will give you all my weapons. Try to propitiate

him, for he is the greatest of the gods. By seeing the three-eyed wielder of the trident, all your desires will be fulfilled.”

After saying this Indra disappeared, and Arjuna was left alone. He decided to remain where he was and begin his austerities and worship of Shiva. He took off his armor and set his weapons down by the same tree where Indra had sat. The tree was situated next to a flowing river, and Arjuna bathed in its clear waters, then sat down to meditate. As he did so, conchshells were heard in the sky and showers of flowers fell from the heavens. Arjuna was pleased by the auspicious sign, and he sat with half-closed eyes, controlled his breathing, and began to intone prayers to Shiva.

During the first month of his meditations, Arjuna ate only fruit on every third day. During the second month, he ate fruit only on every sixth day, and during the third month he ate fruit once a fortnight. During the fourth month he lived only on air, standing on the tips of his toes with his arms upraised. He bathed three times a day and kept his mind and senses under perfect control. As a result of his austerities, Arjuna began to

glow like the sun.

In the heavens the celestial rishis grew anxious. They approached Shiva and said, “Arjuna has become greatly effulgent due to his austerities on the breast of the Himālayas. The earth is becoming heated by his asceticism and is sending forth smoke. O chief of the gods, you should stop him before he upsets the universal order by the power of his penance.”

Shiva replied, “You need not feel anxiety on account of Phalguni. He does not wish to attain heaven or prosperity. I know his purpose and will satisfy him today.”

The rishis bowed before Shiva and returned to their own abodes. Shiva then assumed the form of a tall, powerful, golden-hued hunter, and descended to the place where Arjuna was meditating. Uma, his consort, accompanied him in a similar costume, and many of his goblin followers, who assumed various forms and wore bright garments, followed them. Many of the female goblins assumed the forms of beautiful women and also descended. As Shiva appeared on the mountainside with his followers, the mountain seemed

ablaze with beauty. Strangely, however, all nature became silent. Even the springs and waterfalls ceased their sounds.

As Shiva arrived, he saw a Danava assume the form of a boar and charge at Arjuna. The demon intended to kill Arjuna, and he roared loudly in challenge. Arjuna heard the boar's roar and quickly lifted and strung his bow. Placing a virulent arrow on his bowstring, Arjuna called out, "I have done you no harm. As you seek to kill me, I shall certainly send you to Yamaraja's abode."

At the same moment Shiva also trained his arrow on the boar and shouted to Arjuna, "Stop! This dark-colored boar is mine. I saw him first and have already aimed my arrow at him."

Arjuna ignored Shiva's claim and released his arrow, which sped toward the massive boar. Shiva simultaneously released his arrow and the two shafts both struck the Danava at the same time. There was a sound like thunder as the arrows hit the demonic boar's rock-like body. Assuming his natural form, the demon gave up his life with a terrible cry.

Arjuna looked around at the hunter. His body shone like a golden mountain. He was surrounded by hundreds of women. Arjuna glared at him. “Who are you, dressed like a hunter and wandering in this solitary forest surrounded by your followers? Are you not afraid? Why have you pierced this boar which I targeted first? Do you not know that this is against all accepted practices in hunting. Indeed you have insulted me and so I will punish you by taking your life.”

The hunter replied with a smile, “O hero, you need not be concerned about me. I always dwell in the forest. But what brings you here? You are obviously royalty, used to living in luxury. How is it that you have adopted an ascetic life?”

Arjuna held his bow tightly. “Depending on the strength of my arms, I live in this forest. See how I killed this fearful Rakshasa who was intent on killing me.”

The hunter laughed derisively. “It was I who killed this one, not you. I saw him first, and it was by my arrow that he was sent to Death’s abode. You are overly proud of your strength. Do not accuse others

when you yourself are at fault. O wicked-minded wretch, you have wronged me and will therefore not escape with your life. Stand and receive my arrows. Try to defend yourself, if you can.”

Infuriated, Arjuna immediately struck the hunter with a cluster of swift arrows, but he simply smiled and received Arjuna’s shafts without flinching. He called out, “O wretch! Send your fiercest arrows, those that are capable of piercing to the heart.”

Arjuna released another volley of shafts. Becoming angry, Shiva sent back hundreds of his own arrows. A great battle then ensued. Showers of snake-like arrows sped back and forth. As Arjuna countered the hunter’s arrows, he was surprised to see that, although struck by countless shafts, his adversary was not affected. The Pandava increased the force of his attack, but the hunter stood unmoved. Seeing that he could not shake his foe, Arjuna called out in admiration, “Excellent! Well done!”

Arjuna looked with wonder at the hunter. Clearly this was not an ordinary man. No one could withstand the force of thousands of arrows shot from the Gāṇḍīva

without being moved. Perhaps he was a celestial. Arjuna decided to use his mystical weapons. No matter who this was--even if he was a Gandharva or a Yaksha--unless he was actually Shiva himself, Arjuna intended to kill him.

Arjuna then invoked weapons which fired thousands of arrows blazing like the sun. Shiva cheerfully received all his shafts as a mountain receives a downpour of rain. Then to Arjuna's amazement he found that his celestial quivers were suddenly exhausted. How was that possible? Who was this who swallowed up all his arrows? With what could he fight now? Arjuna raised his great bow like a club and rushed at the hunter. He struck him a number of heavy blows, but Shiva snatched away his bow and drew it into his body. It simply vanished. Arjuna then drew his sword and brought it down upon the hunter's head with all his strength, but it shattered to pieces.

Arjuna was afraid, but he continued to fight. This time he lifted rocks and boulders and threw them at the hunter. He tore up trees and slung them at the hunter. Still he made no impression. Arjuna's mouth smoked

with wrath. He rushed at his foe and pummeled him with his fists. Shiva struck him back and a hand-to-hand fight ensued. They struck one another and grappled furiously, each seizing the other and shoving him with full force. Sparks and smoke flew from their bodies.

Finally, the hunter released Arjuna and he fell back, dazed, almost unconscious. Arjuna looked at the hunter in astonishment. He had failed to make the least impression on him. Surely this must be the exalted god Shiva. No one else could have fought with such power.

Arjuna retreated to a distance and quickly fashioned an image of Shiva from the earth. He worshipped it with flowers and as he did so, he saw flowers falling onto the hunter's head. Now he had no doubt. This was the deity he was seeking. Arjuna fell headlong at the god's feet, and as he did so he felt all his fatigue dispelled.

Shiva was pleased with Arjuna and he spoke to him in a voice as powerful as roaring clouds. "O Phālgunī, today you have satisfied me. There is no warrior equal to you in courage or patience. O best of

the Bharata race, your strength is practically equal to mine. You were formerly a rishi and have now taken birth to serve the Supreme Lord's purposes. Soon you will acquire the weapons with which to defeat your enemies, even if they be celestials. I shall bestow upon you my own irresistible weapon. Now I will give you the eyes to see me in my original form. Behold!"

Arjuna looked up and saw Shiva with his three eyes, holding a trident, a divine serpent draped around his bluish neck. Arjuna bowed down and prayed, "O great god, O highly exalted one, you are the refuge of all the celestials. The very universe has sprung from you. You are Viṣṇu in a different form and are unconquerable by gods, demons or men. O Śaṅkara, pray forgive me. It was only to receive your audience that I came to this mountain. Please pardon me for my rashness in fighting with you. I seek your protection."

Shiva lifted Arjuna to his feet and embraced the Pandava. "I have pardoned you. You are Nara, the friend of Nārāyaṇa. Previously you two chastised the demon hordes at Indra's coronation. Krishna is that Supreme Nārāyaṇa, and with Him you will again

punish the wicked. O Pārtha, take back your Gāṇḍīva bow. Your quivers will again become inexhaustible. There is no man on earth equal to you. Ask from me whatever you desire.”

Shiva handed the Gāṇḍīva bow to Arjuna and Arjuna said, “O lord, if you are pleased with me, then I humbly ask that you bestow upon me your irresistible personal weapon known as the Pashupata. You destroy the universe with this weapon at the end of creation, and with it I may be victorious over Rakshasas, Danavas, Gandharvas, Nagas, ghosts and spirits. It will enable me to emerge successfully from the battle I shall fight against Bhishma, Droṇa, Kripa, and the son of the suta, Karṇa.”

Shiva replied, “O son of Kunti, I will give you this weapon. You are capable of holding, throwing, and withdrawing it. Not even Indra, Yama, Kuvera, or Varuṇa knows the mantras to this weapon--what to speak of any man. However, you must use it only against celestial fighters. The Pashupata should never be released at lesser enemies or else it may destroy the creation. This weapon is discharged by the mind, eyes,

words, or a bow. No one in the three worlds of moving or nonmoving creatures can withstand its force.”

Arjuna then bathed for purification and stood before Shiva to receive the mantras. The god gave his weapon to Arjuna and it then waited upon him just as it waited upon Shiva himself. When the celestials saw the fearful weapon standing in its embodied form by Arjuna’s side, the earth trembled and terrible winds blew in all directions. Thousands of conches and trumpets were heard resounding in the sky. Shiva said, “Now go to heaven and receive Indra’ weapons.” He then departed with Uma and his many followers.

* * *

When Shiva was gone, Arjuna stood for a few moments gazing at the sky, awed by what had just transpired. He had seen the god of gods. The unknowable deity had touched him with his own hand. Arjuna now considered his enemies already vanquished and his ends accomplished. He possessed Shiva’s irresistible weapon. Although he could not discharge the Pāśupāta at human foes, its very possession made him feel invincible.

While Arjuna stood absorbed in thought, Varuṇa appeared before him accompanied by the rivers personified and many Nagas, Siddhas and other lesser gods. Kuvera was also in attendance, his body resembling pure gold and seated upon a splendid chariot. Kuvera was accompanied by countless Yakshas. They stood before Arjuna, illuminating everything with their bodily effulgence. Arjuna also saw in the sky the god of justice, Yamarāja, approaching on his chariot with mace in hand and flanked by the personified forms of Death and Time.

On a nearby mountain summit, Arjuna saw Indra and his queen Sachi seated on the back of the celestial elephant Airāvata and appearing like the rising sun. A white umbrella was being held over his head and he was surrounded by Gandharvas and rishis, who were eulogizing him with Vedic hymns.

Arjuna chanted numerous prayers in praise of the gods and offered them fruits and water. As he stood gazing in amazement, Yamaraja spoke, his voice as deep as autumnal rain clouds. “Behold, O Arjuna, that all the world’s protectors, the Lokapalas, have come

here. We shall bestow upon you divine eyes. O sinless one, you were formerly the Rishi Nara. At Brahma's behest, you have taken your birth as a mortal. You shall vanquish in battle the powerful Bhishma and the many other fierce warriors headed by Drona. The enemies of the gods, Daityas and Danavas, have taken their birth in the world of men. These shall all be slain in a great battle in which you will play the main role. Your fame on earth shall be eternal."

Yamarāja offered his personal weapon, a celestial mace, to Arjuna. The Pandava received the weapon along with the mantras for hurling and withdrawing it. After that, Varuṇa gave Arjuna his inescapable Nāgapasha nooses. Arjuna also received Kuvera's weapon, the antardhāna, which could baffle and render unconscious even mighty Asuras. Then Indra spoke: "O subduer of enemies, you shall perform a great work for the gods. Now you must ascend to heaven. There I will give you my own weapon and other irresistible astras belonging to the celestials. My chariot, driven by my servant Matali, will soon carry you there."

The Lokapālas then vanished, leaving Arjuna alone. As he looked up, he saw what appeared to be a second sun gradually increasing in brilliance in the sky. The whole region vibrated as the radiance increased. Arjuna realized that this was Indra's chariot descending to earth. The chariot was huge, and it was drawn by ten thousand celestial horses of greenish and golden hue. Matali, in golden armor, was holding the reins. As the chariot approached, Arjuna could see upon it innumerable swords and maces, as well as all kinds of missiles. Axes, darts, lances, and spears of every kind were placed all around the chariot. Celestial thunderbolts and brilliant lightning bolts glowed from its sides. Huge-bodied, fierce Nagas with fiery mouths were seated on the chariot, along with great silver canons furnished with wheels and capable of sending celestial missiles a vast distance.

Arjuna saw Indra's dark blue flagstaff, the Vaijayanta, standing in the middle of the chariot as straight as a bamboo and as tall as a great palm tree. Then the chariot halted and Matali stood before Arjuna. Bowing low, he said, "O fortunate one, I have

been instructed to take you to Shakra. Your father, encircled by the celestials, rishis, Gandharvas and Apsaras, wishes to see you in heaven. Shiva has also ordered me. Ascend this chariot and come to the heavenly regions.”

Arjuna again bathed for purification, then offered prayers to Mount Mandara: “O king of mountains, you are the refuge of pious sages seeking heaven. You have sheltered me and I have lived here happily. I offer you my thanks and bid you farewell.” With that, Matali led Arjuna to a flight of crystal steps leading up to the chariot.

Matali urged the steeds which drew the chariot with the speed of the mind high into the sky. As they entered the celestial regions, Arjuna saw thousands of wondrous chariots carrying shining beings of great beauty. He saw kings and warriors who had been slain in battle and had attained effulgent celestial forms. As they moved along the paths of the gods, Arjuna saw Siddhas, Cāraṇas, rishis, Guhyakas and Apsaras. The region glowed with a brilliance born of the ascetic merits of such beings. Amazed, Arjuna inquired into

their identities. The charioteer replied, “These are pious persons, O son of Kunti, stationed in their respective spheres. You have seen their shining abodes from the earth as stars in the firmament.”

The chariot passed through the gate of Indra’s planet, where Arjuna saw Airāvata, the great white elephant with four tusks. The elephant resembled Mount Kailāsa with its four summits. Passing through divine regions meant for pious men who had performed great sacrifices and asceticism, they arrived at last in Amarāvati, Indra’s capital city.

Arjuna gazed with wide open eyes at the astonishing city. Flowers from all the seasons bloomed simultaneously, and there were groves of sacred trees. Fragrant breezes moved among their golden leaves, creating cascades of brilliant light. Countless mansions and palaces stretched into the distance. Arjuna saw the famous Nandana gardens, in which the gods sported with Apsaras.

“Those who turn their backs in battle can never see this place,” Matali said, seeing Arjuna’s amazement. “Neither can those who are wicked-

mined, who have not performed sacrifice, who have not abstained from liquor and meat, who have not bathed in holy rivers nor given charity to Brahmins ever reach this abode.”

As they proceeded through the city, Arjuna beheld celestial cars traveling by the occupants’ wills. Gandharvas and Apsaras eulogized Arjuna as he passed. He heard the sound of celestial music and of thousands of conchshells and drums. Arjuna entered Indra’s magnificent assembly hall and met with the Sādhyas, Maruts, Vishvadevas, and twin Aśvinīs. He saw the Adityas, Vasus, Rudras, and the many royal saints headed by King Dilipa. Narada Rishi was also present along with the Gandharva leader, Tumbaru.

After offering his respects to the assembled personalities, Arjuna approached his father, the king of the gods. Indra was seated beneath his white umbrella and was being fanned by golden-handled and perfumed chamaras. Many pure Brahmins praised him with hymns from the Rig and Yajur Vedas, and the Gandharvas and Charaṇas played celestial instruments of all descriptions for his pleasure.

Arjuna prostrated himself before Indra, who got down from his throne and embraced him. The thousand-eyed god took Arjuna by the hand and led him back up the flight of golden steps to his bejeweled throne. Indra then had his son sit next to him on the throne, where he shone like a second Indra. With his perfumed hand, Indra affectionately stroked Arjuna's head. Out of love, Indra gently patted and rubbed his arms, which were like gold columns. The deity gazed without satiation at his son's face. Seated together on the throne, Arjuna and Indra appeared like the sun and the moon together in a clear sky.

Indra gave Arjuna the celestial sight to perceive Amaravati's divine beauty. The city was unimaginably opulent. The Pandava looked around at the numerous effulgent rishis who sat reciting sacred texts from the Vedas. Groups of Gandharvas headed by Tumbaru sang hymns in voices which entirely captivated the mind. As they sang, Apsaras performed exquisite dances full of gestures and sidelong glances. They shook their breasts and moved their broad hips.

The celestials offered Arjuna the sacred arghya

and washed his feet. At Indra's command, Arjuna was then escorted to Indra's palace. Arjuna took up residence there and Indra instructed him in how to use the celestial weapons, and especially the irresistible thunderbolt weapon, Vajra, and Indra's powerful lightning flashes.

Although living amid splendor and opulence, Arjuna could not forget his brothers in the forest, and he longed to return to them. Whenever he thought of his brothers, he also remembered the circumstances that had brought them to the forest, and he remembered Shakuni, Dushashana, Duryodhana and Karṇa. Arjuna had no peace. As he was equipped with one powerful weapon after another, he thought only of the inevitable battle that would take place in the future. No one would be able to stand against him now. Those wicked-minded men would be punished. Draupadi would be avenged and Yudhiṣṭhira's kingdom would be recovered.

When Arjuna had become adept at using all the weapons, Indra told him, "You should go to your friend Chitrasena and learn singing and dancing from

him. He can teach you such music that does not exist in the world of men and is known only to the celestials. This knowledge will prove useful to you in the future.”

Arjuna thus learned the Gandharva skills. The Pandava did not know why Indra had requested him to study such subjects, but he was sure the god could see by divine intelligence that such knowledge would surely be helpful in the future.

* * *

Arjuna lived in Amarāvati for five years, thinking always of his brothers. As the time for him to leave approached, Indra summoned Chitrasena and spoke with him in private. “O chief of the Gandharvas, I have seen Arjuna casting glances at Urvashi. Go to her and have her wait upon the Pandava with all her feminine graces and skills. As you have taught him all the arts of music, so now you should teach him the art of associating with women.”

Chitrasena said, “So be it,” and went at once to Urvashi and described Arjuna’s many virtues.

“O lady of fair hips, know that I have come here

on Indra's command to ask from you a favor. There is one now living in heaven who is renowned among men for his grace, behavior, beauty, vows and self-control. He is famous for his might and his prowess, and he is respected by the pious. He is also endowed with presence of mind, is a genius, and possesses great energy. That mighty hero is forgiving and without malice. He knows all the Vedas with their many branches, is devoted to his elders, is never boastful, sees even small things as if they were important, and is always the shelter of his dependents. His name is Arjuna, and his father Indra brought him to heaven. O blessed lady, Arjuna seems inclined toward you. Please go to him and allow him to obtain you."

Urvashi cheerfully replied, "Having heard of Arjuna's virtues, how could I fail to be attracted? Indeed, thinking of that hero I am already stricken by the god of love. O Chitrasena, go now wherever you like and I shall go to him."

Having succeeded in his mission, the Gandharva left. Urvashi then prepared to meet Arjuna. She bathed and smeared her body with perfumed unguents.

Dressing with layers of diaphanous silks, she adorned herself with jewels and gold ornaments, as well as fragrant garlands of brightly colored flowers. She was absorbed in thoughts of Arjuna and her heart was pierced with Cupid's arrows. Inflamed by desire, she imagined herself lying with Arjuna on a soft, wide bed laid over with silk sheets.

Setting out at a time when the moon began to rise, the thin-waisted Urvashi went toward Arjuna's abode. As she walked, her long black braids, which she had decorated with bunches of flowers, swung around her beautiful white face. Her two finely tapering breasts, adorned with a string of diamonds and pearls and smeared with fragrant sandalwood paste, trembled as she walked gracefully through the gardens. Her high, round hips, covered with thin cloth and decked with golden chains, moved from side to side. The rows of golden bells around her ankles tinkled gently. She defied the splendor of the full moon and was quite capable of breaking the vows of great ascetics. Exhilarated by the little liquor she had drunk and full of desire, she cast glances from side to side and seemed

even more alluring. Seeing her pass, the Siddhas and Cāraṇas considered her the finest sight in heaven. She soon arrived at Arjuna's door and sent word to him through the doorkeeper.

Arjuna immediately invited her into his house. He was anxious that the goddess had come to see him at night. Seeing her incomparable beauty he closed his eyes out of modesty. Arjuna worshipped her as if she were his superior and said, "O foremost of Apsaras, I bow down to you. What is your command? I am your servant."

Hearing his words, Urvashi was overjoyed. Her voice rang out like tinkling bells. "O best of men, I will tell you what brings me here. When you first came to heaven, a large assembly was convened during which we celebrated your arrival. All the gods and celestials were present, and you were seated by Śakra's side. You saw me then, dancing in the midst of the chief Apsaras. Your gaze rested upon me for some moments and Indra noticed your attentions. Thus he has sent me here through Chitrasena. I have come to wait upon you, O hero. My heart is stolen by your virtues and I am

under the control of Kamadeva. This is my wish: let me possess you tonight.”

Arjuna at once covered his ears in shame. “O blessed lady, O most charming one, it is not proper for me to hear you speak such words. You are the wife of my superior. As the illustrious Kunti or the beautiful Śacī, Indra’s consort, is to me, so too are you, O goddess. Do not doubt what I say. O lady of sweet smiles, I did indeed gaze upon you, but not out of desire. There was quite another reason.”

Arjuna had heard of Urvashi while at home on the earth. Thousands of years previously she had become Pūrurava’s wife, who was one of Arjuna’s ancestors. It was her son who had been the forefather of Arjuna’s dynasty. Arjuna told Urvashi that he thus felt quite unable to make her his lover. “O blessed one, when I gazed at you I was simply amazed to see the mother of my dynasty. You should not entertain any other feeling for me than that of your son.”

Urvashi smiled. “O son of Indra, we of the heavenly realms are not fettered by human morality. You need not see me as a superior. I have sported with

other sons and grandsons of the Pūru dynasty without incurring sin. Be favorable toward me. I am burning with desire and feel devoted to you. Do not reject me, for that is not the practice of virtuous men.”

But Arjuna could not change his attitude. “O beautiful lady, hear what I tell you and let the four directions and all the celestials also hear. You are no different to me than Kunti, Madri or Sachi. I bow my head to you as my mother. Please protect me as your son.”

After Arjuna had spoken in this way, it was clear to Urvashi that he was firm in his determination. Rejected and insulted, she became angry. With knitted brows and quivering lips, she exclaimed, “As you insult a woman who has come to you at your father’s command and out of her own desire--a woman pierced by Cupid’s arrow--you shall lose your manhood and live as a dancer in the company of women. O Arjuna, you shall become a eunuch and lose all respect.”

With that, Urvashi turned and left Arjuna.

Arjuna thought carefully. Surely Indra must have

known that this would happen. Why then had he asked Chitrasena to send Urvashi to him? Arjuna went at once to Chitrasena and told him what had transpired, repeatedly mentioning the curse. Chitrasena then went to Indra and informed him of the situation. Indra called for Arjuna and spoke to him in private.

“O best of men, because you are her son, Kunti is the most glorious mother. You have defeated even the rishis by your self-control and patience. Do not worry. Urvashi’s curse will be for your good and will prove useful. You will need to pass your final year of exile incognito. At that time, Urvashi’s curse will take effect and, living as a eunuch, no one shall discover you. Having passed one year without your manhood, you shall regain it at the end of that period.”

Arjuna was relieved. The Pandava then stopped worrying about the curse and continued to live happily in the heavens with his father and Chitrasena.

Chapter Twenty-six. To Badarika Ashrama

In Hastinapura Dhritarastra sat in his chamber, his head in his hands. As time passed he was becoming increasingly anxious. What would happen at the end of the Pandavas' exile? Would they not return with blazing weapons to seek vengeance? How would any of the Kauravas survive? If only Duryodhana would give up his envy. Yudhisthira would certainly live peacefully with his cousins if they were willing to share the kingdom, but that seemed unlikely. It appeared that nothing could change Duryodhana's attitude. Even he could not sway him.

Dhritarastra's anxiety doubled when he heard from Vyasadeva that Arjuna had gone to the heavens to obtain weapons. Seeking comfort, the king called Sanjaya, and when he was seated before him, he said, "Have you heard anything more about Arjuna's activities? That powerful hero has ascended to heaven in his own body. My son is Arjuna's sworn enemy. Their enmity will surely destroy the world. Aided by Arjuna, Yudhisthira can conquer the three worlds. Who among mortals can stand before Arjuna as he rains down virulent arrows?"

Tears flowed from the king's blind eyes as he continued. "I do not see my son becoming successful even though Bhishma, Drona and Karna support him. None of these warriors can equal Arjuna, the infallible Krishna's friend. The man who can slay Arjuna does not exist, nor can anyone live long after coming within the range of his arrows. It seems to me that our armies have already fled in all directions upon hearing the fearful rumble of his chariot wheels. Surely Brahma created that hero to destroy our race."

Sanjaya said nothing. He had heard the king make similar statements on many occasions, but still Dhritarastra did nothing to control his sons. It was as if he was hoping that Duryodhana and his followers could defy the inevitable outcome of their sinful activities. The old king was no fool, but he was so attached to his son that he allowed his attachment to overpower his reason.

After some moments Sanjaya said, "O king, your words are all true. Nothing you have said is wrong. When they saw their wife insulted in the hall, the Pandavas became consumed by wrath. I do not see how they will ever forgive your sons. I have heard from Vyasadeva that Arjuna satisfied the immortal Shiva and received from him his weapon. Your race now faces

disaster."

Dhritarastra continued to lament. The annihilation of the Kauravas was certain, he said. Allied with Krishna, the Pandavas were invincible. Duryodhana and Karna were the causes of the calamity he now faced. "O Sanjaya, when I shall hear that my armies have been crushed by Arjuna and Bhima, I, forever obedient to Duryodhana's desires, shall then recall all the good advice my well-wishers gave me which I should have heeded."

With a wry smile Sanjaya replied, "Again you have spoken the truth. You do not care for good advice. Therefore, it is only by your own fault that you now lament. You could have stopped Duryodhana, but you chose not to do so. Now we shall all suffer the reaction."

Dhritarastra fell silent. He now felt that the events were beyond his control. It was true. He was too attached to Duryodhana. He could not refuse his son anything. His half-hearted attempts to check Duryodhana were simply a waste of time. His sons laughed at his weakness. They knew they could sway him in the end. The blind king held his forehead and sighed. Would he ever see his son seated on the emperor's throne? That right had become his only due to Pandu's retirement. If only Duryodhana could win that right for himself. But how? Destiny seemed all-powerful. Feeling helpless, the king remained awake throughout the night, as he had on so many occasions.

* * *

After Arjuna had left for the Himalayas, his brothers and Draupadi continued to live in the Kamyaka. They missed him sorely, and they had no idea how long he might be away or whether or not he would ever return. But they knew they would only be successful in their fight to regain the kingdom with Arjuna's assistance. Thus they prayed for his safe passage to the mountains and for his success in gaining the celestial weapons.

Yudhisthira felt especially anguished. Bhima would frequently remind him of the gambling match. That mighty Pandava wanted only to take up arms and chastise the Kauravas. Despite his brother's counsel, he could not see the point of acting honorably toward dishonorable persons. Nor could he see how they would ever gain success by peaceful means.

"As soon as we leave the forest," Bhima said one day to Yudhisthira,

"the sinful Shakuni will immediately challenge you to another game of dice. You will not refuse, although you are still unskilled at the game. Surely you will lose your senses and we shall again be consigned to the forest. O great prince, simply command me and I shall destroy Duryodhana right now, even as a fire consumes a pile of grass."

Yudhisthira consoled his brother. He never allowed himself to become angered by his words, which he knew were spoken out of affection. Bhima wanted nothing more than to see his elder brother as emperor of the world.

As the Pandavas discussed, the rishi Vrihadashwa approached them. He emerged from the woods as the sun comes out from behind a dark cloud. The brothers immediately bowed before him and offered him a seat, arghya, and other items.

The sage was clad in deerskin and had matted hair. Yudhisthira folded his hands and said, "Almighty one, due to the nefarious schemes of evil-minded gamblers, I have been deprived of my wealth and kingdom. Now my brothers are suffering and my wife has been humiliated. We are all exiled. My mind burns both with the remembrance of my enemies' cruel words and my own foolishness, and I feel sorrow to think of my relatives and subjects. Now I have been deprived of Arjuna's company, who is dearer to me than life. I remain awake whole nights feeling his absence. Have you ever heard of any king or prince more unfortunate than myself?"

Vrihadashwa replied that he knew the history of an ancient king who had ruled the Nishadha tribespeople. He too had been defeated at dice by his brother and exiled to the forest with his wife. The king's name was Nala, and his wife was called Damayanti. This story, the sage said, destroyed evil in people's minds and pacified their hearts. Yudhisthira requested him to please narrate the story in detail. It seemed that Nala and Damayanti's plight had been even worse than that of the Pandavas. After losing everything and being sent to the forest, the king and his wife had also been separated, and both had wandered alone for a long time before finally being reunited and regaining their kingdom.

"You, on the other hand, O Yudhisthira, are here with your brothers and wife and are surrounded by brahmins. Do not grieve. Men of your caliber always understand that material happiness and distress come and go

according to destiny. It is beyond human exertion to change it."

The rishi assured Yudhisthira that he could help him never again to fall victim to Shakuni. "I am acquainted with the science of dice, O virtuous hero, and I shall pass this knowledge unto you." Vrihadashwa then taught Yudhisthira the skills of the game and took his leave.

* * *

The Pandavas passed their days discussing spiritual topics and the art of kingship, and hearing the brahmins' recite from scripture. They also underwent a daily regimen of physical training to keep themselves fit as warriors. Draupadi cooked wild roots and vegetables gathered in the forest, then placed everything on the sun god's dish and offered the food to the Lord. From the inexhaustible plate she then fed the hundreds of sages, then her husbands, and after everyone else had eaten, she accepted her own meal.

Besides the brahmins who resided near the Pandavas, many traveling brahmins stopped to see Yudhisthira. From them, Yudhisthira learned that Arjuna was performing severe asceticism in the Himalayas. The Pandavas and Draupadi felt pained to hear of it and prayed that he would soon achieve the goal of his mission and return.

One day Yudhisthira saw the effulgent rishi Narada standing before him. After the Pandavas had worshipped him, the sage offered his blessings and asked if there was anything he could do for them. Yudhisthira bowed before Narada and said that he wished to travel to various pilgrimage sites. He asked Narada which sites would be most beneficial for them to visit. Narada told Yudhisthira of the many holy places he should visit with his brothers. He also asked Yudhisthira to request the rishis who were living with the Pandavas to accompany them. "In this way, O king, you will receive great merit. The paths to the tirthas I have described are infested with Rakshasas. Only you are able to visit such holy places and thus enable these brahmins to see them as well."

Narada assured Yudhisthira that by traveling to the holy places, the Pandavas would have the opportunity to meet such glorious rishis as Valmiki, Kashyapa, Atri, Vashista, Markandeya and others. "Soon the powerful sage Lomasa will come here. Go with him to the tirthas, O King. In this way you will attain everlasting fame equal to that of the kings Mahavisha, Yayati and

Pururava. You will destroy your enemies and recover all that is rightfully yours. Like Bhagiratha, Manu, and even Lord Rama, you will rule the earth and shine among kings as the sun shines among stars."

Just after Narada departed, Lomasa Rishi arrived. The sage was radiant in his black deerskin, and he carried only a water pot. Receiving him with honor, the Pandavas sat around him and asked him to tell of his travels. Lomasa replied, "O heroes, while journeying throughout the worlds I went to Amaravati, Indra's great city. There I saw the exalted king of the celestials and, to my astonishment, your brother Arjuna sharing his throne. Indra asked me to come to you and to assure you of Arjuna's welfare. Thus I have come with all speed."

Lomasa told the Pandavas how Arjuna had acquired the celestial weapons, including Shiva's famous weapon. He had also learned to sing and dance from the Gandharvas. He would be returning soon. "Your brother asked me to lead you to the tirthas so that you may gain pious merits. Indra also made this request, and it is my desire as well. Although I have already been to all the tirthas twice, I shall go for a third time with you."

Yudhisthira and his brothers were overjoyed to hear of Arjuna's success. Yudhisthira said, "O exalted brahmin, your words are like a shower of nectar. Who could be more fortunate than one who is remembered by the king of the celestials? Now having you as our guide, our fortune is complete. Be pleased, O rishi, to show us all the holy places."

Yudhisthira then addressed the brahmins who were staying with them. "O best of men, let those mendicants, brahmins and yogis who are incapable of bearing hunger, thirst, and the fatigue of travel and severe climate desist from following me."

Yudhisthira knew that the journey to the tirthas would be difficult. He did not want to expose the brahmins to unnecessary suffering. He continued, "All those desiring regular meals and living upon cooked food should stay back. You may now go to King Dhritarastra for your maintenance. The king of the Panchalas will also provide for you. With your permission, we shall now depart."

Sorrowfully, a number of brahmins took their leave and traveled toward Hastinapura. Only a few hundred ascetic brahmins remained to travel with Lomasa, Dhaumya and the Pandavas. They chose a day to begin their

pilgrimage that was marked by favorable constellations. Then before leaving, the brothers put on armor over their deerskin and bark garments. They took up their weapons with the expectation of meeting Rakshasas. As they began their journey, Yudhishthira said to Lomasa, "O foremost of celestial rishis, I do not think I am without religious merit, but still I am afflicted with sorrow. On the other hand, I see that my enemies lack all merit but yet they prosper. How can such apparent contradictions exist?"

"O son of Kunti, you should never grieve for such things. A man may be seen to prosper in sin, obtain good fruits or vanquish his enemies, but he is finally destroyed to the root. I have seen many Daityas and Danavas prosper by sin, but I have also seen them overtaken by utter destruction. O ruler of the earth, I saw all this in the Satya-yuga especially."

Lomasa narrated how during Satya-yuga, the first in the cycle of the four ages, the Asuras proudly refused to perform religious acts while the Devas practiced virtue and engaged in sacrifice. At first the Asuras, seeking only wealth, became powerful and wealthy, but it did not last. "From the possession of ill-gotten wealth there arose every kind of evil propensity, and from that arose shamelessness. All good behavior disappeared and for want of good conduct and virtue the Asuras could no longer express forgiveness or morality. They lost their prosperity because the goddess of fortune, Lakshmi, left the Asuras and sought out the celestials—while the goddess of adversity, Alakshmi, sought out the Asuras. When afflicted by adversity the Asuras became angry and became possessed by Kali, the god of quarrel and destruction, who influenced them toward more and more sin. Destitute of all sacrifice and religious ritual, they soon met with complete ruin.

"On the other hand, the virtuous Devas visited holy places and engaged in sacrifice, charity and asceticism. Thus the prosperity they attained was lasting.

"Therefore, O best of men, you too will gain good fortune by visiting the tirthas and by your ascetic life in the forest. Dhritarastra's sons, addicted to sin, will certainly be destroyed exactly as the Asuras were destroyed."

Reassured by Lomasa's words, Yudhishthira and his brothers, along with Draupadi, followed the rishi through the forest. Behind them walked their attendants, headed by Indrasena, the brothers' long-time intimate servant who had gone with them into the forest. The brahmins followed the servants,

and the party formed a long line through the undergrowth.

Gradually they visited the many sacred tirthas and bathed in numerous holy rivers and lakes. They offered oblations to their ancestors and heard spiritual instructions from the ascetics living at the sacred sites. The brothers also heard the fascinating accounts of kings and rishis of former ages associated with all the holy places.

When they reached the Himalayas, Lomasa warned the party to proceed with caution. "There is Mount Meru and the peaks of Kailasha, Gandhamadana, Trishringa and Makaragiri," he said, pointing ahead to the splendid mountain rising into the clouds. "Here reside thousands of invisible celestial beings. The Kimpurushas, Yakshas, Kinnaras, Suparnas, Nagas and Rakshasas, all as swift as the wind and as powerful as a thousand mighty elephants, move about on these mountain ranges. Sinful men cannot gain access here, for they will be destroyed by the celestials."

As Lomasa prayed to the gods for protection, Yudhisthira said to Bhima, "Carefully guard Draupadi, dear brother. She always seeks and deserves your protection when she is afraid. We shall now proceed into these sacred mountains. By virtue of our asceticism and the pious merits we have earned through sacrifice, we may all be allowed to approach this holy region."

Lomasa had told the brothers that they would meet Arjuna in the mountains as he descended from heaven onto the summit of the Gandhamadana mountain. They decided to go there and await Arjuna's arrival. The path to the mountain peak, however, was fraught with danger. Lomasa asked Yudhisthira to tell his servants and most of the brahmins to stay back. Bhima then placed Draupadi on his shoulders, and the party, with only a few brahmins, made their way into the Himalayan range along the craggy mountain paths.

The terrain was rugged and the climb arduous. At last they came to the Alakananda river, said to descend to earth from the heavens. They worshipped the holy river and bathed in its crystal clear waters. The brothers looked around at the brilliant scenery that surrounded them on the high mountain plateau. It seemed as if they had arrived on a heavenly planet. Blossoming trees of every color gave off celestial fragrances. The ground was carpeted with soft bluish grasses and expanses of wild flowers.

Transparent lakes filled with blue lotuses and crowded with swans and chakravarkas lay amid groves of fruit trees. The musical sounds of cuckoos, peacocks and countless other birds filled the air. Lomasa told the Pandavas that Indra came daily to this region to perform his rituals and prayers.

The brothers saw in the distance what appeared to be a number of massive white mountains, but Lomasa told them it was the bones of Naraka, a mighty Asura whom Vishnu had slain in a past age. The rishi related the story as they traveled onward toward Gandhamadana. As they approached the mountain, the path became increasingly difficult. Leaving behind the heavenly terrain, they moved slowly along snow-bound and rocky paths. Suddenly, a violent wind blew up filling the air with dust and dried leaves, blinding the Pandavas. Bhima held onto Draupadi, who became terror stricken as she heard great trees crashing to the ground all around them. It felt as if the mountain itself were being torn asunder by some celestial power. Each of them sought whatever shelter they could find beneath rocks and trees. When the dust storm subsided, rain fell in torrents. Rivulets and streams began to flow everywhere, covered in froth and mud. As the rain continued, the streams grew louder and wider and began to carry away trees and bushes. The sky was thick with black clouds throwing out quick lightning that, despite the ferocity of the storm, seemed to play with grace upon the mountainside.

Gradually the storm abated and the sky cleared. The sun shone brightly and steam began to rise from the ground. The travelers emerged from their hiding places and, reunited, continued toward Gandhamadana.

But Draupadi was exhausted and felt she could not go any further. Overwhelmed, she fainted and fell to the ground like a plantain tree uprooted by the wind. Nakula rushed forward and caught her as she fell, and laid her gently on the deerskin Sahadeva spread out. Yudhisthira said, "How can this beautiful lady, accustomed to every luxury, sleep now on the ground? Her delicate hands and feet have turned blue with cold, and she lies there exhausted. Alas, this is all my doing. Addicted to dice I have acted foolishly and brought great suffering on those I love. King Drupada bestowed this princess upon us in the hope that she would be happy. Now she lies prostrate on the ground in this fearful wilderness."

Lomasa and Dhaumya recited mantras capable of destroying all ills. Nakula gently fanned Draupadi while Sahadeva massaged her feet. As she

slowly regained consciousness, Yudhishthira consoled her. He looked at Bhima. "How shall we carry on, O mighty-armed one? Many rugged and icy paths lie ahead. I do not think that Draupadi will be able to tolerate the journey."

Bhima suggested that they summon Ghatotkacha. "My son is powerful and can carry us through the skies. O king, simply order me and I shall bring him here by thought alone."

Yudhishthira agreed and Bhima sat down and meditated upon his son. As soon as he was remembered, Ghatotkacha appeared before Bhima and stood with folded palms. He bowed at his father's feet and saluted the other Pandavas reverently. After an affectionate welcome he said, "O sinless ones, my father has summoned me and I am ready to do your bidding. Please command me."

Bhima embraced his son. "O invincible hero, we are proceeding to the peak of Mount Gandhamadana where we shall again see our brother Arjuna. Your mother is worn out with fatigue and cannot continue. Nor shall we find it easy ourselves to follow the tortuous mountain paths, covered as they are by ice and snow. You should therefore carry us through the skies."

Ghatotkacha bowed. "With pleasure. I have at my command hundreds of sky-ranging Rakshasas. O father, I shall carry my mother Draupadi, while other Rakshasas will carry you and your brothers and all these brahmins."

Ghatotkacha gently placed Draupadi on his shoulders. He looked upon her as he would look upon his own mother, Hidimbi. Other huge-bodied Rakshasas suddenly appeared and picked up the travelers. Lomasa, however, rose unaided into the sky by his own mystic power, appearing like a second sun.

The Rakshasas flew swiftly through the heavens along the Siddha's path. As the party traveled they saw beneath them the beautiful lands inhabited by Vidhyadharas, Kinnaras, Kimpurushas, Gandharvas, and other divine beings. They saw great forests intersected by rivers and filled with elephants, bears, apes, rurus, surabhi cows and buffaloes. They passed over the country of the Uttara Kurus. Finally, they all arrived at the Gandhamadana mountain. The Rakshasas took them high onto the mountain to Badarika Ashram, the ancient hermitage of Nara and Narayana Rishis.

The Pandavas gazed around in wonder. Even though they were high in the mountains the entire region was adorned with celestial trees in full blossom. They saw the great Badari tree spread out like a vast umbrella of lush green foliage, from which the Ashram had derived its name. The tree exuded freshness and calm, and it invited shelter beneath its boughs. Its branches were loaded with ripened fruits. Colorful birds, intoxicated with the honey falling from the fruits, flew in and out of the tree, filling the air with music.

The Pandavas approached the Badari tree with folded palms. It was surrounded by soft bluish-green grass. Countless thatched cottages, the dwellings of numerous rishis, stood around the tree. The whole region was lit by its own effulgence, requiring neither sunlight nor moonlight, and it was free from excessive heat and cold. The brothers felt both their physical pains and their mental anxieties dissipating. Even their hunger and thirst abated as their minds filled with a deep peace.

As they looked about, they noticed the many sacrificial altars tended by ascetics, and they heard brahmins chanting in melodious voices. Nearby, the cool and clear waters of the Ganges flowed on its way to Earth, after having descended from heaven.

Some of the foremost rishis living in the hermitage came forward to receive the travelers. By their mystic vision they already knew who their guests were, and after accepting their obeisances, they honored them with offerings of pure water, fruits and flowers.

Yudhishthira thanked Ghatotkacha and his followers and asked them to remain with them until they returned to the Kamyaka. On the advice of Lomasa and Dhaumya, the Pandavas took up residence with the rishis to await Arjuna's arrival, passing their time hearing the many rishis' spiritual discourses.

Chapter Twenty-seven. Bhima Meets Hanuman

The Pandavas remained in Badarika Ashram for six days and nights. On the seventh day, a wind blew up from the northeast, carrying a single celestial lotus. The flower fell at Draupadi's feet. The princess looked in wonder at the golden thousand-petalled flower. Its fragrance delighted her mind and its beauty charmed her. She had never seen anything like it and she showed it to Bhima. "Just behold this flower, O mighty-armed one. Have you ever seen anything so wonderful? It gladdens my heart and I desire to give it to Yudhisthira. Please discover where it came from and bring others so that we may take them back to our hermitage in Kamyaka."

Draupadi looked at Bhima with her dark eyes, which were covered with long, curling lashes. Feeling her gaze upon him, Bhima felt commanded. He was overjoyed at the opportunity to do something for her pleasure. She had suffered so much over the past years. The gentle princess was not suited to forest life, and she still felt the agony of the insults she had suffered in Hastinapura. Now she suffered even more due to Arjuna's absence. He had always been her favorite among the Pandavas. Bhima said, "It will be done. O blessed lady, you will see me return with an armful of these golden flowers."

Bhima faced the wind and began to climb the mountain. He traveled swiftly, resembling a furious elephant crashing through the forest. All creatures fled away in fear as he raced ahead, thinking only of Draupadi.

The region through which Bhima passed became increasingly beautiful. The trees were in full bloom and they stood amid black rocks inlaid with gems. It seemed to Bhima as if the Goddess Earth had raised her arm adorned with sparkling ornaments in the form of this mountain. Bhima felt a cool breeze fanning his body, and his energy increased. On all sides he saw numerous Gandharvas and Siddhas sporting on the mountain slopes with their consorts, the beautiful celestial maidens turning their heads sideways to look at the Pandava as he rushed past. Bhima scoured the mountainside as he ran, looking everywhere for the lotuses, but he did not find the flowers. He continued higher into the mountain, roaring with exultation at his own strength and power. Hearing the tremendous noise, animals at a distance became afraid. The mountain tigers left their dens and ran about. Some of them tried to attack Bhima, but he slapped them aside as he ran. He lifted

elephants and tossed them at other elephants, clearing his path.

Bhima then came to a plantain forest. He entered it with force and broke some of the tall trees by hitting against them with his arms and thighs. He was still shouting, and his roars now mixed with the terrified cries of the forest animals. The tumult he created carried for miles.

Suddenly, Bhima noticed aquatic birds rising into the air not far off, frightened by the noise. Realizing there must be water nearby, and that lotuses grow on water, he made his way toward the birds. Soon, he saw a delightful lake. The Pandava went down to the water, which was adorned, by innumerable lotuses and lilies. He dived in and swam about like a maddened elephant. Refreshed and enlivened, he rose from the water and let out a terrific blast from his conch shell. Examining the lotuses, however, he realized that they were not the same as the one Draupadi desired. He set off up the mountain again, following a path leading up from the lake.

He heard a loud noise just ahead of him. The sound echoed all around the mountain and made Bhima's bodily hair stand on end. He ran forward to see what could have made such a noise and he found a huge monkey lying across the path, lashing the ground with his long tail and making the earth tremble. The monkey was effulgent and resembled a blazing hill of copper. He had broad shoulders and a slender waist. His face shone like the full moon, and behind his thin lips, Bhima could see sharp, pearl-white teeth.

Seeing him obstructing his path like a hill, Bhima roared at him. The monkey, however, did not seem impressed. He slowly opened his reddish eyes and looked lazily at Bhima. "Why have you awakened me? I am ill and deserve your kindness. Indeed, as a human you should know the codes of religion and show kindness to all lower creatures. O hero, it seems you do not know virtue because you have come here forcefully, destroying animals on your way. Who are you? Where are you going? Do you not know that you cannot proceed further? This path leads to heaven and men cannot access it. Only those who are successful in ascetic practices can go to the celestial regions. Therefore, give up your quest and turn back. Or rest here awhile and partake of the sweet fruits and cool water. O foremost of men, do not try to force your way past and thus die for nothing."

Intrigued, Bhima responded politely. "Who are you, good sir? Why

are you in the form of a monkey? I myself belong to the royal order. I am a descendent of Kuru and the son of King Pandu, and I was born in the Lunar dynasty from the union of Kunti and Vayu. My name is Bhima."

"I am simply a monkey. I shall not allow you to pass. Turn back now. Do not meet with destruction."

Bhima felt his anger rising. Who was this ape? "O monkey, I do not ask that you give me permission, nor am I interested to hear your thoughts about my destruction. Stand aside. Do not experience grief at my hands."

The monkey, still speaking in a lazy voice, said, "I am ill and cannot move. If you must pass me, then step over my body."

Bhima shook his head. "How can I step over you when I know that the all-pervading Supersoul, the Lord of all, resides in your heart as he does in the hearts of every being? I cannot disregard him."

Bhima looked closely at the monkey and he thought of the great Hanuman, Lord Rama's devoted servant. Could this be him? But that monkey had lived in a long past age. How could he still be alive? That would mean he was now almost a million years old. No, it was impossible. Bhima continued, "Had I not been aware of the Supersoul I would have leapt over you as well as the entire mountain, even as Hanuman leapt across the ocean."

The monkey turned toward Bhima and opened his eyes wide. "Who is this Hanuman who leapt over the ocean? Tell me if you can."

"He was my brother, begotten by the wind-god and endowed with intelligence and strength. He was the best of monkeys and he is celebrated in the Ramayana. For the sake of Rama's wife, Sita, he leapt a hundred yojanas over the sea to Lanka. I am equal to him in strength and prowess and am thus able to chastise you. Arise, O monkey, and give way. Otherwise, I shall send you to Yamaraja's abode."

The monkey remained calm. "I have grown old and cannot move. Please move my tail and make your way past."

Bhima moved toward the monkey. This was surely not Hanuman, for Hanuman's power was limitless. This monkey was simply some insolent and powerless being who deserved to be punished for obstructing his path and refusing to move. Perhaps he was even a Rakshasa assuming a disguise and waiting for a chance to attack. Bhima decided to take him by the tail and

whirl him around till he died. The Pandava bent over and carelessly took hold of the monkey's tail with his left hand. To his surprise, he found that he could not budge the tail even slightly.

Placing both hands firmly around the monkey's tail, Bhima pulled hard. Still it could not be moved. Bhima struggled with all his strength. His face was contracted, he was covered with perspiration, and his eyes rolled. Despite his efforts, however, Bhima could not shift it at all. The Pandava realized that this was not an ordinary monkey or even a demon as he had supposed. Bowing his head in shame, he stood before the creature with joined palms and said, "Forgive me my harsh words. Are you a Siddha, a Gandharva, or a god? I am curious. Who are you in the shape of a monkey? I seek your refuge and ask you in the mood of a disciple. If it is no secret, then be pleased to tell me."

The monkey sat up. "O chastiser of enemies, as you are curious I shall tell you. Know me to be the son of that life of the universe, Vayu, born in the womb of Keshari. I am the monkey named Hanuman whom you mentioned earlier."

As Bhima listened in amazement, Hanuman told him in brief the famous history of the Ramayana, which the Pandava already knew well. When Hanuman finished speaking, tears fell from Bhima's eyes and he fell to the ground to offer his obeisances. Rising up again, he spoke joyfully to the monkey chief. "No one is more fortunate than me, for I have seen my famous and powerful brother. O great one, I have only one desire. Please show me the form with which you jumped over the ocean. I shall then have full faith in your words."

Hanuman replied, "That form cannot be seen by you or anyone else. When I leapt over the ocean the world was a different place. It was a former age, and everything was greater. Now that Kali-yuga is about to begin, all things have diminished. I can no longer display that gigantic form because every being must obey the dictates of time. I am no exception. Therefore, please do not ask me to reveal that form."

Hearing Hanuman speak, Bhima became curious to learn more from his ancient brother. "Please tell me, what are the different manners and customs of each age? You have been alive almost since the first age. How have people pursued religion, economic development, pleasure, and

liberation in each of the yugas?"

Happy to respond to his brother, Hanuman began by describing Satya-yuga. At that time, every living being was self-realized and devoted to the Supreme Lord's service. With the onset of each successive age, however, everything diminishes and becomes more degraded. Virtue was fully manifest in the first age, but it diminished by a quarter in each successive age. By now, Hanuman explained, virtue and religion were three-quarters lost. By the end of Kali-yuga, it will have disappeared entirely. Hanuman concluded, "As the ages progress and virtue diminishes, so the nature and abilities of men undergo diminishment. Everything becomes inauspicious. Even the performance of religious acts in this last age produces contrary results. How then can I show the form with which I leapt over the great ocean? And even if I could, why should a wise man such as yourself ask to see something so unnecessary?"

But Bhima was insistent. He sensed that the very mighty Hanuman was able to show his most powerful form despite his reluctance. The Pandava greatly desired to see it and he declared that he would not leave until he was satisfied.

At last the monkey chief relented. Telling Bhima to stand back, Hanuman rose up from his resting place and expanded his body to massive proportions. He covered all sides and towered above Bhima, looking like a second Vindhya mountain. In a voice that resounded through the forest he spoke to the awestruck Pandava.

"This is the extent to which you are able to see my form. I could go on expanding myself almost without limit. My size and power increase amid foes according to their strength. Rama's devoted servants can never be overcome by any enemy."

Bhima trembled with exhilaration to see Hanuman's majestic form. Dropping to his knees he said, "O lord, greatly powerful one, I have seen your form to my satisfaction. You resemble the Mainaka mountain. As you are able to show such power, how was it that Rama had to exert himself to fight with Ravana? With you by his side, what need was there for him to do battle with that Rakshasa? It seems to me that you could have immediately and single-handedly crushed Lanka with all its warriors, elephants and chariots."

Hanuman returned to his normal size and replied solemnly. "It is exactly as you say, Bhima. That wretch Ravana was no match for me, but if I had slain him, then the glory of Dasaratha's son would have been obscured. By killing the king of the demons and rescuing Sita, my Lord Rama has established his fame and glory among men."

Hanuman then told Bhima to go back to his brothers. Bhima explained that he first had to find the source of the thousand-petalled lotuses and Hanuman showed him the way to the forest where they grew. "There is the path which leads to the Saugandhika forest, and there you will see Kuvera's gardens, which are guarded by the Yakshas and Rakshasas. In a great lake lie the flowers which you seek for your wife."

Hanuman came forward and embraced Bhima with affection. He briefly instructed him in the science of kingship and then said, "O Bhima, having once again come in contact with a human I have felt in my mind the presence of my Lord Rama, who is Vishnu incarnate and who is the blazing sun to the lotus, Sita, and to the darkness called Ravana. Therefore, I wish to give you a boon. Ask of me whatever you desire. If you wish, I shall go to Hastinapura and kill Dhritarastra's insignificant sons and grind their city to powder. Or, I can bind Duryodhana and bring him here. Tell me, what can I do for you?"

Bhima replied that he felt assured of success if Hanuman would simply lend his support and blessings. Even his presence on the battlefield would guarantee victory. Hanuman replied, "When you rush forward for the fight, sending forth lion-like roars, I will add my roars to yours. Remaining on the flagstaff of Arjuna's chariot, I will strike fear into the hearts of your foes by my terrific yells."

After embracing his brother once more, Hanuman told him to depart for Saugandhika. Seeing the glint in Bhima's impetuous eyes as he made ready to leave, Hanuman held him by the arms and said, "Do not take the flowers forcefully, child. The celestials should always be respected. In this way they will bestow their blessings upon you. As a kshatriya, you should perform your duty to protect other living beings humbly and keep your passions under control. Go in peace. I bid you farewell."

Hanuman disappeared and Bhima headed toward Saugandhika. As he walked he reflected on the astonishing form Hanuman had shown him. Who

could imagine such a sight either on heaven or on earth? Bhima also remembered Rama's glories and the great battle he had fought for Sita with Hanuman's help. Millions of Rakshasas had been slain. Bhima knew a similar fight awaited the Pandavas. Again the all-powerful Lord, the original Supreme Person, would take part in the fight. The world would then be rid of unwanted elements. Duryodhana and his brothers were no better than the sinful Rakshasas that Krishna had destroyed as Lord Rama. How could they then rule the world? Surely it was the Lord's desire that they be annihilated.

Soon Bhima's mind again drifted to his surroundings. He was moving swiftly again, but the beauty of the woodlands, groves, orchards, lakes and rivers was not lost on him. The cool breeze still carried that captivating fragrance from the blossoming trees. Herds of wild elephants roved about like masses of clouds, while buffaloes, bears, leopards and deer moved here and there.

Bhima pressed on. Just after noon, he at last arrived in the Saugandhika region. There he saw the lake filled with fresh golden lotuses, exactly like the one that had blown to Draupadi's feet. Swans swam upon the lake, and other water birds mingled with them, all making delightful sounds. The lake seemed to be fed by mountain springs that fell into it in cascades that sparkled in the sun. A canopy of green and golden trees, which swayed gently in the breeze, provided shade along the sandy lakeshore. Heaps of precious stones lay here and there. Along with the thousand-petalled lotuses, other charming flowers of a dark blue hue grew on stalks made of priceless vaidurya gems. Their beauty stole Bhima's mind.

But the thousands of Yaksha and Rakshasa guards Kuvera had deployed to protect his lake saw Bhima arrive. They moved toward him, and their leader shouted, "Who are you, effulgent one? Why have you come here clad in deerskin yet bearing weapons? Know that we are the Krodhavasas, guardians of this lake."

"I am Bhima, Pandu's son. I have come with my elder brother Dharmaraja to Badarika Ashram. There too is my dear wife, Draupadi. The breeze brought to her an excellent Saugandhika lotus, and she asked me to bring her more. O night-rangers, I have thus come here in order to satisfy that lady of faultless features, for her wish is always my order."

The Rakshasa placed his spear on the ground and replied, "O

foremost of men, this place is Kuvera's favorite playground. Humans may not sport here, nor may they take away the flowers and fruits. Only the celestials are permitted to use this lake. Others who try, disregarding the lord of wealth, certainly meet destruction. As you desire to take away the lotuses belonging to Kuvera without his permission, how can you say that you are Dharmaraja's brother? Do not perform an irreligious act. First ask Kuvera's permission and then you may enter the lake."

Bhima did not care for the warning. He had little regard for Rakshasas and was certainly not going to be told what to do by them. Completely forgetting Hanuman's admonishment, he placed his hand on his mace and boomed out, "O Rakshasas, I do not see the illustrious Kuvera here, and even if I did, I would not pray for these flowers. It is not the duty of kshatriyas to beg. In any event, this lake has sprung up on the mountain breast and belongs to everyone. Kuvera did not make it, nor did he create the lotuses. Why then should I ask his permission?"

Having said this, Bhima plunged into the lake and began to gather the lotuses. The Krodhavasas advanced, shouting at him to desist. Bhima ignored them. As far as he was concerned the lotuses were the property of their creator, God, not any lesser god. Bhima felt he had as much right to take them as did Kuvera. The Pandava knew that Draupadi would first offer them to the Lord before giving them to anyone else.

Seeing Bhima taking the flowers despite their warnings, the guards charged, yelling furiously.

"Seize him!"

"Cut him up!"

"Bind him!"

The Rakshasas entered the shallow waters and Bhima stood to receive them. Taking hold of his mace, inlaid with gold and resembling the mace Yamaraja carries, Bhima shouted back, "Stand and fight!"

The guards surrounded Bhima who whirled his mace and met the advancing Rakshasas with heavy blows. Heroic and courageous, Vayu's son was devoted to virtue and truth and could not thus be vanquished by any enemy through prowess. He killed the Krodhavasas by the hundreds, beginning with the foremost among them. Many of them fell into the water,

their arms and legs broken. Bhima resembled a whirlwind. The Rakshasas could hardly look at him as he fought. They began to flee in fear, taking to the skies.

Seeing the guards retreating, Bhima lowered his mace and continued to gather lotuses. He drank the lake's clear water, which tasted like celestial nectar and which restored his energy and strength. As he picked the lotuses, he presented them mentally to Draupadi.

The Krodhavasas ran back in terror to Kuvera and told him what had happened. The god only smiled and said, "Let Bhima take as many lotuses as he likes for Draupadi. I already knew he would be coming."

Hearing their master's words, the guards returned to the lake and saw Bhima sporting alone in its waters with a number of lotuses lying near him on the bank. They watched him in silence, keeping a safe distance.

Chapter Twenty-eight. Kuvera Offended

At Badarika, Yudhishthira suddenly noticed the appearance of fearful omens. A violent wind blew up, lashing sand and pebbles into the Pandavas' faces. Meteors fell from the sky and the sun became obscured by darkness. The earth trembled, dust fell in showers, and explosions were heard in the sky. All around them the brothers could hear the shrieks of birds and beasts.

Yudhishthira looked around. Where was Bhima? Had his brother gone off on some adventure? These omens obviously indicated that something powerful was occurring somewhere. Not seeing Bhima anywhere, Yudhishthira feared that he might be the cause of the portents. He spoke anxiously to his brothers, "Invincible ones, arm yourselves. It seems that the time for us to display our prowess has arrived."

Yudhishthira turned to Draupadi, "Do you know where Bhima is? Is he intent on performing some terrible act? Or has he already achieved a tremendous feat? These omens clearly indicate battle."

Draupadi replied, "O hero, this morning I presented to you a golden lotus. I requested Bhima to fetch more of those flowers, and he left at once for the higher reaches of this mountain."

Yudhishthira could immediately understand that Bhima had disturbed the celestials by attempting to take the lotuses from them. He went quickly to Ghatotkacha and said, "O sky-ranger, you are like a celestial in prowess and ability. We need your help. It seems my younger brother has gone upward to the regions of the gods. By his own power Vayu's son can leap into the sky and come down at will. He moves with the speed of the wind and has left to find the celestial lotuses. Please carry us to the place where they grow so that I may see what Bhima has done."

Replying, "So be it," Ghatotkacha and his followers carried the Pandavas, Draupadi and the brahmins to Saugandhika. Ghatotkacha had already been there a number of times, and he knew the way well. As they descended to the ground near the lake, they saw Bhima standing on the shore holding his mace. At a distance they saw the large-eyed Krodhavasas watching him. A number of them lay on the ground and in the water with their heads and limbs smashed.

Yudhishthira was shocked. He went over to Bhima, embraced him and

said, "What have you done, my brother? Be blessed. But if you wish to do good to me, then you should never again be so rash as to offend the celestials."

Seeing Yudhisthira there, the Yaksha guards folded their palms and bowed their heads in humility. The Pandava apologized for his brother's acts and consoled them with gentle words. Looking around at the beauty of the region, Yudhisthira desired to remain there for some time with his brothers. He asked the guards to request Kuvera's permission for them to stay. Hearing that Pandu's sons had come there, Kuvera was pleased and he gave his assent. Thus Yudhisthira and his party remained for some time on the high slopes of Gandhamadana, enjoying the heavenly atmosphere.

After a few days, Yudhisthira desired to see Kuvera. Sitting by the lakeside one morning, he told Bhima, "We have seen all the holy places with Lomasa and the other brahmins. Let us now see that most holy of places, Kuvera's abode, always frequented by Siddhas and Rishis. Can you think of some way by which we can enter the heavenly region?"

But as Yudhisthira finished speaking, a celestial voice resounded in the sky: "O King, you will not be able to go to the inaccessible abode of Vaishravana by this way. Go back to Badarika Ashram. From that place you will go to the hermitage of Vrishaparva, and then to the hermitage of Arstishena. From there you will see Kuvera's abode."

As the divine voice spoke, a cool, fragrant breeze blew down a shower of flowers. Dhaumya said, "This order of the gods cannot be ignored. We should leave immediately."

* * *

During the last few weeks before Arjuna's return, the Pandavas spent their time in the company of Rishis, but Bhima often roved about the mountain with Ghatotkacha. One day, while the two heroes were absent, a powerful Rakshasa appeared at Badarika Ashram. He had actually been there all along, having assumed the form of a brahmin and living unrecognized by the brothers. He wanted to steal Draupadi. Seeing his chance, he manifested his monstrous form, grabbed Yudhisthira and the twins in one arm and Draupadi in the other. He also seized the Pandavas' weapons. Then he rushed into the forest. Sahadeva managed to extricate himself and snatch his sword

known as Kaushika. Then he chased the demon while calling loudly for Bhima.

Yudhishthira reprimanded the Rakshasa. "O fool, virtue decreases in you and yet you care nothing. What good result do you hope to attain by your vile behavior? In this material world the celestials, Pitris, Siddhas, animals, and even worms and ants depend upon men for life. Even your race depends upon men."

Yudhishthira instructed the Rakshasa about the interdependence of all beings. By sacrifice and religious performances, mankind satisfied the gods and the Supreme Lord, who in turn supplied them and all creatures their necessities. If men suffered and were unable to practice religion, then everyone was affected.

Yudhishthira warned, "O wretch, as you have shown ingratitude for our having maintained you for so long, and as you are now trying to steal our wife, you will surely meet with destruction."

The Rakshasa felt Yudhishthira becoming unbearably heavy. He was forced to slow his pace. Sahadeva was then able to catch up to him. Yudhishthira called out, "Do not be afraid of this Rakshasa, brother. I have checked his speed and I sense that Bhima is not far away."

Sahadeva stood before the Rakshasa and said, "Stay and fight! Only after killing me can you carry this lady away into the forest. Otherwise, you will die. I am Pandu's son Sahadeva, and I am here to punish you."

As Sahadeva brandished his sword, Bhima arrived wielding his mace. Seeing his brothers and Draupadi in the Rakshasa's grip, he blazed with fury and roared, "O sinful wretch, I found you out long ago when I saw you scrutinizing our weapons, but as I apprehended no fear from you and as you were disguised as a brahmin, I took no action against you. He who kills a person living as a guest, even if he knows him to be an enemy, goes to hell. Nor could you be killed before your time had arrived. Today, you have touched the sinless Draupadi and thus destroyed your life duration. You have swallowed the hook fastened to the line of fate and, like the fish, will meet your destruction. Go now to where Hidimba and Baka have already gone."

The Rakshasa became alarmed and let Draupadi and her husbands go. His lips trembled in anger as he rebuked Bhima. "It is you who are sinful. I know of your having slain those Rakshasas. Today I will offer them

oblations of your blood. Come and fight. I am waiting."

Without saying more, Bhima rushed at the demon. Seeing him unarmed, he put down his mace and took hold of the Rakshasa with his bare hands. The demon met him like the Asura Vritra met Indra. As they fought in fury the earth vibrated with their heavy steps.

The twins came forward to help, but Bhima checked them. "I am more than a match for this demon. By my religious merit, my sacrifices, and by my brothers, I swear that I shall kill this one today."

The battle between man and Rakshasa raged. They tossed each other about and aimed terrific blows at one another. Their colliding fists sounded like thunderclaps. As they rolled about, locked in combat, they broke down gigantic trees. They then lifted those trees and fought with them. The air was filled with fragments of wood as the trees were smashed to pieces. When the entire area was denuded of trees, they fought with rocks and boulders.

Without a moment's pause the two fought intensely, each seeking the other's death. They appeared like a mountain and a mass of clouds coming together. As they hurled boulders at one another, it seemed as if meteors were falling from the heavens. Even though repeatedly struck on the head and body by the rocks, neither fighter flinched. They wrestled like a pair of infuriated elephants, gnashed their teeth and roared.

The dreadful fight lasted for almost thirty minutes. Finally Bhima raised his fist, which resembled a five-hooded serpent, and dealt the Rakshasa a terrible blow on the neck. He fainted and Bhima caught hold of him as he fell. He raised the Rakshasa up with his two mighty arms and dashed him to the ground. Bhima pounded his fallen foe into a lifeless lump of flesh. With his bare hands he tore off the demon's head and threw it aside. That blood-smeared head, with wide-open eyes and bitten lips, rolled away like a huge jackfruit.

Spattered with the demon's blood, Bhima came to Yudhisthira and bowed before him with folded hands. Yudhisthira and his brothers praised Bhima, even as the Maruts praise Indra in heaven.

The brothers then returned to the ashram.

* * *

It was almost five years since Arjuna had departed. Lomasa told the Pandavas that they could expect him to return shortly. He thus instructed them to go to a higher part of the mountain to meet him. Taking up their few possessions, and with Dhaumya, Lomasa and a handful of other brahmins accompanying them, the Pandavas climbed to a high plateau on Gandhamadana. As the celestial voice had predicted, they came to the ashrams of the royal sage Vrishaparva and the great rishi, Arstisena. Remaining with them for some time, the Pandavas received spiritual instructions from them.

Arstisena told them that it would not be possible for them to go further up the mountain. "Above here lies the path to the higher planets. No man can go there unless he is entirely pure and sinless. Along that path you will find the gods' sporting ground. Even from here we can hear the sound of their kettledrums, tabors and vinas."

Arstisena told the brothers that he had been to the mountain's summit and seen the gods for himself. He'd also seen the Gandharvas, Vidhyadaras, Kimpurushas and other heavenly beings consorting with the Apsaras. The great lord of wealth Kuvera could often be seen there being worshipped by the best of the Yakshas. "At that time, this entire region resounds with the melodic chanting of the Samaveda. Daityas, Danavas and Siddhas alike join in the worship of that illustrious Lokapala, Kuvera."

The rishi suggested that the brothers should reside peacefully at his ashram until Arjuna returned. Looking especially at Bhima he said, "Do not be restless here. Rather, live at ease. Be peaceful. The time will come soon enough for you to display your strength. Without doubt you will crush your enemies and govern the earth."

Surveying the region, the Pandavas felt as if they had already gone to the heavenly planets. Every kind of tree was present, all of them blossoming and bending with the weight of ambrosial fruits. Sweetly singing birds played in the lush foliage while peacocks, their tails outspread, appeared like the trees' crowns. The lakes teemed with waterfowl and were adorned with lotuses, and the air rang with the hum of maddened bees that drank the nectar falling from the lotus cups. A balmy breeze that carried celestial fragrances and fine drops of cooling spray fanned the brothers. There were countless varieties of animals, all of them peaceful and harmless.

One day, as the Pandavas and Draupadi were seated on the shore of a lake, they saw the great eagle Garuda descending toward its waters. The bird blazed with golden effulgence. His huge wing-beats created a wind that tossed the forest and sent showers of blossoms to the ground. The force of his descent crushed trees closest to the lake and the mountain trembled. He flew with the speed of the wind and before the Pandavas' eyes carried away a mighty Naga serpent who lived in the lake. Having taken hold of the Naga in his talons, Garuda rose high into the sky above the mountain and disappeared into the distance.

As the eagle went north, the wind from his wings blew many flowers from the mountaintop down to where the Pandavas sat. Seeing the celestial flowers of five colors, Draupadi said to Bhima, "O best of the Bharatas, see here the exquisite blossoms which have fallen from the mountain peaks. Surely they have come from Kuvera's abode. O hero, how I wish to see that heavenly place! But it is heavily guarded by Rakshasas, Yakshas and other powerful beings. If only Arjuna were here! When Agni burned the Khandava, your invincible brother held at bay the entire host of gods with their celestial army."

In this way, Draupadi playfully taunted Bhima. Bhima frowned as Draupadi went on, "Surely you too are capable of standing against any foe, human or celestial. O Bhima, send all the Rakshasas fleeing to the ten directions by the mere force of your arms. Let all of us approach this mountain peak without fear. I have cherished this thought in my mind for some time. Protected by your prowess, I long to see this mountaintop."

Bhima looked like a wounded bull. He could not stand Draupadi's words. Without delay, he rose up, took his weapons, and made his way up the mountainside. Moving with the gait of a lion, that mighty man—as tall as a young sal tree, having a complexion of burnished gold, with broad shoulders and a neck like a conch shell—rushed with full force toward the sheer rock face which led to the mountain summit.

Quickly, Bhima found a narrow passage by which he could scale the mountain, which was inaccessible to ordinary men. Grasping hold of creepers and crevices in the rocks, he climbed swiftly. As he reached the summit he came to a vast plateau where he beheld Kuvera's abode. It was adorned with glowing golden and crystal buildings of celestial design. High golden walls encrusted with gems of every color surrounded the heavenly mansions where

Kuvera lived.

Bhima leaned on the end of his bow and gazed in wonder at the city. Ramparts and towers stood all around it and it was graced by huge gates and rows of tall flagstaffs, their colorful pennants fluttering in the wind. In the gardens outside the city lay heaps of gems, and along its walls hung garlands. The trees were beyond human imagination, and around them Bhima saw many beautiful Apsaras dancing to the strains of heavenly music.

The sight of Kuvera's opulence sorrowed Bhima as he remembered the wealth Yudhisthira had once possessed. Then he again became angry as he remembered Duryodhana's crimes. He took out his conch shell and blew it with the full force of his lungs. The sound echoed around the mountain summit and struck terror into the hearts of all creatures.

From the ramparts the startled Yaksha and Rakshasa guards saw Bhima standing with his bow, sword and mace. They swarmed out in the thousands and rushed him, shouting in anger. Their upraised clubs, maces, swords, javelins, spears and axes seemed to blaze up as they advanced. Bhima shot numerous arrows at them, cutting off their weapons and striking down the Rakshasas who were on the ground and in the sky.

The Yakshas hemmed Bhima in on all sides. He now appeared like the sun enveloped by clouds. Without fear, he took out his sword and severed the arms, legs and heads of his assailants. As he fought with the roaring Yakshas, he was drenched in showers of blood. Although they attacked him from every side, the celestial fighters did not see Bhima flinch or become discouraged. Mangled by his weapons they fell back in fear, uttering frightful cries of distress. They dropped their weapons and fled in all directions.

The commander of the Yaksha army, Maniman, addressed his fleeing troops angrily. "How will you tell Vaishravana that a single man has routed vast numbers of Yakshas?" The powerful Maniman, armed with darts, clubs, javelins and maces, stood as firm as a mountain. His voice boomed out like a drum. "O human, stay and fight! Having come to the lord of wealth's abode, you shall now be able to also see Yamaraja's abode."

With a terrible yell Maniman rushed Bhima, who instantly released three arrows, each of which pierced Maniman in the side. Maniman then hurled his mace at Bhima and it flew toward him like a flash of lightning. Bhima fired arrows that struck the mace with force but were unable to stop it.

Quickly, Bhima raised his own mace and smashed the Yaksha's mace, as it fell toward him with the force of a thunderbolt. Seeing his mace broken, Maniman threw an iron club. As the golden-handled club shot through the air, it roared and sent forth bright orange flames and showers of sparks. Bhima moved aside, but the club caught him on the arm, sending him spinning with blood flowing from his gashed arm.

Maniman shouted triumphantly as Bhima fell back for a moment, but Bhima soon recovered and again raised his mace, known as the Shaika. He rushed at Maniman with a tremendous cry. The Yaksha hurled a huge dart and it screamed through the air, glowing like the sun. Bhima whirled his mace and knocked the blazing dart away.

Bhima then resolved to kill his adversary without further delay. He whirled the Shaika over his head and rushed toward the Yaksha. With a shout that reverberated around the mountain, Bhima hurled his mace at Maniman. It struck him full on the chest with a fearful crash and split his heart in two. The Yaksha fell to the ground like a palm tree flattened by a hurricane.

Seeing their commander lying dead, the surviving Yakshas and Rakshasas fled. Bhima stood alone on that mountain plateau, looking around for further attack.

The sound of the battle had reached Yudhisthira. Hearing the mountain caves resound with loud war cries and other sounds, the Pandava and his brothers became anxious. They learned from Draupadi that Bhima had again gone up the mountain. Yudhisthira took the twins and quickly went after him. They ascended the mountain and came to the plateau where Bhima was standing. The Pandava stood looking like Indra after he had slain all the Danavas in battle. The dead bodies of numerous Yakshas and Rakshasas surrounded him. Many others lay on the ground still moving, their limbs smashed by Bhima.

Yudhisthira and the twins ran over to their brother and embraced him. The four Pandavas then sat down on the mountaintop. Looking around at the celestial region, Yudhisthira said reprovingly, "O son of Kunti, there is no excuse for your actions here. One should never offend the king or the gods. We are living in Kuvera's domain and you have surely given him offense by your rashness. Such behavior is as unworthy of you as untruth is of the ascetics. If you have any regard for me, then do not commit such acts

again."

Bhima looked down in shame. It pained him to see his brother so upset. Yudhisthira pondered what to do. Kuvera was the powerful lord of the Yakshas and a universal guardian. If he had taken offense, then their position would be precarious indeed. They could not avoid the all-knowing god, and there was no question of facing him in battle. Better that they try to pacify him in some way. No doubt he would make his appearance to survey the damage. The four Pandavas sat in silence, looking themselves like gods descended to the mountain summit.

In the meantime, the defeated Yaksha and Rakshasa soldiers had run to Kuvera and informed him of what had occurred. Hearing that his commander and friend Maniman had been killed, along with numerous other fighters, the god became angry. He then ordered his attendants to yoke his chariot.

Kuvera's servants immediately fetched his chariot drawn by a hundred horses the color of dark clouds, each adorned with golden garlands and gems. The horses neighed loudly and moved their heads upwards as the divine Kuvera ascended the chariot, eulogized by Gandharvas and Charanas. A thousand principal Yakshas, looking like so many mountains wearing gold armor and equipped with weapons, followed Kuvera as his chariot moved off through the skies.

The celestial chariot seemed to swallow up the atmosphere and draw down the sky as it ranged across the firmament. As he traveled, the lord of wealth pondered Bhima's second assault on the celestials. How dare this human act so insolently toward the gods! But Bhima, of course, was no ordinary human. He was Yudhisthira's brother, and Yudhisthira was Dharmaraja himself. He and his brothers had all taken birth only to fulfill the gods' purpose. Kuvera then recalled a curse uttered long ago by the powerful rishi Agastya. Of course! How else could the mighty Maniman have been killed? Bhima had become the instrument of Agastya's imprecation. Kuvera's frown changed to a smile as he approached the summit where the Pandavas were seated.

The Pandavas saw the celestial chariot approach. Their hair stood on end and they rose quickly with folded palms to greet Kuvera. The chariot stayed in the air near the Pandavas, who stood looking apprehensively

upward. The Yakshas who accompanied Kuvera alighted on the mountain summit like so many great birds. Seeing the brothers looking across at him with reverence, Kuvera was pleased. The Yaksha warriors saw Kuvera's mood and stood with indifference, their weapons lowered.

The four brothers approached Kuvera and bowed before him. Thousands of Rakshasas, with huge bodily structures and ears like javelins, then approached and surrounded Kuvera. Kuvera appeared like a fresh youth. He wore a chaplet and garlands of celestial flowers. In his hands he held a noose and a sword. A large bow hung over his shoulder. Bhima, still clutching his mace, gazed at him without fear. Kuvera smiled at him. Then he turned to Yudhishthira and said, "O Partha, we are well aware that you are always thinking of the welfare of all creatures. Therefore dwell on this mountain peak without fear. Nor should you be angry toward Bhima. His killing of the Yakshas and Rakshasas has been ordained by destiny. Indeed, realizing this I have become pleased with Bhima rather than angry."

Kuvera looked at Bhima and said with a smile, "O child, best of the Kurus, I am not angry with you. Put down your weapons. For Draupadi's pleasure you have acted rashly and disregarded the gods, relying only on the strength of your arms. Nevertheless, I am pleased with you. Today you have delivered me from Agastya's terrible curse. That you should insult me in this way was foreordained. Therefore I attach no blame to you."

Yudhishthira's curiosity was aroused and he asked Kuvera to explain the curse. "I am surprised that having angered the glorious Agastya you were not immediately burned to ashes."

Kuvera told Yudhishthira how he had once been traveling through the skies toward Kushavati where an assembly of the gods was to take place. Hundreds of thousands of Yakshas accompanied him, headed by Maniman. As they crossed the Yamuna river, they saw the effulgent Agastya sitting on its banks practicing asceticism. Out of sheer arrogance and foolishness, Maniman spat on his head. Kuvera immediately went before the rishi to apologize, but Agastya was burning with anger and uttered a curse: "Since this evil-minded one has insulted me in your presence, he will meet with his end along with his forces at the hands of a man. You shall be grieved by this, but you will be absolved of the sin when you see that man."

Kuvera said that having seen Bhima he was now free from Agastya's

curse. He invited Yudhishthira to remain for some days in his abode on the mountain summit, and he gave the Pandavas news of Arjuna in heaven, saying that he would soon be returning. Turning again to Bhima he said, "Yudhishthira, you should ensure that this brother of yours does not give way to rashness too often. If you do not check his impetuosity, it will sooner or later bring you trouble."

Bhima lowered his weapons and bowed before Kuvera, who then blessed him, "May you destroy the pride of your enemies and enhance the joy of your friends."

Kuvera took his leave from the Pandavas as his chariot carried him high into the sky. His Yaksha and Rakshasa attendants followed him, some flying and others riding conveyances covered with finely embroidered cushions and adorned with gems. The bodies of the warriors Bhima had slain were removed, and the five brothers stayed on the mountaintop, served and honored by the Yakshas.

Chapter Twenty-nine. Arjuna Returns

Although offered every kind of enjoyable thing by their celestial hosts on Gandhamadana, the Pandavas thought only of Arjuna. They could not wait to see him again, and the days passed slowly as they expected his return at any moment. The Yakshas brought Dhaumya and Draupadi to the mountain summit to be with the Pandavas and to greet Arjuna when he arrived.

On the seventh day from the battle, the Pandavas saw in the sky Indra's brilliant chariot approaching the mountain, resembling a meteor emerging from the clouds. Upon it they saw Arjuna seated like Indra himself. He wore glowing silk robes and was adorned with celestial ornaments and garlands, a brilliantly jeweled coronet on his head.

The Pandavas stood to receive him. They all felt the greatest happiness as the chariot slowly descended, drawn by its ten thousand steeds. As it reached the ground, Arjuna got down and bowed at Dhaumya's feet, then at Yudhishthira and Bhima's. The twins then bowed to him and he greeted Draupadi with gentle words. He handed her a number of celestial gems of sun-like splendor which Indra had given to him.

Yudhishthira also greeted and worshipped Matali as if he were Indra himself. He inquired from him about the gods' welfare. Matali spoke affectionately to the Pandavas as a father might speak to his sons. Then he ascended the chariot and returned to Amaravati.

Arjuna sat amid his brothers while they asked him to tell them all about his adventures. He narrated everything he had experienced, beginning from his first meeting with Indra in the form of a brahmin up to his departure from heaven. Arjuna told them that after he had received his training from Indra, he had to offer him dakshina. Indra had said to Arjuna, "There is nothing in the three worlds which you cannot now achieve. You are master of all the divine weapons and have no equal in warfare. I desire that you destroy my enemies, the Nivata-kavachas, a race of fierce Danavas who dwell in the womb of the ocean in great forts. By killing these demons you will fully gratify me, O hero, and repay your debt to me."

Indra then allowed Arjuna to use his chariot and gave him a suit of impenetrable armor. He had also placed upon his head the coronet, saying,

"Be victorious!"

Blessed by the celestials, Arjuna then set out on Indra's chariot. As he was leaving, the gods presented him with a conch shell called the Devadatta, whose sound could disperse his foes. Matali drove the chariot and they soon approached the ocean. Arjuna described the ocean to his brothers. "That dreadful and inexhaustible lord of the waters was covered by swelling waves that dashed against each other, appearing like moving hills. I saw ships full of gems sailing the sea, as well as whales, timingilas, serpents and other fierce aquatics. Through the waters I could see submerged shells and heaps of precious stones. They appeared like stars on a night covered with light clouds."

Arjuna described how Matali had steered the mystical chariot, which could travel anywhere in the three worlds, through the ocean toward the Danavas' city. As it entered the nether regions and approached the city it made the whole region resound with the fearful clatter of its wheels. Hearing the thunderous sound, the Danavas considered that Indra must be approaching to do battle with them.

"They closed the city gates and manned the ramparts. I saw thousands of demons standing with bows, swords, javelins, axes, maces and clubs, their hearts filled with fear and their limbs trembling. Taking out the Devadatta, I let out many mighty blasts that made all creatures hide in fear. The Nivata-kavachas then poured out of their city by the tens of thousands. They were clad in shining mail and they clutched maces, spears, clubs, sabers, hatchets, rockets, guns and swords ornamented with gold and jewels.

"Matali maneuvered the chariot skillfully and baffled the demons' advance. Indeed, he moved the chariot so swiftly that I could perceive nothing at all. My enemies sounded their strange musical instruments, creating a discordant blare that filled the battlefield and stupefied the minds of all beings.

"As the Danavas rushed at me releasing hundreds of thousands of arrows, I saw in the sky the rishis who had come to witness the fight. They eulogized me with select Vedic prayers and thus inspired me. I was surrounded and enveloped by sheets of fierce-looking shafts, but I countered the demons' arrows and the downpour of spears, maces and clubs.

"The chariot moved with the speed of the wind. Freed from the

assault, I counterattacked the Danavas. With straight-coursing arrows I drove them back, piercing each demon with a number of deadly shafts. At the same time, Matali urged my ten thousand steeds toward the enemy and trampled vast numbers of them. He drove the chariot with such dexterity that it seemed as if only one horse was drawing it.

"Firing my arrows with unerring accuracy, I cut off the outstretched arms of the demons, which fell to the ground still clutching their weapons. Their helmeted heads rolled on the earth like so many ripe fruits shaken from trees. The Danavas came at me in wave after wave. I charged my arrows with the Brahma mantras and cut them down as they rushed upon me, but so great was their number that I became sorely oppressed on all sides. I then took up Indra's weapon, the mighty thunderbolt, and hurled it against the demons. It threw them away from the chariot and smashed all their weapons to pieces. I quickly followed this move by shooting ten arrows at each of my assailants.

"Seeing shafts leaving my bow like rows of black bees, Matali praised me. The arrows, inspired by mantras, drove back the enemy and mangled the soldiers. Blood was flowing like rivulets during the rainy season.

"The infuriated demons then began to fight by using illusions.

"Instantly the Danavas vanished and rocks showered from the sky. Aiming upward and whirling quickly about, I checked the rocks with crescent-headed arrows, smashing them to pieces. Then the demons sent down torrents of rain, accompanied by a fierce wind. The whole area was flooded and no difference could be perceived between earth and sky. There seemed to be an endless sheet of water covering everything. Struggling to keep my mind controlled, I invoked the flaming Visoshana weapon, which Indra had also given me. It immediately dried up the waters and the air was filled with a massive cloud of steam.

"I could hear the demons' terrible shouts, although they remained invisible. They sent tongues of fire and a screaming hurricane at me. I countered the fire with a celestial water weapon and stopped the wind with a mountain weapon. Then they caused a fearful darkness so that I could see neither Matali nor my own hands wielding the bow. A shower of iron clubs fell from above and the Danavas let out horrible screams on all sides. The steeds drew back and Matali dropped his whip and cried out, 'Where are you, Arjuna? What has happened?'

"Both of us were struck with terror. Matali said, 'O sinless Arjuna, although I have accompanied Indra in many encounters with the demons, I have never been confounded in this way and lost control of the horses. It seems that the creator himself, who now desires the destruction of the universe, has ordained this battle. Surely no other outcome is possible from such a terrible fight.'

"I stood silent for some moments to gain control over my mind. Then I replied, 'Be at ease, charioteer. See now the prowess of my arms and my weapons. I shall counter these illusions with the Gandiva bow.'

"I then invoked astras capable of stupefying the enemy and the Danavas' illusions were dispelled. They again appeared before me. Without delay, they produced more illusions that stunned my mind and senses. At one moment the earth seemed covered by darkness, then it seemed to be submerged in water, then it disappeared completely so that my chariot appeared as if suspended in space.

"I released the Shabdaveda weapon and dispelled that illusion, whereupon Matali again steered the chariot toward the enemy. The demons flew toward me in a rage. I cut them down remorselessly with great volleys of razor-faced arrows. Then they vanished again, continuing to fight invisibly. By using celestial weapons capable of seeking them out, I continued to slay them.

"The Nivata-kavachas then gave up their illusions and retreated into their city. At once everything became visible. I saw the ground covered with their mangled bodies, their weapons, ornaments, armor and limbs. It was impossible for the horses even to step. Matali urged them upward and the chariot sprang into the sky.

"Seeing my foes retreat I relaxed, but the next moment the demons invisibly attacked me again. A thick shower of mountain crags rained down upon me. From beneath me I felt the Danavas grasping hold of the horses' legs and pulling them down. So many rocks were falling that it seemed as if my chariot was in a cave. Again I was gripped by fear. Seeing this Matali said, 'Take heart, Arjuna. Use Indra's thunderbolt weapon. It will destroy these rocks.'

"I chanted the mantras to invoke Indra's weapon while placing iron darts on the Gandiva. Charged with the power of Indra's Vajra, the darts sped

toward the crags and smashed them to powder. The darts also dispelled the demons' illusions and struck them down from the sky. They fell screaming on all sides like huge meteors dropping from the heavens. Many of them fled and entered the bowels of the earth, while others vanished into the sky.

"Realizing that the demons had been defeated, I told Matali to drive the chariot into the city. He gazed about the battlefield in amazement and said, 'I have never witnessed such prowess, not even from the gods. These demons have until now been impossible to conquer, even by the combined efforts of the gods.'

"Matali drove the chariot toward the city gates and I reflected on the battle. Although hundreds of thousands of Danavas, each like a mountain, lay dead, neither Matali nor myself had been injured. This was wonderful. Without doubt it was Krishna's potency alone that had protected us and enabled me to defeat the gods' mighty foes.

"We entered the Danavas' city and saw thousands of wailing women. They fell back in fear as we passed, terrified by the chariot's thunderous rattle. The clash of their jewels and ornaments as they fled resembled the sound of hail falling upon a mountain. I saw the ladies quickly disappear into their golden palaces, which were decked with countless gems.

"Astonished to see the city's opulence, I said to Matali, 'This place appears superior to Amaravati. How is it that the gods do not reside here?'

"Matali replied that the city had once been Indra's residence, but the demons gained possession of it after pleasing Brahma through asceticism. Brahma gave them boons that rendered them invincible to the gods. Indra had then gone to Shiva and asked his assistance, whereupon Shiva replied, 'You shall regain this city in the future when you assume a different body.'"

As Arjuna spoke his brothers looked at him in amazement. His prowess in battle now exceeded even that of his illustrious father, the lord of the gods.

Arjuna continued: "I then left the Danava city and headed back toward Amaravati. On the way back, the chariot passed another great city that floated in the sky and shone like a second sun. It was full of trees made of jewels and adorned with golden towers and palaces. Four impregnable gateways stood on each side of the city, studded with iridescent gems that radiated countless hues. I have never seen anything like them.

"Matali told me that this was the city of the Kalakanyas, a class of fierce Daityas. It was called Hiranyapura, and even the gods could not conquer it. Therefore the demons dwelt there without fear. The Kalakanyas were destined to be killed by a mortal by Brahma's arrangement. Thus Matali urged me to rush upon the Daityas and please Indra.

"I replied, 'Take me there at once. The gods have no enemies whom I do not also consider my enemies.'

"As we approached the city, the demons charged out in a body, thinking that Indra had come to fight. Without a second's delay, they rained weapons upon me—arrows, maces, swords, axes, darts and lances. I countered their attack with mighty volleys of shafts from the Gandiva. Matali drove with such skill that the Daityas were bewildered and they fell upon one another in their attempts to attack me.

"Realizing I was a formidable enemy, the Daityas retreated into their city, which then began to move in all directions. Sometimes it appeared in the sky, then under the ocean, then it disappeared altogether. Then it suddenly reappeared in front of me, shot upward, and made various curving motions through the air. Although I found it difficult to follow its movements, I managed to check its progress with straight-coursing arrows inspired by mantras. I released so many shafts that the city was torn to pieces and it fell to the ground in flames.

"The Daityas rose into the sky and continued to fight. Matali then brought us down to earth and more than fifty thousand chariots immediately hemmed me in. I fought them with celestial weapons, but the powerful Daityas gradually repelled my missiles. The mighty demons stood before me encased in brilliant golden armor, wearing helmets and celestial garlands, and with chariots decorated with rows of flags. The sight of the Daityas in battle array attracted my mind and I struggled in vain to overpower them.

"I was sorely oppressed by their weapons. Sinking in the ocean of the Kalakanyas, I suddenly remembered Shiva's weapon. Mustering up my courage, I uttered the mantras sacred to the three-eyed deity. At once there appeared before me a huge personality with three heads, nine eyes, six arms, and hair blazing like fire. His clothes consisted of great serpents whose tongues darted back and forth.

"I shook off my fear and bowed to that awful form of the eternal

Shiva. Then I fixed on my bow the Rudra-astra and, continuously chanting the mantras, released it to destroy the Daityas.

"Thousands of diversely shaped missiles spread out across the battlefield as the weapon was fired. Some resembled lions, some tigers, and others bears and buffaloes. There were serpent-shaped missiles and others shaped like elephants, bulls, boars and cats. Simultaneously, the battlefield filled up with Shiva's followers—innumerable Guhyakas, Yakshas, Pisachas, Bhutas, and other ghostly beings. All of them rushed toward the Daityas with frightening roars.

"As the Rudra-astra wrought havoc among the enemy, I fired a ceaseless shower of arrows glaring like fire and made of the essence of rocks. The Daityas were routed and the few that survived fled in fear. Seeing that my victory was due only to Shiva's weapon, I bowed down to him right on the battlefield. Matali praised me and we then returned to Indra's abode.

"When Indra heard of my achievement he was pleased and blessed me that I would always remain cool-headed in battle and would always discharge my weapons unerringly. He also said that no celestial fighters, —whether Danavas, Daityas, Nagas, Gandharvas, Suparnas, or Yakshas—would be able to overcome me. He told me that I would conquer the earth and hand it to Yudhisthira. He gave me this impenetrable armor I now wear and fixed this coronet upon my head. He also presented me with the Devadatta; then he brought me back to this mountain."

As Arjuna ended his narration, Yudhisthira was awestruck. He said, "O Dhananjaya, it is fortunate indeed that you have met the most powerful gods and received from them all the divine weapons. I consider the earth already conquered and Dhritarastra's sons subdued. O Bharata, I should like to see the weapons with which you defeated the demons."

Arjuna assented to his elder brother's request and prepared to display the weapons. With the earth as his chariot, the Pandava stood holding the Gandiva and recalled the mantras to invoke the various missiles. In his celestial armor and diadem, he faced east and silently concentrated his mind on the prayers.

Just as he was about to exhibit the weapons, the earth trembled and the mountain seemed ready to split. The sun was covered and the wind ceased to blow. brahmins found themselves unable to recite the Vedas and all

creatures felt oppressed. Suddenly, the Pandavas saw in the sky the powerful four-headed Brahma surrounded by all the gods. The Gandharvas and Apsaras also appeared, dancing and singing on the mountainsides. A shower of flowers fell upon Arjuna as he looked about in amazement. Before him appeared the divine sage Narada, sent by the gods.

Narada said, "O hero, do not discharge the celestial weapons for no purpose or they will destroy the three worlds. These weapons should only be used against powerful foes in battle. Do not be so rash."

Narada turned to Yudhishthira, "O Ajatasatru, you will see all the weapons when Arjuna uses them in the war against the Kauravas."

The brothers bowed to Narada and he departed, along with all the gods.

Chapter Thirty. Krishna Visits the Pandavas

The Pandavas continued to dwell in Kuvera's abode for four more years. In that celestial atmosphere they hardly noticed time pass. One day Arjuna and Bhima approached Yudhisthira and spoke with him privately. Bhima said, "O king of the Kurus, in order to make good your vow, we have restrained ourselves and not killed Dhritarastra's sons. Rather, we have lived for eleven years in the forest, deprived of our inheritance. These past four years have not been difficult, but the time is now approaching when, in accordance with your promise, we will need to enter some inhabited region and live incognito. Let us therefore leave this mountain and descend again to earth."

Bhima said that both he and Arjuna were determined to punish Duryodhana, but feared that if they remained on the high plateaus of the heavenly Gandhamadana, they might forget the miseries the Kauravas had inflicted upon them. This would weaken their determination. "Therefore, we desire to leave now. We brothers, assisted by the infallible Krishna, will surely help you regain your kingdom. We all desire your welfare and long to encounter your enemies in battle."

Yudhisthira agreed that it was now time to depart. Along with Draupadi the brothers visited the various groves and lakes of Kuvera's abode one last time, offering their respects and saying farewell. Yudhisthira then prayed to Gandhamadana Mountain, "O lord of mountains, we are ready to depart. Please grant that after we have conquered our enemies and recovered our kingdom, we may again see you at the end of our lives."

Yudhisthira was thinking of the time when, after ruling the kingdom, they would finally retire to perform asceticism and gain spiritual emancipation. Surrounded by his brothers and the brahmins, he then began the march down the mountainside. Bhima summoned Ghatotkacha and his followers and they again carried the Pandavas' party over the difficult mountain passes. The Pandavas were sorry to leave Kuvera's abode, but as they gazed back at its sublime beauty, their minds were delighted.

The brothers soon arrived at Badarika Ashram. After being greeted by the sages there, Yudhisthira dismissed Ghatotkacha, choosing to continue the downward journey on foot. After remaining a month with the Badarika sages, they set off toward Subahu's country. They met Subahu and spent a

night with him there before proceeding toward the forest Vishakayapa.

As they traveled, followed by their porters and servants, they saw charming woodlands, lakes, rivers and fields. They stopped each evening at dusk and camped wherever they were, preparing a meal from simple forest fare. Gradually they reached Vishakayapa, still within the Himalayan range, just as the monsoon season was approaching. They decided to remain in Vishakayapa until the rains passed, and then return to Kamyaka.

On the first day of their stay at Vishakayapa, Bhima went to explore the area. Armed with a bow and sword he wandered at his pleasure through the woods, which were frequented by Gandharvas and Siddhas. The trees rang with the sounds of exotic birds and bore fruits and blossoms in all seasons. Bhima saw clear rivulets flowing from the mountains, creating large, transparent lakes filled with lotuses.

Wild boars rushed at the Pandava and he killed them each with a slap. He also slew numerous buffaloes and deer, piercing them with his sharp arrows. Bhima possessed the strength of ten thousand elephants, and he sportingly uprooted and broke many large trees, clearing areas where rishis could later dwell and perform sacrifices. He struck his arms and roared exultantly as he roamed about. Elephants and lions fled in fear as they heard his roars.

The ever-proud Bhima, devoid of fatigue, filled the skies with his shouts. He crushed mountain peaks by kicking them. Ranging along the mountain side, he saw large serpents retreat into caves as they heard him approach. Bhima pursued them along the rocky plateaus. Suddenly, he came upon a terrible-looking serpent resembling a hill. It lay coiled at the mouth of a great cave, entirely blocking its entrance. Its skin was yellow with black spots, and inside its yawning mouth were four fangs. As the snake glared about with its copper-colored eyes, its forked tongue licked the corners of its mouth.

Bhima stopped and gazed at the serpent. It resembled Death himself as it lay hissing as if to reprimand him. As Bhima came closer, the snake suddenly seized him and entwined its coils around him. Bhima felt his strength draining from his body, and despite his efforts, he was unable to extricate himself. He trembled and fell unconscious for several minutes.

As he returned to consciousness he considered his predicament. Who

was this being? How had it succeeded in overpowering him? Bhima again exerted himself but found that he was unable to move. Clearly this was not an ordinary snake. He decided to ask the creature its identity.

"O best of serpents, kindly tell me who you are and what you will do with me? I am Bhima, Pandu's son and Dharmaraja's brother. With my bare hands alone I have slain in battle countless lions, tigers, buffaloes and elephants. Not even the celestials can stand against me. How is it, then, that you have succeeded in overpowering me? Is it by virtue of a particular science or boon that you possess such power?"

The serpent's voice was solemn. "O mighty-armed one, I have been hungry for a long time. Therefore, it is my good fortune that you have arrived here. You must be the food ordained for me by the gods. Now listen as I explain how I came to live in a serpent body.

"My name is Nahusha, and I am a royal sage. After attaining heaven I was cursed by Agastya Rishi and fell to earth as a snake. Thus you are my descendent, but that will not stop me from eating you. Whatever falls within my grasp during the middle of the day, be it a cow, a buffalo, or even a human, becomes my next meal.

"Agastya promised that whomever I seize will lose his strength. Thus you have been overcome by virtue of that sage's power. Agastya also told me that I would be freed from his curse when someone could answer my questions about the relationship between the soul and the Supreme Being."

Thinking of Krishna, Bhima replied, "Mighty creature, I am neither angry nor do I blame myself for this calamity. Sometimes a man may succeed in his endeavors for happiness and sometimes he may fail. Certainly the results are not in his hands and therefore he should not lament his misfortune. Who could ever be superior to destiny? Destiny is supreme and exertion made for material gains is useless."

Bhima said he did not grieve for his own impending death, but he felt sad for his brothers and mother. They depended on him and would surely be deprived of strength and energy when they discovered what had happened. And Duryodhana would rejoice.

Back at the Pandavas' camp, Yudhisthira perceived ill omens. Jackals howled and the dreadful Vartika bird, with its one leg, one wing and one eye, circled overhead. It screamed and vomited blood. The wind blew furiously

and the four directions seemed to be ablaze. Yudhisthira felt his left eye and arm trembling and his heart palpitating. He looked about the ashram and, not seeing Bhima, asked Draupadi, "Where is my powerful brother?"

Draupadi replied that he had been long out. Alarmed, Yudhisthira decided to go after him personally. After instructing Arjuna to guard Draupadi and the twins and to protect the brahmins, he began to search for Bhima in the forest. Following his footprints he soon found the smashed trees and the beasts that Bhima had slain. He also saw a trail of bushes that had been blown over by the wind coming from Bhima's body as he ran after game in the forest.

Yudhisthira moved as quickly as he could and soon came to a rough place where Bhima's tracks seemed to end. The ground was dry and full of thorn bushes, stumps and gravel. Strong winds gusted around tall, leafless trees. Yudhisthira began to make his way up the steep incline toward the plateau above. He sensed that his brother was nearby, and he scrambled up the slope. Soon he came to the serpent's lair. There at the entrance to the cave, Yudhisthira found Bhima wrapped in the serpent's coils.

Yudhisthira was amazed to see Bhima held by a snake, and he asked, "Who is this best of serpents with a body as big as a mountain? How have you fallen into its clutches, O son of Kunti?"

"This is the royal sage Nahusha in serpent form. O worshipful brother, he plans to eat me."

Yudhisthira addressed Nahusha, "Kindly release my brother. We shall satisfy you with some other food."

Nahusha moved slightly. "I have obtained this son of a king for my food and will not release him. You should leave this place or else I will eat you tomorrow. The sage Agastya has granted me a boon that whoever comes within my reach will become my food. You are also within my reach. I have not eaten for a long time and will not give up your brother. Nor do I want any other meal."

Feeling pain to see Bhima's plight, Yudhisthira thought carefully. This being was not actually a snake but a great king and an ancestor of the Pandavas. Yudhisthira had heard of Nahusha many times. He had performed numerous sacrifices and become the emperor of the earth before finally going to heaven. After ascending to the higher regions, he must have been cursed to

fall down again. Perhaps there was some condition to the curse. If Nahusha could be freed from his serpent form, then Bhima could be released.

"O snake, under what conditions will you free my brother?"

"Intoxicated with the pride of wealth and power I insulted the brahmins," replied Nahusha. "I was thus cursed by Agastya and brought into this miserable state. But the sage stipulated that I would be released when I found a man capable of answering my questions on spiritual subjects. This, then, is the only way by which your brother can be freed. Answer my questions, sinless one, and free both Bhima and me."

"Ask whatever you will, mighty serpent. I will try my best to answer."

Yudhisthira was always glad to have the opportunity to speak about spiritual matters. For him, this forest exile had provided a welcome opportunity to hear from the rishis and engage in a deep study of scripture, free from the pressures of state affairs. He had acquired an almost unrivalled knowledge of the Vedas. He listened attentively as Nahusha began to speak.

Fixing his narrow eyes upon Yudhisthira, the serpent said, "How can we recognize a true brahmin, and what is the highest object of knowledge?"

"A brahmin is characterized by the qualities of honesty, purity, forgiveness, self-control, asceticism, knowledge and religiosity. The highest object of knowledge is the Supreme Brahman, which can be known when one has transcended all duality."

"The qualities you have attributed to brahmins are also found in other classes of men," Nahusha replied doubtfully, "and how can anyone exist without experiencing happiness and distress, the basis of all duality?"

Yudhisthira smiled. It seemed the snake was already quite knowledgeable and was testing him. "If one finds these qualities in any man, then he should be known as a brahmin no matter what his birth may have been. Happiness and distress in relationship to material objects can be transcended while still being experienced in relation to the Supreme. Material emotions are perverted reflections of original spiritual feelings."

Nahusha was satisfied with Yudhisthira's answer and he asked him to elaborate further. What was the use of dividing society according to caste if such divisions meant nothing? In reply, Yudhisthira explained that due to the

intermixture of social classes, it had become difficult to ascertain a man's class. Only by examining his actual qualities could a man's class be known. Thus society should be divided on that basis only, not on the basis of birth.

Nahusha said, "Well, king, it seems you are clearly acquainted with knowledge. How then can I devour your brother?"

It was obvious to Yudhisthira that Nahusha was himself highly learned. After all, he had once ruled the earth and ascended to heaven after being instructed by the sages. He thought it would be worth making inquiries from such a personality. Folding his palms and standing before Nahusha, Yudhisthira said, "I too regard you as one possessed of superior knowledge. Please instruct me, if you will. By what acts can one attain heaven?"

"In my opinion, O Bharata, one can reach heaven by giving charity to brahmins, by being kind and gentle in speech, by truthfulness, and by remaining non-jealous toward all living beings."

"Which of those acts do you consider the best, and what constitutes non-jealous?"

"Each of these items can be considered superior or inferior depending upon circumstance. One must therefore understand life's ultimate goal in order to know how to act properly at all times. This you have already explained, Yudhisthira. All acts and knowledge should be aimed at achieving the Supreme.

"Non-jealous means always desiring the welfare and advancement of all living beings rather than to exploit them for one's own pleasure. In particular, one should desire the spiritual progress of others and act to assist them in that progress."

"How does the soul accept a material body, O Nahusha?"

"The soul, or atman, receives bodies according to his own behavior. Thus he transmigrates life after life, impelled by his sinful and pious acts, sometimes going to heaven and sometimes moving about in the body of an animal. Final liberation is attained when one comes to know Brahman, the Supreme Absolute."

Yudhisthira nodded. The snake's answers were in accord with what he had learned from the rishis. Clearly Nahusha had deep spiritual realizations. How then had he become a snake?

Nahusha replied, "By sacrifice and asceticism I became so powerful that I coursed through the heavens on a golden chariot. I became emperor of the wide earth and even the Gandharvas, Yakshas, Rakshasas, and all the inhabitants of the three worlds—even the rishis—payed me taxes. Such was my power that I withdrew the energy of anyone simply by looking at them. Then my pride overwhelmed me and I lost my good sense. My knowledge became covered by the ignorance born of pride. I ordered the brahmin sages to draw my chariot and thus offended them.

"One day while in heaven, I touched Agastya Rishi with my foot. The sage cursed me and I fell to earth, my body changing into that of a serpent.

"In accord with Agastya's words, however, you have now freed me from that curse. My discussion with you has reawakened my knowledge. I now realize that my real interest lies in cultivating brahminical qualities and spiritual knowledge, not in material status or opulence."

Nahusha released Bhima and the serpent body immediately died. From out of it the two brothers saw a glowing celestial figure emerge wearing golden ornaments and beautiful garlands. He bowed before the Pandavas and then rose into the sky and disappeared.

Yudhisthira and Bhima returned to the ashram and recounted the incident to the others. When Yudhisthira had finished, the brahmins reprimanded the now sheepish Bhima for his rashness in having challenged the serpent and warned him not to be so foolish again.

* * *

Within days of their arrival at Vishakayapa, the monsoons arrived. They set up their camp on high ground and watched as the rains fell and flooded the earth. They could no longer see the sun. Bolts of lightning lit the forest, while streams of frothing water rushed across the earth, hissing like flights of arrows. All the forest creatures became delighted and frolicked in the rain-soaked woods.

Gradually the season turned to autumn. The clouds dispersed and the sky was lustrous. The days were warm and the nights cool. The Pandavas surveyed the refreshed forest scenery and decided that it was an auspicious

time—the sacred month of Karttika—to return to Kamyaka.

A few days after their arrival, Krishna and Satyabhama came to visit. Krishna knew they had returned to the Kamyaka by his inconceivable powers.

The Pandavas were overjoyed to see their well-wishing friend. With tears in their eyes they rose up to greet him. Krishna got down from his chariot and bowed at Yudhisthira and Bhima's feet, as well as the feet of Dhaumya and the brahmins. He embraced Arjuna and accepted the twins' obeisances. Satyabhama embraced Draupadi and when she and her husband were comfortably seated among the Pandavas, they all began to converse.

Arjuna told Krishna of everything that had transpired with him since their last meeting. He then inquired after Krishna and His family's welfare, asking especially about his wife Subhadra and their son Abhimanyu. Krishna assured him that all was well. Turning to Yudhisthira he said, "O king, the wise assert that righteousness is superior to winning kingdoms, and to cultivate righteousness, asceticism is necessary. In strict obedience to truth you have performed your duties and you have thus conquered both this world and the next. You are not addicted to sensual pleasures, nor do you act out of selfishness. Although you have won opulent kingdoms and been surrounded by luxury, you have not swerved from your practices of charity, truthfulness, asceticism, religion, forgiveness and patience."

Yudhisthira bowed his head modestly as Krishna continued. "Who but you, O Dharmaraja, could have tolerated the outrage toward Draupadi, so very odious to virtue? There can be no doubt that you will recover your kingdom in due course. When your vow is fulfilled and the thirteen years have passed, we shall do everything in our power to chastise the Kauravas."

Krishna spoke kindly to Draupadi, saying that it was by good fortune she had obtained such virtuous men as her husbands. He gave her news of her sons, who were staying in Drupada's kingdom and who also spent time in Dwaraka where Subhadra showered them with motherly love. Krishna's own son Pradyumna was instructing all the Pandavas' sons in the martial arts.

When Krishna fell silent, Yudhisthira said, "O Keshava, there is no doubt that you are our highest refuge. We are always under your protection. When the time comes, you will surely do everything to restore to us our kingdom."

Then they saw Markandeya Rishi approaching. That immortal sage, who appeared like a youth of no more than sixteen years, was cheerful, dressed only in a loincloth and holding a water pot. The Pandavas, Krishna, and all the brahmins stood to offer respect, then offered Markandeya a seat of honor. After he had been worshiped with arghya and presented with sweet water and forest fruits, Krishna said, "We all wish to hear your most excellent words. Kindly narrate to us the ancient histories of virtuous kings and rishis, replete with moral and spiritual instruction."

At that moment, Narada also arrived and was received. He too wished to hear Markandeya speak in Krishna's presence. With those two personalities sitting amid the Pandavas and the numerous brahmins, it seemed as if the sun and moon were seated together in the presence of the planets. Everyone waited for Markandeya to speak. They all knew that the sage had lived since the beginning of the material creation and was therefore acquainted with countless histories of great sages and kings. The Supreme Lord Narayana had personally instructed him and thus he possessed profound spiritual understanding.

Yudhisthira asked, "Please tell me, O highly learned one, how a man receives the results of his own deeds. I am mystified upon seeing how I have been deprived of my kingdom while Dhritarastra's sinful sons prosper. Does one receive the results of his actions during the same life, or do they visit him only in a later existence? How do the results of a man's acts follow him after death? Where do they repose when he gives up his body?"

Markandeya remained silent for a moment. He looked around at the concourse of people assembled in the forest clearing. It seemed as if Yudhisthira were still in Indraprastha, seated in his assembly hall. Raising his right hand, the sage then replied, "The embodied soul travels from life to life as a result of his own acts, good and bad. At no time is the soul without a body as long as he remains within this world trying to enjoy his senses. The soul is covered first by a subtle body made of mind, intelligence, and false ego. The subtle body carries the recollection of every experience the soul has ever had, and thus assumes various gross material forms. Yamaraja controls all of this. Indeed, Yamaraja keeps track of every soul within the material universe. He is empowered by the all-knowing Supreme Soul who resides in the heart of every living being. Thus does Yamaraja award all beings their just deserts. He never makes a mistake in this regard."

Markandeya paused to allow his listeners to absorb what he was saying. "Some men enjoy in this life but not in the next, some in the next but not in this, and others in both. Some men enjoy neither in this life nor in the next.

"A wealthy man who spends this life in pleasure will suffer in the next; an ascetic who forgoes pleasure in this life will enjoy in the next; those who marry and live pious lives as householders, performing sacrifice and giving charity, enjoy both in this life and the next; but the foolish man who follows no scriptural injunctions suffers continuously life after life.

"As far as you brothers are concerned, you are virtuous and have been born only to fulfill the gods' purpose. You are great devotees of the Supreme Lord and thus cannot be affected by karmic reactions. Your apparent setback will ultimately lead to your everlasting fame and happiness. You will be glorified in the world of men, and at the end of your lives, you will attain the highest abode."

Yudhishthira reflected on the sage's reply. Then he asked, "O learned sage, in this world our lives are dedicated to the brahmins. If it pleases you, kindly tell us about a brahmin's greatness and glory."

In response the rishi recounted numerous ancient histories. His audience was rapt in wonder. He also described the creation of the universe, which he had personally witnessed, and the nature of the destruction that occurs at the end of Brahma's day, a period of millions of years. He described how he had floated on the causal water out of which creation occurs, as it rose and covered the lower and middle planets. At the end of that inundation, he had seen a wonderful child lying on a banyan leaf.

"I was struck with amazement. I could not understand how a child could have survived when the entire universe was destroyed. The boy was effulgent and his face was as beautiful as the moon. His eyes resembled full-blown lotuses and his body was a blackish color. He lay there smiling and sucking his toe. Then on his chest I saw the mark of srivatsa and thought that it must be Vishnu, although I could not be sure. As I approached him, he said, 'My child, I know you are eager to rest. O Markandeya, enter my body and rest awhile. I am pleased with you.'

"When the boy addressed me I lost all sense of my identity and forgot my material designations. He opened his mouth and I felt myself

drawn into it. Suddenly entering his stomach I beheld the whole earth with all its cities and kingdoms. I wandered about for some time, seeing all the familiar sights, including the Ganges and her tributaries, the Himalayas, and the forests in which I had performed ascetism. I also saw the race of celestials headed by Indra, as well as the races of kshatriyas, vaishyas, and shudras.

"Although I wandered about within that boy's body for a long time I never did find its limit. Confused, I began to worship the Supreme Lord with my thoughts and words. Suddenly, I found myself emerging again and once more I saw him lying on the banyan leaf. I worshipped that immeasurably powerful being who had swallowed up the entire universe, and I placed my head at his feet. I asked him who he was and about his purpose. Why was he lying there with the universe held in his body?

"The child spoke in such a way that my material illusions were completely dispelled. He told me that he was the original Supreme Person from whom everything emanates and into whom it enters at its end. I was amazed to hear him speak of his own glories. He is known as Vishnu, Narayana and Hari, but he possesses innumerable other names. That all-knowing personality then told me that I should remain within his body until Brahma again awoke and recreated the universe. He disappeared from my sight and I found myself back within the varied creation I had seen within him."

Finishing his narration, Markandeya looked across at Krishna. "King Yudhisthira, that lotus-eyed boy whom I saw at the end of the creation has now appeared as Krishna. He has become your relative and friend. Without doubt you should know him to be the ancient Supreme Person, the inconceivable Hari, and the original Personality of Godhead. He granted me the boon that my memory would never fail and that my death would come only when I wanted it. Seeing Krishna sitting here wearing a yellow silken garment, I am remembering that boy. Do not doubt that it was he whom I saw in the waters of devastation. O hero among men, this entire creation rests within him even as air rests within ether. Take refuge in Krishna, for there are none superior to Him."

Hearing the rishi's words, the Pandavas bowed down before Krishna. Krishna smiled gently and spoke comforting words to them. He glanced affectionately at Markandeya, who gazed back at Krishna with love.

Yudhishthira then asked Markandeya to describe the future. Kali-yuga, the darkest age was approaching. Yudhishthira wanted to know what would happen to the world at that time. Markandeya told him in detail how everything would become more and more degraded. People would become irreligious and would thus be oppressed by misery. The age would culminate in the appearance of Kalki avatara, who would restore order to the world and bring about Satya-yuga, the golden age.

Yudhishthira and Markandeya discoursed for hours and the audience remained fixed on hearing Markandeya's detailed responses, replete with accounts of the different kings, sages, and the celestials who had lived throughout the ages. As evening approached, Yudhishthira finally stopped asking questions. Along with his brothers he worshipped Markandeya. Then the rishi took his leave. Narada also left at that time, ascending into the skyways.

When Markandeya was gone, Krishna spent a little more time talking with the Pandavas. Satyabhama took the opportunity to speak with Draupadi and ask her how she was able to serve and satisfy five husbands. Krishna's wife wanted to learn from the Panchala princess, who was famed for her chastity and womanly skills, so that she might improve her own service to Krishna. Draupadi told her in detail about the many ways she served her husbands.

Draupadi said, "Abandoning vanity and subduing desire and wrath, I serve my husbands with attention, along with their other wives. I do not feel my position of servitude to be a degraded one, and I restrain jealousy by remaining devoted. I neither bathe, sleep, nor eat before my husbands, or even before our servants and followers. At no time do I allow my mind to dwell upon another man or any celestial. My heart never swerves from my husbands. The minute I see them I rise up and greet them, offering them a seat and water. I always keep our living quarters clean and fragrant, and all the household items and food well-ordered."

Satyabhama, herself a great favorite of Krishna's, listened attentively. Draupadi described how she would never enjoy anything her husbands did not enjoy, nor would she perform any act disagreeable to them. When they went away, she renounced her ornaments and cosmetics and practiced asceticism. She tried always to assist her husbands as they performed sacrifices and other religious practices.

"I am the first to rise from bed and the last to take rest. I am ever attentive to my duty and never give way to sloth. In my opinion, service to the husband is the eternal virtue of women. The husband is the wife's god and her sole refuge. By serving him, she pleases even the Supreme Lord himself and thereby attains the highest destination."

When Draupadi finished, Satyabhama embraced her. She heard Krishna calling her and so took her leave, promising to come to Indraprastha after the Pandavas had regained their kingdom.

Krishna bid farewell to the Pandavas and was ready to depart. He and Satyabhama mounted the chariot, which was yoked with Saibya and Sugriva. Seeing Draupadi standing before him so meekly, Krishna said, "Do not be in anxiety. Before long you will be the wife of kings—after your husbands have crushed their enemies and won back the earth. O black-eyed beauty, ladies such as you, possessed of all auspicious marks, can never suffer for long. The Kauravas will soon reap the results of their sins against you. When they have been destroyed, you will see their wives despairing, even as you despaired upon leaving Hastinapura."

Krishna once more assured Draupadi that her five sons were flourishing and that she would soon see them grown up, powerful heroes. Then, saluting the Pandavas and bowing to the brahmins, Krishna urged on His horses and left the forest.

Chapter Thirty-one. The Fight with the Gandharvas

Early in the Pandavas' twelfth year of exile, a brahmin who was journeying to Hastinapura stopped to see them. He spent a few days with them before continuing to the city, where Dhritarastra then received him. The old king was always anxious about the Pandavas and he wanted to hear about them from the brahmin. When he heard how their bodies were emaciated by their spare diet and constant exposure to the elements, he felt pain. Dhritarastra was especially distressed to hear how Draupadi was now pale and thin. He lamented openly in the presence of his ministers.

Knowing himself to be the cause of the Pandavas' suffering, Dhritarastra cried, "Alas, how is it that Yudhisthira, who has no enemy on earth, now lives in a lonely forest and sleeps on the bare ground? How is the ever-wrathful Bhima able to tolerate the sight of Draupadi clad in barks and lying upon the earth? Surely he restrains himself only out of devotion to his elder brother. Arjuna, seeing Draupadi and the twins in such misery, must be breathing the hot sighs of an angry serpent. All those heroes and their wife should not be suffering such pain. Duryodhana's cruel words at the dice game must burn them day and night, and I can imagine Bhima's anger increasing day by day like fire fed with oil."

Dhritarastra's anguish echoed around the assembly hall. Vidura and Bhishma both sat nearby, but they remained silent. The king continued, "Alas my sons, along with Shakuni and Karna, saw only the honey at the top of the tree but not the fall. By robbing the Pandavas they have acted sinfully. I am also sinful for having allowed it. Surely the Kurus will soon be destroyed. Perhaps all these events have been ordained by all-powerful destiny. Nothing can overpower fate. Driven by his own unseen destiny, a man acts in ways he later regrets. Hence I am now left lamenting for the inevitable. After hearing that Arjuna has gone in his own body to heaven and received the celestial weapons, what can I expect for my sons?"

Dhritarastra's voice trailed off into sobs. He raised his hand and dismissed the assembly. Shakuni left the hall and went immediately to speak to Duryodhana. He found him sitting with Karna. The three friends had enjoyed the past twelve years, free finally of the Pandavas. Although his father occupied the throne, Duryodhana was actually the ruler. He tended to all affairs of state. Dhritarastra spent most of his time alone, regretting his

actions toward the Pandavas. Duryodhana had steadily increased his strength by forming diplomatic alliances all around the world. He was ready for the Pandavas to return from exile. That was, of course, if they ever came back.

The Kaurava prince folded his palms and bowed slightly as his uncle entered the room. After taking his seat, Shakuni said, "O ruler of men, having exiled the Pandavas by your own prowess you now enjoy this earth. Indeed, you have no rivals. The prosperity Yudhisthira once possessed is now yours. That great wealth which was formerly the cause of your grief is now your happiness. You have achieved everything by the force of intellect alone. All the world's kings are subservient to you, and you are adored by countless brahmins."

Shakuni smiled as he saw Duryodhana listening to his own praises with relish. Pressing his fingertips together he went on, "Why not pay a visit to the Pandavas, who have never accepted your rule? Surrounded by the Kurus even as Yamaraja is surrounded by the Rudras, go and scorch the Pandavas with the sight of your splendor. That prosperity which is seen by both friend and foe is real prosperity. Let the wives of the Kurus accompany you in their finest dress and look upon Draupadi clad in barks. What greater happiness could you experience?"

Karna voiced his approval with a laugh, but Duryodhana appeared pensive. "I am not sure. I don't think Father will allow me to go to the Dwaitavana. My motives would be too obvious to him. Indeed, the old man is grieving for what we have accomplished, and he considers that they have become more powerful by their ascetic practices."

As he thought of the Pandavas in the forest, Duryodhana smiled. It would certainly be enjoyable to see their poverty and suffering while displaying his own wealth. Gradually, his malice overshadowed his doubts.

"Nevertheless, your suggestion finds favor with me, O hero. What could be a greater delight than to see the Pandavas sunk in misery? Perhaps we can devise some means by which the king can be convinced to let us go. If Dharmaraja, Arjuna, and especially Bhima, were to see me graced with their wealth, then the goal of my life would be attained."

The three Kurus agreed that some feasible reason for their going had to be found. Pondering the problem, they each left for their own abodes. The next morning, Karna said to Duryodhana, "I think I have found a plan that

will work. I have learned that our cattle herds are now in the Dwaitavana. They need to be checked and counted, and it is always proper for this to be overseen by the kshatriyas. If you tell your father that you wish to do this service, he will surely give his permission."

As they were speaking, Shakuni arrived and said the same thought had occurred to him. They felt certain that this was the perfect pretext and they laughed together and shook each other's hands. They decided to go that day to see the king.

Coming before Dhritarastra, they inquired about his welfare and in return he blessed them with affectionate words. As they sat together a cowherd, whom Duryodhana had instructed beforehand, came into the room and spoke to Dhritarastra about his cows. Taking the opportunity, Karna then said, "O King, the cattle are now in a charming woodland and the time for marking the calves has come. This is also an excellent season for your son to go hunting. Why not have him go to the Dwaitavana to check the cattle? Shakuni and I will accompany him there."

The king looked doubtful. "O child, although hunting and seeing the cattle are both proper acts for rulers, I have a concern. The Pandavas are reported to be living somewhere in that region and thus I feel you should not go there. You have defeated them by deceitful means, and thus they are living exiled in the forest. Although Dharmaraja will never become angry, the same cannot be said for Bhima. And Draupadi is effulgence herself; she is endowed with great ascetic merit and capable of consuming you by her curse. Full of pride and folly as you are, you will surely offend her and thus be reduced to ashes."

Dhritarastra continued, his heart burning as he again remembered Pandu's sons and their chaste wife. "Perhaps the Pandavas themselves will consume you with the fire of their weapons. Or if from the force of numbers you seek to injure them, then that would be improper—and I know you can never succeed. The mighty-armed Arjuna has returned from heaven and now possesses all the celestial weapons. Even without those weapons he was capable of conquering the earth. Why then will he not now kill you all? I suggest that you order some trusted men to go there in your place. Leave well enough alone and do not disturb the Pandavas, who are like sleeping lions."

Shakuni rubbed his chin. "O descendent of Bharata, the eldest

Pandava is dedicated to virtue and cannot possibly harm us while he is fulfilling his vow in the forest. His brothers are obedient to him and will do likewise. Nor do we wish to see the Pandavas; we shall not even approach them. You need not fear any misconduct on our part."

Although the king was hardly convinced by Shakuni's words, being repeatedly requested he finally agreed to let Duryodhana go. The prince quickly assembled a large force of men. With all his brothers and thousands of women, they soon set off for the forest. Eight thousand chariots, thirty thousand elephants, nine thousand horses, and many thousands of infantry accompanied them. Carriages, shops, pavilions, traders, bards, and men trained in hunting followed them. As the procession moved off, it resounded like the deep roar of the winds during the monsoon season.

Arriving at the Dwaitavana, Duryodhana camped about four miles from the lake. His many attendants built him a house surrounded by fruit trees near a good water supply. Separate houses were constructed for Karna, Shakuni, and Duryodhana's brothers.

Duryodhana then went to see the large herd of cattle. He examined their limbs and supervised their counting and marking by the herdsmen. When all the work was done, the Kuru prince wandered cheerfully throughout the region, enjoying himself with his friends and the women. His entourage roamed about the woodlands at pleasure, like the celestials enjoying themselves in the Nandana groves. The herdsmen, who were expert at singing and dancing, entertained their royal guests, who in turn distributed first-class food and drinks to the herdsmen.

After the entertainment, Duryodhana decided to go hunting. Attended by his followers he went about the forest killing hundreds of bison, buffaloes, boar, deer, bears and gavayas. The hunting afforded him the opportunity to see the delightful regions in the forest, which resounded with the sweet notes of peacocks and swarmed with bees intoxicated by the honey of fragrant flowers. As the prince went through the forest like Indra amid the gods, he gradually came to the Dwaitavana lake.

On the opposite shore of the lake Yudhishthira was performing the sacrifice known as Rajarishi. Guided by the brahmins he sat with Draupadi making offerings into the sacred fire. Duryodhana, desiring to display his opulence before the Pandavas, instructed his men to build pleasure houses

along the lakeshore. They immediately went toward the lake and looked for a suitable site, but as they came close to the lakeside they heard a voice calling, "Stop! Who are you and why have you come to this place? Know me to be Chitrasena, the Gandharva king. This lake and its surrounding woodlands belong to me."

Duryodhana's soldiers looked around and saw the Gandharva surrounded by other celestials and Apsaras. He was sporting in the lake and he told the soldiers to go back to wherever they had come from.

The soldiers returned to Duryodhana and gave their report. Duryodhana then detailed a number of his most powerful generals to drive the Gandharva and his followers away. The generals went before Chitrasena and said, "The powerful son of Dhritarastra, King Duryodhana, has come here to sport. Therefore, you should leave this place immediately."

But the Gandharvas simply laughed. Chitrasena's reply was harsh. "Your wicked-minded Duryodhana has little sense, or how could he command we who dwell in heaven? We are not his servants. You are fools to bring us such a message and to thus meet your own deaths. Go back to where you came from or find yourselves in Yamaraja's abode today."

The soldiers again returned to Duryodhana and told him that if he wished to use the lake, he would have to fight with the Gandharvas. Duryodhana's anger rose. How dare anyone oppose him! He was the ruler of the earth. He would teach these Gandharvas a lesson. He barked out orders to his men. "Go and chastise these wretches who have so displeased me. Even if it were Indra sporting with the celestials I would not tolerate it."

Knowing the Gandharvas to be formidable fighters, Duryodhana's generals took thousands of heavily armed soldiers and returned to the lake. They filled the woods with their loud roars and crushed everything as they advanced.

The Gandharvas again forbade their approach, but the soldiers disregarded them and came onto the shores, their weapons uplifted. Enraged, Chitrasena ordered his followers, "Punish these wicked wretches."

Thousands of Gandharvas rushed at Duryodhana's men. The soldiers panicked and fled. Karna alone stood his ground. He checked the Gandharvas with his arrows. Displaying his lightness of hand, he struck down the enemy by the hundreds, lopping off their heads and limbs. Gradually, he forced the

Gandharva army back.

But they regrouped and came again in even larger numbers. Karna fought furiously and the earth was quickly covered with the bodies of slain Gandharvas.

Hearing the clamour of battle, Duryodhana, Dushashana and their other brothers raced to assist Karna. The clatter of their chariot wheels as they charged into battle resembled Garuda's roars. A fearful fight ensued, and gradually the Gandharva warriors were overpowered. They retreated to Chitrasena and the Kurus sent up a loud victory shout.

Seeing his army so afflicted, the Gandharva king mounted his chariot and rushed toward the Kurus. He knew all the methods of warfare and he fought with mystical weapons. The Kuru heroes were rendered senseless by Chitrasena's illusions. It appeared that every one of them was surrounded and attacked by Gandharvas. They cried in fear and fled panic-stricken from the fight. Only Duryodhana, Karna, Dushashana and Shakuni remained fighting, although they were all severely wounded.

The Gandharvas concentrated on Karna, surrounding him and raining down showers of weapons. With swords and axes they cut down his chariot and slew his horses and charioteer. Karna leapt down with a sword and shield in his hands and mounted Vikarna's chariot. Urged on by Karna, who was sorely oppressed, Vikarna immediately fled from the battlefield.

Then only Duryodhana and his brothers remained. They hurled their weapons at the Gandharvas, but the celestials closed in on them. They smashed Duryodhana's chariot and he fell stunned to the ground. Chitrasena immediately jumped down and seized the prince with such force that it seemed as if he would kill him. The other Gandharvas took Duryodhana's brothers prisoner, and others ran into their camp and seized their wives. Hundreds of Kurus were taken prisoner by the Gandharvas, who bound them with chains and herded them together.

Some of the Kuru soldiers had escaped. They ran around to the other side of the lake and approached Yudhisthira. Falling before him they implored him to help. "The Gandharvas have captured Dhritarastra's mighty-armed son. His brothers and women are also being held prisoner. O son of Kunti, please save them."

Bhima looked at his cousin Duryodhana's crying followers and

laughed. "What we would have had to achieve with great effort on the battlefield the Gandharvas have easily done for us. It is fortunate for us that there are still those in the world who would do us good. Plainly Duryodhana came here with evil intentions, but he has been overtaken by unforeseen consequences. This is surely what he deserves for his sinful motivations. No doubt the evil-minded one wanted to gloat over us in our misery. Well, he deserves to suffer."

Yudhishthira stopped Bhima's sarcastic words. "This is not the time for cruelty. Why do you speak so harshly to these Kurus who are frightened and have come seeking our protection? Can we let our family disputes come in the way of honor? Among ourselves we are five and they are a hundred, but when an enemy of the Kurus has come, we are a hundred and five brothers. The wretched-minded Gandharva knows we are living here, but disregarding us, he has insulted the ladies of our family."

Yudhishthira looked around at his other brothers. "O foremost of men, arm yourselves for battle. Go at once and rescue Duryodhana and his brothers and wives."

The Kuru soldiers had arrived in great war chariots. Yudhishthira pointed to the chariots and said, "Mount these golden chariots and rush upon the Gandharvas. Even an ordinary kshatriya would try his best to protect one who seeks protection. What then shall I say to you, Bhima? Indeed, what could give us more happiness? The bestowal of a boon, the birth of a son and sovereignty are sources of joy, but the happiness of saving an enemy in distress is equal to all three. Dear Bhima, your sworn enemy Duryodhana now depends upon you for his life. Could anything give you more pleasure than to protect him?"

Yudhishthira said that he would have gone himself, but he was bound by the vow of the sacrifice he was performing. Therefore, he was asking his brothers to go in his place and then to liberate the prisoners. Hearing Yudhishthira's command, Arjuna vowed, "If the Gandharvas do not release the Kauravas, then the earth shall drink their blood."

When they heard Arjuna's vow, the Kuru soldiers were encouraged. They handed over their chariots, and the four brothers, quickly donning their armor, mounted them. Headed by Bhima they raced to the other side of the lake, appearing like four blazing fires. When the other Kurus saw them arrive

ready for battle, they shouted in joy. Hearing their shouts, the Gandharvas, who were preparing to depart with their prisoners, turned and saw the Pandavas approaching.

The Gandharva warriors immediately took up their battle formation. A skirmish ensued as they released arrows at the Pandavas and the Pandavas countered the attack. Arjuna, hoping that they may be able to convince the Gandharvas without bloodshed, raised his bow and called out, "O Gandharvas, let go of my brother, the king Duryodhana."

The Gandharvas laughed. "We obey only one person's order. Under his rule we pass our days free from misery. O descendent of Bharata, we are always obedient to his command alone."

Angered by their disregard, Arjuna answered, "Contact with others' wives and fighting with ordinary men is not proper behavior for celestials. At Dharmaraja's command you should release the Kauravas and their women. Otherwise, I will have to rescue them by force."

Arjuna could see that the Gandharvas were ignoring him. He immediately fired fierce arrows at them. The Gandharvas turned and swiftly responded with their own blazing shafts. They quickly surrounded the Pandavas, sending arrows, axes, maces and swords at them by the thousands. The brothers, facing the four directions, countered the weapons while simultaneously attacking the Gandharvas. An extraordinary battle took place, with thousands of Gandharvas fighting against the four humans. The Gandharvas tried to destroy the Pandavas' chariots as they had destroyed the chariots of Karna and Duryodhana, but they were checked by the Pandavas arrows and could not get close enough to do any harm.

Arjuna ground his teeth in rage. He began to invoke celestial weapons. He threw the Agneyastra which slew thousands of Gandharvas. Bhima's forceful arrows killed innumerable other Gandharvas, while the sons of Madri, fighting with great prowess, attacked and killed hundreds of others.

The Gandharvas rose up to the sky, taking with them their prisoners, but Arjuna released arrows by the tens of thousands and created a net over the Gandharvas. They then angrily attacked Arjuna by throwing down maces, darts and swords. Checking their weapons, Arjuna fired crescent-headed shafts that tore off the Gandharvas' heads and limbs. They tried overcoming him with a fearful shower of celestial weapons, but Arjuna held off all those

missiles with his arrows. By invoking various mystical weapons, Arjuna created havoc among his foes and they screamed in terror.

Chitrasena could see that his followers were being routed by the Pandavas. He rushed at Arjuna with his mace held aloft. With swift arrows Arjuna cut his iron mace into seven pieces. The Gandharva king resorted to illusion and appeared to attack the Pandavas from all sides. Arjuna invoked the Shabdaveda weapon, which destroys illusion. Chitrasena disappeared from sight, continuously raining down weapons of every description, but Arjuna attacked him with arrows capable of striking an unseen enemy.

Chitrasena, who had fought the Pandavas only to protect his honor, then appeared in front of Arjuna and said, "Behold, it is only your friend fighting with you."

Seeing Chitrasena approaching in peace, Arjuna withdrew his weapons and his brothers did the same. The Gandharva king and Arjuna inquired after each other's welfare, and Arjuna said, "O hero, what purpose do you serve by punishing the Kurus? Why do you persecute Duryodhana and his followers?"

Chitrasena smiled. "Listen, Dhananjaya, I knew long ago the real purpose for Duryodhana's coming here. He wanted to mock you in your adversity and flaunt his own wealth. Understanding this, Indra ordered me to capture the wretch and his followers and to bring them before him in chains. Allow us to carry them away."

Arjuna shook his head. "If you want to please me, then let them go. Dharmaraja has commanded it. They are our kinsfolk."

Chitrasena frowned. "The sinful Duryodhana is full of vanity. He does not deserve to be freed. He has deceived and wronged your brother and grievously offended your wife. O Arjuna, he came here to add insult to injury. Yudhishthira did not know his reason for coming. Therefore, let us explain it to him and see what he decides after that."

Arjuna agreed and they all went to Yudhishthira to inform him of what had transpired. Yudhishthira said, "Dear sir, it is fortunate for us that although you possess great prowess you did not slay Dhritarastra's wicked sons. Our family honor has thus been saved and it will be further saved if you release them. I am pleased to see you. Please tell me if there is anything I can do for you and then return in peace to your own abode."

Chitrasena was delighted at Yudhishthira's words. "I am satisfied simply to see you, great one. We shall free the Kurus."

The Gandharva brought his captives into the Pandavas' presence. Indra then appeared and sprinkled celestial nectar on the Gandharvas who had been slain. They all regained their lives. Headed by Chitrasena, they rose up to the skies and vanished.

In an affectionate voice, the ever-compassionate Yudhishthira said to Duryodhana, "O child, never again commit such a rash act. A rash man never becomes happy. O Kuru prince, be blessed with all your brothers. Go home now and do not be despondent."

But Duryodhana was devastated. He felt as if his heart was splitting in two. He had achieved the opposite of what he had intended. Instead of humiliating his enemies, he had himself been shamed. As he made his way back to the city, he moved as if he were unconscious and without will. He said nothing to anyone. Leaving the Pandavas to worship the sacred fire and the brahmins, he hung his head.

The Kaurava prince could not stop thinking of his defeat. After he had gone about ten miles back through the forest, evening fell and he ordered his party to stop for the night. They set up camp on a grassy bank of a nearby river. Duryodhana entered his tent. Sitting on a bedstead as bright as fire, he looked like an eclipsed moon. Unable to sleep, he remained lost in painful thoughts.

Just before sunrise, Karna came to see him. Having fled far from the battlefield when defeated by the Gandharvas, he had not witnessed the Kauravas' capture. When he returned no one had been able to tell him how his friend had been humiliated. He had therefore assumed that the prince had overpowered the Gandharvas by his own might.

Praising Duryodhana's strength and prowess, Karna said, "It is indeed fortunate that you are alive and we have met again. By good luck you have defeated the Gandharvas, who possess great might as well as the powers of illusion. I was forced to flee for my life, my body mangled by arrows. It is a great wonder that I see you and your brothers and wives here safe after that superhuman battle. What man could have done what you did today?"

Karna's words only increased Duryodhana's grief. He replied in a choked voice, "You do not know what happened, so I am not angry with you.

Although you think I overcame the Gandharvas, in fact my brothers and I were all defeated. After a furious battle we were taken prisoner and carried through the skies."

Karna was amazed. Duryodhana related to him how the four Pandavas had come to rescue them on Yudhisthira's order, and how the Gandharva king had revealed to Yudhisthira the Kurus' real purpose in coming to Dwaitavana. "When I heard Chitrasena speaking in the Pandavas' presence, I felt like entering the earth. Alas what greater sorrow could be mine than to be bound by chains and offered as tribute to Yudhisthira in the sight of all our women? I have always persecuted those brothers. They are my enemies and will always be so. Yet it was they who released me from captivity. I am indebted to them for my life. I would have preferred to die in the battle than to suffer such a fate."

Duryodhana wept and Karna tried to console him. Gradually the prince managed to regain his composure. His voice was grave. "Listen, friend. I will now remain here and fast until death. Let all my brothers and other relatives return to the city. My enemy has insulted me. I can never return to Hastinapura. I, who was respected and feared by my enemies and who enhanced the respect of my friends, have now become a source of joy to my enemies and of grief to my friends. If I return to the city, what could I say to my father? What could I say to Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Ashvatthama, Vidura, and the other Kuru chiefs?"

In his suffering Duryodhana realized his foolishness. What madness had driven him to come out to this forest? He recalled the many times Vidura had tried to counsel him. He had never paid even the slightest regard to that advice. Surely he was now reaping the results of his own stupidity. It was unbearable. Death was the only recourse.

Looking at Karna, his eyes filled with tears, he said, "Men like me, puffed up with vanity and insolence, are never blessed for any length of time even if they obtain prosperity and knowledge. Alas I have been wicked. Now I suffer. Leave me here to die. I can no longer continue to live. What man could be rescued by his enemies and still drag on in his miserable existence? Proud as I am, the enemy has laughed at me, finding me deprived of my prowess."

Duryodhana asked Karna to bring Dushashana to him. When the

prince arrived, Duryodhana said, "O descendent of Bharata, hear my words. I order you to be installed in my place as the earth's ruler. Become the refuge of your friends and relatives and the terror of your enemies. Always bestow charity upon the brahmins and cherish your gurus. As Vishnu protects the celestials, so you should protect your dependents."

Duryodhana clasped his brother's shoulders. "Go, dear brother, and rule this wide earth. I shall end my life here."

Dushashana was grief-stricken. He lowered his face and said, "O brother, please give up your determination to die. It can never be. Do not accept such a path. How can I become king in your place? The earth may split, the heavens may fall, and the sun may lose its heat, but I can never rule the earth without you."

Crying out, "Relent, relent," again and again, Dushashana fell at his brother's feet. "You alone shall be the king for one hundred years and I shall be your servant."

Then Karna said, "O heroes, what will all this achieve? Weeping does not drive away grief. Summon your patience. Do not grieve and thus give more joy to your enemies."

Resting his hand on Duryodhana's shoulder, Karna continued, "The Pandavas only did their duty when they rescued you, for it is always the duty of subjects to do what is good for their king. Under your protection, the Pandavas happily reside in your dominion. They are dependent upon you, O King. It is not otherwise. Do not indulge in sorrow like an ordinary man. O Duryodhana, we are all suffering to hear you speak of dying. Be blessed. Rise up and return to your city! Console your relatives."

Karna tried his best to convince his friend to change his mind. He pointed out that although he had subjugated and even enslaved the Pandavas, they had not resolved to die. It was not wonderful that they had rescued him. There were many instances where a mighty king had somehow been overpowered by his enemies and been rescued by his troops. The fortunes of war were unpredictable. Sometimes one gained victory and at other times he was defeated. A warrior had to learn how to tolerate life's reverses if he wanted to ultimately gain success.

Karna, who was covered in wounds from the battle, laughed as he continued. "Therefore, O king, rise up. Do not become the butt of jokes for

other kings by dying like this. Go forth and earn everlasting fame. Put this setback behind you. Victory will surely attend you."

Although both Dushashana and Karna repeatedly beseeched him, Duryodhana did not rise up. He had decided to die.

Shakuni had entered the tent and heard Karna and Dushashana's attempts to encourage Duryodhana. Seeing Duryodhana's resolution, and knowing that he was incapable of tolerating any insult, he said, "O descendent of Kuru, you have heard Karna's speech. It is full of wisdom. Why then are you foolishly throwing away the wealth I won for you? This is childish and unnecessary. It seems you have never waited upon your elders and learned self-control. As an unfired earthen pot leaks when it is filled with water, so one without self-control is lost when grief or joy arises. This is no occasion for grief. The Pandavas have helped you. Now you should not indulge in grief—reward them instead."

Shakuni had always recognized that the Pandavas were superior in strength. Thus he had advised Duryodhana to defeat them at dice rather than to face them in battle. He also recognized that the five heroes were devoted to virtue and truth. They posed no threat to the Kauravas at all. Whatever enmity and antagonism there was between the two families came only from the Kauravas. But it seemed as if there was no way to overcome the Pandavas. Perhaps it would be better to accept that fact with good grace rather than to be annihilated in some final confrontation.

Thinking in this way, Shakuni continued. "Your behavior makes no sense, O King. You owe it to the Pandavas to repay them for their favor. Do not undermine what they have done for you by lamenting. Rather, go to them with a cheerful heart and return their kingdom. You will thereby win both virtue and renown. Establish brotherly relations with the Pandavas and then you will be happy."

Shakuni thought that now would be an opportunity for Duryodhana to display his nobility. By going to the Pandavas and offering them their kingdom in return for being saved, he would reverse the situation. Instead of appearing foolish, he would appear generous and upright. The Pandavas would also appear the recipients of his mercy.

Duryodhana bent down and lifted the weeping Dushashana. After hearing Karna and Shakuni speak, he was overwhelmed by shame. Despair

overtook him completely. "I have nothing more to do with virtue, friendship, wealth, renown, sovereignty or enjoyment. Do not oppose me. Leave me—all of you. I am resolved to abandon my life! Go back to the city and, on my behalf, worship my gurus with respect."

Karna stood with tears streaming down his face. "O king of kings, how can we leave you here? Your way is our way. We are all united in happiness and distress. Give up this resolve or we too shall die."

Still, Duryodhana did not waver in his determination. He spread kusha grass on the ground, took off his royal garments and put on rags, purified himself by touching water, and sat down in a yogic posture. With a desire to attain heaven, he began to observe the Praya vow of fasting until death. He stopped speaking, and ceasing all other external activities, half-closed his eyes. Soon he was meditating.

In the nether regions, the Danavas and Daityas became aware of Duryodhana's resolve. Those celestial beings, who had been defeated in a war with the gods, were depending upon Duryodhana to oppose the gods' purpose on earth. Many of the demons had even incarnated upon earth as kings and warriors with the hope of overthrowing the pious kings who made sacrifices to the gods. Fearing that their party would not succeed without Duryodhana, the celestial demons began a fire sacrifice. They employed brahmins to chant mantras that had the power to summon to their presence a man from another planet.

As the brahmins offered ghee into the fire while reciting hymns from the Atharva Veda and the Upanishads, a strange looking, effulgent goddess rose from the fire and asked, "What shall I do?"

Pleased, the demons commanded her, "Bring Duryodhana, the son of Dhritarastra, here. He is engaged in a vow of fasting."

"So be it," she said, and vanished. She went immediately to the place where Duryodhana sat. Unseen, she took him in his subtle body and brought him before the demons in the nether region.

As if in a dream, Duryodhana found himself standing in an assembly of Danavas. Their leader, his eyes wide with delight, said, "O king of kings, O perpetuator of the Bharata race, you are always surrounded by heroes and illustrious men. Why then have you undertaken such a rash vow? Suicide always leads to hell. One who kills himself is reviled on earth and he attains

no auspicious destination. Intelligent men like you never engage in acts that go against their best interest. O king, give up your resolve to die! Such a resolve is destructive to morality, profit, happiness, fame, prowess and energy. If you commit suicide, you will enhance your enemy's joy. Listen now as we tell you the truth of your position, your celestial origins, and your power. Then you may decide what you wish to do."

The Danava then described how Duryodhana had been born as a result of the demons' austerities. They had obtained him as a boon from Shiva. His body was made of thunder and was virtually invincible. Powerful Danavas had incarnated on earth as kings and were supporting him. United in battle, he would doubtlessly destroy his enemies. Other great demons would, at the time of the battle, possess the hearts of Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, and others. Thus the Kuru chiefs would cast aside restraint and compassion and kill anyone who opposed them, even their brothers, sons, friends, fathers, disciples—even children and old men. Blinded by ignorance and wrath, they would show no mercy and would slay hundreds of thousands on the battlefield.

As Duryodhana listened in amazement, the Danava continued, "O hero, you should not fear Arjuna. We have already decided how he will die. The soul of the powerful Naraka, who Vishnu himself slew, has taken birth as Karna. Remembering his former enmity, he will kill both Krishna and Arjuna. Knowing this, the wielder of thunder, Indra, will try to divest Karna of his natural armor and earrings—both of which render him invincible. We have therefore also arranged that hundreds of thousands of mighty Daitya warriors, now present on earth in the form of the Samsaptakas, will fight Arjuna. If Karna does not slay Arjuna, these warriors will. Therefore, do not grieve. You will rule the earth without a rival. Go back and give up your vow. You are our refuge and we are here to assist you in every way."

The Danavas and Daityas came forward and embraced Duryodhana. They all spoke encouragingly and cheered his mind. Finally, they said, "Go and attain victory!" Then they commanded the goddess to return him to his body.

After being returned to his seat on the kusha grass, Duryodhana opened his eyes. He recalled his meeting with the Daityas as if it had been a dream. The prince was not certain if it had actually occurred, but it had changed his mind. Whether or not he had met the celestial beings was

unimportant. He took their predictions seriously. Surely their words would come to pass and he would defeat the Pandavas. Karna and the Samsaptakas would kill Arjuna, and thousands of other kshatriyas would assist him in the war to come.

While Duryodhana sat ruminating on the Danavas' words, Karna came before him. Duryodhana immediately decided not to tell anyone what had happened. Seeing that he had stopped his meditation, Karna said, "It is good to see that you are restored to your senses. A dead man can never conquer his enemies. This is not the time to grieve. Why do you wish to die so ignominiously? O hero, rise up and kill your foes. Go out and attain victory and immortal fame. I swear that when the Pandavas emerge from exile, I will conquer them and bring them under your subjugation."

To the delight of his brothers and Karna, Duryodhana replied, "So be it." He stood up, still reflecting on the Danavas' speech. He then took his place at the head of his army and started back for Hastinapura, his mind set upon amassing his army for war.

Chapter Thirty-two. Sage Durvasa

When Bhishma heard of the events at Dwaitavana he decided to speak to Duryodhana. Finding the prince seated with Shakuni in his majestic palace, Bhishma approached him and said, "O child, I have repeatedly requested you not to maintain enmity with the Pandavas. You were advised not to go to the forest, but still you went. Now you have clearly seen the Pandavas' prowess, and also that of Karna. In your presence he fled the battlefield. It was then left to the Pandavas to rescue you. O king, in martial skills, heroism or morality, Karna is not even a fourth of any one of Pandu's sons. Make peace with the brothers—for your good and for the good of our race."

Bhishma knew that most of Duryodhana's hopes of defeating the Pandavas rested on Karna. Ever since Karna had appeared at the martial arts demonstration and challenged Arjuna, Duryodhana had seen him as the only way to conquer Arjuna. Now it should be obvious that Karna was no match for Arjuna.

Bhishma looked hopefully at the prince, but Duryodhana, remembering the Danavas' words, laughed. What did this old man know? The Pandavas were in for a surprise. Bhishma himself would be a part of that surprise when the demons took hold of him.

Duryodhana did not bother to reply. He stood up suddenly and walked out of the room. Bhishma could only shake his head sadly. He was not surprised to see Duryodhana's arrogance. It now seemed that the Kurus' destruction was imminent. The old warrior returned slowly and sadly to his own chambers.

After he left Bhishma, Duryodhana was joined by Karna, Shakuni and Dushashana. The prince looked around at his counselors and asked, "What remains to be done? How can I secure my good fortune? Let us fix on some plan."

Duryodhana told them what Bhishma had said and Karna became uncomfortable. The Kuru grandfather was always berating him. He did not seem to like him. Karna felt he was as much a well-wisher of the Kurus as was Bhishma himself. Maybe it was time to prove Bhishma's assessment of him wrong. Wringing his hands he said, "O mighty king, Bhishma blames us

and praises the Pandavas. It is clear that he favors them over you. Because he bears you ill will, he abuses me too. I cannot bear to hear his words any longer. Give me an army and I shall single-handedly conquer the world for the Kauravas, just as the Pandavas did before the Rajasuya sacrifice. Let the wicked-minded wretch of the Kurus, the senile Bhishma, see it and regret how he has treated me. Simply command me and I shall leave at once."

Duryodhana slapped his friend on the back in delight. "I am blessed because you have favored me, O hero. What more could I want than to see one such as you interested in my welfare? Surely my life has borne fruit today. Go out, dear friend, and vanquish my foes. May good come to you! Just ask and I shall do whatever I can to help."

Karna at once began to make arrangements for his expedition. Duryodhana amassed a vast army with a year's supplies. After consulting with brahmins and gaining Dhritarastra's permission, he selected a favorable day to depart. Bhishma and Vidura, however, did not approve of Karna's plan, but they chose to remain silent. Perhaps the fool would be defeated somewhere and his pride would be curbed. At least while he was gone, he would not be influencing Duryodhana toward yet another rash scheme.

Blessed by the court brahmins, who uttered prayers for his victory, Karna went out of the city followed by thousands of troops. He first attacked King Drupada's beautiful city. Drupada did not pay allegiance to the Kauravas. Like many of the kings who had accepted Yudhisthira's rule, Drupada was not inclined toward Dhritarastra. In the end, however, the superior force brought from Hastinapura overpowered Drupada and obliged him to offer Dhritarastra tribute.

Karna then moved north, subjugating all the kings in that region. He vanquished Bhagadatta as well as all the Himalayan mountain kings. Traveling east, he overcame many tribes. None were able to defeat him in battle as he rained down fierce arrows. Surya's son was a peerless fighter whom few on earth could face, especially when the Kuru army joined him. He soon defeated all the kings in the south and made his way west, conquering and subjugating all in his path.

Well within a year Karna had accumulated a huge amount of wealth from his conquests. He carried it back to Hastinapura in a long line of chariots and oxen. Duryodhana and his father and brothers greeted him as he

entered the city. They congratulated Karna and embraced him. Duryodhana said, "What I have not received even from Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, or any other, I have received from Karna. O mighty-armed hero, in you I have my protector. All the Pandavas and other kings are nothing compared to you.

Seeing Karna successful, some of the citizens were pleased while others, favorable to the Pandavas, lamented or remained silent. Dhritarastra was overjoyed and embraced Karna with affection, considering him his own son.

From that day on, Duryodhana, seeing Karna's prowess, considered the Pandavas defeated. The prince was encouraged and began to think about performing the Rajasuya sacrifice. Now that the world had been brought under his control, he wanted to equal the Pandavas in every way. If he could preside over the Rajasuya, then all his desires would be fulfilled.

But when the prince approached his chief priest and requested him to perform the sacrifice, he was told it was not possible. "As long as Yudhisthira lives," the priest said, "no man on earth can perform the Rajasuya. It is only possible for one monarch to perform that sacrifice at any one time. Nor can a man perform the sacrifice in his father's presence."

Then the priest explained that there was another sacrifice, resembling the Rajasuya, which Duryodhana could perform. It was called the Vaishnava sacrifice. No person other than the immortal Vishnu had ever performed it, and it was equal to the Rajasuya in every way. "O King, using the gold offered as tribute by the kings of the world, make a golden plow. With this plow you should prepare the ground, and upon that spot I shall begin the sacrifice."

Duryodhana immediately discussed the sacrifice with his father and counselors, who all expressed approval. He then appointed people to the various posts required for the sacrifice and instructed artisans to make a golden plow. All the Kuru elders were delighted to see Duryodhana performing a sacrifice, an act which they hoped would increase his piety and the glory of the Kuru race. Swift messengers were dispatched to invite the kings of the world.

Dushashana asked messengers to go to the Dwaitavana and invite the Pandavas so they could see the Kurus' power. When Yudhisthira heard the invitation he replied, "It is indeed fortunate that Duryodhana is perfuming

such a great sacrifice. I should very much like to attend, but it will not be possible. I cannot leave the forest until my vow is completed. Duryodhana will see me in Hastinapura only when the thirteen years of exile are over."

Bhima, however, glared at the messenger. "King Yudhishthira will go when we are ready to put Duryodhana into the fire kindled by weapons. Repeat this message to Duryodhana: 'When thirteen years are complete, Dharmaraja, the lord of men, in the sacrifice of battle, will pour onto the sons of Dhritarastra the ghee of his anger.' That is when we shall come." The other brothers said nothing.

When Duryodhana heard the messages, he simply smiled.

Thousands of brahmins and kshatriyas arrived in Hastinapura. They were warmly greeted and offered food and drink and appropriate accommodation. Vidura took charge of receiving the guests, ensuring that they were satisfied in every way. Once they had been properly refreshed, he showed them to the sacrificial compound outside the city. The visiting kings brought tribute and Duryodhana and his brothers offered the brahmins charity.

At the end of the sacrifice, Duryodhana re-entered his city surrounded by his brothers and eulogized by bards and singers. His friends and relatives glorified him, saying that this sacrifice had surpassed all those performed by his ancestors, all of whom had gone to heaven.

However, some fearless citizens said that the sacrifice did not compare with Yudhishthira's Rajasuya. Although Duryodhana heard these comments, he did not respond. He knew it was true. The Rajasuya had been the most opulent and splendid ceremony he had ever witnessed. His had come nowhere near its magnificence.

Karna saw his friend again becoming pensive. Placing his arm around the prince he said, "O best of the Bharatas, by good fortune your sacrifice has been successful. This is only the beginning. When the Pandavas are slain in battle, you will then complete the Rajasuya. I look forward to again glorifying you at that time."

Duryodhana embraced Karna and thought of the Rajasuya. "O Kurus," he said, "when shall I celebrate that best of sacrifices, the Rajasuya, after killing the wicked-minded Pandavas?"

Karna stopped walking and spoke gravely. "Hear my words, O king. As long as I have not killed Arjuna, I will not taste meat or accept luxuries. I will give to anyone anything they ask of me. When asked for charity, I will never say, 'I cannot give.'"

Dhritarastra's sons cheered to hear Karna's vow. They considered the Pandavas already slain. As the handsome Karna strode powerfully into his palace, even as Kuvera enters his abode, the Kauravas all praised him.

* * *

The Pandavas also heard about Karna's vow. Bhima and Arjuna sneered, but Yudhisthira was alarmed. Thinking of Karna's impenetrable natural armor, he knew Karna could not be slain. Yudhisthira brooded on the situation. He had brought on all their hardships and dangers. Out of their devotion for him his brothers now accepted miseries they did not deserve. Soon they would face great danger in the battle with the Kuru heroes, who would be assisted by Karna and the other powerful warriors.

Yudhisthira fell into anxiety day and night. Remembering the gambling match and the harsh words of Karna and Duryodhana, he felt as if a lance had pierced his heart. His brothers and Draupadi, seeing his condition, also felt pained. Enraged at the Kauravas, they longed for the time when they could at last confront them in battle. Each day the brothers practiced rigorous physical exercises, keeping themselves fit for fighting and giving vent to their wrath.

In the final months of their stay in the forest, Vyasadeva again came to see them. Yudhisthira worshipped him with devotion and then sat before him to hear his words.

Seeing the Pandavas lean and anxious, the sage was moved to compassion. In a voice choked with tears he said, "O foremost of men, no man can ever experience unmixed happiness. Everyone experiences happiness and distress in due course. A wise man therefore becomes neither joyful nor grief-stricken. He does not indulge in happiness or give way to sorrow when each arrives. Rather, he practices asceticism to attain the eternal happiness born of spiritual realization. From asceticism comes the greatest happiness, not from improving our material circumstances. Foolish persons, seeking material enjoyment by any means, obtain births as beasts in their next

lives. They never enjoy happiness. O king, your practice of asceticism, although difficult, will lead to your ultimate welfare."

After describing the many qualities a man would develop from asceticism—truthfulness, freedom from anger, self-control, non-violence—Vyasadeva went on to speak of charity, which Yudhisthira always practiced when he had wealth.

When Vyasadeva fell silent, Yudhisthira asked, "Pray tell me, great rishi, which is better: asceticism or charity? Which produces a better result and which is more difficult to practice?"

Vyasadeva replied, "O child, there is nothing more difficult to practice than charity. Men thirst for wealth and obtain it only after great effort. Risking their lives, they enter the depths of the sea and the forest in their search of wealth. There is nothing they will not do to become rich. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to part with hard-earned wealth. But, O hero, properly earned wealth should be given away with an open heart to worthy persons. Ill-gotten wealth, however, even if given away, will not free its owner from degradation in the next life."

Yudhisthira asked Vyasadeva to speak more about the benefits of giving charity and the sage told him an old history. There had been a poor man named Mudgala who had attained the supreme spiritual abode simply by his practice of giving charity to brahmins. The Pandavas were fascinated. Finally the sage said, "O son of Kunti, do not grieve. Happiness and distress revolve around a man one after the other as if on a wheel. You will surely recover your father's kingdom at the end of your exile. By your asceticism and charity you will attain all auspiciousness. Be at peace. I am going."

The Pandavas offered their obeisances as the rishi rose to leave and felt comforted by his words.

* * *

Duryodhana thought continuously of ways by which he might harm the Pandavas. He consulted with his brothers and Karna, trying to devise a means to overcome the brothers before they returned from the forest. While he was considering different plans, the ascetic Durvasa happened to visit the city. He had with him ten thousand disciples and he came to the royal palace

asking for food for all of them. The sage was famous for his anger; if he were not served properly, he would quickly curse the offender. He would also test his hosts to the limits of their patience, wanting to see if they adhered to their religious obligations under all circumstances. Fearing that some incompetent servant would bring his curse upon them, Duryodhana served Durvasa personally. With all the humility and gentleness he could muster, he carefully ministered to the sage's every request, acting just like a menial servant.

Durvasa was unpredictable. Sometimes he would demand that a meal be prepared immediately, but when it was fetched he would go away to bathe. He would then return after a long time and say, "I will not eat now. I am no longer hungry." He would rise at midnight and call for food and other attentions, often criticizing the food and service he received. Duryodhana served him without complaint and remained attentive to the rishi's every wish. Durvasa was pleased with the prince. Just before leaving he said, "You have served me well. I will grant you a boon. Ask from me whatever you desire. If it is not opposed to religion, I will satisfy you at once."

Duryodhana felt as if he had received new life. He had already conferred with his counselors as to what boon he should request if Durvasa should ask him. Thus he replied, "O brahmin, just as you have been my guest, so you become the guest of Yudhisthira in the forest. He is accomplished and well behaved and he is a great king, the best and eldest of our family. He therefore deserves to receive your blessings. You should go to him when his entire family has finished eating and are preparing to rest. You will then be well-received by those pious men."

Durvasa replied, "I will do as you ask." He then left with his disciples, heading for the Kamyaka.

Duryodhana punched the air in joy. The Pandavas would never be able to receive Durvasa and his many disciples properly after Draupadi had eaten. They would have no way to feed ten thousand brahmins without the magic plate they had received from Surya. Surely Durvasa would curse them, and a rishi's curse could never fail.

Duryodhana ran to his friends. "Our plan has succeeded!" he cried. "The Pandavas are doomed." He embraced Karna, who said, "By good fortune you have fared well and fulfilled your desire. By good fortune your enemies are cast into an ocean of misery, difficult to cross. Through their

own fault they now face great danger." Laughing and clasping each others' hands, Duryodhana and his counselors rejoiced.

* * *

Some days later, Durvasa arrived at the Pandava camp just after Draupadi had eaten. Leaving his disciples on the outskirts of the camp, he walked in alone and appeared before the brothers. They all immediately stood with joined palms. Seeing the famous rishi standing before them, they fell to the ground in respectful obeisance. Yudhisthira offered Durvasa an excellent seat and worshipped him with all attention. Durvasa then said, "I am here with my ten thousand disciples and we need to eat. We have been walking all day and are hungry. O king, please arrange for our food. We shall first take our bath and then return for the meal."

Yudhisthira said, "So be it," and Durvasa left for the river with his disciples. After he had gone, Yudhisthira expressed his alarm. How could he possibly feed that many people? Draupadi had already eaten and the mystical plate would not yield more until morning. Yudhisthira asked his wife if she could do anything. Draupadi, who always thought of her husbands' welfare, began to contemplate the problem. Her only hope was prayer. The princess thought of Krishna and prayed, "O Krishna, Lord of the universe, destroyer of your devotees' difficulties, unlimited and all-powerful one, please hear my prayer. You are the refuge of the helpless, the giver of endless boons to all beings, the unknowable and all-knowing Supreme Person. Kindly protect me. I seek your shelter. O Lord, as you formerly saved me from Dushashana in the assembly, so please save me now from this difficulty."

Krishna was in his palace at that time, lying on his bed with Rukmini. That mysterious person, whose movements are unknown to all, heard Draupadi's prayers. He immediately rose from his bed and, leaving his wife, ran from the palace. Within a few moments he was standing before Draupadi, who fell at his feet with tears in her eyes. "O Krishna, we face a great danger from Durvasa's curse. What can be done?"

Krishna smiled. "I will do whatever can be done, but I too am hungry. Please feed me first and after that I shall do whatever is required."

Ashamed, Draupadi replied, "My lord, the vessel given by the sun remains full until I have eaten. I recently took my meal and now it will not

give more food."

"This is no time for joking," said Krishna. "Quickly fetch the vessel and show me."

Draupadi brought the dish before Krishna and he examined it closely. In one corner He found a particle of rice and vegetable stuck together, and he ate it at once, saying, "May Lord Hari, the soul of the universe, be satisfied with this food and may the Lord of all sacrifices be pleased."

Krishna then turned to Sahadeva and said, "Go quickly and bring the ascetics here and feed them."

The Pandavas looked around fearfully. There was no sign of food. But they had faith that Krishna would not let them down. Sahadeva left for the river to find Durvasa and his disciples.

At the river the innocent Durvasa was expecting Yudhisthira to have prepared a meal for him and all his followers, but suddenly he felt as if he had just consumed a huge feast. He looked at his disciples. They too appeared full and were rubbing their stomachs and belching. Looking at each other, the ascetics realized that none of them felt like eating at all!

Durvasa said to his disciples, "We have uselessly made Yudhisthira prepare a meal for ten thousand men and done him a great wrong. Will not the Pandavas destroy us by looking upon us with angry eyes? O brahmins, I know Yudhisthira to be possessed of great powers. He is devoted to the feet of Lord Hari and I fear such men. They can consume us with their anger as fire can consume a bale of cotton. Let us therefore depart quickly from this place before they see us again."

Although he was a powerful mystic yogi, Durvasa knew that his power was nothing compared to that of those devoted to the Supreme Lord, who always acts swiftly to protect his devotee. He recalled a previous incident when he had upset another devotee of the Lord. At that time he had been placed in great difficulty and had almost lost his life.

Without another word Durvasa came out of the river and walked swiftly away from the Pandavas' camp. His disciples fled away in all directions, keeping well clear of the Pandavas.

When Sahadeva arrived at the river he found no one there. A few water pots and pieces of cloth were lying around, but there was no sign of the

ascetics. He searched around and came across other brahmins who informed him that Durvasa and his followers had left suddenly. Sahadeva went back to his brothers and gave them his report. Yudhisthira was worried. "The ascetics will come back in the dead of night and demand their meal," he said fearfully. "How can we escape from this great danger created by destiny?"

Krishna smiled. "Yudhisthira, you need not fear. Durvasa and his disciples have fled, afraid of your ascetic power. Those who are virtuous need never fear danger. With your permission I shall now return to my home."

Yudhisthira replied, "O Krishna, as persons drowning in a vast ocean are saved by a boat, so we have been saved by you. Be pleased to go now as you desire."

Krishna left and the Pandavas surrounded their chaste wife, thanking her for her presence of mind in praying to Krishna. They discussed the incident among themselves. The incident seemed to have been arranged by the Kauravas. Fortunately, Krishna was always there to save them no matter what danger they faced. Thinking of their friend from Dwaraka, the brothers entered their thatched cottages and rested for the night.

Chapter Thirty-three. Jayadratha Kidnaps Draupadi

About a month after the incident with Durvasa, the Pandavas were out hunting together. They had left Draupadi at the hermitage under Dhaumya's care. While they were gone, the king of Sindhu, Jayadratha, passed that way while traveling to Salva's kingdom. Seated upon a royal chariot, he came to the outskirts of the Pandavas' ashram and saw Draupadi gathering flowers. The king at once fell in love. The beautiful Draupadi, her dark complexion framed by bluish curls, shed luster on the woodlands. As she bent over to gather the wild forest flowers, Jayadratha was captivated. He said to his son Kotika, "Go and ask this lady her name. Find out if she is an Apsara or a daughter of some god."

Jayadratha was on his way to marry King Salva's daughter, but upon seeing Draupadi he lost all interest in that other princess. No woman could ever match the beauty of this forest lady.

"Go, Kotika, and find out why this lady loiters in the forest full of wild beasts and thorns. If she will have me as her lord, then I will consider my life successful."

The prince jumped down from the chariot. As a jackal approaches a tigress, he went up to Draupadi and asked, "Fair one, who are you who stands here leaning on the branch of a kadamba tree, looking like a brilliant flame? Why do you feel no fear in this forest? Are you a goddess or the daughter of a celestial? Perhaps you are the wife of a Lokapala. Tell me, gentle lady, who and whose you are, what is your race and why are you here?"

The prince introduced himself and then, pointing to his father, said, "That one there, shining like a sacrificial fire, is the king of Sindhu. Surrounded by powerful kings he is traveling at the head of six thousand chariots and many elephants, horsemen and infantry. Like Indra amid the Maruts, he is journeying amid his friends. He is gazing upon you, O thin-waisted one."

Draupadi stepped back and pulled her cloth over her head. "O prince, it is not proper for me to speak to you here. The ordinance dictates that a woman should never be alone with any man other than her husband. Under the circumstances, however, I will tell you who I am. I am the daughter of King Drupada and the wife of the five heroic Pandava brothers. My husbands

are now out hunting, but they will return soon. You should tell your father to dismount from his chariot and wait for them. Yudhishthira is fond of guests and will doubtlessly offer you a fitting reception."

Draupadi turned and walked back toward her cottage, leaving Kotika standing by the kadamba tree. Kotika then returned to his father and told him what she had said. Unconcerned to hear of her marital status, the king replied, "Why have you returned unsuccessful? I must have that woman. Now that I have seen her, all other women seem to me like monkeys. My mind was entranced the moment I saw that princess."

"You will have to take her by force, dear father. She will surely not come willingly."

Jayadratha got down from his chariot and went with his son and several other kings toward the Pandavas' hermitage. Like a pack of wolves entering a lion's den they went into the ashram and saw Draupadi standing there. In a silky voice Jayadratha said, "Is all well with you and your husbands, O queen?"

Draupadi answered that everything was well, then said, "Is all well with your kingdom, treasury and armies? Are you justly ruling the prosperous countries of Sindhu, Sauvira, and all others brought under your sway? Yudhishthira will soon return and offer you refreshments. For now, please accept this water to wash your feet and be pleased to wait for my husbands."

Draupadi pointed toward several large pitchers of water standing by her cottage. Jayadratha smiled. "All is well with us, O fair-faced one, but we have no interest in food and water." He stared at Draupadi as he continued to speak. "I wish to take you with us. Why do you remain attached to Kunti's wretched sons? They have lost all their prosperity and are forced to dwell in the forest. A woman of good sense does not devote herself to a fallen husband. Your husbands have fallen from their dignity and have lost everything. You need not share the Pandavas' miseries. O you of beautiful hips, renouncing them, become my wife and share with me the kingdoms of Sindhu and Sauvira."

Draupadi frowned and retreated a few steps. She felt pained to hear Jayadratha's speech. "Are you not ashamed to speak in this way?" she retorted. "How dare you address me thus!"

Draupadi's face flushed and her eyes turned crimson. Her voice rose

to an angry shout. "You fool, how dare you insult the illustrious Pandavas, each of whom is like Indra himself. They all abide by their duties and never waver in battle even with the celestials. The wise never criticize men who practice devout penances, even if they are impoverished. Only dogs speak like that. I do not see anyone here who can save you from the pit you have dug under your own feet. By expecting to defeat the pious Yudhisthira you hope to separate with a stick a Himalayan elephant from his herd. Out of childishness you are rousing a sleeping mountain lion to pluck a hair from his face. You will have to flee with all speed when you see the furious Bhima. When Arjuna returns you will not know which way to turn. Your inviting these two heroes to an encounter is like a fool trampling on the tails of two enraged and venomous cobras. As a bamboo bears fruit only to perish, or as a crab conceives only to die, so shall you meet your end when you lay your hands upon me."

Jayadratha laughed, enchanted by the sight of the furious Draupadi. "I know all this, O Panchali," he replied derisively. "You cannot frighten me with your threats. I am born in a royal line endowed with opulence and power. I consider the Pandavas inferior. Therefore mount my chariot and come with me. Do not speak so boastfully."

Draupadi was horrified. "Why does this fool take me to be powerless?" she cried. "Even Indra could not abduct me. Even if he tried, Arjuna and Krishna, riding upon the same chariot, would follow and destroy him. What then of a weak human? O King, when Arjuna releases his deadly arrows, you will see your entire force destroyed as dry grass is consumed by fire. Beholding Bhima rushing at you with his upraised mace, and the twins ranging on all sides vomiting forth their anger, you will then be sorry. As I have never proven false to my husbands even in my thoughts, so those men will destroy you. I do not fear you, wretch."

Draupadi looked away from Jayadratha. She knew that by her own ascetic power she could reduce him to ashes, but she did not want to be drawn to violence by Jayadratha. Her husbands would deal with him soon enough.

Jayadratha stepped forward and seized the princess by her arm. She cried out, "Do not pollute me by your touch!" and called out for Dhaumya. Jayadratha took hold of her upper garment, but she pushed him back with such force that he fell to the ground. Jayadratha sprang back to his feet, his

face flushed with anger. He grabbed Draupadi and dragged her to his chariot.

Dhaumya suddenly appeared and rebuked Jayadratha. "You cannot seize this lady without defeating the Pandavas, O king. You should observe the kshatriyas' ancient custom. Truly you will reap the results of this wicked act when the heroic Pandavas return."

Jayadratha ignored Dhaumya. He placed Draupadi on his chariot and sped away, followed by his army. Dhaumya entered among the king's troops and stayed close behind, continuously reprimanding him with strong words.

The Pandavas were some distance from the ashram. As they went through the dense forest, Yudhisthira began noticing inauspicious signs. He said, "Do you see how these birds and animals flee toward the sun and pass excrement? This indicates that enemies have invaded the forest. Let us return to the ashram. My heart seems to be aching for some reason, and my mind is clouded. I feel as if I were about to fly out of my body."

The five brothers immediately started back. As they raced through the trees and bushes with their weapons flying behind them, they saw a jackal yelling hideously. Yudhisthira became still more concerned and urged them on.

Suddenly they burst into the clearing where they were camped. There on the ground they saw Dhatreyika, Draupadi's maid, weeping loudly. The Pandavas' ever-present servant and charioteer, Indrasena, dismounted and went over to her. "Why do you weep? I hope no ill has befallen the princess Draupadi. Could anyone have been fool enough to snatch away that incomparably beautiful lady? Dharma's son has become so anxious that he is ready to go after her even if she has entered the earth, soared to the heavens, or gone to the bottom of the sea. Who today will fall to the earth with his body pierced and torn by arrows? Do not weep, gentle girl, for Panchali will come back this day and be reunited with her lords."

Rubbing her face, the maid said, "Disregarding her five Indra-like husbands, Jayadratha has carried Draupadi away by force. See there the trail left by that wretch and his followers. It happened not long ago. He cannot have gone very far."

Dhatreyika looked up at the Pandavas and said, "Quickly give chase, my lords, lest Draupadi be violently overpowered and, being beside herself, gives up her person to an unworthy man, even as the sacrificial oblation

might be thrown onto ashes. Do not let the ghee be poured onto chaff, or the sacred garland thrown into a crematorium. Let no mean man touch with his lips your wife's brilliant face, as the Soma juice might be licked up by a dog through the priest's inattentiveness."

Yudhisthira said, "Go to your hut, gentle woman, and govern your tongue. Kings and princes who are puffed up with their power soon come to grief."

The brothers immediately went after Jayadratha. They twanged their bows and breathed hot sighs like furious serpents. Soon they saw the dust raised by Jayadratha's army. Coming near the soldiers they saw Dhaumya wailing. Urging Bhima to go after Jayadratha, Yudhisthira consoled the rishi and said, "Go back now, O priest. This low-minded one will soon be punished."

Like hawks swooping on prey, the Pandavas rushed upon Jayadratha's army with fierce cries. Seeing the Sindhu king in the distance with Draupadi on his chariot, their anger increased like a fire fed with oil. They called out to him to stop and fight. Upon hearing their thunderous shouts, Jayadratha's soldiers lost their senses and were seized by terror.

Jayadratha looked back and saw the Pandavas' five chariots racing toward him. He said to Draupadi, "Five great heroes approach, princess. I think they are your husbands. Tell me which of them rides which chariot?"

Draupadi snorted angrily. "After committing an act which will end your life, fool, why do you ask such a question? Still, as you are on the point of death, it behoves me to answer. Seeing Dharmaraja here with his brothers, I have not the slightest fear."

Draupadi pointed to the foremost of the five chariots. "Do you see that car upon which there is a staff with two celestial drums that are always being beaten? There you can see a lean man the color of pure gold, with large eyes and a high nose. That is Yudhisthira. He is merciful even to an enemy who seeks his shelter. Therefore, put down your weapons and fall at his feet if you wish for your own safety."

The princess then indicated the chariot to Yudhisthira's right. "The one seated on that car, who has long arms and is as tall as a sal tree, who is biting his lips and contracting his brow—that is Vrikodara. His strength is superhuman and the earth knows him as Bhima. Those who offend him

cannot live. He does not forget an enemy but always takes revenge, and even then he is not pacified."

Draupadi went on to point out Arjuna, who rode by Yudhisthira's left. "He who blazes like fire, who is always firm in battle, who never commits a cruel deed, who never relinquishes virtue out of fear, lust or anger, and who can face any enemy—that is my husband Dhananjaya.

"Behind Yudhisthira you see the twins on golden chariots. Here comes the religious Nakula who is loved by his brothers as if he were their own life. He is an expert swordsman and today you will see him cut your troops down like wheat. By his side is Sahadeva, the youngest and favorite of all the Pandavas. His wisdom and eloquence are without comparison. That intelligent hero, so dear to Kunti, would rather enter fire than say anything against religion or morality."

Jayadratha looked alarmed. Draupadi laughed. "Now you will see your army like a ship with its cargo of jewels wrecked on rocks. If you escape unharmed from the Pandavas, you will have a new lease on life."

Jayadratha shouted commands to his generals, quickly arraying his forces for battle. The Pandavas left off the infantry soldiers, who were begging for mercy, and made straight for the chariot fighters surrounding Jayadratha. As they charged into battle, they darkened the sky with a thick shower of arrows. Seeing them advance like dreadful tigers, the fighters in Jayadratha's army lost heart.

Raising his mace, Bhima flew toward Jayadratha with a roar. Kotika and the other charioteers came quickly to protect their king. They rained down arrows, darts and clubs upon Bhima, but he careered on without flinching. With a single blow from his mace he slew a great elephant with its driver that was fighting in front of Jayadratha. With a few more blows he mowed down fourteen foot soldiers. At the same time he fended off all the weapons hurled at him.

As Bhima moved closer to the Sindhu king, Arjuna killed five hundred warriors who stood before him. Yudhisthira himself slew hundreds more and Nakula went about with a sword, scattering the heads of the soldiers fighting in the rear of the army like a cultivator sowing seeds. From his chariot Sahadeva released fierce iron arrows that cut down many warriors fighting on the backs of elephants; they fell like birds dropping from a tree.

A powerful king named Trigarta, fighting against Yudhishthira, suddenly descended from his chariot and slew the Pandava king's four horses with his mace. Yudhishthira pierced Trigarta's breast with a sharp-pointed arrow and he fell to the earth vomiting blood. Yudhishthira, with his charioteer Indrasena, then leapt onto Sahadeva's chariot.

Suratha, a mighty elephant fighter, assailed Nakula. The elephant crushed his chariot and dragged it across the battlefield. Nakula jumped down with his sword and shield and fearlessly faced his foe. Suratha goaded his elephant toward him and the infuriated beast rushed at Nakula with a scream. Nakula swung his sword and severed the elephant's trunk and tusks. The beast, which was clad in golden mail, fell headlong to the earth, crushing its rider. Nakula quickly jumped onto Bhima's chariot.

Bhima released arrows with deadly accuracy. With a crescent-headed shaft he slew Kotika's charioteer and his chariot flew about pell-mell on the battlefield. As the confused Kokita tried to restrain his horses, Bhima shot a beautifully plumed arrow and severed the prince's head. At the same time, Arjuna killed twelve other princes fighting by Kotika's side. Thousands of other warriors were slain by the Pandavas. The battlefield was now strewn with the bodies of men and animals. Many chariots with tall standards lay smashed on the ground, along with armor, helmets, swords and severed limbs. What was left of Jayadratha's army fled. Many ravens, crows, falcons and jackals—all crying out in joy—came to feast on the flesh of the dead warriors.

Jayadratha was now terrified. He quickly put Draupadi down from his chariot and fled into the woods. Yudhishthira had Sahadeva take Draupadi up onto his chariot, while Bhima continued to slay fleeing soldiers. Arjuna, however, checked his brother. "What will you gain by killing these poor soldiers? They are afraid for their lives and running here and there. Leave off and chase Jayadratha."

Bhima agreed. Turning to Yudhishthira he said, "O King, the army has been routed and its leader has fled. If you wish, go with the twins and take Draupadi back to the hermitage. Arjuna and I will deal with Jayadratha. He will not survive even if he goes to Indra for protection."

Yudhishthira replied, "O mighty-armed one, you should remember that he is the husband of our sister Dusshala, Gandhari's daughter. Therefore,

do not kill him."

Draupadi became agitated to hear Yudhishthira's words, and she said to Bhima, "If you wish to please me, then do not spare that infamous and despicable Sindhu king. An enemy who carries away one's wife or who wrests his kingdom from him should never be forgiven in battle, even if he begs for mercy."

Yudhishthira consoled Draupadi and returned with her to the hermitage. Bhima and Arjuna at once headed into the forest after Jayadratha.

The Sindhu king had already gone about two miles. Arjuna took out four arrows and began uttering mantras as he placed them on his bow. Pulling back the Gandiva into a full circle, he fired the arrows. They sped through the air over the tops of the trees, covering the full two miles and killing Jayadratha's four horses. The king fell from his chariot in fear. Getting to his feet he stumbled through the undergrowth deeper into the forest.

Quickly catching up to him, Arjuna shouted, "O Sindhu king, with what prowess did you dare take away our wife? Stand and fight. It does not become you to flee, leaving your followers to face the enemy."

Jayadratha did not look back. Bhima jumped down from his chariot and bounded after him, his eyes red with fury. He quickly caught the terrified king and seized him violently by the hair. Arjuna called out, "Don't kill him," and Bhima, who was about to deliver a powerful blow, pulled back his fist. He dashed Jayadratha to the ground and kicked him in the head. As the dazed king staggered to his feet, Bhima knocked him about, striking his head and chest with his fists and knees. Jayadratha fell unconscious to the ground and Bhima dragged him to Arjuna.

Through clenched teeth Bhima said, "This one committed a heinous crime and does not deserve to live, but because Yudhishthira has commanded us, what can we do? The king is always merciful and forgiving."

Bhima looked contemptuously at Jayadratha, who was returning to consciousness. The Pandava considered how best to punish him. He took from his quiver a razor-headed arrow and shaved off Jayadratha's hair, leaving only five tufts. For a kshatriya, such treatment was tantamount to being killed. It meant that he had been defeated and humiliated at the hands of a more powerful enemy, but left with his life. It was better to die in battle than to suffer such humiliation, and Jayadratha was consumed by shame.

Bhima threw him to the ground and said, "Fool, if you wish to live then listen to my words. From now on, wherever you go you must announce yourself as the Pandavas' slave. This is the accepted custom."

Jayadratha sat on the ground with his head bowed. "So be it," he replied, trembling.

Bhima pulled the king up and pushed him toward Arjuna's chariot. "Get aboard," he ordered. "We will take you to Yudhisthira to receive his command."

They rode back to the hermitage and found Yudhisthira seated amid the brahmins. Bhima dragged Jayadratha down from the chariot and had him bow before Yudhisthira. "Here is the wretch who offended Draupadi. You may tell the princess that this vile man has now become our slave."

"Let him go," Yudhisthira said with a smile.

Draupadi came out of her hut and saw the bedraggled Jayadratha on the ground in front of Yudhisthira. The soft-hearted princess, thinking of her cousin Dusshala, said, "Yes, we should spare him. Bhima has punished him sufficiently and he has now become our slave. Set him free."

Bhima told Jayadratha to go. The Sindhu king, beside himself with anguish and shame, bowed before Yudhisthira and the brahmins and then stood up to leave. Yudhisthira said, "You are a free man. I will release you this time, but do not commit such a vile act again. Although weak and powerless, you tried to abduct another's wife by force."

Seeing Jayadratha's piteous condition, Yudhisthira was moved to compassion. He held up his hand in blessing and said, "May your heart grow in virtue. Go now in peace with your followers. Never again contemplate such impiety."

Jayadratha walked away from the hermitage sorrowfully. He thought only of how to avenge himself on the Pandavas. Realizing that he would never be able to overcome them in battle, he decided to accept a vow of asceticism to please Shiva. If he were empowered by that great deity, then surely he would be able to defeat any enemy, even the mighty Pandavas. The Sindhu king made his way to the bank of the Ganges and sat down in meditation.

For a long time Jayadratha practiced severe austerities, eating only

leaves and remaining rapt in prayer to Shiva. Eventually, the god came before him and said, "What do you desire?"

The delighted king replied, "May I be able to vanquish in battle all five Pandavas, seated on their chariots."

Shiva smiled. "This cannot be. The Pandavas are unconquerable because they are protected by Krishna. Even I cannot slay them. Therefore, your desire is impossible to fulfill. But I will grant you this: with the exception of Arjuna, who is the invincible Nara incarnate, you will be able to check all of them in battle one time only."

After granting this boon Shiva vanished, leaving Jayadratha to return to his own kingdom, wondering when the day would come when he would be able to use his boon.

Chapter Thirty-four. The Lake of Death

As the Pandavas passed their twelfth year in the Kamyaka, Indra thought of how he might do them good. The king of the gods knew that Yudhisthira was afraid of Karna, whose divine armor and earrings afforded him supernatural protection from weapons. Indra decided to disguise himself as a brahmin and beg the armor from Karna.

Divining Indra's intention, the sun-god appeared before Karna in a dream in the form of an effulgent brahmin. He spoke to Karna in grave tones. "Mighty hero, my son, I have come to advise you for your everlasting good. Listen carefully. Indra will come before you disguised as a brahmin in order to beg for your armor. He is aware that you have vowed never to refuse charity. You must somehow resist his request. Offer him anything else in its place. If you part with your armor and earrings, which are made of the essence of celestial nectar, you will die in battle. Possessed of your armor and earrings, however, not even the gods can slay you."

In his dream Karna asked, "Who are you who cares so much for my welfare?"

"I am the god of limitless rays. I advise you out of affection. You should heed my words."

Karna did not know that the sun-god was his father. He replied, "I am fortunate that the lord god of all splendor, whom I worship daily, desires my welfare. Out of my love for you I say this: please do not prevent me from observing my vow. Such dishonor would be worse for me than death. O Surya, the entire world knows I will part with my life if a brahmin begs for it. Should Indra come to me as a brahmin, I shall not be able to refuse him whatever he may ask."

Fame was everything to Karna. He would never do anything that would lead to infamy of any kind. He added, "If I give my armor to Indra, I shall win great fame in this world, while Indra will become infamous. Fame prolongs life and leads to heaven. A famous man lives even after his death, while those who are infamous are as good as dead even though they still breathe. O Surya, I will preserve my fame even at the cost of my life."

Surya replied, "Dear child, a wise man does not do anything that will injure himself or his dependents. There is no doubt that the everlasting fame

you desire will cost you your life. Therefore, what profit is there in sacrificing your body for fame? Only while you are alive can you use the fame you accrue. Fame is useless to a dead man. It is a garland around a corpse. Because you worship me, I speak for your good. If you use reason, you will be able to distract Indra from his purpose. If you wish to face Arjuna in battle, you must not give up your earrings and armor. You will not be able to stand against Arjuna without them."

Karna was still not convinced. "O god of brilliant rays, you are dearer to me than my wife, sons, friends, and even my own self. Please cherish me as a devoted worshipper and allow me to do as I please. I cannot embrace falsehood; death would be preferable. With bowed head and repeated prayers I implore you to forgive me, for I cannot do as you say. I do not fear Arjuna. Parasurama has given me powerful weapons. I will defeat Arjuna in the battle when the time comes. Please permit me to observe my vow when Indra approaches me."

Surya could see that Karna would not change his mind. It was as the god had expected and he had already considered an alternative. He continued to address his son in gentle tones.

"If you must give your armor and earrings to Indra, then you should ask him something in return. Worshipping him with pleasing words, you should offer him your armor only in exchange for the infallible dart he possesses. That weapon can destroy any enemy. If you possess that weapon, you will remain invincible. Ask him for it. It is called the Shakti."

Suddenly, Surya vanished and Karna awoke, thinking about his dream. After bathing he went before the rising sun with folded palms. He told the sun everything that had occurred in his dream. From the heavens a voice echoed: "This is all true." Amazed, Karna returned to his palace, expecting Indra's arrival at any time.

A few days later, Karna entered the Ganges at noon to perform his daily worship of the sun-god. Each day at the end of his worship, the brahmins would come to beg charity. He never refused anyone anything. Now Indra came to him, dressed as a brahmin. Seeing the effulgent ascetic standing before him, Karna said, "You are most welcome. What can I offer you? If you like, I can bestow upon you villages, cows, and beautiful damsels adorned with gold."

"I do not desire any of these things," the brahmin replied. "You may give these to others who beg for them. O sinless one, if you are true to your vow, then cut from your body your armor and earrings and give them to me. This is all I desire."

Realizing that this was Indra, Karna replied, "I will gladly give you whatever you wish, but why ask only for my armor? Take from me instead enough wealth to maintain you and all your dependents for as long as you live."

Karna tried in various ways to distract Indra from his goal, but the god made it clear that he wanted only the armor. Finally Karna said, "Divested of my natural armor and earrings, which were created from celestial nectar, I shall die in battle. That is why I am reluctant to part with them. Still, I know you are Indra and that you are here to help the Pandavas. As the lord of the gods, it is you who should be bestowing boons upon me. Therefore, O deva, please consider offering me a boon in exchange for my armor."

Indra replied, "Before I came here, Surya divined my intentions. No doubt he has told you all. Let it be as you desire. With the exception of my thunderbolt weapon, ask from me what you wish."

Karna asked for the Shakti dart Surya had mentioned. Indra reflected for a moment and replied, "I have invoked the weapon and will give it to you as soon as you give me your armor, but I do so under one condition. When I release this dart, it kills hundreds of my enemies and returns to my hand. However, you will be able to release it but once to kill one powerful enemy. When your enemy has been slain, it will return to my hand—not yours."

Karna was grave. "I desire to kill only one mighty foe."

"I know your desire. But a high-souled being protects the one you wish to kill. The great Lord Krishna, who is the inconceivable Narayana, protects him."

"Be that as it may, give me your weapon, for it will surely be capable of slaying any human enemy. I shall then cut my armor from my body. But I ask that you prevent my body from becoming disfigured."

"So be it. Because you desire to adhere to truth, you will not be scarred. You will be restored to your present handsome and shining

complexion."

With a sharp sword Karna immediately began to cut away his armor. Seeing Karna smiling through the pain, the gods and demons roared like lions and beat celestial drums. A shower of heavenly flowers fell upon Karna as he took off the armor and earrings and handed them, wet with blood, to Indra. Then Indra gave Karna his weapon, saying, "Do not use this unless you face the gravest danger. Otherwise it will fall upon you." The god then soared into the sky, feeling he had accomplished the Pandavas' purpose.

* * *

The Pandavas stayed in the Dwaitavana for the final part of their exile in the forest. Only a short while remained before they had to disguise themselves and hide for the thirteenth year. They wondered where they should go. One day, as they sat discussing in the company of rishis, a brahmin in obvious distress came before Yudhisthira. He explained that a deer had caught hold of the sticks he used to light his sacred fire and taken them into the forest. "The sticks, along with my ladle and other paraphernalia, were tied in a bundle. Somehow the deer caught them on his horns. O hero, I must have them back so that my sacrifice may not be stopped."

Yudhisthira reassured the brahmin and stood up at once with his brothers. Taking up their bows, they went in pursuit of the deer. Although they shot many arrows at it, however, they could not catch the animal. It bounded swiftly away and vanished into the woods. The brothers became tired and disappointed and, coming to a large banyan tree, they sat down in its shade. With a heavy heart Nakula said to Yudhisthira, "In our race, virtue has never been sacrificed and we have never been idle. Nor have we ever refused anything to any creature. How, then, has this calamity befallen us?"

Yudhisthira placed his large bow on the ground. "There is no limit to misfortunes in this world, dear brother. We cannot always ascertain their causes because it is the great god Dharma who distributes the fruits of both virtue and sin."

Bhima frowned. "We have met with this disaster because I did not slay Dushashana when he dragged Draupadi into the assembly hall."

"I too am to blame for our present misfortune in that I did not

retaliate when Karna uttered his cruel words that day," Arjuna added.

"And I too am to blame," said Sahadeva. "I should have slain Shakuni at the dice game as soon as he cheated you, O king."

Yudhisthira turned to Nakula. "It is certainly hot in this forest. Quickly climb a tall tree and look around for a lake. Your brothers are tired and thirsty. Having refreshed ourselves, we can then decide what to do next."

Nakula climbed a nearby tree and gazed around. "There seems to be water not far away," he called. "I see what appears to be a lake and can hear the cries of cranes."

As Nakula slid down the trunk, Yudhisthira said, "O handsome brother, go and fetch water for us all."

Nakula emptied the arrows from a couple of quivers and left his brothers. He soon arrived at a large, clear lake covered with lotuses and lilies. Kneeling down on the shore, he was about to drink when he heard a voice from the sky saying, "O child, do not drink this water. This lake is mine and no one may drink its water without first answering my questions."

Nakula looked around. He could not see anyone. His thirst was intense. Not caring for the voice he cupped his hands and drank the water. As soon as it passed his lips he fell down dead.

After some time, Yudhisthira became anxious. Nakula had not returned. He asked Sahadeva to look for him. Sahadeva followed his brother's path and also came to the lake. Seeing Nakula lying dead on its shore he was grief-stricken. He touched his brother, looking for signs of life. Nakula seemed to be buried in a deep slumber. He had not lost his bodily luster, but there was no pulse and he was not breathing. Sahadeva stood up, perplexed. Feeling an unbearable thirst he went to the water's edge to drink. As he knelt down he heard the same voice from the sky. "Do not drink the water of my lake. First of all answer my questions and then you may drink."

Sahadeva was unable to heed the words. His thirst was oppressive. He took a swallow of the cool water and, like his brother, fell dead.

Seeing that neither of the twins had returned after nearly an hour, Yudhisthira told Arjuna to go and see what had happened. With his bow at the ready and his sword unsheathed, Arjuna proceeded with caution. Finding the twins lying on the water's edge, he was seized with anxiety. He ran over

to them and knelt by their sides. There were no signs of life. Arjuna was amazed. Who could have killed them? There was no indication of a fight. Arjuna looked around but saw only the trees moving in the breeze and the water birds on the surface of the lake. He went down to the water's edge to slake his thirst and again the voice resounded from the sky. "O Partha, do not attempt to drink this water by force. It is mine and you may only take it after answering my questions."

Arjuna shouted up to the skies. "Come into my presence and prevent me. You will not speak in this way again when you are riven by my arrows." He immediately released countless arrows which, empowered by mantras, were capable of hitting an unseen object. Arjuna filled the sky with arrows, darts and javelins. Again the voice spoke. "Your exertions are useless, Arjuna. Answer my questions—or, if you drink the water—you will die."

Disregarding these words, Arjuna took a sip of water and fell dead alongside his brothers.

Almost another hour had passed. Yudhisthira felt increasing anxiety. He now sent Bhima. "O tormentor of foes, we have been seated here for a long time awaiting our brothers. I think you should find them and bring them back. I shall wait here."

Bhima nodded and rose, running quickly along the path to the lake. When he saw his three brothers lying there he was astonished. Surely this was the work of a powerful Rakshasa. It seemed hardly possible that any being could have slain Arjuna and the twins. Bhima considered that he would soon have to face a formidable enemy. He had best drink some water and overcome his fatigue in preparation for the fight.

The Pandava ran down to the water and again the celestial voice resounded in the heavens. "O child, do not attempt to drink from my lake. First answer my questions."

Bhima thought that the voice must have come from whomever had killed his brothers. He looked around angrily. That wicked being would soon repent his vile act. Not caring for his warning, Bhima plunged his face into the water and drank. Like his brothers, he fell to the ground, dead.

Alone, Yudhisthira waited; but when Bhima didn't return, his mind was filled with foreboding. He thought it impossible that Bhima and Arjuna could be overcome in battle. Where were they? Perhaps they had found

celestial delights by the lake and were enjoying them together. No, they would surely not neglect their duty. They had received his order and knew he was waiting. The brahmin's paraphernalia also still had to be recovered. Something must have happened to prevent them from returning. Apprehensively, Yudhisthira set off along the forest path.

Passing by trees covered in blue and red blossoms, Yudhisthira approached the lake. The warbling of birds and the hum of bees resounded in his ears as he moved quickly through the woods. Within a short time he came to the lake, which seemed to him as if it had been transported from Indra's abode. It was covered with lotuses and surrounded by blossoming trees and varieties of wild forest flowers. By the side of the delightful lake, however, Yudhisthira saw his four brothers fallen to earth, resembling the four Lokapalas fallen from the heavens at the end of an age.

Yudhisthira ran to his brothers and fell to the ground by their side. Breathing heavily he shed tears of grief. He lamented loudly, his voice echoing from the tall trees around the lake. "Mighty-armed Bhima, you swore you would break Duryodhana's thighs in battle. Of what value is that promise now? Arjuna, how are you lying here today? Human promises may prove false, but how can those of the gods? We heard all the celestials proclaim your glories and declare that you would win back our lost kingdom. 'None will be able to vanquish him in battle,' was Indra's prophesy. How has this come to pass? Surely my heart is made of stone because it does not shatter upon seeing such a sight."

As he looked at his motionless brothers Yudhisthira was beside himself with grief. He cried for some time, his mind utterly confused. Gradually, he managed to control himself and ponder the situation. Who could have slain these great warriors? There were no signs of battle—their bodies were unmarked—and they seemed to have dropped to the earth in some deep, dreamless sleep.

Yudhisthira looked carefully at the lake. Perhaps Duryodhana had made it and filled it with poison. But no poison could kill Bhima. Maybe the Kauravas had conspired with the Asuras to bring about the Pandavas' death. But again, what Asura could face Arjuna, who had single-handedly overpowered the Nivatakavachas?

Yudhisthira looked around. He could see no footprints. Arjuna's

arrows were scattered here and there, but there was no blood. It was unimaginable that Arjuna would not have hit his enemy. He never discharged his arrows uselessly. Yudhisthira considered that some mighty being without a material body must have overpowered his brothers. He examined them closely. Although they appeared dead, they had not lost their color and their features were unchanged. Their souls were surely still present, although the symptoms of life were gone. It seemed that their life-force had been removed by the god of death himself, acting from within them. Convinced of this, Yudhisthira thought he would discover the truth if he entered the lake. It was because of this lake that his brothers had met their death.

Yudhisthira went down to the water and, throwing off his armor, plunged in. Immediately he heard the same voice that had spoken to his brothers: "O child, do not take this water. This lake belongs to me and if you want to drink, you must first answer my questions."

Yudhisthira gazed around. "Who are you?" he shouted.

"I am a crane living on moss and fish. Your younger brothers, disregarding my warning, have been brought by me under the control of death. O king, if you do not answer my questions, then you shall become the fifth victim."

Yudhisthira looked about in astonishment. He saw the crane on a tree bough near the lake. "Are you Shiva or the foremost of the Vasus? Or are you a Marut? It is not possible for a bird to have killed these four mountain-like heroes. O strongest of all those endowed with strength, you have achieved what even the gods, Gandharvas and Asuras could not do. I do not know who you are or what is your intention, but I am curious to know these things—and I am also terrified. My heart is troubled and my mind confused. Please tell me why you stay here and what you desire."

Yudhisthira then saw the crane transform into a huge, fearful-looking being. His large red eyes were pointed and he blazed like the sun. Roaring like a thundercloud, he said, "I am a Yaksha, not a bird. Hail to you! It was I who killed your energetic brothers for their own faults. Although forbidden to drink, they disregarded me. If one loves life, he should not attempt to take this water by force. The lake is mine and one may take its water only after answering my questions."

"O Yaksha, I do not wish to take what is yours. I shall try to answer

your questions to the best of my ability. Please ask me what you will."

The Yaksha began to place questions before Yudhisthira:

"What makes the soul rise out of his entanglement in matter? Who keeps him company, who is his guide on that spiritual journey, and on what is he established?"

"It is knowledge of the Supreme Lord which makes the soul rise. Godly qualities are his companions, dharma is his guide, and he is established on truth."

"What makes one learned? How does one attain to that which is most exalted? How does one acquire a second self, and by what, O King, does one become wise?"

"One becomes learned by studying the Vedas. By asceticism one attains what is most exalted. Intelligence is like a second self, and serving one's elders makes one wise."

The Yaksha then asked about all kinds of subjects, ranging from worldly wisdom to knowledge of religion to spiritual matters. Yudhisthira answered them all without hesitation. Finally the Yaksha said, "I am satisfied. Answer my last four questions and I will restore one of your brothers to life. Who in this world is happy? What is the most wonderful thing? What are the tidings of this world, and how can one find the eternal path of religion?"

With folded palms Yudhisthira replied, "He who is neither in debt nor exiled and who lives simply, eating simple food in his own home, is happy. The most wonderful thing is that although every day innumerable creatures go to the abode of death, still a man thinks he is immortal. The tidings are that in this world—which is like a cauldron with the sun as its fire, days and nights as its fuel, and months and seasons as its wooden ladle—all creatures are being cooked by time. The eternal religious path is found only in the heart of great mystics."

The Yaksha smiled. "You have rightly answered every question. Tell me which of your brothers you wish to have restored to life?"

"O Yaksha, let Nakula, as tall as a sal tree and endowed with a broad chest and long arms, be brought to life."

The Yaksha was surprised. "Bhimasena is surely more important to you than Nakula, O King, and Arjuna is your chief support. Why do you ask

for Nakula to be revived?"

"He who sacrifices virtue is himself destroyed," replied Yudhisthira, "and he who preserves virtue is in turn preserved by it. I am therefore careful to always observe virtue. For me, great virtue lies in refraining from cruelty; it is superior to all worldly gain. Thus I ask for Nakula. Both Kunti and Madri are the same to me. In myself Kunti still has one son, but Madri now has none. With a desire to behave equally toward my two mothers, I ask for the life of Nakula."

"Since, O Pandava, you consider abstention from cruelty superior to both profit and desire, then let all your brothers be restored to life." As the Yaksha spoke, the four brothers rose from the ground as if from a sleep. They felt refreshed and free from hunger and thirst.

Yudhisthira then asked the Yaksha, "Who are you, O great being, who assumes the form of a crane? Tell me in truth your identity. Are you a god? Perhaps you are my father himself."

Yudhisthira had guessed correctly and the Yaksha replied, "I am indeed your father, O best of the Bharatas. Know me to be Dharma. I have come here with the intention of meeting you. Fame, truth, self-control, purity, simplicity, charity, modesty, steadiness, asceticism and celibacy are my limbs. I am reached by abstention from cruelty, impartiality, peacefulness, asceticism, purity and humility. You possess all these qualities, dear son. By good fortune you have conquered your mind and senses and practice virtue. I wanted to test you and I am fully satisfied. Ask me for boons and I will bestow them. Those who are ever devoted to me need never experience misfortune."

Yudhisthira bowed respectfully before his father and said, "My first desire is that the Agnihotra of the brahmin whose fire-sticks were lost not be destroyed."

"O son of Kunti, it was I in the form of the deer who carried away those sticks. I shall return them to you. Ask for some other boon."

Yudhisthira thought carefully and said, "The twelve years of our forest life are now complete. For the thirteenth year we must live incognito. Please grant that no man will recognize us during that time."

"So be it. Even if you wander about in the world as your actual

selves, you will not be recognized. Through my favor you will lead a secret, incognito life in the city of Virata. Now take these fire sticks and ask from me another boon. I am not satisfied with conferring only these two favors. O Yudhishthira, you should know that I begot you. Vidura, your friend and well-wisher, is also a part of myself."

Dharma handed the sticks to Yudhishthira, who replied, "O god of gods, it is enough for me that I have seen you. To please you, however, I will accept one further boon. O lord, grant that I may always overcome avarice, folly and anger, and that my mind be always inclined toward charity, asceticism and truth."

Dharma smiled and said, "By nature you are gifted with these qualities, O Pandava. You are already the embodiment of virtue. But I grant your desire."

The god then disappeared, leaving the five Pandavas standing together on the shore of the lake. In wonder they returned to their hermitage with the brahmin's fire-sticks.

Chapter Thirty-five. Into Virata

As the rainy season ended, Dhaumya determined by astrological calculation that the thirteenth year of exile was about to commence. The brothers discussed their strategy. Encouraged by Dharma's boon, they were hopeful. Although Duryodhana would undoubtedly send hundreds and thousands of spies all over the world to search for them, he would not find them. But they did not want to take any chances. Thus they considered how best to conceal themselves.

Yudhisthira spoke to Arjuna. "What is your view? How shall we remain incognito?"

"By virtue of Dharma's boon we shall be able to go about without being discovered. I have no doubt about that. But let us consider carefully the places where we could reside peacefully. I shall name them."

Arjuna listed a number of countries where their allies lived and asked Yudhisthira which he felt was most suitable. Yudhisthira replied, "Dear brother, what Dharma has said must come to pass. We shall reside in Matsya, the kingdom of Virata. That aged king is powerful, charitable, of a righteous disposition, and always favorably disposed toward us. Let us go there as his servants. Tell me, how we should each present ourselves to the king."

Arjuna replied doubtfully, "O virtuous one, how will you become the servant of the king? You are like a god among men and have always been the lord of others. How will you submit yourself to a lesser man?"

Yudhisthira reassured Arjuna. "There will be no problem. I shall become the king's dicing partner and friend. Presenting myself as Yudhisthira's former personal servant and close friend Kanka, an expert at gaming, I will offer him and his ministers various kinds of pleasing service."

Yudhisthira turned toward Bhima. "Now, O Vrikodara, tell me in what capacity you will enter Virata's city?"

Bhima had already decided. "I will present myself as a cook named Vallabha. I will say that I formerly worked in Yudhisthira's royal kitchens. I am an expert in the kitchen business and will prepare fine dishes for the king's table. I will also please the king by feats of strength and by wrestling. I will overpower elephants and bulls, and throw down the best of Virata's wrestlers without killing them. O king, do not fear for me. I will take care of

myself."

Yudhisthira nodded approvingly and turned to Arjuna, "What work will Dhananjaya—who possesses invincible power, who is the joy of the Kurus, and before whom the god Agni appeared as a brahmin begging a favor—accept? As the sun is the foremost of all planets, the brahmin the best of all men, and the thunderbolt the best of all weapons, so Arjuna is the best of all archers. What humble office can he accept, having gone to heaven and obtained all celestial weapons after pleasing the god of gods, Shiva? I think Krishna's friend does not deserve to be reduced to such a plight."

Arjuna then remembered Urvashi's curse and Indra's subsequent instruction. "O ruler of the earth, I shall become a member of the third sex: a eunuch. In order to conceal the scars the bowstring has made on my arms, I will wear numerous bangles. With bright gold earrings and braided hair I will go before the king as Brihannala and offer to instruct his ladies in singing and dancing. I have acquired proficiency in these skills from the Gandharvas. Living in the king's seraglio, I will act as a female and please the king and his women by my services and by reciting many stories. On being asked for my background, I will say that I was formerly a waiting maid in Yudhisthira's palace. O king, hiding myself in this way, as fire is concealed by ashes, I will pass my days during this last year."

Yudhisthira looked in wonder at Arjuna. A eunuch! How astonishing were the movements of destiny. He turned to Nakula and asked him how he planned to appear before Virata. Nakula replied, "I shall be a keeper of horses known as Granthika. I am thoroughly acquainted with all aspects of horsemanship and enjoy that work. O king, horses are as dear to me as you are. I will tell Virata that I was previously in charge of Yudhisthira's horses."

Yudhisthira finally asked Sahadeva what disguise he would assume. The youngest Pandava replied that he would become a cowherd. "This work pleases me, O king. I possess the skills of taming, milking and breeding cattle. I can recognize all the signs and characteristics of different kinds of cows and bulls. Known as Tantripala, I shall thus render service to Virata, telling him that I used to work in that capacity for Yudhisthira."

Yudhisthira looked across at Draupadi, who sat near the brothers. "Here is our beloved wife. She is dearer to us than life. Like a mother she is to be cherished and like an elder sister respected. How will she appear before

Virata? She is not accustomed to the position of servant and has been accustomed from birth to royal opulence."

Draupadi replied, "O lord, there is a class of maid known as Sairindhri who serves others. It is understood that no respectable lady would accept such service, so I will conceal myself in that guise. Saying that I was formerly Draupadi's waiting maid, I will serve Sudeshna, the king's esteemed wife. By my expert service of dressing hair and ornamenting the queen, I will please her. Do not be anxious for me, O king."

Yudhisthira looked at his devoted wife. She was prepared to undergo any austerity to serve her husbands. Although she was energetic and accomplished, it would not be easy for her to accept the position of menial servant to someone inferior, and her stay in Virata would be fraught with danger from lusty men who thought she had no protector. "You have spoken well," Yudhisthira said. "Devoted as you are to piety and chastity, you are a stranger to sin. You should behave yourself in Virata in such a way that no wicked man might become attracted to you."

The Pandavas had discussed their plans for the final year in a secluded place. They did not want to risk disclosing their whereabouts even to their friends and servants. When they had decided upon their disguises, they went back to the hermitage. Yudhisthira then said to Dhaumya, "O learned brahmin, if it is agreeable to you, please go to Drupada's city. There you may live in peace and preserve our Agnihotra fires."

Yudhisthira ordered his servants, headed by Indrasena, to go to Dwaraka and live with the Yadavas. "Upon arriving there you should tell everyone that you were left alone by the Pandavas at Dwaitavana. You have no idea of their whereabouts or intentions."

Dhaumya made all arrangements for the Pandavas' journey. He lit the sacred fire and offered oblations on their behalf, invoking auspiciousness upon them and blessing them that they would achieve victory. The brothers and Draupadi then walked around the sacred fire and, after bowing before the brahmins, left the hermitage.

Lean and bearded after their long stay in the forest, the five brothers, clad in deerskins and carrying their weapons, seemed like five powerful rishis as they made their way on foot toward the river Kalindi. As they passed through various countries, staying sometimes in the wild and at other times in

inhabited regions, they presented themselves as hunters.

Bhima carried Draupadi and they moved quickly toward their destination. After many days of travel they finally arrived in the Matsya's expansive country. They saw the well-laid roads and paths that led from the forest into the capital.

When the Pandavas reached the outskirts of the city, Yudhisthira sat them all down in a grassy clearing and said, "O best of men, although you are all acquainted with the science of diplomacy and policy, it still behoves me to advise you. We should conduct ourselves carefully in Virata's presence. Kings are always to be feared as one fears a deadly snake. The protectors and cherishers of all beings, they are deities in human form and are like great fires equipped with all weapons. One should always act with the utmost caution in a king's presence. He who acts falsely with a king is killed by him—of this there is no doubt."

Yudhisthira spoke for some time, giving detailed instructions about all aspects of behavior with kings. He did not want his brothers to make any mistakes now that they were so close to completing their vow. Just one more year and they would be able to reclaim their kingdom.

After finishing his instructions, Yudhisthira led them toward the city. As they walked on he said to Arjuna, "If we enter Virata with our weapons, we will frighten the citizens and be conspicuous. Indeed, your Gandiva is famous throughout the world. If we are discovered by anyone, then we will have to live a further thirteen years in exile."

Yudhisthira had faith in Dharma's boon, but he did not want to take unnecessary chances. The Pandavas decided to conceal their weapons near the city. After looking around they came upon a huge sami tree near a cremation ground. The area was dismal and deserted, far from the road and close to the forest. Arjuna suggested they wrap their weapons into a cloth bundle and place them high in the tree. Anyone seeing that bundle by the crematorium would assume it to be a corpse and leave it alone. Agreeing to the suggestion, the brothers unstrung their bows and placed them upon Bhima's large deerskin garment. They wrapped and tied the bows, swords, quivers and arrows. Nakula ascended the tree with the bundle and secured it to a high branch, which he felt offered sufficient shelter from the rain.

The Pandavas then made their way toward the city. They passed

some cowherd men and told them that they had just placed their mother's body on the tree. "This is our ancient custom," Yudhisthira said. "We have placed our old mother's body high in the tree. May she attain to the blessed heavenly regions."

As they reached the city gate Yudhisthira prayed to Goddess Durga. Seeing her as Krishna's divine energy whose service it was to conceal the Lord's identity from the atheists, he asked for her protection. Pleased by his prayer the goddess appeared before the Pandavas. "O heroes, you will soon attain victory in battle. After slaying your enemies you will again enjoy the earth. Through my grace, neither the Kurus nor the inhabitants of Virata will recognize you until the final year has expired."

The goddess disappeared and the Pandavas entered the capital, Virata. Yudhisthira went first, but before parting from his brothers he gave each of them a secret name by which they could call each other if the need arose. He was called Jaya, and the others were Jayanta, Vijaya, Jayatsena and Jayatbala. Yudhisthira then strode into the city like a mighty lion. He went directly to the king's court. The king saw him enter like the moon emerging from clouds. Turning to his counselors he asked, "Who is this man who walks into my court as if he were a king? He cannot be a brahmin. I think he is a lord of the earth, although he has neither a slave nor any other attendants with him. He shines like Indra and approaches me as fearlessly as an elephant might approach a lotus."

Yudhisthira came up to Virata and said, "O sinless one, know me to be a brahmin who has lost everything and now seeks your service. I wish to live with you and accept you as my master." Joyful at having acquired such an obviously qualified man, Virata replied, "O worshipful one, I bow down to you. You are most welcome. I will give you the post you desire. Which country are you from and what is your name? Do you possess any particular skills?"

"I was formerly a friend of Yudhisthira and my name is Kanka. I am expert in casting dice and can entertain and please you in that way."

The king smiled without thinking for a moment that the so-called brahmin before him might actually be Yudhisthira himself. Although he felt the newcomer to be extraordinary, he accepted his explanation. He felt an immediate affinity for Kanka, whose expressions and bodily movements

were gentle and pleasing. If he was Yudhisthira's friend, then he was surely of the highest character and worthy of his respect.

"Live with me in peace," Virata said cheerfully. "This kingdom is as much yours as it is mine. I am always pleased by expert dicers."

Yudhisthira asked that he not be called to play with low-class people or involved in disputes or fights over the game. The king replied, "I will kill anyone who does you any wrong. If the wrongdoer is a brahmin, I will banish him from the kingdom. Let all my subjects hear my proclamation: this Kanka is as much the lord of this dominion as myself."

Turning to Yudhisthira the king continued, "You shall be my friend. You will ride on my chariot, wear the best clothes, and enjoy the finest dishes. My door will always be open to you, and you will become my closest advisor and counselor."

Yudhisthira was then shown to his quarters in the king's palace and he began to live there happily and undetected by anyone.

The following day Bhima entered the city. He went down the main road toward the king's palace, appearing like a powerful lord of elephants. In his hands he held a ladle and a cooking spoon, as well as a shining, unblemished sword, azure in color. Dressed as a cook he went before the king, illuminating the royal court with his bodily effulgence. Virata looked at him in amazement and asked his counselors, "Who is this young man, exceedingly handsome and with the shoulders of a lion? Although he is new here, I feel as if I have always known him. I cannot place him, but he surely must either be Indra himself or perhaps the powerful Gandharva king. Whatever he wants, let him have it immediately."

One of Virata's counselors went to Bhima and asked him what he desired. The Pandava looked up at the king and said, "O king, I am a cook named Vallabha. Pray appoint me to your kitchen, for I am expert in the culinary arts."

Virata gazed at Bhima's massive arms and broad chest. "I cannot believe that you are a cook. You shine like the thousand-eyed king of the gods, and from your grace, beauty and prowess you appear to be the best of men."

"O king, I am your servant. Allow me to work in the royal kitchens."

As he addressed the king, Bhima's voice resounded in the royal court like a great drum. "In days gone by, my cooking was tasted by Yudhisthira, but I possess other abilities as well. I am a peerless wrestler and can entertain you by fighting lions and elephants."

As with Kanka, the king felt an immediate affection for this unusual arrival. "You shall become the head of my kitchens. But I do not think this office worthy of you, who should rather be the ruler of the earth."

Bhima began to work in the kitchens, becoming a great favorite of the king and recognized by no one.

Draupadi was next to enter the city. With her glossy black hair twisted into one long braid thrown on her right hand side, and dressed in a single, soiled cloth, she walked through the city streets as if in distress. Many people gathered around her and asked her who she was and what she wanted. "I am a Sairindhri," Draupadi replied. "I seek someone who will employ and maintain me."

Hearing her sweet voice and observing her incomparable beauty, the people found it hard to believe that she could be a maidservant. They directed her to the royal palace, and as she was walking, Sudeshna, Virata's wife, saw her. The queen asked, "O gentle one, why do you wander about in this way?" Draupadi repeated her story and Sudeshna replied, "This surely cannot be true. O most beautiful one, it seems to me that you yourself could appoint numerous servants. By your bodily appearance I take you to be of the highest and most noble lineage. Your countenance shines like the full moon, your body is shapely, your eyes are like lotus petals framed by curling lashes, your lips are red like the bimba fruit, and your skin is as smooth as silk. In beauty you resemble a goddess and must surely have descended from the heavens. Pray tell me who you are, for you cannot possibly be a maidservant."

Draupadi straightened her disheveled cloth and turned her dark eyes toward the queen. "I am neither a goddess nor a celestial. I am a maid of the Sairindhri class. I am skilled in dressing hair and preparing unguents. I can make variegated and beautiful garlands of jasmines, lotuses, and lilies. Previously I have served Satyabhama, Krishna's beloved queen, and Draupadi, the Pandavas' wife. My name is Malini. Now I have no engagement. Please allow me to serve in your palace, O Queen."

Sudeshna gazed at Draupadi's unparalleled beauty and obvious

nobility. How could she be a serving maid? Still, she would make a valuable addition to the palace. But what effect would she have on the king and, indeed, any other man who saw her? The queen smiled at Draupadi, but spoke doubtfully. "I can place you on my head, never mind as my servant. I do not doubt it. Yet I fear that your beauty will captivate the king's heart. Seeing how even the women here are staring at you, I feel there is no man alive who could resist your charms. It seems that even the trees are bending low to pay you homage. Surely upon seeing you the king will lose his heart and forsake me. O lady of sweet smiles, the person upon whom you cast a glance will certainly fall victim to the god of love. By engaging you I will bring upon myself my own destruction. Although I should love to have your company, this is my fear."

Covering her long hair with her upper cloth, Draupadi reassured the queen. "Neither Virata nor any other man can win me, fair lady, for I have five Gandharva husbands. Those invincible heroes always protect me and I will not cast a single glance on another man. However, they stipulate certain conditions for those who would engage me. My husbands desire that I not eat any food that has already been taken by another and that I not be asked to wash another's feet. Guarding me secretly, my husbands bring about the immediate destruction of any man who desires me. No one is able to sway me from the path of righteousness, O queen. Indeed, I ask that you always keep me safe from other men. Therefore, allay your fears!"

Sudeshna decided to employ Draupadi. She promised that her food would always be fresh and untouched by another and that she would not be called upon to wash anyone's feet. Draupadi thanked her and was led by the queen into the inner chambers of the palace, where she began her life as a maidservant.

The day after Draupadi's entrance into Virata, Sahadeva made his way into the city dressed as a cowherd. He arrived at the cow pasture in the region of Virata's palace. The king happened to be visiting his herd and was present when Sahadeva arrived. Virata sent for him and asked who he was and why he had come to the city. Sahadeva replied, "I am a vaishya named Tantripala. I used to work with the cows belonging to the Pandavas. I am expert in handling cattle and desire to render you that service."

Virata observed Sahadeva's broad shoulders and long arms. "You must surely be a brahmin or a powerful kshatriya," he replied. "The office of

a ruler would better suit you than that of a cowherd. Tell me, from where do you hail, O afflicter of enemies? What engagement do you desire and what payment?"

"I used to reside in Indraprastha and I took care of the innumerable cows there," Sahadeva answered. "I know everything about caring for cows. O king, I desire only my residence and upkeep and will serve you to the best of my ability."

The king accepted Sahadeva's request. "I have one hundred thousand cows. These, along with their keepers, shall be placed under your care. Live here in peace and I shall ensure that you are provided with whatever you desire."

The day after Sahadeva's entry, another newcomer was seen making his way into the city. Of huge body and adorned with the clothes and ornaments of a woman, he went toward the king's palace, shaking the earth with his steps even though he walked with the gait of a broad-hipped woman. He stood before the king with his body concealed by layers of colored silks. His arms were covered by numerous conch bracelets set with gold, and he seemed like a huge, gorgeously decorated elephant standing in the royal court. Virata looked at him in surprise. He asked his courtiers, "Who is this person? I have never seen such a one." When none of them could identify him, the king turned to Arjuna and said, "You appear endowed with the might of a celestial. Young and dark-complexioned, you look like a lord of elephants. Although you wear bracelets and fine gold earrings and have braided your hair, you still shine like a god decked with garlands and equipped with armor and weapons. Become like my son or even my self. I am old and worn out. Therefore, rule this kingdom in my place and let me retire. I cannot believe you are of the neuter sex."

In a deep voice that echoed around the court, Arjuna replied, "I sing, dance and play musical instruments. I am skilled in all these arts. O god among men, assign me to your daughter Uttara and I shall be her dancing master. Please do not ask me how I acquired this form, for that would only add to my pain. Know me to be Brihannala, a son or daughter without parents."

Virata stared with astonishment at Brihannala. "After testing you I will happily place you as my daughter's instructor. I feel, though, that you

deserve to rule the earth rather than to accept such a humble office."

The king had beautiful women examine Brihannala to ensure that he was free from lust. He also asked him to display his abilities of singing and dancing. The women reported that there was no problem; and the king, after seeing his celestial skills, happily appointed Brihannala as Princess Uttara's teacher.

In the guise of a eunuch Arjuna began living with the women in Virata's palace, instructing them in singing and playing musical instruments as well as in the various modes of dancing he had learned from the Gandharvas. Due to Urvashi's curse, he felt no disturbance in the women's presence and he soon became a great favorite in their chambers. No one suspected that he was in fact the world-renowned Pandava.

It only remained for Nakula to enter Virata. Then, on the day after Arjuna entered, he appeared in the city. The people saw him walking through the streets like the sun appearing from behind clouds. Going to the royal stables, he began to examine the horses. When the king saw him there, shining like a celestial, he had him summoned to the royal court. Nakula introduced himself. "O king, all victory to you. I am the keeper of horses known as Granthika. I was formerly employed by Yudhisthira and am versed in all the arts of horsemanship. I know the temper of horses and can break them completely. Under my care, hardly an animal falls ill and not even the mares are found to be wicked. Employ me as horse keeper, O king, and I shall serve you well."

Virata looked at the tall, powerful person before him. He seemed to be born of aristocracy. There was no doubt that he had the abilities he claimed. The king agreed to employ him. "You shall take charge of my stables and all those who work in them, including my charioteers. You appear to me like a king yourself, and your sight is as pleasing to me as it must have been to Yudhisthira. I wonder how that faultless Pandava is faring in the deep forest without servants such as yourself."

Having achieved the positions they desired, the five brothers and Draupadi began their final year in exile, unsuspected by anyone.

Chapter Thirty-six. Draupadi Again Insulted

After twelve long years in the forest, waiting for the day they could reclaim their kingdom, the final year of busy city life passed quickly for the Pandavas. Yudhishthira dined with Virata and, thanks to the skills he had acquired from Vrishaparva, won much wealth from the king. He secretly distributed his winnings to his brothers. Bhima ensured that his brothers had the best of food and drink. From the ladies in the palace Arjuna obtained many items of clothing, which he gave to his brothers, and the twins also shared with their brothers the wealth they earned from the king. The Pandavas lived so happily that it seemed they were back in their own home. They kept vigilant eyes on Draupadi and were always alert to danger from Duryodhana's men.

In the fourth month of their stay in Virata, there was a festival held in honor of Shiva. Among the festivities was a wrestling contest. Many powerful fighters from all over Bharata assembled in the city, roaring like lions. Those colossal-bodied men were maddened with power and strength. They strode about the wrestling arena slapping their arms and chests. Virata honored them and organized a tournament between them. One wrestler, Jimuta, was the most powerful and he emerged victorious from the contest. As he stood shouting out a furious challenge, none dared come forward to fight him. Virata then summoned his cook, Vallabha, and ordered him to fight.

Bhima could not defy the king's order. Reluctantly, he prepared for the match. Although he enjoyed fighting, he was afraid someone would recognize him if he displayed too much power. Praying to Krishna that he not be recognized, he went before the roaring Jimuta. The two wrestlers appeared like infuriated elephants about to fight for leadership of the herd. A fierce fight ensued with the combatants locked together, each looking for the other's weak points. Their blows sounded like thunderbolts striking mountains. The crowds gasped and cheered in turn. Each fighter dashed the other to the ground, threw him, pressed him down by force, and whirled the other around. They slapped and kicked one another with tremendous power. Knees struck against knees and heads against heads, sounding like two stones crashing together. As they fought they shouted insults at each other. The crowd was delighted, some supporting Bhima and others Jimuta. Finally Bhima, who

had been withholding his full strength, decided to end the bout. He suddenly lifted his rival over his head and whirled him about. He spun him a hundred times with such force that he fell unconscious. Then Bhima dashed him to the ground.

Seeing the senseless Jimuta lying on the ground, Virata was overjoyed. He immediately gave Bhima valuable gifts and asked if there were any others who dared challenge him. When no one came forward, Virata ordered that he fight with lions, tigers and elephants. Bhima overpowered many animals in the midst of the astonished crowd, but none had any idea of his actual identity.

The king was pleased with all the Pandavas. By his celestial skills in the arts, Arjuna delighted Virata and the palace ladies. Nakula showed him many well-trained and swift horses, and the king was also pleased with Sahadeva's handling of his cows and bulls. But Draupadi, seeing her husbands engaged in such menial service, felt pained at heart.

The Panchala princess waited upon Sudeshna in misery, but she conducted herself in such a way that the queen was satisfied by her service and gave no thought as to who she might actually be. Eleven months passed.

One day, as Draupadi was moving about the palace, the commander of Virata's army, Kichaka, happened to see her. Cupid's arrows immediately struck the mighty Kichaka when he saw Draupadi's enchanting beauty. She seemed like a goddess descended to earth. His heart was inflamed by desire. He went to his sister Sudeshna and said, "I have never seen this maidservant before. Who is she? Her beauty maddens me as wine does with its aroma. Indeed, this bewitching damsel has ground my heart and brought me under subjection. I am almost feverish with desire, and only she has the cure. Tell me, sister, how has she come to be your servant? It seems that she is too good for such a position. Let her grace my palace and enjoy every opulence with me."

As he spoke, Draupadi entered the queen's chamber. Without waiting for Sudeshna's answer, Kichaka turned to Draupadi and said, "Who are you and to whom do you belong? O fair-faced maiden, simply by seeing you I have lost my mind. I have never seen such grace and beauty in a woman. Are you Goddess Lakshmi herself, or perhaps one of those other divine ladies, Sri, Hri, Kirti or Kanti? You must be a celestial because you shine like the

full moon. What man would not yield to Cupid's influence when he beheld your face shining with such heavenly beauty? Your well-shaped breasts, resembling lotus buds, and your shapely form have afflicted me with the blazing fire of lust. O fair one, pray extinguish this fire with the rain cloud of union. Your maddening gestures and movements have pierced my heart. It behooves you to save me from my plight by surrendering yourself to me and allowing me to enjoy your company. You shall have whatever you desire and your time as a servant will end."

Kichaka spoke at length in his attempt to woo Draupadi, but she was only filled with horror. Lowering her face and covering her head she replied, "I am a Sairindhri of low caste, holding the hateful position of dressing hair. O hero, in desiring me you wish for one who is not worthy of such an honor. Furthermore, I am already the wife of others and thus your conduct is unbecoming. Do not turn your mind to adultery, for it leads inevitably to disgrace and calamity. To fully abandon sin is ever the duty of the good."

Kichaka, whose senses were completely overpowered by lust, simply smiled. Without caring for the consequences he addressed Draupadi in sweet tones. "O timid one, it is not fair of you to reject me. Cupid enslaves me on your account. If you do not accept my proposal, then you will have to regret your decision. I am the lord of this realm; the people depend upon me for their safety. In heroism I have no rival on earth. My power and prosperity are without compare. Why do you turn me down in favor of a life of servitude? I shall bestow the kingdom upon you. Live with me in happiness and enjoy whatever you desire."

Draupadi was disgusted by Kichaka's shamelessness and she became angry. "O son of a suta, do not needlessly throw away your life. Five heroes always protect me. You cannot win me because I am already married to five Gandharvas of terrible prowess. They will not tolerate this insult and will doubtlessly slay you if you persist in your attempts to win me. You will have no refuge, even if you descend to the subterranean world or soar to the heavens. My husbands always crush their enemies. Why, Kichaka, do you desire me like a child on his mother's lap who desires the moon? Look to your safety and leave me alone."

Draupadi turned and quickly walked from the queen's chamber. Kichaka was shocked and dismayed by Draupadi's stern refusal. He said to Sudeshna, "Please do whatever is necessary to make this maiden inclined

toward me. If she does not accept me, I shall kill myself."

Sudeshna pitied her brother in his disappointment. She said, "I will find a suitable opportunity and send Sairindhri to you to fetch something. In the solitude of your quarters, you will be able to solicit her at leisure. She will then most likely become attached to you." Kichaka agreed to his sister's suggestion and returned to his palace.

A few days later the queen called for Draupadi and said, "Sairindhri, today is a festival and I am thirsty. My brother has had some excellent wines prepared. Please go there and fetch some for me."

Draupadi answered in alarm, "My lady, I shall not go to that wicked man's house. You have seen for yourself how shamelessly he approached me. Most beautiful one, I asked when I came here that I be kept safe from other men. If you send me to Kichaka, he will dishonor me. Please send one of your other maids."

"You need have no fear," Sudeshna replied dismissively. "You are being sent from the royal palace; my brother will not dare to insult you."

The queen gave Draupadi a golden pot and waved her away. Fearful and crying, Draupadi left for Kichaka's palace. As she walked she prayed, "As I am always faithful to my husbands, by the strength of that virtue may I be protected from Kichaka." Draupadi looked up at the sun and asked the sun-god for his protection. Surya, out of compassion, ordered a mighty Rakshasa to invisibly protect her, and from that time on he never left her under any circumstances.

When Draupadi entered, Kichaka stood up in joy. With folded palms he said, "O fair one of beautiful tresses, you are welcome. Somehow I have managed to survive the last few days since seeing you. Now you shall become the mistress of my house. Let golden chains and brilliant ornaments of every description be brought for your pleasure. Gems, jewels and silken garments await you in abundance. I have prepared for you a fine bed. Come, drink with me the honeyed wine."

Without looking at him Draupadi replied coldly, "Sudeshna has sent me to fetch wine. Please fill this pot and let me leave quickly, for she is thirsty."

"Let others take the queen her wine," Kichaka said, moving toward

Draupadi. "You should remain here with me."

Kichaka took Draupadi by the arm. Crying out in fear, she said tearfully, "As I have never acted unfaithfully toward my husbands, even in my mind or heart, I shall by virtue of that truth see you hurled down and punished for this sin."

Draupadi struggled free from Kichaka and he ran after her, grabbing hold of her upper garment as it trailed behind her. Trembling in wrath she spun round and pushed him with all her strength. Caught by surprise, he fell to the ground like a tree cut at its root. Draupadi rushed into the royal court to seek the king's protection. Kichaka pursued her and caught her right in front of the king. Pulling her back forcefully, Kichaka kicked Draupadi and she fell to the mosaic floor. The invisible Rakshasa appointed by the sun-god then struck Kichaka a blow with the force of the wind and he fell prostrate.

Bhima happened to be present in the court, along with Yudhishthira, and he glared at Kichaka. The unforgiving Pandava gnashed his teeth and clenched his fists, ready to leap up at once and kill Kichaka. His eyes became dark and smoky, and terrible wrinkles appeared on his forehead along with beads of sweat. Bhima rubbed his forehead with his huge hand, fighting his desire to hurl himself at Draupadi's offender. Yudhishthira reached over and pressed Bhima's arm. "O cook, you had best go about your business," he said in a low voice. "You are surely needed in the kitchen."

Restrained by his elder brother, Bhima rose up slowly and left the court with his eyes fixed on Kichaka, who was picking himself up from the floor, looking around in amazement to see who had struck him. Draupadi, seeing her husbands maintaining their disguises before the king, stood before Virata with flashing eyes. "This son of a suta has kicked me, the honored wife of those whose enemies can never sleep even if they reside in heaven. The suta's son has kicked me, the respected consort of those who are truthful, devoted to brahmins, and ever accustomed to giving charity. He has kicked me, the beloved wife of those who are endowed with energy, power and self-control, and who, if they were not tied down by duty, could destroy the whole of this world. Alas, where today do those warriors roam? How can they, like eunuchs, suffer their spouse to be so insulted? Where is their wrath, prowess and energy when they cannot protect their own wife from a wretch?"

As she spoke Draupadi glanced toward Yudhishthira, who was

squirming in pain. Turning her gaze on Virata she went on, "What can I do? I am in this city, and he who defies virtue has coolly allowed me to be insulted before his eyes. Why does the king not act like a king toward Kichaka? O best of men, how do you tolerate this outrage? Let all the courtiers mark your failure today. Where is the virtue in either Kichaka or Virata, or even in the silent courtiers, who have witnessed Kichaka's despicable behavior?"

Draupadi was sobbing. Virata replied, "I do not know the full details of your quarrel with Kichaka. Without knowing everything, how can I pass judgment?" The king looked at his brother-in-law, who was smiling. The aging Virata depended on Kichaka to defend his city. The king could not say anything to offend him, but the brahmin courtiers were now praising Draupadi and reproaching Kichaka. "This gentle lady is like a goddess in our midst," they said. "Surely the man who has her for a wife wants for nothing. By insulting her, Kichaka has performed a sinful deed."

Yudhishthira sat burning with anger. Drops of perspiration ran down his face. In a taut voice he said to Draupadi, "O Sairindhri, return to Sudeshna's apartments. The wives of heroes endure pain on behalf of their husbands, but in the end they attain those blessed regions where their husbands go. I think your Gandharva husbands do not feel that the moment is right for a display of their power. You should not remain here and cause a disturbance. Be confident that your husbands will assuage your sorrow in due course."

Draupadi, who had fallen weeping to the floor, composed herself and stood up to leave. "I practice piety for the sake of my kind and forgiving husbands. They, of whom the eldest is addicted to dice, are ever oppressed by others."

Watched by the mystified king, she went out of the court with her head lowered and returned to the queen's chambers. When Sudeshna saw her tearful face she asked, "O beautiful one, who has slighted you? Why do you weep? O gentle one, whose happiness will come to an end today?"

Bowing before the queen, Draupadi replied, "As I went to fetch your wine, Kichaka struck me in the court in the king's presence."

"What? Then I shall have him chastised," Sudeshna said angrily. "O lady with curling tresses, if it is your will, then let this lustful man be killed."

"Do not worry, O Queen. Those whom he has wronged will deal with

him soon enough. I think he will go to Yamaraja's kingdom before long."

Draupadi went to her own rooms and bathed herself, putting on fresh garments. She wanted to purify herself of Kichaka's touch. Her mind dwelt on her insult and she considered how to avenge herself. She thought of Bhima. He had obviously been ready to annihilate Kichaka on the spot. Certainly he would fulfill her desire if she approached him. She could not face another day knowing that Kichaka still lived. Seeing the king powerless to protect her, and thinking she had no protector, Kichaka would doubtlessly continue to harass her. Draupadi decided to go to Bhima. When the palace residents were asleep, she went silently to his quarters.

As she entered his room she found him asleep, snoring like a lion. The chamber, filled with her beauty and Bhima's effulgence, seemed ablaze with splendor. The princess went up to Bhima's bed and embraced him, even as a creeper embraces a sal tree. In a voice as sweet as the sound of a vina, she said, "O Bhima, rise up. Why do you sleep like one dead? How can a sinful wretch survive after insulting the wife of one who lives?"

Bhima sat up. "Why have you woken me, gentle princess? You appear wan and sorrowful. Surely the incident today in Virata's court is the reason. I too am burning with anger as I remember it. Tell me the cause of your pain, O Panchali, and I shall do whatever lies in my power. I will always do whatever pleases you, and I am prepared to deliver you from danger again and again. Quickly let me know your desire and go back to your bed before others are up."

Draupadi wept. "How can she who has Yudhisthira for a husband ever be free of grief? You know all, O Bharata, and have no need to ask. The grief I felt when Dushashana dragged me into the assembly hall still burns me day and night. What other princess could live after such an insult? How could anyone survive what I suffered at Jayadratha's hands? Who but me could endure being kicked in the presence of the Matsya king? Of what use is my life when you allow me to suffer all these pains, O hero?"

Bhima gently stroked his wife's face as she wept. She looked into his angry eyes and continued, "The wicked Kichaka wants me to marry him. As I remember his words my heart bursts like an over-ripe fruit. O slayer of foes, all my sufferings are due to your elder brother's addiction to dice. Who else but him could have sacrificed everything, including his own self, for the sake

of gambling? Having lost inestimable quantities of wealth, he now supports himself by dicing. The great king Yudhishthira, who was worshipped by throngs of brahmins and tributary kings, now hides himself in fear, overpowered by calamity. That lord of men—who is free from cruelty, full of compassion, forbearing and truthful—has become a gambler in King Virata's court. He now depends on another's mercy for his subsistence. Surely he is experiencing the misery of hell."

Draupadi poured out all her pent-up grief. The time in Virata had passed slowly for her. With no opportunity to speak to her husbands and to be solaced by them, she had suffered silently. It was agonizing to see her five heroic husbands living as servants, and her own position as a serving maid was practically intolerable. Only her sense of duty and loyalty to Yudhishthira sustained her. Although she criticized Yudhishthira to Bhima, she would never consider being disloyal to him for even a moment. She spoke at length of her sorrow at seeing Yudhishthira's plight, and Bhima consoled her.

Taking hold of Bhima's hands, the Panchala princess continued. "O Bharata, I shall tell you of another great grief. Do not become angry as I speak only out of the sadness in my heart, but seeing you a servant and cook causes me more distress than I can bear. When Virata joyfully made you fight with elephants, and the ladies of his palace laughed, my mind sank in sorrow. Indeed, I fainted and the queen had to revive me. She said, 'It seems you harbor some attachment for this cook. Both of you came to Virata together and I often see you lamenting for him. Are you attached to the handsome Vallabha?' She still chides me in this way, which only increases my pain."

Draupadi then described to Bhima the pain she felt on seeing Arjuna acting as a eunuch. "The mighty Dhananjaya, the scourge of his enemies and fearful to even the celestials, now lives in a guise despised by all men. Covering his body with gaudy clothes and bangles, that hero lives in grief, surrounded only by women. When I see the dreadful wielder of the bow decked with ornaments, with his hair tied in a braid, my heart burns with anguish."

Bhima remained silent as Draupadi spoke, revealing to him all the pain she was experiencing upon seeing each of her husbands in positions of servitude. Finally she concluded, "I tell you all this only so that you may be aware of my suffering. You are always my protector and shelter and I depend fully upon you. Surely in some past life I offended some great deity and am

thus receiving the results. The destiny of men is difficult to understand. When I see you five brothers cast into sorrow and myself subjected to the hard miseries of a maidservant, I consider it all the work of inscrutable destiny. I do not know how much longer I can carry on. Just look at my hands."

Draupadi held out her hands and showed Bhima the calluses caused by the work she did for the queen. Hearing of her suffering and seeing her condition, Bhima covered his face and cried. After some moments he composed himself and said in sorrow, "Fie on the strength of my arms and fie to Arjuna's Gandiva, since I now see your two lotus hands scarred by work. O princess, I would have wrought havoc in Virata's court, but Yudhishthira restrained me. With a single kick I would have crushed Kichaka's head. When I saw him strike you I was ready to destroy the entire Matsya race. It was only due to Dharmaraja that I held back. I too suffer in silence, O beautiful one. That we have been expelled from our kingdom, that I have not yet annihilated the Kauravas, and that we are forced to live here as servants scorches my limbs and afflicts my heart as if it were pierced by a dart."

Bhima told Draupadi to be patient and not to criticize Yudhishthira. He cited the examples of other great ladies who had followed their husbands in times of misery. Eventually they were all brought again to happiness due to their virtuous practices. Bhima held Draupadi's hands. "Less than a month now remains of our exile," he said. "After that time you will again become an empress. Do not doubt."

Draupadi threw herself onto Bhima's chest. "I do not think I will last that long. The wicked-minded Kichaka will not leave me alone. He has no fear from anyone and will doubtlessly seek to outrage me if I do not accept him. That man is without virtue. He is proud, cruel, impudent and war-like, absorbed only in gratifying his senses. Even the king has no power over him, and he will not hesitate to approach me as he pleases. O Bhima, although you Pandavas are adhering to your pledge out of virtue, you will surely suffer a loss of virtue when I am violated and give up my life. To protect one's wife is a pious husband's first duty, for from the wife one's own self is born as the son. For heroes there is always virtue in repressing the enemy. O mighty one, as you have always rescued me from wicked men, I entreat you to slay Kichaka without delay. If he should live for even one more day, I will swallow poison and give up my life."

Bhima made up his mind. He could not stand Draupadi's pain.

Taking her by the shoulders he said, "Gentle one, I will do as you say. Today I will slay Kichaka and all his followers. Listen carefully. When the sun rises, you should go to him with sweet smiles. Tell him that you secretly hold in your heart an attraction for him. Then arrange to meet him in the evening. There is a dancing hall some way from the other residences that is empty at night. Have him come there and I shall greet him and send him to meet his ancestors."

Overjoyed, Draupadi embraced Bhima and left his room.

Just after dawn the next day, Kichaka went to the palace to seek her out. Finding her in the queen's quarters he said, "O timid one, yesterday you witnessed my power. Although I threw you down in front of the king, he said nothing. He is king in name only. I am the actual ruler here. Accept me as your lord and I shall bestow heaps of gold and gems upon you. One hundred male and one hundred female servants will wait upon you. You will ride on the best of chariots. O most beautiful lady, let us be united."

Draupadi saw her chance. She glanced down demurely. Turning herself slightly away from Kichaka she replied, "Mighty hero, our union together must be without anyone else's knowledge. I am afraid of my husbands. If we can lie in secret, then I shall be yours."

Kichaka laughed with joy. He placed a hand on Draupadi's shoulder and replied eagerly. "It shall be as you say. I am under your control and overpowered by Cupid. Let us meet in some lonely place where none shall detect us."

Sickened within herself but smiling outwardly, Draupadi said, "Not far from here is the king's dancing hall. The princess uses it only in the day. I will go there two hours after sunset. Meet me there."

Draupadi left at once and went to her own chamber. Thinking of the night to come, the day seemed like a month. On the plea of feeling ill, she remained in her room the whole day. She felt sullied by her conversation with Kichaka and would only feel peaceful when he was slain.

For his part, Kichaka was filled with anticipation. As evening approached he dressed carefully and ornamented himself. He put on fragrant garlands and smeared his limbs with perfumes and sandalwood paste. Burning with lust, he waited impatiently for nightfall.

As soon as the sun had set Bhima made his way to the dancing hall. He slipped inside and hid himself, waiting for Kichaka's arrival. Draupadi also came there, and before long Kichaka entered the darkened hall. He called out for Draupadi. "Although praised for my handsomeness by the women in my house, I came here thinking of you alone. You shall become the best of my consorts and I shall give you immense wealth. O fair maiden, where are you?"

"By my good fortune you have come here tonight, handsome one," Draupadi replied sweetly. "I consider your touch as burning and you are an expert at gallantry. There is no other man as attractive as you are to women. I am over here."

Kichaka moved toward the sound of Draupadi's voice. Bhima was hiding behind a silk drape at the side of the hall. As Kichaka passed, he suddenly came out and stood before him. Bhima's angry voice boomed out, "Today your sister shall behold you, vile as you are, thrown down on the earth with your limbs shattered. With you slain, Sairindhri shall wander freely without fear. Then too shall we, her husbands, live happily."

Bhima immediately seized hold of Kichaka's hair, which was adorned with garlands, and dragged him down. Kichaka was shocked. Sairindhri had tricked him. Snapping quickly out of his mood of enjoyment, he pulled himself free of Bhima's grasp. Bhima punched Kichaka with his iron-hard fists. Kichaka took hold of Bhima's two arms and tried to kick away his feet. The two mighty men shuffled violently around the hall, locked together. They appeared like the two celestial monkeys, Vali and Sugriva, fighting together in days of yore. Breaking apart they stood belligerently facing one another. Their upraised arms looked like two pairs of furious, five-hooded serpents. They struck one another with the force of thunderbolts. The empty hall resounded with great cracks and the walls trembled.

Enraged, they fought with fists, nails and teeth. They kicked and hurled each other about with the force of a tempest. Neither showed fatigue nor wavered. Blows rained down without cessation as both men became worked up into a fury. Like two powerful bulls, they came against each other again and again. As their blows landed the air was filled with the sound of trees splitting open. Kichaka was astonished at his opponent's power. Although he had fought and defeated great heroes all over the world, he had never encountered such a foe. It was like fighting with a mountain or the

earth itself. Kichaka exerted himself to his full power, trying to throw the unshakeable Bhima to the ground, but Bhima caught him in an embrace that crushed him like a steel vice.

Breathing in deeply and expanding his massive chest, Kichaka broke free. Bhima instantly came at him again and struck him on the breast. Then he threw Kichaka across the hall as a hurricane tosses a tree. Mustering all his strength Kichaka rushed at Bhima and took hold of his neck. He pulled the Pandava down and brought his knee up into his chest with all his power. Bhima was thrown to the floor and he rolled over quickly. He looked up at Kichaka with burning eyes. Appearing like Yamaraja with mace in hand, he rose from the floor blazing with anger. He bellowed at Kichaka and rushed at him like a maddened elephant charging another. The two heroes again locked together, grunting and grappling as they moved about the hall.

Although Kichaka was a powerful fighter, expert in all forms of combat, he found all his moves more than matched by Bhima. Gradually he felt his strength waning. Bhima, seeing his foe weakening, became even more energetic. He took hold of Kichaka and crushed him in his mace-like arms. Unable to catch his breath, Kichaka fell senseless to the floor. Bhima grabbed his hair and roared like a lion that had just killed a large animal. Lifting his groggy opponent above his head, he whirled him about violently. Bhima then smashed Kichaka onto the marble floor and fell upon him. Placing his knees on Kichaka's chest he took hold of his throat, strangling him. Draupadi was joyful as she watched the utterly enraged Bhima pound Kichaka into a mutilated mess. He thrust his arms, legs and head into his body, and reduced him to a shapeless lump of flesh.

His anger appeased by Kichaka's death, Bhima stood up. He turned to Draupadi. "See what I have done to this wretch, Panchali. You should know that any who seek to harm you will meet a similar end."

Bhima quickly left the hall and made his way back to his room. Draupadi returned to the palace and told the guards that they should go to the dancing hall. "There you will find he who desired another's wife. Slain by my Gandharva husbands, he lies weltering in gore."

The guards ran to the hall and saw the dead Kichaka. They gazed in amazement at his mangled body. Gradually thousands of soldiers came there to see their slain commander lying amid his scattered ornaments. All of them

were astonished. He was hardly recognizable. Who was capable of such a feat? Kichaka was an almost invincible warrior who had beaten the best wrestlers and fighters in the world. The soldiers gasped in disbelief. Somehow none of them suspected Vallabha. Struck with wonder they stood about asking, "Who could have done this? Where are Kichaka's arms and legs? Where is his head?"

As Kichaka's followers looked at him they were filled with fear. Talking among themselves they concluded that the Gandharvas must have killed their leader. They lifted his body, which resembled the body of a tortoise with its limbs withdrawn, and carried him outside the hall to perform the last rites. As they made their way to the cremation ground they saw Draupadi watching them. Knowing that Kichaka had gone to meet her, some of them exclaimed, "There is the unchaste one for whom Kichaka was slain. She too should be killed. Let us burn her along with our lord."

A couple of the soldiers sought the king's permission to execute Draupadi by placing her on the fire with Kichaka. The king, knowing the power of his commander's followers, agreed. The sutas at once ran to Draupadi and seized her. They bound the struggling princess and placed her upon the large bier with Kichaka's corpse. Draupadi cried out in terror as she was carried toward the crematorium. "May Jaya, Jayanta, Vijaya, Jayatsena and Jayadbala hear my words! Save me! The sutas are carrying me away. Let those heroic Gandharvas, whose chariots and bows resound like thunder, understand that their wife is in great peril."

Bhima heard her pitiful cries. Without hesitation, he ran from his room. He could understand that Kichaka's followers were taking Draupadi to the crematorium. The Pandava went there by a different route without being seen, his head covered with a cloth. Scaling walls and bounding across gardens he swiftly reached the cremation ground, which lay just outside the city. He found a great Palmyra tree, uprooted it and placed it on his shoulders. Kichaka's followers arrived and saw Bhima standing like Death personified holding his rod of chastisement. They howled in fear. "Here is the Gandharva who killed Kichaka. Release Sairindhri before he kills us all."

The sutas put Draupadi down and ran in all directions. Bhima pursued them relentlessly and struck them down with the tree. As he struck out at them, he knocked over other trees, which fell crashing to the ground. Roaring like a furious lion, the Pandava slew all the sutas one after another.

In a short time, the crematorium was covered with more than a hundred dead bodies. They all lay about like uprooted trees. Telling Draupadi to return to her rooms, Bhima quickly went back by the route he had come before anyone discovered him.

The people of Virata, hearing the commotion from the crematorium, rushed to see what was causing it. Discovering the slain sutas, they ran to the king and informed him. "O king, the powerful suta followers of Kichaka have all been killed. They are scattered about like so many mountain summits clapped by thunderbolts. Surely this is the work of the Gandharvas, enraged by Kichaka's assault on Sairindhri. She is now returning to your city unharmed. We are afraid of her. She is beautiful beyond compare, the Gandharvas are powerful and wrathful, and men are undoubtedly lustful. Quickly do something so that our city may not be destroyed."

Virata was astonished. "Let Kichaka and all his followers be cremated on one great pyre with gems and perfumes. I will take care of Sairindhri."

Turning to his wife the king said, "When Sairindhri comes, tell her this from me: 'Fair one, please go wherever you like with my blessings. We are afraid the Gandharvas will destroy us all. Indeed, I am too fearful to even speak with you directly.'"

As Draupadi entered the city, the people fled in all directions like deer seeing a tiger. Some even shut their eyes and covered their heads. Draupadi went back into the palace. After she had bathed the queen approached her and conveyed Virata's message. Draupadi replied, "O queen, allow me to remain here for only two more weeks. The Gandharvas will be obliged to you for this favor. After that, they will take me away from here and do whatever is agreeable to you."

The queen assented and released Draupadi from her duties. After telling her to remain in the palace until her husbands came, she left to inform the king.

Chapter thirty-seven. The Kurus Attack Virata

The news of Kichaka's death spread from country to country. Everyone was amazed to hear of his mysterious killing and the subsequent death of his one hundred followers. In Hastinapura, the spies dispatched by Duryodhana came to the court and reported everything they had seen and heard. After informing the Kurus that they had found no trace of the Pandavas, they then told them about Kichaka's death. The Kurus were joyful to hear this news. Kichaka had been a thorn in their side, often attacking surrounding countries and defeating their armies. Many times tributary kings seeking protection from Kichaka had approached the Kurus. Now he and his generals were dead, apparently killed by invisible Gandharvas.

Duryodhana pondered the news. Less than two weeks remained of the Pandavas' exile. Although he had sent out thousands of spies, none had managed to find them. The Pandavas had hidden themselves well—if they were even alive.

The prince summoned his courtiers and said, "You should arrange for one final search for the Pandavas. Have the best of our men scour every city and town. If those heroes still live, we face great danger. We are expecting them to emerge from exile surrounded by their forces. Let us discover them before this happens and send them back to the forest."

Dushashana agreed. "We should certainly make a great effort to locate the Pandavas, but I doubt we will find them. We have already searched every city and town. Either they have perished or they have crossed the ocean. I think they are gone forever. I do not think we need fear them."

When Dushashana sat down, Drona stood up and said, "Persons like the Pandavas never meet destruction. They are heroic, resourceful, intelligent, self-controlled, pious, grateful, and attached to observing vows. Yudhishthira is both virtuous and without enemies. He is their leader. Thus they are patiently waiting the day when they can return and overcome their misfortunes. This is my opinion. O Duryodhana, you will see the Pandavas at the end of their exile and not before. Do not waste your energy searching for them. Rather, you should prepare a welcome for them. Give them back their kingdom."

Bhishma applauded Drona's speech. The Kuru grandfather longed to

again see Pandu's sons. Their exile had passed slowly for him. His guilt at not having prevented Duryodhana from banishing them burned him day and night. The pain of remembering how Draupadi had been violated was especially acute. Bhishma felt helpless. Dhritarastra did not heed his advice, and the evil-minded Duryodhana was left to do as he pleased. Now the Pandavas would finally be returning. Surely they had suffered enough. Perhaps the king could now be convinced to return to them their kingdom. Like the full moon rising in the east, Bhishma, clad in white silks, rose from his seat to address the assembly.

"I fully agree with Drona. The virtuous Pandavas, guided by the brahmins and walking always on a righteous path, will not perish. They who have as a friend the infallible and all-powerful Krishna cannot be overcome by misfortune. The pure-souled Yudhisthira can consume his enemies with his glance alone. We should consider carefully how to deal with them now that their exile is ending. It is certainly a mean policy to search for them. I have another view. Listen carefully and I will speak for our good. A counselor should always speak the beneficial truth and never anything evil."

Bhishma looked around the Kuru assembly hall. At its head sat Dhritarastra, flanked by Vidura, Drona, Kripa, Bahlika, and himself. Duryodhana and his brothers sat to the king's right, along with Karna and Shakuni. Other kings sat in the assembly and all gazed intently at him as he spoke. Although it was well known that he loved the Pandavas dearly, the assembled kings knew he would never be partial. His first thoughts were for the welfare of the entire Kuru race, and he dealt equally with everyone, desiring nothing but their good fortune. Placing his hand on his golden-hilted sword, Bhishma continued.

"As far as locating the Pandavas is concerned, I will tell you where to find them. Look for that place where there are no calamities or disasters. Where the pious Yudhisthira dwells, there will be an atmosphere of peace and security. The people will be inclined toward charity and will be liberal, humble and modest. There the people will be cheerfully performing their respective duties, attached to piety, truthfulness and purity. You will hear the Vedic hymns being chanted and see sacrifices being performed. Clouds will shower abundant rains and the earth will be bearing crops. There will be signs of wealth everywhere, and no one will be miserable. Indeed, that place where Yudhisthira lives will resemble the heavens. Knowing all this, O

Kurus, consider what should be done. In my view, we should give up our petty attempts to find them just to send them again to the forest. Let us welcome them back and restore to them their father's kingdom."

Bhishma sat down, applauded by Drona, Vidura and Kripa, who himself rose from his seat and said, "What the aged Bhishma has said is undoubtedly correct and meant only for our good. His words are reasonable, truthful, and consistent with scripture. Returning the Pandavas' kingdom is surely the wisest course of action."

Looking across at Duryodhana and his brothers, Kripa said, "But if we are not to follow this course, then we had best prepare for war. When those powerful heroes return, they will be burning with energy and ascetic power. Therefore, consider now how to expand your own forces. Seek out your allies and make treaties with them. Build a vast, unassailable army. If you deny the Pandavas their rights, then we face the gravest possible danger."

Duryodhana was pensive. Kripa was right. If he did not return the Pandavas' kingdom, there would no doubt be a fight. But he had no intention of returning their kingdom. The fight was inevitable—unless they could be discovered first and sent back into exile. The Kaurava prince thought carefully. The report about Kichaka had intrigued him. Apparently he had been slain by the five Gandharva husbands of a single woman. The coincidence with Draupadi and the Pandavas was almost incredible, especially because there were only a handful of men who could have killed Kichaka in hand-to-hand combat: Balarama, Shalya, Karna—and Bhima. It could not have been the first three, because what reason would any of them have had for going to Virata and killing Kichaka in secret? He had been beaten to a pulp in the dead of night. That sounded suspiciously like Bhima's handiwork. And he would have had to do it in secret. It added up. Kichaka had violated a woman with five husbands and had been slain in a manner that bore Bhima's unmistakable stamp.

As Duryodhana pondered, Susharma, king of the Trigartas, took advantage of the silence and said, "O Kurus, if you desire to expand your forces, you can begin by bringing Virata under your subjection. Now he is without Kichaka, and his followers should be little trouble. Let us go and take his wealth. Subjugating him, you shall increase both your treasury and your army by requisitioning his forces. I will bring my own army to assist you. Too many times have the Trigartas been overpowered by Kichaka. Now we

shall avenge ourselves on the Matsyas."

Duryodhana felt that the gods—or perhaps the Danavas—had answered him. If he went to Virata, they might find the Pandavas. If they were not there, then there was no loss. He would still gain something by winning over that kingdom. The prince stood up and issued instructions. "Susharma has made an excellent suggestion. We should go to the Matsya kingdom immediately. Prepare our army to leave at once. As he has suggested, Susharma will accompany us with his own forces."

Duryodhana ordered that they depart the next day. He told Susharma to go ahead with his army and begin by taking away Virata's cattle. Duryodhana would follow with his forces and attack the city. As the other Kuru elders sat in silence, Dhritarastra gave his approval and preparations were begun.

* * *

After Kichaka's death Virata's citizens were afraid. Although Kichaka had been cruel, he had also been powerful enough to protect them. Now they had no protector. How long would it be before some aggressive monarch tried to conquer them? The king, desperate to replace his commander, considered Kanka, Vallabha, Tantripala and Granthika. It seemed to him that any of them could lead his army and protect the Matsyas.

It was not long before Virata was presented with an opportunity to test his ideas. One morning as he sat in court, a cowherd ran in and exclaimed, "The Trigartas are attacking us and stealing your cows, O king. Come quickly to rescue them."

The king immediately issued orders for his army to assemble. He called for his armor and weapons and prepared to lead his army. His four sons surrounded him, also ready for battle. In a short time, hundreds of other powerful warrior chiefs assembled in the court. Outside the assembly hall, the vast Matsya army lined the streets, ready to march. Chariots, elephants, horses and infantry created a clamor that resembled the ocean's roar.

Virata's younger brother, Satanika, stood by the king's side. The king said, "I have no doubt that Kanka, Vallabha, Tantripala and Granthika will fight. Give them armor and chariots adorned with flags. I do not think such

men, endowed as they are with bodies like mountains and arms like elephants' trunks, will not join the battle."

Virata strode anxiously out of his hall to organize his army, while Satanika had chariots fetched for the Pandavas. Having the four of them brought before him, Satanika presented them with armor and weapons and ordered them to fight. Enlivened by the thought of a battle, the Pandavas selected suitable armor and put it on. They mounted chariots and rode out of the city behind the king.

The Matsya monarch charged into battle on a massive chariot surrounded by his sons and the Pandavas. In his burnished armor, adorned with a hundred suns and a hundred eyes, the king shone like the sun encircled by the major planets. Behind them came a thousand infuriated elephants. Eight thousand chariot fighters and sixty thousand horsemen followed them, holding their weapons aloft and sending out terrible war cries. The entire army seemed like a mass of clouds charged with lightning moving across the earth.

The Trigartas were still rounding up Virata's huge herd as the Matsya army rushed upon them. Quickly abandoning the cows where they would not be harmed, the Trigarta warriors met the Matsya's charge. A fierce battle ensued on the grazing grounds. As the enraged warriors slew one another, the battle resembled the one that had once taken place between the gods and the demons. A thick dust cloud rose up from the field, obscuring everything and screening the afternoon sun. Thick showers of arrows whistled through the air and warriors fell by the thousands. The screaming fighters hacked at one another with their swords and axes.

As the blood of slain fighters flowed into the dust on the field, the cloud subsided. Heads adorned with helmets and earrings were rolling on the earth. Well-muscled arms, their gloved hands still clutching weapons, lay on the ground like serpents. Shattered chariots and pieces of armor were strewn everywhere. Vultures descended and tore at the bodies of the dead fighters. Jackals surrounded the battlefield.

Susharma, mounted on a gold chariot, came before Virata and bellowed out a challenge. He immediately released a hundred powerful arrows that struck Virata's armor and fell to the ground. Roaring like maddened bulls, the two kings circled one another with their weapons

upraised. They discharged arrows like clouds pouring torrents of rain. Seeing him engaging with the Matsya king, Susharma's two brothers came to his assistance. With well-aimed arrows, they killed Virata's four horses and his charioteer. They then slew the warriors protecting his sides and rear. Susharma leapt from his chariot with his sword held high and rushed toward Virata. With his two brothers, he seized Virata and took him captive.

Yudhishthira saw Virata being led away on Susharma's chariot. He quickly went over to Bhima and called out, "The Matsya king has been captured and his army routed. We have lived peacefully in his kingdom this last year and are indebted to him. Bhima, free Virata and thus repay our debt. We shall then put the Trigartas to flight."

Bhima's eyes glinted at the prospect of the fight. He had been awaiting Yudhishthira's command before engaging in the battle. "So be it," he replied. "Behold my prowess. I shall take hold of that huge tree over there like a mace and disperse the entire Trigarta army."

Bhima moved toward a huge sal tree nearby, but Yudhishthira checked him. "O child, do not be rash. If you uproot this tree and perform superhuman deeds, people will be amazed and say, 'Surely this is Bhima.' Take some other weapon so that people will not recognize you. Go on your chariot and the twins will protect your wheels. Release the king."

Bhima urged on his charioteer and raced toward Susharma, who was heading away with the captive king. Nakula and Sahadeva rode on either side and carved through the Trigarta forces. Approaching Susharma, Bhima yelled, "Wait! Turn and fight! Behold now a mighty feat of arms as I throw you down with all your followers."

Bhima let go a steady stream of arrows and Susharma turned to face him. When the Trigarta king saw the powerful Bhima and the twins before him, it seemed to him that Yamaraja, flanked by Death and Time, had come to do battle. Along with his sons and generals he tried to withstand the Pandavas' attack, but hundreds were being killed. Chariots were smashed and elephants slain. Horses with their riders fell like trees blown over in a storm. The Pandavas' forceful arrows swept in clouds through Susharma's ranks and created havoc. Bhima leapt from his chariot and rushed about, whirling his mace, mowing the infantry down like a field of corn.

Witnessing the devastation, Susharma was astonished. It seemed that

these three warriors would annihilate them. He pulled his bow back to his ear and sent long steel shafts at the roaring Pandavas. Bhima struck the straight-flying arrows with his mace and the twins struck at them with their swords. Encouraged by the Pandavas' prowess, the remainder of Virata's army rallied and charged back into the fight. Yudhisthira rode into their midst, working a great bow. With sharpened arrows the eldest Pandava quickly dispatched a thousand Trigarta warriors to Death's abode. Bhima, back on his chariot and fighting alongside his brother, killed seven thousand. Nakula and Sahadeva, focusing their efforts on protecting their elder brothers, slew a further thousand brave Trigarta fighters.

Susharma began to retreat and Bhima went after him swiftly. He killed Susharma's four horses and brought him to a halt. Seeing his opportunity, Virata grabbed a mace and leapt from the chariot. The old Matsya king began fighting Susharma's troops, wielding his mace and dancing about like a young man. Susharma jumped from his chariot and raced away. Bhima called out to him, "Stop! It is not becoming of heroes to fly away. With such prowess why did you think of stealing Virata's cows? Why are you now abandoning your followers?"

Susharma, provoked, again turned to face Bhima. "Stand and fight!" he shouted, brandishing his iron club.

Bhima leapt down and rushed toward the bellowing Susharma as a lion attacks a deer. Not caring for Susharma's blows, Bhima seized him by the hair and dashed him to the ground. Pulling him back up, he struck him several fierce blows. Susharma fell gasping to the ground. Bhima placed his knee on his breast and dealt him powerful blows to the head. Susharma lost consciousness and Bhima dragged him to his chariot. He took the insensible Trigarta king to Virata and said, "Behold this sinful man, whom I have captured. Surely he does not deserve to live."

The king replied, "Release the wretch."

Bhima dragged Susharma to his feet and, as he returned to consciousness, snarled at him, "Although I should slay you for stealing the cows, I will release you. According to kshatriya custom, you are now Virata's slave. You must declare this wherever you go. Only if you agree to this condition will you be allowed to live. Go now and do not again perform such rash acts."

Susharma bent his head low and climbed down from the chariot. He bowed to Virata and left, taking with him the remnants of his army.

The Matsyas cheered. They surrounded the Pandavas, still unaware of their identities, and praised them. Virata said, "Today I have been saved by you four heroes. All this kingdom's wealth is as much yours as it is mine. I will bestow upon you richly adorned women and heaps of gems. Tell me what you wish to have and it is yours. Indeed, become the rulers of my kingdom. What more can I say?"

Yudhisthira said humbly, "O king, we are pleased with your words, but it is sufficient for us that you are freed from danger."

"Come," Virata said. "I will install you as king of the Matsyas. How can I rule in your majestic presence? It is due to you alone that I am even able to see my kingdom and my relatives today."

Yudhisthira held up his hands in deference. "We are not able to rule Matsya. Pray forgive us. O king, you should continue to rule this prosperous kingdom in peace and happiness. Send emissaries into the capital to announce your victory. In keeping with the custom of the victorious, we must spend this night on the battlefield."

Virata turned to his ministers and ordered them to carry news of their victory to the city. "Let damsels and courtesans, decked with ornaments and carrying musical instruments, come out of the city to entertain the troops," the king said delightedly. The ministers left at once and the warriors prepared to spend the night on the field.

Chapter Thirty-eight. Arjuna Encounters the Kurus

At dawn the next day, the Kaurava army arrived at the opposite side of the city from where the battle with the Trigartas had been fought. Finding herds of cattle grazing there, they immediately seized them. Once again the terrified cowherds, seeing the Kaurava banners, fled into the city. They ran to the royal court crying for protection. Virata's eldest son, Bhuminjaya, was sitting on the king's throne in the king's absence. The cowherd leader came before him and said, "O prince, mighty hero, we depend on you alone. The mighty Kauravas with Duryodhana in the lead are seizing our cows. Defend the honor of our race. The king has always praised your heroism and power. Taking whatever soldiers that still remain in the city, display your power. You are this kingdom's greatest support. You resemble Arjuna himself. We beseech you to save us."

Addressed thus in front of the palace ladies, Bhuminjaya replied proudly, "I will surely display my prowess with the bow today, but I need a skilled charioteer. My own charioteer was recently slain and has not been replaced. Find the best of men to drive my horses, for I will fight a tremendous battle with the haughty Kauravas. Entering into their army of elephants, chariots and horsemen, I will destroy them. After striking terror into the hearts of Duryodhana, Bhishma, Karna and Kripa, I will bring back the cows. The assembled Kurus will see my prowess and will wonder whether it is Arjuna who is fighting with them.

The prince's brave words circulated through the palace and soon reached Arjuna. Delighted at the chance to confront Duryodhana, he approached Draupadi and said, "Go at once to the prince and tell him that Brihannala was formerly Arjuna's charioteer. O slender-waisted princess, convince him to let me drive his chariot into battle against the Kurus."

Draupadi went straight to the royal court where she found Bhuminjaya still vaunting his prowess. Unable to bear his repeated references to Arjuna, she stepped forward and said, "The beautiful youth resembling an elephant and known by the name Brihannala was once Arjuna's charioteer. He was the disciple of Partha and is himself a mighty bowman. I saw him when I lived with the Pandavas. It was Brihannala who drove Arjuna's chariot when he vanquished the gods at Khandava. Indeed there is no charioteer like him."

Bhuminjaya looked at her in surprise. "How can I ask a eunuch to govern my horses?" he asked.

"Have your sister ask him, O hero. He will certainly do her bidding. Do not hesitate to engage him. With Brihannala as your charioteer, you will undoubtedly vanquish the Kurus and rescue the cows."

Still doubtful, the prince turned to his sister Uttara and said, "Go at once and fetch Brihannala."

Virata's daughter nodded and left the court. That lotus-eyed maiden was as beautiful as Lakshmi herself with her slender waist and well-rounded breasts adorned with pearls. She ran to the dancing hall, her golden ornaments tinkling as she hurried along. Finding Arjuna, she bowed humbly before him. "O Brihannala, our cows are being carried away by the Kurus. My brother, full of heroism, is about to confront them with bow in hand. He requires a charioteer. Sairindhri told him that you formerly drove Arjuna's chariot. She said that there was none equal to you in the skills of governing horses and driving chariots. Therefore, O Brihannala, become the prince's charioteer. Go quickly! There is no time to lose."

Arjuna smiled. "I am going." He immediately left the palace followed by Uttara, just as an elephant in rut is followed by a she-elephant.

As he entered the court the prince called, "Ah, Brihannala, you are here. I have heard that you are skilled in the driving chariots. As you drove Arjuna's chariot into battle against his foes, so today you should drive mine against the Kurus."

Arjuna approached the king and glanced downwards, playing with the long braid of hair that hung down his side. "What power do I have to act as a charioteer? Had you wanted song and dance, then I would have been the right choice. How can I drive horses into battle?"

The prince looked at Brihannala. Although a eunuch, he was huge-bodied and appeared to possess great power. His arms, covered with bangles and bracelets, seemed like decorated serpents, and his shoulders, draped with white silk, were as broad as a palace door. Having faith in Sairindhri's words, Bhuminjaya said, "O Brihannala, whatever you may be, drive my chariot today. We shall challenge the wicked Kurus on the battlefield."

The prince had a suit of armor brought for Arjuna. As if to make fun,

Arjuna struggled to put it on in various wrong ways. He appeared bewildered and dropped the armor with a loud clatter. The palace ladies laughed and Bhuminjaya came over to help him don the shining mail. He then led Arjuna out to his chariot, which flew a flag bearing the sign of a lion. The prince climbed aboard his chariot, his armor shining brilliantly in the morning sun. Arjuna took his place at the front of the chariot and held the reins. The palace maidens called out to him, "O Brihannala, after the prince defeats the Kurus, take from them their fine silks and clothes as a token of your victory. We desire to have those cloths for our dolls."

"When the prince has overpowered the Kurus I shall surely bring back many beautiful clothes for you," Arjuna replied, throwing back his hair.

As Bhuminjaya was about to set off for battle, the brahmins blessed him: "May that great victory which Arjuna obtained at Khandava be yours today when you meet the Kurus," and they walked around the chariot with their hands held palms outwards.

Arjuna urged on the horses and the chariot moved off with a deep rumbling sound. Guided by Arjuna, the horses, decorated with golden necklaces and silver armor, seemed to fly through the air. Within a short time the chariot came within sight of the Kurus and Arjuna brought it to a halt. They were not far from the cremation ground where his weapons were kept. The prince and Arjuna gazed at the Kuru army in the distance. It seemed like a vast ocean, or a forest of high trees moving through the sky. The dust raised by the army rose up in a great cloud that screened the sun.

Bhuminjaya's mouth fell open. He had never seen such a huge army. His hair stood on end and he dropped his bow. "How can I fight such an enemy?" he exclaimed, trembling. "Even the celestials could not face them. The Kuru army has in their midst heroes like Drona, Bhishma, Karna, Kripa, Ashvatthama, and the heroic king Duryodhana. Simply seeing them from a distance I have become terrified."

Wailing loudly, the prince ordered Arjuna to return to the city. "It is not wise to confront this army. My father has gone out with the army and I am alone. I have not practiced the skills of warfare. I am only a boy. I cannot overcome those who are expert in arms. O Brihannala, head back to the capital."

Arjuna turned to face the terrified prince. "Why do you increase your

enemies' delight, O prince? You have become pale with fear before you have even begun to fight. Before both men and women you loudly vaunted your powers. You said, 'I shall defeat the Kurus and bring back the cows.' Those were brave words. O mighty-armed hero, how can you now return unsuccessful? Everyone will deride you. As for myself, eulogized by Sairindhri and commanded by you, I have come here to defeat the Kurus. I will not return without achieving that goal. Stop wailing and let us proceed into battle."

Bhuminjaya stood shaking in the chariot. "Let the Kurus take our wealth as they please. Let men and women laugh at me. Let the cows go anywhere. Let the city be desolate. Let me fear my father. I cannot enter the battle."

The prince jumped down from his chariot and began to run back toward the city. Arjuna called out to him, "A brave kshatriya never flees the battlefield. Better to die in battle than to run in fear."

Bhuminjaya did not listen. With his long sword swinging from side to side as he ran, he did not even look back. Arjuna sprang from the chariot and ran after him.

Having seen the chariot's approach, the Kurus had moved toward them. They saw the prince running in fear and an unusual figure pursuing him, his long braid and white silks streaming in the breeze. The Kuru soldiers laughed and said to one another, "Who is this person, who appears to be a eunuch? He is like fire concealed by ashes. Although assuming the form of a neuter, he has the body of an elephant. Indeed he resembles Arjuna, with the same head, the same neck, and the same mace-like arms. His movements also resemble those of the Pandava."

The Kurus gazed at Brihannala as he raced after the prince. Clearly he was no eunuch. Surely it was Arjuna in disguise. Who else would have dared to face the Kuru army alone? Obviously the Matsya prince had ventured to fight simply out of childishness. It seemed that Arjuna was trying to stop him from fleeing. The Kuru warriors watched the scene, not quite certain if they were seeing Arjuna or not.

Catching Bhuminjaya, Arjuna seized him. The prince cried out, "Let me go! O Brihannala, turn back the chariot. Only one who lives can secure prosperity and happiness. When we get back I will give you one hundred

coins of pure gold, eight brilliant vaidurya gems, an excellent car drawn by the best of horses, and ten infuriated elephants if you release me."

Arjuna said nothing. He dragged the prince back to the chariot. He then said, "If you do not like to fight, let us swap places. You govern the horses and I will fight the enemy. Protected by my arms you may fearlessly enter into the midst of the dreadful Kuru host. Why are you distraught, O hero? You are the foremost of kshatriyas and a great prince. Together we will overpower the Kurus and release the cows. Take the reins and we will proceed into battle."

Bhuminjaya was still terrified, but he became encouraged by Arjuna's confidence. He sat on the chariot and took the reins. Arjuna directed him to guide the chariot toward the sami tree by the crematorium. Before facing the Kurus he wanted to retrieve his Gandiva bow.

As the chariot moved off with Arjuna now in the back, the Kurus spoke together. All of them suspected that the so-called eunuch was actually Arjuna. Within the hearing of Duryodhana, Bhishma and Karna, Drona said, "I perceive numerous ill omens. Violent winds whip up around us, throwing dust and gravel over our troops. The sky is shrouded with darkness and huge black clouds are forming overhead. Our celestial weapons seem to jump from their cases and our horses shed tears. Jackals yell hideously nearby. All these signs indicate a calamity. Protect yourselves and arrange the army well. Expect a great slaughter and guard well the cows. This great bowman in the guise of a eunuch is undoubtedly Partha. O heroic men, surely this man dressed as a woman is Kiriti, whose chariot bears the emblem of Hanuman, the destroyer of Lanka's gardens. Indignant after his long stay in the forest, he will today wreak havoc in battle. I do not see anyone here who can stop him from defeating us and taking back the cows."

As Drona spoke, Karna became angry. "Why do you always make light of us and praise Arjuna? He is not even a sixteenth part of either myself or Duryodhana."

But Duryodhana was smiling. "If this is Partha, O Radheya, then my work is done. We have discovered the Pandavas before their final year is complete. Now they will have to return to the forest. If this is anyone else in eunuch's guise, I shall soon lay him flat on the ground with my sharp arrows."

Arjuna's chariot soon reached the sami tree, out of sight of the Kurus.

Arjuna said, "Climb this tree, O prince, and bring down that bundle up there. It holds the weapons I need. Your bow and arrows will not withstand the force of my arms when, worked up with anger, I defeat our enemies. Here are the Pandavas' weapons, including the Gandiva bow, as huge as a palm tree and embellished with gold. It is a celestial bow without blemish, and it is capable of bearing the heaviest weight."

Bhuminjaya looked up at the bundle high in the tree. "It is heard that a corpse is tied to this tree. How can I, a prince, touch such an unclean thing?"

"Do not be afraid, O prince. This is no corpse. There are only weapons wrapped in that bundle. Bring them down at once. I would not make you perform a cursed deed, born as you are of a noble race and heir to the Matsya king."

Bhuminjaya reluctantly climbed the tree. He cut the bundle loose with his sword and brought it down to the ground, struggling under its huge weight. Arjuna told him to open the bundle and the prince cut away the deerskin covering. As the weapons were revealed they shone like the sun. Bhuminjaya gasped. The blazing weapons resembled sighing serpents. The prince was awestruck. He reached out to touch them and asked, "To what illustrious hero does this bow, with its hundred golden embellishments, belong? And whose is this one, embossed with shining golden elephants? Surely some powerful warrior owns this bow, decorated with three effulgent suns."

Bhuminjaya carefully lifted the brilliant weapons. Arjuna's two inexhaustible quivers lay next to Nakula and Sahadeva's swords, which had hilts worked with gold. Both swords were sheathed in tiger skins. Arjuna explained who owned the weapons.

"The bow about which you asked first is the Gandiva. It is equal to a hundred thousand other bows and is worshipped even by the celestials. It was first held by Brahma, then by Indra and Soma, and now it has come to Arjuna through Varuna. The bow next to the Gandiva, adorned with a hundred golden insects, belongs to Yudhisthira, and the huge bow next to that is Bhima's. The quivers containing winged shafts as sharp as razors belong to Arjuna. Those arrows become inexhaustible in battle. The sword nearby the quivers bearing the emblem of a black bee and carrying the sting of a bee is

also Arjuna's."

Arjuna described each weapon and its owner to the amazed prince. When he had finished Bhuminjaya said, "These weapons are both beautiful and dreadful, but where are their owners? Where is Arjuna and the noble Yudhisthira? Where indeed are the twins and the mightiest of men, Bhima? We never hear of those heroes, who are capable of destroying all enemies but who lost their kingdom in a game of dice. Where is Draupadi, the jewel among women, who followed them faithfully to the forest?"

Arjuna then revealed to the prince his identity and that of all his brothers. The prince looked at him in astonishment. He had never suspected it, but now it seemed obvious. The mighty Vallabha could well be Bhima, and Kanka always had a certain nobility and bearing which outshone the other courtiers. Surely he could be Yudhisthira. But the prince still needed to be convinced. He asked Arjuna, "I shall believe your words if you can tell me Arjuna's ten names, which I have heard before."

Arjuna replied, "Because I conquered many countries and collected their wealth, I am called Dhananjaya. I never return from battle without defeating my enemy and thus I am called Vijaya. My steeds are white and so they call me Swetavahana. I was born when the constellation Uttara Phalgun was in the ascendant; therefore, I am Phalguni. Because I wear the brilliant diadem given to me by Indra, I am called Kiriti. I am dreadful to behold in battle and so men call me Bibhatsu. I am named Savyasachin because I can draw the bow with either hand. Being unapproachable and irrepressible, I am known as Jishnu. Arjuna is my name because I always perform white deeds of great purity. My father, out of affection for a black-complexioned boy, called me Krishna. These are my ten names, O prince."

Bhuminjaya fell at Arjuna's feet with his arms outstretched. "By my good luck I have seen you, O Dhananjaya. Please forgive anything I may have said to you in my ignorance. You are worthy of my worship. My fears are all removed and I am ready to act as your charioteer. Please order me."

"I will fight the Kurus and return your animals. Have no doubt," Arjuna said as he strapped on his quivers. "This chariot will be like your citadel with my arms for its ramparts and the Gandiva as its unassailable defenses. Simply guide this chariot and have no fear."

The prince placed the Pandavas' weapons in the chariot. "With you in

the chariot, how can I be afraid? But I am bewildered as to how you have accepted the guise of a eunuch. It seems incredible that one of your prowess and power should assume such a form."

Arjuna smiled. "I am observing a vow, both to acquire religious merit and to satisfy another's will. That vow is now complete, O prince."

The Pandavas had calculated that the full term of their exile was completed that day. Thus Arjuna had revealed his identity to the prince without fear. Now he would fight openly with the Kurus. He looked at the horses yoked to the chariot. "Are these horses battle-trained?" he asked.

"These horses are equal to the four horses that draw Krishna's chariot," the prince answered proudly. "I myself am a skilled driver, no less skilled than Daruka or Matali. I will break through the enemy ranks with such speed that the chariot will hardly be visible."

Arjuna nodded and removed his bangles. He pulled on a pair of iguana-skin gloves that covered his forearms. Tying back his hair with a piece of white cloth, he sat on the chariot and thought of his celestial weapons. They appeared within his mind and said, "We are here, son of Pandu. We are prepared to do your bidding."

"All of you dwell within my memory," Arjuna said with delight. The thought of battle with Duryodhana was filling him with new enthusiasm and energy. Thirteen years had been a long time to wait. At last he would have the chance to use the weapons he had obtained from the gods. He strung the Gandiva and twanged it, producing a sound of two mountains striking one another. The earth vibrated, shaking the trees, and fireballs fell from the sky. When the Kurus heard the terrific sound, they knew it was surely Arjuna with his Gandiva bow.

Arjuna took down the lion banner and meditated on Agni. A celestial banner fell from the sky adorned with gold and bearing Hanuman's image. After walking around it reverentially, Arjuna hoisted the flag on the chariot's flagstaff. He ordered Bhuminjaya to drive, and the chariot moved off toward the north in the direction of the Kurus. Arjuna blew his conch shell with all his strength. It emitted a thunderous sound that made his horses drop to their knees. The prince, stricken with fear, fell over in the chariot.

Arjuna consoled the prince and told him to take courage. "You are a kshatriya and the son of a great king. Why then do you tremble at this sound,

losing control of the horses? Many times have you heard the sounds of battle, of mighty conches and trumpets being blown. Why are you terrified like an ordinary man?"

The prince got up and took hold of the reins. He brought the horses back to their feet and replied, "Surely I have heard many conches blown, but never one such as this. Nor have I ever heard a bow sounding like the Gandiva. This celestial banner also fills me with wonder. The monkey seems to be alive and about to leap down from the flag. My mind is simply astonished."

Arjuna laughed. "Stand firm on the chariot and hold the reins tightly, for I will blow my conch again."

Arjuna blew his conch and twanged his bow once more. The combined sound filled the four quarters and seemed to rend the mountains. The prince kept his position with difficulty and controlled the terrified steeds.

In the distance Drona heard the terrible sounds Arjuna was making. He turned to Duryodhana. "There is no doubt that Savyasacin has come to fight with us. Even more dreadful omens are now visible, portending a great calamity for the Kurus. Your army seems cheerless, as if they are weeping. All our leading warriors stand motionless, bereft of energy. A pall of gloom seems to hang over our forces. Let us make ready for battle. When Partha appears, you will have cause to repent your actions."

Duryodhana scowled. He went over to Bhishma and said, "O grandfather, it seems that we have found the Pandavas before their exile is complete. The condition was that they should return to exile if found in their final year. If this is indeed Bibhatsu, then they will have to spend another twelve years in the forest. You should carefully calculate the time, O Bhishma, so that there is no doubt."

Duryodhana looked around. In the distance he saw the dust rising from Arjuna's chariot. The Kaurava held his bow firmly. "Whoever it is coming toward us, be it Arjuna or the Matsya king, we will have to fight today. Why then are our leading men sitting panic-stricken on their chariots? We are many and here comes but a single warrior. Our preceptor's talk of omens and calamities is unbecoming. Our agreement with Susharma was that we would support him in the battle against Virata. We must now keep our promise. O Bhishma, arrange our troops for battle. I fear that Drona is

overpowered by his affection for the enemy. How can he guide or protect us in our hour of danger?"

Karna had come up alongside Duryodhana. He spoke loudly so that all the leading Kurus could hear him. "It seems you have all become fearful simply upon seeing Arjuna. Do you not know that Arjuna is no match for me? After spending a long time in the forest, he will be weak in battle. Like a qualified Brahmin receiving charity, he will soon quietly receive thousands of my arrows. By killing Arjuna I will repay my debt to Duryodhana. Today I will extinguish the Pandava fire, which is kindled by the fuel of weapons and which consumes all enemies. My unfailing shafts will pierce Partha like serpents entering an anthill. You will see him lying on the ground like a hill covered with golden karnikara flowers. With powerful javelins I will bring down the screaming monkey from his banner and shatter his chariot to pieces. All of you may fight alongside me or, if you like, go away with the cows. I can face Arjuna alone."

Kripa looked contemptuously at Karna. "O Radheya, your crooked mind always desires war. You do not understand things according to time, place and circumstance. Wise men only choose war when all other means have failed and when the signs are favorable. How can it be favorable for us to face Partha in an encounter? Alone he vanquished the Gandharvas and alone he withstood the celestial host at Khandava. Again, he alone defeated the powerful Nivatakavachas and Kalakanyas. Unaided, he fearlessly took away Subhadra from the midst of the Yadus, exciting the wrath of the invincible Balarama. Now he has come before us after practicing celibacy in the forest and having acquired from the gods all their divine weapons."

Arjuna's chariot had stopped some way off. The Kuru army arrayed itself in a pointed formation facing his direction. At the head of the army Kripa continued to speak, admonishing Karna who stood fuming on his chariot, his great bow held at the ready.

"Anyone desiring to fight alone with Arjuna is deranged," Kripa said as he pulled on his gloves. "He is like a man who desires to swim the ocean with a rock tied to his neck. O Karna, you brag like a foolish child. You wish to take out the fangs of an infuriated serpent with your bare finger, or pass through a blazing fire after smearing your body with oil and dressing in silk. Partha will move through our ranks like a Yamaraja with his rod in hand. Let our army, clad in coats of mail, stand ready. Let yourself, myself,

Duryodhana, Bhishma, Drona and his son all stand together. Maybe if we six are united and supported by our army, we will stand a chance, although even then I am doubtful."

Ashvatthama pulled up his chariot behind his father. He had heard Karna's speech and he too spoke derisively. "We have not as yet achieved anything, Karna. We have not taken the cows and we have not defeated the enemy. Why then do you boast? Great heroes, even after winning many battles and conquering great kingdoms, do not utter a single word of self-praise. Indeed, silence itself is the quality of the truly powerful. Fire burns silently and silently does the sun shine. The earth bears her great load of moving and non-moving creatures without a word."

The powerful Ashvatthama, always galled by Karna's arrogance, was especially angered by his disregard for Drona. Standing in his chariot with his hand on his long sword, he loudly rebuked Karna, echoing his father's sentiments. "What kshatriya on this earth could be proud of winning a kingdom by deceitful gambling like this wicked and sinful Duryodhana? In what single combat did you or he ever defeat Arjuna or any one of his brothers? In what battle did you conquer Indraprastha? In what encounter did you win Draupadi, O man of wicked deeds, so that you could drag her to the assembly when she was in her period and wearing a single cloth? You have cut the root of the sal tree that is the Kuru dynasty. Arjuna and his brothers will never forgive you for your insult to Draupadi."

Ashvatthama looked across at Arjuna's chariot, which was waiting in the distance. He remembered their time together in his father's school. Arjuna had always been Drona's favorite and that had hurt him deeply, but there was no doubting Arjuna's martial skill. Ashvatthama had been forced to grudgingly admit his own inferiority. There was not a warrior on earth who could match Arjuna at bowmanship. Karna's bold words would soon be shown to be little more than idle boasts.

Turning back to Karna, Ashvatthama continued. "Dhananjaya never turns away from a fight even when faced with Gandharvas, Rakshasas or Asuras. Whoever he turns upon is blown away as a tree is knocked over by the force of Garuda's wings. Who would not praise Partha, who is superior to you in prowess, no less skilled a bowman than Indra, and equal even to Krishna himself in battle? My father's warning should be heeded. His affection for Arjuna should not be criticized, for the wise say that a disciple is

the same as a son."

Ashvatthama then looked at Duryodhana. "O proud man, fight with Arjuna in the same way that you defeated him at dice. Let your uncle Shakuni now show his true prowess in a real fight. The Gandiva does not cast dice, but it discharges burning arrows. Those dreadful shafts can rend the mountains and pierce the earth. The lord of death, the wind-god, or the god of fire may leave something behind, but Arjuna, worked up with anger, does not. You may challenge him if you wish, supported by the vain son of a suta—but for myself, I see no point in fighting Dhananjaya."

Bhishma had been listening to all the speeches. He was sure that it was Arjuna who had appeared before them in the guise of a eunuch. The old Kuru warrior longed to embrace him again. It was tragic that he had to face Arjuna on the battlefield. A kshatriya's duties were hard and painful without doubt. There was no way to avoid this fight. Arjuna would certainly not abandon his duty as a warrior. The Kurus would need all their powers united to face him in battle. Their arguments would only weaken them and make it easier for Arjuna to win.

Bhishma looked across at Arjuna's chariot and said, "Drona's son has spoken well, as has Kripa. Karna speaks his boasts only to incite us to perform our kshatriya duties. No wise man would find fault with his preceptor. In my view, we must fight. Who would not be bewildered when faced with an adversary as powerful and effulgent as the sun? Karna's words should only encourage us. Ashvatthama, forgive him. There is serious work at hand. With Kunti's son before us, there is no time for dissension. The wise declare that of all the dangers that face an army, the worst is disunion among the leaders. Ashvatthama is right. We should heed Drona's warning, for Arjuna is the best of warriors."

Duryodhana folded his palms and said to Drona, "O preceptor, please forgive us for doubting you and let us be peaceful among ourselves. If you are pleased, then everything can be accomplished."

Drona stood in his chariot, radiant in his bright armor. "Bhishma's words have pacified me. The grandfather has spoken well. We should arrange ourselves with care and protect Duryodhana. I am sure this is Arjuna, and I do not think merely recovering Virata's cows will satisfy him. I am also sure that he would not have shown himself before his exile had expired. O

Bhishma, tell us your opinion."

Bhishma had already calculated the time. Like Duryodhana, he too had carefully considered the reports of Hastinapura's spies and concluded that the Pandavas were very likely at Virata. As he looked across at Arjuna's chariot, tears pricked his eyes. "Kunti's sons are not greedy and will never do anything against virtue," he declared. "All of them are noble. With Yudhishthira at their head, there is no doubt they will keep their word. They do not desire to win the kingdom by unfair means. Otherwise, why did they not show their prowess even at the gambling match? The Pandavas would sooner invite death than speak an untruth. By my calculation their time is complete. I therefore conclude that we will soon see all five brothers again. If Duryodhana will not restore their kingdom, then our meeting will take place on a battlefield."

Duryodhana seemed about to burst into flames. His dark eyes turned toward Bhishma and he spoke in a low voice. "I will not return the Pandavas' kingdom. O Grandfather, please arrange for a battle."

Bhishma was grave. "We should act with caution. I have yet to see a battle in which one side was sure to be victorious. And one party is always defeated. We now face Vijaya. I therefore suggest, O king, that you leave with half the army. Take the cows with you. I, along with the other Kuru leaders, will remain here to hold off Arjuna."

Duryodhana agreed. Leaving Bhishma in charge of half the army, he left with the other half, driving the cows ahead of him. Bhishma stood surrounded by Drona, Kripa, Karna and Ashvatthama. He ordered them into various positions in preparation for battle. As they moved into position they saw Arjuna's chariot approach. Hearing a sound resembling thunderclaps as Arjuna twanged his bowstring, Drona said, "There is no doubt that that is the Gandiva. No other bow could emit such sounds. Observe closely the banner on the chariot. There you will see a celestial monkey sending forth terrible cries. Know for certain that it is Arjuna who faces us."

As Drona spoke two arrows fell from the sky and landed in his chariot at his feet. Other arrows touched the chariots of Bhishma and Kripa.

"Seeing his elders again after a long time, Partha is offering his respects," Drona said, holding up his hand to bless Arjuna. "Pandu's son shines on the battlefield like a well-tended sacrificial fire. Stand firm, for his

next arrows will not be carrying his respects."

Chapter Thirty-nine. The Battle at Virata

In his chariot only a half a mile from the Kurus, Arjuna instructed the prince to halt while he established the enemies' position. Bhuminjaya gazed in amazement at the army before them. "Who are these heroes who resemble mountains in the midst of a mighty ocean?" he asked.

"The one with the emblem of a golden waterpot on his flagstaff is Drona," Arjuna replied. "I always worship him. You should circumambulate his chariot and I will strike him only if he first attacks me, for such is the duty of kshatriyas."

Arjuna pointed to each of the leading chariots. "The hero clad in a coat of tigerskin on the chariot drawn by red horses is Kripa. Today I will show him how light I can be in the use of weapons. By his side, the warrior whose flag bears the sign of a bow is Ashvatthama. He is my preceptor's son. Thus he too is worthy of my respect. The one clad in golden mail, whose emblem is a serpent against a gold background, is Duryodhana. He always bears the Pandavas ill will. Immediately behind him is a hero, blazing like fire, with the emblem of a strong rope for binding elephants—that is the wicked-minded Karna. Be careful when you approach him for he always challenges me to fight."

Arjuna pointed toward the chariot that stood just behind the four he had already named. "This great hero, whose flag is blue and emblazoned with a golden palmyra and five stars, and who is shielded by a white umbrella, is Shantanu's son Bhishma, our grandfather. Always treated with regal honor by the Kauravas, he follows Duryodhana. You should approach him last for he will never harm me."

After observing the army for some time, Arjuna told the prince to advance. As they moved off, he saw Duryodhana detach himself from the army and move toward the south, followed by half the troops. Arjuna ordered Bhuminjaya to follow him. "I will engage with Duryodhana, for if he is overpowered, then our purpose will be accomplished." Arjuna then sent arrows toward his three elders, who faced him on the battlefield.

Kripa, observing Arjuna's chariot change direction, immediately understood his intention. "Quickly move to intercept the Pandava," he shouted. "What will we do with the Matsyas' vast wealth if Duryodhana were

to sink like a holed boat in the Partha water?"

Arjuna released hundreds of thousands of arrows, and they covered the Kuru forces like a swarm of locusts. The warriors could not see anything and they became confused. Being unable even to flee, they praised Arjuna's prowess. The earth and sky resounded with the twang of the Gandiva and the blast of Arjuna's conch shell. Virata's son maneuvered the chariot dexterously and cut off Duryodhana, preventing him from escaping with the cows. As Arjuna closed upon Duryodhana, the cows began to run back toward the city. Duryodhana quickly came back to the side of the other Kuru leaders.

After saving the Matsya cows, Arjuna said, "Let us leave the cowardly Duryodhana for now. He has fled for his life. I know the wretched Karna desires to fight with me, even as one elephant fights with another. Seek him out, O prince, and I will curb his pride. He has grown insolent due to the protection Duryodhana has afforded him."

The prince swung the chariot around and raced into the center of the battlefield, from where he could see all the leading Kurus. Four of Duryodhana's brothers came forward and confronted Arjuna. They sent their arrows toward him in steady waves, but Bhuminjaya avoided the falling shafts by his skillful driving. At the same time, Arjuna shot his own blazing arrows, which covered the Kaurava chariots. The Pandava, remembering Bhima's vow to kill all of Dhritarastra's sons, avoided slaying any of them.

Other mighty warriors rushed at Arjuna, roaring and releasing showers of weapons. One, a king named Shatruntapa, assailed him with such force that he checked the movement of his chariot. Arjuna disappeared beneath a hail of arrows as Shatruntapa fought with fury. Wounded by the assault, Arjuna blazed up in anger. He drew the Gandiva back to his ear and fired five deadly arrows that killed Shatruntapa's four horses and his charioteer. With ten more straight-flying shafts, he tore off the king's armor along with his arms and head. Shatruntapa fell to the earth like a mountain peak struck down by a thunderbolt.

Arjuna turned toward the other Kuru fighters who were closing in on him. He seemed to be dancing in his chariot as he released his gold-plumed arrows. Long lines of shafts were seen to fly from Arjuna in all directions. As he moved among the Kuru army he appeared like a forest fire consuming dry wood at the end of summer. The battlefield presented a dreadful scene, with

the mangled bodies of warriors and animals strewn about. Elephants screamed and horses whinnied in terror. The roars of the fighters and the blasts of conchshells and trumpets added to the clamor. Above all these sounds rose Hanuman's terrible cries from Arjuna's standard.

As Arjuna's chariot approached Karna, Arjuna was attacked by Karna's brother. Arjuna at once killed his horses and with a crescent-tipped arrow beheaded the warrior right in front of Karna. Seeing his brother fall like a palm tree cut at its root, Karna was infuriated. He rushed at the Pandava with a great shout. With twelve arrows he wounded both Arjuna and Bhuminjaya, as well as all of his horses. Arjuna assailed Karna with full force, like Garuda falling upon a serpent. The other Kurus, seeing an encounter about to take place between the two heroes, stood back to watch.

Arjuna sent a thick shower of arrows toward Karna, but Karna baffled the shafts with his own. He counterattacked Arjuna with thousands of arrows. With his bright armor and flashing steel arrows, Karna seemed like a fire sending forth showers of sparks. Seeing Karna holding Arjuna off, the other Kuru fighters cheered him on. They clapped their hands and blew their conches. Arjuna could not tolerate hearing such praise and he fought with redoubled strength. Both combatants sent hundreds of thousands of arrows at each other. To those watching it seemed like the sun and moon were contending behind black clouds.

Karna repeatedly attempted to kill Arjuna's horses and charioteer, but the Pandava checked Karna's arrows with his own every time. The two fighters fired arrows with blinding speed, their hands hardly visible as they worked their bows. Karna sent a non-stop stream of shafts that resembled the sun's rays shining on the earth. Gradually, however, Arjuna gained an edge over his opponent. While checking Karna's arrows he began to pierce him all over his body. With fleet arrows he wounded Karna in the arms, thighs, breast and head. Without his natural coat of impenetrable armor, Karna was hurt badly by Arjuna's attack. Finally he turned away from the fight and fled like one elephant defeated by another.

When Karna retreated, the other Kurus, headed by Duryodhana, came to attack Arjuna. Without flagging, Arjuna cheerfully met their attack. He displayed various celestial weapons and filled the entire sky with arrows. No part of the battlefield occupied by the Kurus was visible as Arjuna's arrows rained down. It was impossible to even look at the Pandava in his

anger. He seemed like the fire at the end of the cosmic manifestation. As Arjuna fought like a superhuman being, he created havoc among his foes. His arrows only fell where they were aimed and his bow was always bent into a circle. The Kuru army fell back in terror, the soldiers worshipping Arjuna in their minds. Horses and elephants that were not slain ran in all directions. Smashed chariots lay everywhere, with the bodies of their drivers and warriors lying prostrate nearby.

In the sky the gods, Gandharvas, Siddhas and rishis assembled to watch Arjuna fight. The fragrance of their celestial garlands spread across the battlefield as if the trees had blossomed in spring. Their clothes, ornaments and shining conveyances lit up the region with a brilliant lustre. The sky was ablaze. It was beautiful to behold. In the midst of all the celestials stood Indra, looking with affection at his son.

Arjuna looked around at the routed army and saw Drona. Feeling affection for his teacher he ordered Virata's son to drive the chariot toward him. "O prince, Drona is always worthy of my worship. In intelligence he resembles Shukra, the guru of the demons, and in his knowledge of morality he is no less than Brihaspati. He has studied all the Vedas and the science of archery resides within him. He is always ornamented by forgiveness, self-control, truthfulness and compassion. I desire to fight with him, so advance with caution."

The prince urged on the horses and Arjuna blew his conch. Drona saw him coming and took out his own conch, giving it a mighty blast. The conches sounded together like a thousand trumpets. Drona's red horses rose up and drew his chariot quickly forward. Seeing his preceptor approach, Arjuna was joyful. Placing his bow by his side he called out, "O gentle one, we have completed our term of exile in the forest and now wish to exact our revenge. You should not be angry with us. O irrepressible hero, I will not strike you unless you attack first."

Drona smiled at his favorite disciple. Without replying he raised his gold-plated bow and discharged more than twenty shafts. Arjuna instantly raised his own bow and countered his arrows with astonishing speed. Drona covered Arjuna's chariot on all sides with thousands of arrows. Bhuminjaya swiftly turned the chariot and dropped away from Drona as Arjuna dexterously cut down his arrows. Both fighters invoked celestial weapons and spread a network of arrows that amazed the watching Kuru soldiers. Other

weapons began to appear on the battlefield as the two combatants chanted mantras sacred to various deities. Firebrands and blazing discuses were hurled from Drona's bow, but Arjuna struck them all down. He sent an even greater number of long-shafted arrows toward his preceptor. Drona, smiling all the while, cut down all those arrows in mid-flight.

The Kurus cheered again and again as they witnessed the prowess of both guru and disciple, and they wondered at the harshness of a kshatriya's duty that impelled the two to fight one another.

Even as he fought with Drona, Arjuna kept up his attack on the Kuru army. His arrows descended on them like lightning bolts. As the fierce razor-headed shafts struck horses, elephants and soldiers, they made a sound resembling a hard downpour of hailstones. The battlefield was strewn with arms still clutching weapons and heads adorned with helmets. Golden armor and pieces of shattered chariots littered the ground. The screams of terrified soldiers filled the air as Arjuna maintained his assault.

Feeling affection for his disciple, Drona displayed only some of his power. He held off Arjuna's attack on himself and sent a barrage of golden-feathered arrows back at him. His shafts traveled toward Arjuna in rows, their feathers touching. Arjuna responded by releasing so many arrows that Drona and his chariot became invisible. Those observing Arjuna could not discern any interval between his taking up arrows, placing them on his bow, and then firing them. Even Indra, watching from the heavens, was wonderstruck. Drona was totally enveloped in a thick mass of arrows that fell continuously upon him. Seeing this the Kurus cried out, "Alas!"

Ashvatthama was infuriated and he rushed at Arjuna, bellowing out a challenge. The Pandava turned toward him and offered Drona a chance to retreat. Ashvatthama, highly skilled in battle, released an arrow that cut Arjuna's ever-twanging bowstring. The deities in the sky, beholding this superhuman feat, exclaimed, "Well done! Bravo!" Ashvatthama succeeded in wounding Arjuna with a number of sharp-pointed shafts decked with kanka feathers.

Arjuna laughed and restrung his bow. A furious fight ensued between the disciple and the son of Drona, which made the bodily hairs of the heroes who were watching stand erect. It resembled a clash between two maddened elephants. They struck one another with burning arrows that looked like

serpents hissing through the air. But Ashvatthama's arrows quickly became exhausted as Arjuna fought on, his own supply being inexhaustible by the fire-god's boon.

As Ashvatthama withdrew from the fight, Karna returned and twanged his bowstring with a crash like thunder. Arjuna gazed at him with coppery-red eyes. Hoping to kill him, he fired thousands of arrows in his direction. He then called out, "Well, Karna, the time has come for you to make good your boastful words. Many times have you vainly stated that there are none to equal you in battle. Fighting with me today you will know your own strength and will never again disregard others. Without ever considering piety, you have given vent to many harsh words. Try your best to make good those insults you offered me in the assembly. You cannot defeat me. Now reap the fruit of your insult to Draupadi. Only virtue restrained me that day from exacting a terrible vengeance. Today you will feel the force of my restrained anger, held in check these last thirteen years. Fight, sinful one, and let all the Kurus watch as you perish."

Karna sneered. "Prove yourself in battle, Partha. The world knows that your words exceed your deeds. As a result of your weakness and inability, the Kauravas have forced you to suffer. Do not bother to make excuses. Now we will all see your power when I strike you with my irresistible weapons. Even if Indra himself came to fight on your behalf, you would not escape."

Arjuna was derisive. "You have always fled from me and thus you still live to utter these empty words. Even today when you saw your brother slain you fled. What power were you showing then?"

Bending the Gandiva into a semicircle, Arjuna quickly fired dozens of armor-piercing arrows that shone like fire. Karna delightedly received those shafts with his own, intercepting every one. Again a network of arrows spread out between the two fighters. Karna released searing shafts with unerring accuracy and pierced Arjuna's arms and hands. Unable to tolerate the attack, Arjuna cut Karna's bowstring with a crescent-headed arrow. Karna replied with a number of arrows that made Arjuna lose hold of the Gandiva. Quickly regaining his composure, Arjuna sent razor-headed shafts at Karna that cut his bow to pieces. Karna took up a fresh bow and released a fierce steel arrow resembling a lance, but Arjuna struck it down even as it left Karna's bow.

Five or six powerful fighters came up to support Karna, but Arjuna slew them all. The Pandava drew his bow back to his ear and fired four steel shafts that killed Karna's horses. With another powerful arrow he struck Karna on the breast, making a sound like an explosion. The arrow pierced Karna's armor and penetrated into his body. He lost consciousness and fell sideways in his chariot, whereupon he was quickly taken onto another chariot by his charioteer and carried away.

Arjuna and Bhuminjaya scoffed at the defeated Karna. Arjuna then looked around and said, "Take me to the place where you see the emblem of the golden palmyra. There stands our grandfather, Shantanu's son, looking like an immortal. He too desires to fight with me."

Bhuminjaya was exhausted. Gasping for breath he replied, "I do not think I can continue guiding your horses. My mind is confounded and my limbs are weak. It seems as if the four quarters are melting from the power of the celestial weapons you and the Kurus have released. I am beside myself with the sight and the smell of flesh and blood. I have never before seen such a battle. The clamor has deafened me and I feel stupefied. The twang of the Gandiva, like repeated thunderclaps, and your lightning bolt arrows have rent my heart. I am consumed by fear. It appears as if the earth is shifting before my eyes and I am losing my vitality."

Arjuna consoled the prince. "You are a prince in the Matsya line. It is your sacred duty to face the enemy in battle. Take heart, for you will find strength in the Supreme Power. The Lord is always pleased when we perform our prescribed duties with firmness and determination. Guide the horses for only a while longer. I wish to face the grandsire in battle."

The prince felt heartened and he urged the steeds forward. As the chariot moved across the battlefield toward Bhishma's chariot, Arjuna continued, "This battle will not last much longer. The Kuru army is reeling like a wheel under the force of my weapons. I will make a river flow toward the other world, with blood for its waters, chariots for its eddies, and elephants for its aquatics. The Kuru forest, with heads, arms and tall backs for its branches, will be cut down. I have obtained all the celestial weapons from the gods. Do not fear, O prince, for I will rout the Kurus and put them to flight."

When Arjuna got within striking distance of Bhishma, he sent a hail

of shafts at him. Bhishma patiently countered his arrows and four of Duryodhana's brothers came forward to protect him. Dushashana launched a fierce attack on Arjuna. He wounded Bhuminjaya with a large dart and pierced Arjuna's breast with another. Arjuna at once sent golden-winged arrows, which cut Dushashana's bow to pieces and severely wounded him in the chest. Dushashana retreated, leaving his three brothers to fight with Arjuna. Each of them were similarly injured and had to retreat.

At Bhishma's command, thousands of Kuru troops surrounded Arjuna and assailed him. The Pandava spun around in his chariot with his bow constantly drawn to a circle. Sometimes he shot with his left and sometimes his right arm. Blazing arrows went in all directions and the Kuru force was torn apart. Arjuna appeared in battle like the scorching mid-day sun with its unbearable rays. Kuru heroes leapt down from their cars and fled, throwing aside their weapons. Horsemen turned and drove their horses away in terror. The Kurus retreated with difficulty, falling over the bodies of men, elephants and horses.

Duryodhana, Karna, Kripa, Drona and Ashvatthama then rushed toward Arjuna together. They covered him with so many arrows that no part of his body was visible. Even amid that onslaught Arjuna maintained his calm and invoked the Agneyastra, summoning the fire-god's invincible power. That weapon sent hundreds of thousands of flaming arrows and darts at the Kurus and drove them back. Arjuna then saw Bhishma standing before him on his chariot. Ganga's son was smiling. In his shining coat of mail, he shone like a white mountain at sunrise. He lifted his gold-plated bow and fired a dozen arrows, which struck the roaring monkey on Arjuna's banner.

Pushing aside the affection he felt for the old Kuru leader, Arjuna sent a huge dart that broke down the white umbrella over his head. He quickly followed it with arrows that severed his flagstaff and killed the two warriors protecting his flanks. Arjuna wounded Bhishma's horses and brought his chariot to a halt.

Bhishma became angry and he began to invoke divine weapons. A massive hail of arrows, darts and spears fell blazing from the sky. Arjuna instantly checked the attack with his own celestial missiles. He counter-attacked Bhishma with volumes of arrows that sped toward him. Bhishma received Arjuna's assault like a hill receiving a cloud. He dexterously cut down all the arrows as they flew, and they fell in pieces to the ground.

The battle between Arjuna and Bhishma raged fiercely for some time as the Kurus watched in amazement. It seemed as if Indra were contending with Bali, the Asura king. Neither side paused in the fight. Arjuna's Gandiva had become a circle of fire and Bhishma danced on his chariot like a youth.

Finally, Arjuna succeeded in baffling Bhishma with a mystical weapon that sent an uncountable number of golden-winged arrows in repeated waves. Bhishma fell back in his chariot and, seeing his opportunity, Arjuna severed his bow with a razor-faced arrow. Immediately after that he shot ten steel shafts with heads shaped like calves' teeth. Those deadly arrows pierced Bhishma's breast. The Kuru chief was stunned and he stood leaning on the pole of his chariot for some time. Seeing him senseless, his charioteer turned the chariot and carried him away.

Most of the Kuru army had been overpowered and, if not slain, had fled. Only a few of their heroes still stood on the battlefield. Duryodhana, burning with anger and humiliation, brought his chariot before Arjuna. With tremendous power he hurled a golden dart that struck Arjuna on the forehead. Blood gushed from his head and the son of Kunti looked like a mountain giving forth a stream of red lava. Not caring for his injury, Arjuna drew back his bow and struck Duryodhana with arrows that stung like poisonous snakes. The two cousins fought furiously, using all their martial skill.

Duryodhana's brother Vikarna came to support him on an elephant. He drove the beast toward Arjuna's chariot intending to crush him underfoot, but Arjuna bent the Gandiva into a full circle and fired an iron arrow that hit the elephant on the forehead. The arrow penetrated the elephant's head up to the feathers and the beast fell screaming to the ground. Vikarna leapt clear and, terrified, sprinted a full eight hundred paces to his brother Vivingsati's chariot.

Arjuna released a similar arrow that struck Duryodhana full on the chest. The Kaurava prince fell to his knees and vomited blood, his shining armor bent and pierced. Seeing himself standing alone against Arjuna, Duryodhana ordered his charioteer to retreat. Arjuna laughed and called after him, "Why do you flee, O hero? How are you renouncing your fame and glory? Why do your trumpets not blow in the same way as they did when you first left Hastinapura? Know me to be Yudhishthira's obedient servant and Kunti's third son. Remembering the conduct of kings, turn back and show me your face, O mighty-armed one."

Without looking back Duryodhana and his brothers continued to flee. They completely abandoned their attempts to steal the Matsyas' wealth. Remembering his promise to the Matsya ladies, Arjuna went around the battlefield and took the costly robes from the fallen Kuru warriors.

As they made their way back to the city Arjuna said, "You are the only person who is aware of my true identity. It may be wise to keep this information secret for a little while longer. You should tell your father that it was you who routed the Kurus."

Arjuna wanted to wait for Yudhisthira to decide the exact moment for them to reveal their identities. Understanding this, Bhuminjaya replied, "I could not have achieved anything like what you achieved today, Arjuna, but I will not disclose your identity until you give me your permission."

Arjuna had the prince take the chariot back to the cremation ground. When they arrived, Arjuna folded his palms toward Hanuman on his banner. The monkey flew up into the sky and vanished, and Arjuna hoisted the prince's lion banner again. He replaced his weapons in the bundle high in the sami tree. Then, taking his place as the chariot driver, they headed back toward the city.

Chapter Forty. Out of Exile

Toward noon on the day after his victory, King Virata reentered his city. Praised by bards he shone amid the four Pandavas, whose identities he still did not know. When he reached his palace and was seated upon his throne, he inquired after the whereabouts of his eldest son. Some of the palace ladies told him what had happened. "Out of excessive bravery, the prince has gone out to fight the best of the Kurus. With Brihannala as his charioteer and no other support, he rode out promising to defeat the vast Kuru army and bring back the cows."

The king looked at the ladies in disbelief. What on earth had his son been thinking? Fearing the worst, he sighed in sorrow and said, "How will my son fare against the likes of Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Duryodhana? And when the Kurus hear of the Trigartas' defeat, they will likely attack the city. Surely we are in grave peril."

The king told his ministers to have the army prepare to go out again. "We must quickly rescue Bhuminjaya and hold the Kurus off from attacking our city. With such a useless person as his charioteer, I do not think my son will be alive."

Yudhisthira smiled as he took his place near the king. "If Brihannala is his charioteer, you need not fear. The Kurus will not be able to defeat him. Indeed, even the celestial hosts would not be able to overpower him with Brihannala on his chariot."

The king looked at Yudhisthira quizzically. This was no time for joking. He wrung his hands and thought only of his son. Surely Bhuminjaya was already dead. It was reckless of him to have ventured out, especially with a eunuch as his only support.

As Virata gave orders for his forces to assemble, a messenger entered the court with the news that the Kurus had retreated. "The cows have been rescued and your son is well, along with his charioteer. They will soon be arriving in the city."

"This news is not at all wonderful," Yudhisthira said. "Victory is certain for anyone who has Brihannala with him."

The king ignored Yudhisthira's remark and said joyfully, "Decorate the highways with flags and festoons. Worship all the gods with profuse gifts

of flowers and costly incenses. My other sons and my ministers should go out to greet the prince, along with musicians and beautiful dancers. Bring him here in style and have a messenger riding an elephant go around the city ringing a bell to announce our victory."

Soon a large procession of handsomely dressed and beautiful maidens, musicians playing drums, trumpets, cymbals and conches, Brahmins chanting auspicious hymns, and bards composing songs in praise of the prince made its way out of the city.

Overjoyed, the king turned to Yudhisthira and said, "Come, Kanka, let us play dice while we wait for my son. I will happily stake heaps of gems, gold, and numerous well-adorned women. My pleasure knows no limits today."

"O King, one should never gamble when he is experiencing so much joy," Yudhisthira replied with a smile. "Gambling is attended by many evils. The great King Yudhisthira lost his entire kingdom, all his wealth, and his godlike brothers in a game of dice. Therefore, I do not like to gamble. But I will play if you wish."

The king laughed and sat down at his dicing table with Yudhisthira. As they played he said, "What do you think of this news then, Kanka? My son has single-handedly defeated the invincible Kurus."

Yudhisthira again said that it was no surprise since the prince had Brihannala with him. The king was beginning to feel annoyed. "Why do you praise a eunuch as superior to my son? O brahmin, you insult me by such words. Why should my son not have defeated the Kurus? He is a fearless and powerful fighter."

Yudhisthira threw the sapphire dice across the gaming board. "When Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Duryodhana, and the other Kurus assemble for battle, I do not see any warrior who could face them except Brihannala. None have been seen, nor will they ever be seen, who can equal his strength of arms. He always delights in a mighty encounter."

The king stood up suddenly, clutching the dice in fury. "You obviously do not know right from wrong. I should certainly punish you for this impropriety."

Virata hurled the dice at Yudhisthira and struck him in the face.

Blood flowed from his nose and Yudhisthira cupped his hands to catch it. He looked across at Draupadi, who sat in the court. She quickly fetched a jug of water. Yudhisthira held a wet cloth to his face to stem the flow of blood.

At that moment, a second messenger came before the king and announced that his son had arrived at the palace gates. The king, forgetting his anger, told the messenger to bring the prince in at once.

The messenger turned to go, and as he was leaving Yudhisthira whispered to him, "Have the prince come alone. Tell Brihannala not to enter the court."

Yudhisthira knew that Arjuna had taken a vow that if anyone caused his blood to flow other than in battle, he would kill that person. If Arjuna saw his brother now, Virata would be slain.

Within minutes Bhuminjaya entered the court adorned with garlands and sandalwood paste. He bowed at his father's feet and folded his hands toward Yudhisthira. Seeing him covered with blood he asked his father, "Who has done this to Kanka? O king, who has committed such a crime?"

The king looked angrily at Yudhisthira. "This wily brahmin deserves even more. While I was praising your achievements, he glorified Brihannala as if he were your superior."

Bhuminjaya was shocked. "You have committed a great sin! Pacify him at once so that the deadly venom of a brahmin's curse does not consume you."

The king apologized to Yudhisthira, who nodded his forgiveness. Virata then said to his son, "O descendent of Kekaya, in you I truly have a son. There can be none to equal you. Alone you overcame the Kuru host and took back our cows, even as a tiger snatched his prey."

The prince shook his head. "I did not rescue the cows, Father, nor did I defeat the Kurus. The son of a celestial did everything. Seeing me fleeing in fear, that mighty one, capable of wielding the thunderbolt, stopped me and got upon my chariot. He alone defeated the Kuru army, headed by Bhishma, Drona, Duryodhana, Kripa, Karna and Ashvatthama. Indeed, I could hardly look at those warriors as they released their weapons. The celestial youth routed them one by one. He overpowered that army of lions and sent them reeling back to Hastinapura."

The king was astonished. He asked his son where the youth had gone, but Bhuminjaya said he could not tell. Yudhisthira remained silent, tending the wound on his face. He glanced at Draupadi who stood smiling. The king would soon discover the truth.

It was late in the evening when Virata dismissed the royal court. He went away with his son, listening in astonishment as the prince described the battle with the Kurus.

* * *

The following day at dawn, Yudhisthira, surrounded by his brothers, entered the royal court before the king arrived. They were dressed in white clothes and adorned with gold ornaments. Like five angry lions, they strode up to the royal dais and took their seats on thrones reserved for kings.

Soon after their arrival, the king, accompanied by his ministers, entered the hall. He saw with surprise that Kanka was sitting near his throne with the four Pandavas next to him. Still not realizing their identities, he stormed over to Yudhisthira. "What are you doing? You are a dice player and a courtier. Why are you sitting on a royal seat, adorned with ornaments and surrounded by my cook and my horse and cow-keepers?"

Arjuna replied, "This man, o king, is worthy of sharing a seat with Indra. Ever engaged in performing sacrifice, respectful toward brahmins, well-read in the Vedas, firm in his vows—he is the embodiment of virtue. Even the celestials, Asuras, Nagas, Gandharvas, Yakshas, and other divine beings are not his equal. He is far-sighted, forgiving, powerful, truthful and self-controlled. Famous all over the world and loved by all, this man is a royal saint like the great Manu himself. O King, this is the foremost of all the Kurus, the pious King Yudhisthira. Does he not deserve a royal throne?"

Virata's eyes opened wide. Staring at the five brothers one after another, he replied, "If this is Yudhisthira, then who are these other four? Where is the mighty Bhima and his invincible brother, Arjuna? Where are Nakula and Sahadeva and the illustrious Draupadi? Since their defeat at dice, no one has seen them."

Arjuna lifted his hand towards Bhima. "This one, your cook Vallabha, is Bhima, possessed of dreadful prowess and energy. It was he who

slew the lustful Kichaka. On the other side of Yudhisthira sits Nakula, the keeper of your horses, and next to him is Sahadeva, your chief cowherd. These two warriors are capable of slaying enemy battalions consisting of thousands of warriors. As far as the lotus-eyed Draupadi, she has for this last year served in your palace as Sairindhri, for whose sake Kichaka was slain. I am Arjuna, Kunti's third son. We have all lived happily in your city like creatures living in the womb."

Virata's eyes flooded with tears. The great and virtuous Pandavas had chosen his kingdom to spend their final year of exile. Why had he not recognized them? Now it was obvious. Who else could have exhibited such power in battle but these brothers? The king folded his palms and bowed low to Yudhisthira.

As the king stood up again, Bhuminjaya indicated Arjuna. "It was he who slew the Kurus like a lion killing deer. It was he who rescued the cows and overpowered the great heroes from Hastinapura. My ears are still deafened from the incredible blasts of his conch."

Virata felt deeply ashamed of himself for insulting and wounding Yudhisthira. He spoke humbly. "The time has come for me to honor your illustrious selves. What should I do? If you like, I shall bestow my daughter Uttara on Arjuna. I am fully indebted to you all. It was Bhima who rescued me from the clutches of Susharma, and Arjuna has saved us from defeat at the hands of the Kurus. O great king, please forgive me if I unwittingly gave you any offense. You are worthy of my worship."

Virata offered his entire kingdom to Yudhisthira, with his scepter, treasury and city. He arranged for brahmins to offer them worship and repeatedly exclaimed, "What good fortune!" The Pandavas got down and embraced the old monarch, who gazed at them without satiation. Again offering his kingdom to them, he turned to Arjuna and added, "O hero, please take my daughter's hand."

Arjuna placed his arm around the king's shoulders. "Let your daughter become my daughter-in-law. That would be a fitting alliance between our two houses."

The king looked surprised. "Why would you not accept the princess as your own wife?"

"Since I came here, your daughter has seen me like a father," Arjuna

replied. "We have often been alone together and she has often confided in me. O king, I have seen her as my daughter and do not wish anyone to think it was ever different. If I were to accept her as my wife, others will doubt her purity. I wish to prove her purity and therefore will continue to see her as my daughter. There is no difference between a daughter and a daughter-in-law. Let her wed my son Abhimanyu. He is Krishna's nephew and he resembles a celestial in every way. He will be a proper husband for Uttara and a son for you."

The king nodded approvingly. "You have spoken wisely, most virtuous one. Do what you think is proper. Whoever has a relationship with Arjuna, no matter what it may be, has all his desires fulfilled."

Yudhisthira gave his permission for the marriage and it was settled. The king then arranged for the brothers to be quartered in his palace. He sent messengers out to announce to the Pandavas' friends and allies that, having come out of exile, they were well and now staying in his capital. Yudhisthira invited all of them to come to the city, and before long they began to arrive. Krishna and Balarama came from Dwaraka, bringing Abhimanyu and many other members of their family. Drupada arrived accompanied by a huge division of soldiers. The great king Kashiraja, a good friend of Yudhisthira whose daughter had married Bhima, also came with another vast army.

The Pandavas duly worshiped all of them as they arrived in Virata. They were particularly joyful to see their friend and well-wisher Krishna, who brought with him an immense force of warriors. He bowed before Yudhisthira and Bhima, while the younger Pandavas touched his feet. Then they all embraced and sat down to exchange news.

It was settled that the marriage between Abhimanyu and Uttara would take place on the next full-moon day, and Virata began to make the arrangements. The city was decked with flags and festoons. When the day of the wedding arrived, garlands were hung everywhere and musicians played in Virata's palace. Many beautiful damsels, wearing jeweled earrings and headed by Draupadi, led Uttara to the wedding sacrifice. Numerous Brahmins sat around the fire chanting auspicious hymns from the Vedas. As the Pandavas looked on with Krishna, Balarama and the other kings, Abhimanyu accepted Uttara's hand from Virata.

Surrounded by the brahmins and kings, the bride and groom shone

like a god and goddess amid the celestial hosts. Virata gave Abhimanyu a dowry of seven thousand horses, two thousand elephants and a great heap of gems and gold. The ceremony ended with a feast. Pure foods were offered to Vishnu and then distributed first to the brahmins and then to the thousands of citizens who attended the wedding. Gifts and charity were distributed to all, and everyone left the ceremony filled with joy. As they departed for their homes, they praised the king as well as his daughter and new son-in-law.

* * *

With the wedding celebrations over, the Pandavas began to think of their next move. How would they recover their kingdom? No word had been received from Hastinapura. The Kurus now knew that the Pandavas were alive and well and living at Virata. According to the agreement made at the final gambling match, it was time to give them back their city and dominions. But it seemed the matter would not be settled peaceably. Krishna suggested they call an assembly and discuss what to do next. Thus the day following the wedding, all the kings came to Virata's court.

On the front seats sat Virata and Drupada, the senior most kings, along with Krishna and Balarama, whom everyone considered to be the greatest. By their sides sat Yudhisthira and his brothers, and all around them were dozens of other monarchs. These mighty heroes shone like stars studding the clear sky, while Krishna and Balarama looked like the sun and moon in their midst. The hall buzzed with their conversation as they settled into their places. When everyone was seated, the noise died down and they sat gazing pensively at Krishna. Smiling and glancing around at all the kings, Krishna spoke.

"Everyone knows how Yudhisthira was unfairly defeated at dice and dispossessed of his kingdom by Suvala's son. You also know how he and his brothers were made to live in the forest for thirteen years. The sons of Pandu, who are capable of subjugating the world by force of arms, whose chariots go unrestrained to any terrestrial or celestial region, and who are true to their word, have now completed their vow. They have suffered unbearable hardships, especially in this last year when they were obliged to accept menial service to others. They now seek their rightful kingdom."

Krishna looked around the assembly. All the kings, seated on golden

thrones decked with gems, gazed intently at him as he continued. "O kings, consider what is right and best for both the son of Dharma and for Duryodhana. The virtuous Yudhishthira will not accept even the kingdom of the gods unrighteously. He would prefer the rightful lordship of just a single village. Although he has been antagonized and cheated by the Kauravas, he still wishes them well. Duryodhana and his brothers have repeatedly tried to kill the Pandavas, but Yudhishthira has tolerated everything with a peaceful mind. All of his brothers are obedient to his order and would never abandon virtue. They will accept whatever he decides is right, and he will always follow my advice."

Krishna glanced at Yudhishthira, whose eyes were fixed affectionately on Krishna's face. Yudhishthira desired only to please Krishna, and his brothers all shared that sentiment. Whatever Krishna advised would surely be best for them. Even Bhima, although longing to wreak vengeance on the Kauravas, would renounce his anger if Krishna deemed it wrong. He rested a hand on his great mace as Krishna went on.

"My feelings are that we should first establish Duryodhana's intentions by sending a reliable messenger to Hastinapura. Let us try by all means to settle this affair peaceably and fully in accordance with the eternal codes of religion. Let us avoid unnecessary violence. But if Duryodhana will not return Yudhishthira's lands, then I think there will have to be war. The Pandavas will slay Duryodhana and all his followers. If you feel the Pandavas' cause is just, then unite yourselves and your forces with them and march out for battle. Tell me, O kings, if my words meet with your approval."

Balarama raised his hand, signifying his intention to speak. The assembly turned toward him. His dark blue silks highlighted his pure white complexion. A brilliant helmet adorned his head and a garland of white lotuses hung around his neck. By his side lay his golden plow weapon. As he spoke, his voice resounded around the hall like a drum.

"Devaki's son has spoken well. His words are meant for the welfare of both the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Let the Kuru kingdom be shared. The heroic sons of Kunti will dwell in peace with their cousins, each ruling half of the Kuru empire. I agree that a man should be dispatched to Hastinapura. He should address the noble-minded Bhishma, Drona, Vidura, Kripa, Karna, Shakuni, and all of Dhritarastra's sons. All of them are heroes and all of them are well-versed in the Vedas. After informing these men of Yudhishthira's

desire, the messenger should carry back their reply. But the Kauravas must be given due deference. After all, it was by Yudhisthira's fault that the kingdom was lost. Although unskilled at dice, he accepted the skillful Shakuni's challenge. There were many other kings with whom he could have played, but he chose the son of Suvala."

Balarama looked at Yudhisthira and smiled. The Pandava showed no sign of discomfort at His words. Yudhisthira had always felt guilty of a misdemeanor for having gambled away his kingdom. He bowed his head as Balarama went on. "The brave son of Pandu unfortunately lost at every step of the game. In the grip of lust and anger, he gambled everything and was defeated. Who can blame Shakuni for this? Therefore, we must adopt a conciliatory tone when we address the Kauravas. We should avoid war by any means. That gained by peaceful methods is beneficial to all, while that gained by war has the opposite effect."

Although Yudhisthira humbly accepted Balarama's speech, it surprised the other Pandavas. They knew that the Yadava hero had a soft spot for Duryodhana, his disciple at mace fighting, but when he last saw them, just after their leaving Hastinapura, he had been in favor of them marching into the Kuru capital and punishing the Kauravas. It was hard to understand why his attitude had changed. Perhaps Duryodhana had influenced him with his verishion of what had happened in Hastinapura. Whatever the causes, the Pandavas knew that Balarama was always their well-wisher. They remained silent as he paused in his speech.

Suddenly Satyaki, a powerful Yadava hero and one of Arjuna's martial students, leapt to his feet. He was incensed by Balarama's words and could not hear more. Even as Balarama continued to speak Satyaki interrupted, and all eyes turned toward him. "A man will always reveal his inner nature when he speaks. Even as a forest contains trees that bear fruits and those which do not, so in one family are born powerful heroes and others who are powerless and cowardly. O plow-bannered one, I am loath to call you cowardly, but why do you display such timidity toward the wicked Kauravas?"

Balarama sat calmly, but Satyaki's face glowed red with fury. He gazed around the assembly as he went on. "How can anyone sit here and listen as Balarama speaks in this way? We all know what happened in Hastinapura. Yudhisthira was cheated of his kingdom by a mean trick. Had

the Kauravas gone to Indraprastha and defeated him there, then that would have been fair, but they summoned him to play in their own city and then compelled him to accept Shakuni's challenge. How can prosperity attend such men? Why should Yudhisthira now approach them in a servile mood? The Kuru kingdom is his by right. It once belonged to his grandfather and then to his father. There is no doubt about this. Even if this pious man had no rightful claim to the kingdom, he still deserves to rule the earth by virtue of his qualities. If the Kauravas will not willingly give him back his ancestral territories, then I will force them to do so. I will persuade them by cold steel on the battlefield."

Satyaki stepped forward and stood on the mosaic floor in the center of the hall. He clutched the hilt of his sword as he stepped into the middle of a design depicting the blazing sun. "I will oblige the evil-minded Kauravas to fall at Yudhisthira's feet. If they refuse, then they shall have to go with their ministers to Death's abode. Who can withstand Satyaki when he stands ready to fight? Can the mountains bear the thunderbolt? In the same way, who can bear the brunt of the Gandiva bow when Arjuna wields it, or the force of Bhima's mace? When the Pandavas are united with Drupada and his two sons, as well as with their own sons, what man valuing his life would face them? When the great Yadava heroes come out for battle, what will the Kauravas do? After killing all of them, let us install Yudhisthira as emperor of the world. It is impious and shameful to beg from enemies. We should set out at once. Either the Kauravas will surrender the kingdom, or they will lie prostrate on the battlefield."

Having vented his anger, Satyaki returned to his seat. Balarama still remained peaceful. He could understand Satyaki's feelings. The old king Drupada then spoke. "Well said, Satyaki. It will doubtlessly be as you say. Duryodhana will never surrender the kingdom. Dhritarastra is too fond of his son, and he will follow him without question. So it will be with Bhishma and Drona. They have a misguided loyalty. In my opinion, we should not act on Balarama's suggestion. Duryodhana will not respond to a humble approach. He will misunderstand such a mild message as weakness. Force is the only language he respects."

Everyone present esteemed Drupada's wisdom and maturity. They listened attentively. "This is my advice: let us prepare for battle. Send out messengers to all our allies and have them come here. Duryodhana will

certainly do the same. Even now his men will be heading out and approaching even those whom we now count as friends. Our messengers should travel swiftly around the globe, for a noble man will not refuse he who first asks him for help."

Drupada then named the kings and their countries where they could find support. He knew Duryodhana would ask everyone to fight with him, whether they were his allies or not. It was important to reach the kings first with their own plea. After listing forty or fifty monarchs who might assist their cause, Drupada concluded, "While we are assembling our forces, let a good man go to Dhritarastra. I suggest we send my priest. We should carefully instruct him what to say to the Kauravas. But I do not expect much to come of that. Battle is inevitable."

Krishna clapped his hands approvingly. "These words befit the great king of the Panchalas, who is unequalled in prowess. You are old in learning and wisdom. Thus you are just like our guru. We should act as you say and not otherwise. I agree. But my relationship with both the Pandavas and the Kauravas is the same, regardless of the present situation among them. I have come here and been pleased by King Virata's reception. The wedding is over and I will now return to Dwaraka. I leave it in your hands, O monarch, to guide these kings in how to sue for peace between the two parties. If a mutually agreeable solution cannot be found, and if the foolish Duryodhana will not accept peace due to his pride and ignorance, then summon me again. I will do all in my power to help."

The assembly of kings agreed to Krishna's proposal and they withdrew to their own quarters. Virata worshipped Krishna with respect and sent him on his way back to Dwaraka. Then he began to make preparations for war. Messengers on swift horses were dispatched around the world, and soon large armies began to arrive at Virata. Troops poured in from all quarters and set up camp around the city. Filled with men and animals, the earth seemed covered with dark clouds. The gathering troops created a clamor resembling the roaring ocean. In the Kuru capital also, vast armies were amassing to support Duryodhana. The goddess Earth, with her mountains and forests, seemed to tremble under the burden of so many warriors.

When the large force was ready at Virata, Drupada, after consulting with the other kings and the brahmins, spoke with his priest. "O brahmin,

among all men those who are twice-born are the best. Among the twice-born the brahmin is the best, and among brahmins he who knows the Vedas is superior. Those who have realized Vedic knowledge are even better, and among those the best are they who practice their knowledge in life. I am of the opinion that you are the best of all men, having realized the Supreme Brahman. Your knowledge and wisdom are equal to Brihaspati's. You know what kind of man Yudhisthira is and how the Kurus stole his kingdom. You also know the situation in Hastinapura, as well as the nature and disposition of Dhritarastra and his son. Duryodhana will not voluntarily return Yudhisthira's kingdom. His old father, blinded by attachment, will follow his lead."

Drupada then explained that although he should go to Hastinapura to ask Dhritarastra to return the Pandavas' kingdom, there was another purpose. He knew that Duryodhana—and his father—could not be swayed by reason. The priest's job, therefore, was to convince other Kuru leaders of the righteousness of Yudhisthira's claim and of Duryodhana's foolishness in bringing on war. After thirteen years of listening to Duryodhana, few among the Kurus may still recognize the truth. The cruel and dishonest treatment meted out to the Pandavas at the dice game might have been all but forgotten. Even the wise and ever-virtuous Balarama seemed to have been influenced toward the Kauravas.

"By speaking words of virtue and truth, you will win the hearts of honest men. Vidura will support you, as will Bhishma, Drona and Kripa. In this way, you will create dissension among the Kurus. They will lose time trying to re-establish unity among themselves, and that will allow us to make further preparations for war. It may even be that Dhritarastra, moved by your words, will act upon them and do what is right. In any event, we will benefit from your going there. Do not fear for yourself, as they will certainly respect you. You are a learned Brahmin and an ambassador, as well as an aged and virtuous man."

After receiving Drupada's request, the priest left immediately for Hastinapura.

Chapter Forty-one. The kings choose sides

While both the Kauravas and Pandavas were preparing for war, Krishna and the Yadavas returned to Dwaraka. Duryodhana heard of Krishna's arrival and decided to go personally to ask his assistance. Having learned from his spies of the Pandavas' preparations, the Kuru monarch had already sent messengers to every part of the globe to seek other kings' assistance, but Krishna was so powerful that he warranted a personal request. Krishna and the Yadavas were the greatest warriors on earth. If Duryodhana could secure their assistance, then the Pandavas would stand no chance. Krishna was their main support. Accompanied only by a few bodyguards, Duryodhana mounted the best of his horses and set out for Dwaraka at a gallop.

In Virata, Arjuna also thought of Krishna. After consulting Yudhisthira, he too decided to go personally to seek his friend's help. Leaving in a swift chariot he soon arrived in Dwaraka. As he reached Krishna's palace, he saw the palace guards receiving Duryodhana. The two princes, after greeting each other in a friendly way, went together to Krishna's chamber. They found him asleep on a large bed. One of his wives was fanning Him gently. Duryodhana went straight to the head of the bed and sat down, but Arjuna remained at Krishna's feet, standing with palms folded and gazing at his face with tears of affection in his eyes.

After a while Krishna awoke. As he opened his eyes he saw Arjuna, who bowed to him in love. Then Krishna sat up and saw Duryodhana by his head. He immediately welcomed both visitors. After honoring them, he inquired why they had each come.

Duryodhana replied, "It is well known that you are equally disposed toward both myself and Arjuna. I have come here to seek your assistance in the war which will soon be fought among us. Indeed, O killer of Madhu, I arrived before Arjuna and thus it is only right that you assist me rather than him. This is the practice of good men, and you, Krishna, are the best of men." Krishna looked smilingly at Duryodhana. "I accept that you arrived first, O King, but I saw first Arjuna. Therefore, I think I will help both of you. Scripture ordains that one should help the youngest first, so I will first offer My assistance to Arjuna. I have an army of one million soldiers known as the Narayanas, all equal to me in battle. Let one of you take them and let the

other take me alone. But I will not fight. Indeed, I plan to leave my weapons aside during the entire battle. O son of Kunti, what do you choose?"

Without hesitating Arjuna chose Krishna. Duryodhana could hardly conceal his joy. Arjuna's sentimentality had overpowered his reason. He had forsaken Krishna's invincible army in favor of Krishna himself, who would not even fight. What a mistake!

His lips curling in a half smile, Duryodhana said, "It seems then that I am left with the army. With your permission, O Keshava, I shall now depart."

Having received Krishna's army, Duryodhana thanked him and left. He made his way to Balarama's palace. He knew that Balarama was always favorable toward him. Surely he would take his side in the war. Duryodhana found Balarama seated in his palace. After greeting him with words of affection and praise, Duryodhana submitted his plea.

Balarama, his hand resting on his plow weapon, looked grave. "O son of Kuru, for your sake I spoke out in Virata's assembly at the time of Abhimanyu's marriage. I pointed out to Krishna that our relations with you and the Pandavas are equal, and that your cause is as just as that of the Pandavas. O hero, Keshava did not accept my words. I cannot for a moment exist apart from Krishna. Therefore, I have decided to help neither side. I will take no part whatsoever in the upcoming war. Fight according to kshatriya principles, O best of men. May good fortune be yours."

Balarama stood up and embraced Duryodhana. Knowing that Krishna had sided with the Pandavas, He considered the Kauravas already defeated. Duryodhana left Balarama's palace and went to see Kritavarma, the Yadava commander-in-chief. He asked for his help and Kritavarma, in accordance with kshatriya custom, could not refuse. He agreed to fight on the Kaurava side along with the million warriors already given by Krishna. He thus gathered the army and prepared to leave with Duryodhana. Surrounded by the terrible-looking forces, and with Krtavarma by his side, Duryodhana headed back toward Hastinapura with a light heart.

In Krishna's chamber, Arjuna and Krishna were alone. Krishna asked, "Why did you choose me rather than my army, especially knowing that I will not fight?"

Tears flooded Arjuna's eyes as he replied. "There is no doubt that

wherever you are there will be victory. If you desired it, you could slay all the Kurus. In your presence, O foremost among men, I too will be able to kill them all. You are the most famous and illustrious person in the world and I will attain a similar fame by gaining victory in this war. O Krishna, it has long been my desire that you act as my charioteer. Please fulfill my desire, if you find it acceptable."

"It is fitting, O son of Kunti, that you measure yourself against me," Krishna replied. He placed a jeweled hand on Arjuna's shoulder. "I shall gladly act as your charioteer. Let your desire be fulfilled."

The two friends spent some time together in Dwaraka and then prepared to leave. Surrounded by many Yadu chiefs and warriors, they set off for Virata.

* * *

King Shalya of Madras received news about the impending war. As the brother of Pandu's second wife, Madri, he wanted to assist his nephews, the Pandavas. He had already formed a strong friendship with Yudhishthira, and he longed to see him again. Taking his army he left his city to go to Virata. While traveling, Shalya's army occupied an area of four square miles. With their flashing armor and bright pennants, they appeared like a moving sea covered with gems. They traveled in slow marches toward Virata, shaking the earth and sending up massive clouds of dust.

Hearing that the Madras army was on the move, Duryodhana arranged a regal reception for them along the way. He had palaces erected in charming spots, well-decorated with gems. The Kaurava sent artistes for their entertainment and had the best of food and drink laid out for the entire army. Artificial lakes adorned with lotuses and fountains were constructed, with fine seats arranged around them. As Shalya approached each place he was greeted by thousands of brahmins, who received him with worship and adoration. He was shown to a palace that would have been suitable for the gods.

Greeted with honors befitting Indra, Shalya was pleased, thinking too highly of himself and too little of the king of the gods. Assuming that Yudhishthira had made all the arrangements, he asked his servants, "Where are Yudhishthira's men? Fetch them, for I would like to reward them."

The servants looked surprised. They went to Duryodhana, who had remained concealed from Shalya, and informed him of everything. When Shalya had become so pleased that he was ready to give away even his life, Duryodhana revealed himself. Bowing before his maternal uncle, the Kaurava prince said, "You are welcome. Please instruct me what else I can do for you."

It was Shalya's turn to be surprised. He embraced Duryodhana and replied, "I am satisfied by your reception. Ask from me what you may desire."

Duryodhana folded his palms. "Grant me an auspicious boon, O illustrious man. Become a leader in my army."

Shalya realized that he had been tricked, but out of honor he could not refuse Duryodhana's request. He replied, "It is done. What else do you desire?"

Duryodhana said that he had no other desire. With joy he continued to repeat Shalya's words: "It is done."

Disappointed that he would now be opposing the Pandavas in battle, Shalya said, "O king, go back to your capital. You shall soon see me there, but first I want to see Yudhishthira. Then I will come and join your army."

"You may go, but please return quickly. I am depending on you. Do not forget your promise."

After embracing, the two men parted and Shalya continued on to Virata. He saw the Pandavas there and was greeted by all of them with respect. They embraced him and sat him on a beautiful seat. Shalya gazed at his nephews with tear-filled eyes. "It is good to see all you heroes hale and hearty after your exile. How have you passed these last thirteen years? Nothing but misery attends one who has lost a kingdom; but now your suffering, brought on by Dhritarastra's son, will end as you slay your enemies."

Shalya looked at Yudhishthira sitting at his feet. "O great devotee of God, no one has seen even a trace of greed in your character. Like the rishi kings of old you exhibit self-control, forgiveness, truth, nonviolence, and all the other qualities that are so rare in this world. You are mild, generous, religious, and attached to virtue. O chief among kings, it is fortunate that I am

able to see you freed at last from your difficulties."

Shalya then told Yudhisthira about his meeting with Duryodhana and his promise to the Kaurava prince.

Although Yudhisthira was disappointed, he agreed that it was a point of honor. He said, "O King, you have done the right thing by granting such a boon when you were pleased at heart. You had no choice and I do not criticize you for it. Still, I have a request. You can do us a great favor in the coming war with our cousins. It is well known that you are a charioteer without equal in this world. I have no doubt that when the final battle takes place between Arjuna and Karna, you will be asked to drive Karna's chariot. At that time you should do whatever you can to discourage Karna and take away his energy to fight. Although it is improper to ask this of you, O hero, still I ask it out of fear of the suta's son. We must by any and all means defeat that evil-minded one."

Shalya felt pleased that, although he had been forced into fighting for Duryodhana, there was still something he could do for Yudhisthira. The news of the Pandavas' exile had greatly upset him. It was outrageous that the Kurus had allowed such a thing to happen. His brother-in-law Pandu would have been mortified if he had been alive. How could the Kurus expect any good fortune when they injured men of the Pandavas' caliber, and especially when they insulted a woman like Draupadi?

Shalya said, "I will surely do as you ask, O noble-minded one. I do not doubt that Duryodhana will have me drive Karna's chariot. At that time I will speak words calculated to deprive him of energy. O king, all the miseries you have endured at Duryodhana and Karna's hands will soon give rise to your happiness. This is the way of the world, O hero. Do not blame yourself. Everything is under the control of supreme destiny. It is the Lord's arrangement only that great personalities like you suffer difficulties. Even the gods are sometimes obliged to suffer. I have heard that Indra has had to endure much misery, along with his queen."

Yudhisthira asked Shalya to tell the story of Indra and how he had suffered. The Madras king recited the history in detail. Shalya was well known for his wisdom and knowledge, and even the brahmins came forward to hear him speak.

After speaking with the Pandavas for hours, it was time for Shalya to

depart. Yudhisthira again worshipped him with due honor and reminded him of his promise. Assuring Yudhisthira that he would do whatever he could to assist him, Shalya bid the Pandavas farewell and made his way to Hastinapura.

Soon after Shalya's departure, Satyaki returned from Dwaraka. He brought with him a huge army consisting of chariots, horsemen, elephants and infantry. Bearing battle axes, swords, spears, lances, mallets, clubs, maces and bows of all sorts, the army appeared like clouds with lightning. A full akshauhini in number, it merged with Yudhisthira's forces like a river entering the sea.

One after another, different kings came to Yudhisthira's side. Dhristaketu, the king of the Chedis, came with another akshauhini division, as did the king of Magadha, Jayatsena. The two kings Pandya and Virata also each supplied an akshauhini of powerful warriors. Finally, Drupada brought his army, assembled from various countries and led by his two sons, which amounted to two full akshauhinis. Within only a few months, seven akshauhinis stood ready at Virata to fight for the Pandavas.

In Hastinapura, various other kings were coming to assist Duryodhana. They amassed eleven akshauhinis. The soldiers crowded Hastinapura and its surrounding regions so that there was hardly any free space anywhere. Duryodhana had arranged for a vast army of vaishyas and shudras, greater in number than even the warriors themselves, to ensure that the soldiers received sufficient care while they awaited the order to march into battle. All that remained to be done was to meet with the Pandavas or their emissaries. If no agreement could be reached—and Duryodhana planned for no agreements—then the war would begin. The Kurus, informed that a messenger was on his way, waited expectantly.

* * *

Drupada's priest arrived at Hastinapura soon after the troops had assembled. As he approached the city from a distance, he saw soldiers camped everywhere like masses of clouds descended to earth. Entering Hastinapura, he made his way through the crowds and came to Dhritarastra's palace, where the king himself, along with Bhishma and Vidura, received him. They brought him straight to the royal court. After worshipping him

with arghya and other offerings, they invited him to address the assembly.

Looking around at the many kings and ministers seated in Dhritarastra's great hall, the priest spoke. "As you all know, Dhritarastra and Pandu are brothers. Therefore, their claim to their paternal kingdom is equal. No one doubts this to be true. Yet although Dhritarastra's sons have inherited their share of the kingdom, the Pandavas have been denied theirs. Dhritarastra's sons wrested the Pandavas' kingdom and wealth which they had fairly acquired through the practice of virtue. Even before that, the Kauravas attempted to kill their honest cousins in different ways. Because the Pandavas' life duration has not expired, the Kauravas were unsuccessful in their attempts. Despite all this, Yudhisthira bears no ill will toward them. He has accepted all tribulations without complaint. Now he wishes only to have his rightful property returned. Although he has suffered the severest miseries—in this court, in the forest, and at Virata—he does not long for war."

The priest paused and looked at Dhritarastra. The blind king shifted uncomfortably on his throne. Shafts of sunlight entered through the latticed windows, illuminating his pained expression. By his side Bhishma and Vidura slowly shook their heads, remembering again the terrible day when Pandu's sons had been sent away. They looked intently at the priest as he continued.

"The Pandavas wish for a peaceful settlement. They do not want to gain back what is theirs by ruining the world. Forgetting their troubles these last thirteen years, they are prepared to live in friendship with their cousins. But their kingdom must be returned. They have gathered seven akshauhinis and prepared them for battle. Although you have a greater force, you should not consider yourselves more powerful. The Pandavas have Krishna on their side, who possesses inconceivable power. They are also assisted by Drupada, Pandya, Dhristadyumna, Shikhandi and other mighty monarchs. Each of the Pandava brothers is a maharatha capable of contending with vast armies single-handedly. Arjuna alone exceeds the strength of your entire army, O descendents of Bharata. What man would dare face Dhananjaya when he comes out to fight, his chariot guided by the immortal Keshava? Therefore act according to virtue. Give back what should be returned. Do not miss this opportunity."

The assembly remained silent when the priest had stopped speaking.

Everyone's eyes turned toward Dhritarastra. It was up to him to respond. The Kuru monarch said nothing. Duryodhana smiled and glanced at Karna. This old priest was wasting his time. They had an army almost twice the size of the Pandavas' forces. Where was the question of surrendering anything to Yudhisthira? The Kaurava prince looked around the assembly at the silent kings and ministers.

Bhishma broke the silence. He thanked and praised the priest with gentle words. Then he said, "O learned one, it is fortunate that the Pandavas are doing well and that they have secured the assistance of many kings. It is especially fortunate that Damodara, Krishna, has taken their side. It is fortunate indeed that they desire to act virtuously and that they wish for peace. You have spoken the truth. Your words are sharp, in keeping with your status as a brahmin. All the Pandavas have borne many troubles and are certainly entitled to their father's wealth. Not even the holder of the thunderbolt could keep that from them, what to speak of those bearing the bow. There is little doubt, as you say, that Arjuna alone can defeat our army. He could stand against the three worlds."

Without looking at Bhishma, Karna sprang to his feet. Catching Duryodhana's eye he barked at the priest, insolently interrupting Bhishma. "O brahmin, you waste your time. Yudhisthira was fairly defeated and went to the forest in accordance with his vow. I do not believe that the prescribed term has even ended. Why then are the Pandavas demanding their kingdom? Duryodhana will not yield even an inch of land out of fear, but out of virtue he could give the entire earth. Let the Pandavas first keep their vow and then come humbly before Duryodhana, who will doubtlessly afford them refuge. If they desire to abandon righteousness and seek battle, however, they will meet only grief."

Karna glared at the assembly. Both he and Duryodhana refused to accept that the Pandavas had fulfilled their vow. They did not believe that Bhishma's astronomical calculations were correct. According to their own estimations, there were a few months left. Duryodhana would not even consider negotiating with the Pandavas. The prince nodded in agreement as his friend spoke.

Bhishma turned toward Karna. "O son of Radha, why do you talk so much? Do you not recall how during the fight in the Matsya kingdom Arjuna single-handedly defeated all of our principal warriors, including you? You

have seen his prowess often enough. If we do not do what this brahmin says, we will all be killed."

Some of the kings present agreed with Bhishma while others praised Karna. The hall buzzed with voices and Dhritarastra raised his hand for silence. He rebuked Karna, then solaced Bhishma. Then he addressed the assembly: "In my opinion, Bhishma has spoken well. He speaks for our interests and for the interests of the entire world. I need time to deliberate. Let the assembly be adjourned. O brahmin, go back to the Pandavas and tell them that I shall send Sanjaya soon with my reply."

After the priest had been worshipped by Dhritarastra's court brahmins, he left the assembly. Everyone then returned to their own abodes, leaving Dhritarastra alone with his personal servants.

The blind king pressed his hands together. There was no doubt that Bhishma had spoken wisely, as he always did. Dhritarastra could not ignore his assessment of the situation, especially when it was shared by Vidura, Drona and Kripa. These were all learned and virtuous men. To dismiss their opinions was a perilous course. Now they were imploring him to control Duryodhana and return Yudhishthira's kingdom to him.

But whenever he spoke to his son he felt powerless in his hands. Even when he tried to instruct Duryodhana in righteousness, Duryodhana simply laughed. The prince's view of righteousness did not include justice for the Pandavas. It seemed that Providence was in control and that they were all moving inevitably toward some divine plan. Dhritarastra sighed and loosened his heavy royal robes. Perhaps he should take stern action and have his son chastised and even imprisoned, but he simply felt unable. All he could do was advise the prince for his own good. After that, it was between him and his own destiny how he chose to act.

The king called for Sanjaya. Sanjaya was intelligent and affectionate toward the Pandavas; he would certainly be the best man to send as an envoy to them. He would know what to say to pacify them. Perhaps he would even be able to prevent a war.

Sanjaya entered the room and, after he had announced himself, Dhritarastra said, "O Sanjaya, the sons of Pandu are now living in Virata. Please go to them and convey my feelings. O learned one, I have never heard of faults in those men. Even now, after suffering so much at our hands, they

remain friendly toward us. They act only to acquire virtue and never fall into ignorance, folly or laziness. Those heroes have conquered their senses and live only for others' benefit. They have no enemies other than that great weak-brained fool, my son, Duryodhana, and the still meaner Karna. Duryodhana is strong only at the beginning of endeavors because he is so given to indulgence. Still, he thinks himself capable of robbing the Pandavas of their rightful share. Who could hope to stand against Yudhisthira, Keshava, Arjuna, Bhima, Madri's twin sons, Satyaki, and the other great kings? Indeed, Arjuna alone, with Krishna guiding his chariot, can subdue the three worlds. His arrows fly in clouds, roaring like thunder and sweeping away everything in their path."

Dhritarastra had thought about the upcoming battle again and again. He knew his sons did not stand a chance. Although they had a bigger army, that would not stop the Pandavas, assisted as they were by Krishna, from winning.

Dhritarastra revealed his fears to Sanjaya. "No one can hope to conquer Krishna; He is always victorious. He is the best of all men and the Lord of the worlds. With his support the Pandavas could, I am certain, stand against the celestial host, headed by Indra and Mahadeva. Just he and Arjuna together have already shown their power at Khandava. What then can we expect when they are united with Bhima and the twins? Our army is finished! The Pandavas' power is inestimable. O Sanjaya, let me tell you about the other kings who have rallied to their cause."

Dhritarastra had already heard from his spies about the situation in Virata. After listing all the kings supporting the Pandavas, he again turned to the discussion of Krishna. It was Krishna he feared. Just see how easily he had slain the mighty Sishupala, Naraka, Kamsa, and so many others. "He is surely Vishnu incarnate. Thinking of Krishna's power and Vishnu's deeds in former ages, I find no peace, O son of Gavalgani. Perhaps the only person I fear more is Yudhisthira. I do not fear anyone as I fear him. He has long practiced austerity and dedicated himself to virtue. Whoever receives his wrath will be consumed like a reed falling into fire. His cause is just. This also frightens me."

Dhritarastra fell silent for some moments. He had to think of some way of stopping the Pandavas from taking up arms against his sons. Some way, that was, other than returning their kingdom. Sighing, he went on

addressing Sanjaya.

"Go on a swift car to the high-minded Yudhisthira and speak affectionate and kind words. Tell him that I desire peace and will comply with any request he makes. Inquire after his welfare and that of his friends and followers. Say whatever you feel is appropriate to promote the interests of our race. Do not speak anything which will give rise to hostility."

Without offering assurance that the Pandavas would regain their kingdom, Dhritarastra gave his own message to Sanjaya and then asked him to leave at once.

Chapter Forty-two. Dhritarastra's Message

The Pandavas were sitting alone with Krishna when they received word of Sanjaya's arrival. Yudhisthira asked that he be brought in at once and then received him warmly. Sanjaya bowed before Krishna and all the brothers. After he was seated he said to Yudhisthira, "It is fortunate, O king, that I find you in good health and among friends. Surrounded by your brothers and the illustrious Krishna, you appear like Indra. The aged and wise Dhritarastra inquires after your welfare, along with the well-being of your wife and other relatives."

After saying that everything was well, and asking after the Kurus' welfare, Yudhisthira said, "Do the Kurus still think well of us? Do they remember Arjuna's unequalled prowess and that he can send sixty arrows at once from his bow? Do they remember the mighty Bhima, who can make entire armies tremble when he picks up his mace? Do they remember the twins, who conquered so many regions of the earth by the strength of their arms? Surely Dhritarastra's sons have not forgotten the defeat they met at Dwaitavana, when Bhima and Arjuna had them released. Although we would be their friends and live with them in peace, I fear this will not come to pass. Alas, Sanjaya, there seems to be no way to win Duryodhana over despite our best endeavors."

"It is exactly as you say," Sanjaya replied sadly. "The Kurus are well and they certainly remember you. Duryodhana is surrounded by both wise and wicked men, but he takes his inspiration only from the latter. His behavior toward you is surely reprehensible. His father sincerely regrets it. Indeed, the old king often sits sighing, lost in feelings of repentance for the ill treatment you brothers have received at Kuru hands. He has consulted brahmins and knows that conspiring against friends is the worst of all sins. The king wants only to make a lasting peace among us all. Yes, the Kurus remember your power. It is a mystery how men of your caliber are forced to suffer so much misery, but we are sure that you will never abandon virtue for the sake of pleasure. O you who have created no enemies, listen now as I convey to you Dhritarastra's message."

Yudhisthira asked that Sanjaya speak the message before all the kings gathered at Virata's court. The charioteer then stood in their midst and bowed before speaking. "I offer you my respects. Dhritarastra has sent me

here to say that he desires peace. He inquires about your welfare and asks with all sincerity that there be peace among us. This is what he said. The sons of Pandu are all virtuous. They are incapable of a mean act. Yudhisthira is mild, generous and forgiving, and acts only for the welfare of all beings. How could he be responsible for an act which will destroy us all, which is sinful, and which leads only to hell—an act which will bring the same result regardless of who is successful. Blessed are those who promote their cousins' interests. They are truly sons, well-wishers and friends of the Kurus who are prepared to sacrifice their own interests for that of the dynasty."

Krishna smiled. The kings glanced at each other. Dhritarastra's message was clear. They listened as Sanjaya clarified it further.

"If you succeed in subjugating the Kauravas, O sons of Kunti, and thus regain your kingdom, what will you gain? Having slain your relatives, your life will be like death. What will be the result of a battle in which heroes such as yourselves, Keshava, Satyaki, Chekitana and others contend with Drona, Bhishma, Kripa, Ashvatthama and the Kuru warriors? It means total annihilation. There will be no good to either side. I find it hard to believe that the Pandavas are capable of causing such destruction. With clasped hands I fall at the feet of Krishna and of the aged Drupada. Throwing myself upon your protection, I beg that all be well between the Kurus and the Pandavas. If someone requested it, you would give up your lives; why, then, would you not act to preserve all these warriors?"

The hall remained silent. Yudhisthira waited until Sanjaya had taken his seat and said, "What have I said that made you think I wanted war, Sanjaya? What man, so cursed by the gods, would choose war when peace could be made? The sons of Kunti will act only according to virtue and thus bring happiness to all. One who acts according to the dictates of the mind and senses follows the path leading to misery. We become free from misery only when we are free from the longing to gratify our senses. Dhritarastra and his foolish sons fail to understand this truth. Thus they act in ways which never bring happiness."

Yudhisthira looked at Krishna, who smiled in approval. The Pandava stood up as he continued to speak, appearing in his robes and ornaments like a golden banner raised in honor of Indra.

"Having accepted the advice of his dull-headed son, who is wicked

and addicted to sin, the king now laments. Why did he not heed Vidura's words, who desired only the Kurus' well-being? To gain prestige for himself, Duryodhana seeks to deprive others of prestige. He is jealous, wrathful, haughty, spiteful, and filled with lust. Dhritarastra knows what his son has done, but still he chooses to follow him, thus forsaking both virtue and pleasure. He cannot hold his ill-gotten gains for long, although he wishes for unending prosperity. He and his son desire to rule the earth undisputed. We have heard nothing to indicate that they have changed their minds, O Sanjaya. They now consider whatever of our wealth they possess to be rightfully theirs."

Yudhisthira indicated the kings who sat in a circle around the hall. "All these monarchs know well how Duryodhana came to possess our kingdom. He and his brothers, along with the unintelligent Karna, think they can overcome us in battle. Obviously, they have not seen Arjuna with his Gandiva bow stretched to its limit, nor have they seen Bhima whirling his mace or the twins with their swords in hand. Sanjaya, you know the troubles we have borne at the Kurus' hands. Even so I forgive them. Let there be peace between us. Let them return Indraprastha to me and they keep Hastinapura. Let Dhritarastra return what is rightfully ours."

Sanjaya had delivered Dhritarastra's message, but he now wished to speak on his own behalf. He was surprised to see the usually peaceful Yudhisthira so inclined toward war. "There can be no doubt that you are attached to virtue, O king of men. Why do you desire to destroy the Kurus? Death may come at any moment. It behooves all men to remain fixed on the path of truth. No one should even contemplate sin, for that may immediately lead one to hell. O Bharata, if the Kurus will not return your kingdom without war, would it not be better for you to live as a beggar than to seek to annihilate them? Indeed, you could live happily with Krishna and the Yadavas. Desire for wealth is the enemy of virtue. A wise man should shun it entirely. One who renounces desires and lives simply, even though devoid of wealth, shines like the sun and becomes famous in this world; but one who is the slave of desire, even if he obtains the earth, is ruined."

As Dhritarastra's intimate servant, Sanjaya wanted to carry out his mission to secure peace. He knew the Kauravas could not win in a war, but he also doubted Yudhisthira's motives. Sanjaya was a spiritual disciple of Vyasadeva and had received many instructions from the rishi. It seemed to

him that Yudhisthira was allowing himself to be overpowered by material desire without considering what might be in his spiritual interests.

Sanjaya maintained a respectful tone. "O son of Kunti, you have studied all the Vedas and performed asceticism. You have controlled your mind and senses and you are dedicated to sacrifice and charity. Why are you now giving way to anger? You are already famous in this world as a man of the highest principles; you have presided over the Rajasuya and offered gifts to hundreds of thousands of brahmins. O king, do not let this go in vain by now committing a great sin. Do not act impelled by malice and thereby destroy the results of all your asceticism and sacrifice. Forbearance is surely best for you now, not the enjoyment gained at the cost of great men's lives. What happiness do you think you will enjoy when you and your brothers have slain all your relatives? Even after gaining the earth, you will have to reap the results of your good and bad deeds. Happiness and distress will arrive in due course, and in the end you will meet with decrepitude and death. O hero, knowing all this you should not fight. If your advisors would have you fight, then you should abandon them. Do not forsake the path that leads to the worlds of the gods and beyond."

Sanjaya sat down again and Yudhisthira thought before replying. The sound of the jeweled fountains in the gardens just outside made a gentle cascading resonance. Temple bells chimed in the distance. Fragrant incense billowed through the hall. The kings awaited Yudhisthira.

Finally, he said, "It is undoubtedly as you say. One should never stray from virtue. But before blaming me, you should first ascertain whether it is virtue or vice I follow. Sometimes virtue may look like vice and vice as virtue. Only after careful deliberation can one discriminate between the two. All men should follow the duties prescribed for them according to their respective social positions. Brahmins may beg for a living, but kshatriyas may never beg. Even in times of distress, kings and rulers should not accept alms. The creator has ordained that we should live by gaining lordship over lands and protecting the people. I would not accept this entire earth, or even the kingdoms of the gods, through unrighteousness.

"Here is Krishna. He knows every facet of Vedic knowledge and possesses full wisdom. Let him decide what is right in this case. I will always follow his dictate and will never ignore his advice. Keshava is our friend and well-wisher; we will hear his opinion and decide what should be done."

As Yudhisthira took his seat, Krishna stood. His bodily lustre seemed to illuminate the hall with a mystical radiance. Shining yellow silks and gold ornaments framed his complexion, which resembled a blackish autumnal rain cloud. Turning his lotus-petal eyes toward Sanjaya, he said, "O Sanjaya, I desire that both the Pandavas and the Kurus be happy and prosperous. I want peace and I am happy to see that Dhritarastra also desires it. Yudhisthira has already shown a rare kind of commitment to peace, since it is he who has been antagonized and abused by the Kurus. Why should he suddenly wish to escalate the conflict between himself and his cousins? Surely, Sanjaya, you know as well as I do the nature of right and wrong. Why, then, do you find fault with Pandu's son, who has always adhered to his duties as they have been laid down in the scriptures since the days of old?"

"Regarding our present discussion, there are two schools of thought among the Brahmins. Some say that by renouncing our duties we shall achieve perfection, and others say that duties should never be renounced but should be performed without attachment. My opinion concurs with this latter view, O Sanjaya. Even to maintain himself a man must perform his duties in this world. Knowledge without work yields no fruit."

Krishna lifted a graceful hand as he spoke. "See how the gods in heaven shine through work, how through work the wind blows and the sleepless sun gives rise to day and night? Sleepless does the Earth goddess carry her load, and sleepless do the rivers carry their waters to satisfy all creatures. Indra attained his exalted status by giving up pleasure and sense gratification. This is true of all the principal deities. Knowing this, O suta, why do you plead on behalf of the Kauravas, exhorting the Pandavas to renounce their prescribed duties? You are wise and aware of the truth. Then consider this question: does a king's duty lie in fighting or in not fighting? Surely you know that the creator endowed kings with the power to check and even kill miscreants. Dhritarastra has robbed Yudhisthira of his rightful property. Whether one steals covertly or openly, stealing is sinful. Should Duryodhana and his followers not then face the consequences of their sin? Is Yudhisthira not justified in seeking to recover his stolen property, even if it means killing the robbers?"

Krishna looked at Yudhisthira and his brothers, who sat together like a pride of lions. The eyes of all the kings turned toward them as Krishna continued.

"Certainly Yudhisthira desires peace; but if his kingdom is not returned, then in my opinion it is his duty to declare war. Indeed, it would be virtuous and praiseworthy to be killed fighting in such a religious war. It is better that Yudhisthira regain his own ancestral kingdom than to take the kingdom of another. O Sanjaya, go now and lay these ancient principles before Dhritarastra amid his sons and the assembled chiefs of the various countries."

Krishna paused. His audience was absorbed, accepting his gently spoken arguments. Even Sanjaya nodded his head in agreement as Krishna went on.

"My dear Sanjaya, let me remind you that the Kurus committed their sin in their own council hall. All of them, even Bhishma, was silent when the chaste Draupadi stood weeping in Dushashana's clutches. That slave of lust viciously dragged her before her fathers-in-law to abuse and insult her. If Dhritarastra had checked his sons, he would then have pleased me. He and all the Kurus said nothing. That is, all except Vidura and one honest kshatriya. The other kings also remained silent. You too, Sanjaya, did not utter a word. Now you want to preach righteousness to Yudhisthira."

Krishna's eyes flashed as he described the incident. "At that time Karna spoke such sharp words to Draupadi that they pierced her heart. 'Become the Kauravas' slave,' the fool said. 'Your husbands are no longer your husbands. Choose another man.' Karna's arrow of words also buried itself deep into Arjuna's heart.

"The sinful Shakuni again and again urged Yudhisthira in the dice game, 'You have only Draupadi left. Stake her, O king.'

"Again, when the Pandavas were about to depart to honor their vow, clad in black deerskins, Dushashana said, 'These eunuchs, vanquished and ruined, are going to hell for a long time.'"

Krishna paused again to allow his words to sink in. After thirteen years the shock of those terrible events had worn off, but as Krishna described them, Sanjaya remembered the horror of that day. He knew he had been wrong to stand by silently as Duryodhana and his friends committed their crime. Out of loyalty to the blind king he had watched in anguish as the noble Pandavas, and especially their gentle wife, had suffered unbearable insults. Without doubt the seeds of the present calamity had been sown at that

time. The arrows the Kauravas had shot at that time would now come back at them as blazing shafts launched from the Gandiva. The elders' silence on that day would soon be answered by the clamor of fierce battle. Sanjaya bowed his head.

Krishna continued. "I shall go to Hastinapura to remind the Kurus of all these events. We will settle the matter. If I can bring about peace without injuring the Pandavas' interests, then I will have performed a virtuous act. I will also have released the Kurus from the clutches of death. I hope Dhritarastra's sons will receive me with respect when I go there to speak of virtue and humanity. If it is otherwise, you can be sure that those men, consumed by their own viciousness, will lose everything on the battlefield. At the proper time, Bhima, mace in hand, will remind Duryodhana of his cruel words."

Looking around the hall, Krishna concluded with a number of poetic metaphors. "Duryodhana is a tree full of malice, Karna is its trunk, Shakuni its main branch, Dushashana and his brothers the numerous fruits and flowers, and the blind king Dhritarastra its root. On the other hand, Yudhishthira is a tall tree full of virtue, Arjuna is its trunk, Bhima its branch, and the twins its fruits and flowers. I myself, along with the Vedas and the brahmins, are its root.

"O Sanjaya, tell your master that peace with the Pandavas is the only intelligent course. The Kurus are like a forest and the Pandavas are the tigers. Without tigers men would cut down the trees, and without the forest the tigers have no protection. They need each other.

"The Kauravas are creepers of virtue while the Pandavas are huge sal trees. Without the support of a tree the creepers cannot grow. Pandu's sons are ready to either wait on Dhritarastra or ready to fight. Everything depends on how the king acts now. Go back, wise one, and explain all this to Dhritarastra."

Sanjaya made no reply. He knew that Krishna spoke the truth. Bowing respectfully to him, he turned to Yudhishthira and said, "With your permission I will leave. O god among men, I hope I have not offended you in any way. After saying good-bye to Janardana, Bhima, Arjuna and Madri's sons, as well as the other heroes in the assembly, please give me leave to depart. May happiness and prosperity be yours. May the king look upon you

with goodwill."

Yudhisthira folded his palms toward Dhritarastra's secretary and replied, "O Sanjaya, we know you are our well-wisher. Your speech did not offend us, for you spoke with a pure heart. Surely you are our favorite and you have always shown us so much affection. Other than you, only Vidura could have come here. O wise one, please convey our regards to our elders and friends. Offer our respects to the brahmins and our affection to the people. Is the king protecting them well? O Sanjaya, are the arrangements we made for the well-being of all our subjects still in place? I hope no person is needy or afflicted within the Kurus' jurisdiction."

Yudhisthira named the Kurus one by one and asked Sanjaya to go to each of them on his behalf and ask after their health. At last he said, "Go to Duryodhana, who is dull-headed, ignorant, wicked and addicted to vice, and say that the desire tormenting his heart for undisputed rulership is not justified. Tell him this: 'We shall not do anything disagreeable to you. Either give back Indraprastha or fight, O chief of the Bharatas.'"

The assembled kings cheered Yudhisthira's words and the Pandava raised his hand to silence them. Turning again to Sanjaya he said, "I pray that the Supreme Lord will bless that foolish man with wisdom. Sanjaya, also say this to Duryodhana: 'Pandu's sons are ready to forget even the disrobing and abuse of their wife just so that the Kurus may not be slaughtered. We will bear all the ills and insults they have heaped upon us, but we want our due share. O best among men, give up your greed for others' property. Only then will there be peace. We will accept even one province so that we may perform our God-given duty of ruling over and protecting the people. Give us just five villages, one for each of us, and let there be an end to this quarrel. Let brother follow brother and father unite with son. I desire to see the Kauravas and the Panchalas coming together with cheerful hearts. To do my duty I am prepared for peace or war. The choice is in your hands.'"

When Yudhisthira was finished, each of his brothers gave messages for the Kauravas. When they had all spoken, Sanjaya said he would repeat their messages exactly as they had been spoken. Then he bowed before the assembly and departed for Hastinapura.

Chapter Forty-three. Anxiety for the blind king

Dhritarastra sat alone in his chambers. Sanjaya had been gone for days and was due back at any time. The king wondered how the Pandavas would receive his message. Surely the gentle Yudhisthira would not opt for war. How could he condone killing his beloved elders? But he would certainly act on Krishna's advice. Krishna was an unknown element. Dhritarastra could not fathom his motivations or intentions. Sometimes he seemed impartial—or at least he said he was—yet he always appeared to favor the Pandavas. Then again he had given his army to Duryodhana and had promised not to fight. It was difficult to understand.

As Dhritarastra sat thinking, a messenger entered his room to inform him that Sanjaya had returned. The king asked that Sanjaya be shown in at once.

Sanjaya entered the chamber with clasped hands and stood before Dhritarastra. "O lord of the earth, I am Sanjaya, returned from seeing the Pandavas. Yudhisthira sends his greetings and asks after your health, and that of your sons and grandsons."

"Blessings to you, Sanjaya. Welcome back. Tell me how Yudhisthira, who creates no enemies, is faring. Are he and his brothers well?"

"All is well with the Pandavas. Yudhisthira desires to have what was formerly his. In his opinion, virtue is superior to acquiring wealth, and it is the essence of happiness and joy. That godly man, motivated only by virtue, wishes to again protect the people in accord with the eternal duties the creator has assigned to him. Surely men are puppets led by God's will. Otherwise, how could the Pandavas have suffered so much? I think that as long as a powerful man does not have an opportunity to rectify things, his antagonists will prosper. Your acts have been indescribably sinful, O king, and you will soon receive their results. Yudhisthira, having cast away sin as a snake sloughs its skin, is now resplendent amid other heroes."

Sanjaya's long and intimate relationship with Dhritarastra allowed him to be frank. The king winced as his secretary continued. "Reflect carefully on your course, O king, because your motives are suicidal. You have acted dishonorably toward the Pandavas, and you have achieved neither virtue nor wealth. Vicious and cruel, your deeds have earned you only shame

and censure among men. We can understand such actions from low-class men with poor education, but you are born in the line of Bharata and have been advised by many wise ministers. You too are wise and know the difference between right and wrong. Why, then, do you act to bring about the destruction of your race?"

Dhritarastra pressed a forefinger and thumb into his eyes. He felt unbearably hot, although he was being fanned on both sides with chamara whisks. He unbuttoned his tunic and called for a cup of cool water. Sanjaya did not relent. He could not bear to see his master bring about his own ruin. The time for diplomacy was past. Disaster was imminent. If there was any hope of averting it, the king needed to keep hearing the truth—and do something soon.

"Surely the Pandavas are aided by divine forces. Otherwise, how could Arjuna have gone to the heavens in his mortal body? God alone awards men the results of their deeds. Our exertions are useless if we fail to recognize this truth. Striving only for our own gratification, we will gain nothing but misery. O king, I blame you for the present situation. You have acted without regard for God's laws. If you do not reverse your decisions, you will be responsible for the annihilation of innumerable men. Arjuna will destroy the Kurus as fire destroys a heap of dry grass. Influenced by your headstrong son, you think your success is sure. Thus you did not prevent the dice game. Now look at the result of such madness. O king, because you are weak you will not be able to retain sovereignty over this broad realm, any more than a fool can retain wealth suddenly gained."

It was late and Sanjaya was tired from his long journey. He asked Dhritarastra's permission to take rest and said he would return in the morning to deliver Yudhisthira's message to the assembly. The king dismissed his servant with kind words. He knew that Sanjaya had only his interests at heart, no matter how cutting his words.

After Sanjaya left, Dhritarastra sat alone, his mind wracked by painful thoughts. Everything depended upon him. It would surely be just to return Indraprastha to Yudhisthira, but Duryodhana would never agree. Would he be able to check him? It had been almost twenty years since Dhritarastra had assumed the throne. Now he was lord of the earth—that is, he and Duryodhana, his empowered representative. To give Yudhisthira his kingdom would end all that. The self-effulgent Pandavas would soon

reestablish their supremacy over their cousins. He and Duryodhana would be eclipsed. The king felt his limbs tremble. Having had such power, it would be worse than death to have it taken away.

Although it was late, Dhritarastra felt that he needed to hear from Vidura. No one could offer him impartial, thoughtful advice like Vidura. The king asked that Vidura be summoned and within a short time he entered the chamber. "O you of great wisdom, I am Vidura, here at your command. Order me. What can I do for you? I am your servant."

The king welcomed him warmly and had him sit at his side. He spoke in somber tones. "O Vidura, I have just spoken with Sanjaya. He strongly criticized me. He has not yet told me what Yudhishthira said and now I am anxious. My body is burning and I cannot sleep. Tell me how to cure my condition."

Vidura, who had been called from his prayer and meditation, replied, "Sleeplessness overpowers one who has been attacked by a stronger man, the weak, those who have failed to attain their goal, those who have been robbed, those consumed by desire, and thieves. I hope that you do not fall into any of these categories, O king, nor that you are greedy for another's wealth."

Vidura knew well the king's dilemma. He had discussed it with him on countless occasions, always offering him the same advice. Dhritarastra had always ignored it. Vidura had repeatedly warned him of the eventual outcome of his acts, an outcome that was now imminent. Dhritarastra was obviously realizing that fact.

The king turned his head toward Vidura. "Speak wisdom to me, dear brother. Speak those words which are at once morally uplifting and also calculated to secure my welfare."

Vidura's affection for his brother never waned, despite his brother's foolishness. He patiently advised him for his good, praying that one day the blind king would come to his senses. Perhaps now, with the approach of calamity, he would become more thoughtful. Vidura said, "Yudhishthira is a king graced with all auspicious marks. He is fit to rule the world. You should have kept him near you, but you exiled him. For this blindness you are condemned, O king, although you know what is virtue. Because he is inoffensive, kind, forgiving and a lover of truth, Yudhishthira remembers your supremacy and patiently bears the hardships you have inflicted upon him.

Having bestowed lordship of the world on Duryodhana, who bears enmity toward Yudhishthira, how can you now expect peace and prosperity?"

Vidura had himself received many instructions from rishis and sages, and he sought their association whenever it was available. Recalling the saints' words of wisdom, he became more gentle with Dhritarastra as he continued to instruct him. The king listened attentively.

"He is said to be a wise man who cannot be deviated from duty by anger, exultation, pride, lust or ignorance, and who remains fixed on the highest goal of life. Attachment to the saintly, renouncing the association of blameworthy men, and maintaining faith and reverence toward elders are also signs of the wise. A wise man acts in accordance with religion, pursuing a course that benefits him in both this life and the next rather than one that offers only immediate pleasure. Wise men do not lament for what is lost, nor do they hanker for the unattainable. They rejoice in virtuous deeds and they shun sin. The wise understand this world to be temporary and miserable. They recognize God's supremacy and their own position as his servants. All their acts are aimed at pleasing the Lord and achieving his eternal abode.

"On the other hand, a fool is proud, even though ignorant, vain and poor. Fools try to achieve prosperity through sin, and hanker after others' property. Resorting to deceit and violence, a fool thinks nothing of hurting others to achieve his nefarious ends. A fool forsakes that which should be obtained and desires that which should not be desired. He is faithless, makes no offerings to the ancestors, and worships only himself. Arrogant, angry and harsh of speech, he lacks discrimination and befriends those who should be foes while hating those worthy of friendship. Failing in his endeavors, he blames others and punishes the innocent. Such men are ultimately destroyed to their roots."

Vidura instructed Dhritarastra well into the night. He tried his best to turn the old king's mind toward virtue and truth. He had nothing new to say to Dhritarastra. The Kuru monarch had often heard such teachings. He agreed with everything, and even enjoyed hearing it. As Vidura spoke the king recognized his own foolishness and sinfulness, and he freely admitted them. He prompted Vidura to speak more and more, asking question after question. The night ended with Vidura pointing out the certain results that would ensue if the king did not act fairly toward the Pandavas.

But Dhritarastra knew he could not find the strength to act upon Vidura's wisdom. He knew that even though he wanted to act properly, he would not have the will to cross Duryodhana. He knew that when he sat among the kings in the assembly the next morning, he would be unable to accede to Yudhisthira's request.

Vidura understood the king's position. He knew his words were having little effect and decided that Dhritarastra needed to hear from someone more spiritually potent. After having spoken to the king for several hours he said finally, "I am a shudra, O king. I cannot instruct you further, but I know of someone who can. The saintly rishi Sanat-Sujata has instructed me in the eternal Vedic truths on many occasions. I will invoke him and he will appear to speak to you. That sage has lived a life of perpetual celibacy. His words are powerful and pure. With your permission, I will call him."

Dhritarastra assented and Vidura sat in meditation, fixing his mind on Sanat-Sujata. The rishi divined Vidura's thoughts by his own power and he came there at once. His body shone with a brilliant luster, and he carried a waterpot and a staff in his hands. Vidura received him with due rites and offered him an elevated seat near the king.

When the sage was sitting at his ease, Vidura said, "O lord, the king has doubts I cannot clear. If it is your desire, please instruct him in the ancient truths as you have realized them. Only you can free him from duality and help him become fixed on the path of virtue."

The rishi, who was clad in a black deerskin and had matted locks of hair, nodded. Seeing his willingness to speak, Vidura told the king to place his questions before him. Dhritarastra said, "O Sanat-Sujata, please guide me. Pray tell me how I can attain to the highest end of my life. Death comes to all beings, but I hear that you know the secret of defeating death. How should I act so that I might not be forever subjected to birth and death in this world?"

Sanat-Sujata replied, "You have asked how death may be avoided and eternal life attained. Listen, O king, and I shall instruct you to the best of my knowledge. It is said that actual death is ignorance. Where there is no ignorance, there is no death. He who is ruled by lust, anger and greed is ruled by Yamaraja and will see that great god again and again. Falling into all kinds of hells he suffers unbearable miseries. Then he rises again and takes birth among animals and men in this world, once more beginning the cycle.

One who controls his senses, however, and does not act on their dictates is saved from this suffering. To such a man who checks his mind and senses, death offers no threat. Therefore, you should avoid all sensual desires and cultivate knowledge of the eternal soul, which exists separately from the senses and is different from the body."

Dhritarastra asked, "What regions do those who control their senses attain? How should such a man act in this world? O sage, I am not satiated by hearing you speak only once."

Sanat-Sujata sat cross-legged on the golden seat, his two hands held in front of him with forefinger and thumb joined together as he spoke. "O king, one should perform sacrifice and penance aimed at pleasing the Supreme Person. If you do this, you will attain the supreme, eternal regions from which you will not return. Step by step, one should progress along the path of knowledge, never thinking oneself to be the material body and always acting to attain spiritual progress."

Dhritarastra flinched as the sage continued. The aged monarch already knew these teachings. He knew the sage spoke the truth. Dhritarastra knew that his own actions had been far from submissive to those instructions. Worse than that, however, he knew he was unlikely to change. No doubt he would have to perform much asceticism and penance to atone for his sins. Maybe then he would finally be able to apply the saint's instructions. It seemed that for now, destiny was moving him to act in ways contrary to good advice. Feeling helpless in the face of his own weakness, Dhritarastra went on questioning the rishi.

Sanat-Sujata could also see the king's inner feelings, but he continued to address him for his ultimate welfare. It was up to Dhritarastra to choose his own course of action. The sage knew that all he could do was make clear the consequences of the various courses available to the king.

Dhritarastra listened as Sanat-Sujata described how the Supersoul pervades the universe and resides in the hearts of all living beings.

The king asked, "How can one come to know that Supersoul?"

"The Supreme, who is known as Brahman, can only be known by one who has attained the same spiritual nature as him. That nature is attained by the practice of serving the spiritual master, studying the Vedas, observing celibacy, practicing asceticism, and abstaining from violence toward others.

Gradually one will become free of the material nature's influence and become situated in his original spiritual nature. Then by meditation, one can know the Supreme."

Dhritarastra was intrigued. "What form does the immortal and omnipresent Supersoul have in this world? Is he white, red, black, or some other color? What are his attributes?"

"He may appear as any color, but he is not like anything within your present experience. He is the form of the universe, but simultaneously appears in the heart in a form the size of your thumb. Everything rests in Him and is absorbed back into Him at the time of dissolution. He is without duality and yet from him springs the infinite varieties of creation. His arms and legs are everywhere yet he is still. He sees everything and he possesses all knowledge. No one is unknown to the Supreme Being."

Returning to the king's question about how to know the Supersoul, the sage further described what behavior elevates one to the spiritual platform. He went on to explain about the nature of Brahman and the state one experiences when he attains that nature. Sanat-Sujata spoke until the rising sun filled the king's chamber. Seeing that it was daybreak, the rishi concluded his discourse and stood up to leave. Vidura touched his feet and both he and the king thanked him for his instructions. Sanat-Sujata then vanished, leaving the two men to prepare themselves for the assembly.

Chapter Forty-four. Panic Among the Kauravas

Duryodhana had risen early on the day of the assembly. He knew Sanjaya was going to deliver Yudhishthira's message. After performing his morning ablutions and receiving the worship and praise of the palace brahmins and bards, the prince met with Shakuni and Karna. He expressed his determination not to return the Pandavas' kingdom. His friends agreed and cheered him. They encouraged him to remain firm and assured him that his old father, bound by ties of affection, would not force him to return Indraprastha if he was resolute. As they spoke, the three men slowly made their way to the assembly hall, which shone like the Himavat mountain in the early morning sunlight.

Dhritarastra entered the hall at the head of all other kings. Led by Vidura, he made his way to his throne. The floor in the hall had been sprinkled lightly with perfumes and spread with flower petals. The kings took their places on seats made of carved ivory and wood, decorated with golden inlays and precious stones. As they settled onto the silk cushions, they looked around to see who was present. Immediately surrounding Dhritarastra were Vidura, Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Shalya, Krtavarma, Jayadratha, Bahlika, Somadatta, Ashvatthama, as well as Duryodhana and his one hundred brothers. The chamber, filled with so many heroes, seemed like a cave full of lions. The lustrous men, with their bright silks and golden ornaments, lit up the hall and appeared like an assembly of the gods.

When everyone was seated, the doorkeeper announced that Sanjaya had arrived and was waiting to deliver his message. Dhritarastra gave permission for him to enter the hall. Sanjaya, his gold earrings swinging, bowed at Dhritarastra's feet. Folding his palms he faced the assembly and said, "O sons of Kuru, I have just returned from the Pandavas. Those virtuous men salute you all, each according to your age and status. Hear now the messages they have sent through me."

Sanjaya carefully relayed Yudhishthira's message exactly as he had heard it: either the Kurus should return the Pandavas' kingdom—or even just five villages—or there would be war.

Dhritarastra said nothing. He looked pensive. After some moments he said, "I wish to hear Arjuna's message, for it is from him that we face the greatest danger. Krishna's friend, Arjuna, is immeasurably powerful and has

suffered at our hands. Tell me, Sanjaya, what did Dhananjaya, the destroyer of sinful men, say?"

Sanjaya bowed his head to the king and remained standing. "These were the words of the wrathful Arjuna, who was eager to fight and who, with reddened eyes, spoke in the presence of Yudhishthira and Krishna."

Summoning the mood in which Arjuna had spoken, Sanjaya delivered his exact words: "Speak to Dhritarastra's son in the midst of the Kurus, and in the hearing of the wicked-minded Karna, who always desires to fight, speaks harshly, has a dull intellect, and is extremely ignorant. His time has come. Speak also in the presence of those kings who have come from around the world to fight the Pandavas. If Duryodhana does not surrender Yudhishthira's kingdom, then it is clear that he desires to pay for his former antagonism toward us. If he chooses battle, then our ends will be achieved. Tell him not to choose peace, but to choose to fight with me and Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva, Satyaki and Dhristadyumna, and Shikhandi. I look forward to it. Although we have lain on a bed of woe these last thirteen years, let Dhritarastra's son, when he lies dead on the battlefield, obtain a bed of endless woe. He could never conquer the virtuous Yudhishthira in a fight. Therefore, he resorted to trickery and deceit. Pandu's eldest son, whose senses and mind are fully under control, has patiently endured all his suffering. When he directs his anger against the Kauravas, then will Duryodhana have cause to repent."

Duryodhana sneered as Sanjaya continued. Arjuna described how he envisioned the war between them taking place. "As a blazing fire in the summer consumes dried grass, so will the Kaurava army be consumed even by Yudhishthira's glance. When Duryodhana sees the iron-clad Bhima on his chariot, mace in hand and vomiting the venom of his wrath, then will he repent this war. When that exceedingly vain one sees Bhima felling elephants by the thousands, their warriors dispatched to the next world, then will he repent. When Nakula comes down from his chariot, clutching his sword and razing warriors as if they were a field of corn, then will the wicked one repent. When Sahadeva chops off the heads of kings with his well-aimed arrows, and when he finally encounters the vicious Shakuni, then will Duryodhana repent."

One by one Arjuna mentioned all the great warriors who would fight for the Pandavas, describing how they would wreak vengeance on the

Kauravas. Dhristadyumna would kill Drona and Shikhandi would slay Bhishma. Bhima had already vowed to slay Duryodhana and all his brothers. Arjuna would destroy warriors by the tens of thousands. Finally he would kill Karna and all his sons and followers. Arjuna painted a grim picture of the war's outcome, which he saw ending in the total annihilation of Duryodhana and his forces. Finally he spoke about Krishna.

"I have selected Krishna as my charioteer in preference to Indra and his thunderbolt weapon. If Krishna desires someone's victory, even if he himself does not fight, that person cannot fail. Our victory will be easy. Whoever desires to overpower Krishna wishes to swim the unfathomable ocean or to put out a blazing fire with his two hands, or to stop the sun and moon in their course through the heavens. That best of men, the Lord of all the worlds, has already slain demons more powerful than Duryodhana. Even the invincible Naraka, son of the Earth, who could easily withstand the gods in battle, succumbed to Krishna's irresistible weapons. Duryodhana desires to defeat Krishna, who is the Supreme Vishnu, either by capturing him or by winning him over to the Kaurava side. That fool will soon realize his ignorance."

Through their spies, the Pandavas were aware of the Kauravas' strategies. Arjuna knew that Duryodhana feared Krishna and was thinking of how to deal with Him. The Kaurava prince even considered capturing Him when He came to Hastinapura on His peace mission.

Arjuna ended his speech by describing the omens he saw: "Without my touch the Gandiva bow stretches. My arrows move out of their quiver on their own accord. My polished sword leaps from its scabbard. Near my banners I heard, 'When will your chariot be yoked, O Kiriti?' At night, crowds of jackals howl gleefully and vultures and crows descend from the sky. All these signs indicate carnage. These omens will prove true when I hurl my celestial weapons in all directions. I will leave no trace of the Kaurava army. O Sanjaya, tell this to Duryodhana in the hearing of the king, Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, and the wise Vidura. I will surely act as these elders say. Let them check the evil Duryodhana or let the war begin."

The assembly was silent. Duryodhana looked nonchalantly around the hall, smirking. Karna fumed and clutched his ivory-hilted sword. Seeing Duryodhana's indifference, Bhishma addressed him gravely.

"O prince, listen as I recount an ancient history. Once all the gods went to visit Brahma. Arriving at his abode they saw two beautiful, blazing personalities illuminating even that shining region by their splendor. Brahma told the gods that these two were Nara and Narayana Rishis. They were forever practicing asceticism for the good of the worlds, and they lived to destroy the demons. The gods had come to Brahma out of fear of the Asuras and, headed by Brihaspati, they approached those two rishis and begged that they help them defeat their enemies. Assisted by Nara and Narayana Rishis' invincible power, the gods triumphed over the Asuras. Now those two rishis among the gods have appeared as Krishna and Arjuna. Such is the general belief. Arjuna has already shown his prowess by slaying thousands of demons in the celestial realm. The son of Vasudeva has also killed innumerable demons. Together they have vanquished the gods at Khandava, and together they will fight us."

Bhishma looked penetratingly at Duryodhana, who moved uncomfortably on his throne. He did not want to hear about his enemies' power. Anyway, why should he worry? He thought of the Danavas' assurances and remembered how they would possess his forces. Soon he would be seeing a different Bhishma, and soon the Pandavas would be facing an army more powerful than they had anticipated.

Bhishma concluded his speech. "Nara and Narayana repeatedly take birth in this world to annihilate the miscreants and demons. It was Narada Rishi who told us this. O child, when you see these two seated on the same chariot, armed for battle, then you will remember my words. By desiring to fight with them you have lost sight of both virtue and profit. Do not encounter them in battle. If you ignore my advice, you will see your warriors slain.

"But it seems that you will only listen to the advice of three persons: Karna, who is the son of a suta and has been cursed by his guru; the cunning Shakuni; and your small-minded brother Dushashana."

Karna was already seething from Arjuna's speech. Now he was infuriated. Springing to his feet he exclaimed, "It is unfair that you speak of me in such a way, O grandfather. I follow a kshatriya's duties and have not abandoned virtue. Why do you always revile me? I wish only for the Kurus' good. Dhritarastra's sons are honestly ruling the world. Why should they give the kingdom to their enemies? To serve Dhritarastra I will slay the Pandavas

in battle."

Karna roared and then took his seat. Bhishma looked at him sadly; then, turning toward Dhritarastra, said, "O king, although this suta's son brags of his power, he is not even a sixteenth part of the Pandavas. You should know that this fool is largely responsible for this calamity about to befall your sons. Encouraged by his empty promises, Duryodhana is ready to face Arjuna in battle. Your weak-brained son, depending upon Karna, has insulted the Pandavas. What can this vain man achieve that is even approaching what Arjuna has achieved? What could he do when Arjuna killed his brother in the fight against the Matsyas? What did he do when the Gandharvas carried away your son? Yet he roars like a bull in the assembly. Ignorant of virtue and profit, he simply speaks whatever comes to his mind."

Bhishma sat down. Karna kept his head down and said nothing. Bhishma's words cut him deeply. He longed for the chance to prove him wrong. The sooner he could face Arjuna in battle the better. It would be different next time. Indra's shakti weapon would settle the dispute once and for all. Why had he not had it with him at Virata? Somehow it had not occurred to him to bring that weapon. He had not been expecting to meet Arjuna. Well, he would not make that same mistake again. Then Bhishma would be silenced.

Drona had listened carefully to everything that had been said. Seeing his opportunity, he rose to speak. Facing Dhritarastra, the old martial preceptor said, "Take heed of Bhishma's words and follow his advice, O king. You should not let yourself be guided by those who covet wealth and are slaves to desire. Peace with the Pandavas is without doubt the best course. What Arjuna has submitted to us through Sanjaya will surely come to pass if we fight. In all the three worlds, no one wields a bow like him."

Drona, Bhishma and Vidura all looked expectantly at Dhritarastra. But the old king remained silent. Ignoring their advice, he asked Sanjaya to repeat what the other Pandavas had said. "What did the large-minded Yudhisthira say when he heard that we had amassed a huge army? Who is looking up to him for orders and who is trying to dissuade him from war? What is that virtuous one, wronged by my wicked sons, now planning?"

Sanjaya, who had been seated while the others had been speaking, came again to the center of the assembly. "All the Panchalas now look up to

Yudhisthira, as well as the Matsyas and Kekayas. All those tribes, down to the last herdsmen, are ready to do his bidding. Clad in a coat of mail he sits amid their chieftains like Indra amid the gods."

"Tell me in detail more about Yudhisthira's forces. Also, please describe Dhristadyumna's army and the army of the Somakas."

As Sanjaya recalled the sight of those troops he became stunned and fell silent. He drew a long sigh. His mind was overwhelmed with fear and he suddenly fainted.

Vidura said loudly, "Sanjaya, recalling the mighty sons of Kunti and their assembled troops, has lost control of his senses. He cannot utter a word."

Dhritarastra asked a servant to sprinkle cool water on Sanjaya's face.

"The sight of the tigers among men has filled him with terror," Vidura repeated. "Console him with comforting words, O king, and let him continue his report once his mind is peaceful."

After some moments, Sanjaya came to his senses. Reassured by Dhritarastra, he drank some water and stood again to address the assembly. "I have seen, O great king, those mighty heroes arrayed in armor like a pride of angry lions. At their head stands the ever-truthful Yudhisthira, who never departs from virtue out of desire or fear. He is ready to fight even the gods if need be. By his side stands the terrible Bhima, whose strength equals that of ten thousand elephants and who has slain Rakshasas with his bare hands. Bhima brought down the powerful Yakshas on the Gandhamadana mountain, and he slew Kichaka and all his followers.

"Then there is Arjuna, whose glories have already been described and who is fired with wrath. He is repeatedly bending the Gandiva and uttering war cries. He satisfied the immortal Shiva in a fight and was given the celestial weapons.

"Next Madri's two sons, the powerful twins, stand ready with their terrible weapons, breathing hot and heavy sighs."

Sanjaya spoke of all the principal warriors on the Pandavas' side. He mentioned Shikhandi, who, according to prophesy, was destined to kill Bhishma, and Dhristadyumna, destined to kill Drona. As he named the many great heroes aligned against the Kauravas, Duryodhana and Karna scoffed.

Dhritarastra, however, became fearful. When Sanjaya stopped speaking, the king began to address the assembly.

"O Sanjaya, all these you have named are powerful and courageous fighters, but Bhima is equal to them all. He gives me the greatest fear. We are like deer facing an enraged and hungry tiger. Many a night have I remained sleepless, thinking about the furious Bhima rushing at my sons with mace in hand. I do not see anyone in our army who can face him. When wrathful he is an implacable foe who tears through the battlefield like a tornado. He will surely put an end to my wicked sons. Seeing him advance toward them, they will meet with a calamity equal to meeting the god of death wielding his staff. Bhima will roam among my sons as a fully grown lion roams among a herd of deer. From his childhood he has been inimical to Duryodhana and his brothers. Finding the opportunity on the battlefield, he will not hesitate to annihilate all of them. O Sanjaya, it is only by good fortune that he has not already killed my sons for the wrongs they have inflicted upon him and his brothers."

Dhritarastra went on to describe the threat Bhima posed to his sons. Sweat ran down his face and he clenched his fists as he spoke. Bhima's vow to kill his sons gave him the greatest anxiety. The kings and ministers in the hall looked at him with pity as he concluded his speech.

"Destiny is surely all-powerful. Even though I see my sons' inevitable death, still I do not dissuade them from their aims. Because they all desire to traverse the eternal, noble and heavenly path, they will part with their lives in battle and ensure their everlasting fame on earth. Perhaps our only hope now lies in the support of our three aged, wise heroes: Bhishma, Drona and Kripa. They will doubtlessly repay the support and kindness we have given them by coming out for battle against the Pandavas. Even though the sons of Kunti are as dear to them as my sons, they will not avoid their duty. For a kshatriya to meet death in the line of duty is commendable. It leads to glorious regions of bliss. It seems to me, Sanjaya, that knowledge does not destroy woe; rather, distress destroys knowledge. As I contemplate the impending destruction of the Kurus, grief bewilders my senses and confounds my mind. I cannot let go of my attachment for my sons, the kingdom, my wife, my grandsons, and a thousand other things. Such blind attachment leads only to suffering."

Dhritarastra sighed. Bhishma and Vidura looked at him in despair.

He could clearly understand what would happen should they fight the Pandavas, but still he would not save the situation. All he had to do was give his sons the order to cease hostilities and the war would be finished before it began. Although Duryodhana officiated as the monarch, his father still occupied the throne as the head of state. If the king ordered the prince to make peace with the Pandavas, he would have to obey.

But Dhritarastra showed no signs of giving such an order. He seemed resigned to actualize the death and destruction of everyone and everything he held dear. The two ministers looked at each other, hopelessly, as the king continued.

"This great calamity the Kurus now face owes its existence to the dice game. My son is at fault because he is filled with avarice. This is the work of eternal time. Bound by time I am helpless in the face of my own ruination. What can I do? Where will I go? O Sanjaya, the foolish Kurus will all be killed by time and I can do nothing about it. I will hear news of my hundred sons dying and then hear the loud wailing of women. Only I will be left alive. How will death touch me? As a raging fire consumes a dry forest, so Bhima and Arjuna will consume my army."

The king then described Arjuna's prowess, whom he considered no less a danger than Bhima. He knew Arjuna was truthful and would not kill any of his sons out of respect for Bhima's vow, but he would certainly not restrain himself with the rest of the Kaurava forces.

"Although I think about it day and night, I do not see a warrior on earth who can stand against the Gandiva bow." Dhritarastra's voice was almost choking. "Some may think that either Karna or Drona can withstand him, but I do not share that view. Karna is careless and passionate, and the preceptor is old and weakened by affection for Arjuna. No one can kill Arjuna, nor will battle with him result in anything but his own victory. The authorities have assured us of this truth, and the Kurus have witnessed his strength with their own eyes. With Keshava guiding his chariot and the Gandiva in his hand, Arjuna will be irresistible in battle.

"The fools under Duryodhana's control do not know this. When a thunderbolt falls on one's head, something may be left behind. When Arjuna's arrows fall on one's head, however, nothing will be left behind. I can see him now in my mind's eye, coursing through our troops, his arrows flying in all

directions and beheading countless warriors. Could anyone face the combined might of Arjuna and Bhima and survive? Whomever Providence wills to be destroyed will not escape. Alas, the time for the Kurus' destruction is imminent."

Dhritarastra fell silent. If his sons were destined to die, then it would come to pass. But perhaps destiny would dictate some other outcome. After all, who could have foreseen that the noble Pandavas would have to give up their kingdom and enter the forest? Maybe their victory was not so certain. The king hardly dared to hope for his own victory. How could the Pandavas be overcome while they were supported by that unfathomable Krishna?

Weeping and sighing repeatedly, Dhritarastra said, "Although you have told me of the Pandavas' powerful forces, there is one who equals all of them and more. That mighty one could, by His desire, bring all the worlds under His control. That person is Krishna. He seems to have set His mind on the Pandavas' victory. It seems hopeless for my party. My heart quakes as I think of Yudhishthira's wrath, Bhima's prowess, the strength of Arjuna and the twins, and Krishna's inconceivable powers. What fool, desiring death, would fall like a moth into the inextinguishable Pandava fire? We have treated those heroes deceitfully. As a result, my sons will have to die. O Kurus, do not fight. If you wage war, then our race will be annihilated. Let us seek peace. Yudhishthira will not disregard me, especially upon seeing my distress."

The king trailed off in tears. The rest of the assembly regarded him silently. What could anyone say? Dhritarastra had said nothing about giving back Yudhishthira's kingdom. His desire for peace was an empty hope born of fear. He would not pay the price to bring peace. War was certain.

Sanjaya again approached the assembly, his hands clasped, and said, "O great king, it will be exactly as you say. That the kshatriyas will be destroyed by the Gandiva bow is obvious. I cannot understand how you, who can clearly see this truth, still allow yourself to be controlled by your sons. This is not the time to give way to grief. It is your fault alone that has caused this disaster. You have neglected the Pandavas, who are like your own sons, and treated them harshly. Sitting in the gambling arena you called out like a child, 'What has been won?' See now what you have won. Laugh now as you did then, O King. Now you must face the vengeful Pandavas and their friend, the Lord of all beings, Krishna. The Kauravas are about to sink like a holed boat in a shoreless ocean. Your hope for victory arises only from madness.

Whoever despises the Pandavas will be destroyed. It is not proper that you now grieve, O Bharata. You have had ample opportunity to prevent this calamity, but you repeatedly ignored all good advice. Your lamentations are useless, O chief among kings."

Sanjaya returned to his seat at the foot of the kings and ministers. Dhritarastra shook his head, tears running down his face and falling into his beard.

Duryodhana began to worry that the king might decide to give in to the Pandavas. He leapt to his feet and said, "There is nothing to fear, O great king. You need not grieve for us. We are capable of winning the battle. When I heard that Yudhishthira had amassed an army and was intent upon war, I approached Bhishma, Drona and Kripa. I sought their advice, asking if they felt we should surrender or fight. Victory was by no means certain. Each of them assured me, 'You need fear no enemies. Let anyone come. We will curb their pride with our sharp arrows. No one can defeat us in battle.' Declaring their loyalty to you, O king, they reassured me. I have faith in their words. Bhishma alone overpowered all the world's kings at Kashi. Again, that hero subdued the invincible warrior-sage Parasurama. How can the Pandavas defeat him? What power do they have? They do not have their kingdom or their wealth. We are the lords of the earth. Now is the time for us to assert our supremacy and our rightful position. This kingdom is yours, O best of men. How can we surrender it to the enemy?"

As usual, Duryodhana swayed Dhritarastra's mind. It was true that Bhishma was an insuperable warrior. He had also been given a boon that he would die only at his own will. No one could kill him. If he declared his intention to fight with all his heart, then all was not lost. The king checked his tears as Duryodhana continued.

"Why are you struck with fear simply upon hearing descriptions of the enemy? Consider our own army, almost twice the size of theirs. Even Indra could not overpower our forces. That Yudhishthira asks only for five villages shows that he is afraid of our might. As far as Bhima is concerned, do not be afraid of him. None in this world can equal my mace fighting. I am a match even for Balarama, my tutor, and with a single blow I will dispatch Bhima to Death's abode. I can break the Himavat mountain to pieces. I long to face Bhima in battle."

Duryodhana scowled in anger at the thought of Bhima. He had had the palace artisans make an iron replica of Bhima. Each day the Kaurava would smash the iron statue with his huge mace. Soon he would have the opportunity to smash Bhima himself.

"As for Arjuna, how can he possibly be victorious when he fights with Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Ashvatthama, Shalya, Bhurisrava and Jayadratha simultaneously? Even Drona single-handed is more than a match for him. Born from the immortal rishi Bharadvaja, no one can even look upon Drona when he is worked up in battle. Then there is Kripa, born from a powerful rishi. No man or god can slay him. And then there is Karna, whom I consider to be the equal of Bhishma, Drona and Kripa combined. Even Indra came to him out of fear and begged for his natural armor. That lord of the gods has bestowed an infallible weapon upon Karna with which he will surely slay Arjuna."

Duryodhana continued praising his forces and deriding the Pandavas. Naming all the kings on the Kaurava side, he breathed confidence into his father. There was no possibility the Pandavas could win the war. Dhritarastra could rest at ease.

In conclusion, Duryodhana asked Sanjaya, "With seven akshauhini divisions, what does Yudhisthira hope to achieve? Does he really think he can overpower us?"

Sanjaya smiled. "Yudhisthira and his brothers are all cheerful. I did not detect any fear in them. Arjuna mounted his heavenly chariot as I was leaving and said, 'I have seen divine omens foretelling our victory.' Looking at Arjuna clad in mail and standing on his chariot as lightning sits within a cloud, I saw truth in his words."

Duryodhana laughed sarcastically. "You are always praising the Pandavas, whom we defeated at dice. Tell me about Arjuna's chariot. What sort of horses and banners are attached to it?"

Duryodhana had heard about Arjuna's divine chariot, given to him by Agni. The Gandharva chief, Citraratha, gave Arjuna its steeds. He listened as Sanjaya described it.

"Arjuna's chariot is of celestial origin and cannot be impeded. It is drawn by white horses which move at the speed of the wind across both earth and sky. Citraratha has granted him a boon that there will always be a

hundred horses no matter how many are slain.

"I can barely describe Arjuna's banner. It was created by Visvakarma, and it throws up a celestial illusion. It appears to extend for miles in all directions. It is impossible to ascertain of what the banner is made, but it resembles smoke mixed with fire. It has all the colors of Indra's bow. The terrible monkey Hanuman sits there, as do other celestial beings of terrifying form."

Sanjaya described the other four Pandavas' chariots. When he had finished, Dhritarastra said, "O Sanjaya, which of the Pandava warriors will contend with which of mine?"

"Dhristadyumna, born from fire, has reserved Drona as his share. His brother Shikhandi has marked out Bhishma, while the pious Yudhisthira has determined to slay his uncle Shalya. Duryodhana and his hundred brothers will belong to Bhima. Arjuna has named Karna, Ashvatthama and Jayadratha. Whoever in this world claims to be invincible, Arjuna will also slay. Abhimanyu will meet all of your grandsons, O king. The deceitful Shakuni belongs to Sahadeva, while Nakula will engage with Shakuni's son Uluka and the hordes of mountain fighters he leads. O leader of men, all the rulers and warriors in your army have been assigned to one or another of the Pandavas and their followers. Therefore, do quickly what needs to be done, for the battle will soon begin."

Dhritarastra again became fearful. His mind swung between hope and despair. He spoke again, trembling.

"All my foolish sons, who will face Bhima, have already ceased to exist. The other kings and rulers will all be slain by the Gandiva bow as moths are killed when they enter fire. I see my army routed by the Pandavas, whom I have made into my enemies. Yudhisthira's forces are like a formidable ocean my son desires to cross with his two arms. Indra himself could not withstand such heroes, who are cool and composed in battle and capable of breaking down the Himalayas. Alas, my wicked son desires to fight them, ignoring my protests."

Duryodhana rose to his feet. "Both parties are mortals. Why then do you ascribe victory as belonging only to them? Think again about the heroes arrayed on our side. Not even the gods combined could overpower them, what to speak of the puny Pandavas. O sire, I do not consider the Pandavas

capable of even gazing at our forces. The kings and rulers who wish me well will take hold of the Pandavas as deer are held in a trap. They will be vanquished along with all of their followers."

Dhritarastra sat shaking his head. His intelligence told him that the Pandavas, aided by Krishna, could not be defeated, but his heart was held by the strong grip of attachment for his sons. His choked voice echoed around the hall. "See how my son raves like a maniac, Sanjaya. How will he ever defeat Yudhisthira in battle? Surely Bhishma knows the truth about the Pandavas' strength since he does not desire to fight with them. Tell us again of their prowess, Sanjaya. Let us be in no doubt of the danger we now face."

"Among the Pandavas' forces, Dhristadyumna constantly incites them. He said, 'Go, Sanjaya, and tell the Kauravas their annihilation is imminent. Tell them they can only avert this calamity by sending a pure and honest man to Yudhisthira to return to him his kingdom. Do not let Arjuna release the fire of his anger at the Kurus. He is protected by the gods in heaven and by the Supreme God himself. He cannot be slain. O Kurus, do not even think of fighting with him.'"

Dhritarastra cried out, covering his face. "O Duryodhana, my son," he wailed, "turn your mind from war. One half of this wide kingdom is more than enough for you and your ministers. Return to the Pandavas that which is theirs. All the Kuru elders see this as the only virtuous path and you should accept it, my child. Apart from you and the small-minded son of a suta, I do not think there are any here who desire war. Led by Karna, Dushashana and Shakuni, you are traveling the path to destruction. Come to your senses, dear son. Do not be misled."

Dhritarastra's words carried no authority. His plaintive cries were not taken seriously by anyone in the assembly. He had clearly abdicated his power to Duryodhana and would ultimately go along with whatever the prince decided. When Dhritarastra had spoken, Duryodhana stood gazing defiantly around the assembly. He made his decision clear. "I do not depend upon any of the warriors assembled on our side. Karna and I alone can perform the sacrifice of war, with Yudhisthira as the sacrificial beast. My chariot will be the sacrificial platform and my weapons the paraphernalia. My shafts will substitute for kusha grass, while my wide fame will be the clarified butter. We shall perform the sacrifice in honor of the god of death and will come back crowned with a halo of glory. Let the war begin. Either I

will rule the wide earth after killing the Pandavas, or they will enjoy the kingdom after killing me."

Duryodhana paused in order to add weight to his words. His voice, full of pride and arrogance, reverberated around the assembly hall. "I can sacrifice my life, my wealth, my kingdom, my everything, O king, but I can never live in peace with the Pandavas. I will not surrender to them even as much land as can be pierced by the point of a needle."

The hall remained silent after Duryodhana had taken his place on his throne. Bhishma and Vidura glanced at each other. Duryodhana's words did not surprise them. What could they say in reply? Only Dhritarastra could check his son and he was not doing that, despite his pitiful entreaties. He still had given no strong order to return the Pandavas' kingdom, nor was he telling anyone else to restrain Duryodhana. It was clear that destiny had ordained war.

Dhritarastra broke the silence. "I grieve for all of you, O rulers, who are following this fool to Death's abode. I cast off Duryodhana forever. Soon the Pandavas will move among our forces like tigers through a herd of deer. My army will fall like a helpless woman struck down by a wicked man. Beholding the Pandavas approaching like moving mountains, you will remember my words. O my sons, if you do not conclude peace now, you will meet with everlasting peace when you are struck by Bhima's mace."

Duryodhana looked at Karna and Dushashana. His old father may be terrified by the thought of battle, but he could hardly wait. Alone or assisted by his Danava-inspired troops, he was ready. No other course was possible.

Dhritarastra asked Sanjaya to repeat to him what Krishna had said. Sanjaya related Krishna's words, calling for the return of the Pandavas' kingdom. After this he described another meeting he had had with both Krishna and Arjuna.

"I was invited to see them in Arjuna's quarters. With my mind fixed on sacred things I entered the innermost apartment in the palace, my head lowered and my hands clasped in prayer. The two great souls, however, put me at my ease. They were seated together on a golden bed bedecked with precious stones. Krishna's feet rested on Arjuna's lap and Arjuna's on Krishna's lap. Draupadi and Satyabhama sat nearby like two shining moons. Arjuna pointed to a seat. I touched it with my hand and sat next to it on the

floor. Krishna and Arjuna rose from their place, like a couple of massive sal trees. Seeing the two black-complexioned heroes towering above me I was seized with fear. They were like Indra and Vishnu together. I realized that whoever has them on his side cannot possibly meet defeat."

Sanjaya closed his eyes as he recalled the sight. He was silent for some moments, then continued in a subdued voice. "After they had reassured me and offered me foods and drink, I placed my clasped hands on my head and told them of your desire for peace. O king, Arjuna then asked Krishna to make a suitable reply, whereupon the Yadava leader spoke. His words were charming and mild, but their import was terrible. They were calculated to inspire fear in your sons' hearts. He said, 'O Sanjaya, say this before Dhritarastra and all the Kuru elders after offering them our respects and asking after their welfare. Tell them that they should now perform auspicious sacrifices and make numerous gifts to the brahmins. Then they should make merry with their wives and sons, for they will soon face a calamity. I am thinking now of my debt to Draupadi, which is still not paid. That chaste lady purchased me for all time when she cried out, 'O Govinda,' amid the Kurus, who were afflicting her with pain.'"

Tears streamed down Sanjaya's face as he thought of how Krishna gave himself completely to whomever sought his shelter. "Krishna then spoke the following words: 'The Kurus have made the wielder of the Gandiva bow, with me as his second, their enemy. Who would dare challenge us in battle, even if the gods assisted them, unless their time had come? He who defeats Arjuna could hold up the earth in his two arms. He could burn up all creatures and destroy the heavens. Among all the beings within the three worlds, I do not see any to equal Arjuna in battle. Surely the fight at the Matsya kingdom was sufficient evidence of that—what to speak of his encounter with the Danavas in the nether world. Strength, agility, prowess, lightness of hand, untiring energy and patience reside always in Arjuna and in no one else. Consider all this carefully before beginning hostilities, O Kurus.'"

Sanjaya then told the Kurus that Krishna planned to come to Hastinapura himself to encourage peace.

Dhritarastra sat with his head bowed. He had spent many a long night pondering Arjuna's power, trying to weigh whether it could be countered by any of the Kuru warriors. It was hard to decide. Now that Arjuna was united

in battle with Krishna, the odds had shifted dramatically. Krishna's power was impossible to estimate. He was said by the rishis to be the Lord of all divinities. Opposing him would surely mean opposing the gods themselves.

The blind king spoke out with apprehension. "These descriptions of Arjuna and Krishna only convince me all the more of the folly of war. O Duryodhana, think again. Think with whom you will be fighting. Great men always repay their debts. Agni is indebted to Arjuna for his assistance at Khandava. He will surely help Arjuna in the war. So will the god Dharma align himself with his son, Yudhisthira. Bhima is Vayu's son and the twins are born of the two Ashvini gods. Thus it appears that we will be facing a force both human and divine. I cannot see how we can win. Son, make peace with the Pandavas. If you do not, then the Kurus' end has come."

Duryodhana was losing his patience. All this agonizing was too much. The prince jumped up in a rage. "O best of kings, why do you keep praising the Pandavas? They are mortals like the rest of us. How will the gods come to their assistance? The gods are never impelled by base emotions. It is only by indifference to worldly desires, the absence of avarice, anger and hatred that they have attained their heavenly positions in the first place. They do not get involved in petty human struggles based on emotional attachments. Were this not the case, then how could the Pandavas have undergone so much suffering? And even if the gods do take their side, so what? I am the equal to any of them. By my own mystic power I can stop fire from burning even if it wishes to consume the three worlds. With incantations I can solidify water, enabling chariots and infantry to march over it. I can break apart mountains and send down showers of rocks accompanied by a gale like that which blows at the time of destruction."

As he praised himself Duryodhana became increasingly enlivened. He flailed his arms and glared at the kings in the assembly. "You all know that in my kingdom there are no natural calamities caused by gods. Due to my protection, there are not even frightful beasts or snakes to assail my subjects. All the citizens practice virtue and live peacefully under my rule. Neither the gods nor the Asuras would dare protect anyone hated by me. Why did the gods not prevent me from exiling the Pandavas or from taking their wealth? Whomever I desire to be happy or miserable meets with that end without fail. I am never thwarted in my aims. O monarch, my words will not prove false. I am known in this world as one who speaks the truth. The world

witnesses my fame and glory. I say this only to console you and not out of self-praise. You will soon hear of the Pandavas' defeat, rest assured. I am superior to them in intelligence, might, prowess, knowledge and ability. I shall destroy them."

Duryodhana, who was now in the center of the hall, strode back to his seat, his head held high. Karna applauded him and then stood to speak, disregarding Dhritarastra, who had raised his hand to reply. Karna's voice rang around the assembly. "I will take it upon myself to kill the Pandavas. I have received the brahmastra from Parasurama and the shakti from Indra. With these two weapons I will destroy Pandu's sons. All of the other Kurus may stay with Duryodhana to protect him. Leave the Pandavas to me."

Bhishma laughed loud and long. "What are you saying, Karna? Your intelligence has obviously been dulled by death that now approaches you. Remembering the incident of the burning of Khandava, you should restrain yourself, foolish one. Your shakti weapon, of which you are so proud, will be burned to ashes when Krishna's discus hits it. The Supreme Person has already destroyed enemies far greater than you, Karna. Meeting with him and Arjuna, you and all your weapons will be ruined."

Bhishma reminded Karna how Parasurama had cursed him that, when he most needed it, he would not be able to remember the incantations to invoke the brahmastra. Karna had deceived the sage into thinking he was a brahmin in order to receive his teachings. When Parasurama discovered the lie, he uttered this curse. Karna would not be able to use the brahmastra weapon when he was faced with imminent danger, and Arjuna would certainly not have the same difficulty.

Karna snarled. "Your praise of Krishna is proper, O grandfather. I know him to be as great—even greater—than you say, but I can no longer tolerate your cruel words toward me. Hear now the result of your harshness. I will not engage in battle as long as you are present. Rather, I will lay down my weapons until you are laid low. Then the world will see my prowess."

Karna stormed out of the hall. Bhishma laughed again and turned toward Duryodhana. "The suta's son is a man who keeps his word. How will he now fulfill his promise to wipe out the enemy troops? In this assembly I heard him say, 'All of you here shall be the witness. I will again and again kill thousands and tens of thousands of enemy soldiers.' How will he act upon

it now? He is passionate and arrogant. At the very moment he cheated the holy rishi Parasurama he lost all virtue and ascetic merits."

Duryodhana was perplexed by Karna's sudden departure but, maintaining a calm appearance, again asserted that he depended on no one. Whether or not Karna aided him, he would face the Pandavas and win. When the prince finally stopped boasting, Vidura rose from his seat and began to tell a story.

"There was once a fowler who set a net in the forest to capture birds. Two large birds were trapped in the net, but they rose up to the sky, carrying the net with them. The fowler saw this and ran after them. As he ran, an ascetic saw him and said, 'How strange that one who moves by his feet on the earth should run after those who wander in the sky.' The fowler replied, 'Those birds united have been able to take my net, but they will fall down when they quarrel.' Sure enough, before long the two birds began to fight and they dropped to earth where the fowler caught and killed them. In the same way, brothers who fight one another are soon overpowered by death. O Duryodhana, cousin brothers should enjoy life together, eating and sporting but never quarreling."

Vidura confirmed what had already been said of the Pandavas' power, trying to dissuade Duryodhana from war. The prince said nothing. He already knew Vidura's opinion, and Vidura obviously favored the Pandavas.

It was clear that the assembly had nothing more to say. Sanjaya had delivered the Pandavas' messages and the Kurus had replied. Dhritarastra's pathetic calls for peace were useless if he did not return even a portion of Yudhishthira's kingdom to him. Never once had he indicated that he was willing to do this. Therefore, unless Krishna was able to change his mind, there would be war. One by one the kings and ministers left the hall.

At last Dhritarastra sat alone with Sanjaya. Having heard everyone's opinions publicly expressed, the king now wanted to hear his secretary's opinion. Did he think there was any chance of the Kurus winning the war? Sanjaya had seen both sides and was able to assess their respective strengths. Although Sanjaya had already stated that he saw little hope for the Kurus, still the king hoped that in private he would give him a clue as to how they might win.

Sanjaya was worried that if he spoke alone to the king his opinion

might not be taken seriously. He knew that Dhritarastra felt he was inclined toward Pandu's sons. He therefore asked if he could call for Vyasadeva, who was present at the time in the palace. If Dhritarastra saw that the wise rishi agreed with Sanjaya's opinion, perhaps he would take it more seriously.

The king agreed and also invited his wife Gandhari to be present. When both Vyasadeva and Gandhari had taken their seats near the king, Sanjaya turned to address his spiritual master. "O my lord, please grant me permission to speak to the king in your presence. He has asked about the Pandavas' strength."

Vyasadeva lifted his right hand in blessing. "O Sanjaya, you should tell him everything about Krishna, for he is the Pandavas' real power."

With his hands folded Sanjaya said, "O King, you have again and again asked about the strengths and weaknesses of the Pandavas. Their strength can be measured simply by measuring that of Govinda, for his strength knows no limits. If the entire world were placed on one side and Janardana on the other, then he would surpass the world on the point of strength. He can reduce the earth and all its creatures to ashes in a moment. Where there is truth, where there is righteousness and virtue, where there is modesty, and where there is humanity—there you will find Krishna. And where there is Krishna, there will be victory. He is the soul of all beings come to this world as if in play. The Pandavas are merely the instruments of his desire. That all-powerful being desires to annihilate all the miscreant and irreligious elements in the world. O King, your sons are such an element."

Dhritarastra reached out for his wife's hand and held it tightly. Sanjaya went on, "Keshava is the Lord of time, of death, and of moving and non-moving beings. Appearing as an ordinary man by his own illusion, he comes to this world. Those who know him are not deceived."

The old monarch was curious to hear more about Krishna. He had always known that his secretary accepted Krishna as the Supreme Deity. Sanjaya was Vyasadeva's disciple, who himself worshipped Krishna. The king was not sure. Krishna was certainly extraordinary. It was astonishing how he had killed so many powerful demons, and the rishis all extolled him as the original divinity. Yet he appeared so human. The king asked, "How is it that you accept Krishna as the Supreme God? Why do you know him as such and I do not? Please explain this to me if you feel it is appropriate,

Sanjaya."

"Those who are too attached to matter cannot know that great personality," Sanjaya replied. "To them he remains a mystery, or they simply do not accept his existence as God. I am not enamored of material things and have kept my desires in check. At the same time, I carefully study the Vedas and faithfully hear from holy men, such as my spiritual master, Vyasadeva. Thus I have been able to know Keshava in some part. You too may acquire this knowledge, O King. Take shelter of Krishna, for he is your best well-wisher. Do not despise him or his advice. Your foolish son has no faith in Krishna and will lead you and the Kurus to destruction."

Gandhari nodded in agreement. "Our wicked-minded son will certainly bring destruction upon us. He is envious and vain and never listens to his elders' advice. After enhancing the joy of evil men and my grief, he will die at Bhima's hands. Only then will he remember his father's words."

Vyasadeva, seated on an elevated seat spread with silk cushions, said, "O king, you are dear to Krishna. Listen to my advice. Hear carefully from Sanjaya. He can tell you the path by which Krishna can be known and accepted as one's shelter. Only due to excessive desire and hatred are men denied knowledge of God. Coveting wealth and fame in this world, almost all men are fully absorbed in illusion. Thus they come under the control of death again and again. A wise man therefore gives up all attachments and takes to the path of liberation, which leads ultimately to Krishna."

Dhritarastra asked Sanjaya to describe that path. After bowing before Vyasadeva, Sanjaya said, "Sense control is the beginning of the path. Performance of sacrifice without sense control will not allow you to know God. Renunciation of sensual desires arises from the awakening of true knowledge, which is born of wisdom. Wisdom is gained by experience and by hearing from the wise. True wisdom means controlling the senses. One with controlled senses will experience pleasure within as he proceeds on the path of self-realization. By this path can you attain Keshava, O king. Follow that path with a genuine desire to know and please that most ancient of deities and success will be assured."

Dhritarastra asked his secretary to tell him more about Krishna's attributes and qualities. Sanjaya told him of Krishna's various names and their different meanings which describe him as creator, sustainer and, ultimately,

destroyer of everything material and spiritual.

After hearing these descriptions Dhritarastra became thoughtful. He dismissed Sanjaya. After Vyasadeva had also left, he sat alone with his wife. The old king was perplexed. He could not deny Krishna's supremacy.

Sanjaya's descriptions, supported by Vyasadeva, were lucid and thorough. It was obvious that opposing Krishna and those backed by him was sure to end in defeat. But if it was Krishna's desire that the Kurus be destroyed, then what could he do? It seemed that his actions were all useless in the face of the Lord's divine plan. Dhritarastra sat sighing and holding his head. Did Krishna really desire that his sons, relatives and friends all be annihilated? Why, then, was he coming to Hastinapura to establish peace? It was a mystery the blind monarch could not unravel.

Chapter Forty-five. The Pandavas Consult Krishna

In Virata the Pandavas received the Kurus' response: no lands or wealth would be returned. Dhritarastra was pleading for peace, but he wanted to keep his world sovereignty. Duryodhana was his usual obstinate and wrathful self.

Yudhisthira was not surprised. All that remained now was for Krishna to go to Hastinapura, as he had promised. "The time has arrived for you to show your friendship, O Lord." Yudhisthira folded his hands as he addressed Krishna. "It is known throughout the world that you are devoted to the welfare of your friends. Depending upon you we have asked the Kurus to return our kingdom. I do not see anyone other than you who could get us through this difficulty. O Madhava, You are our only shelter."

Krishna was seated slightly lower than Yudhisthira on a gold throne decked with precious stones. His curling black hair fell around his smiling face. A diamond-encrusted crown shone from His head, and his brilliant, shark-shaped earrings flashed as he turned toward Yudhisthira. "Here I am," he replied to the Pandava. "I am ready to do whatever you ask. What do you want to say?"

Yudhisthira was moved by Krishna's response. What had he and his brothers done to merit such support from him? Here was the greatest of all personalities ready to carry their message and act as an envoy for peace. All five brothers gazed intently at Krishna's face and tears pricked their eyes.

"You have heard Sanjaya describe Dhritarastra's mind and feelings, O Krishna. He wants peace without giving us what is ours. That covetous man, partial to his own sons, has a sinful heart. We lived for twelve years in the forest and, at his command, a further miserable year in this kingdom. The brahmins know that we were true to our promise, but he has reneged on his agreement. Following his foolish son's advice, he desires to follow a deceitful course. He will not even grant us five villages. He thinks he owns the world. He has no shame. Because of his greed we have been reduced to poverty and are unable to perform our kshatriya duties. Without wealth it is difficult for us to acquire virtue. Asceticism and begging are not a kshatriya's duty, O Krishna. We are meant to rule over people and to maintain large treasuries in order to support brahmins and the needy. Alas, what greater misery is there than for a prosperous man to lose his wealth? Death would be better."

Yudhisthira looked at his brothers, who sat in silent agreement. At his command they would have accepted even a village each, but Dhritarastra wanted them to remain beggars. The old monarch's suggestion was outrageous. It was unthinkable for a powerful kshatriya to beg. Even their having to beseech the Kurus for their own kingdom was painful and humiliating.

Yudhisthira continued, "Although it would be a vicious act to take back our kingdom by slaying our relatives, I cannot see any other course. Fighting when the proper time comes is the hard duty of kshatriyas, but war means suffering for all. Even if we win we will suffer repentance and grieve the death of our relatives and friends. If we lose we will suffer extinction. Yet without a kingdom we are as good as dead. Therefore I ask Dhritarastra to peacefully return to us what is already ours. Failing this, then war is the righteous course of action for us, even though it be fraught with misery."

Yudhisthira did not relish the prospect of a war with his elders. According to sacred texts, one should always acquiesce to his superiors in an argument. He asked Krishna to clear his doubts. "What is your opinion, O Keshava? What is the path of virtue that I should now tread? Is it right for us to fight with Dhritarastra and his followers? I doubt he will accept any peaceful approach because he is too attached to his sons. He will simply laugh at our respectful submission."

"O Dharmaraja, whether or not to fight is not your choice. Rather, the choice belongs to Dhritarastra. For the good of you both I will go there and sue for peace. If peace can be achieved, then I will have done something virtuous and the Kuru and Pandava armies will be freed from the death trap."

Yudhisthira looked doubtful. "It is not my wish that you go to the Kurus, O Krishna. Even if you address Duryodhana in a friendly way, he will not listen to you. I am sure he will try to harm you in some way. What will be the use of any of this if some harm befalls you?"

Krishna laughed. "I know Duryodhana's vicious nature, but by going to the Kurus and trying for peace, we will not be censured. No one will be able to say that we did not do everything in our power to avoid war. Do not be afraid for me. All the earth's rulers united could not stand before me in battle when I am angry. If the Kurus insult me when I desire their good, then I shall consume them."

"As you wish, O Krishna," Yudhisthira acceded. "Go to Hastinapura. May all good come from it and may we see you returned in good health with your object achieved. You are as dear a friend to me as to Arjuna. Relying on your friendship I am not anxious. You should speak to Duryodhana in a way that will secure peace, even if it means we have to sacrifice virtue. I will accept less than my rightful share, or even play another game of dice if necessary, if war can be averted."

Yudhisthira was confident that he would not lose another dice game, having learned the secrets of the game from Vrishaparva in the forest. He was also alluding to the fact that he would peacefully accept just five villages. He was prepared to make any personal sacrifice in order to avoid fighting his relatives and teachers. Yudhisthira was even beginning to wonder if it may not be better to simply let the Kauravas keep the kingdom. Perhaps he could stay with his brothers in a country belonging to their allies. He was certain both Krishna and Drupada would be happy to give them some territory to rule.

Krishna's face assumed a grave expression. "I know well both your intentions and Duryodhana's intentions. Although you would prefer peace by any means, it is not a kshatriya's duty to avoid a righteous fight. Rather, the creator has ordained that a kshatriya must meet victory or death. He cannot gain his livelihood by gentleness—begging or gathering fruits and roots in the forest. When the time comes, he must show his power rather than retiring in a spirit of humility."

Yudhisthira was almost too humble. Krishna knew that Duryodhana would only take advantage of his mildness and tolerance if he displayed it. The language of strength and threats was the only way to sway the Kaurava from his sinful aims. It would benefit no one if Duryodhana was allowed to get away with his cruelty and deceit. The world would be deprived of its most virtuous ruler and would be led instead by a man given over to selfishness. Krishna reminded Yudhisthira of the many insults the Kurus had offered the Pandavas.

"Duryodhana has shown no remorse or shame for having sent you to the forest clad in deerskins. Indeed, he and his brothers spoke harshly at the time. The elder Kurus simply watched as you were cheated of your kingdom in the dice game. Then the evil-minded Dushashana dragged the weeping Draupadi by her hair into the assembly hall."

Krishna's eyes blazed as he recalled Draupadi's violation. His stern voice echoed through the hall. "All the kings present shed tears and censured Duryodhana but did nothing. For that act alone he is fit to be killed by anyone, what to speak of yourself. He is blamed and condemned by the brahmins and all virtuous men. Thus he is as good as dead already. Just as there is no sin attached to killing a serpent, so there is no sin attached to killing him. Those who would follow him into battle also deserve death for supporting one so wicked."

Krishna paused. Yudhisthira had rarely seen him so angry. What hope was there for the Kauravas when they had incited Krishna to such fury? He seemed about to consume the entire cosmos by his mere glance. Yudhisthira saw him looking over at Draupadi, who had been moved to anger as he recalled Dushashana's terrible act. Tears dropped from her eyes and she breathed heavily as Krishna went on speaking.

"By going to Hastinapura I will remove all doubts. Everyone will see your good-heartedness and Duryodhana's sinfulness. I will remind the Kauravas of all the evils they have perpetrated against you. None shall call you sinful, for you ask for peace. The world will blame the Kurus, headed by Dhritarastra. I will ask for peace without sacrificing your interests, O ruler of men. Hearing their reply and understanding their intentions, I will then return."

Krishna looked around the room. Everyone's eyes were fixed on him as he turned back to Yudhisthira and solemnly concluded his speech. "Know that war will certainly result. Duryodhana will not return to you any portion of your prosperous territories. It shall only remain for you to kill he who has already been killed by his own sins. And I shall assist you."

Yudhisthira accepted Krishna's speech. He knew that Krishna's acts were always meant for the good of all beings. If He deemed war as necessary, then it could not be avoided—even if it meant killing the esteemed Kuru elders.

Krishna wanted to hear from all of the Pandavas before he left. He looked across at Bhima. Realizing Krishna's desire, Bhima said, "I think you should say whatever you can to achieve peace, O Madhusudana." To the amazement of all, his voice was mild and impassive. "But please be careful. Duryodhana is resentful, wrathful, arrogant, and unable to hear good advice.

Do not address him in harsh words or he will react violently. Treat him with courtesy. It will be difficult to effect peace, but please try your best. Still, I foresee the imminent destruction of the Kurus. Even as Kali was born among the Asuras, so has this wicked Duryodhana taken birth among the Kurus. Try to assuage him with mild words, O Krishna, or our race will be extinguished. Let there be peace among us, let us avoid the sin of annihilating our relatives, and let us live together as brothers."

Krishna appeared surprised. Glancing at Yudhisthira and Arjuna He began to laugh. "O Bhima, your words are like coldness in fire or lightness in the earth."

Bhima frowned as Krishna went on, "What has brought about this change of heart? Until now you have spoken only words indicative of war. You have spent entire nights sitting with your face bent downwards, breathing hot sighs. Running about and beating the earth, you sometimes appear insane. You spend your time in solitude and nothing can give you delight. Suddenly you will laugh out loud and at other times weep profusely. For long periods you sit with your head between your knees with your eyes closed. All this is the work of wrath. O Bhima, you have sworn to kill Duryodhana and all his brothers. Why this sudden display of mildness?"

Krishna smiled as he continued. "Alas, it seems that even the powerful are struck by terror when the time for battle arrives. Surely you are seeing unfavorable omens and so you desire peace. Seized by fear you have become like a eunuch, devoid of manliness. O son of Kunti, the minds of men are inconstant and easily swayed, like saplings moved by the wind. O hero, be firm. Do not give way to fear. I am totally amazed to see you in this state. Without you, your brothers will sink in an ocean of despair. Think of your noble lineage. You are a kshatriya and meant to live by your might. This weakness of heart is unbecoming, O Bhima."

Like a first-class horse prodded by its rider, Bhima quickly stood and said loudly, "Do not think my mind has been swayed, O Krishna. I am cheerful at the prospect of war. You know this well enough as we have lived together many times. Or perhaps you do not know me, as one swimming in a lake does not know its depths. Thus do you find fault with me. Who, knowing me as Bhima, could possibly have spoken such words? Although it is always condemned to praise oneself, I shall speak of my prowess in order to ease your mind."

Bhima held out his arms, which resembled a pair of elephant trunks. "Who is there who having once entered within the circle of these arms could escape? Even if Indra, the ocean, and the Himavat in person assisted him, he would die. If the earth and heavens were to suddenly come against one another in fury like two great mountains, I could hold them apart with my two arms, along with all their movable and immovable creatures. All those who oppose the Pandavas I will trample under my feet. O Achyuta, although you do not know me now, you will surely know me in the turmoil of battle. Your words pain me like the lancing of an old boil. My strength is even greater than I have described. When the time comes, you and the world will see me cutting down the foremost warriors with their elephants, horses and chariots. I would not be afraid even if the three worlds rushed against me. I spoke only out of mercy, O Krishna, and could bear any sort of trouble to avoid annihilating the Bharatas."

Krishna smiled broadly as Bhima returned to his seat. "Desiring to know your intentions, I spoke only out of affection. I was not finding fault with you because I know you are capable of all you have said and more. I know the greatness of your soul and the strength you possess. My words were only meant to inspire you to be determined. Firm action will soon be required. Without action a man cannot achieve his ends in this world. Although it is the ultimate cause, destiny alone is not sufficient. One who acts with full knowledge of cause and effect, without attachment to the results, can bring about his highest goals. Those who remain idle, either out of ignorance or fear, do not achieve success."

Krishna turned toward Arjuna. "What is your view, Dhananjaya? I shall leave at dawn for Hastinapura. Do you have any final thoughts?"

Arjuna had been silently taking everything in. He looked around the great hall. The many kings and brahmins present looked back at him as he began to speak.

"I think Yudhisthira has said all that needs to be said, O Janardana. But it seems to me that you do not see peace as being easily obtained, owing to Dhritarastra's avarice and his wicked son's malice. You consider too that man's desires are useless unless attended by action—that one should not simply depend on destiny. Thus do you consider that we should take up arms to recover our rightful kingdom, should that become necessary."

Having stated his understanding of Krishna's speech, Arjuna gave his response. "In my opinion, O Keshava, there is nothing unattainable to one who acts in knowledge. Acting in accordance with your desire constitutes supreme knowledge. I know you to be the best well-wisher of both ourselves and the Kurus. Whatever you decide to do I will accept. If peace is desired by you, then it shall be so; and if you desire war, then I am ready to fight."

Arjuna paused. His hand rested on the long sword by his side. Surely he had been born only to wield weapons in combat. He could not honestly see any chance of peace, even with Krishna going to Hastinapura. Despite his power, Krishna never compelled others to act against their own desires. He would offer them wisdom, present logic and reason, but in the end everything would depend upon Dhritarastra and Duryodhana's free will. There was nothing to indicate that they would respond favorably. In all probability Krishna would return insulted.

Arjuna's voice rose in anger as he thought about it. "Without doubt the evil-minded Duryodhana deserves to die. He and his brothers cruelly and deceitfully robbed us of our kingdom and insulted the innocent Draupadi. I cannot see him accepting any good counsel. Your words will be like throwing seeds on barren land. If you think he should be destroyed, then do it at once, O Lord, for there is nothing to be considered in this matter. Otherwise, let there be battle! What kshatriya would turn away from such a fight, even if death stares down upon him?"

Krishna nodded slowly. "It is exactly as you say, Arjuna. Peace and war both lie in my hands, but I will not force either. Even the divine agency which causes the results of actions allows men their free choice. Every man must accept the consequences of his own action. Blinded by attachment, men do not see the final results of their acts, but the divine power always brings about those results. I will convey in full Yudhishthira's message to the Kurus. As you say, Arjuna, Yudhishthira has already said everything that should be said. Duryodhana is likely to be too vicious to accept my advice. He is unable to part with even a tiny piece of land for a brief period. Thus there will be war. You will be required to fight, Bibhatsu. Fix your mind on battle, for whomever you determine to defeat is already vanquished. For my part, I desire to do whatever is good for Dharmaraja. I will always follow the instructions of that pious king, and I will also duly consider Duryodhana's wicked acts."

Krishna turned toward the twins. Both of them expressed their willingness for battle. Satyaki also spoke of his determination to fight. There was little doubt in anyone's mind that war was unavoidable. Duryodhana would simply laugh at Krishna.

Draupadi was also seated in the assembly. The talk of peace had alarmed her. For thirteen long years she had waited for the time when Duryodhana and his brothers would receive justice. She wanted the battle to begin at once. Krishna's final peace mission worried her. What if he succeeded? It seemed her husbands—even Bhima—were ready to accept peace if Krishna could somehow secure it without sacrificing their interests. How, then, would she be avenged for her suffering at the Kauravas' hands? How would her defiled honor be restored? She addressed Krishna with anguish in her voice.

"O Achyuta, why are you going to Hastinapura? What do you hope to achieve? Has Duryodhana not made it clear that he will never return Yudhishthira's kingdom? Yudhishthira asked for five villages, and still the evil one would not agree. Neither by peaceful means nor by surrender will we attain our ends. Only by battle will we recover our kingdom. I cannot see any point in your going there, O Krishna, unless it is to annihilate those sinful men. You should not show mercy at this time. It is said that the sin of killing an innocent man accrues to a ruler who fails to kill one who is guilty. Do not let yourself be touched by that sin, O Janardana."

Draupadi reminded Krishna of the pain she felt in the Kurus' assembly hall. Her voice was choked. "Shame to Arjuna's skill in archery, and shame to Bhima's strength that Duryodhana still lives for even a moment longer. O Lord, if I am fit to be favored by you, if you feel mercy toward me, then direct the full force of your wrath on Dhritarastra's sons."

Draupadi rose up from her seat behind the Pandavas. Taking hold of her ringlets of deep blue hair, she approached Krishna. "O lotus-eyed one, this is the hair that Dushashana seized. If Bhima and Arjuna are so mean as to desire peace, then my old father and his sons will fight for my virtue. So too will my heroic sons, with Abhimanyu at their head, come to avenge me. If I do not see Dushashana's hand torn from his body, then how can I ever experience peace? For thirteen years my mind has been ablaze with thoughts of revenge. My heart has been rent asunder upon seeing Bhima inclined toward mildness."

Draupadi stopped speaking. Hot tears fell on her breasts and she covered her face with her delicate hands. Krishna consoled her gently. "Before long, Panchali, you will see the Kauravas' wives weep as you weep now. Those with whom you are angry are already destroyed along with all their kinsmen and followers. The gods have ordained it. Bhima, Arjuna, the twins, Yudhisthira and I will kill them. Do not doubt this. If Dhritarastra's sons do not heed my advice, they shall lie upon the bare earth, their bodies food for dogs and jackals. O gentle lady, stop crying. You will soon see your husbands regain their kingdom after killing their enemies."

Draupadi was pacified by Krishna's words. There was nothing left to be said. It was late afternoon and Yudhisthira adjourned the assembly. Krishna would leave early the next morning. He rose and bowed to Yudhisthira, leaving the hall like the sun going behind a cloud. The Pandavas followed him and gradually the others dispersed, all reflecting upon Krishna's momentous words.

Chapter Forty-six. Krishna's peace mission

Just before dawn, bards and Brahmins assembled outside Krishna's bedchamber. They chanted auspicious Vedic hymns as musicians played lutes and drums. Inside the chamber Krishna had already risen and was performing his morning rituals. After bathing and worshipping the sun and the sacred fire, he put on yellow silk garments. The palace servants helped adorn him with numerous gold ornaments studded with priceless gems. As he paid his respects to the Brahmins, giving them cows and gold in charity, Satyaki entered. Krishna greeted him cheerfully and said, "O hero, please prepare my chariot. Equip it with both offensive and defensive weapons. Duryodhana lacks all scruples, and so do Karna and Shakuni. An enemy should never be disregarded, even if he is weaker."

Satyaki detailed some soldiers to prepare Krishna's chariot. They brought out the car meant for high-speed journeys, which had two great wheels resembling the sun and the moon. It blazed like fire and was decorated with moons and stars as well as figures of sharks, animals, birds, and various kinds of flowers worked in precious stones. The chariot was covered with tigerskins and rows of small bells. A tall flagstaff of lapis-lazuli bore a large dark-blue banner emblazoned with the emblem of Garuda.

Krishna's four horses, Saibya, Sugriva, Meghapushpa, and Balahaka, all clad in mail, were yoked to it with harnesses of jeweled leather.

Krishna came out of the palace and mounted the chariot with Satyaki. His charioteer, Daruka, urged on the horses and they moved off, being loudly praised by crowds of citizens. Krishna saw by the roadside brahmins offering him worship while musically chanting sacred Vedic hymns. As he proceeded along the city's main highway, the sky cleared and a gentle breeze began to blow. The gods, Gandharvas, and celestial rishis assembled in the sky, offering prayers. The Pandavas and their allies followed the slowly moving chariot on foot. The citizens threw flowers and rice on the road in front of the procession. Conchshells, kettledrums, trumpets, and other instruments sounded on all sides.

When Krishna reached the city's outskirts he dismounted. Yudhisthira embraced him, wishing him success. With tears in his eyes he said, "O Govinda, please go to the pious lady who patiently awaits our return, passing her days in grief—she who is ever attached to the worship of the Supreme Lord, to whom fasts and devotions are second nature, and who is charitably disposed to all beings—please offer her our deepest respects. Alas, when shall I be able to render my mother some good? Please comfort her, O Madhava, and tell her everything about us."

The last time the Pandavas had seen Kunti was when they were going into exile. She had followed them along the road, crying and stumbling in sorrow and pain. Now it seemed they might not see her until after the war, if at all. Each of them sent her a message through Krishna.

Yudhisthira continued, "Please also greet on our behalf our grandfather, Bhishma, and our preceptor, Drona. The wise Vidura, who has unlimited knowledge, we embrace with affection. Offer all the Kuru elders our respects and love."

Yudhisthira gave a final message for Dhritarastra, then he walked respectfully around Krishna with his hands folded. After this, Arjuna came forward to say farewell. After embracing Krishna he said, "O Govinda, it has been decided that you will demand for us one-half of the kingdom. If Duryodhana refuses, I will certainly annihilate the kshatriyas. There is no doubt of that. Go now, O Lord, and we shall remain always thinking of you. Everything will be done just as you desire."

After the Pandavas had circumambulated Him, Krishna climbed back onto his chariot. Spurred on by Daruka, the horses took off. As the Pandavas stood watching, Krishna's chariot rapidly disappeared into the distance. A dust cloud rose behind it, and the five brothers stared after Krishna until the dust settled and they could no longer see him.

Satyaki looked around as they sped toward Hastinapura. He saw various omens, both earthly and celestial. Lightning flashed in the cloudless sky, and behind them showers of rain fell. Rivers flowed backwards and the earth shook. Satyaki saw water gushing out of wells and fire blazing up on the horizon. The atmosphere darkened and loud roars emanated from the sky, although no beings were visible. Although Satyaki saw all these terrible signs, the area around the chariot was calm. A cool breeze blew, carrying fragrant lotus petals and drops of water. The road ahead always seemed smooth and free of debris and thorns.

They passed through various provinces and were greeted and praised by thousands of brahmins. The brahmins worshipped Krishna with offerings of arghya and flowers. Beautifully dressed and ornamented women stood by the roadside, ululating joyfully and throwing flower petals and fresh grains. Krishna stopped to greet the people and receive their worship. At the end of his first day's journey he arrived at Brikasthala, where he spent the night in a spacious house offered by the local people. They brought him all kinds of food and drink and he offered them blessings. Krishna and Satyaki then took rest on large, comfortable beds, still being praised by the brahmins.

* * *

As Krishna approached Hastinapura, a fierce wind blew up. The city was ravaged. Huge trees were uprooted and buildings smashed. There were also other signs of foreboding. The sky became black and there were repeated crashes of thunder. Vultures and crows wheeled, crying loudly, while jackals howled.

On the day before Krishna's arrival, Dhritarastra called an assembly to discuss how to greet him. He had been informed of Krishna's arrival at Brikasthala. Thinking of Vidura's instructions, the old king said, "Krishna can fulfill all our desires if we satisfy him. On him the world's course depends. he is the Lord of creation, the source of all power, wisdom and opulence. He is

worthy of our respect and worship in every way. Indeed, if we do not respect him, then misery will ensue. Let us prepare a welcome for him befitting the gods. By pleasing him in this way we will obtain the fulfillment of our desires when he arrives."

Dhritarastra suggested that they offer him the best of residences, equipped with everything enjoyable. They decided to offer to him Dushashana's palace, which was the most opulent in Hastinapura. The king then asked that various kinds of wealth be prepared to offer as gifts. "I wish to present him with sixteen golden chariots, each drawn by excellent horses of the same color, eight huge elephants with tusks like ploughs, a hundred virgins and the same number of menservants. Thousands of deerskins, costly blankets and silks shall be brought before Krishna, along with profuse quantities of gold and gems. Let all my sons, with the exception of Duryodhana, go out to greet Him. The citizens should line the streets and beautiful dancing girls and actors should perform for his pleasure. Decorate the city with flags, festoons and garlands. Sweep all the roads and drench them with scented water. Tomorrow we will declare a festival in honor of Keshava."

When Dhritarastra stopped, Vidura said, "O King, you are respected in this world as a man of virtue. Old in wisdom and knowing what is right, you desire to please Krishna. This is good, but in my opinion you are not properly motivated. You wish to win over the lord of the Yadavas by offering him wealth, yet you will not accede to his real desire that you surrender even five villages to the Pandavas. All your ministrations and gifts will prove useless if you do not grant Yudhisthira his rights. For sure, the all-powerful Govinda will not even cast His eyes upon your wealth. If you really want to please him, do as he asks. Act as a father should act toward his children. Do not bring about your sons' destruction by your own foolishness."

Duryodhana glanced at Shakuni and stood to speak. "What Vidura has said regarding Krishna is correct. Kind words and gifts will not separate him from the Pandavas' cause. Therefore, I feel we should not offer him wealth. Although Krishna is worthy of all this worship and more, he will simply see our attempts as a sign of weakness. Our gifts of wealth, while demeaning us, will not sway him from his determination for war. It may even anger him."

Bhishma shook his head. "Janardana will not become angry whether

he is properly received or not. We cannot insult him, nor can we win him over. Whatever he desires will happen and we cannot check it by any means. Our only course of action is to abide by his wishes. Krishna will surely say only what is conducive to the welfare of all beings. We should follow his direction. O King, effect peace with the Pandavas, for this is Krishna's desire."

Duryodhana, his eyes smoldering, retorted, "I will never be able to share power with the Pandavas. I have another idea. When Krishna enters this assembly, I will take him captive. With him as my prisoner the Yadus, Vrishnis, Pandavas, and indeed the whole world will be at my disposal. We should think of some means to effect this plan so that he will not suspect anything."

Duryodhana had discussed this idea with Shakuni and Karna and had already made arrangements, whether or not the court agreed. Taking Krishna prisoner seemed to him the best course of action. The Pandavas would never dare attack them if they were holding Krishna.

As Duryodhana made his foolhardy suggestion the kings in the assembly gasped. Dhritarastra was shocked and said angrily, "O child, do not speak in this way. This is against eternal virtue. A messenger should never be violated, what to speak of one such as Krishna. He is our relative and is dear to us all. What wrong has he ever done the Kurus? He should certainly not be made captive."

Bhishma's furious voice then rang out. "Your son is on the verge of oblivion, O king. He chooses only evil and never good, although advised by numerous well-wishers. You follow him on his unrighteous path toward certain ruin. He will cease to exist the moment he comes against Krishna, who can do anything he desires without the least exertion. I dare not listen to any more words from this sinful person."

Bhishma strode out of the assembly hall in a rage. Dhritarastra then ended the session and everyone left, censuring Duryodhana. His suggestion had gone beyond the bounds of propriety. Surely Dhritarastra would now see the folly of supporting him. As they left the hall the kings and ministers looked at the blind king, who sat in silence. What would he say when Krishna arrived the next morning?

* * *

After a pleasant night in Brikasthala, Krishna and Satyaki rose before dawn and began their morning worship. They then left the village at sunrise. In less than two hours their fast-moving chariot approached the outskirts of Hastinapura. Crowds of people lined the roads for miles outside the city, hoping to see Krishna. Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, and the other Kuru elders also came out to greet him. All of them were beautifully attired and filled with joy to see Krishna's approach. He entered the decorated city, surrounded by the people. Along the roads Krishna saw archways and other structures decked with precious gems. From the balconies of the high, white mansions along the road ladies threw fragrant flowers onto his chariot. Many instruments played and the blasts from thousands of conchshells filled the air.

The roads were packed with people, and Krishna dismounted from his chariot to pass through their midst. Fifty tall and well-armed soldiers walked ahead of him to clear a path through the crowds. As he went along the smooth stone road, Krishna glanced about on all sides, smiling at the people. Loud shouts of "Hail Govinda!" were heard everywhere. Slowly Krishna made his way toward Dhritarastra's home, consisting of numerous large palaces arranged around spacious gardens. He was led through the inner quarters, passing through a number of gates guarded by young warriors holding bows and spears.

Krishna was brought directly to Dhritarastra in the royal court who immediately honored him with suitable words of praise. The king received him with the greatest respect and had him seated on a jeweled golden throne no less opulent than his own. Two young maidservants stood on either side of the throne, fanning Krishna with chamara whisks.

After Krishna had been worshipped with the traditional rites of hospitality, he stayed in the court for a short while, exchanging informal and joking words with the Kurus. It was decided that there would be a full assembly the following day when they would hear Krishna's message. Taking Dhritarastra's permission, Krishna then left the court and went to Vidura's house to see Kunti.

Vidura was overjoyed to see Krishna approaching his home. His eyes flooded with tears and he bowed at Krishna's feet. Krishna raised him up by the shoulders and embraced him with affection. Vidura gazed into Krishna's

face. "I cannot describe the joy I feel upon seeing you," he said. "You are the inner soul of all embodied beings. I am honored beyond measure."

Vidura showed Krishna into his home and, along with his wife, worshipped him with love. He asked after the Pandavas, and Krishna told him all the news from Virata. Vidura was happy to hear that the Pandavas were well and that they had many allies.

Krishna wanted to see Kunti at once, so Vidura showed him to her quarters. As he entered her room, Kunti stood up quickly and ran toward him. Remembering her sons, she cried aloud. Then she clasped hold of Krishna's neck and shed tears. Krishna consoled her and her tears gradually subsided. She brought Krishna into the room and sat him on a large couch spread with white silk. As she offered him arghya, Krishna saw that his aunt had become emaciated through fasting and grieving. In one part of her spacious quarters he saw Brahmins tending a sacrificial fire, their voices carrying through the room as they chanted mantras. A deity form of Vishnu stood on a large altar, beautifully dressed and decked with fresh garlands. Incense burned on the altar and its pleasant fragrance filled the room.

Kunti had not seen Krishna since before her sons' exile. Sitting near him on the couch she poured out her lamentations, her voice choked with sorrow. "Tell me, how are my sons? O Keshava, those pious boys, even from their childhood, were attached to serving their elders, were humble, kind, and always wished for each others' welfare. But they were robbed of their kingdom and sent to the forest. How cruel is fate! They have brought wrath and joy under control, are devoted to the Brahmins, and are speakers of truth; yet, abandoning their wealth and opulence, they lived in exile. This has ripped open my heart. How did they live in the forest, O Krishna? After living in palaces attended by numerous servants, how did they survive in the wild? Formerly they would sleep on the best of beds in well-appointed rooms. How could they lay down on the bare earth? Alas, my children have suffered too much sorrow. Deprived of their father as young boys, they then had to leave their mother and all their friends and relatives."

Kunti lamented at length. She described each of her sons, her voice rising and falling in grief. "Shall I ever see them again?" she cried. "O Achyuta, tell me how Draupadi is faring. She is dearer to me than all my sons. That noble lady preferred her husbands' company to that of her father and sons. It seems one does not necessarily get happiness as a result of virtue,

for she is the most virtuous of all women and yet has had to suffer unbearable misery. When I remember how she was dragged into the assembly my heart feels such agony. Nothing has ever given me greater pain. Dragged by that dishonorable and covetous wretch even as the Kurus looked on, she found no protector other than Vidura. The virtues of the high-souled Vidura are an ornament for this world."

Kunti's choked voice trailed off and she sat weeping for some time. Krishna looked compassionately at her tear-streaked face. Even in old age she was still beautiful, her fine features highlighted by her white widow's silk covering her head. She had not decorated herself since Pandu's death, but she still bore a regal splendor and was obviously noble.

Taking several deep breaths, Kunti regained her composure and went on. "When my sons were born, the gods spoke from the sky. 'This one will be lord of the world,' the gods said at Yudhisthira's birth. At Arjuna's birth, the heavenly voice predicted that he would slaughter the Kurus in battle. I do not doubt these prophecies. The time has come for my sons to show their prowess. This is the moment for which kshatriyas take birth. You should tell Yudhisthira that his piety is decreasing daily. As long as the sinful Duryodhana and his evil brother, the defiler of Draupadi's virtue, remain alive and unpunished, he suffers a decrease of virtue. O Keshava, I do not grieve for the defeat at dice, the loss of the kingdom, or even separation from my sons as much as I grieve for the youthful Draupadi being brought in a single cloth before the Kurus and insulted. How can I experience such grief? With you and the invincible Balarama as my protectors, as well as Bhima and Arjuna, it is truly astonishing."

Kunti gazed at Krishna. She knew who he was—that somehow he had arranged everything. Still, it was difficult to understand. Why had he allowed the chaste Draupadi to be insulted? Why was the wicked Duryodhana allowed to rule the world? Surely there was some divine plan underlying it all, meant for the good of all men. Kunti remembered a proverb she had often heard from Pandu: 'Man proposes, God disposes.' She had also received instructions from the great Vyasadeva and other rishis, who had given her a transcendental understanding of the Lord's nature. The Lord fulfilled men's desires in accordance with what they deserved. Eventually, all of a man's acts would bring about appropriate reactions. Although it may seem that a sinful man prospered while a virtuous man suffered, in the end

sin always brought ruin while virtue brought success. Kunti had little doubt. The destruction of the Kurus was imminent.

Krishna consoled his grieving aunt. "O Kunti, what woman is there in this world like you? Born of a noble family, you married a lord of the earth and have given birth to five great heroes. Your sons are like virtue personified. They have controlled sleep, laziness, anger, joy, hunger and thirst. They do not desire any mean pleasures. The happiness belonging to those possessed of true power is all they desire. The greatly powerful seek either extreme happiness or extreme suffering, and they accept nothing mediocre. Either they rule the earth or they practice severe asceticism. Your sons have made this same choice. The time has now come for them to assume rulership of the world. You will soon see them in good health, with all their ends achieved, installed as kings and surrounded by prosperity."

Krishna conveyed to Kunti all of her sons' messages. Comforted by his words she replied, "Whatever you think is right and whatever you wish to be done should be done without delay, O Keshava. Surely you are the greatest well-wisher of the world. O chastiser of enemies, I know the truth of your existence. You are the unlimited Brahman, the original and Supreme Person in whom resides all power and opulence. Everything depends upon you. What you have said must come to pass, for truth itself depends upon you. I bow to you and pray for your everlasting service. O Govinda, please be gracious to me."

Krishna smiled and spoke a few more consoling words before rising to leave. He walked around Kunti, offering his aunt the same respect due his mother.

Leaving Kunti's quarters, Krishna returned to Duryodhana's palace. Without hindrance he passed through the heavily guarded gateways and came to the vast palace occupied by the Kaurava prince. It was comparable to Indra's abode, appearing like a mass of clouds and as high as a mountain. The white marble building was decked with countless precious gems and gold engravings. Krishna entered and went along the wide corridors, which were decorated with golden images of the gods. He passed through three large divisions of the palace, each designed and decorated in a different mood, and at last reached the central hall. There he found Duryodhana seated amid a thousand kings and warriors. Next to him were Shakuni, Karna and Dushashana. They all rose to greet Krishna as he entered the hall.

Duryodhana came down from his elevated seat and welcomed Krishna warmly. He showed him to a large throne covered with an exquisite silk carpet and soft white cushions. When Krishna was seated the Kuru prince personally worshipped him and offered him the traditional gift of a cow. His brothers also came and worshipped Krishna, along with the other kings.

When the rites were complete, Duryodhana folded his palms and said, "We are honored, O Govinda. What can we do for you? You may consider this wide kingdom and all our wealth yours. Please be gracious and accept an invitation to dine with us. We have prepared Dushashana's palace for your residence, which is superior even to my own."

As Duryodhana bowed and tried to ingratiate himself with his guest, Krishna said, "I will not eat with you, O hero, nor shall I stay in Dushashana's palace."

Duryodhana smiled and spoke with forced humility. "Why do you refuse our invitation, Janardana? Are we not as dear to you as the Pandavas? Surely you see both parties equally. Your relationship with Dhritarastra is as close as your relationship with the Pandavas. O Madhava, please tell me why you will not accept our hospitality."

"Only those messengers who have gained their objectives should accept the hospitality offered by those who have received his message." Krishna raised his long arm and held out his palm toward Duryodhana. "After you have fulfilled my wish, you may entertain both myself and my followers."

Struggling to control his anger, Duryodhana replied, "It is not befitting that you treat us so, Madhusudana. Whether your objects are achieved or not we are bent upon pleasing you with our hospitality. You have denied us that opportunity with no good reason, O best of men. We feel no enmity toward you and therefore cannot understand why you snub us in this way."

Krishna was grave. "I never abandon virtue from motives of desire, anger, hate or attachment. One should eat another's food if there is love between them or if he is in distress. O King, you do not please me and I am not in distress. For no reason you have borne malice toward the Pandavas from their childhood. Your cousins are virtuous and devoted to the good of all beings. Whoever bears malice for such blameless men bears malice

toward me. He who follows the virtuous follows me. Know that I am merged in the Pandavas and cannot be separated from them."

Krishna looked intently, but without anger, at Duryodhana, who frowned. "O Bharata, whoever becomes antagonistic toward a virtuous man, impelled by lust or anger, should be known as the vilest of men. He does not keep his prosperity for long. On the other hand, he who wins over virtuous men with services and kind words, even though they may not be dear to him, gains great renown in the world. Your food is defiled by wickedness. I will not eat it. I prefer instead to stay with Vidura and eat his food."

Leaving Duryodhana fuming, Krishna left the hall and returned to Vidura's house. All the Kuru elders visited him there. They each offered him their own abodes, but Krishna thanked them and replied, "I am honored by the offer, but I am content to stay with Vidura."

Krishna and Satyaki happily ate the food Vidura's wife prepared, after first offering a portion to the Brahmins. When the meal was over, Vidura said, "Duryodhana does not much appreciate your visit, O Keshava. That wicked-minded fool transgresses all religious codes. He is incapable of accepting good advice and is bound for destruction. In his opinion he is wise, but he follows nothing other than his own desires. He is an enemy even to his friends. Having abandoned virtue he is fond of untruth and is simply a slave to his senses. He will certainly ignore your advice."

As Vidura spoke his wife came into the room and offered Krishna herbs and fragrant spices to purify his mouth after eating. She lit incense and took up a chamara whisk to fan Krishna. He smiled at her and told her to sit with her husband.

"Duryodhana has full confidence in Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Karna, Ashvatthama and Jayadratha. With his armies at the ready he does not even think of peace. He thinks the Pandavas will not be able to even look upon his forces. Lacking all intelligence, he has firmly resolved to return nothing to the Pandavas."

Vidura did not like the idea of Krishna going into the Kauravas' assembly. He knew that he would only be insulted and even abused. Although Vidura knew Krishna to be beyond insult, out of love he did not want to see it happen. Nor did he want the Kurus to be further blighted by sinful reactions due to their offenses.

"Duryodhana suspects your motives," Vidura continued, as he pressed Krishna's feet. "He will by no means listen to your submission. Surrounded by his chariots and elephants, he feels invincible. He now considers the kingdom to be his and his alone. He thinks you are biased toward the Pandavas. Many of the kings following him are your enemies of old. Out of fear of you they have joined with Duryodhana. All of them are delighted at the prospect of fighting the Pandavas. How can you go into their midst, O crusher of enemies? Although I know your true position, power and invincibility, still I cannot see the purpose of your going there simply to be ignored. I speak only out of love, reverence and friendship. My Lord, what is the use of describing the joy I feel upon seeing you? You are the Supreme Soul and the very life of all beings."

Krishna reached over and clasped Vidura's hand. "You have spoken with wisdom. You have spoken as a friend should speak to a friend. Your words are conducive to morality and worldly good, like the advice of a father or mother. What you have said is true, but listen to my reasons for coming here. Knowing full well of Duryodhana's hostility and wickedness, I have come here to do something virtuous. He who liberates these men from the clutches of death will earn great religious merit. The wise have said that if one attempts a virtuous act with all his power but fails, he will still receive the merit of that act. Therefore, with all sincerity I will seek to establish peace. This calamity has its roots in the Kurus, for it has been brought about by Duryodhana and Karna."

Krishna rose from his seat and walked slowly across the room, His gold ornaments and jewels glinting in the light of the oil lamps. "If one does not try to save a friend from impending calamity, then he cannot be called a friend. A friend should pull one away from acting improperly even if it means seizing him by the hair. Therefore, it behooves me to try to dissuade Duryodhana from his purposes. If he disregards me, at least I will feel that I did all a friend could do. If the fool does not accept my advice, then he will have only himself to blame for the consequences. Nor will men blame me for having failed to effect peace. If, without sacrificing the Pandavas' interests, I can bring about peace between the cousins, then I will have done good to both parties. Otherwise, not even all the rulers of the world can stand against me any more than small animals can stand against an enraged lion."

Krishna spoke with Vidura through most of the night. They rested

briefly. Then as dawn approached, bards assembled outside Vidura's house and recited hymns from the Samaveda to the accompaniment of cymbals, drums and conchshells. Krishna rose immediately upon hearing the sound. He performed his morning ablutions and went through his usual morning rituals, chanting incantations to the fire-god and worshipping the sun as it rose. Even as he performed his morning devotions, Duryodhana and Shakuni came to see him. With folded palms they informed him that Dhritarastra and the other Kurus were in the assembly hall. "They are awaiting you even as the gods in heaven await Indra."

Krishna replied that he would soon be ready, and Duryodhana said he would wait outside. After he and Shakuni had gone, Krishna distributed charity to the brahmins from the many chariots filled with riches he had brought with him to distribute. He gave gold, gems, and fine cloth to numerous brahmins, then prepared to go to the Kuru assembly. Daruka fetched his chariot and it approached Vidura's house with a deep rumble. After circumambulating the sacred fire and the brahmins, Krishna left the house.

Krishna, Satyaki and Vidura mounted the chariot and it moved off. Duryodhana and Shakuni followed in their own chariot. Behind them came Kritavarma and other great warriors, some on chariots and others on elephants. Brahmins went on foot, chanting auspicious prayers, and musicians played their instruments. Thousands of young warriors came behind them, dressed in armor and carrying swords, lances and axes. The streets were packed with citizens, all hoping to catch a glance of the famous Krishna. Balconies were crowded with women, who gazed down on Krishna's chariot as it passed. They filled the air with a continuous stream of many-colored flower petals.

Chapter Forty-seven. Duryodhana's obstinacy

In the hall, the assembled Kuru elders waited with anticipation. As they heard Krishna's chariot approach, the hall buzzed, and as Krishna dismounted from His chariot, shouts of "Hail to Govinda!" and "All glories to Krishna, lord of the Yadavas!" rang out.

Krishna caught hold of both Vidura's and Satyaki's hands on either side of Him and walked into the hall. Dhritarastra rose, along with Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and others. Crossing the floor, Krishna greeted Dhritarastra respectfully. The king offered him a beautiful throne encrusted with jewels. With his divine vision Krishna saw numerous celestial rishis approaching the assembly from the sky. He said, "Many rishis, hoping to witness what will happen here today, have assembled. See, there is Narada Muni. Offer them suitable seats, for how can any of us sit down while they remain standing?"

Dhritarastra ordered his servants to fetch golden seats. The rishis entered the hall like glowing planets descended from the heavens and accepted the seats. After they had been worshipped with all respect, Krishna accepted his own seat and was in turn worshipped by the Kurus. Vidura sat next to Krishna on a seat covered with white deerskin and decked with gems. Opposite Krishna, Duryodhana and Karna sat together on a single throne. As the monarchs took their places, brahmins recited Vedic hymns to invoke an auspicious atmosphere. Gradually everyone fell silent and gazed at Krishna. Seated on his throne, He looked like a dark gem set in gold. There was perfect stillness in the hall as everyone waited for him to speak.

Krishna looked toward Dhritarastra and said, "May there be peace between the Kurus and Pandavas, O Bharata. May no heroes be slain on either side. Only for this have I come. O King, I have nothing more to say."

Hearing Krishna speak reminded the assembly of the soft thunder of autumnal rain clouds. All eyes remained fixed upon him. "O King, you know as well as I do the cause for the present situation. Peace lies in your hands. You have a great responsibility. Your dynasty is famed for its virtue and nobility. The Kurus are especially known for their knowledge of scripture, good behavior, kindness, compassion, forgiveness and truthfulness. Do not allow your fine heritage to be sullied. You are the Kurus' leader and must bear the reaction to any sinful acts they perform. A calamity now faces your race, caused by the Kurus' behavior. If you do not check it, O monarch, it will

destroy the world."

Krishna looked over at Duryodhana. The prince appeared distracted, looking away from Krishna and rubbing his face with a hand covered in gleaming gems.

Krishna went on, "O king, your sons are not considering morality or even profit. Wicked and overcome by avarice, they act unfairly toward even their own friends. I do not think peace is so difficult to achieve. It depends upon you and me. You should give an order and your sons should follow it. The Pandavas never ignore my advice. Set your sons on the path of peace and I will do the same with the Pandavas. Consider everything carefully, O king. Even if you desire to rule this world, it is still better to establish peace with the Pandavas than to make them your enemies. At present, they see you as a worshipable elder. They will wait upon you and protect you and even the gods will not be able to assail you. You will not find better allies than the Pandavas. With them at your side, you would lead troops headed by Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Karna, Ashvatthama, Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, and so many other great heroes. Where is that fool who would fight such warriors?"

The blind king sat with his head bowed. Krishna's speech was as he had expected—cutting and painfully true. His throat was parched and he called for water as Krishna continued.

"On the other hand, O king, what profit will there be in fighting with the Pandavas? What merit do you see in arranging for so many men to die? O best of the Bharatas, what will you feel when you hear of the deaths on either side? There is no question that both parties can survive the war. The kings you see here and the kings at Virata will slay each other mercilessly, influenced by anger. O great emperor, rescue them from death. Save this world from disaster. Let the feelings of affection you once bore for the Pandavas again flood your heart. Bring them here as your children. According to worldly virtue, such fatherless boys deserve your protection, especially in their distress. Now hear their message to you, which they asked me to repeat in the assembly."

Krishna repeated what Yudhishthira had said just before Krishna departed. "'At your command, O king, we have spent thirteen years in exile expecting that you would keep your word. As we have carefully kept our

pledge, so we ask you to keep yours. We have suffered greatly and now desire to return to our kingdom. O Bharata, you know the principles of virtue. Act toward us as a father should act toward his sons. We will act as your sons. You are our worshipable elder. If you find us remiss in our duties, do not hesitate to correct us, O king. Set us on the proper course and thereby follow the excellent path of virtue."

Dhritarastra shifted on his throne as shafts of sunlight illuminated his pained expression. His guilt at having mistreated Pandu's sons bothered him more than anything else. They had been brought to him as young children after their father – his brother – had died. Certainly he should treat them no differently than his own sons. This was surely his greatest sin; that he had neglected and even inflicted suffering on those deserving his protection. Tears fell from his blind eyes as Krishna continued.

"In an assembly where virtue is overcome by vice, it is the duty of the members of that assembly to remove it by all means. If vice is not removed, then it will kill all those who have participated in it. If vice prevails over virtue, falsehood over truth, then those who allow it will be ruined.

"What else could you do but return the Pandavas' kingdom? I desire both your good and what is best for the Pandavas. If my words are true, then let the Kurus confirm them and release the kshatriya race from the shackles of death. Make the large-souled, virtuous Yudhishthira your ally. Do not destroy these kings for the sake of vice, nor morality for the sake of so-called happiness. Do not mistake good for evil and evil for good. O lord of the earth, restrain your sons, who are too attached to avarice. Kunti's sons are ready to serve you and to fight for you. This is my advice. Choose now that course which appears best to you, O king."

Everyone remained silent. Having listened carefully to Krishna, the kings were speechless. No one could argue with anything he said. Only Duryodhana found fault with him, and he looked at Krishna with a sly smile.

Parasurama was among the rishis, and when Krishna finished speaking, he stood to address the assembly. All eyes rested upon him as his voice rang out around the hall. He wore a black deerskin and had matted hair. His dark eyes glowed, and his body shone with a mystical luminosity. He told the assembly a story about the ancient king Dambhodbhava. That king had possessed incomparable power but had become excessively proud and

arrogant. He searched continuously for opponents to defeat in battle. One day, he heard that the two rishis, Nara and Narayana, were the most powerful men on earth. He went at once to Gandhamadana where they were practicing asceticism and challenged them. Although they declined, the king insisted. Finally Nara said, "Fight, then, if you must, O kshatriya. Bring your entire army and all your weapons. I will soon destroy your thirst for war."

The king attacked the rishi with all his power. Nara pulled up a handful of grass and, imbuing it with mystic power, hurled it at the king and his army. The grass transformed into razor-sharp steel shafts that sliced off the ears and noses of all the soldiers. So many shafts rained down upon them that they were unable to move. Dambhodbhava fell at Nara's feet and begged for mercy. The rishi forgave him his insolence and instructed him to never again insult someone without first establishing his opponent's power.

Parasurama looked around the assembly. "Nara's feat was wonderful. Narayana is capable of still greater deeds. Those two high-souled rishis are now present as Arjuna and Krishna. Do not, like the vain Dambhodbhava, try to face them in battle. Men suffer from eight vices that steal their life duration: namely, desire, anger, greed, vanity, insolence, pride, malice, and selfishness. Influenced by these evils, men are bewildered and act like fools. O heroes, do not fall victim to these vices and lose your lives. No one can defeat Arjuna within the three worlds, and Janardana exceeds him. Make peace with them and do what is good for yourselves and the whole world."

Then another rishi, Kanwa, spoke. Confirming what Parasurama had said about Nara and Narayana, he added, "One should not consider he who possesses great physical strength powerful. Real strength lies in virtue. The Pandavas are virtuous. Furthermore, Krishna, the reservoir of all virtue, is on their side. Those five heroes combined with Krishna are no less than Dharma, Vayu, Indra, and the twin Ashvini gods united with Vishnu. O Duryodhana, how will you even look at them? Effect peace at once or be annihilated."

Duryodhana breathed heavily, his brow contracted. He gazed at Karna and laughed aloud when Kanwa stopped speaking. Slapping his thigh he said defiantly, "I am whatever God has made me. It is he who created me and he who decides my fate. I will do exactly as he has determined and nothing else. What use is this discussion?"

The prince had little faith in any supreme power and his voice

dripped with sarcasm. He looked at Karna, and both of them smiled. They were not interested in the rishi's words. Then Narada spoke. Like Parasurama, he narrated an ancient history about a king who had suffered as a result of his own obstinacy and ignorance. In conclusion he said, "O ruler of the earth, listen to your well-wishers' advice. Obstinacy leads to ruin. Abandon your anger and vanity and make peace with the Pandavas. Reflect carefully on this story I have just told, which is full of profound instructions and is approved by learned men. By understanding these instructions and by curbing desire and anger, a man may attain sovereignty over the world. By acting otherwise, one achieves only destruction."

Duryodhana said nothing. Dhritarastra lifted his hand and replied, "O Narada, what you have said is true. I too wish for peace, but I am not the master in this case."

Dhritarastra turned toward Krishna, who sat easily on his throne, one foot on the seat and the other resting on the cushion at His feet. "O Keshava, I accept what you have said as the truth. What you have said is for our benefit and the benefit of the world. By following your words we can attain heaven."

Dhritarastra's words surprised no one. He always knew what to say; what was right and wrong – but his acts belied his words. As his audience expected, he went on to make his excuses yet again.

"But I am not my own master. O best of men, try to persuade my wicked son Duryodhana, who disregards all scriptural injunctions and never does what pleases me. He will not listen to me, and neither will he hear from Vidura, Bhishma, or any of his elders. Please instruct him, Krishna. If you can correct my son of crooked intellect and sinful heart, then you will have performed your duty as a friend."

Krishna turned towards Duryodhana. "I will speak only for your good, O best of the Bharatas. I desire your prosperity and happiness as much as you do. What you are contemplating will make you suffer. Wise men in this world act only for virtue and profit. Thus they fulfill their desires. What you are proposing will not fulfill your desires. Your obstinacy is vicious, frightful and destructive. It will hurt you, and there is no reason for it. Give it up. Pursue instead a course that will benefit you, your brothers, your followers and your friends. O chastiser of foes, make peace with your cousins. This will please your father and all the Kuru elders. Your father has

commanded you to seek peace. A good man never neglects his father's order. Nor does he ignore the advice of friends who know what is good. One who disregards the orders of seniors and the advice of well-wishers will be consumed as one who eats poisonous fruit dies. He never achieves his goal and is ultimately left sunk in remorse."

Krishna paused. He looked steadily at Duryodhana, who remained silent. The prince looked downward and rubbed the floor with his sandaled foot. All eyes in the hall were on him.

Krishna continued to speak in measured tones. "He who prefers the advice of inferior men to that of learned elders meets dangers. Nothing can rescue him. Who but you would abandon kinsmen who are equal in battle to Indra in favor of incompetent and dishonest strangers? Peace with the Pandavas is more in your interests than union with wicked men. Even though you treated them with deceit and harshness since they were born, they are prepared to forgive everything and live with you as friends. O best of the Bharatas, do not show anger toward your own relatives. Live for virtue and not only for pleasure. Only then will you be able to achieve what you desire. Living in peace with the Pandavas, all your aims will be achieved, and your fame will spread far and wide. How can you prefer the shelter of Karna, Shakuni and Dushashana to that of your noble cousins?"

Karna felt insulted by Krishna's words. He glanced at Duryodhana, who kept his head lowered. Both men found Krishna's speech hard to stomach. Both were convinced that their cause was no less righteous than that of the Pandavas. How was Dhritarastra's claim to the throne any less than Pandu's, his younger brother? Duryodhana's right to the kingdom was at least equal to, if not greater than, the Pandavas' claim. They would not be able to live together in peace. That was clear. Then why should Duryodhana be the one to make concessions? The Pandavas left Hastinapura long ago. Things were going on well enough without them. It seemed that Krishna favored them, perhaps because they were close friends. How could he say that he had Duryodhana's interest at heart?

Karna turned his angry eyes toward Krishna, who, seeing both his and Duryodhana's defiance, said, "O hero, show me the man who is capable of standing against the enraged Bhima without being destroyed."

Having first cajoled, then cited the benefits of peace, Krishna ended

by explaining the likely results of a war with the Pandavas. He intended to instill fear and dissension among the Kurus.

"Again, who can go into battle against Arjuna and return home alive? Why do you seek war? What benefit do you see in slaughtering all these men? At Khandava, Arjuna vanquished the gods and the Gandharvas, Asuras and Nagas. What chance do you have? Will it be any different from what you experienced when you came to attack the Matsya kingdom? Look at your kinsmen and friends. Do not let them be killed for your own stupidity. Let not the prosperous Kuru race be destroyed for your sake. Bring the Pandavas here in peace. They will surely install your father as the emperor and you as his viceroy. That is your only chance to achieve lasting prosperity and happiness. Do not ignore it. After making peace with the Pandavas, you will attain a blessed state."

Duryodhana showed no sign of agreeing with Krishna's words. He sat as if on fire, resembling a heap of hot coals.

Seeing the prince unmoved, Bhishma said, "Krishna's words are those of a friend, dear son. Follow his advice and do not be vindictive. If you ignore Krishna, you will achieve neither prosperity nor happiness. He has told you what will lead to virtue and profit; any other course will result in ruin. O king, do not destroy the Kuru's prosperity. Do not cause the death of all these kshatriyas. Do not destroy your brothers. Do not destroy yourself. Do not drown your parents in a sea of grief. Accept Keshava's advice."

When Bhishma was finished, Drona stood. "I too accept what Krishna has advised. His words are pregnant with virtue and will profit all of us. Duryodhana, follow that advice. Do not insult Madhava with your perverted understanding. Those who now encourage you to fight will do little when the time comes. Rather, like you, they will have to depend on others. Know from me that none of us are capable of withstanding Arjuna and Krishna in battle. If you reject my words, you will be left to grieve before long. You have heard all this again and again. What point is there in repeating it? Do as you wish. I do not wish to address you any more."

The Kuru elders had lost patience with Duryodhana. It seemed that nothing could make him see sense. That all these kshatriyas were soon to die seemed inevitable. There could be no outcome other than what Krishna and so many others had described.

After Drona, Vidura spoke. He knew Duryodhana would not hear him, but he wanted to show his solidarity with Krishna's speech, as Krishna had requested. "I do not grieve for you, Duryodhana. Rather I grieve for your old parents. With only you to protect them, they will soon wander about without anyone. All their friends and ministers will be slain like birds shorn of their wings. Because they begot such a vicious son, they are destined to become beggars in this world."

Having heard his three chief ministers concurring with Krishna, Dhritarastra leaned forward on his throne. "The time has come to make peace, Duryodhana. The great-souled Keshava has spoken the truth for our benefit and ultimate salvation. With his help, we can attain our goals. Go with him in peace to Virata and arrange to bring the Pandavas here. Let the hostilities cease. Let the virtuous Yudhishthira place his red-palmed hand on your back with affection. Let the broad-shouldered Vrkodara embrace you with goodwill. Let Arjuna and the twins offer you respects while you offer them blessings. You and they may enjoy sovereignty over the world together. I think that time has arrived, dear son. Do not disobey me. Choose peace, for you cannot be victorious in battle."

Duryodhana was furious. Why was everyone afraid of the Pandavas? Perhaps he had been unfortunate when he had encountered them in the past, but that would soon change. Now, aided by the Danavas' mystic power and the combined might of the Kuru heroes, he was invincible. The prince looked at his father. How could the old man order him in this way? Accept Bhima's embrace? Duryodhana shuddered at the thought. And, having ruled over the entire earth, how could he be expected to now offer his respects to Yudhishthira?

Duryodhana felt it was time he spoke his mind. Calming himself, he rose from his seat and looked at Krishna. "Although you speak out of concern for me, O Madhusudana, You nevertheless criticize me alone. Why, O Keshava, do you praise the Pandavas and accuse me without properly understanding the situation? You, Vidura, Bhishma, Drona, and my father have all found fault with me, but not with any other. Yet in this matter, I do not find I have acted in any way unworthy. I have not committed the slightest fault. Even after much introspection, I see nothing wrong."

The thought of Duryodhana introspecting in any way brought a smile to Bhishma's face. The prince plainly could not see past his own nose. He

went on addressing Krishna in tones of indignant self-righteousness.

"The Pandavas lost their kingdom at dice. They were not forced to play that game. Even when their wealth was returned, they agreed to play a final game and were thus exiled. Was that my fault? Why do they regard me as an enemy? Even now, although they are weak and incapable, they threaten the Kurus."

Duryodhana looked at Karna, who clenched his fist in support. The Kaurava prince continued. "We are powerful kshatriyas and will not bow to any man out of fear. I do not see anyone who can face the Kuru army in battle, O Keshava. Why should I give anything to the Pandavas under threat of war? Rather, it is my duty to fight. If I lay down my body in battle, then I will achieve a glorious destination in my next life. What kshatriya born in a noble family would avoid battle out of fear of the enemy? No self-respecting ruler would bow to one who threatened him with harsh words. I am not afraid of the Pandavas. O Madhava, I will never give them any part of this kingdom. It now belongs to Dhritarastra and so it will remain. We are simply his servants. Although he once gave away that which should not have been given, we have rectified his error. When I was a child and dependent on others, the Pandavas were mistakenly given the kingdom. We will not make the same mistake again."

Duryodhana paused and glanced round at his audience. He rested one hand on his hip and the other on his sword hilt. He concluded, "Keshava, this is my reply: as long as I rule this kingdom on my father's behalf, I will not give the Pandavas even that much land which can be pierced by the point of a needle."

Duryodhana sat down, his eyes fixed on Krishna. Karna lifted his huge arm, smeared with red sandalwood paste, and placed it over Duryodhana's shoulders. Vidura looked at the two men and shook his head sadly. Dhritarastra was the only one who could prevent the impending calamity, but the old monarch remained silent—hearing everything, seeing nothing. If the king desired peace as he said he did, he would have to restrain his son forcibly. Duryodhana was not going to listen to him unless he was prepared to back his words with action. He would have to have the prince arrested. Otherwise, his words were empty.

Reflecting a moment, Krishna said, "You obviously desire the

endless sleep of the hero, and it shall soon be yours. Wait just a little longer. Then there will be the massacre you desire.”

Krishna’s expression became stern as he went on. "O fool! You think you have no blame, but everyone here knows the truth. You were jealous of the Pandavas' prosperity, and you plotted with Shakuni to defeat Yudhishthira at dice. Who else could have treated his brother's wife as you treated Draupadi? Draupadi is chaste, of noble birth, and is well-behaved. She is dearer to the Pandavas than their own lives. Still you insulted her before all the Kurus."

Krishna reminded Duryodhana how Dushashana had addressed the Pandavas as they left Hastinapura, and how even before the dice game the Kurus had antagonized them. To plead innocence was simply evidence of his arrogance.

“If you do not return their kingdom to them willingly, you will have to return it to them when they defeat you in battle. You have committed so many evil deeds toward the Pandavas and now you try to appear innocent. You have been repeatedly ordered by your elders to make peace, but you ignore them. Only by peace will everyone be benefited, including yourself. That it appears otherwise to you is a sign of your lack of intelligence."

Krishna's speech had convinced even some of Duryodhana's brothers. Dushashana in particular had begun to favor peace. Remembering Bhima's vow to tear out his heart, he addressed his elder brother. "If you are so foolish that you will not willingly make peace, then the Kauravas will bind you hand and foot and offer you to Yudhishthira."

Duryodhana stormed out of the hall. Then his one hundred brothers and all of his ministers followed him.

After they had gone Bhishma said, "One who abandons virtue and profit out of wrath will soon be sunk in a sea of troubles. This prince lacks wisdom and knowledge. He is influenced only by anger and greed. O Janardana, I think the kshatriya race is about to be annihilated, for his brothers and ministers follow him out of folly."

Krishna turned his lotus-like eyes toward Dhritarastra. "This is the fault of all the Kuru leaders. You should have restrained Duryodhana by force. O sinless men, it is time for you to act. Listen as I describe what is in your best interests.

"You all know how Kamsa, king of the Bhojas and Ugrasena's wicked son, was rejected by his kinsmen. In the end, I killed him. By this one act, the Yadavas, Andhakas and Vrishnis all became happy. One man should be sacrificed for the sake of a race, the race for the good of a town, the town for the benefit of the country, and the earth for the sake of the soul. O Bharatas, after binding Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni and Dushashana, make peace with the Pandavas. In this way the kshatriyas may be saved."

This made Dhritarastra even more uncomfortable. From Duryodhana's birth his advisors had insisted he reject his son. He had refused. Now he was tasting the bitter fruit of his mistaken judgment. He was too attached to his son, and that attachment had not weakened over the years. Duryodhana took advantage of his weakness and ignored him. It seemed Duryodhana could be checked only if he were executed, or at least imprisoned. Now Krishna was suggesting that they carry this through. How could he contemplate such an option? He thought of Gandhari. Maybe the prince would listen to his mother.

He decided to ask her to enter the assembly. "O Vidura, please go and bring the queen here. Then order my son to return to the assembly. Perhaps the wise Gandhari will be able to persuade him."

Vidura left the hall and soon Gandhari entered, maidservants leading the blindfolded queen to her place next to the king. After being seated and informed of the situation, she addressed Dhritarastra.

"Your son is full of lust and greed. Only by your blessings has he obtained this kingdom, which he in no way deserves. O king, although you know he is sinful, you support him out of fondness. For this you are as much to blame for the present situation as he is. It will be difficult now to check Duryodhana."

As Gandhari finished, Duryodhana returned, strode angrily across the hall, bowed slightly to his parents, and sat down. He was still breathing heavily, his eyes red.

Gandhari spoke gently. "My dear son, listen as I offer advice meant only for your benefit. It is my most earnest wish that you make peace with the Pandavas. Follow your elders' guidance, my son, and reap the fruits of virtue. You want to control the earth only because you are full of sense desire and anger. You do not know that only by overcoming those two impulses can

a man attain success in life. One who is controlled by his senses cannot control a kingdom. Only after conquering ourselves can we conquer the earth. Otherwise, it is not possible. The uncontrolled senses are powerful enough to kill a man, just as untrained horses can kill an incompetent driver. Prosperity always attends the king who has mastered his passions and who stands ready to chastise offenders, acting only after careful consideration. He who gives in to desire and wrath will lose everything in the end. Such a man cannot even attain heaven. Therefore, strive to control your senses, for in this lies your greatest good."

Gandhari spoke from her own realization. Since the Pandavas' exile, she had begun to practice asceticism. Feeling guilty for the way the Kurus had insulted Draupadi, she fasted and performed constant sacrifice. She practiced penance, praying that her licentious son might somehow be brought to his senses. But that seemed impossible. His heart was steeped in greed and envy, but he could not recognize these qualities in himself.

Imploring, the queen continued. "By joining with the virtuous and self-controlled Pandavas, you can enjoy this earth for a long time. What will you gain by fighting with them? Here is Krishna, who performs powerful acts with little exertion. He is able to destroy all the kings alone. What then will happen when He unites with Arjuna? You have heard this advice again and again. One who ignores his well-wishers will only lament. But his enemies will rejoice.

"O child, your father gave the Pandavas their due share afraid of a dispute. Now you are enjoying the fruits of that gift. It was those heroes who subjugated the world. Surely half the kingdom can satisfy your needs. Do not invite destruction by igniting a dispute with the Pandavas. They have suffered enough these last thirteen years. Give them back what is theirs and save the world from disaster. When Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Karna, Bhima, Dhananjaya and Dhristadyumna come together in anger, all creatures will be destroyed. Therefore, quench your greed and act with wisdom. This is my advice to you, dear child."

Duryodhana snorted. He had heard it all before. Everyone praised the Pandavas and criticized him. There didn't seem to be anything he could say to convince them otherwise. Seeing that his mother had finished, he again left the hall. It was time to act.

He went straight to Dushashana's palace. His brother was sitting with Karna and Shakuni. Slapping his thigh in anger he said to them, "It seems that Krishna is swaying everyone's minds toward the Pandavas. He is urging the king to have us arrested. This gives me great anxiety. Krishna is very persuasive."

Duryodhana looked at Dushashana. "Krishna even turned your mind in the hall." Dushashana looked down in shame as his elder brother went on. "We must quickly execute our plan to capture Krishna. Even as Vishnu seized Bali we will grab Krishna and bind him. When the Pandavas hear of his capture, they will lose both heart and energy for the fight, just like serpents whose fangs are broken. Let us do it swiftly before the old man gives everything away again."

Dushashana and Shakuni agreed, but Karna was uncertain. "I do not believe we will be able to capture Keshava, O king. If you wish to try, I will do what I can to help, but I doubt we can overcome Him."

Unlike Duryodhana, Karna felt no anger toward Krishna, whom he respected as a great warrior. Krishna had killed many powerful fighters. According to the rishis he was an incarnation of the original Supreme Person. Karna thought it likely. He only joined in the plot to capture Krishna out of friendship for Duryodhana. But he had little faith it would succeed.

Duryodhana laughed away his friend's doubts. "Krishna will be unprepared for our move. He has come without weapons and not expecting to fight. We can catch Him off guard and have Him bound and taken away before He even realizes what is happening."

The prince had no doubts about his plan. Perhaps it may fail, but there was nothing to lose. He had already declared open hostility against the Pandavas. The fight may as well start immediately; and if Krishna could be captured, then the odds would shift dramatically in his favor. With the still uncertain Karna, he left to make the arrangements.

* * *

In the hall Satyaki had watched Duryodhana closely. He noted that as the prince left, certain key Kuru leaders had also departed. It was obvious that Duryodhana was about to try something. Satyaki knew that he had already

stated his intention to capture Krishna. It seemed he was about to try.

Leaning across to Krishna, Satyaki whispered, "I think Duryodhana will now try to seize you. He has taken a contingent of warriors out of the hall with him. I am sure he will try to take your life. O Keshava, this wicked man has lost all sense of propriety."

Krishna smiled and reassured Satyaki. "Do not fear, my friend. All the kings on earth together could not capture me. Speak to Dhritarastra and see what he decides should be done."

Satyaki addressed the old king. "It seems your foolish son intends to make good his threat to capture Madhava. O leader of men, he and his evil counselors, overpowered by desire and anger, seek to do something exceedingly mean. Yet they cannot possibly succeed any more than children can take hold of blazing fire."

Vidura had also noted Duryodhana's intentions. Rising from his seat he said, "O King, your sons' time has come. They are preparing to do that which cannot be done. Even so, it is sinful beyond all limits to even contemplate. Standing against Krishna, they will die like worms falling into a fire. He will send them all to Yamaraja's abode as a lion destroys a flock of sheep."

Krishna laughed. "Let them try! Maybe this is how this problem will be solved. But do not worry. I will not do anything for which I can be censured. Although I could slay them all outright, I will not do so. In any event, they have already been killed by their own sinful desires. By coveting Yudhishthira's wealth they have weakened themselves and will soon be ruined. O King, let Duryodhana do as he likes."

When Krishna stopped speaking, Dhritarastra's voice boomed through the court. "Bring my wicked son here at once and bring his ministers with him. I will again try to bring him to the path of righteousness."

Once again Duryodhana was brought back into the hall. He entered with Karna and Dushashana just behind him. Again he strode across the hall and took his place.

Dhritarastra was angry. "O you of inhuman conduct and extreme sinfulness, having as your support only men of small deeds, you want to perpetrate an act which is too difficult to accomplish and which is heinous

beyond limit. Like a child wanting to hold the moon, you desire to capture the lotus-eyed Krishna. All virtuous men would condemn you. Anyway, it is not possible for you to carry this through. Even the gods could not take Keshava prisoner. O fool, give up your absurd notions and come to your senses immediately."

Duryodhana was seething with anger. He said nothing. He had already ordered his men to come into the hall as soon as Krishna rose to leave. Everyone else may be afraid of the Yadava, but he was not. The prince glanced across at Krishna, who sat smiling and at ease. Soon everyone would see his actual strength.

Vidura, clearly remembering how the Kurus had violated Draupadi, could not stand the thought of Krishna receiving similar treatment in the same hall. He spoke again, trying one last time to influence Duryodhana.

"O Bharata, listen as I remind you once more of the many demons who have tried and failed to overpower Krishna. The hugely powerful Naraka, who was son of the Earth goddess herself, lived for thousands of years surrounded by his vast forces. Krishna killed him easily. He also destroyed the five-headed Mura, who struck fear into the hearts of the gods. When he was a child he killed Putana and the evil wizards Arista and Dhenuka. When he was only seven years old he held Govardhana Hill aloft with one hand."

Vidura named various other asuras and kings whom Krishna had defeated. Finally, he said, "Krishna is the doer of everything. He is the cause of all causes. From him comes all power and opulence. He can do anything without the least effort. O Duryodhana, you do not understand Govinda. His prowess is incomparable and it will reduce you and your followers to ashes. Attempting to take him prisoner is ludicrous in the extreme."

Krishna looked at Duryodhana. "O Kaurava, out of folly you think me to be alone and vulnerable. O one of small intellect, see now as I show you the truth. Here are all the Pandavas, the Vrishnis, and the Andhakas. Here too are the gods, the Adityas, Rudras, Vasus, and great rishis."

Duryodhana could take no more. He jumped up and pointed at Krishna. "Seize him now!" At once his soldiers began running into the hall from all its entrances. With swords and bows at the ready they closed in on Krishna.

Krishna laughed and as he did, His body suddenly flashed like lightning. He began to grow in size and various gods issued from Him. Brahma sprang from his forehead and Shiva from his chest. The Lokapalas sat on his arms and Agni appeared from his mouth. Then Indra and the Maruts appeared along with hosts of Gandharvas, Yakshas and Rakshasas. From his two eyes came Balarama and Arjuna, who stood on his left and right sides. Behind him stood Yudhisthira, Bhima, and the twins, and behind them were the Vrishnis and Andhakas, headed by Pradyumna. Krishna's mace, discus and club weapons appeared, blazing brilliantly. His pores emanated light, sparks and clouds of smoke.

The sight was so frightening that almost everyone in the assembly closed their eyes. Only Bhishma, Drona, Vidura and Sanjaya were able to look upon Krishna as he manifested His universal form. The rishis also gazed upon him, folding their palms and offering prayers. The sky resounded with celestial drums and flowers showered from the heavens into the hall.

Sanjaya described the event to Dhritarastra, who said, "O Krishna, you are ever doing good for the world. Therefore, it is right that you should bless me with the eyes to see your form. O best of the Yadavas, I pray for the sight to see you."

"O Kuru leader, let your eyes have sight," Krishna replied, and immediately Dhritarastra could see him standing within the great hall. He also saw numerous gods approaching Krishna and worshipping him with Vedic mantras.

Outside the hall a fierce wind blew. Huge waves moved over the ocean and thunderclaps reverberated in the sky. The earth trembled.

The hall was in a tumult. Krishna withdrew his mystical form and again assumed a two-armed form. Taking permission from the rishis, He left the hall, holding the hands of Satyaki and Kritavarma. The rishis, headed by Narada, rose from their seats and vanished—their minds astonished. Dhritarastra again became blind and he sat in silent amazement.

As Krishna left, the Kurus followed him with folded hands, like the gods following Indra. Only Duryodhana and his ministers remained seated. They were struck with wonder and unable to do or say anything. Their plan to capture Krishna was obviously futile.

Outside the hall all the natural disturbances had stopped and a gentle

breeze blew. Krishna mounted his chariot and prepared to leave. As He sat upon His golden car, spread with white tiger skins, Dhritarastra came out of the hall. Led by Vidura, he went up to Krishna and said, "You have seen the influence I wield over my sons, O Janardana. You have seen everything. Nothing has been hidden from you. It is not proper to blame me, O Keshava, for I desire only peace. I have no wicked intentions against the Pandavas. You have heard me speak to Duryodhana and seen his response. I have done my best."

The Kuru elders surrounded Dhritarastra. Krishna looked at all of them and said, "You have also witnessed everything, how that uncultured man walked out, even as he was receiving instructions meant for his good. You have also heard the ruler of the earth state that he is powerless. With your permission, I will now return to Yudhisthira."

Krishna sat down with Satyaki and Kritavarma on either side of him. Daruka urged on the horses and the chariot moved off. The Kurus watched it move along the broad highway, cheered on all sides by crowds of citizens. Krishna ordered Daruka to take him back to Vidura's house. He wanted to speak once more to Kunti before he left for Virata.

Going before his aunt with Satyaki, Krishna touched her feet and told her what had transpired in the assembly. Kunti was not surprised. She had not expected Duryodhana to listen. Fearing that Yudhisthira might be too forgiving, she asked Krishna to exhort him to fight. She knew he would be loathe to fight with his kinsmen and elders only to win a kingdom. As a kshatriya princess, Kunti had been educated in the rules of conduct for warriors. She spoke for some time with Krishna, citing the rules and making it clear that the proper course for Yudhisthira was war. Her sons should harbor no doubt about it.

Again reminding Krishna of the prophetic voices that had foretold great things for her sons at their births, Kunti said, "Let it be as the divine oracles predicted. O Krishna, my sons must now fulfill their destiny and take control of this earth. They will not achieve it through peaceful means. Nor can Draupadi's honor be restored unless my sons fight. For me this is the most compelling reason for war. They must avenge their wife. They have not freed themselves of that obligation. They failed to protect her in the vicious assembly at the dice game. They must now rectify this wrong."

Kunti bowed down and touched Krishna's feet with her hands. Standing again she concluded, "O Keshava, tell my sons that I am well. Go now on your auspicious way."

Krishna stood up to leave. After walking respectfully around his aunt he bid her farewell and left the room. Outside, he found Bhishma and the other Kuru leaders waiting to see him off. Krishna bowed before them, exchanged farewells, and mounted his chariot with Satyaki. Then he headed out of Hastinapura.

The Kurus watched as the chariot sped toward the city's southern gate. Urged on by Daruka, Krishna's horses seemed to leap into the sky again and again. In a short time he was out of sight. The Kuru chiefs turned and headed toward the king's palace. Krishna's peace mission had failed. War was certain.

Chapter Forty-eight. To Kurukshetra

Early on the morning of Krishna's departure, Karna rose to perform his usual worship of the sun-god, Surya. Since childhood he had been attracted to Surya and had never missed his rituals and prayers. An hour before sunrise he mounted his chariot and went to the Ganges, accompanied by numerous brahmins. Wearing only a loin cloth he waded into the shallows and faced east, chanting Vedic hymns. On the river bank the Brahmins lit a sacred fire and made offerings to Surya on his behalf.

It was well known that Karna would offer charity to anyone who approached him after his worship. His vow to give anything to any petitioner was famous. Indra had already taken advantage of the vow and divested him of his natural armor.

Now Kunti approached him. The first time she saw the youthful Karna enter the arena of Drona's martial exhibition she knew he was her son. She also knew he was ignorant of the fact. It was painful to see him feuding constantly with his brothers. She was mortified at the thought that they would soon try to kill each other in battle. It was time to tell Karna the truth. Perhaps he could be convinced to join his brothers' side.

Just as the sun rose, Kunti made her way alone to the Ganges. As she approached the riverside she heard Karna reciting prayers aloud. She looked at him as a mother looks at her son. He stood facing the sun, his arms held over his head and his hands joined together in prayer, a position he would maintain until the sun had risen high into the sky. Kunti sat on the river bank and waited for Karna to finish. It was summer and the thin silk cloth covering her head provided little protection from the heat. After she had waited for more than two hours, Karna finally completed his worship and turned around. He was surprised to see Kunti before him, but he said, "You are most welcome, noble lady. I am Karna, the son of Adhiratha and Radha. I salute you with all respect. Tell me what I can do for you today?"

Kunti rose and went toward Karna with faltering steps. He had now stepped from the river and stood dripping. As the Kuru queen approached him he saw that her beautiful features appeared drawn. Her eyes darted nervously from him to the ground. Claspings her hands together, she softly addressed him. "O my child, you are not the son of Radha and Adhiratha."

Her voice quavered and she paused to gain her composure. "Dear child, you were not born a suta. Know that you are my son, conceived by the powerful Surya. When you were born, you blazed like your father, and you wore a natural coat of armor and shining earrings. Out of fear for my reputation, and my father's, since I was still considered a maiden, I cast you away, stricken with grief."

Tears flooded Kunti's eyes. It always cut her heart to think of how she had abandoned Karna at birth, but there had been no question of telling anyone about it, even when he arrived at the arena that day. She had been gratified to know that Adhiratha and his wife had at least cared for her son, and she thought there would be no need to reveal the truth. Now he was about to die. She had to try to save him. If he did not die, he would kill Arjuna, and Kunti could not bear losing either son.

She looked into Karna's wide unbelieving eyes. "Not knowing of your birth, you have not realized that the Pandavas are actually your brothers. You now serve Duryodhana. This is not proper, my son. Avaricious and deceitful men who have stolen Yudhisthira's kingdom are leading you. You will be ruined if you continue to follow them. Instead, follow the virtuous path and join your brothers."

Karna pressed his two strong hands to the sides of his head, as if to contain the raging confusion that Kunti's words had created. How could it be true? If she had always known that he was the Pandavas' brother, then why had she not said so sooner? Was this just some ploy to discourage him from fighting with the Pandavas? That seemed unlikely. Kunti was famous for her virtue and truth. Her words must be true. As they sank in, Karna felt rooted to the spot where he stood. He was too amazed to speak

Kunti wiped her eyes and glanced up at the sun. Why had that blazing deity put her through such pain? It had been an extremely difficult decision for her to reveal the truth to her first-born son. She loved Karna, but he would surely find that impossible to accept. Whenever she had contemplated telling him, the fear of his reaction had stopped her. Would he reject her out of hand, just as she had rejected him? Now it no longer mattered. She was willing to risk his rejection and anger if it meant saving his life.

"Let the Kurus see you join with Arjuna. When brotherly feelings are

established between you, the Kauravas will bow before you in fear and respect. You and Arjuna, united like Balarama and Janardana—what will you not achieve? O Karna, surrounded by your five brothers you will shine like Brahma amid the gods. You are my eldest son. Child, do not call yourself a suta again." When Kunti had finished, Karna heard a voice coming from the sun: "O Karna, Kunti speaks the truth. Follow her advice, for that will be in your best interests."

Karna was convinced. He was Kunti's son and Yudhisthira's elder brother. Suddenly it all made sense. Adhiratha had told him how many years ago he had found him floating in a basket in the Ganges. Adhiratha said that he had shone like a celestial, and he had thought the gods had sent him a child to fulfill some divine purpose. He had brought the child home and raised him with love. Later, when Karna learned from the sun-god that his natural armor was celestial, he had realized that Adhiratha was probably right—he must have been conceived by some powerful deity. But he had never guessed the truth.

Karna's voice rose above the rushing sound of the river. "I do not doubt your words, lady, but I cannot respect them. I do not see what virtue would lie in my joining with the Pandavas, nor do I feel that you were virtuous to have abandoned me at birth. By doing so, you have destroyed my fame and renown. I have been labeled a suta and denied the rites of a kshatriya, which were rightfully mine. What enemy could possibly have done me greater harm?"

Karna dropped to his knees, clenching his eyes and fists. He threw his head back toward the sun. Hot tears wetted his face, which was contorted with grief and anger. He had often wondered about the identity of his real mother, longing to one day meet her. Now here she stood. Kunti. The Kuru queen and mother of his hated enemies. But his own mother nevertheless. Feelings of love welled up in Karna's heart, but he fought to deny them. Even in spite of Surya's words, it was hard to accept that she had his interests in mind. Nor did he like the idea of leaving Duryodhana at his most dire hour of need. Unlike Kunti, the Kaurava prince had shown him real love and friendship from the very beginning. How could he now suddenly abandon him and switch his affections to the Pandavas?

Karna's words grew sharper. "I cannot accept that you are my well-wisher. You did not show me mercy at the proper time, and have come to me

now only to fulfill your own needs. I cannot do as you suggest. If on the eve of battle I leave Duryodhana to join with the Pandavas, then who will not call me a coward? The Kauravas have granted all my desires. They have worshipped me. What kind of man would I be to leave them now? They depend on me as men on the sea depend on their boat. Now I must show my gratitude to Dhritarastra's sons."

Karna remembered his impulsive vow to Bhishma in the Kuru assembly. He felt guilty that he had abandoned Duryodhana even that much. Now he could not fight until Bhishma was slain. It was prophesied that Shikhandi would kill Bhishma. Then Duryodhana would need Karna more than ever. There was no question of leaving him now.

"I cannot prove untrue to my lord now. I will not abandon him. Yet your appeal will not go in vain. With the exception of Arjuna, I will not kill any of your sons in battle, even if I overpower them. When I kill Arjuna I will become famous for my prowess. Even if he kills me, I will still earn world renown. Thus you will always have five sons, O princess. Either Arjuna or I will survive, but not both."

Kunti stepped toward him and held out her arms with tears streaming down her face. Despite himself, Karna felt his powerful arms reach out to envelop Kunti as if of their own accord. As mother and son stood embracing for the first time in their lives, Kunti sorrowfully said, "O child, destiny is most powerful. What you say will surely happen. The Kurus will be destroyed and I will lose either you or Arjuna, if not more of my sons. When it is time to hurl weapons, do not forget your promise. May you be blessed and may all be well with you. I am leaving."

Kunti stood back and looked at her first-born son one last time. Then she hurried back toward the city. Karna climbed onto his chariot and sat there unmoving for some time. Kunti's words repeated themselves in his mind again and again. How different things might have been if she had kept him as her son. But destiny had decreed a different path for him. His fate now lay with Duryodhana and the Kauravas. There was no use lamenting for what might have been. Karna resolved not to reveal to anyone what had transpired between himself and Kunti. It would only confuse the issue, and make his own vows impossible to follow. With a troubled heart he set off toward the city.

* * *

Before leaving, Krishna asked to speak privately with Karna. As He reached Hastinapura's southern gate at around noon, He saw Karna waiting for Him. Krishna stopped and asked Karna to mount His chariot with Him. He took Karna out of the city, speaking as they rode in the direction of Virata. Krishna considered Karna the most serious threat to the Pandavas in the coming war. Karna's charioteer drove his car behind Krishna with Satyaki, who had dismounted from Krishna's chariot to give Him the privacy he desired with Karna.

Placing his hand on Karna's shoulder, Krishna said, "According to scripture the child born of a mother before her marriage becomes her husband's son. You were born before your mother's marriage, Karna, and are therefore Pandu's son. The Pandavas are on your father's side, and the Vrishnis on your mother's. You are related to both these races, O best of men. O hero, come with me and become the king. The Pandavas will worship you as their elder brother, as I will, and all their followers. The wives and daughters of kings will anoint you with water from golden pots. At the proper time, Draupadi will approach you as a wife does her husband. Your five brothers will follow behind you, even as the gods follow Indra. I too shall follow you, accompanied by the Andhakas and the Vrishnis. Rule over this earth, O Karna. Let the bards and chanters sing your praises. Delight Kunti's heart and take your rightful place at the head of her sons."

Karna looked into Krishna's smiling face. Surely he knew everything, as the sages said, but it was difficult to accept his advice.

Karna shook his head. "Undoubtedly your words are meant for my good, O Keshava. I now know that I am Pandu's son. Kunti has told me everything. But she abandoned me and Adhiratha and his wife raised me. They have loved me as parents, and have always seen me as their son. So too have I seen them as my parents. They performed all the necessary rituals in my life. After adopting me they later had more children, to whom I have become an elder brother. They even selected my wives, and I have conceived sons and daughters with those wives. I cannot break those relationships even to gain both heaven and earth. Nor, O Madhava, shall I break them out of fear."

Karna felt righteous. Following Krishna's advice would mean

transgressing proper behavior. He gazed ahead at the rolling countryside as he continued. "For thirteen years I have enjoyed sovereignty only due to Duryodhana's favor. I owe him a lot. Depending on me, he has formed an enmity with the Pandavas. I have been chosen to face Arjuna in combat. If I back down now, then I will become infamous. O Keshava, I cannot let myself be labeled as a coward, nor can I prove myself disloyal to Duryodhana. If I were given the world to rule, I would immediately give it to Duryodhana. How could I live with the Pandavas after all that he has done for me?"

Karna reflected on his feelings towards the Pandavas. He respected Yudhisthira, Bhima, and even the twins. His hatred for Arjuna owed its origins to the day he had been refused entry into Drona's school. When he came again to Hastinapura to compete in the exhibition, Drona had not recognized him as the boy he had turned away years earlier. He had told him then that he only accepted royal princes in his school. Karna was a charioteer's son. Burning with shame, he had gone away, vowing vengeance. Defeating Drona's best student, Arjuna, would be the best way to exact that revenge. As soon as he had seen Arjuna in the arena his heart had filled with envy. That envy had not waned. Soon it would explode in a fight to the death. There was no other course for him now.

"O Krishna, I do not hold much hope for our victory, but I shall not change sides now. I know Yudhisthira is virtuous and pure-minded. He will preside over the coming battle sacrifice in which Dhritarastra's sons will be the sacrificial animals. The Pandavas are pious men who deserve to rule the earth. The harsh words I spoke to them and their wife previously were only for Duryodhana's pleasure. Remembering them now I am filled with remorse.

"Still, I will fight Arjuna, O Keshava; that is my duty as a moral man and a kshatriya. It is likely that I will die, because I do not see the Kauravas winning. This dispute will end when Arjuna kills me and Bhima kills Duryodhana. This battle will be so great that it will be remembered as long as the mountains stand. It cannot be stopped."

Krishna laughed. "Do you not then desire to rule the earth, O hero? Will you not peacefully accept the kingdom in the way I have indicated? Without doubt, the Pandavas' victory will soon follow. When you see the five brothers coming out for battle, know that the terrible Kali age is approaching. Many men will be destroyed. Go back to Hastinapura and tell Drona and Kripa to make ready. It will be the full moon in seven days. Let the battle

begin on that day. The kings under Duryodhana's leadership will soon meet an excellent death at the edge of weapons."

Karna could not understand Krishna's purpose. Why was he asking him to defect now? He knew that ultimately it would make little difference to the outcome of the battle. Destiny had, it seemed, already determined everything.

Karna looked at Krishna, who sat with his long, black hair flowing in the wind. "Why do you confound me, O Keshava? Why would you lead me to folly? You know everything. The destruction of the world is at hand, with Duryodhana, Shakuni, Dushashana, and myself as its root cause. It will be as you say and no other way. O Krishna, we have already seen the omens that portend Duryodhana's defeat. I even saw the Pandavas in a dream coming out of the fight successful. I saw Yudhisthira, clad in white silks, swallowing the earth. He and his brothers ascended a palace of a thousand pillars. You were also there, O Madhava, by Arjuna's side. On the other hand, the Kauravas and all their followers, wearing blood-colored robes, were going south toward Yamaraja's abode. I and countless other warriors will soon enter the Gandiva fire. I know it for certain."

Krishna looked sadly toward Karna. "This will surely come to pass, Karna, since you do not seem prepared to accept my advice. When destruction is at hand, my dear friend, wrong appears as right and remains in the heart. What more can I say?"

Karna bowed his head slightly. "If I somehow survive the battle, I will see you again, O Krishna. Otherwise, we will meet in heaven. It now seems to me that I will see you only there, O sinless one."

Krishna had Daruka pull up His chariot. He embraced Karna, who then jumped down and mounted his own chariot. Krishna, joined again by Satyaki, urged on His charioteer and sped away. Karna headed sorrowfully back toward Hastinapura. Soon he would have to wage war against his own brothers. And against Krishna, who was clearly his well-wisher, even if his advice was hard to follow. Thinking still of Kunti's words, and of his conversation with Krishna, Karna's mind felt heavy. It seemed he was not destined to enjoy happiness and prosperity in this life.

* * *

Soon after Krishna left Hastinapura, Dhritarastra decided to call one last council to discuss strategy. War was now unavoidable, but the blind king was anxious. Having seen Krishna's universal form, he was filled with apprehension. Surely no human could contend with such power. Perhaps there was still a possibility to make a last-minute agreement. The king looked at his counselors. "O learned men, we have all heard Krishna's speech, and we have seen his superhuman power. The Lord of all the worlds will now ride into battle with the Pandavas, whom we have made our enemies. My son has insulted them. Now he has left us in anger. Surely we now face the greatest danger. Tell me what can be done to avert disaster."

Bhishma shook his head. "Our fate is sealed, O King. We have abused Keshava, who is worthy of even the gods' worship. There is no more fortune for us. We will have to take up arms in a contest that will divest the earth of innumerable heroes. What need is there for further discussion? It only remains for us to make arrangements for the war."

Drona and Kripa agreed with Bhishma, and Duryodhana smiled. The moment he had been waiting for was near. Now there would be no more moralizing and useless talk. It should have been obvious to everyone from the start that the only way to deal with the Pandavas was on a battlefield. Krishna had shown supernatural power. So what? He was not even going to fight. In any event, there were many heroes on the Kaurava side who were masters of mystical weapons. He was not afraid.

Vidura saw Duryodhana's smirk and felt unable to constrain himself. He leapt to his feet and glared at the prince. He could not forgive him for insulting Krishna. "You must now return Yudhishthira's legitimate share of the kingdom. Yudhishthira has no enemies and he has been more than forbearing. He is waiting with his younger brothers, among whom is the vengeful Bhima, breathing like a snake. Surely you are afraid of him."

Duryodhana looked angrily at his uncle. Vidura continued, "Lord Krishna, the Supreme Lord, has accepted Kunti's sons as kinsmen. He lives in Dwaraka with the Yadu kings and princes, who have conquered unlimited rulers, and he is their Lord. Surely you fear him."

Vidura turned to the king. "O ruler of the earth, by your inaction you are supporting offense personified, Duryodhana, as your cherished son. But he is envious of Krishna. Because of this, you are devoid of all auspicious

qualities. Relieve yourself of this ill fortune as soon as possible by punishing him and thus do your whole family good! Otherwise, we are all doomed."

Duryodhana could take no more. From his childhood he had seen his uncle favor the Pandavas. It seemed he had no affection for him and his brothers. Now he had gone too far. Duryodhana leapt up, his body swelling with rage, his lips trembling.

"Who asked him to come here, this son of a maidservant? The deceitful Khattwa is no friend of the Kurus. He is so crooked that he works secretly in the interest of the enemy, plotting against those who have supported him. Toss him out of the palace and leave him with only his breath!"

Dhritarastra was shocked at his son's outburst. He raised a hand to silence him, but Vidura smiled and rose to his feet. Without saying anything, he lifted his bow, which he had never drawn in anger, and walked toward the door. He had been wondering how he would avoid having to fight against the Pandavas. Here was his opportunity. Leaning his bow against the door to signify that he would not fight for the Kurus, he walked out of the hall and headed toward the city's northern gate and the rishis' ashrams. His mind was fixed on holy pilgrimage.

The other Kuru elders censured Duryodhana, who merely laughed. Dhritarastra then ended the assembly. It was time to prepare for war.

* * *

When Krishna returned to Virata, Yudhishthira and his brothers greeted him warmly. Krishna then described everything that had transpired in Hastinapura, except for the private discussion with Karna. Krishna knew that if Yudhishthira were informed of Karna's actual identity, he would not fight with him. It had to remain a secret for the time being.

The Pandavas were not surprised at the description of Duryodhana's refusal to accept good advice. They were not even surprised to hear how he had repeatedly stormed out of the court like an angry child.

Sitting amid the Pandavas and surrounded by other monarchs, Krishna said, "I employed every means of diplomacy, from conciliation to the creation of disunion. I told them that you would abandon pride and become

Dhritarastra's servants if the Kurus made peace with you. They could keep the kingdom and give you but five villages. When they still refused, I resorted to threats and displaying my superhuman powers. I tried to frighten Duryodhana, but he remained fixed in his foolishness. He would not offer you any part of the kingdom. Therefore, there is only the fourth means of diplomacy left. You must punish them. That is all they will understand. You will not regain your kingdom without war, O great heroes. Already Duryodhana's forces are making their way to Kurukshetra, for they have selected that place for the battle. The kings will all be massacred. They are all within the pale of death."

Yudhisthira was grave. He looked around at his brothers and the assembled kings. "O heroes, you have heard Krishna's words. All that is left is to prepare our armies for war. The time has come to select a general to command our forces. We have already made seven warriors leaders of our divisions: Drupada, Virata, Dhristadyumna, Shikhandi, Satyaki, Chekitana and Bhima. Which of these should take overall command? Sahadeva, what is your opinion?"

Yudhisthira looked at his younger brother. As was the custom, he wanted to hear individual opinions, starting with the youngest and ending with the eldest among them. Sahadeva replied, "I think we should select Virata. Family ties bind him to us; he is a ruler endowed with prowess and conversant with virtue. The mighty Matsya king is difficult to vanquish in battle. We have long depended upon him and can do so again in the upcoming battle."

Yudhisthira turned toward Nakula, who said, "That one who in maturity, knowledge of scripture, patience, nobility of birth, and respectability is the best of all; he who is ever devoted to truth; who has learned the science of weapons from Bharadvaja; who challenges Drona and who has performed austerities to bring about his destruction; that monarch who stands surrounded by his sons and grandsons like a tree with a hundred branches—the mighty Drupada should stand at the head of our army."

Then it was Arjuna's turn. His voice rang out. "He who by virtue of his austerities and his gratification of the rishis came out of the blazing fire armed with weapons and adorned with golden armor; he who himself resembled the fire and who then ascended a celestial chariot and went about roaring like a cloud; he who possesses the strength of lions and is capable of

slaying a lion because he has the heart, chest and shoulders of a lion; he who shines like the sun and is beautiful to behold; he who speaks the truth and has controlled his senses; he who was born for Drona's death—Dhristadyumna should lead our forces. No one can pierce him with weapons and he will be able to withstand Bhishma, whose arrows fall like thunderbolts or like Yamaraja's messengers. I do not see another who can stand against Bhishma except Dhristadyumna. Therefore, let him be our commander!"

Bhima said, "We should be led by Shikhandi. He was born for Bhishma's destruction, as the rishis have told us. When he stands ready for battle, displaying his celestial missiles, he resembles the great Parasurama. In my view, the man has not been born who can overcome him when he mounts his chariot, clad in mail and lifting his weapons. Only he will be able to slay Bhishma."

Having heard from all his brothers, Yudhisthira said, "Keshava alone knows the truth and untruth of all things, and their strength, weakness and other inherent qualities. He whom Krishna, lord of the Dasarha race, names will be our commander and no other. Krishna is the root of our victory or defeat. On him depend our lives, kingdom, success, happiness and misery. My dear brothers, Keshava is the Lord and ordainer of all things. Let him speak and let us abide by his decision. It is almost night. When he has named our commander, let us rest. In the morning, after worshipping our weapons and the Brahmins, we will march to Kurukshetra."

Krishna said, "Any of the heroes named are capable of leading our army. All of them are competent and can inspire fear even in Indra—what to speak of Dhritarastra's sons. Although weak due to their sinfulness, Duryodhana and his brothers consider themselves strong. Duryodhana's attitude will soon change when he sees the mood of Arjuna, Bhima, and the twins. When Abhimanyu and Draupadi's sons, along with Drupada, Virata, and all the other chiefs come out for battle, Duryodhana and his brothers will repent their folly. I have endeavored to secure peace, and thus we have paid our debt to virtue. We cannot be blamed for what is about to happen. It is time for war. As far as leading our army is concerned, I agree with Dhananjaya. Let the mighty Dhristadyumna become the general."

When Krishna was finished speaking, the assembled kings and kshatriyas shouted their agreement. They were enlivened at the prospect of a fight. None of them hesitated to accept Krishna's choice of a general. Then

they all retired for the night. The next day they would march toward Kurukshetra, a journey of six or seven days.

* * *

As the sun rose over Virata, the air was filled with the clamor of men and animals. Warriors rushed about in all directions, and shouts of "Yoke up!" and "Load the weapons!" were heard everywhere. Numerous conches were sounded, firing the men with enthusiasm, and brahmins chanted auspicious hymns to invoke good fortune for the army. Elephants trumpeted and chariot wheels rattled. Drummers beat drums as the huge army began the trek to Kurukshetra. In front of the army marched Bhima and the twins, clad in shining mail. Behind them came Dhristadyumna, surrounded by Draupadi's sons and Abhimanyu.

The soldiers were cheerful, and they shouted with joy. Yudhisthira rode in their midst. He was mounted on a golden chariot and dressed in golden armor. He held his great spear. By his side rode Arjuna, with Krishna as his charioteer. On numerous chariots around Yudhisthira, his treasury was carried, along with the servants and attendants of the army. Behind the army came a long line of supply chariots holding provisions, spare weapons, and other goods. Thousands of physicians and surgeons were also in attendance.

As the army traveled, the Pandavas arranged for charity to be distributed to brahmins along the way. They passed near many villages and colonies, but they carefully avoided temples and hermitages so as not to defile any holy places and thus bring misfortune upon the army. Brahmins continuously recited Vedic mantras along the length of the procession of millions of men.

Stopping each night at sunset and camping wherever they were, they went by slow marches. On the sixth night they reached Kurukshetra, where they camped around lake Hiranvati. In the center of the encampment servants erected a large tent for the Pandavas. This tent would also serve as the battle headquarters. Surrounding it, Krishna, Dhristadyumna, Drupada, Virata, and the other army chiefs had tents erected. The provisions were also placed in well-guarded tents near the center. The armor, weapons and chariot parts placed in piles resembled large hills, as did the heaps of grains, ghee, honey and other foodstuffs.

Many thousands of elephants had been assembled, looking like moving mountains and wearing coats of steel covered with spikes. There were also fighting machines of all types which were capable of throwing rocks, iron pellets, burning oil, lances, and red-hot iron shot.

After conferring with Krishna, Dhristadyumna, and his own brothers, Yudhisthira had the army settle to await the commencement of battle. Some miles away they could hear the Kaurava forces rumbling like thunder in the distance. All that was required now was a meeting between the leaders of both armies in order to agree on a day for the fighting to begin.

* * *

When Krishna had left Hastinapura, Duryodhana went to his counselors and said, "Having thwarted our attempts to capture him, Krishna has gone back to the Pandavas. Without doubt, he will be angry with us and will incite the Pandavas to fight to their full power. There will be a battle that will make our hair stand on end. We should not lose time in arranging our forces. Have them proceed at once to Kurukshetra. Let the road between here and there be leveled and cleared. We ourselves should prepare to depart."

The ministers, headed by Karna, Shakuni and Dushashana, got up from their seats and put on fine headdresses. Happy at the prospect of a battle, they slapped their arms and laughed. They brought out their weapons and had them loaded onto their chariots. The entire city of Hastinapura was filled with the commotion of men preparing for battle. The city resembled an ocean with cars, elephants and horses for its waves, and gleaming weapons for its foam. Drum beats and conch blasts were the ocean's roar, and the city's palaces were the mountains along its shore.

Duryodhana rejoiced at the sights and sounds coming from his army. He personally oversaw the loading of weapons onto thousands of chariots. As well as bows, arrows, axes, spears, clubs, maces and spiked bludgeons, there were massive pots of molasses and sand, which would be heated and then hurled at the enemy. There were large baskets full of poisonous snakes. Devices for throwing every kind of missile were loaded by the thousands. Chariots were filled with bullets, bombs and other explosive weapons. The sight of all the weapons and missiles cheered the heroes and frightened the weak-hearted.

The warriors gathered, wearing glittering robes embroidered with gold and adorned with gems. Powerful men clad in mail and masters in the use of weapons were appointed charioteers for more powerful fighters. The chariots were equipped with every kind of weapon, as well as drugs and herbs for curing wounds. Each chariot was drawn by four horses with bells and pearls strung around their necks. Tall standards had flags attached to them, and on the chariot turrets were ornaments, shields and swords, their blades pointing outwards. They looked like moving fortresses and were difficult to approach.

The great war elephants were decked in armor decorated with jewels and wreaths of pearls. Seven men rode on the back of each—two who were expert bowmen, two swordsmen, two bearing hooks and one armed with lance and trident. The elephants rocked as they moved. Following them were thousands of horsemen, clad in mail and ornaments and holding up flags. The horses were the best of their species, all under full control and free from the habit of scratching the ground with their forefeet. Behind the horsemen came even more infantry, their polished armor shining in the sunlight. For every chariot there were ten elephants; for every elephant, ten horsemen; and for every horseman, ten foot soldiers.

As Duryodhana presided over his eleven akshauhinis, each containing over twenty thousand elephants, his heart swelled with pride. Seeing the endless procession of men he wondered how the Pandavas would be able to even look upon them. He selected first-class warriors to lead each subdivision, and as leaders of the akshauhinis he appointed Kripa, Drona, Salya, Jayadratha, Sudaksina, Kambhoja, Krtavarma, Ashvatthama, Bhurisravas, Shakuni and Bahlika.

When all the arrangements were under way, Duryodhana approached Bhishma and asked humbly, "Without a commander-in-chief, even a large army is broken in battle like a swarm of ants. Division leaders seldom agree and are usually jealous of one another. You surely know the story of how the kshatriyas of the Haihaya race, although they were few, were able to defeat in battle the brahmins united with the vaishyas and shudras. When the brahmins asked the kshatriyas why they were successful, they replied, 'In battle we listen to the commands of only the wisest person, but you were separated and followed your individual whims.' When they heard this, the brahmins selected a suitable leader and were victorious over the kshatriyas.

"We too need a leader. O Grandfather, you are equal to Shukra himself. You always wish me well and always follow the path of righteousness. Therefore, become my general. To the Kurus you are like the sun among luminous bodies, Kuvera among the Yakshas, Indra among the gods, Meru among mountains, and Garuda among birds. If you protect us, not even the gods in heaven can assail us. March at our front like Karttikeya leading the celestials and we will follow you like calves following a cow."

The noble Bhishma looked down at Duryodhana, who stood with his hands clasped tightly. "It may be as you say, O ruler of men, but as you are to me, so are the Pandavas. It is equally my duty to look after them. Still, I will fight on your behalf as I have promised."

Bhishma remembered long ago a vow he had made to his father to always protect the king in Hastinapura, even though he himself would never be monarch. How could he have known it would come to this? Thus when Duryodhana had approached him some months ago to secure his assistance in the war, he had felt obliged to agree.

Looking across to the great throne in the hall, where his own father had once sat, Bhishma continued, "I do not see the warrior who can match my strength—except Arjuna. He possesses wisdom and he knows the mantras for all the celestial weapons. But he will not encounter me in an open fight. I can quickly strip this world of men, gods and Asuras by the strength of my weapons. I will slay ten thousand warriors a day. However, O king, I will not slay any of the Pandavas."

Bhishma added, "There is one other condition to my accepting leadership of the army: either Karna fights or I fight. The suta's son and I cannot fight together."

Karna retorted, "I have already vowed that I will not fight while you are fighting. When you have been slain, O son of Ganga, then I will fight with the wielder of the Gandiva bow."

Duryodhana gathered brahmins and had them perform the rituals to install Bhishma as commander-in-chief. Hundreds of drums and conches were sounded as his head was anointed with sacred water. The assembled warriors roared in delight. With Bhishma as commander, who could defeat them? He was capable of annihilating armies single-handedly, and he could not be killed unless he chose to die.

Outside the hall, however, frightful omens were seen as Bhishma was installed. Showers of blood fell from the sky and the earth shook. Fierce whirlwinds blew and trees toppled to the ground. Incorporeal voices cried out, meteors shot across the sky, and jackals howled. Afraid, Hastinapura's citizens made offerings to the gods.

Bhishma came out of the hall looking like the full moon. Worshipped by brahmins, he mounted his chariot and set off for Kurukshetra at the head of a large division of soldiers.

The Kuru army encamped on the western side of Kurukshetra. They resembled a vast sea, the soldiers in flashing armor looking like water sparkling in the sunlight. Warriors roared and conch blasts continuously sounded. At last the time for which a kshatriya always longs had arrived. They would either be victorious in battle or die and attain the heavens.

PART TWO. DELIVERANCE

Chapter One. The Armies Prepare

After installing Dhristadyumna as his commander-in-chief, Yudhishthira and his generals consulted Krishna. They had heard that Duryodhana had requested Bhishma to be the Kurus' commander-in-chief and that he had accepted. Yudhishthira then asked Arjuna to be his army's chief general, working immediately under Dhristadyumna. He wanted to ensure that Arjuna's incomparable expertise was utilized fully in the battle. The seven divisions of the Pandava army were then placed under their seven commanders.

As the Pandavas were speaking about the arrangements, Balarama arrived. He entered Yudhishthira's tent in the company of Akrura, Uddhava, Samba, Pradyumna, and other leading personalities from Dwaraka. In his blue garments and garlanded by golden flowers, Balarama looked as majestic as Mount Kailasa. Krishna stood to greet him, and all the kings did the same. They worshipped him with affection. Yudhishthira took Balarama's hands and greeted him warmly, showing him to a fine seat.

After Balarama had saluted elders such as Drupada and Virata, he took his seat and said, "Many men are about to be slaughtered. Surely fate has ordained it and it cannot be avoided. It is the hour of death for all these kshatriyas. The earth is about to become a mass of clay thickened with flesh and blood. I hope you heroes will emerge alive and well. Repeatedly did I request Krishna to act equally toward both Kauravas and Pandavas, but he chose to favor you."

Krishna looked at his elder brother and smiled. Balarama glanced across at him as he continued. "Keshava has set his heart upon your interests, and especially the interests of Dhananjaya. Your victory is assured because Krishna desires it. I cannot at any time act separately from him. Therefore I will play no part in the war. Both Duryodhana and Bhima are my pupils at mace fighting, and both are equally dear to me. I cannot bear to fight against either. Therefore I have decided to leave the area and go on a pilgrimage to the holy places because I would not be able to sit by and indifferently watch the massacre."

Balarama stood up and placed his helmet on his head. Taking leave of Krishna and the Pandavas, he left, followed by the Yadavas who had come with Him.

Soon, the Pandavas received another visitor. It was Rukmi, King Bhishmaka's son and Krishna's brother-in-law. He arrived with a full akshauhini division of warriors. To please his sister he had decided to offer his assistance to her husband's side. Twanging his bow he strode into Yudhisthira's tent where the Pandavas received him respectfully. He said, "O great ruler, if you are afraid at the prospect of war with the Kurus, then I am here to help you. There are none who can match my prowess. Your enemies will not be able to bear my might. Whatever part of their army you allot to me as my share will be ground into the earth. Even Bhishma, Drona and Kripa cannot face me. I will defeat the Kurus and deliver you the world."

Arjuna could not tolerate Rukmi's proud speech. He laughed. "I was born in the Kuru race, I am Pandu's son and Drona's pupil, and I have Keshava's assistance. How can I be afraid of the enemy? O hero, when I faced the Gandharvas, who was my friend then? When I fought the furious Danavas in the nether worlds, who came to my aid? Then again in the battle with the Kurus in the Matsya kingdom, who was my helper? I am not afraid, Rukmi. We have no need of your help. Go wherever you please, or stay here if you like. Either way we will fight with the Kurus and win."

Seeing the other warriors agreeing with Arjuna, Rukmi scowled. Taking up his bow he marched out of the tent without a word. He then took his soldiers to Duryodhana. If the Pandavas did not want him, then he would fight with the Kauravas. At least he had offered his help to Yudhisthira first. Actually, he was just as happy to fight for Duryodhana. Rukmi still remembered his sister's svayamvara in which he had wanted her to select Sishupala. Krishna had come and kidnapped Rukmini. Rukmi had then chased Krishna and fought with him, only to be defeated and humiliated. Maybe now he could exact his revenge.

Going before Duryodhana, he repeated the words he had used when speaking to Yudhisthira. "Do not be afraid of the Pandavas, O king, for I am here to help you."

Duryodhana also rejected him. "I have no need of your help," he laughed. "What fear do I have of the Pandavas, surrounded as I am by the

world's greatest heroes, and being a mighty warrior myself?"

Rukmi left the Kauravas and returned home, deciding to play no part in the war. If no one wanted his help, then he would not fight. Let them annihilate one another without him.

* * *

After Rukmi left, Duryodhana summoned his counselors. He had Shakuni's son Uluka come as a messenger to the Pandavas. Assured of his superior position, the prince wanted to mock his enemies and show his contempt for their so-called army.

Duryodhana said, "O Uluka, go to the Pandavas and speak these words in Krishna's hearing: 'The time has now come for action. What we have expected for a long time is finally come to pass. We are about to fight a frightful war between ourselves, and you have caused it. Prove now the truth of all the boastful words you sent through Sanjaya. Let us see your actual power.'"

Duryodhana's black eyes narrowed. Standing up as he spoke, he pointed at Uluka. "Say this to Yudhisthira: How do you pose as a virtuous man, O descendent of Bharata? You now desire to destroy the world for the sake of wealth. One who presents himself as pious while secretly concealing wicked intentions is said to be like the cat in the famous story of old. Listen to the story my father heard from Narada Rishi.

"Once there was a cat who went to the Ganges. Standing on the bank with upraised paws he said, 'I shall practice virtue.' After some time, the birds began to trust him and even praise him for his devotions.

"That cat continued with his austerities, and in due course the mice also saw the cat's peaceful demeanor and long-time pious practices. They decided to take shelter of him, although he was naturally their enemy. They said, 'We seek your protection. You are our refuge and our best friend. Be like an uncle to us and save us from our antagonists. You are virtuously inclined and have adopted a pious course.'

"The cat reluctantly agreed. 'I will do what I can for you, but I also need your help. My austerities have made me so weak I cannot move. Therefore, some of you must assist me to reach the riverside each day so that

I can bathe.'

"The mice agreed to this and began to live around the cat. Every day a number of them would go to the river with him and the cat would eat them. Thus the cat grew fatter and stronger, while the mice diminished in number. Soon they realized what was happening. One wise mouse among them pointed out that an animal living on fruits and roots cannot have hairs in its feces. He concluded, 'This cat only makes a show of devotion. His real business is eating mice.'

"The mice fled in all directions and the wicked cat also went back to where he had come from. O Yudhishthira, you are behaving in the same way toward your kinsmen. Your words mean one thing while your acts are quite different. Give up your disguise as a gentle and harmless man. Come out and fight like a true kshatriya. Dry your mother's tears by winning victory in battle—if you can. Remember our former antagonism—the poison, the lac house, the insult to Draupadi. Show us your real strength."

Duryodhana laughed. He derided the Pandavas in various ways, mocking their power and praising his own. He reminded them of all the vows they had taken. Now they should fulfill them.

Duryodhana remembered Krishna's universal form, which he had exhibited in Hastinapura. "Tell Vasudeva that his display of illusion does not scare me. I too can show many forms, but what is the use of such things? O Keshava, come in that mystical form to the battlefield and we will see what difference it will make. I know your power and I know Arjuna's. I know the Gandiva bow and the inexhaustible quivers he holds, as well as about the fiery chariot Agni gave him with its celestial banners. Still I challenge you. Indeed, I could face a thousand Krishnas and a hundred Arjunas and still have them flee in all directions. Even knowing everything about your power, I shall deprive you of your kingdom without fear."

Duryodhana began to pace as he delivered his arrogant message. Karna, Dushashana and Shakuni cheered his brave speech and encouraged him to say more. Duryodhana reminded the Pandavas of the dice game and their exile at his hands. "Is this not sufficient proof of my superiority? Bhima must have been tired as he cleaned pots in Virata's kitchen; Arjuna wore bangles and braided hair; Yudhishthira became Virata's servant—these are the ways a kshatriya punishes others weaker than himself. I have no fear of the

Pandavas, nor of Krishna, nor of any of the fools who have chosen to fight beside you. I will not return even the smallest part of your kingdom."

Uluka memorized every word in the mood with which it was spoken, although Duryodhana spoke for almost an hour. He concluded, "Let the battle begin tomorrow. Then you will see your folly. Like a frog in a well who cannot know the ocean, you cannot know how vast are my forces. One who wishes to defeat Bhishma, Drona, and Kripa would be able to rend a mountain with his head or swim across an ocean. When you see the Kuru forces assembled like a great sea, then will your desire for the kingdom disappear. All thoughts of ruling this world will vanish. Like a man who has never practiced devotion yet desires heaven, so is your hope for winning this kingdom. Tomorrow we will see who should be the earth's rightful ruler."

Duryodhana then told Uluka to deliver the message at once. Uluka mounted his chariot and rode over to the Pandavas' camp, with Duryodhana's words ringing in his head. He knew his message would incite the Pandavas' fury, and he approached Yudhisthira with apprehension. "Please see me only as an envoy. Knowing the law in relation to messengers, do not become angry when you hear my words. I will only speak what Duryodhana has told me to say and nothing more."

Yudhisthira smiled and showed Uluka to a seat in his tent. "Do not fear. You may speak freely here. Tell us what the small-minded Duryodhana, driven by greed and lacking in foresight, has said."

Uluka looked around the tent. All the Pandava chiefs were present. With their bright armor and colorful silks they resembled glowing planets decorating the firmament. They were all watching him and waiting for the message.

When Uluka had finished, the Pandavas leapt from their seats. Speechless with rage, they stared at each other and ground their teeth. Their breath came in hot blasts and they seemed like infuriated serpents. Bhima's eyes turned red and he looked across at Krishna, who laughed and said, "O Uluka, go back to your master and tell him we have heard his message and understood its meaning. Let it be as he says. The battle will begin tomorrow."

Having heard Duryodhana's abusive words, the assembly of kings resembled the storm-tossed ocean. They rose up roaring and slapped their arms.

Rubbing his hands together, Bhima roared, "O fool, we have heard your words, intended to rouse us to action as if we were weak and inactive. Uluka, carry my reply back to your master.

"Duryodhana, only due to respect for our elder brother have we tolerated you for so long. The virtuous Yudhisthira has offered peace. You have refused. Pushed by your own fate, you now desire to meet Yamaraja. The battle will certainly begin tomorrow. I have vowed to slay you and all your brothers. Do not doubt my power to carry out this vow. The ocean may transgress its banks, the mountains may split asunder, but my words will not prove false. O you of little sense, not even the gods and demons combined can save you now. I will drink Dushashana's blood and grind the rest of the Kauravas into the earth. Any kshatriya approaching me in anger will go at once to Death's abode. I swear by my soul that I speak the truth."

Sahadeva then stepped forward. "Tell this to the fool who gives you orders: 'Only because of you has this dispute arisen. You were born for the destruction of your own race, and indeed of the world. Goaded on by Shakuni, you have always acted with evil intentions toward us. You will soon be slain by me before all your warriors.'"

Duryodhana's message was creating a tumult in the Pandavas' tent. The kings and warriors shouted and waved their weapons at Uluka. Arjuna calmed them. Then he turned to Bhima and said, "O Bhimasena, be patient. Those who have made you their enemy will soon be destroyed. Nothing can save them. There is no need to rebuke Uluka. He is only an envoy. What fault can an envoy commit? The words he spoke were not his own."

Arjuna looked at the assembled kings. "You have all heard Duryodhana's foul speech directed even toward Krishna. With your leave I will give my response."

By now, Uluka was trembling. Arjuna said, "Tell Duryodhana: 'Tomorrow you will have my reply delivered by the Gandiva. Only eunuchs use words as weapons.'"

Arjuna took his seat by Yudhisthira's side, who then said, "I have heard your master's words, Uluka. Tell him this in reply: 'O fool, you have ever adopted an evil course with us. Although you lack power, you now challenge us to war. Depending on others' prowess you utter threats. A real kshatriya fights his enemies depending upon his own power. Since you are

unable to do so, why do you roar so much?"

Seeing that Yudhisthira had finished, Uluka rose from his seat to depart. Krishna checked him. "Also say this to Duryodhana: 'O sinful one, you think that I shall be of no consequence in this war as I will not fight. Do not make such a miscalculation. I will act as Arjuna's charioteer and you will see him everywhere, destroying your forces as fire burns dry grass. Even if you go beyond the three worlds or enter the nether regions, you will see Arjuna's chariot there tomorrow. You also think Bhima has indulged in idle threats, but you can consider that he has already drunk Dushashana's blood. Neither Yudhisthira nor his brothers are in the least afraid of you. You are strong only in speech.'"

As Krishna stopped speaking, Arjuna leapt to his feet. He was not satisfied with the curt response he had given to Duryodhana. He spoke again. "Tell this to your master: 'O worst of men, having installed Bhishma as your commander, you are boasting that Arjuna and his brothers will never attack him. But I will make him my first target.'"

Arjuna's voice seethed with restrained rage as he went on. "Although the worshipful grandfather's senses are under control and he possesses great wisdom, he has taken your side and chosen to die. I will not hesitate to direct my arrows toward him. O Duryodhana, your hopes are in vain. You are arrogant, harsh, inhuman, addicted to vice, partial, and you hate virtue. You will soon receive the consequences of your nature. When I am angry and have Krishna as my second, what hope can you have for success? Your relatives will soon lament your death. When you are struck down by Bhima, you will recall your foolishness."

When Arjuna sat down, Uluka bowed before Yudhisthira, trembling with fear. Reassuring him, Yudhisthira said, "Say this to Duryodhana also: 'You have judged me improperly. I do not desire to harm even worms or ants—what to speak of my relatives. Thus I was prepared to accept only five villages to avoid this war. It is only due to you that this calamity has arisen, O man of meager understanding. Overpowered by lust you could not accept Krishna's advice, and for that reason you rant like one deprived of his senses. What is the use of your words? Come out and fight along with all your friends. Death awaits you.'"

Bhima wrung his hands together and breathed heavily. Although he

would have accepted a peaceful solution to the conflict, he could not deny his joy at the prospect of finally confronting the sinful Kauravas. Uluka's message had stoked his long-cherished anger to the point of distraction. But he would have to wait until morning. It would be a long night. Suppressing his rage, Bhima spoke again to Uluka even more harshly. "This is my final word to Duryodhana: 'O sinful one, either remain in Hastinapura or lie in the belly of a vulture. Those are the only choices left for you now. I swear by truth that my words made in the council hall will come to pass. I will drink Dushashana's blood and I will smash your thighs. Know me as the death of all Dhritarastra's sons.'"

As Uluka turned and bowed to the assembled kings, Dhristadyumna's voice rang out: "O Uluka, tell Duryodhana that I was born to kill Drona. He and all his followers will die at my hands. There is no doubt. What more need I say?"

Uluka went out of the tent backwards, bowing from the waist with his palms folded. He ran over to his chariot and leapt aboard, urging his horses back to the Kaurava camp.

Yudhishthira began to move his army into position on the battlefield. Dhristadyumna appointed specific tasks to the principal warriors. Each chariot fighter was to protect the divisions of foot soldiers from the enemy charioteers. Equals should fight equals. The chiefs of the army were allotted chiefs on the opposing side. Bhima would fight with Duryodhana, Sahadeva with Shakuni, Nakula with Ashvatthama, Shikhandi with Bhishma, Uttamauja with Kripa, and Dhristadyumna would engage with Drona. Abhimanyu, whom he considered as powerful as Arjuna, was ordered to engage with all the kings supporting Duryodhana, while Arjuna had the task of protecting the entire army.

Gradually the Pandava forces arrayed themselves. By evening, everyone was in position, ready to march into battle the next morning.

* * *

Duryodhana was sitting amid all his generals when Uluka returned and delivered the Pandavas' replies. The prince sneered and turned to Bhishma. "The war begins tomorrow, O Grandfather. What should be done now?"

Bhishma, having surrendered himself to the certainty of war and the hopelessness of making Duryodhana see sense, replied, "After bowing before Kumara, the god of war, I will act as your general. I am as capable of organizing armies as Brihaspati. Conversant with every means of attack and defense employed by men, gods and demons, I will confound the Pandavas. I will fight according to the rules laid down in holy books, all of which I know. Let your fears be gone."

Duryodhana did not like hearing that he might be afraid. "I am not afraid even of the gods and Asuras united. O you of long arms, I tell you this truly. How much less afraid am I when I have you as my commander and Drona by my side? O best of men, with you fighting for me, I think kingship of the gods would not be hard to attain."

Duryodhana paused reflectively. Surely his army was invincible, especially under Bhishma and Drona's leadership; but the Pandavas had so far proved difficult to overpower, even without the support of an army. Now they had amassed seven divisions of warriors ready for war, and the brothers, protected by the wily Krishna, would fight filled with rage. He had made sure of that. The Kaurava looked inquisitively at Bhishma. "I desire to hear from you about the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy and also of ourselves. Please tell me everything you know."

Sitting before a large number of warriors in Duryodhana's tent, Bhishma said, "O King, listen as I describe who are the rathas, maharathas, and atirathas in your army. There are thousands of rathas on your side, each capable of contending with a thousand warriors at once. There are also numerous maharathas, who can stand against ten thousand, and many atirathas, who can face an almost unlimited number of opponents. You, O son of Gandhari, are an atiratha, and your brothers are all maharathas. All of you are skillful elephant and chariot drivers, and expert with weapons. You will slay Pandava forces in large numbers."

Bhishma then described the strength of every principal warrior on the Kauravas' side. He described Kritavarma, Shalya, Kripa, Drona, Ashvatthama, and Bahlika as atirathas. When he came to Karna, usually considered an atiratha and upon whom Duryodhana pinned his hopes, Bhishma said, "Because of Parasurama's curse and the loss of his celestial armor, he is no longer powerful. Although he brags of his prowess and you have elevated him to a higher station than he deserves, he is of little

consequence. In battle he becomes confounded and is too soft on the enemy. In my opinion, he is only half a ratha. When he comes before Arjuna, he will not escape with his life."

Drona agreed. "It is so. What you say is never false."

Karna started up from his seat, his eyes angry. "O Grandfather, you are ever given to piercing me with your sharp words. What sin have I committed that you derive such pleasure from insulting me? I tolerate it only for Duryodhana's sake. In my opinion, you too are only half a ratha. I do not speak an untruth when I say that you are the enemy of the entire universe. You are the Kurus' enemy in the guise of a friend. Who else would seek to create disunion among our forces and sap their energy by mean descriptions of their power? By saying that one is greater than another, based upon your own estimation, you simply discourage the fighters. You are moved only by desire and hatred."

Karna's voice filled the tent. He could no longer tolerate Bhishma's stinging words. Clenching his fists, he turned toward Duryodhana. "O king, abandon this wicked man at once! If you do not, he will soon destroy your army by sowing the seeds of discord. What use are his estimations? Let me go out to meet the Pandava armies. They will soon be routed like bulls meeting a tiger. Bhishma boasts of being able to fight the universe, but his words are vain and empty. He is old and senile. His intelligence has become like a boy's. Reject him at once and choose me. Alone I can slay the Pandavas and all their followers.

"But I will not do it while Bhishma is still on the battlefield. The glory and fame of a victory goes to the commander and not to the individual fighters. I will do nothing to increase Bhishma's fame. When he is killed, I will come out and display my prowess."

Bhishma looked contemptuously at Karna. "The time for battle has arrived. Long have I known this calamity would come. Now the burden of this battle, vast like the ocean, rests upon my shoulders. I have no desire to create dispute among our men. For this reason only do you still live, O son of a suta. Although I am now old and you are young, I would still immediately destroy your desire for battle and take your life."

The Kuru commander felt his anger rising. "Good men do not approve of self-praise, but I will say something now because I have lost my

temper. When I attended the svayamvara at Kashi, I single-handedly overpowered all the kings on earth. What have you done? You are an ill-starred man, and since your arrival the Kurus have met with disaster. Prove your words in battle. I will see your actual strength when I see you escape from Arjuna, O evil-minded one."

Duryodhana leapt up. "Be peaceful, O son of Ganga. I need both you and Karna in this fight. No doubt you will both perform heroic deeds. Leave aside this petty squabbling and tell me more of the strengths and weaknesses of the two sides. The fight will soon begin."

Still glaring at Karna, Bhishma began to describe the Pandavas' strength. "The pious king Yudhishthira is himself a mighty maharatha. He will roam about in battle like fire itself. His brother Bhimasena is powerful beyond measure. His strength is not human, and in a fight with either mace or arrows he is without equal. The two sons of Madri are peerless fighters. Remembering their hard suffering in the forest, they will release the poison of their anger on your men. O King, all five Pandavas are great-souled devotees of the Supreme Lord. They are invincible. They have all practiced asceticism and are devoted to virtue. Their prowess is incomparable, as you saw at the Rajasuya when they conquered the earth. Even as children you saw their extraordinary strength, and that is when you first became envious of them. In my view, you should avoid them in battle."

Bhishma looked intently at Duryodhana as he spoke. "Regarding the copper-eyed Arjuna, who has Narayana as his ally, I say this: No brave warrior in either army can match him in any way. Even among the gods, Gandharvas, Nagas, Rakshasas and Yakshas he has no equal, what to speak of among men. He has the Gandiva bow, a divine chariot drawn by horses that can fly at the speed of the wind, impenetrable celestial armor, and two inexhaustible quivers. He knows every celestial weapon. He will wreak havoc in your army, O king. Only the preceptor or I can advance against him. There is no third warrior capable of standing before him when he pours forth his showers of arrows. But he is young and fit, while both Drona and I are old and worn out. He now waits for battle with Keshava at his side."

All the kings in Duryodhana's tent heard Bhishma's description of Arjuna and felt shorn of power. Bhishma described the other fighters on the Pandavas' side. Having named many of them as atirathas and maharathas, he spoke about Shikhandi. "You have all heard that he is destined to kill me. But

he was born a woman and I will not, therefore, face him in battle. Listen now as I tell you his history, which I have heard from Narada Rishi."

Chapter Two. Shikhandi's destiny

“As you know, I long ago accepted a vow neither to occupy the throne nor to have children who could lay claim to it. My father, Shantanu, then married the beautiful Satyawati and had two sons, Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. He died before his sons were grown and I was left as their protector. Chitrangada was killed in a battle with the Gandharva king, and Vichitravirya was left sole heir to the throne.

“As he came of age, I thought it time to find him a wife. I heard that the king of Kashi had arranged a svayamvara for his three daughters, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. I decided to ride into Kashi on my chariot, prepared for battle. Kings and princes had assembled at the svayamvara from all over the world; all hoping one of the girls would choose to marry them.

“Upon seeing this, I remembered that the wise approve of many kinds of marriage, but for a kshatriya the best is when the bride is snatched from an assembly of warriors after defeating them in a fight. I then announced to the kings that I had decided to carry away all three princesses for my younger brother, and challenged them to prevent me if they could.

“Then I took all three maidens onto my chariot and sped away. The kings were at first surprised, then furious. They pulled on their armor and mounted their chariots. Soon hundreds of them were in pursuit. Thousands of arrows showered down upon my chariot, but I dexterously avoided them all. As the princesses trembled in fear, I took up my own bow and turned to face the kings. I countered the shower of their shafts with my own. At the same time, I pierced every one of my antagonists. So swiftly did I shoot my arrows that my foes were completely confounded and could only applaud my prowess. Some were killed and others had their weapons smashed and their armor torn off. They retreated and fled in various directions.

“Shalva, however, continued to chase me. He was determined to win the hand of one of the maidens, and he rushed after me shouting, ‘Stay, stay!’

“Provoked, I faced him. A furious but short-lived battle ensued. I soon overpowered Shalva and destroyed his chariot, although I decided not to kill him. I then returned to Hastinapura with the three maidens.

“When I arrived in Hastinapura, the eldest princess, Amba, approached me and said, ‘I had already chosen Shalva as my husband. He too

accepted me in his heart and my father agreed to the match. I would have chosen him in the svayamvara, but you kidnapped me and I did not have the opportunity. O knower of virtue, tell me what I should now do.'

"I asked her to wait while I discussed the matter with the brahmins. It was concluded that Amba should be allowed to go to Shalva's city and offer herself to him. We gave her an escort of priests and maidservants, and sent her to Shalva. When he saw her, however, he said, 'O lady of fair complexion, I no longer desire to accept you as my wife, for you have already been taken by another. You were led away cheerfully by Bhishma before all the other kings. How can I, who must lay down the law for others, now accept you? You have been touched by another. According to holy books, I cannot now accept you as my wife.'

"Amba tried to change Shalva's mind, pleading that she had not been happy to be kidnapped. She had gone to Shalva at the first opportunity. The king was adamant. He would not accept her. He told the disappointed princess to return to Hastinapura. Weeping like a she-osprey she thought, 'What woman in the world could fall into greater trouble than the predicament I now face? I have been robbed of my friends, Shalva has wronged me, neither can I now return to Hastinapura, and neither can I go home in such shame and rejected by everyone.'

"Reflecting on the cause of her troubles, Amba decided that I was to blame. She wanted revenge. Rather than return to Hastinapura, she chose to go to a hermitage and stayed the night. In the morning, the rishis saw her weeping and inquired about her sorrow. The lady told them everything and asked them to help her, but the Rishis replied, 'We have renounced all worldly action. What can we possibly do to help your cause?'

"Amba asked that they allow her to remain with them and to engage in asceticism. She had decided that the calamity that had befallen her was the result of her past sins, and that by practicing penance, she could become freed of them.

"The rishis consulted among themselves. Some thought Shalva should have accepted her, while others proposed that I should marry her. Eventually they decided that she should return to her father, for a woman must always be under the shelter of a husband, son or father. But Amba refused to go. She said she would never return to her father's city and suffer

disgrace.

“While the rishis thus sat pondering about what to do, the royal sage Hotravahana arrived at the hermitage. He took special pity on Amba because he happened to be her maternal grandfather. He became enraged that I had stolen her and thus ruined her life. With his lips trembling in anger he said, ‘O Amba, you have grieved enough. Do not go to your father's house, for that will only increase your grief. You should place your case before the great Parasurama. He is my good friend and well-wisher. For my sake he will surely remove your grief. Either he will convince Bhishma to accept you, or he will slay him in battle. Only this sage is powerful enough to do either.’

“It so happened that Parasurama was due to arrive at the hermitage the next day. He arrived early in the morning, clad in black deerskins and surrounded by his disciples. With an axe over his shoulder and a bow in his hand, he was a frightening sight. Long matted locks hung down to his shoulders, and his eyes blazed like fire. After he had been properly received and worshipped by the other sages, he sat down with Hotravahana and was told of Amba's plight. He called for her and said, ‘You are as dear to me as you are to Hotravahana. Tell me what I should do for you. If you like, I can order Bhishma to accept you. If he will not, then I will consume him and all his ministers in battle. Or, if you prefer, I will order Shalva. Tell me your decision, O princess.’

“Amba replied, ‘It seems that Bhishma is the cause of my present calamity. I think you should slay him. I have become so vengeful that I now wish only to bring about his death. O great sage, kill that covetous and mean-spirited man for my sake.’

“Parasurama was reluctant to take up arms against me and said, ‘I will only use my weapons if the brahmins request it. This is my vow. I can, however, make either Bhishma or Shalva accept my order. Therefore, select one of them as your husband, fair maiden, and I will do the rest.’

“Amba had already concluded that all she wanted was for me to die. She asked Parasurama again and again to challenge me to a fight. At that time another rishi, Akritavana, feeling compassion for Amba, also requested him to fight. Because a brahmin requested him, Parasurama finally said, ‘All right, I will go to Bhishma to seek a solution by peaceful means. If he will not accept my words, then I will certainly slay him.’

“The following day he made his way to Hastinapura with Amba. I worshipped him with all respect, and then he said with anger in his voice, ‘O Bhishma, in what consciousness did you kidnap Amba? Although you took her by force, you then sent her away. You have robbed her of her virtue, for no other man will now accept her. Therefore, you should accept her either for your brother or for yourself.’

“I replied, ‘I cannot by any means take back this maiden, for she has given her heart to another. It is always wrong for a virtuous man to accept such a woman. I cannot renounce my duty out of fear, greed, attachment or pity. This is my vow, O Rama.’

“The sage blazed. ‘If you do not act according to my instructions, then I shall slay you and all your ministers.’

“He said this repeatedly, and I tried in many ways to calm him with gentle words. Realizing that he was bent upon fighting, I asked, ‘Why do you wish to fight with me, O best of your race? In my childhood I was your pupil, and you taught me the military arts.’

“Parasurama replied, ‘Although I am your preceptor, you have not obeyed my command. There is only one way to gratify me: either accept this maiden and perpetuate your race, or prepare yourself for death.’

“But my guru's words found no place in my heart. I replied, ‘O lord, I cannot obey your command. What is the use of laboring for it? What foolish man would accept into his house a woman sighing for another? Furthermore, I have made a solemn vow never to marry. I see no virtue in your order. The god Vayu has stated that a preceptor may be abandoned if he is vain, has swerved from the right path, or does not know his proper duties. I see no sin in fighting with you on this occasion rather than accepting your order. You are asking me to engage in an unrighteous act only for your profit. Witness now the strength of my arms and my superhuman prowess. Let us go to Kurukshetra. Slain by my arrows, you will attain the glorious regions you have earned by asceticism, O you whose only wealth is devotion.’

“By then, I was myself infuriated. I added, ‘You boast that you have conquered the entire kshatriya race, but today I will prove that boast false. When you defeated the kshatriyas, I had not yet been born, nor anyone like me. You consumed straw. He who will end your boasts and your desire for battle has now been born. I will destroy your pride. Do not doubt it.’

“The sage smiled. ‘It is fortunate, O Bhishma, that you wish to fight. I will thus curb your arrogance. We will fight at Kurukshetra. There your mother Ganga will see you thrown down and turned into food for vultures. O ruler of the earth, your mother does not deserve to see such a sight, but it must be so, for you are foolish and overly proud.’

“I bowed before the sage and said, ‘Be it so.’ After performing propitiatory rites to invoke the brahmins' blessings, I mounted my chariot and headed out of the city. Equipped with all my weapons, I shielded my chariot with a white umbrella and yoked my white horses, which can move with the speed of the wind. As I moved off, bards and singers eulogized me. I arrived at Kurukshetra and saw Rama waiting there, clutching his huge bow. Thousands of his followers were present, and around the battlefield stood numerous rishis. In the sky I saw the gods, headed by Indra. Celestial music sounded and flowers fell from the heavens.

“My own mother, assuming her divine human form, came before me and asked, ‘What do you wish to do, my dear son?’

“When I told her, she reproved me. ‘You should not fight with a brahmin. Do not fight Jamadagni's son. His strength is equal to that of Shiva. He exterminated the kshatriya race. You know all this. Why, then, have you come to fight with him?’

“I explained to my mother all that had happened and made it clear that I would not now turn back. She then implored the sage not to fight with me. I was, after all, his disciple, which is the same as a son.

“The sage said he was determined to teach me a lesson. Helpless to stop either side, my mother retired from the battlefield, feeling anxious for my sake.

“I looked across at Parasurama and saw that he had no chariot or coat of mail. I called out, ‘How can I fight you while you stand upon the earth, O Rama? Mount a chariot and put on your armor, for I will now release my weapons.’

“Rama laughed back, ‘The earth is my chariot, the Vedas are my horses, and the wind is my driver. The mothers of the Vedas—Gayatri, Savitri, and Sarasvati—are my armor. Well protected by all of them I shall fight, O delighter of the Kurus.’

“The sage immediately covered me on all sides with a thick shower of arrows. Repelling his shafts, I saw him mount a blazing chariot that resembled a city. Celestial horses were yoked to it and it was protected and ornamented by golden armor and decorations. The chariot was wonderful to behold and had been created by his will. Clad in brilliant armor, he stood upon it looking like Yamaraja surrounded by the personified astras. His disciple, Akritavana, who had requested him to fight, had become his charioteer, and he dexterously wheeled the chariot about as Rama now called out, ‘Come! Come!’

“I repelled another two showers of arrows. Then I dismounted my chariot. Putting down my weapons, I went over to the sage and prostrated myself on the ground. ‘Whether you are my equal in battle or my superior, I will fight with you, my lord, even though you are my preceptor. Bless me that I may obtain victory.’

“Rama smiled. ‘O best of the Kurus, your behavior is proper and I am pleased by it. If you had not come to me in this way, I would have cursed you. I cannot bless you to gain victory since I myself desire to vanquish you. Go and fight fairly and with patience, O hero.’

“I returned to my chariot and blew my conch, signaling the start of the battle. Both of us hurled every kind of weapon at each other. Each desiring victory, we fought furiously. Laughing, I released broad-headed shafts that chopped his bow into fragments again and again. Other arrows passed clean through his body and came out dripping blood, entering the earth like hissing serpents, but by his spiritual power the sage maintained his life and fought back with fearsome energy.

“Covered with blood, Rama stood in his chariot like a mountain pouring forth lava. He responded with well-sharpened arrows that struck me like thunderbolts. Pierced in my vital organs, I trembled and held onto my flagstaff for support. I summoned all my patience and, regaining my composure, released a hundred deadly shafts at Rama. Struck by my arrows, Rama fell senseless to the floor of his chariot.

“I was immediately seized by remorse and cried out, ‘What have I done! I have slain my own preceptor, a virtuous brahmin.’ I dropped my weapons and held my head in anguish, but Rama soon rose again, his charioteer having expertly removed the arrows and tended him. The sun set

and we retired for the day, coming together in the evening as friends.

“The next day at sunrise we faced each other again on the battlefield. Rama shot blazing arrows with serpent-like mouths. I cut them down with my own arrows even as they sped through the air. The sage then resorted to celestial weapons, which I countered with my own. During the violent exchange of weapons, I was suddenly caught on the chest by a dart that rendered me unconscious. My charioteer quickly removed me from the battle and all of Rama's followers, along with Amba, sent up a cheer.

“After some time I regained consciousness and ordered my charioteer to take me back into battle. He urged on my horses, which seemed to dance as they bore us toward Rama. As soon as I saw him I fired hundreds of straight-flying arrows that screamed through the air, but Rama cut every one of them into pieces with his own arrows and they fell uselessly to the ground. Then I sent hundreds more shafts at Rama, even as he was countering my last assault. He was caught off guard and knocked unconscious. As he fell from his chariot a loud cry of ‘Alas’ went up from his followers.

“Seeing him dropped to the earth like the sun fallen from the sky, the Kashi princess, along with his many disciples, ran over and comforted him. They sprinkled his face with cool water and uttered benedictory hymns. Rama slowly rose and looked across at me, seated on my chariot. Enraged, he shouted, ‘Stay, Bhishma. You are already killed!’

“Even before remounting his chariot, he shot an arrow that seemed like the rod of death. It hit my right side and sent me spinning. As I reeled Rama killed my horses. He simultaneously covered me with a thousand more arrows. Without becoming confounded, I countered his attack with lightness of hand. As I struck down his arrows my charioteer quickly fetched fresh horses for my chariot. A terrible exchange went on between us. Our celestial arrows met in mid-air and stayed there without falling. The sky became covered with a network of arrows that screened the sun. Rama shot thousands, then tens of thousands, then millions of arrows at me, which I duly countered with divine weapons. A great fire appeared in the sky, reducing the surrounding forests to ashes. As we fought on in this way, the sun set and the battle subsided.

“We fought for many days, utilizing every celestial weapon and all forms of combat the Vedas describe. Rama released missiles that can hardly

be described. They assumed diverse forms and came from every direction. I was continuously whirling in my chariot, repelling his weapons and trying to counterattack with my own. Both of us sought gaps in our opponent's defenses, and we both defended ourselves closely. The battle raged through the day, and at night we rested. We were both extremely exhausted from the fighting.

“On the twenty-third day of the battle, Rama fought with redoubled strength. All of a sudden he fired a number of arrows that fell upon my horses and charioteer like venomous serpents. They were all slain and I was left standing on an immobile chariot as Rama shot arrows charged with death at me. As I fought off his shafts, Rama fired a powerful missile that came at me like a streak of lightning. It caught me on the chest and threw me backwards off the chariot. I fell on the ground a full fifty paces away.

“Thinking me dead, Rama roared like a thundercloud and all his followers cheered. The Kurus who had accompanied me were overwhelmed with sorrow. As I lay there stupefied, I saw eight brilliant brahmins with celestial forms surrounding me. They raised me off the ground and gently supported me. Sprinkling my face with cool water, they said, ‘Do not be afraid. You will soon be successful.’

“Revived and comforted, I stood up and saw my chariot yoked to fresh horses that my mother was tending. I touched her feet and worshipped the memory of my ancestors. Then I ascended the chariot and sent her away. I took the reins and continued fighting. I managed to catch Rama with an arrow of great power that pierced him deeply. He dropped to his knees and his bow slipped from his grasp as he fell down senseless.

“I then saw many inauspicious omens. The sky rained blood and meteors fell. The sun was eclipsed, high winds blew, and the earth trembled. But Rama was only stunned. In a short while, he got back to his feet and continued the fight. Both of us threw our fiercest weapons at each other until the sun again set, when we once more retired for the night.

“That night, as I lay on my bed, my mangled body being tended by physicians, I thought that the battle would never end. I prayed to the gods that they would show me some way to overcome Rama. Then, while I was sleeping, I again saw the eight brahmins who had visited me on the battlefield. Comforting me again, they said, ‘Fear not, O son of Ganga. You

are our own body and we will give you all protection. You will surely vanquish Rama. Here is a weapon that was known to you in your previous birth. Manufactured by Vishvakarma, it is called the Prashwapa, and no one on earth knows it—not even Rama. Call it to mind in the battle tomorrow and it will come to you. Rama will be thrown down by that weapon, but not killed. He cannot be slain, but he will be defeated and rendered unconscious by the Prashwapa. You will then be able to revive him with the Samvodhana weapon.’

“The luminous brahmins vanished and I awoke with joy. The sun rose and the battle began again. Encouraged by the celestial brahmins, I was enlivened and fought with renewed energy. After a furious exchange of weapons I thought of the Prashwapa. The mantras suddenly appeared in my mind, but as they did I heard a tumultuous uproar of heavenly voices: ‘O Bhishma, do not release the Prashwapa missile.’

“Disregarding them, I placed the weapon on my bow and aimed it at Rama. Suddenly, Narada Rishi appeared before me. ‘The gods are stationed in the sky and they forbid you to use this weapon. Rama is an ascetic, a brahmin, and your preceptor. O son of Kuru, do not humiliate him by any means.’

“As Narada spoke I again saw the eight brahmins in the heavens. They smiled and said, ‘O best among the Bharatas, obey Narada. This will benefit all creatures.’

“Parasurama, seeing the irresistible Prashwapa upon my bow and not realizing that I had been forbidden to release it, shouted, ‘Alas, O Bhishma, I am vanquished!’ and he dropped his bow. His father, Jamadagni, along with other heavenly rishis, then came to him and ordered him to stop fighting. They told him that I was one of the eight Vasus and that he could not slay me in battle. Jamadagni said, ‘Arjuna, the powerful son of Indra, will later cause Bhishma's death. Brahma has ordained this.’

“So the battle ended. Severely wounded, I went before my preceptor and prostrated myself at his feet. After this he said to Amba, ‘O princess, you have seen me exert myself to defeat Bhishma. Still I have not been able to overpower him. Therefore, you may go where you please. There is nothing more I can do.’

“The maiden replied mournfully, ‘Be it so, O holy one. You have

done your best on my behalf and I am grateful. Still, my heart burns with revenge. I will practice asceticism. In this way I will gain the power to personally bring about Bhishma's death.'

"My preceptor was highly pleased with my prowess and he blessed me that I would be without any equal in battle. After Amba had bowed before him, he left with all his followers.

"Amba then entered the forest. She went to the Yamuna and performed severe penance. I knew everything because when I returned to Hastinapura I appointed men to watch over her constantly. They gave me regular reports. For one year she stood on the riverbank without eating. Emaciated and rough-skinned, bronzed by the sun, her hair matted—she stood with hands upraised.

"After one year she broke her fast by eating a single dry leaf. Then she remained waist-deep in the water for another year, standing on one foot, fired with indignation.

"For twelve years she went on in this way. Neither her relatives nor anyone else could convince her to desist. Then she left the Yamuna and wandered at will, visiting the sacred hermitages of many rishis. All the while she continued her austerities, bathing three times daily, meditating silently, and fasting. Her appearance changed from gentle to fierce, and she began to glow with ascetic power.

"One day as she was bathing in the Ganges, my mother said, 'Why do you perform such terrible penance, O maiden?'

"Amba replied, 'I desire to destroy Bhishma, who is so powerful that not even Parasurama could defeat him. Thus I am set upon achieving insuperable power by my austerities.'

"My ocean-going mother became angry upon hearing her words. 'O lady, you act crookedly. You will not be able to attain your object because you are so weak. O daughter of Kashi, if you hold to your determination, I will curse you to become a terrible river in which water flows in you only during the rainy season. May you be full of crocodiles and other fierce aquatics.'

"After saying this and pretending to smile, my mother vanished, leaving Amba in her waters. Still, the princess did not desist. She performed

even more severe austerities, abstaining from all food and water and controlling even her breathing. She wandered on, and when she arrived at Vatsabhumi, she fell down and began to run as a river. It is recorded that the river in Vatsabhumi runs only during the rainy season and is unapproachable due to its many crocodiles and dangerous fish.

“By merit of her austerities, however, only half of her body became a river while the other half continued as before. She went on with her asceticism, and after some time the rishis at Vatsabhumi approached her. They asked her what she desired and when she had explained they said, "You should seek Mahadeva's favor, for that deity can fulfill any desire."

“Amba supplicated Shiva and he soon appeared before her asking to know her desire. When she asked the god for the power to kill me, he replied, ‘You will slay him.’ Amba then asked how it would be possible, since she was a woman. Shiva replied, "My words can never be false. O blessed one, you will become a man and kill Bhishma in battle. You will remember all this in your next life. Born in Drupada's line, you will become a maharatha, quick in the use of weapons and highly skilled and fierce in battle. This will come to pass soon."

“When Shiva vanished, Amba gathered wood and built herself a funeral pyre in the sight of all the rishis. Setting fire to it, her mind burning with wrath, she hurled herself onto the pyre, crying, ‘For the destruction of Bhishma!’

So, Shikhandi was Amba in his last life. He was born first as a woman and then attained his present form. Listen as I tell you how this occurred.

Drupada's queen was childless for a long time. Together, she and her husband worshipped Shiva for a child. He prayed for a powerful son, but Shiva told him that his wife would give birth to a daughter who would later be transformed into a man. Although Drupada beseeched the god for only a son, Shiva replied, "It shall be as I have said, for it has been decreed by destiny."

Soon after, Drupada's queen conceived. In due course she gave birth to a daughter. Remembering Shiva's words, Drupada announced that a son had been born. He had all the rituals performed for a boy. No one saw the baby; only a few trusted palace staff knew the truth.

Drupada raised his child with love, teaching her writing and all the arts. He also had her instructed in bowmanship and other martial skills. When she became a youth, the queen asked Drupada to find her a suitable wife. Drupada was anxious. The child had not been transformed into a son. Were Shiva's words false? But his wife was fixed. Mahadeva's promise cannot fail. Shikhandi will become a male, and therefore should marry a woman.

Drupada was convinced by the queen's faith and arranged for a marriage. He chose the daughter of Hiranyavarman, king of the Dasharnakas. That king was unconquerable, and he was happy to give his daughter to Drupada's son. No one suspected anything when the wedding ceremony was performed. The youthful Shikhandi, beautiful like a god, appeared dressed as a boy in fine armor. She remembered the events of her previous life and Shiva's words, so even though she had been born a woman, she conducted herself as if she were a man.

But it was only a matter of time before Hiranyavarman's daughter discovered the truth. She sent messengers to her father to inform him that Drupada's son was actually a woman. Her father was furious. He sent an emissary to Drupada saying, "I am insulted by your wickedness. How could you have accepted my daughter in marriage for your own daughter? I am preparing now to come and punish you for this act. Soon I will slay you and all your ministers."

Drupada was caught like a thief. There was nothing he could say. He tried to convince Shikhandi's wife that her "husband" would in fact soon become a male, but all to no avail. The girl's father amassed a large army and marched on Kampilya. Drupada was alarmed. He said to his wife, "Fools that we are, we have brought a great calamity onto our heads. We are in danger. What should we do now, in your opinion?"

Drupada and his wife concluded that their only recourse was to worship the gods. Drupada supplicated the deities, while Hiranyavarman advanced on his country.

Meanwhile, Shikhandi, in sorrow at the danger she felt she had brought on them all, left the city. Resolved to take her own life, she entered the forest in an area that was home to a powerful Yaksha named Sthuna. Finding his abode, a white palace washed with lime, she entered it and sat down to practice austerities. A few days later, Sthuna returned and saw her

sitting there, her body reduced from fasting. Kind by nature, he asked her why she was performing asceticism. The Yaksha said, "Tell me if I can do anything to help you."

Shikhandi replied, "No one can give me what I desire."

But Sthuna didn't agree. "I can surely give you whatever you wish, O princess. I am Kuvera's attendant and can grant boons. I will bestow even the unbestowable. Tell me then what you desire."

Shikhandi related the whole story in detail, concluding, "The only way to save the present situation is that I attain my manhood, O faultless one."

The Yaksha, saddened by her story and feeling afflicted by destiny, considered her request carefully. Finally he replied, "Truly this must be so. I will, however, make a condition. I am able to grant your wish only by changing my sex with yours, but you must return my manhood after a short time."

Shikhandi agreed to return to Sthuna as soon as Hiranyavarma left Kampilya. The two then exchanged sexes and Shikhandi went back to her father's palace.

When Hiranyavarma's army arrived at Kampilya, he dispatched his priest to Drupada, saying, "Come out and give me battle, vile one. You have cheated me." But by then Shikhandi had returned in a male form. Drupada said, "There has been a mistake, O holy one. The king has been misinformed. See for yourself my son's gender."

The surprised Hiranyavarma had a number of beautiful maidens sent to examine Shikhandi. When they informed him that Drupada's son was indeed male, he entered Kampilya with a glad heart. He stayed with Drupada for some time and finally returned to his own country, happy in his newfound alliance with Drupada.

Sthuna had concealed himself in his palace, waiting for Shikhandi's return. As he waited, Kuvera happened to pass by, coursing through the skies in his heavenly chariot. He saw Sthuna's palace, shining beautifully and adorned with colorful banners, gems, and garlands. Descending, he approached the palace, but when no one came out to greet him he angrily asked his attendants, "What fool lives here? Why does he not greet me?"

Some Yakshas then informed Kuvera what had transpired. They told him that Sthuna was hiding in shame in his palace. Kuvera replied, "Bring that foolish one here. I will punish him."

Sthuna came out. In his woman's form he stood bashfully before his master, Kuvera. "Why have you acted in this way?" Kuvera asked. "You have humiliated the Yakshas by giving away your sex. Therefore I curse you not to regain your masculinity. Shikhandi too will not regain her female form."

The other Yakshas felt compassion for Sthuna. After all, he had acted only out of kindness. They asked Kuvera to set a limit on his curse so that Sthuna would not be always punished.

Kuvera said, "When Shikhandi dies, Sthuna will regain his male form. Let him be free of anxiety."

The powerful Kuvera, who can travel long distances in a moment, then left with his followers. Shortly afterwards, Shikhandi returned. "O Sthuna, as we have agreed I will now return your manhood."

Sthuna replied, "It has been ordained that manhood shall be yours for this life, O noble one. Be pleased to return to your abode." Hearing this, Shikhandi returned in joy to Kampilya.

* * *

When Bhishma finished telling the story, he added, "Thus Shikhandi, formerly Amba, hates me, but because he was first born a woman, I will never raise weapons against him. I have vowed this: I will not fight with weapons against women, or those who bear women's names, or even those who appear like women. O Duryodhana, I will not fight with Shikhandi even if he attacks me, desiring my death."

Duryodhana nodded. He looked at Bhishma with respect. Even though the grandfather was often cutting and harsh toward him, the prince could not deny his nobility. Placing his hand on the royal scepter, Duryodhana said, "O son of Ganga, we will now have to fight the mighty Pandava army. Abounding in heroes equal to the universal protectors, the army will be as difficult to cross as the ocean. Tell me, O Grandsire, how long you feel it will take you to annihilate them."

Bhishma's old leathery face, adorned with a flowing white beard,

broke into a smile. "It is fitting that you should ask, Duryodhana. A leader must know both the strengths and weaknesses of both the enemy and himself before beginning to fight. Hear then of the utmost power I will display in this war. Using ordinary weapons on ordinary soldiers, and celestial weapons on those versed in them, I can slay ten thousand foot soldiers and one thousand charioteers a day. Or it may be more. If I become fired with anger when I release my weapons, I can destroy many more men than that. However, you should know that I will only fight fairly."

Bhishma reminded Duryodhana of the rules of battle, which he would not break. For example, heroes should never use divine weapons to kill lesser warriors. The fight should always be equal. Even if one possessed celestial weapons, he should contend only hand-to-hand with a weaponless enemy if such became necessary.

Bhishma's hand touched his bow. "In this way, O king, by fighting ceaselessly throughout the day, I can slay the enemy army in one month."

Cheering Bhishma, Duryodhana turned toward Drona. "O preceptor, what about you? How long do you think it would take you to overcome the enemy?"

Like Bhishma, Drona smiled at Duryodhana. "I am old and have lost some of my strength. Still, I will exert myself fully and consume the Pandava army by the fire of my weapons. I also think I can annihilate all the warriors in about a month."

Kripa said it would take him two months, and Ashvatthama, bolder, said he could do it in ten days. Karna said he could annihilate the enemy in five days, at which Bhishma laughed and said, "You may speak in such strains only so long as you do not encounter Arjuna with his weapons and his conch, guided by Vasudeva. Say whatever you will, son of Radha, for talk is cheap."

Karna frowned, but remained silent. Duryodhana continued questioning his generals and commanders, ascertaining their power and determination to fight. The Kauravas discussed their battle plans well into the night. Soon after sunrise the fight would begin.

Chapter Three. Into Position

Early the next morning, Yudhisthira made his final preparations. His spies had reported to him everything that had taken place in Duryodhana's tent the previous evening. Anxiously he said to Arjuna, "You have heard how Bhishma claims he can slay our army in one month. Drona has said the same. All the Kaurava heroes have stated their determination. Karna even suggested that he could defeat the armies in five days. Tell me, O Phalguni, how long you think it would take you to kill them."

Arjuna glanced across at Krishna. "The Kuru warriors are all high-minded heroes who are expert in wielding weapons, but do not be anxious, dear brother. Our enemies will not have the chance to slay us. I say truly that, with Krishna's aid, I can uproot the three worlds in a moment. I possess Shiva's personal weapon, which alone is capable of annihilating the creation. None of the Kauravas know this weapon. Of course, it would not be proper for me to use it against them, but there will be no need. We shall gain victory by the mere strength of our arms."

Arjuna indicated the many kings present with a sweep of his hand. "Besides me, you have numerous heroes on your side. By ranging among the enemy ranks in our chariots we will soon cause great destruction. Of course, we also have you, O king. Surely whomever you cast your angry glance upon will immediately be consumed like dry leaves in a fire. I do not see how the Kauravas can win this war."

Comforted, Yudhisthira continued to arrange for the first day's battle. His commanders surrounded him, clad in armor. All had been purified by sacred rituals and had bestowed wealth upon the brahmins. With their ornamented swords swinging by their sides, they left the tent one by one to lead their respective divisions into position. The early morning sun rose to reveal the vast Kurukshetra field covered by the two armies. They seemed like two great oceans drawn against one another. The sound of the armies filled the heavens like the low rumbling of clouds in autumn.

When everything had been finalized, Yudhisthira himself left the tent, followed by his brothers and Krishna. On all sides they saw cheerful troops preparing their weapons and chariots. As the Pandavas and Krishna mounted their cars, crowds of brahmins praised Yudhisthira and offered prayers to Krishna.

According to their battle plan, the Pandava army arranged and rearranged itself in different formations, moving their leading warriors about the field and confounding the Kauravas. In response, the Kauravas also moved their divisions about in various ways, so that the Pandavas would not easily see their plan of attack. As the two immense armies maneuvered around the field, a huge dust cloud rose into the sky, screening the morning sun. The thousands of elephants made the earth vibrate as they moved across the field, resembling dark clouds. The formations of chariot fighters, with their polished golden cars, seemed in contrast to the elephant divisions like clusters of brilliant luminaries in the night sky.

Behind both armies their encampments stretched for miles, looking with their rows of tents and shops like two large towns. They were bustling with cooks, servants and tradespeople going about their business. All the warriors had left for the battle, which would last until sunset.

Gradually the two armies closed on each other. Hundreds of thousands of conches filled the air with their blasts. The beating of drums and blowing of trumpets created a cacophony of sound that mixed with the elephants' majestic cries. Countless banners fluttered from chariots, appearing like waves of bright colors amid the assembled troops.

The commanders of the two sides met to agree on the rules of battle. Warriors should only fight with equals and with equal weapons. None should strike another without warning, but should first challenge him. One who has surrendered or one fleeing from the fight should never be struck down. The many servants on the battlefield, carrying weapons and other paraphernalia, were also not to be killed.

The commanders spoke for some time. When all the rules had been established, Dhristadyumna became thoughtful. Duryodhana and his henchmen had never shown much regard for righteousness. Why would they now observe rules, especially if the battle was not going their way? As Bhishma and his generals were about to leave, Dhristadyumna voiced his doubts. "We will respect these stipulations, but I make one provision. If the Kauravas forget our agreement and fight without respect for the rules, then we too shall adopt whatever tactics we deem appropriate. We will not, however, be the first to break the conditions."

"So be it," Bhishma replied. He took his leave from Dhristadyumna

and the warriors returned to their positions to prepare for the start of the battle, which would be signaled by both commanders-in-chief blowing their conchshells.

* * *

Dhritarastra sat anxiously in his palace. There was nothing he could do now but wait. Wanting to share his feelings with someone, and missing the association of Vidura, the old king called for Sanjaya and said, "Tell me what is now happening, O Sanjaya? Have the two armies reached Kurukshetra? Destiny is more powerful than all of a man's endeavors. Even though I tried to restrain my son, aware as I am of the horrors of war, I was unsuccessful. Why was that, O wise Sanjaya? Although I can see Duryodhana's folly, still I have not been able to stop him. Surely this war has been divinely ordained. Besides, it is always honorable for a kshatriya to die in battle."

Sanjaya felt he did not have much more to say. He had tried many times to point out how the blame for the disaster facing the Kurus rested not only with Duryodhana but with the king himself, yet the king seemed unable to admit it. "O king, surely a man who meets with calamities as a result of his own acts should not blame either the gods, destiny or others. Each of us receives the just results of our own actions. O leader of the Kurus, you have failed to act virtuously. The Pandavas have borne your sons' persecution, always hoping that you would deliver justice in the end. But you have not done so. Now all that is left is for you to hear of the Kuru heroes being slaughtered."

As Sanjaya spoke, Vyasadeva suddenly entered the chamber. The rishi, who could see past, present and future, said, "O great king, your sons and all the other kings have now arrived at the end of their lives. They have assembled for battle and will all kill one another. Remembering the changes that are inevitably brought about by time, do not grieve. O child, if you wish to see the battle, I will give you the ability."

Dhritarastra sighed. "I do not desire to see my sons die, O great sage. Simply let me hear of the battle."

"Then I shall bestow the ability to see upon Sanjaya," Vyasadeva replied. "By my grace, he will be able to see everything that takes place at

Kurukshetra. With celestial vision he will see even things that are concealed and all that happens at night. He will feel no exhaustion for the duration of the war. As for victory, that will occur wherever there is righteousness. Regardless of who wins, however, you should know that almost all the warriors on both sides will be slain. This is what the omens say."

Vyasadeva described the portents, earthly and celestial, which predicted destruction. Thousands of carnivorous birds were alighting on treetops, crying in glee. Herons, uttering harsh cries, were flying toward the south. The sun was screened by tri-colored clouds at both twilights. In temples the images of gods perspired and trembled, and sometimes dropped from their positions. "All this indicates a great slaughter. Many heroic kings will sleep forever, embracing the earth as if she were a lover."

Vyasadeva also described how the planets were aligned in malefic formations. After speaking for some time he concluded, "Know that these signs point toward an annihilation of the kshatriyas. There can be no doubt."

Dhritarastra lifted his face toward the rishi. "Surely this war has been divinely ordained. O sage, will not all the kshatriyas attain the regions reserved for heroes, thereby experiencing unending happiness? By giving up their lives in battle certainly they will achieve fame in this life and joy in the next."

Vyasadeva did not answer immediately. He concentrated his mind in meditation, then replied, "Time destroys the universe and all its creatures. Nothing in this world lasts forever. Only virtue lasts along with the soul when all else has been destroyed. Therefore, point your sons to the right path. All of you should follow Krishna's will. That eternal being has personally shown virtue's proper course, but you did not accept it. The slaughter of men, especially kinsmen, can never produce good. The Vedas always condemn it. You are still able to prevent what is about to transpire, my son, but you do not because you are attached to the kingdom. Your virtue is quickly fading. You have allowed your son, who has been born as Death personified for your family, to lead the Kurus to ruin."

Dhritarastra hung his head as his father continued to criticize him in strong words, his voice breaking the still silence of the empty chamber. "What is the value of a kingdom gained through sin and earning only sin, O king? Protect your good name and your virtue. You will then be able to attain

heaven. Let the Pandavas have their kingdom and let the Kurus have peace."

Dhritarastra was embarrassed before the sage. His pathetic voice pleaded in reply. "O Rishi of immeasurable power, your words are without fault. I also know what you know. Please believe that I am not inclined toward sin. My sons will not obey me. I have tried my best. Do not forsake me. You are able to protect my fame and virtue. See me as an ordinary man whose intentions are good but whose power is limited. O great one, you are the respected grandfather of all the Kurus. Be gracious to me."

Vyasadeva could understand that there was nothing more he could do to help the Kurus. He stood up. "O king, I am leaving. Is there any last thing you desire to hear from me?"

"Yes, there is one thing. What signs portend victory for an army?"

The king still hoped that somehow his sons might emerge victorious. He wanted to know if there were any indications of it. After all, the Kaurava forces were almost twice the Pandavas'.

Vyasadeva told him which omens indicate victory. Understanding Dhritarastra's mind he said, "The size of an army is of little consequence. Indeed, a large army that is broken and routed is difficult to regroup. More important is the courage and camaraderie of the soldiers. Even fifty well-trained men, who do not retreat and who know each other well, can defeat an entire army. Victory in any battle is always uncertain. Therefore, it is always superior to negotiate for peace. The result obtained by negotiation is best, that obtained by disunion is indifferent, and that obtained by war is the worst. Even the victors suffer heavy losses."

The rishi then took his leave, the sound of his wooden sandals on the marble floor echoing through the chamber. Dhritarastra sighed repeatedly as Sanjaya began to describe what was happening at Kurukshetra.

* * *

On the battlefield, Yudhisthira spoke with Arjuna. "In comparison to the enemy, our troops are but few. In such cases, Brhaspati has recommended the needle formation. Quickly array our forces in this way, O Dhananjaya, or in any other way you see fit."

Arjuna stood before his brother clothed from head to foot in

impenetrable armor. In his hands he held the Gandiva, which gave off an iridescent glow. Nearby stood his fire-colored chariot, with Krishna holding the reins of his pure white horses. He looked at Yudhisthira, who shone in his own brilliant armor and jeweled helmet. "I will arrange our forces in the unassailable Vajra formation, which Indra designed. I will station Bhima at the head. Simply upon seeing him, the enemy will flee like so many terrified animals seeing a lion. There is no man who can even cast his eye on Vrikodara when he is enraged. He will be our shelter as Indra is the shelter of the celestials."

Arjuna mounted his chariot and set out to make the arrangement. The leading chariot divisions moved quickly forward and formed themselves into a long point, with Bhima, Dhristadyumna, Nakula, Sahadeva and Dhristaketu at its head. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers wielding swords, spears and axes accompanied those generals. Flanked by great elephants clad in steel armor, the army thundered forward. Behind the point they opened out into a larger group, filled with horsemen and infantry. Virata and his entire akshauhini of troops protected the formation in the rear.

Nakula and Sahadeva guarded Bhima's left and right sides, while Abhimanyu and Draupadi's sons protected him from behind. Not far behind them came Shikhandi, protected by Arjuna and advancing with firm determination to kill Bhishma. Yudhisthira took up his position in the center of the army. Many chariot fighters protected him all around, and he appeared like the sun surrounded by bright planets.

The warriors' standards rose above the troops like palm trees decorated with gold and silver. Above them all was Arjuna's huge banner, with Hanuman at its top shouting out his fearful battle cry. As the army advanced, Bhima whirled his mace and roared. He seemed to scorch the Kauravas by his glance. Even his own troops were afraid of him.

Once the Pandava forces were arrayed, they stopped to await orders. The two commanders had yet to blow their conches before the fighting could begin. The Pandavas looked toward the eastern side of the battlefield, where the immense Kaurava army spread out across the entire horizon as far as the eye could see. A strong wind began to blow, carrying sharp stones and pebbles, and the sky thundered, although no clouds were visible. Meteors fell and the earth trembled. A thick cloud of dust rose and obscured the sun.

Seeing the Pandavas' Vajra formation, Bhishma arrayed the Kaurava troops in a counter-formation. With his white headdress, white banner, white bow, and a white umbrella over his head, he looked like a white mountain. Duryodhana rode in the midst of the army, riding an elephant the color of a blue lotus. Above his seat a large white umbrella sheltered him. His great mace rested on his shoulder and his bow was by his side. He was eulogized by bards and singers, and was protected by hundreds of thousands of troops.

All of Dhritarastra's sons were in the division under Bhishma's command and personal protection. Countless kings and princes from every part of the globe, surrounded by their armies, advanced toward the Pandavas. Behind all the troops came Drona, riding on a golden chariot yoked with red horses.

Gazing across at the Kaurava army with Bhishma at their head, Yudhisthira again became apprehensive. He turned to Arjuna. "O mighty-armed hero, it seems to me that Bhishma has arranged his troops in an impenetrable formation. Nor do I see any possibility of overpowering the grandfather. He has limitless strength and unfading glory. Who can approach him in battle? How can victory be ours?"

Yudhisthira appeared disconsolate and dejected. Arjuna offered words of encouragement. "Listen, O king, as I tell you how only a few men can overpower a vast army. Brihaspati explained this in days of yore when the celestials fought the demons. Those who desire victory do not conquer by prowess but by truth, compassion, piety and virtue. Fight with assurance, dear brother, for victory is always where righteousness is found."

Yudhisthira still seemed doubtful. Was his cause even righteous? It seemed to him that his desire for the kingdom was at the root of this war. Arjuna, sensing his misgivings, continued. "We have Krishna on our side. He is righteousness and truth personified. Narada said that victory is certain to go to Krishna and whoever is on His side. Indeed, it is one of the Lord's eternal attributes. His might is infinite. He is the original person, beyond and above this mundane world with all its politics and suffering. I do not see the cause for your sorrow when that Lord of the celestials is on your side and wishing you success."

Thinking of Krishna, Yudhisthira felt pacified. He looked at his troops. "It is exactly as you say, Arjuna. Krishna desires this conflict and thus

we should not hesitate. Tell our men to fight to the best of their power, with fairness and with the desire to attain heaven."

Yudhisthira then distributed charity to the numerous brahmins who had accompanied him onto the battlefield. He was surrounded by rishis, who walked around him chanting hymns in his praise and invoking auspiciousness for the battle. Having been given gold, cows, fruits, flowers and silken cloth, they left the field, uttering prayers and Vedic mantras.

Arjuna's chariot moved to the front of the army. Krishna said, "There stands that mighty hero among men Bhishma, who has performed hundreds of sacrifices, who scorches his foes in battle, and who will soon attack our troops like a lion. Innumerable troops protect him as clouds cover the sun. Make him your target, Arjuna, for none other can face him."

Krishna told Arjuna to offer a prayer to the goddess Durga so that she would empower him. Arjuna alighted from his chariot and knelt down with folded palms. With his face to the east he chanted hymns from the Vedas to supplicate the powerful goddess of the material energy. As he prayed, the goddess appeared above him in the sky. "O son of Pandu, you will surely attain victory. You have the invincible Narayana to help you. No foe can defeat you, not even the mighty Indra."

Durga vanished and Arjuna rose to his feet. Considering himself blessed, he remounted his chariot with a joyful heart.

Seeing that both armies were in position and waiting for the battle to begin, Bhishma raised his conch and sounded a great blast. At once the sounds of hundreds of other conches reverberated around the battlefield as all the leading warriors joined with him. Drums, bugles, trumpets and horns were all suddenly sounded, creating a tumult.

Arjuna and Krishna took out their conchshells. They blew long and mighty blasts that resounded across the battlefield. Bhima, the twins, and all the other leading Pandava fighters also sounded their conchshells. Hearing the celestial sound, the Kauravas felt their hearts quake, but Bhishma was cheered. His eyes flooded with tears as he recognized the sound of Krishna's transcendental conch. Here was the eternal Lord of all the worlds prepared to protect his devoted servants by personally coming into battle with them. Bhishma gazed across at Arjuna's chariot. It was a cruel destiny that had brought him into opposition with Krishna and the Pandavas. Surely duty was

all-powerful.

Chapter Four. The Bhagavad-gita

The first maneuvers of the battle began. Arjuna took up the Gandiva and said to Krishna, "O infallible one, please draw my chariot between the two armies so that I may see the enemy and how they are positioned. Go forward, O Lord, so I can see who is desirous of fighting with us today. Let us see those fools who wish to please the evil-minded son of Dhritarastra."

Krishna drove the horses forward and the fine chariot moved into the center of the field. Krishna smiled. "Just behold all the Kurus assembled here." Arjuna looked across the field. Krishna could understand Arjuna's mind. The long-awaited time for war had arrived—a terrible fratricidal war. There was now no turning back. Suddenly seeing the horror of it before him, Arjuna gazed at his relatives and friends--men who were like fathers, brothers, sons and grandsons, as well as teachers, uncles, friends, in-laws and well-wishers.

Arjuna was overwhelmed with compassion. How could he possibly have looked forward to killing his own kinsmen and friends? He felt weak, and addressed Krishna in a trembling voice. "My dear Lord, seeing my friends and relatives before me in a fighting spirit, I feel my limbs quivering and my mouth drying up."

Arjuna's bow slipped from his hand and his body shook. His skin was burning and he felt his hair standing on end. "O Keshava, I do not think I can carry on in this fight. I am forgetting myself and my mind is reeling. It seems to me that only evil and misfortune will result from this battle. How can any good come from killing one's own relatives? What value is victory if all our friends and loved ones are killed?"

Arjuna dropped to his knees. There was no question of fighting. It had been different when he faced the Kauravas on Virata's field. At that time, he had no intention of killing them. He had only wanted to teach them a lesson. This time, however, either the Pandavas or the Kauravas would not return home. Tears streamed from his eyes as he revealed his mind to Krishna. "O Govinda, I have no desire for a kingdom bereft of my kinsfolk. When I see my teachers, fathers, sons, and so many other near and dear ones standing before me, my thirst for the fight completely deserts me. Even though they may be desiring my death, I cannot possibly think of killing them. O Janardana, I would not slay them even in exchange for the three

worlds, let alone this earth. I can see no happiness arising from this battle."

Sweat covered Arjuna's brow. His breath came in heavy sighs. The sight of old and respected personalities such as Bhishma, Drona, Salya and Bahlika, all of whom he loved dearly, filled him with grief. The many young princes, sons of the Kauravas and their allies, were all like his own sons, and he felt compassion for them too. Even Dhritarastra's sons were pitiable because they were so foolish. How could there be any virtue in killing them?

Arjuna implored Krishna. "In my opinion we will be overcome by sin if we slay such aggressors. Our proper duty is surely to forgive them. Even if they have lost sight of virtue due to greed, we ourselves should not forget religious principles in the same way. If we kill the learned family elders, the traditional rituals will be forgotten, and they are essential for religious life. Without tradition, the whole of society will gradually become godless. By slaying the men, we will leave the women unprotected. They will then be prey to sinful men and unwanted children will be born. Who will train these children? O Krishna, I will be responsible for all these social anomalies and will be worthy of a permanent residence in hell."

Remembering his moral training, Arjuna based his arguments on Vedic statements. It seemed to him that killing his relatives was clearly immoral, particularly killing his elders, who were responsible for maintaining the religious traditions in his dynasty. Surely they should never be killed, especially for the dubious cause of winning wealth and kingdoms.

Arjuna wept. "I would rather the Kauravas killed me, unarmed and unresisting, than raise my weapons against them for the sake of my own happiness." He threw down his weapons and slumped in his chariot.

Krishna was still smiling as he looked at his grief-stricken friend. This was an uncharacteristic display of timidity from such a fearsome warrior. He replied to Arjuna firmly. "How have these impurities come upon you at such a critical time, Arjuna? This is not at all befitting a man who understands life's true values. It leads not to higher planets but to degradation and infamy. O son of Kunti, do not yield to such impotence. It is quite unbecoming. Give up this petty weakness of heart and arise, O chastiser of enemies."

Arjuna looked with surprise at Krishna. What could he mean? He had simply dismissed all his arguments. Krishna had never given improper or

disastrous advice at any time. He was the personification of all religious principles. Arjuna was perplexed. Why had Krishna disregarded the religious considerations he had raised? Of course, for a kshatriya it was always religious to fight and check miscreants, but these were not ordinary wrongdoers. Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, and so many others were highly respectable men who carefully followed their religious duties.

Still shaking, Arjuna asked, "My dear Krishna, although it is right to kill sinful enemies, how can I fire arrows at men who are worthy of my worship? I would rather become a beggar than win this world at the cost of their lives. Even if they are afflicted with greed, they are still my superiors. What religious principle sanctions slaying them? If we win the war then all our ill-gotten gains will be tainted with their blood. It seems to me that winning will be no better than losing. Victory is in any event uncertain, but in this case it is not even desirable. How could I live after causing my relatives' death? Yet they are standing before me with upraised weapons."

Arjuna could see no way out of his situation. The Kauravas were clearly intent on killing him and his army. Still, he had no heart for the fight. Nor did it seem religious. At the same time, his religious arguments had no effect on Krishna. What was his duty now? There was only one person who could help him. He looked up at Krishna, who sat peacefully with the reins in his gloved hands. It was by Krishna's help that Arjuna and his brothers had survived so many difficulties. He was without doubt the wisest person. He would know what to do.

Deciding to surrender himself to whatever Krishna advised, Arjuna said, "O Krishna, I am confused about my duty and have lost all composure due to weakness of heart. Surely I am being consumed by miserly and selfish considerations, but I am not able to overcome them. In this condition I ask you to please tell me what is best for me. Now I am your disciple and a soul surrendered unto You. Please instruct me. I can see no means to drive away this grief. Even winning a prosperous kingdom equal to that of the gods will not assuage my sorrow. O Govinda, I will not fight."

Arjuna fell silent. Now it was up to Krishna to convince him. On the other side of the field Bhishma looked with interest at Arjuna's solitary chariot in the middle of the two armies. Why was Arjuna not in position? He seemed to have dropped down in his chariot. Something was going on between him and Krishna. Bhishma raised his hand to hold back his forces.

Was Krishna considering a final peace effort, even on the battlefield? Surely not. The conches had already been blown to signal the beginning of the fight. Whatever Krishna was doing, Bhishma wanted to respect it. Bhishma decided to wait until Arjuna's chariot moved off again before giving the order to charge. Yudhisthira was also holding his forces in check, so there was no need for immediate action.

Krishna now smiled more broadly. He was pleased that Arjuna, his dear friend, was ready to accept him as teacher and guide. Holding up his hand in blessing, He said, "Although you are speaking learned words from the scriptures, you are still mourning for something unworthy of grief. A wise man laments neither for the living nor the dead. Both you, I, and all these assembled kshatriyas have always existed and will always exist. We are eternal souls, passing from body to body. Even in this life we see how the body changes, even though we remain the same person. In the same way, when death comes, we are given a new body. A self-controlled person is not bewildered by such a change."

Kneeling at Krishna's feet, Arjuna felt immediate relief. As usual, Krishna had gone straight to the heart of the matter. Arjuna listened attentively as Krishna continued. "O son of Kunti, happiness and distress come and go constantly like winter and summer seasons. They arise from sense perception alone, O Bharata, and one should tolerate them without being disturbed. A person capable of such tolerance is eligible for liberation from all misery. The great seers who know the truth have concluded from a careful analysis that the soul and spiritual reality are unchanging, and that the temporary material body is ultimately without any basis in truth. The soul pervades the body and is indestructible. No one can destroy the immeasurable and eternal soul, but the body is sure to come to an end. Therefore, fight without any compunction for your relatives' bodies, O Arjuna."

Arjuna understood well enough what Krishna was saying. The soul was surely eternal; but was that a good argument to use when he was about to kill? Death and subsequent rebirth were painful experiences for the soul.

Out of love for Arjuna, and understanding his doubts, Krishna said, "Neither he who thinks the living entity the slayer nor he who thinks it slain is in knowledge, for the self slays not nor is slain. For the soul there is neither birth nor death at any time. He is never created. Unborn and ever-existing, he is not slain when the body is slain. Knowing this, how can you ever be the

cause of anyone's death? Indeed, the body's death allows the soul to receive a new body, just as a person puts on new garments after discarding the old."

Arjuna understood that Krishna was reassuring him that his beloved relatives would not be the losers. By killing their bodies, Arjuna would free them from the pain and suffering brought on by their present karma, and they would then be given a new start in a better body, probably in the higher planets. But Arjuna worried about the celestial weapons he would use, fearing they might somehow hurt even the soul.

Krishna answered that doubt. "There is no weapon, be it fire, wind or water, that can damage or cut the soul. The soul is unchanging and impervious to all material effects. The soul is described by the Vedas as invisible, inconceivable and immutable. The body is only the outward dress of the indestructible soul."

Arjuna remained silent. Even knowing Bhishma and Drona to be eternal souls, he still grieved at the prospect of their death. Krishna had already instructed him that such distresses were unavoidable and had to be tolerated, but it would not be easy.

Krishna smiled affectionately at His friend. "Even if you believe the self to be the same as the body, you still have no reason to lament, O mighty-armed hero. The body is matter, and material objects are always being created and destroyed. What wise man laments for the inevitable changes to matter that are wrought by time? Whatever you believe, the effects of time cannot be checked. Death follows birth, and birth follows death in due course. Simply perform your duty without lamentation, for you cannot change the course of time, which is ultimately the cause of everyone's death."

Arjuna reflected on Krishna's words. It was difficult to comprehend the soul's existence. That it was undying and indestructible had been made clear, but its actual nature remained a mystery.

Without pausing Krishna concluded his instructions about the soul. "Those who know the soul consider him amazing. He is described in the Vedas as amazing. Even persons who have heard all the descriptions of the soul still fail to understand him at all. Nevertheless, O descendent of Bharata, he cannot be slain at any time. Therefore, give up your useless grief for your relatives."

Krishna changed tack and began to address Arjuna's fear that he

would be tainted by sin if he killed his elders. "You are a kshatriya, Arjuna, and it is thus your foremost duty to fight according to religious principles. You should not hesitate. Rather, you should embrace this opportunity, for it opens the way to heaven for you. If you do not fight, you will incur sin for neglecting your duty. Thus you will lose your good reputation. You will become infamous, and for a respectable person dishonor is worse than death. No one will think you desisted from fighting out of compassion. They will think you fled in fear and will thus lose their respect for you. What could be more painful than that?"

Hearing his commitment to his warrior duties challenged, Arjuna shifted uncomfortably. The thought that he might be acting sinfully was painful, and the loss of his good reputation would be intolerable. Krishna continued.

"In this battle there are two possibilities: you will either be killed and thus attain heaven, or you will defeat your enemies and win the earth. Therefore, fight with determination. This too is my desire. O Partha, fight because it is your duty without thought for happiness or distress, loss or gain, victory or defeat. In this way you will never incur sin."

Arjuna felt his heart opening as he absorbed Krishna's instructions. Krishna had countered his fears that he would suffer and become sinful by fighting. Actually, it would be sinful not to fight.

"I have told you some existential truths about the soul, O son of Kunti. Listen now as I speak about working without desire for the results, and thus without entangling yourself in karmic reactions. This is the path to liberation. Once you are on this path you will not fall back again into the abyss of material existence. Those on this path only desire to serve the Supreme and are resolute in performing their religious duties. Those who seek worldly happiness, however, are constantly overwhelmed by diverse temptations.

"Only unintelligent men are attracted to those sections of the Vedas that speak about material happiness. Desiring sensual pleasures, opulence and power, they think there is nothing more to life. They become bewildered by such desires and cannot fix their minds upon yoga practice. Do not let yourself be attracted by anything in this world, O Partha. Be free from all the dualities of happiness and distress. Established in the self, give up your

anxiety for material gain and safety."

Arjuna could understand that his earlier arguments were aimed only at material happiness. Although he had argued on the strength of Vedic morality, it was becoming clear that he had not fully understood the Vedas and their ultimate aim. There were higher principles and truths. Krishna continued to explain them.

"The Vedas give directions for achieving material happiness, Arjuna, but there is a deeper purpose behind all Vedic instructions. One who knows this purpose can satisfy all his desires without pursuing them all separately, just as one who has access to a great river has no need for small wells and ponds. The greatest aim of life is achieved by working without desire for the fruits of action, simply because it is one's duty to do so. In this way you can be situated in yoga without attachment for success or failure in your work. Thus you will remain untouched by sin. Even your previous karmic reactions will be destroyed by such work. You will then be able to attain the highest destination, the supreme abode of God, and be freed forever from the cycle of birth and death. When you are no longer attracted by the promises of material happiness given in the Vedas, and remain satisfied by the self alone, you will then be fixed in the divine consciousness which leads to eternal liberation."

Arjuna asked, "How can we recognize a man in divine consciousness, O Krishna? What are his symptoms?"

"Such a person takes no delight in sensual pleasures, O Partha. He is ever satisfied within himself. No miseries can disturb him, nor any kind of material happiness. He is without attachment, fear and anger, and remains always aloof to the dualities of this world. His senses are under complete control, even though he may still experience sense desires. His mind is fixed upon the Supreme and he is always peaceful. He does not dwell upon the objects of sense pleasure, which can steal away even a practiced yogi's mind, and thus he keeps himself free from all material entanglement. Due to such sense control, his intelligence is undisturbed and he is peaceful. O Arjuna, one whose senses are uncontrolled is not peaceful. How, then, can he ever be happy?"

Arjuna was bewildered. Krishna was recommending yoga and sense control—keeping oneself peaceful—and at the same time telling him to fight. How were the two compatible? "O Keshava, why do you want me to engage

in this ghastly warfare if you think that yoga and detachment are better? Surely fighting requires me to be motivated by a desire for victory. I am confused by Your instructions. Please tell me clearly what will be most beneficial for me."

"O sinless Arjuna, there are two paths to liberation: one involves renunciation and the pursuit of knowledge, while the other involves working without material desires. One cannot achieve perfection by renunciation alone, for by simply stopping work one does not necessarily remain free from karmic reaction. Impelled by his nature a man is forced to act at every moment, even if the action is only in his mind. To withdraw the senses while allowing the mind to think of sense pleasures is useless, O Arjuna. It is simply a pretense of yoga. Far better is the man who uses his intelligence to control his senses and at the same times works without attachment."

Arjuna thought of his own case. Even if he tried to renounce the battle and remain aloof, his mind would still work. It was likely he would continue to think of Duryodhana and his evil deeds, and of how Yudhisthira had been robbed of his kingdom. Those thoughts would sooner or later impel him to act—to take up arms and fight. But how can one fight without attachment?

"Work must be done as a sacrifice for Vishnu, O son of Kunti. This is detached work. Any other work causes bondage in this world. Therefore, work only for his satisfaction. By such sacrificial work a man can achieve all life's necessities and at the same time make spiritual progress. Only a man who is completely self-satisfied need not perform such work."

Arjuna wondered if he was able to remain self-satisfied. He already had some experience of yoga and meditation. Did he really need to work?

Krishna smiled. "A genuinely detached man sees no need for work, but he also sees no need to give up work. He works simply as a matter of duty and without desire for the results. By this work he ultimately attains the Supreme. He also sets the right example for others, for whatever a great man does will always be followed by ordinary men."

Krishna was thinking of Arjuna's position in society. He was highly esteemed as a leader and hero. If he gave up his duty, even assuming he was qualified to do so, then his example would be imitated by unqualified men. Krishna reminded Arjuna of the famous king, Janaka. Although renowned as

an advanced spiritualist and quite able to remain fixed in meditation on the Supreme, Janaka had nevertheless continued to do his duty as a king.

"Think of my own example, O Partha. You know my identity as the Supreme Lord of all the worlds. What duty is there for me? Nevertheless, I execute all the duties incumbent on a man in my position very carefully. If I did not do so, then all the worlds would fall into ruination, for all men would follow my example."

Arjuna knew that Krishna, as a householder and a member of the royal order, was scrupulous in performing the duties prescribed in the Vedas for such men. It was a perfect example.

"One who knows the truth knows well the difference between material work, motivated only by sensual desires, and work done for the pleasure of the Supreme. O Arjuna, I am that Supreme. Therefore, fight for my pleasure, without desire for personal gain, with no claims to proprietorship, and without lethargy. Those who work only according to my instructions, with full faith in me, attain complete liberation. Those who disregard My injunctions, however, are simply fools and will achieve neither perfection nor happiness."

This made sense to Arjuna. He had always understood Krishna's divinity, and that knowledge had always stood him in good stead. He and his brothers had enjoyed Krishna's protection up to the present moment when he stood ready to go with them into battle against their enemies. Why, then, did not all men devote themselves to Krishna's instructions? Arjuna voiced his doubt. "Why, dear Lord, do men not do their religious duties?"

"They are overpowered by lust, the greatest enemy in this world. Due to excessive desire for material objects, men commit sinful activities, not seeing the suffering that will result. Lust is never satisfied. Rather, it burns like fire, and when it is frustrated, it turns to anger. A man is thus completely bewildered when he gives in to lust. O Arjuna, you should check lust by controlling your senses. Otherwise it will destroy your knowledge and self-realization. Listen now as I explain the science of sacrifice and self-control."

Krishna told Arjuna that the knowledge he was speaking was ancient. He had first told it to the sun-god millions of years ago. Hearing this, Arjuna asked, "How can I accept this, Krishna? It appears that you were born in this world only recently."

Krishna replied, "Both of us have had countless births, O Arjuna. I can remember all of them, but you cannot. Actually, I am never born like ordinary men. My body is transcendental and neither changes nor deteriorates. Still, I appear to take birth in every age. I come only to establish religion and to curb irreligion, Partha. In this way, I deliver the pious and annihilate the demons. One who understands this truth about me will not have to take another material body. Those who take refuge in me will become free from attachment, fear and anger and will attain pure, transcendental love for me. According to their faith in me, I reciprocate with all men, O Arjuna. Anyone can attain me."

Krishna explained that he had also arranged for the fulfillment of men's material desires. He was prepared to give everyone whatever they wanted, whether it be sense enjoyment or love of God. He had no vested interests in the material world and simply acted in reciprocation with men's desires, according to what they deserved. Krishna himself was always transcendental to the material world. Knowing this, all the liberated souls in the past had attained perfection. They acted only for Krishna's pleasure. Such work was without reaction, as he was the supreme transcendence.

But those who renounced work, if the renunciation was not done for his pleasure, were still subject to reaction. Anything done on one's own account, whether motivated by attachment or repulsion, carried a karmic reaction.

After describing various kinds of sacrifice, Krishna said, "All types of sacrifice are meant to culminate in transcendental knowledge, or realizing one's identity as an eternal servitor of the Supreme. This is the mature fruit of all mysticism and it burns to ashes all of one's accumulated karmic reactions. By working in this knowledge one is never again affected by the reactions of work. All of your doubts have arisen out of ignorance, Arjuna. Kill them with the weapon of knowledge. Armed with yoga, stand and fight."

As Krishna went on to explain how to work in devotion, Arjuna began to understand that this was true renunciation. Only by dedicating all one's work to the pleasure of the Supreme could one be genuinely detached. Krishna explained that working in such consciousness gradually brought one to the point of always remembering the Supreme, or samadhi. This type of yoga was no less effective than the practice of asceticism and meditation; indeed, it was easier, for to give up everything and meditate in a solitary

place would be difficult for a worldly man like Arjuna. To Arjuna's relief, Krishna made it clear that this was not necessary. He also assured Arjuna that the path of yoga, once begun, was never lost. Even if he did not achieve success in this life, in his next life he would be able to continue from whatever point he had left off.

Having established that constantly thinking of the Supreme was the highest goal of yoga, Krishna made his own position clearer. "It is I who should always be remembered, O Partha. There is no truth superior to me. Everything rests upon me, as pearls are strung upon a thread. I am the creation and dissolution of all the worlds. People are bewildered by material desires. Thus they do not know me, who am always above the material world. It is hard to fully overcome attraction to this material world and its allurements. Only by surrendering to me is it possible. It may take many births and deaths of striving in yoga until one finally comes to understand me. It is a rare soul who achieves such perfection. Due to their lack of intelligence, most men are content to worship lesser gods. Other foolish men think that beyond me lies some impersonal supreme existence. Because of deep-seated material desires, such fools can never know me, although I am the Lord and the knower of all living beings."

Arjuna was feeling reassured by Krishna's instructions. All his life he had thought only of Krishna as his protector and greatest friend. Now Krishna was telling him that this was life's perfection. The highest achievement in life was to remember Krishna at the moment of death, and thus attain his eternal, spiritual abode.

But this required a lifetime of practice. Arjuna listened without question as Krishna described the best process for always remembering him.

"This is the king of knowledge, Arjuna, the most secret of secrets and the perfection of religion. It is I alone who am to be worshipped and served with love. Fools cannot understand how I am able to assume a human form and appear in this world. They do not know my transcendental nature as the Supreme Lord of everything. Intelligent men, however, are fully engaged in my devotional service. They are always chanting my glories, endeavoring to please me with great determination, bowing down before me, and worshipping me with all their hearts. I always personally protect such persons. I am indebted to anyone who lovingly offers me even a leaf, flower or fruit. Therefore, you should do everything as an offering to me, O son of

Kunti. In this way, you will achieve perfection. This is the highest instruction. Engage your mind always in thinking of me, become my devotee, offer obeisance to me, and worship me. By such full absorption in me surely you will come to me, life's supreme goal."

Arjuna was now looking at his friend with amazement and love. The Supreme Lord had become his charioteer. Surely this was a testament of his loving reciprocation with his devotees. Who could ever understand it? Krishna seemed so human. How would people be able to accept his supreme divinity?

Again understanding Arjuna's doubts, Krishna went on. "Those who are devoted to me are able to know of my position and opulence. Because you are my dear friend, I will explain further about myself. Not even the demigods and great sages can know me in full, for in every respect I am their source. I am the source of all things, material and spiritual. Everything emanates from me. The wise who know this perfectly fully engage in my loving devotional service. Their thoughts always dwell in me and they derive great pleasure from talking about me. To one who constantly serves me with love, I give the understanding by which he can come to me. With the shining lamp of knowledge I destroy all their ignorance."

Arjuna had no doubts about Krishna's position. He had already experienced Krishna's power and opulence, as well as having heard it described by so many rishis. Now Krishna was making it plain. Arjuna was awe-struck. Folding his palms he knelt before Krishna and said, "You are the original Supreme Person, the ultimate abode, and the Absolute Truth. Unborn, eternal and transcendental, you are the greatest of the great and the possessor of all opulences. This is confirmed by those sages who can see the truth, such as Narada, Asita, Devala and Vyasadeva, and now you yourself are declaring it to me. O Krishna, I totally accept as truth all that you have told me. None can know you, not even the gods and Asuras. You alone can know yourself by your own potency, O Lord of all beings, God of gods, Lord of the universe!"

Feeling a surge of divine love, Arjuna asked Krishna to describe himself further. "Tell me how it is that you pervade all the worlds, O Lord. How should you be remembered and how can you be known? Please tell me in detail of your mystic power and opulences. I never tire of hearing such descriptions and long to taste the nectar of your words more and more."

"My opulence is limitless, O Arjuna. I shall therefore tell you only of that which is most prominent."

Krishna explained that although everything was a manifestation of his energy and power, he would highlight for Arjuna some principal features by which he could be remembered. He told him that he was Vishnu among gods, the sun among planets, Shiva among Rudras, and Meru among mountains. He described himself in many ways, revealing to Arjuna how he was present in everything Arjuna saw. Concluding his description, he said, "Know that all opulent, beautiful and glorious creations spring from but a spark of my splendor. Is there any need for so much detailed information about me? With a tiny fragment of myself I pervade and support this entire universe."

Tears streamed from Arjuna's eyes. Remembering how he would often sport with Krishna as if he were an equal, he said in a choked voice, "Only out of illusion did I ever believe you to be a man like me. That illusion is now dispelled. I am convinced of your supreme position. But, O greatest of all personalities, there are many who will not believe this truth. Please, therefore, show yourself in all your majesty. I too desire to see that great form which pervades and supports the worlds. If I am able to see it, O Lord, then please display it to me now."

Krishna assented to Arjuna's request. "See now my mystic opulence, O son of Kunti. Here are my hundreds and thousands of varied divine and multicolored forms. My dear Arjuna, I shall bestow upon you divine vision, for you cannot see me with your present eyes. Behold, O best of the Bharatas, all that you desire to see and all that you will ever desire to see in the future. Everything moving and unmoving is here in one place."

As Arjuna looked on in astonishment, Krishna displayed his universal form. In Hastinapura he had shown a partial manifestation of this form, but this time he exhibited it in full. Arjuna became aware of a vast form possessing unlimited mouths and eyes. It was decorated with countless celestial ornaments and held many divine weapons. Decked with celestial garments and garlands, it was wondrous, brilliant, unlimited, and expanded everywhere. It seemed as if hundreds of thousands of suns had risen simultaneously in the sky.

Arjuna felt his hair standing on end. He bowed his head to the floor

of his chariot and offered many prayers to Krishna. In Krishna's divine form he could see all the gods headed by Brahma and Shiva with all the Rishis, Siddhas and Nagas. Every kind of created being appeared in that form, all the worlds were visible, and nothing was missing.

Finding it difficult to look at the universal form, Arjuna said, "O inexhaustible one, this unlimited body of yours is wonderful and at the same time terrifying. I see all the gods and Rishis standing before you and offering prayers. As they are disturbed, so am I, dear Lord. Seeing this tremendous manifestation I am losing my peace of mind and my balance. I cannot look upon your thousands of blazing, death-like faces. All the soldiers of both sides appear to be rushing into the fearful mouths of those faces. Indeed, You are destroying all men and everything else. Everything is entering your mouths as moths fall into a fire. Covering all the universe, you are manifest with terrible, scorching rays."

Arjuna was trembling. "O Lord of lords, so fierce of form, please tell me who you are and what is your mission."

Krishna's voice seemed to Arjuna to be resounding from all sides as he replied. "I am Time, O Partha, the great destroyer of all the worlds. With the exception of you, your brothers, and a few others, everyone will be slain. This will come to pass whether you fight or not, Arjuna. Therefore, do your duty as a warrior and you will become an instrument of my desire. Bhishma, Drona, and all the Kuru heroes are already dead. Fight without disturbance, Arjuna, and you will gain a glorious victory."

* * *

Sitting before Dhritarastra, Sanjaya saw everything that was taking place between Arjuna and Krishna. He described it in detail to the blind king, telling him the exact words spoken by them both. The king was amazed as he heard of Krishna's divine opulence. As Sanjaya tried to describe the universal form, Dhritarastra felt his heart tremble. How could his sons face such power and survive? Now Krishna was saying that all the Kuru heroes had already been put to death by a divine arrangement. Could it be true? Was Krishna really able to make such a prediction? It seemed that not everything was in His power. After all, He had come to Hastinapura seeking peace and had failed in His mission. Perhaps He would also fail to fulfill His desire to see

the Pandavas victorious in the war.

Sanjaya told the king what Arjuna said to Krishna after he heard that all the fighters would be killed. "Arjuna could understand Krishna's desire. He then replied, 'All this is rightly done, O Lord. You are the protector of pious and perfected beings and the destroyer of atheists and demons. This is for the good of all, for even the demons will finally be brought to their senses by this treatment. O almighty one, everyone should simply offer their obeisances unto you. You are the ultimate sanctuary. Knowing everything, you are all that is knowable. I fall before you again and again. My obeisances from every side, O Lord! I have obviously disrespected you until now. Please forgive me. Not knowing your glories I have lain with you on the same bed, jested with you, and surely dishonored you many times out of madness or love. O infallible one, please excuse me, even as a father would excuse his son, or a lover his beloved.'"

Sanjaya sat with his eyes closed, envisioning the scene. He saw Arjuna bowing at Krishna's feet. As Arjuna stood up he said, "O almighty one, having seen this form which I have never seen before, my mind is filled with fear. Please be gracious and allow me to see your beautiful Vishnu form, with its four arms and divine decorations."

Krishna said, "Happily have I shown you, by my spiritual potency, this supreme universal form. No one else has seen this form. Not by any means can it ever be seen, O Arjuna. You have been disturbed and frightened by this horrible feature of mine. Let it be finished. See now my Narayana form and be peaceful again."

Krishna withdrew his universal form and Arjuna saw before him the graceful form of Narayana, with his four arms holding a conch shell, disc, club, and lotus flower. After some moments, that form again changed to Krishna's original, two-armed form, from which all other forms emanate.

Arjuna regained his composure and felt encouraged. Krishna said, "O Arjuna, although my universal form is difficult to see, it is even harder to know my original form. The gods are always seeking an opportunity to see me as I now appear. This form is the most dear and it can only be known by undivided devotional service. Only in this way can one enter into the mysteries of my understanding."

As Sanjaya repeated Krishna's words to Dhritarastra, the king heard

about the science of bhakti-yoga, or devotional service. Krishna first explained that there were two classes of transcendentalists: those who worshipped the unmanifested Supreme Brahman—the eternal, spiritual energy which is the basis of all existence—and those who worshipped Krishna's personal form.

"Of the two, he who fixes his mind on my personal form, worshipping me with faith and love, is considered the most perfect. For the other class, advancement in spiritual life is difficult, although they too will finally come to the point of worshipping me when their realization matures. Indeed, O Arjuna, I am the basis and origin of the impersonal Brahman. Therefore, worship me alone. I swiftly deliver my devoted worshippers from the fearful ocean of birth and death. They then live with me in perfect happiness eternally."

Krishna then explained how to approach the practice of bhakti-yoga by the gradual method. After describing the qualities found in a consummate practitioner of bhakti, he spoke about the material nature and consciousness. Through descriptions of the knower, knowledge, and the objects of knowledge, Krishna explained in detail how he pervaded the material energy and how he was the Supersoul in every living being. He thus assured Arjuna of his complete ability to protect and deliver his worshippers.

From Krishna's instructions, Arjuna could understand that the living being is the cause of his own happiness and distress. By initially desiring to turn away from God, he is placed in the material energy. Then by associating with the various aspects of matter, he becomes more and more entangled, being attracted to various forms of material enjoyment. He is thus obliged to take birth in various species of life. All the while the Supersoul accompanies him as the witness of all his actions. The Lord is the overseer and sanctioner of the living being's activities. If the living being turns again toward the Lord, he can at once become free of matter.

Krishna continued. "Those who can see the difference between the body and the soul, and who can see the Supersoul, are eligible to approach the supreme spiritual abode. Such persons will not become degraded in this world, even though engaged in action."

Arjuna was curious to know how the soul first came into the clutches of matter. Krishna explained it in full. By this knowledge, one would be able

to extract himself from the material energy. Arjuna inquired as to what were the qualities of a person who had achieved complete freedom from material bondage, and Krishna gave a detailed description. He concluded by saying, "He who engages in full devotional service to me, unfailing in all circumstances, is at once freed from the material energy and raised to the transcendental platform."

Arjuna understood that freedom from matter did not mean leaving the material world altogether. It simply meant being freed from attraction and attachment to material things and working only for the pleasure of the Lord. In this mood Arjuna should fight. Krishna had clearly elaborated on his initial instruction to Arjuna to fight without material attachment.

Having told Arjuna about the auspicious path of bhakti-yoga and the qualities of a person on that path, Krishna went on to describe the atheistic persons who went further and further away from God. "Such persons are absorbed in the conceit of pride and false prestige. They are driven by lust and greed, and they believe that satisfying their senses is the prime necessity of life. Perplexed by various anxieties and bound by a network of illusions, they become strongly attached to material pleasures and fall down into hell. They then attain birth in all kinds of low and abominable species as a result of their own sinful desires.

"Those who disregard scriptural injunctions and act whimsically achieve, in the end, only misery." Krishna concluded his instructions to Arjuna by describing how a person could work in the spirit of renunciation. "In that mood, O Arjuna, fight. One who is not motivated by the false ego of thinking himself to be the body, whose intelligence is not entangled in material calculations of profit and loss, even though he kills men in this world, does not actually kill. Nor is he bound by his actions. On the other hand, he who chooses not to kill, based upon his material calculations is motivated only by false ego, and he becomes bound by sinful reactions."

Arjuna nodded. He understood. His hesitation to fight was born of ignorance. All his considerations had been selfish. Seeing his beloved relatives before him, he had forgotten his true spiritual nature and allowed himself to be influenced by mundane sentiment. Now Krishna had awakened his higher intelligence. He and all these kings on the battlefield were all eternal servants of God; their highest duty was to render loving service to the Lord. That very Lord was now standing before Arjuna and asking him to

fight. By acting according to Krishna's instructions, he would achieve perfection, becoming free from material bondage, and attain the eternal spiritual abode.

Seeing that Arjuna had understood his instructions, Krishna said, "Because you are my very dear friend, I have fully explained to you all spiritual knowledge. Deliberate on it fully and do what you wish to do. My final advice is that you simply surrender to me and act for my pleasure. This is the supreme morality. There is no need to consider any other process of yoga or religion. If you act in this way, I will always protect you from sinful reactions. Do not fear."

Krishna looked at Arjuna, sitting at his feet. "Tell me then, O son of Kunti, have you heard everything attentively? Is your illusion dispelled?"

Arjuna stood up in the chariot and took hold of the Gandiva. "My dear Krishna, my illusion is gone and by Your mercy I have regained my memory. I am now firm and free from doubt. I shall act according to Your divine instructions."

Sitting before Dhritarastra, Sanjaya said, "Having heard this conversation between two great souls, I feel my hair standing on end, so profound and wonderful is its import. My heart is thrilled. Upon remembering Krishna's wondrous form, I rejoice again and again. Wherever there is Krishna, the master of all mystics, and wherever there is Arjuna, the supreme archer, there will certainly be opulence, victory, extraordinary power and morality. That is my opinion."

Dhritarastra said nothing. Sanjaya's prediction was certain to be fulfilled. The old king wondered how there could be any hope for his sons, but he still could not help wishing that somehow they would win the war. It was strange. Even though his intelligence accepted the obvious fact that Krishna, and anyone who took his side, could not be defeated, his attachment to his sons rose up and overpowered his intelligence. The internal conflict he suffered was itself a war. He could neither rest nor sleep, although he felt emotionally and physically drained. Somehow, hearing Krishna's instructions to Arjuna had soothed him, although his sons' position seemed even more hopeless. He sat holding his head as Sanjaya began to describe the beginning of the war.

Chapter Five. The War Begins

The warriors on the Pandavas' side had watched and waited as Arjuna spoke with Krishna. Obviously he had been overcome by uncertainty. No doubt seeing his beloved grandfather and teacher had filled him with apprehension. Now he seemed to have regained his resolve. He was again standing in position on his chariot, with the Gandiva held high. The Pandava warriors sent up a great shout. They blew their conches and beat their drums. Horns and bugles sounded continuously and uproariously.

In the sky assembled the hosts of rishis, Siddhas, and other classes of celestials—all wanting to witness the battle. They gazed in wonder at Arjuna's chariot, amazed to see Krishna acting as his charioteer.

Seeing that the battle was about to begin, Yudhishthira took off his armor and climbed down from his chariot. His brothers and the other warriors watched as he walked toward the Kauravas. What did he have in mind? Had he suddenly decided to be humble and hand over a bloodless victory to the Kuru forces? All his brothers called out to him, asking him about his intentions, but the king made no reply. Unarmed and unprotected, he walked straight toward Bhishma's chariot.

Krishna spurred on Arjuna's white horses and the chariot moved closer to the cars of Bhima and the twins. "I know your brother's intentions," he said. "He intends to pay his respects to his gurus before fighting with them. It is said in the old histories that one who first offers his respects to his elders and teachers before engaging with them in battle gains victory."

As Yudhishthira approached Bhishma, shouts of "Alas!" were heard among the Pandava forces, who thought that, in the face of such tremendous opposition, he had decided not to fight. Dhritarastra's sons thought that Yudhishthira was afraid. "Just see this infamous wretch," they laughed. "Stricken with terror he has gone to Bhishma to beg for his mercy." Disregarding their jeers, Yudhishthira went before Bhishma, who got down from his own chariot as Yudhishthira approached. The Pandava bowed down and took hold of Bhishma's feet. "O invincible one, I bow to you," he said. "We will fight with you. Please grant us your permission and give us your blessings."

Bhishma smiled and raised his right hand. "O ruler of the earth, O

great king, if you had not come to me in this way, I would have cursed you with defeat. I am pleased with you, dear son. May you fight and obtain victory. Ask for a boon, O son of Kunti—anything you desire. Alas, men are the slaves of wealth, but wealth is no one's slave. I am bound by the wealth of the Kurus and like an impotent man I stand against you in battle, although I know your cause is just. Tell me, dear child, what you wish to have from me."

Yudhisthira felt tears coming to his eyes. "O wise one, desiring my welfare, please look after my interests. Do your duty and fight for the Kurus' sake. This is my wish."

Bhishma appeared despondent. "Although I must fight for your enemies, O king, tell me what I can do for you."

Yudhisthira folded his hands and bowed his head. "O sire, there is one thing I will ask. Tell me how we will be able to vanquish you, who are invincible. If you see any good in it, please give me this information for my benefit."

Bhishma stood with his large, silver-gilded bow in his hand. Although advanced in years, he was still a formidable figure in his polished gold and silver armor. He placed a hand on Yudhisthira's shoulder. "O descendent of Bharata, I do not see that man who can defeat me in battle, even if he be the lord of the celestials. The time for my death has not yet come. Approach me again and ask this question at some other time."

"Be it so."

Yudhisthira again bowed to his grandfather and then walked away. Making his way through the lines of curious soldiers, he went to Drona. After circumambulating his chariot he said, "O invincible hero, tell me how I may fight with you, my worshipable teacher, without incurring sin. How, O great brahmin, will I be able to vanquish my enemies?"

Like Bhishma, Drona said, "O king, if you had failed to come to me, I would have cursed you with defeat. I am pleased with you, sinless one. You have my permission to fight. May victory be yours. Please tell me what I can do for you. I desire to give you a boon. Alas, I cannot fight for you, for I am a slave of the Kurus' wealth, but I will pray for your victory."

Tears again sprang to Yudhisthira's eyes as he heard Drona's

affectionate tone of voice. How cruel a fate that he should now be forced to fight his esteemed and elderly guru!

But Drona would be difficult to overcome. He was now old but his energy appeared undiminished and he could still fire an unending stream of arrows from his great bow. He also knew the secrets of all the celestial and earthly weapons. Yudhisthira could not imagine anyone even approaching him in battle. With reverence he said, "O brahmin, do pray for me and tell me also what is good for me. Fight for the Kurus with all your might. This is my desire."

Drona looked lovingly at his disciple. Although not as physically powerful as Arjuna or Bhima, Yudhisthira was strong in his ability to remain fixed on the path of virtue. Drona knew that a pious man was always protected by his virtue. He glanced at Arjuna's chariot across the field. "O king, your victory is certain. You have Krishna as your counselor, and righteousness is always with him. Where there is Krishna, there must be victory. O son of Kunti, go and fight with full confidence. What else will I say to you?"

"O mighty-armed one, please tell me how you may be defeated?" Yudhisthira asked.

"As long as I fight, you will not obtain victory, O king. Therefore, seek my death at the earliest opportunity. But there are none who can face me when I am fighting. Neither man nor celestial can stand before me when I am angry and scattering an incessant shower of arrows in all directions. O Bharata, only when I lay down my weapons and am prepared for death, with my senses withdrawn, will you be able to kill me. This is the truth. Having heard something disagreeable from some credible source, I shall abandon my arms and cease fighting."

Yudhisthira bowed to his preceptor. Thinking about what he had said, he walked toward Kripa's chariot. After offering respects to the old brahmin warrior, he said, "O teacher, only with your permission can I fight without incurring sin. Please permit me to engage in battle to defeat my enemies."

Like Bhishma and Drona, Kripa replied that he would surely have cursed Yudhisthira to be defeated if he had not come to him for his permission. He also lamented his obligation to the Kauravas. Having stated

his inability to fight for him, he asked Yudhisthira what else he could do for him.

As he stood before Kripa, Yudhisthira felt as if his heart might break. First Bhishma, then Drona, and now Kripa—all three were like fathers to him and his brothers. From their childhood when they had first come to Hastinapura, these elders had cherished and taught them with the greatest care. He could not recall a single cruel word or deed from any of them. Now he must go before them and ask how they could be killed. Yudhisthira stood with his head bowed. His throat was choked and he could not say anything.

Understanding his plight, Kripa said, "O king, no one can kill me. Knowing this, go and obtain victory."

Kripa's father, Gautama Rishi, had told him that he would be invincible in battle. Therefore, he advised Yudhisthira not to waste time trying to bring about his fall. Lifting his right hand in blessing, Kripa continued, "I will rise from sleep every day and pray for your victory. I say this truly. Go now and obtain your desires."

Yudhisthira went at last to Salva. After asking his permission to fight with him, he stood with folded palms, looking up at his maternal uncle. Salva sorrowfully replied, "The Kurus' wealth has made me their slave. What can I do for you under these circumstances? I wish to bestow a boon upon you for your having come to me in humility. What do you desire?"

Yudhisthira reminded him of his promise to discourage Karna when it came time for him to fight with Arjuna.

"It shall be so," Salva answered. "Go and fight. I will pray for your victory."

Yudhisthira bowed to Salva and then returned to his army. Witnessing the respect and honor he paid to his elders, even the Kauravas praised him. Cries of "Excellent! Bravo!" were heard among the soldiers on both sides. As they thought on the noble qualities of Yudhisthira and his brothers, the soldiers wept aloud.

After he was again stationed on his chariot, clad in armor and ready for battle, Yudhisthira called out to the Kauravas, "If any among you wishes to choose us, we will consider you our ally. Come then to our side."

There was silence and no one moved. Then from out of the Kaurava

ranks emerged Yuyutsu's chariot. "I will fight for you," he shouted. "O sinless one, will you accept me?"

"Come, come," replied Yudhisthira. "Fight with us against your foolish brothers. O Yuyutsu, we accept you into our ranks. It seems the thread of Dhritarastra's line, as well as their last funeral offerings, will rest upon you. O prince, accept us who accept you. The wrathful and foolish Duryodhana will not survive."

As drums and cymbals were sounded, Yuyutsu went over to the Pandavas' side. Duryodhana glared in silent fury at his half-brother. Yuyutsu had never shared his feelings toward the Pandavas. That had been obvious enough from their frequent disagreements. But how did he dare abandon his family in their hour of need? He would regret this foolish decision.

Seeing that the moment of battle had arrived, the warriors on both sides began to shout in exultation. Now they would either die and thus be elevated to the heavenly realm, or they would emerge victorious. To the sounds of thousands of conches, trumpets and drums, the warriors rushed at each other with uplifted weapons. The earth shook and clouds of dust rose into the air as they advanced. They sounded and appeared like two great oceans coming together. Bhima's cries rose above the tumult as he raced ahead of the Pandava forces roaring like a bull. Hearing his shouts, which drowned out other sounds, the Kaurava soldiers became afraid. Horses and elephants passed urine and excrement, faltering as they ran. Dhritarastra's sons were struck with terror as Bhima came toward them, his mace whirling above his head. Bhima laughed at his frightened foes. At last the time had come. Now he could finally release the full fury of his anger.

Taking heart, the Kauravas shouted out their own battle cries and waved their bows in the air. They surrounded Bhima and began firing snake-like arrows at him. Laughing as the arrows glanced off his armor, he struck other shafts down with his mace. Bhima shook off their attack. He replied with thousands of his own arrows, dispersing the Kaurava princes in all directions.

Abhimanyu and Draupadi's sons, along with Nakula, Sahadeva and Dhristadyumna, advanced in a body and tore into the Kaurava forces, scattering arrows everywhere.

Neither side flinched nor turned back from the violence as they

hurled their weapons at one another. The twang of bowstrings and the slap of strings hitting leather arm-protectors and gloves was heard everywhere. The air was full of swift-flying arrows. Spears, darts, and iron balls fell upon both armies in the thousands. The blare of conches, the lion-like roar of warriors, the heavy tread of infantry, the neighing of horses, the clash of weapons, the clatter of chariot wheels, the jingle of bells around the elephants' necks, the elephants' trumpeting, and the beating of drums mingled to produce a hair-raising uproar. Recklessly the warriors rushed forward.

Arjuna immediately engaged with Bhishma. With lightness of hand he fired countless arrows at him, but Bhishma countered them all. He returned numerous shafts at Arjuna. Even though Bhishma's arrows pierced him, Arjuna did not waver. Nor could he shake Bhishma, as he sent at him his own deadly shafts. The two heroes exchanged arrows while the fight raged around them.

As the battle got under way, the sky began to flash red and blue, while black clouds showered flesh and blood onto the field. A terrible wind blew, carrying innumerable stones and afflicting all the troops. The loud rumble of thunder resounded and bolts of lightning struck the earth.

Powerful chariot-warriors engaged with other chariot fighters, while infantry battled infantry and horsemen engaged with other mounted troops. The warriors sought out their marked enemies. Bhima assailed Duryodhana; Sahadeva came against Shakuni; and Dhristadyumna faced Drona. As other kings and kshatriyas came to their aid, the battle became general and weapons flew in all directions.

On both sides of the armies divisions of Rakshasas marched. Ghatotkacha led a division of Rakshasas on the Pandavas' behalf and the powerful Alambusha led the Rakshasas for the Kauravas. These awful beings created a huge carnage among the soldiers as they wielded their axes and bludgeons.

The warriors fought as if possessed by demons. No quarter was shown. Amid the terrible confusion, fathers could not recognize their sons, brothers their brothers, nor friends their friends. Uncles slew their nephews and cousins killed cousins. Men hacked and struck at one another with swords, spiked maces, and heavy clubs. Streams of blood flowed freely across the ground, carrying mutilated and severed limbs. Chariots smashed

against chariots, breaking them to pieces, while elephants tore into other elephants, gouging them with their steel-tipped tusks.

The battlefield assumed the appearance of Yamaloka, the abode of Death. Men screamed in pain, sounding like souls condemned to hell. The bodies of slain warriors and animals lay everywhere in heaps. Axes and swords dripping with blood whizzed through the air. There was a continuous loud thudding sound as heavy maces and swift arrows struck the bodies of soldiers.

Bhishma fought with fury. His tall standard, bearing a palm tree and five stars, glided through the Pandava army, leaving a trail of bodies and shattered chariots in its wake. With his straight arrows he severed the heads and limbs of all who came before him. The old Kuru hero seemed to dance in his chariot as he whirled about wielding his bow. His deadly shafts were fired with such power that they would pierce even great elephants to their vitals, sending them tumbling to the earth.

Seeing the destruction Bhishma was causing, Abhimanyu rushed toward him shouting out a challenge. Bhishma was protected by five maharatha heroes, but Abhimanyu attacked them all. Firing arrows that flew with blinding speed, he held off Bhishma's protectors while simultaneously attacking him. With one well-aimed arrow, he cut Bhishma's bow in two. Another three arrows cut down his standard, which fluttered to the floor of his chariot.

Witnessing Abhimanyu's lightness of hand, even the celestials were pleased. The warriors who saw him considered that he was in no way inferior to his father. His bow, which sounded just like the Gandiva, seemed like a circle of fire as he continuously released arrows. As the god-like prince spun in his chariot, his shafts appeared to be leaving his bow in all directions at once.

Under attack, Bhishma gathered himself and fought back. He wounded Arjuna's son with nine arrows, then cut down his standard with three more. Kritavarma, Salya and Kripa, who were among Bhishma's protectors, all assailed Abhimanyu, but they could not make him waver. He repelled their attack while maintaining his assault on Bhishma. The warriors witnessing the fight all praised Abhimanyu's prowess, calling out "Bravo! Well done!"

Bhishma covered Arjuna's son with thousands of arrows. As he increased the ferocity of his attack, a number of other Pandava heroes, headed by Bhima, came to Abhimanyu's aid. All of them aimed their weapons at Bhishma. Not the least perturbed, Bhishma sent his long golden shafts at all of them.

The prince of Virata, Bhuminjaya, also came to support Abhimanyu. Salya attacked him and a fierce battle ensued between the two fighters. Bhuminjaya was mounted on a huge elephant and he rushed at Salya, wielding a lance. The elephant placed its foot onto the yoke of Salya's chariot, crushing and killing the four horses. Remaining on his chariot, Salya took out a large iron dart and hurled it at Bhuminjaya with all his strength. That dart pierced his armor and went into his chest. The prince fell lifeless from his elephant, his hook and lance falling from his hands. Salya jumped down from his chariot. Raising his sword he brought it down and severed the elephant's trunk. As the great beast fell dead, Salya quickly climbed onto Kritavarma's chariot, being praised for his heroism by all the fighters present.

Bhuminjaya's brother, Sweta, saw Salya kill his brother. Blazing with anger, he rushed at the king of Madra like an infuriated elephant. Seven Kaurava warriors came forward to check him, showering him with arrows. Sweta countered the shafts and, with seven broad-headed arrows of his own, cut all his assailants' bows in two. The Kaurava fighters angrily hurled darts at Sweta which flew toward him like fiery meteors, but with razor-headed shafts the prince cut down the missiles before they could reach him. With still more arrows he wounded his attackers and sent them reeling in all directions, their standards cut and their bodies mutilated.

Sweta continued toward Salya, and it appeared as if Death personified had come for the Madra king. Seeing him advance, Bhishma quickly placed himself between Sweta and Salya. Thousands of horsemen and charioteers had come to Sweta's aid and Bhishma began to pick them off with his unerring shafts. As he fired his uncountable golden arrows, the son of Ganga seemed like the blazing sun with its rays in summer. As the sun dispels darkness, Bhishma dispelled the foes who surrounded him. Soon, the many chariots he had deprived of warriors flew aimlessly about the field. Impetuous horses carried youthful riders killed and hanging from their saddles. Hundreds of slain warriors lay on the ground, their armor shattered and their heads and arms cut off.

As Bhishma slew the Pandava troops, Sweta killed large numbers of the Kaurava army. In his fury, none could stand before him. After some time only he and Bhishma remained facing one another. They attacked each other like two enraged lions. Showers of arrows sped through the sky like golden-winged birds. Each fighter wounded the other. Sweta, with blood flowing from his wounds, fired twenty-five arrows into Bhishma's body. He then cut Bhishma's bow with another ten arrows. With still more arrows he killed Bhishma's horses and charioteer.

Without hesitating, Bhishma took up another bow and jumped down from his chariot. He continued fighting the prince on foot. Sweta then took out a golden dart and called out, "Wait only a moment, O Bhishma. I will slay you at once." He hurled the dart, which flew toward Bhishma like a comet. The many warriors watching the fight cried out, "Alas! Bhishma is slain."

Bhishma did not flinch. He sent eight arrows at the dart and cut it into fragments. He fought on with the prince, who became senseless with fury as he saw his dart checked. Sweta took up a huge spiked mace and rushed toward Bhishma. Ganga's son, mounted on a fresh chariot brought by his aides, considered the attack unstoppable. He leapt clear of his chariot just as the prince brought the mace down upon it. The force of the blow smashed the chariot, standard, horses and charioteer.

Bhishma got up on another chariot and resumed his attack on Sweta. The prince had now mounted his own chariot and Bhishma advanced toward him. As the two warriors closed on one another, continuously releasing weapons, Bhishma heard a voice from the sky: "O Bhishma, O mighty-armed hero, the time fixed for Sweta's destruction has arrived. Fight on with all your power and gain victory."

Bhishma looked at Sweta. He was flanked by numerous Pandava warriors, among them Bhima, Abhimanyu and Satyaki. Encouraged by the divine voice, however, he attacked Sweta alone while parrying the other attacks. Coming close to the Virata prince, he took up an arrow that resembled the rod of death. He placed the golden shaft, decked with gems, onto his bow and drew back the string to his ear. Imbuing the arrow with the force of the Brahma weapon, he released it to kill Sweta.

With a flash like a thunderbolt, the arrow struck the prince on the

chest and passed clean through his body. It entered the earth like a snake going into its hole, carrying with it the hero's life. Sweta fell from his chariot like a peak loosened from the summit of a mountain. The Pandavas sent up cries of lamentation, while the Kauravas shouted joyously. Duryodhana and Dushashana danced in delight. They repeatedly praised Bhishma as the loud music of trumpets and drums sounded.

The sun was slowly disappearing over the western horizon and Arjuna and Dhristadyumna withdrew their troops. The two armies entered their respective camps for the night, the Pandavas cheerlessly and the Kauravas laughing and shouting. As darkness fell, thousands of vultures and jackals came onto the battlefield, their cries mixing with the sounds of the warriors withdrawing.

Chapter Six. Yudhishthira's Fear

Sanjaya finished his description of the first day's battle. Dhritarastra smiled as he heard of Bhishma's incomparable prowess and the slaying of the two Pandava heroes. Perhaps destiny would favor his forces after all. It was hard to imagine anyone overcoming Bhishma in battle. Feeling a surge of hope, the king said, "Your words are pleasing for they describe our victory. The old Kuru chief Bhishma is ever devoted to my interests and will never abandon his prowess. My heart feels no shame on remembering our transgressions against the Pandavas. But that itself is shameful."

Dhritarastra fell silent again for some moments. Sighing, he continued. "Even hearing of our success I cannot condone the battle brought about by my foolish son, O Sanjaya. What good can war do for anyone? Apart from my wicked sons and their equally evil advisors, I do not think there were any who approved of this fight."

The king's mind swung between hope for his sons and sorrow at the thought of the Kurus' inevitable death. Sometimes he was overcome by despair as he pondered on the Pandavas' power and virtue. And then there was Krishna. Today's report was encouraging, but Arjuna had still to exhibit his prowess, as had Bhima and the other Pandava generals. Many would die before the outcome was settled. He did not doubt that. How could his sons survive?

Waving away the servants who were fanning him, Dhritarastra shook his head and said, "Victory will doubtlessly attend the righteous, Sanjaya, but is our case so clearly wrong? Should not the throne have been mine? Does not Duryodhana have the foremost claim to sovereignty, even over Yudhishthira?"

Sanjaya did not respond. It had long ago been established that Pandu was the rightful monarch. Dhritarastra was born blind and that disqualified him from ruling the kingdom. Pandu's sons were thus the rightful inheritors of at least half the kingdom, if not all. Sanjaya knew that Dhritarastra cursed his blindness and considered it an unfortunate quirk of destiny that had denied him his rights. In Sanjaya's mind, it was clearly the Lord's arrangement. There were none who could match the virtue and kindness of the Pandavas. The earth could have no better rulers—especially if the alternative was Duryodhana and his brothers.

Struggling with his inner conflict, Dhritarastra went on dolefully, "But there can be no excuse for the cruelty my sons meted out to the Pandavas and their chaste wife. Soon we will see the fire of their anger blazing on the battlefield. O Sanjaya, thinking of their anger, incited by Duryodhana, I am restless both by day and by night."

Seated at the feet of his master, Sanjaya spoke frankly, but with affection. "You are the cause of the Kurus' present plight. Why do you blame only your son? Your present remorse is like the building of a dam after the water has escaped. Listen as I describe how events are unfolding at Kurukshetra. You will soon be consumed by a lonesome regret as this war takes its inevitable course."

Dhritarastra remained silent as Sanjaya again began to describe the events at Kurukshetra.

* * *

After arriving back at camp at the end of the first day's fight, Yudhishthira called a council of war. He consulted with Krishna, who sat by his side, wearing golden armor and a jeweled helmet. "O Govinda, behold how the powerful Bhishma is consuming my troops as fire consumes dry grass. How can we even look at him as he releases his celestial weapons? Seeing him stationed on the battlefield, my troops are flying away in all directions. Perhaps we may defeat Varuna or Vayu or even the mighty Yamaraja in battle, but I do not think we can overpower Bhishma."

Yudhishthira's voice was heavy with sorrow as he went on. "O Keshava, when Bhishma is my foe, I think it preferable to retire to the forest. It is wrong for me to sacrifice these kshatriyas into the fire of his weapons simply for the sake of sovereignty. Look at my brothers! They have all been wounded for my sake. Not only that, but they have been deprived of both happiness and wealth because of the love they bear for me. How can I allow them to suffer further? I will therefore spend the rest of my days practicing asceticism."

Krishna said nothing as Yudhishthira poured out his feelings. He knew the Pandava king had no intention of abandoning the fight. The first day had not gone his way, and naturally he was frustrated—especially in the face of a warrior like Bhishma. It was not going to be easy to win this war. That much

was already clear.

Yudhisthira continued. "It seems that Arjuna is content to be only a spectator in this battle. Bhishma alone remembers his kshatriya duties and fights with determination. Why, O Krishna, does your friend Arjuna look on with indifference as Bhishma annihilates our troops? Tell me who can stop Bhishma? We must devise a plan to check him before he destroys the entire army. O Govinda, only by your grace will we regain our kingdom after killing our enemies."

Yudhisthira sat with his head down. Krishna replied, "O best of the Bharata race, do not give way to grief. Great chariot warriors who are all dedicated heart and soul to your welfare surround you. I am also engaged in doing you good. You have your brothers, as well as Drupada, Virata, Dhristadyumna, Satyaki, Shikhandi, and many others. All of them are illustrious fighters who will not waver in battle. Shikhandi will surely slay Bhishma in due course. Do not despair."

Yudhisthira was heartened by Krishna's assurance. Certainly he could never utter an untruth, and it was obvious that he wanted the battle to continue. Nor could it be checked regardless. It must go on.

Yudhisthira was concerned that his outpouring of sorrow may have discouraged his troops. Looking at Dhristadyumna, he said, "O hero, you have been appointed leader of my troops. Even as Karttikeya leads the celestials, lead our army to victory. Use your prowess to kill the Kurus. I will follow behind you, along with my brothers and all the other kshatriyas."

Dhristadyumna replied, "O son of Pritha, it is ordained that I will kill Drona. I will now fight with any Kuru who stands before me. Let all those proud kings try their best; I am not afraid of any of them."

Everyone present cheered. Yudhisthira then discussed the arrangements for the next day's battle. His army would arrange itself in the Krauncha-vyuha, the formation shaped like a crow, which Brihaspati had devised. After arranging the warriors' positions, the Pandava army rested for the night, with the moon casting its glow over their thousands of tents.

* * *

As the sun rose on the second day of battle, the Pandava forces

arranged themselves in the Krauncha formation. Seeing this formidable array, with its atirathas and maharathas stationed at key points, Duryodhana asked Bhishma to form a counter-array of his own troops. Bhishma formed his forces into another mighty vyuha. As countless conches and trumpets were sounded, the two armies attacked. Bhishma headed the Kaurava attack personally. He immediately assailed the foremost Pandava fighters, led by Dhristadyumna, Abhimanyu, Bhima and Arjuna.

Under Bhishma's attack, the Pandava vyuha wavered. Charioteers and horsemen fell in quick succession. Bhishma's gold-winged arrows whistled through the air with deadly accuracy. The Pandava troops were terrified as the old Kuru hero continuously showered them with his shafts.

Seeing the carnage, Arjuna was infuriated. "Go, O Janardana, to the place where the grandfather stands. It seems he will annihilate our entire army for Duryodhana's sake. Therefore, I will kill him."

"Be on your guard," Krishna cautioned. "I will now take you to Bhishma."

As Krishna crossed the field, Arjuna sent arrows in all directions, killing the Kaurava forces in large numbers. The twang of his bow, the slap of the string on his leather fences, and the whistling of arrows leaving his bow made one continuous sound. An endless line of shafts emanated from his chariot in many directions as he whirled about.

Bhishma saw him approach. The great chariot with its white horses, huge ape banner, and numerous other celestial flags was easy to recognize. Without delay, Bhishma sent eighty long shafts at Arjuna. At the same time, Duryodhana sent another sixty, while Kripa fired fifty, and Drona twenty-five. Many other powerful warriors supporting Bhishma also trained their arrows on Arjuna.

Although struck on all sides, Arjuna was unmoved. He sent his own arrows at his assailants, piercing each of them. Satyaki, Virata, Dhristadyumna and Draupadi's sons came to support him as he targeted Bhishma. Each engaged with one or more Kuru heroes, leaving Bhishma unprotected.

Unperturbed, Bhishma quickly sent another eighty arrows which wounded Arjuna and sent him reeling in his chariot. The Kauravas shouted with joy. This infuriated Arjuna. He quickly regained his stance and had

Krishna drive his chariot toward the Kaurava heroes, attacking all of them with arrows fitted with heads shaped like calves' teeth. Suffering Arjuna's attack, the Kauravas resembled an ocean lashed by a tempest. Their armor was torn off and their bows repeatedly shattered. Arjuna routed them by the thousands and they fled in terror.

Duryodhana quickly rode up to Bhishma, who had not followed through on his attack on Arjuna. He called out, "O sire, see how this mighty Pandava is cutting down our troops like a farmer cutting wheat. How can you allow this? Only for your sake has Karna laid aside his weapons. As a result, it seems Arjuna will destroy us all. Act quickly to protect us, O son of Ganga."

Bhishma looked at the agitated prince. "Fie upon the kshatriya's duty!" he replied, turning his chariot toward Arjuna. He did not want to face the Pandavas in battle, but he knew it could not be avoided. As he went toward Arjuna, the Kauravas cheered and blew their conches. Duryodhana, Ashvatthama and Dushashana went with him on his two sides and at his rear.

The two atirathas, Bhishma and Arjuna, exchanged arrow for arrow. Each fighter released first ten, then a hundred, then a thousand shafts. Arjuna sent so many arrows at Bhishma that he seemed to be covered by a net, but the Kuru hero soon dispelled the arrows with his own and quickly counterattacked Arjuna. As they fought both were pleased by the other's prowess. Neither could gain the advantage.

Krishna was struck on the breast by three arrows and blood flowed from His wounds. As He dexterously drove the horses, He appeared like a blossoming kinsuka tree with bright red flowers. Standing on the chariot, He made it advance and retreat with beautiful circling motions. So swift was its movement that Bhishma found it difficult to aim at Arjuna. He too wheeled rapidly about the field, confusing Arjuna's aim.

The earth trembled under the chariot wheels and appeared ready to split open. Those who witnessed the fight were wonderstruck. They could not mark any difference between the two combatants, nor see any flaw in their fighting techniques. Most of the time both remained invisible beneath a network of arrows. In the sky the celestials said, "These two cannot be defeated by any foe, earthly or divine. Surely this battle will be without end."

While Arjuna and Bhishma fought, the two armies continued cutting

each other down. Drona and Dhristadyumna contended like two enraged lions. As guru and disciple battled, the contest was no less spectacular than that between Arjuna and Bhishma. Both pierced the other's armor, and both stood as immovable as the Himalayan mountains. Dhristadyumna, conscious of his destiny to kill Drona, constantly sought an opportunity to slay his opponent, but Drona repeatedly and fearlessly confounded his attacks. The martial preceptor displayed his unmatched ability as he fought Drupada's son.

At one point, seeing his chance, Dhristadyumna hurled a long dart adorned with gold and vaidurya gems. It flew like a streak of lightning toward Drona. The moment it was released, however, Drona shot three razor-headed arrows that cut it to pieces in mid-air. It fell to the earth like a shower of meteors.

Infuriated, Dhristadyumna rained down arrows on Drona, but the Kuru warrior checked them all and at once cut apart Dhristadyumna's bow with a crescent-headed shaft. He then killed his four horses and smashed his chariot.

Clutching a massive mace, Dhristadyumna leapt from the smashed chariot. Drona immediately struck the mace with a volley of arrows and shattered it into small pieces. Dhristadyumna took out his long sword and, raising his shield adorned with a hundred gold moons, ran at Drona. Seeing him charging like a hungry lion running at an elephant, Drona checked him with a cluster of barbed shafts. Dhristadyumna could not take another step but was forced to ward off the arrows with his sword and shield. Bhima saw him struggling, and he pulled him up onto his own chariot, riding swiftly away from Drona.

After Dhristadyumna had mounted a fresh chariot and turned again to face his opponent, Bhima encountered the king of Kalinga, Ketumat, and his vast army. Another monarch named Srutayush, who was followed by thousands of Nisadha fighters, supported Ketumat. The two armies surrounded Bhima. Finding himself hemmed in on all sides by elephants, chariots and horsemen, Bhima laughed and began unleashing his arrows in all directions. The arrows, fired by Bhima's mighty arms from his huge bow, passed clean through the bodies of men and horses.

But the Kalinga and Nishadha forces were fearless. Other Pandava troops moved in to assist Bhima. The Matsyas, Cedis and Karushas together

attacked the armies surrounding him. A terrible fight then took place. The clash of weapons and the screams of men and animals was deafening. Hacking and chopping, the soldiers made the field resemble a ghastly crematorium strewn with flesh and blood. They could hardly distinguish between friend and foe, and warriors slew others from their own side. Gradually, the Nishadha troops, fighting with demonic fury, forced back the Chedis and Matsyas. Bhima was left alone on his chariot, still surrounded by thousands of fighters.

Undaunted, the Pandava stood his ground. He covered the Kalingas with showers of arrows and sent up a great cry. Ketumat and his son Sakradeva rushed upon Bhima, letting loose numerous shafts. Roaring, Bhima shook his bow and warded them off with ease. Sakradeva fired a volley of shafts that killed Bhima's horses. Remaining on his chariot, Bhima fended off Sakradeva's attack. He quickly took up an iron mace and hurled it at the prince. That mace sped through the air as straight as an arrow. It caught Sakradeva on the chest, killing him instantly and throwing him out of his chariot onto the earth some distance away.

Seeing his son killed, Ketumat rushed forward backed by his troops. Bhima took up a long sword forged from the finest blue steel. Holding the sword as well as a massive shield made of bullhide decorated with golden stars and crescents, he leapt from his chariot. Hoping to kill Ketumat, he ran at him with his sword held high.

Ketumat at once released a poisoned dart that sped toward Bhima. The Pandava whirled his sword and cut it down as it flew. He shouted in the exultation of battle, and his shout filled his enemies with fear. Ketumat became completely enraged and hurled fourteen more darts at Bhima, each with heads of sharpened stone. Bhima cut all of them into fragments with his sword. As he performed this wonderful feat, Ketumat's brother Bhanumat, who was mounted upon a great elephant, rushed upon him with a lion-like roar. Unable to tolerate that cry, Bhima shouted even louder. Both yells terrified the troops, and their animals froze in fear where they stood.

Bhima ran toward Bhanumat and leapt onto his elephant. With a powerful sword stroke he cut Bhanumat into two halves, which fell on either side of his elephant. Bhima then swept his sword down and severed the elephant's trunk. As the beast fell like a mountain hit by a thunderbolt, Bhima jumped clear. He stood on the ground roaring furiously. The Kauravas looked

in horror upon Vayu's enraged son, no longer considering him human.

Bhima began to whirl around like a firebrand, cleaving a path through the enemy with his bright, blood-soaked sword. Heads and limbs flew about as he slaughtered innumerable warriors and their animals. He moved around the field with the speed of a hawk. Anyone who came before him was instantly slain. He seemed to be Yamaraja himself at the time of universal dissolution. The Kaurava troops were terrified. They ran about in all directions, screaming in fear.

Bhima exhibited various motions. He wheeled and whirled. Making side thrusts, leaping high, jumping forward and then back, he moved about like a frenzied dancer. All the while his sword flashed, seeming to cover all sides at once. As he butchered them, the enemy soldiers shrieked. Hundreds of elephants fell with fearful cries. Bhima hacked indiscriminately into the forces of the Kalingas and Nishadhas. The ground around him was strewn with broken armor and weapons. Lances, bows, mallets, maces, darts and axes—all cut asunder—lay everywhere. Beautiful golden housings from the backs of elephants adorned the field, along with shining bells and other colorful decorations. The heads and arms of warriors lay about in large numbers, their jeweled ornaments glinting from the ground.

Bhima could not be checked. The earth around him became a thick mire of flesh and blood. Wanting to save his soldiers, Srutayush came before him on his chariot and shouted out a challenge. He immediately shot a hundred fierce arrows at the rampaging Pandava. Pierced by the arrows like an elephant pierced by a hook, Bhima's anger knew no bounds. His charioteer, Vishoka, came to him with a fresh chariot and Bhima leapt aboard. Crying, "Wait! Wait!" he rushed at Srutayush, who continuously fired sharp arrows at him. Bhima took up his bow and sent nine iron arrows at the Kalinga king. Three shafts hit Srutayush with the force of a

thunderbolt and threw him lifeless to the ground.

Turning at once to Ketumat, Bhima similarly slew him with a number of long shafts that left his bow with the sound of thunderclaps. The remaining Kalingas surrounded Bhima in the hundreds of thousands. All of them rained their weapons on him at once. Bhima repelled their weapons and then took up his mace. He jumped down from the chariot and resumed fighting on foot. Wielding his huge mace he sent the Kalingas to the region of Death. So rapid were his movements that no one could touch him. He crushed his enemies and they broke and ran.

Seeing his foes fleeing, Bhima took out his conch and blew repeated blasts on it. The incredible sound reverberated around the field and struck the Kauravas with panic. They trembled and seemed to lose consciousness. As Bhima continued to move among the remaining Kalingas, they appeared to be in a trance. The whole army shook like a lake agitated by an alligator. Bhima wiped out their entire army. With great difficulty their commander rallied the few that were left and brought them back to the fight.

Bhima remounted his chariot and stood ready as more troops came to assist the Kalingas. Dhristadyumna then came up to Bhima, followed by large numbers of Pandava warriors. As the sun approached the western horizon, the fight raged on. When twilight fell, the two armies disengaged and withdrew from the field. As jackals and vultures again gathered around the grisly scenes of carnage, the soldiers made their way back to their encampments.

Chapter Seven. Bhishma Wreaks Havoc

On the third day, the Kurus formed their troops into the Garuda vyuha, shaped like the divine eagle with outspread wings. On the neck of the eagle stood Bhishma, and its two eyes were Drona and Kritavarma. At its head stood Ashvatthama and Kripa, backed by the Matsya, Kekaya and Vatadhana armies. Other armies made up its two wings and back. Duryodhana, with all his followers, were its center and tail.

In opposition to the Kurus, the Pandavas countered with a formation in the shape of a crescent, its points toward the enemy. Bhima stood at the right point, surrounded by many kings. Dhristadyumna and the immense Panchala army formed its middle. Behind was Yudhisthira, protected by Satyaki and numerous other chariot fighters. Arjuna stood at the left point with Ghatotkacha and his awful Rakshasa troops.

Once again the two armies closed to the sound of countless drums and conchshells. They resembled two clouds merging in the heavens. As soon as they met, the great slaughter began again.

Urged on by Krishna, Arjuna displayed his full prowess. He seemed like the Destroyer himself at the end of creation. Many heroes, hoping to win glory and with death as their goal, came before Arjuna as he let loose his shafts. They fell by the thousands. Arjuna carved a path through the Kauravas.

Fearing that Arjuna might destroy his entire force in one day, Duryodhana commanded his generals to surround the Pandava. Coming upon him from all sides, they hurled their bright lances, darts, clubs, maces, pikes, battleaxes, mallets and arrows. Smiling in the midst of the downpour of weapons, Arjuna quickly checked them with his arrows. At the same time, he maintained his attack on his assailants. In the sky the celestials were astonished by his extraordinary lightness of hand and they praised him loudly.

As Arjuna engaged with the Kuru chiefs, other Pandava heroes also attacked the Kauravas. Yudhisthira and the twins fought furiously, driving back the Kuru forces with their incessant showers of arrows. Bhima and Ghatotkacha, father and son, performed terrible feats of valor.

Clenching his teeth in fury, Duryodhana challenged Bhima. The

Pandava at once fired an iron arrow at him. Struck on the chest, Duryodhana collapsed on the floor of his chariot. His charioteer quickly carried him away and all the troops supporting him broke and fled.

As Bhima, Ghatotkacha, Yudhishthira, and the twins fought together, Abhimanyu joined them. At the same time, Arjuna continued his attack on the kings surrounding him. Thus the Pandava warriors assailed the Kauravas like a tempest tearing into a forest. Although both Bhishma and Drona tried to rally their fleeing forces, they were unsuccessful.

Duryodhana returned to his senses and again stood in his chariot. Seeing the commotion, he called out to his panic-stricken soldiers, "Where will you go, foolish men, leaving behind your fame? Do not act like eunuchs. The fight has hardly begun. While I am still standing, and while Bhishma and Drona are our leaders, how will we not gain victory? Turn back and fight!"

The warriors stopped, shamed. Desiring to exhibit their prowess, they turned back toward the Pandavas. Rallied, the huge Kaurava army resembled the sea surging at the full moon's tide. As they again rushed toward the foe, Duryodhana rode over to Bhishma. "O Grandfather, O descendent of Bharata, please hear my words."

Bhishma lowered his bow and looked across at the agitated prince. It was obvious that Duryodhana was angry and trying to control the harshness in his voice. "O scion of the Kuru race, I do not consider the Pandavas to be a match for you. When you are fighting, backed by Drona, Kripa, Ashvatthama, and so many other maharathas, how is it possible that my troops are flying from the battle? Surely you are favoring the Pandavas. Therefore, you forgive them for this slaughter of our men. O hero, you should have told me before the battle began that you would not fight the Pandavas. I could then have consulted with Karna and decided what to do. O best of men, if I do not deserve to have you abandon me, then fight to the utmost of your power."

Bhishma laughed angrily in return. "O prince, have I not told you on so many occasions that the Pandavas are invincible? I will nevertheless do whatever I am capable of doing. See now my power in battle. In the sight of all I will chastise the Pandavas with their troops and kinsmen."

Duryodhana clenched his fist and smiled. He ordered drums and conches to be sounded. As the sun began its descent toward the west,

Bhishma advanced toward the Pandavas, flanked by the best of the Kauravas.

Seeing the Kauravas returning back to the battle, roaring and beating their drums, the Pandavas cheered and blew their conches in reply. The fight continued. Warriors on both sides again fell like ripe ears of corn in a field. The brave shouts of thousands of fighters merged together and sounded like a roaring sea. Cries of "Stand your ground!" "Strike!" "Turn back!" "On your guard!" and "Here I am!" were heard everywhere, and the stench of blood filled the air.

The warriors could hardly traverse the battlefield, it was so thick with corpses. Strewn with colored armor, turbans and ornaments, the field appeared as beautiful as the autumn sky at night. Though mortally wounded, warriors were seen to rush upon their enemies with pride. Others who lay dying called out to their loved ones, "O Father, O Brother, O Uncle, do not abandon me." In some places, headless trunks ran about wildly, blood spurting from their severed necks.

In accord with his promise to Duryodhana, Bhishma wrought a terrible havoc on the battlefield. His bow was constantly drawn to a circle. Virulent arrows sped in all directions and cut down warriors by the thousands. The blazing shafts never missed their aim. The old Kuru chief trained his weapons on all the principal Pandava heroes, calling them by name as he fired. His chariot made wondrous motions as it careened about. It seemed as if he was everywhere at once, and he left a trail of destruction in his wake. Everyone who saw him considered that he had somehow multiplied himself a thousandfold by the power of illusion. None could look at him. All that they could see was an endless stream of arrows leaving his bow.

The Pandavas and their allies gave way to lamentation. Any kshatriya brave enough to encounter Bhishma was immediately dispatched to Death's abode. Whoever came near him was seen at that moment to fall to the ground. With a single long arrow he pierced three or four men seated on the back of an elephant. With another shaft he slew the elephant itself. Horsemen and infantry were swept away like leaves blown by a gale.

The Pandava army trembled and gave way, fleeing in all directions. They were so completely routed that no two persons were seen together. With cries of "Oh" and "Alas," they scattered in fear. Many men with dishevelled hair and clothes were seen running away in terror, throwing aside their

weapons and armor. Even the Pandava chiefs were confounded by Bhishma's prowess.

Seeing their confusion, Krishna halted Arjuna's chariot and said, "O foremost of men, strike Bhishma alone. He alone is dispersing your army. Take action or everything will be lost. O hero, formerly in the assembly of kings you said, 'I will kill all the Kaurava warriors, headed by Bhishma and Drona.' O son of Kunti, chastiser of foes, make good your words. Stand before Bhishma. He appears today like the Destroyer himself with his mouth opened wide to consume all beings."

Arjuna looked around at the annihilation. Even though it was his own army being destroyed, he was nevertheless filled with an admiration and joy. Bhishma's power in battle was incomparable.

But he had a duty to perform. Bhishma had sided with Duryodhana. Thinking of the Kaurava prince again incited Arjuna's anger. "Plunge through this sea of hostile troops, O Keshava, and take my chariot to Bhishma. Today I will throw down that invincible warrior."

Krishna at once urged on the silver-white horses, and the brilliant chariot sped unobstructed toward Bhishma. Seeing Arjuna coming to face Bhishma, the rest of the Pandava army was heartened and rallied back to the fight.

Bhishma saw Arjuna approach and he roared like a lion. He immediately covered him with countless shafts. In a moment Arjuna's chariot with its standard and charioteer became invisible beneath a curtain of arrows. Krishna fearlessly and patiently maneuvered the chariot out from under the arrows. As he emerged, Arjuna fired four straight-flying shafts from the Gandiva and cut apart Bhishma's bow. Bhishma, angry, took up another bow and strung it in an instant. Without delay, Arjuna cut the new bow to pieces with razor-headed arrows. Bhishma praised him, calling out, "O Partha, son of Pandu, well done, well done! I am pleased with you for this wonderful feat. Now fight your hardest with me."

Bhishma whirled around in his chariot and appeared with yet another bow. He shot large numbers of shafts at Arjuna, but Krishna, by His expert driving, baffled them all. The chariot went around in swift circles with Arjuna moving about to keep his arrows aimed at Bhishma. Both Arjuna and Krishna were wounded, and they both resembled angry bulls scratched by one

another's horns. Laughing loudly, Bhishma again covered his foe with arrows on all sides. Even Krishna was astonished by his skill and power.

Seeing Arjuna's chariot swamped, Dhristadyumna rushed to his aid, accompanied by a large number of troops. He released volleys of powerful shafts, which distracted him from his attack on Arjuna. At the same time, the twins hurled their weapons at him. Arjuna, freed from Bhishma's assault, sent countless arrows back at him and at the kings supporting him. Other Kuru fighters rode up to assist Bhishma and gradually the fight between all the warriors became a general conflagration.

As the two armies clashed, the sun pursued its course to the western hills. Once again the conches blew and the soldiers lowered their weapons. Slowly they withdrew from the field. Both sides had suffered heavy losses, but the Pandavas had been particularly afflicted by Bhishma's prowess. As Rakshasas and carnivorous beasts and birds descended on the battlefield, the troops rested for the third night, exhausted from the day's fighting.

Dhritarastra was cheered by the report of the third day of battle. It seemed that even Arjuna and Krishna together could not check Bhishma when he fought with fury. And there was also the mighty Drona, who was perhaps even more powerful than Bhishma. What to speak of Kripa, Ashvatthama, and the other maharathas. Even if the Pandavas somehow managed to overpower Bhishma, there was still Karna waiting on the sidelines to come into the battle. And he would not have been fighting, so his strength would be fresh. Things looked promising for the Kauravas. The old king looked forward with hope to the fourth day.

* * *

On the fourth morning, Arjuna arranged the Pandava forces in a vyuha shaped like an alligator. From a distance it looked like a mass of clouds. On the other side the Kauravas arranged a counter-array and moved toward their foe. As the two armies came together, the earth shook.

The chief chariot fighters of the two sides clashed, while the infantry fought hand-to-hand on the ground. Once again a great din arose. The Pandavas had been cheered by Krishna after their battering at Bhishma's hands, and they fought with renewed vigor. Arjuna fought with Bhishma and kept him at bay, while Dhristadyumna and other great fighters slaughtered

many enemy kings and their forces.

Thinking of his vow to slay Dhritarastra's sons, Bhima began to search them out. As he ranged across the earth, causing destruction, he came across Duryodhana's chariot. Drawing up his own chariot at a distance, he smiled as he saw Duryodhana's many brothers surround their king. Here was his chance to finish them all.

Duryodhana saw Bhima facing him. The two enemies glared at one another for a moment. Then Bhima took up his mace, roared and raced toward Duryodhana.

With a wave of his gloved hand, Duryodhana ordered a large division of elephants to charge the advancing Bhima. Licking his lips and whirling his iron mace, named Shaikya, Bhima leapt from his chariot. He ran straight at the company of elephants with his mace held high. Careering about, he smashed the elephants and brought them down one after another. The elephant warriors could not approach this circling firebrand. Even his terrible shouts made the huge beasts stop in their tracks and tremble.

Behind Bhima came Abhimanyu and Draupadi's sons, as well as Dhristadyumna and the twins. They all fired razor-headed arrows, which beheaded the fighters on the elephants. The riders appeared like trees on a mountain with their tops cut off.

The leader of the elephant division, Maghadaraja, goaded his mount toward Abhimanyu. The immense beast resembled Airavata, Indra's elephant carrier. Unperturbed, Abhimanyu shot a long iron arrow which hit the elephant between the eyes, penetrating up to its feathers. As the beast fell like a mountain toppling, Abhimanyu fired another arrow that took off the head of its royal rider.

Bhima continued annihilating the elephants with mace blows. He felled them with a single stroke and they dropped down with their heads broken open. Others had their tusks, backs and legs broken. They fell vomiting blood and screaming. Bhima moved among them like Shiva wielding his Pinaka weapon. The Pandava looked exactly like that mighty god dancing his wild dance of destruction at the end of the cosmic age. His mace, stained with blood and fat, whizzed through the air with a roar like the ocean.

Like clouds driven in a tempest, the elephant forces broke and fled.

Surrounded by the carcasses of the hundreds that were slain, Bhima looked like Rudra standing in the middle of a cremation ground. He roared repeatedly, his red eyes looking about for more enemies.

Duryodhana foamed at the mouth. He screamed out to his troops, "Kill Bhima!"

All the forces supporting Duryodhana turned and rushed toward Bhima, who smiled grimly as they charged. The advancing army came like a tidal wave toward him, but Bhima stood firm to meet them. The other Pandava warriors flanking Bhima blew their conches and roared along with him. All of them joyfully met the charging Kauravas with volleys of weapons. They were like the seashore resisting the surging sea. Bhima alone checked the leading Kauravas by ranging about with his mace. He again created confusion among his foes. They looked on him as if he were the immovable Mount Meru. None of their weapons affected him at all. Most were knocked to the ground by his mace. Those that struck him he shrugged off.

Headed by Bhima, the Pandava forces crushed the Kaurava army like an elephant crushing a cluster of reeds. With one blow from his mace Bhima would destroy a chariot along with its charioteer and the warrior fighting on its terrace. As he roved about like a tornado, the Kaurava soldiers turned their eyes away from him in utter horror.

Surrounded by many of his brothers, Duryodhana roared out a challenge. With a grim smile the Pandava glared at him. Seeing the prince and his brothers mounted on chariots, Bhima quickly signalled to his charioteer to bring over his own chariot. Jumping aboard he rushed at his foes. As Bhima approached them, Duryodhana and his brother Nandaka fired arrows at him, wounding both Bhima and Vishoka, his charioteer. They cut Bhima's bow apart and it fell in pieces to the floor of his chariot.

Unable to tolerate their attack, Bhima took up another bow, as tall as a man. Releasing an arrow fitted with a horseshoe head, he cut apart Duryodhana's buffalo-horn bow. Excited to the highest pitch of his anger, Duryodhana took hold of another bow from the many lying in his chariot. He instantly fired at Bhima a long hammer-headed arrow that resembled a bludgeon. It blazed through the air and struck Bhima full on the chest. Rendered senseless by the blow, Bhima fell to his knees for some moments.

The Pandava forces supporting Bhima poured upon Duryodhana a relentless shower of arrows. As the Kaurava ward off the attack, Bhima regained his senses and sent up a shout. He quickly pierced Duryodhana with eight swift shafts. As Duryodhana's brothers converged on him, he licked the corners of his mouth like a hungry wolf. Fourteen of Dhritarastra's sons surrounded him at once and hurled countless arrows and other weapons at his chariot.

Laughing amid their furious assault, Bhima swiftly fixed razor-headed shafts onto his bow. Sending the arrows to all sides with deadly accuracy, he cut off his opponents' heads one after another. Duryodhana looked on helplessly as his brothers were slain like a herd of deer killed by a lion. Their beautiful helmeted heads, adorned with golden earrings, rolled in the mud. In a short time, all fourteen were killed and the rest of the brothers had turned and fled.

Bhishma came up to Duryodhana to support him and he shouted commands to the army. "Bhima is wantonly slaying the king's sons, although they are accomplished in arms and courageous. Quickly fight with the son of Pandu before he annihilates all our princes."

The battle soon became general as the warriors of both sides came together, matching their prowess and their weapons. As evening approached Ghatotkacha and his Rakshasa followers, whose strength increased with the onset of night, worked another great carnage among the Kauravas.

Seeing his troops receiving the worst of the fight, Bhishma blew his conch and ordered the army to withdraw. As the afflicted Kaurava forces left the battlefield, the victorious Pandavas cheered. Ashamed and dispirited, the Kauravas went back to their encampment. On their side, the Pandavas, cheerful despite their wounds, returned to their camp with Bhima and Ghatotkacha at their head. They praised and worshipped their two heroes, who had caused such destruction among the Kauravas.

Chapter Eight. The Rakshasas Show Their Power

Dhritarastra wept when he heard of his sons' deaths. "O Sanjaya, I am afraid. I am amazed to hear of Bhima's god-like prowess. Hearing, too, of my sons' humiliation, I am burning with anxiety. What will be the outcome of this war? I remember only Vidura's prophecies. By the influence of destiny, it seems his words will prove true. The Pandava heroes are emerging successful, even though our forces, headed by Bhishma and Drona, appeared so invincible. What austerities have they performed? What knowledge did they cultivate? What boons have been bestowed upon them? Alas, my sons are doomed."

Dhritarastra began to wail. Sanjaya consoled him, but the king continued to weep for some time. Struggling to regain his composure, he clutched the arms of his golden throne and continued to speak.

"I am being chastised by destiny. Tell me, Sanjaya, why my sons are being killed while the Pandavas survive? I cannot see any end to this ocean of distress into which I am plunged. I am like a man who desires to swim across the sea. No doubt Bhima will slay all my sons. O Sanjaya, tell me what Duryodhana and his generals are doing as a result of the Pandavas' victory."

Sanjaya sat at the king's feet with his eyes closed. He could see everything occurring on the battlefield in both camps. Visualizing the scene in Duryodhana's tent, he said, "Listen carefully, O king, and I shall describe everything. What is the use of hoping for victory? You have already been told so many times about the Pandavas' position. Those heroic men live only for Krishna's pleasure, and the universe itself depends on his will. Your sons are wicked and have perpetrated numerous ills upon their cousins. Now they are reaping the bitter fruits."

Sanjaya then continued his description of the battle.

* * *

Duryodhana entered his tent with a heavy heart. Tens of thousands of his troops lay dead on the battlefield, and Bhima had killed fourteen of his brothers. Tears of grief and frustration ran down his face as he took his seat among his counselors. Turning to Bhishma, he spoke in a voice laden with sorrow.

"O Grandsire, on my side I have you, Drona, Salya, Kripa, Kritavarma, Ashvatthama, and many other warriors incapable of being defeated. All of you are ready to lay down your lives for my sake. Our numbers are far superior to those of the Pandavas. In such circumstances, I cannot understand how we can be suffering at their hands. How is it, O hero, that we are being overcome? What is the secret of their success?"

Bhishma, laying his silver helmet by his side, turned and looked at Duryodhana. "O king, I will explain once again why we cannot defeat the Pandavas. For your own good you have repeatedly been counseled to seek peace with them. You have chosen to ignore these instructions. Therefore, you will have to suffer, as all your counselors predicted. I have cried myself hoarse trying to make you see sense. What more do you want me to say? However, because I desire your welfare and the welfare of your brothers, I will try one more time."

Bhishma felt his compassion stir for the grieving Duryodhana, who sat weeping as he remembered his brothers, relatives and friends who had died for him. Although the prince had always scorned his well-wishers' advice, Bhishma hoped that his misery would make him more receptive. The Kuru commander waited until he had the attention of all the kings present, then he spoke in a loud voice.

"O king, lord of the earth, there was not, is not, and will never be any person who can slay the Pandavas while Krishna protects them. I will describe to you an ancient history which I heard while I resided in heaven with my mother. Once, Brahma was sitting in his assembly with the gods. At that time, the earth goddess Bhumi came to him crying. She said she was afflicted by the sinful acts of the demons and Danavas, all of whom had taken birth on earth. Thus she sought the shelter of the unborn creator. 'O my lord,' she prayed, 'all the mighty and wicked Daityas and Danavas whom the gods slew in battle have now appeared on earth as kings and warriors. I can no longer bear the burden of such cruel men, who rape and plunder my resources for their own selfish pleasure.'

"Feeling compassion for Bhumi, Brahma, accompanied by the gods, went at once to the limitless milk ocean, where the inconceivable Vishnu lies. After offering prayers to the Supreme Personality, he told him of the earth's plight. Brahma then heard Vishnu speak to him from within his heart, where the Lord ever resides as the Supersoul of all beings. The Lord told him that

he would soon appear on earth to destroy the demons. His personal servants would incarnate along with Him. All the gods should expand themselves by their mystic power and take birth on earth. Assisted by all of them, the Lord would execute his divine plan for saving the earth."

Bhishma paused and looked at Duryodhana. He knew the Kaurava cared little for histories. Although he was prepared to accept that Vishnu was a powerful being who acted for the gods' good, Duryodhana could not accept Vishnu's identity as the Supreme Lord. Duryodhana was not a religious man in that sense. Despite performing his religious duty as a kshatriya, he had no concept of serving and pleasing a God who controlled everything. He believed in his own power. Now, in a moment of distress, where it was obvious that his own power was limited, Bhishma hoped to find his mind more open. He went on addressing the grieving prince.

"That eternal and indescribable Lord Vishnu has now appeared as Krishna. Indeed, it is Krishna who is the source of Vishnu. There is no difference between the two personalities. O Duryodhana, you have already heard that Krishna and Arjuna are the two ancient rishis, Narayana and Nara. Know too that the many kings and kshatriya fighting with them are expansions of the gods. The Pandavas themselves are all former Indras from different ages. Through them Krishna will execute His divine plan to kill the demons, who have amassed as your army, O king. Krishna's will is infallible. He is the supreme mystery, the supreme shelter, and the supreme glory. Do not disregard him, thinking him an ordinary man. You should worship that undeteriorating being of endless energies. The wise say that one who thinks Krishna an ordinary man is a fool and a sinner."

Bhishma stopped and Duryodhana sat in thought. It was hard to accept that Krishna was the all-powerful Supreme Being. Certainly he was an extraordinarily powerful person, but God? Could any being lay claim to possessing such power? Some great force or power lay beyond everything, that was sure, but how could it be a person? And how could that person be Krishna, who had sided with his foes? After all, was he, Duryodhana, the king of the Kurus, really such an irreligious person? Everyone condemned him as such, but he had always done his duty and tried to rule the people with justice. If there was a God, why should he be antagonistic toward him? But if Krishna was God, it would certainly explain why the Pandavas proved so difficult to overpower. Why, though, was he favoring Pandu's sons?

Duryodhana took a deep breath. "Tell me more about Krishna," he asked, his voice unusually subdued. "I always hear Him spoken of as the highest being. O Grandsire, I desire to know all about his position and his glory."

Bhishma then described Krishna's opulence as he had heard of it from Narada, Vyasadeva, Markandeya and Parasurama. "All these wise sages accept Krishna's divinity. They consider him the master and sustainer of all beings. He is everyone's well-wisher and friend, but you do not see him as such, O king. For this reason I consider you to be a Rakshasa of wicked heart and mind. You are immersed in ignorance, absorbed only in thoughts of selfish happiness. Thus you cannot know Krishna. Only those free from lust, greed and anger, and those who realize themselves to be his eternal servants can know him. O king, try to see things in this way, for that alone will lead to everlasting happiness. Make peace and live happily with your cousins. You cannot win this war. Your enmity toward Krishna and the Pandavas will result only in suffering and defeat."

Hearing Bhishma speak at length about Krishna, many of the kings surrounding Duryodhana began to regard the Yadava as the Supreme Person. Even Duryodhana began to wonder. Perhaps Krishna was something more than just a man; maybe he was even higher than a celestial.

But it was too late to turn back from the fight now. Whoever Krishna was, the Pandavas were Duryodhana's enemies. He would give them nothing. If they wanted the kingdom, they would have to fight for it. Even if their army was comprised of expansions of the gods, his forces would be empowered by the Danavas, whose power was equal to that of the gods.

Duryodhana dismissed the assembly and went to bed. Before laying down to sleep he bowed down to Krishna. If the Yadu hero was actually the Supreme, then it would do no harm to offer him some respect. Perhaps, the prince thought, his own fortunes might change. Lying on his milk-white silk sheets, Duryodhana then slept fitfully.

* * *

As the sun rose on the fifth day, the two armies again rushed at one another. The warriors slain the previous day had been left to lie on a hero's bed for one night, then cremated at dawn, leaving the field clear for the day's

action.

Worked up with the fury of battle, the opposing troops again slaughtered one another. The killing did not end at any time throughout the day. Arjuna showed his incomparable prowess as he moved about the field. The Gandiva bow resembled flashes of lightning as he released innumerable arrows on all sides. Other great fighters, such as Abhimanyu, Bhima, the twins, Satyaki, and Yudhisthira, also created havoc among the Kauravas.

On the Kauravas' side, Bhishma and the other powerful warriors continued their destruction of the Pandava army. Shikhandi faced Bhishma on a number of occasions, intent upon his destruction, but each time Bhishma turned away from the fight. Dhristadyumna also constantly sought an opportunity to slay Drona, but the Kuru preceptor held off his attack and drove Dhristadyumna back with his own irresistible assault. Drupada's son wondered how he would ever fulfill his destiny, but he fearlessly challenged Drona again and again.

Bhima also constantly watched for any opportunities to catch Dhritarastra's sons. He was determined to kill them as quickly as possible. As he roved across the battlefield, he appeared like the god of death. He favored fighting with his mace, although he was equally accomplished with the bow and would frequently shower volleys of arrows on the Kurus.

The fifth, sixth and seventh days passed with many men being slaughtered, but none of the principal warriors fell on either side. In an attempt to limit the destruction Arjuna was causing among his troops, Duryodhana assigned Susharma and his army, the Samshaptakas, to engage him. Those warriors challenged Arjuna at the start of each day and the Pandava duly fought with them, killing thousands.

Despite their inferior numbers, the Pandava army slowly wore down the enemy. Duryodhana repeatedly harangued Bhishma and Drona, accusing them of partiality toward the Pandavas. Both of them tried again and again to convince Duryodhana to stop the war and to make peace, but Duryodhana was resolute. The fight would continue.

On the eighth day, Bhima encountered and killed another seventeen of Duryodhana's brothers. Although a large contingent of them had surrounded Bhima and hurled their weapons at him, he cut them down relentlessly with his arrows. Standing on his chariot, it was clear that he

intended to kill all of Duryodhana's brothers there and then. Only when Drona came forward, showering him with arrows, were they able to stop him. By shooting so many arrows that Bhima could no longer be seen, Drona allowed Dhritarastra's sons to escape. Breaking free from Drona's attack, Bhima again ranged about the battlefield like a wolf amid a flock of sheep.

As Bhima ravaged the Kaurava troops and the other Pandava heroes slew warriors in other parts of the battlefield, Arjuna's son Iravan came to the battle. Born from the Naga princess Ulupi, Iravan was a powerful celestial fighter. He headed a division of warriors who rode upon many-hued horses that had been raised on the high tracts of the Himalayas. The horses were clad in steel mail and caparisoned in gold. The Naga fighters riding them charged at the Kauravas with fearful cries, appearing amid the battle like a flock of swans on the bosom of the ocean.

The Naga cavalry were met on Duryodhana's side by the large division of horseback warriors from the hilly region of Gandhara led by Shakuni's six younger brothers. Covered in armor and screaming battle cries, they rushed at Iravan and his troops and penetrated their forces, their minds fixed on victory or the attainment of heaven. Iravan laughed loudly, calling out to his followers, "Kill all these warriors by any means."

The Nagas displayed dazzling skills at riding and fighting. Their horses seemed to float in the air, and their weapons fell from all sides onto their enemies. The Gandhara fighters were crushed, leaving only Shakuni's brothers to face the Nagas. They threw lances at Iravan and pierced his armor. The lances stuck out from his chest, back and legs.

Undaunted, Iravan pulled out the lances and hurled them back at his roaring foes. He came down from his horse with blood streaming from his wounds. Taking out a fearsome saber, he ran at Suvala's sons. The powerful Naga appeared like a moving mountain covered with red oxides. As he whirled his saber and buckler, he covered himself on all sides. Although the Gandhara princes shot hundreds of arrows at him, they could find no gap in his defense. They surrounded Iravan and hurled their long lances. Beating down their spears, Iravan leapt up with his saber and cut off their arms and legs. Their mutilated limbs fell to the earth, along with their weapons, armor and shields. Iravan then swung his saber with deadly accuracy, severing his opponents' heads.

Only one prince, Vrishaba, escaped. He ran to Duryodhana to report that the Gandhara forces had been annihilated. Duryodhana's wrath flared. He called for Alambusha, a massive Rakshasa of frightful appearance. Alambusha had joined with Duryodhana because he hated Bhima, who had slain his brother Baka. As he came before Duryodhana, the Kaurava said, "Behold the destruction caused by Arjuna's son. The master of illusions, Iravan, can only be checked by one of equal power. O hero, you are capable of going anywhere on the earth and in the sky. You can assume forms at will. Go and slay Iravan in battle, the son of your sworn enemy's brother."

Replying, "So be it," the Rakshasa uttered his terrible war cry and rushed at Iravan. By his mystic power he created a large division of demons, mounted upon chargers. The demon warriors held lances fitted with spiked ends and brandished bludgeons stained with blood.

Seeing Alambusha racing toward him, Iravan rallied his horsemen. Then the Nagas and Rakshasas clashed. Soon, both divisions were slain and Iravan and Alambusha faced one another alone just as Indra met the demon Vritra in ancient times. As the Rakshasa approached Iravan, the Naga swung his saber and cut apart his enemy's sword.

Alambusha rose up into the sky and confounded Iravan's attack. Iravan, by his own powers, followed the Rakshasa into the heavens. In their shining armor the fighters appeared like two planets colliding. Assailing the Rakshasa with great force, Iravan cut off his limbs and mutilated his body, but Alambusha somehow evaded death. Rather, he immediately appeared in a new, youthful body. Iravan slashed at him again and again with his saber and battle-axe, but the Rakshasa appeared in a new body each time. Alambusha roared discordantly, the sound filling the sky. He suddenly assumed a dreadful and prodigious form and tried to capture Iravan.

As thousands of warriors looked on from below, Iravan created his own illusions. He appeared in an enormous form resembling Ananta-sesha. Numerous other Nagas in the forms of terrible-looking serpents surrounded him. They closed on Alambusha, baring their fangs and spitting poison. The Rakshasa, after reflecting for a moment, assumed the form of Garuda. Swooping about rapidly, he devoured his antagonists.

Iravan was confounded by Alambusha's illusory powers. As the Naga again assumed his own form, Alambusha rushed at him, swinging his great

sword. With a powerful stroke he cut off Iravan's head, graced with earrings and a diadem, and it fell down to the earth like the moon falling from the heavens.

Duryodhana and his followers cheered loudly and fought on with renewed vigor. The Pandava forces cried out in dismay. Elsewhere on the field, Arjuna battled the Samshaptakas, unaware of his son's death.

But Ghatotkacha had seen Iravan's death. Enraged, he sent up a huge roar. The earth with her mountains and lakes quaked as the terrifying cry echoed off the distant hills. The Kauravas trembled and perspired. Their limbs froze in fear and they gazed about to see what had caused that horrific sound. Depressed by the cry, they fled in all directions like a herd of deer frightened by a lion.

Ghatotkacha raised his blazing trident and advanced toward the Kauravas. He was backed by hordes of Rakshasas who had all assumed fearful forms. As they rushed into battle, they dispersed the enemy troops like the wind blowing away dust and debris.

Duryodhana saw his forces fleeing in fear at the sight of the Rakshasas. Shouting out a battle cry he stood firm to face them. He shook his bow and took out a number of long, razor-headed shafts. Behind him stood a large division of elephant fighters. They rushed at the Rakshasas, yelling out their war cries again and again.

Ghatotkacha was furious. Screaming, he and his loyal followers met Duryodhana's forces. Appearing as fiends, goblins and hideous demons, the mighty Rakshasas attacked the elephants. With arrows, darts, sabers, lances, mallets and battle-axes, they slew the warriors who rode them, then lifted boulders and trees and killed the elephants. Crushing and butchering the entire division, the Rakshasas roared in triumph.

Duryodhana was beside himself with anger. Heedless of his own life he rushed at Ghatotkacha and his troops. The powerful Kuru sped countless arrows at his foes. He killed dozens of them, and they fell screaming to the earth. Duryodhana exhibited astonishing prowess as he ranged about the field. His shafts flew like lightning and severely afflicted the Rakshasas.

Ghatotkacha then personally attacked Duryodhana. Although Ghatotkacha rushed forward like Death incarnate, Duryodhana did not waver. The Rakshasa approached him and began to rebuke him.

"O evil-minded one, today I will liquidate the debt I owe my fathers whom you exiled. You robbed such virtuous men and insulted their chaste wife. O man of perverse intelligence, wretch of your race, for these and many other insults I will now punish you. Stand and fight, if you have any courage."

Biting his lips, Ghatotkacha released a shower of arrows at Duryodhana. The Kaurava seemed like a mountain under a storm in the rainy season, but he bore the arrows without flinching as if he were an elephant receiving a shower of flowers. He shot twenty-five shafts at the Rakshasa in reply. His arrows fell like serpents falling upon the Gandhamadana mountain. Pierced and bleeding, Ghatotkacha resolved to kill Duryodhana. Forgetful of his father's vow, he took up a mighty lance that was capable of penetrating rock. It blazed with a brilliant effulgence as Ghatotkacha raised it to destroy Duryodhana.

Seeing the Kaurava in danger, the leader of an elephant division, a king named Banga, urged his elephant forward. He came between Duryodhana and the Rakshasa just as the lance was hurled. Struck by the blazing lance, the elephant was slain and the king leapt from its back.

Duryodhana seethed. His forces were being slain on all sides. Now Bhima's Rakshasa son stood before him like an immovable mountain. How could he possibly overpower him? But keeping in mind his kshatriya duty, the Kaurava prince stood firm. He let go a number of searing shafts that flew toward Ghatotkacha like a cluster of comets.

The Rakshasa moved about swiftly and expertly evaded the arrows. He roared repeatedly, petrifying his enemies.

Hearing his roars, Bhishma became fearful for Duryodhana's life. He went quickly to Drona and said, "It seems from his cries that Ghatotkacha is overpowering the king. No creature can conquer Bhima's son. Only you can help the king. Go at once and rescue him. May good betide you."

Drona immediately turned toward the sound of Ghatotkacha's roars. He was followed by Ashvatthama, Kripa, Bahlika, Somadatta, Salya, Bhurisrava, and other Kuru warriors. Reaching Duryodhana, Drona saw that he was hard-pressed. He quickly shot a volley of arrows at Ghatotkacha, while the other Kurus attacked the Rakshasa army with arrows, darts and lances. The crack of bowstrings striking leather fences sounded like the

crackling of burning bamboos in a forest fire. The Kurus hurled their lances at the Rakshasas and they soared through the air like thousands of virulent serpents.

Seeing the Kuru force arriving, Ghatotkacha laughed and stood his ground. With another terrible yell he stretched his huge bow and released a crescent-headed shaft that destroyed Drona's bow. With other arrows he pierced all the leading Kurus and broke their standards. So swift was his movement that the Kurus had hardly any opportunity to train their weapons upon him before they were struck by his arrows. The power of his shafts sent them reeling. Many of them sat down on the terraces of their chariots, stunned and wounded.

As the Kurus fell back under the fierce assault, Ghatotkacha focused his attention on Duryodhana. He rushed at him with his sword held high. Seeing this, the Kurus rallied and rained arrows on the roaring Rakshasa. Sorely afflicted, Ghatotkacha rose into the sky like an eagle. His roars carried to Yudhisthira, who said to Bhima, "Those are surely the roars of your son. I suspect he is under attack from many powerful foes. O foremost of men, go at once to his assistance."

Bhima obeyed his brother's instruction and raced off toward Ghatotkacha, supported by other Pandava chariot-warriors and a large contingent of soldiers. As he approached his son, he shouted out his battle cry.

Hearing Bhima's cries, the Kurus turned pale with fear. As he rushed toward them, many fled. But the leading Kurus stood their ground. A violent battle ensued between them and the combined forces of Ghatotkacha and Bhima.

Duryodhana rallied his troops and they returned to the fight only to be slaughtered by the charging Pandava warriors. The earth became thick with the mutilated bodies of fighters from both sides. The clash of weapons striking armor was deafening. A thick cloud of red dust filled the air and no one could see anything clearly. In that awful and confused encounter, friend struck friend, unable to distinguish him from foe. Gradually, the earth became covered with so much blood that the dust cloud subsided. Everything again became visible, revealing scenes of destruction everywhere.

Bhima and Ghatotkacha swept about the field like whirlwinds, killing

thousands of men. Duryodhana saw his forces overpowered. He ordered Bhagadatta, the king of Pragyotisha, to attack Bhima and his son. The mighty warrior rode upon a great elephant no less powerful than Airavata. Backed by a vast division of other elephant warriors, he advanced toward Bhima, shouting out his challenge. Seeing him approach like a moving mountain, the Pandava fighters surrounded him and assailed his elephant with numerous shafts that thudded into its side.

Wounded by hundreds of arrows, the huge beast resembled a hill decorated with seams of red chalk. It screamed in fury and rushed at its foes, trampling entire chariots with their horses, charioteers and warriors. Despite its wounds, the elephant could not be checked.

The ruler of the Dasarhas, Kshatradeva, mounted upon another elephant, ran in fury at Bhagadatta. The two elephants collided, but Bhagadatta's mount did not waver. Kshatradeva's mount, however, stumbled backwards. In swift succession, Bhagadatta hurled at him fourteen lances decked with gems and fitted with long, barbed points. They pierced through the elephant's armor and sent it reeling. Screaming in pain, the Dasarha monarch's elephant turned and ran, crushing the army to which it belonged. Bhagadatta roared in joy and goaded on his own beast, which began to careen wildly about the field. The unstoppable elephant crushed divisions of soldiers as it ran here and there. The Pandavas were dispersed and they raced away in all directions, shouting in terror.

Ghatotkacha then challenged Bhagadatta with a roar of anger. Assuming an immense form, he hurled a blazing trident at the elephant. As it flew it emitted fire. Bhagadatta instantly shot a crescent-headed shaft that cut the trident down before it reached him. It fell in pieces to the earth like a couple of meteors fallen from heaven. Bhagadatta then threw a lance at the Rakshasa that blazed as it flew.

Ghatotkacha leapt up and caught that lance. Yelling, he broke it across his thighs as the Pandavas cheered. Infuriated, Bhagadatta rushed at the Pandava warriors, backed by his elephant division, and a fierce fight ensued. Ghatotkacha kept Bhagadatta at bay while Bhima and other warriors slaughtered the enemy troops.

Chapter Nine. Bhishma's Vow

On the far southern side of the battlefield, Arjuna fought the Samshaptakas, headed by Susharma. These warriors were dauntless and had vowed never to retreat. They kept the Pandava fully engaged and away from Bhishma and the other leading Kurus.

Arjuna fought fairly. He would not use the weapons he had received from the gods, even though the celestial missiles were capable of annihilating his human foes. But even with conventional weapons Arjuna was formidable. The Samshaptakas rushed at him in waves, hurling darts, lances, clubs, axes and countless arrows, all of which Arjuna effortlessly countered with his own arrows from the Gandiva. He repeatedly struck his antagonists with clusters of shafts that tore through their armor. With every attack thousands fell, but they kept coming at him.

Late in the day a messenger reached Arjuna and informed him of Iravan's death. He cried out and sat down on his chariot. Seeing him overpowered by grief, Krishna maneuvered the chariot away from the enemy. Arjuna buried his head in his hands and wept. After a few minutes he said, "Alas, Lord, I am realizing how pious was Yudhisthira in seeking to avert this war by any means. Surely that great-minded soul saw clearly how this war would mean such a terrible destruction of men. Therefore he begged for only five small villages. But the mean-spirited Duryodhana refused. Now innumerable kshatriyas are being slain for the sake of wealth. Seeing all these heroes lying prostrate on the earth, I can only reproach myself. Fie upon the duty of a kshatriya! Fie upon the desire for kingdom and wealth! I cannot take any pleasure in this battle."

Arjuna gazed with tearful eyes at the waiting Samshaptakas. There was now no question of abandoning the fight. It was clear that the war would end only when Duryodhana's forces were annihilated, and him along with them. Arjuna's grief turned to anger as he thought of Duryodhana's obstinacy. Now Arjuna's own dear son had perished thanks to Duryodhana.

Frowning and breathing heavily, Arjuna reached for his bow. "This is no time for a display of feminine sentiments. Drive the chariot toward Duryodhana, O Keshava. Let us cross over this impassable ocean of soldiers. By your grace, dear Lord, I will soon end this war."

Krishna urged the horses forward and the chariot raced across the field. From a distance Arjuna saw the banners of Duryodhana, Drona and Bhishma, who were fighting together supported by Kripa, Ashvatthama and Bhagadatta. As they saw Arjuna approach, they met him with volleys of arrows. Not tolerating their attack, Arjuna replied with arrows of his own. He began to range about the field firing his shafts on all sides. Each of them flew with unerring accuracy toward its target. Warriors fell from their chariots like ripe fruits falling from trees caught in a gale.

As the sun went toward the west, the battle raged on. The combatants fell upon each other like angry lions fighting for their prey. They dragged one another by the hair and hacked off each other's limbs and heads. Striking with weapons, fists, feet and teeth, they fought in a frenzy, slaying both armies in droves.

Beautiful bows, their staves decked with gold and jewels, lay discarded on the field. Precious ornaments and arrows soaked in oil shone from the ground. Steel swords with ivory hilts and fine shields embossed with gold engravings fell from their owners' lifeless hands. Lances, darts, battle-axes and maces, all ornately worked with gold and jewels, were scattered about. Men lay in unnatural positions, still clutching weapons. With wide, staring eyes, they appeared as if still living. Others lay butchered and twisted, their arms and legs akimbo and their mouths hanging open. The smell of blood and burning flesh filled the air.

Toward the end of the day, a fearful fight took place between Bhima and Duryodhana. Having just single-handedly slain an entire division of ten thousand men, Bhima heard Duryodhana challenging him. "Stand and fight with me, Bhima, if you have any courage! So far you have killed only ordinary soldiers. Let us see now how you fare against a truly powerful warrior!"

Clasping his iron mace as if he might crush it, Bhima laughed. "The hour I have so long anxiously awaited has arrived. Today I will kill you, if you do not abandon the fight out of fear. Today I will soothe the sorrows of Kunti and Draupadi. Killing you in battle, I will avenge the woes we suffered in the forest. Inflated with pride you have disregarded us. Reap now the fruit of that folly. O man of wicked mind, you have despised even the sinless Krishna, although he personally came to Hastinapura to seek peace. Filled with a sick joy you sent Uluka to us with your depraved messages. For all

these acts I will dispatch you and your relations to Death's abode."

Bhima lifted his bow and instantly fired thirty-six arrows resembling thunderbolts at Duryodhana. They killed Duryodhana's horses, knocked his charioteer to the ground, and broke his bow. Bhima swiftly followed the arrows with two more razor-headed shafts, which cut down Duryodhana's standard and the white umbrella above his chariot. The Kaurava's fine standard, emblazoned with a golden serpent and decked with gems, suddenly dropped to the ground and Bhima roared in exultation.

Duryodhana reached for another bow, but Bhima struck him with ten more arrows. The Kaurava reeled about on his chariot. Without his horses, he could not maneuver away from Bhima's attack. Seeing his plight, Jayadratha advanced and attacked Bhima with a shower of arrows. At the same time, Kripa came up to Duryodhana and took him onto his own chariot.

As Kripa carried away the almost unconscious Duryodhana, many other Kaurava fighters attacked Bhima, who was then joined by Abhimanyu. A ferocious battle ensued among all those heroes. Once again the sun set on scenes of widespread destruction all over the battlefield. The two armies withdrew for the night, praising each other for their respective feats of prowess.

* * *

Back in his tent, Duryodhana slowly came back to his senses. Smarting from the wounds inflicted by Bhima and from the shame of losing the fight, he began to think of Karna. If Bhishma was not willing to slay the Pandavas, then he should stand down and allow Karna to fight. The Kaurava prince decided to speak with his friend, who was waiting in the camp for his opportunity to join the battle.

Seeing him entering his tent bloodied and covered with dust, Karna jumped up and embraced him. "How fares the Kurus? Are you gaining victory over your enemies and increasing your fame?"

Duryodhana shook his head. "No, my friend, things are not going our way. We are being routed by the warlike Pandavas, who cannot be slain even by the celestials. Day by day they are grinding down my forces. O Karna, I am weakening and our store of weapons has been reduced. I am now

wondering if we will ever defeat the Pandavas."

Karna's face flushed and he clenched his fists. "Grieve not, O best of the Bharatas. I will do what is pleasing to you without delay. Let Bhishma be withdrawn from the battle. When that old hero lays down his weapons, I will come personally to slay the Pandavas. Bhishma will always treat Pandu's sons leniently and is incapable of killing them. Order him to stand down, O King. I swear that I will then, before everyone's eyes, bring down the mighty Pandavas in battle."

Karna only wanted to say what pleased Duryodhana. He knew that he too could not kill all the Pandavas; he had promised Kunti to spare all but Arjuna. At least he would fight with his full power, perhaps killing Arjuna and sending the other brothers fleeing. That would lead to the Kauravas' victory without a doubt.

Duryodhana was heartened. "Your words fire me with new enthusiasm, O great hero. I will go to Bhishma. If the powerful warrior will not agree to slay the Pandavas tomorrow, then I will return. You will then be able to fight, for I will persuade Bhishma to retire."

Duryodhana left Karna's tent. Mounting his dark-colored horse, he made his way to Bhishma's quarters. Seeing him so badly hurt, Bhishma had royal physicians cleanse his wounds. He then personally applied herbs, which quickly healed the prince. By the application of vishalyakarini, a herb taken from the Himalayan mountains, Bhishma removed Duryodhana's pain. As he was treated, the Kaurava leader spoke anxiously with his commander.

"It seems we can do nothing to stop the Pandavas' onslaught. O sire, they surge forward and break our lines. Penetrating, crushing, and slaughtering, the mighty warriors gain fame at our expense. Today they smashed apart our formation and routed our troops. I myself have been wounded by Bhima and almost slain. O best of men, I do not accept that you are incapable of checking the Pandavas. Tomorrow you should exert your full power. By your grace, I desire to obtain victory and kill Pandu's sons."

Bhishma looked with pity upon Duryodhana. He still could not realize that his hope to destroy the Pandavas was futile. Equally futile was trying to explain that to him. He would have to learn the hard way. Bhishma thought of Krishna. Whatever plans or maneuvers the Kurus attempted, no matter how skillful, Krishna would doubtlessly thwart. Yet as the commander

of the Kuru army, Bhishma knew it was his duty to do everything in his power to try to defeat the Pandavas. Duty was painful. At least it brought him into contact with Krishna, and that could never be inauspicious under any circumstances.

Having finished his medical administrations, Bhishma took his seat by Duryodhana's side. "I have fought to the utmost of my power each day." The old Kuru held up his arms, which were scarred from countless strikes of the bowstring. "I have slain tens of thousands of warriors. Still, I cannot harm the Pandavas and their foremost fighters. They are protected by virtue and by the Lord of virtue himself. What can exertion achieve?"

Duryodhana folded his palms as he addressed Bhishma. "Relying on you, O slayer of foes, we are capable of vanquishing in battle even the celestials and Asuras combined. What then of the Pandavas? How can I believe that you cannot kill five men, even if they are supported by their relatives and allies?"

Tears flowed from Duryodhana's eyes. "O son of Ganga, my lord, you should be merciful to me. Slay the sons of Pandu like Indra slays the Danavas. Make good your promise to me that you would slaughter the enemy armies. Exhibit your full power and kill the five brothers along with all their followers."

Duryodhana paused and breathed deeply. He looked into Bhishma's eyes. "Or, if out of compassion for them, O lord, or hatred for me, you do not wish to kill the Pandavas, then please step down and allow Karna to fight. That great hero, the very ornament of battle, has promised to kill Kunti's sons and all their allies."

Bhishma felt the dagger of Duryodhana's words pierce his heart. The prince's suggestion that he was not trying his best only compounded the pain he already felt at having to fight in the first place. It seemed Duryodhana had no intelligence. Had he not seen how hard his warriors had been fighting? What more did he think Karna could achieve? Bhishma remained silent for a moment to control his anger. Breathing heavily and clutching the hilt of his sword, he finally said in a cool voice, "Why, Duryodhana, are you stinging me with this insult? I always endeavor to the best of my ability to accomplish your good, even at the cost of my life. I say the Pandavas are invincible. Is it not sufficient evidence that Arjuna gratified Agni by withholding the celestial

hosts at Khandava? Or that he and his brother rescued you from the enraged Gandharvas? Where was the suta's son that time?"

Bhishma felt an increasing sense of frustration as he addressed Duryodhana. The prince thought only of himself. He cared nothing for others. Why could he not understand what was in his own best interests in this case? Surely he was blinded by envy and hatred for his cousins. Thus he embraced his own destruction, even as it unfolded before his eyes.

Mixed with his frustration, Bhishma felt compassion. "Surely a man on the brink of death loses his senses, O son of Gandhari. You cannot see the inevitable consequences of the enmity you have created with the Pandavas. Standing as they are with the immortal and infallible Keshava on the field, there can only be one outcome. This is your doing. Why do you rant? The time you have long anticipated has arrived. Now match your malice with acts of valor. Display your long-vaunted prowess in battle and end this conflict."

Servants entered the tent to inform Bhishma and the prince that their meal was ready. Duryodhana dismissed them with a wave of his hand. He had no appetite. Since the battle had begun, he had hardly eaten, refusing even the wine that he normally enjoyed so much. His mind thought only of the Pandavas and how they might be slain. Sitting at Bhishma's feet, he looked up at him imploringly. If the son of Ganga became determined, then the Pandavas were as good as dead.

Bhishma drew a deep breath. "You should know, O monarch, that I will not at any time abandon you or the Kurus. Such is the duty of kshatriyas and indeed my own determination. For your sake, O King, I will make a mighty effort to bring about the Pandavas' death tomorrow. Breaking through the hostile ranks I will personally confront them in the thick of battle. Any who come to protect them will be at once killed. With the exception of Shikhandi, I will spare none."

Bhishma reached down by his side and lifted up his large silver quiver, which was studded with precious stones. He extracted five shining arrows, gilded with gold and decked with gems. These arrows were fitted with long spiked heads and fletched with buzzard feathers. Bhishma spread out a silk cloth on the ground and carefully placed the five arrows upon it. As Duryodhana watched, he sat in meditation for a few moments, muttering Vedic mantras.

Finally he said, "I have imbued these five arrows with the full force of my ascetic powers. Even Indra would not escape them. With them, I will kill the five Pandavas tomorrow."

Bhishma's voice was flat and cheerless. Tears came to his eyes as he continued. "Sleep peacefully tonight, O king. In the morning I will come out and fight a terrible battle, the like of which has never been seen. The Pandavas will not escape. Only Krishna can save them, but he has vowed not to take up weapons."

A smile touched the corner of Bhishma's mouth. Would Krishna find some way to save His beloved servants? That would be wonderful indeed. But failing that, the Pandavas would be finished. His empowered arrows would not fail.

Duryodhana jumped to his feet beaming and slapping his arms. Then he became thoughtful. Like Bhishma, he also wondered if Krishna might devise some means to thwart the plan. Looking down at the arrows lying before Bhishma, he said, "Let me keep these shafts tonight. I will guard them carefully and hand them over to you at the start of the battle."

Bhishma nodded and Duryodhana took the arrows. He bowed before Bhishma and went to his own quarters, carefully placing the arrows by his bed. Now surely the Pandavas were doomed. Bhishma was famous everywhere as Devavrata, one of unbreakable vows. Nothing would stop him from fulfilling his promise. Duryodhana lay down happily to rest. He could not wait for the next day's battle.

* * *

Yudhisthira sat in his tent surrounded by his brothers. After eight days of fighting, it seemed his forces were gaining the upper hand. Although pleased, Yudhisthira was simultaneously saddened that so many men were being slaughtered. By the time the war ended, the earth would be full of widows. Yet what could be done? He had made every attempt to bring about peace. The stubborn Duryodhana and his blind father were to blame. Now they were suffering the results of their folly. They were so foolish that not even Krishna could change their minds. Yudhisthira looked at Krishna. The Yadava hero had assumed a pensive expression. As everyone settled into their seats around him, he began to speak.

"We are becoming successful in this fight. Bhima and Arjuna are crushing the Kauravas, supported by all you men. In my view, our enemies will resort to every desperate means to reverse the situation. Even now I sense that they are devising some dangerous scheme."

Krishna looked at Arjuna, who sat apart from the others, his head bowed. He thought only of Iravan. The Naga prince had fought out of love for his father. Arjuna remembered the day long gone when he had conceived Iravan with Ulupi. She had raised the boy among the Nagas, but he had sometimes come to see Arjuna at Indraprastha. Tears fell from Arjuna's eyes as he recalled the days he had spent with his son. Now that boy lay on a hero's bed, another victim of Duryodhana's greed. Arjuna sighed and looked through the tent opening into the dark night.

Krishna moved toward his friend and placed an arm round his shoulder. "O Partha, holding fast to the duty of a kshatriya, dismiss this grief. Your son has surely reached everlasting regions of bliss. Shake off your sorrow and fix your mind on the fight."

Arjuna wiped his eyes and turned toward Krishna. How fortunate he was that the Lord of all beings was personally present to keep him fixed in virtue. The duty of a warrior was certainly not easy.

Krishna smiled comfortingly as he went on. "There is something you must do tonight, Arjuna. Do you recall the time when you saved Duryodhana from the Gandharvas—how he then promised to return the favor? I believe that time has now come. The Kaurava has in his possession five arrows meant for the death of you and your brothers. O Arjuna, go to him in friendship and ask for the arrows."

Arjuna remembered that day in the forest when he had released Duryodhana and his brothers. The Kaurava had been consumed by shame, yet his kshatriya honor had compelled him to admit he owed Arjuna a boon. Arjuna recalled how he had laughed and said he would claim it in the future. He had thought that day would never come, but it seemed that Krishna thought differently.

Arjuna began to remove his armor. "O Janardana, I will always follow your determination. I will go at once to Duryodhana."

Unarmed and alone, Arjuna mounted a white horse and rode across to the Kaurava camp. By the kshatriya's code of honor he knew he faced no

danger. Many times after the day's fighting, the soldiers of the two armies would meet together as friends. The Kaurava guards stood aside as they saw Arjuna arrive. He was quickly shown to Duryodhana's quarters, where he found the prince about to sleep.

Duryodhana stood up in surprise as Arjuna was shown in. "Hail, O Partha," he said, pointing to a seat near his bed. "You are welcome. Tell me, why you are here? Have you come to ask for the kingdom without a fight? If so, then I will give it to you at once."

Arjuna knew that Duryodhana was being facetious. The prince knew that Arjuna would never beg for anything. If he were to take the kingdom now, it would only be at the end of the war, after his enemies were slain. But he obviously wanted something. Duryodhana looked at him curiously.

Arjuna continued to stand. "O hero, I have come here remembering that you offered me a boon. Do you recall that promise?"

Duryodhana shrank with shame as he thought back to that day. "Yes, of course I remember it well. What would you ask of me?"

"I believe you have here five arrows, O Bharata. I wish to have them."

Duryodhana looked at him with shock, but without hesitation he reached down and picked up the arrows. Placing them across his outstretched hands, he offered them to Arjuna. "Take them at once, Partha, but pray tell me how you knew about them."

Taking the arrows and thanking Duryodhana, Arjuna told him that Krishna had informed him of their existence. He then took his leave and returned to Yudhisthira's tent, leaving Duryodhana seated on his bed, wringing his hands. Krishna again! Maybe the eulogies of Bhishma and Vidura were true. There was surely something extraordinary about that Yadava. It seemed he knew everything. Duryodhana lay down and gazed up at the empty expanse of the tent's large roof. Was there any hope of victory? Perhaps. The arrows may be gone, but Bhishma had still decided to kill the Pandavas.

Chapter Ten. Krishna Protects His Devotee

At sunrise the following morning, Bhishma went to Duryodhana and asked for the arrows. Hearing that Arjuna had taken them at Krishna's behest, Bhishma smiled. He was not surprised. Even if he had kept the arrows, Krishna would no doubt have found some way to thwart him. While Krishna rode on Arjuna's chariot, the Kurus were doomed. How much longer could this fight go on? Would everyone have to die before it was over?

Donning his armor Bhishma said, "It seems the Yadava has made my promise false. I cannot invest another five arrows with the same power. Therefore, it will not be possible for me to slay the five brothers today. However, I will still exert myself on your behalf. Everything that lies within my power will be done. I will focus my attention on Arjuna. Even if I slay him alone, your purpose will be accomplished."

As he prepared for the day's fighting Bhishma thought of Krishna's promise not to take up arms in the battle. Today he would test that promise. If the Yadu hero made him forsake his vow, then he would force Krishna to break his own. Either he would have to fight or he would see his beloved Arjuna slain.

Bhishma mounted his chariot and moved off to the head of the army. Shouting commands he arranged the Kauravas in the formation named Sarvabhadra. It resembled an eagle with outspread wings. With Kripa, Kritavarma, Jayadratha and other kings, he stationed himself at the front and center of the troops. Other mighty heroes stood at the right and left wings, guarding the infantry in their separate divisions. Duryodhana stood in the middle, surrounded by his brothers and protected by Drona and his son. Alambusha and his Rakshasas stood in the rear, along with tens of thousands of other soldiers.

Duryodhana looked at Bhishma at the front of his army. Amid the Kauravas, the old hero shone like the moon. The prince felt his hopes rise. With Bhishma exhibiting his full power, the Pandavas would doubtlessly be thrown into complete disarray. Still, they would try by any means to stop him. But there was only one person capable of that, at least according to the prophesy.

Duryodhana turned to Dushashana and called out, "Today the

grandfather will slay our enemies in battle like a fire burning grass. Surely that which we have longed for all these years will now be achieved. Thus I consider it our highest duty to protect Bhishma. But for Shikhandi, he said, he will slay anyone who crosses his path in the battle. We should therefore ensure that he does not have to face Drupada's son. We should not let Shikhandi kill him, like a wolf in a pack slaying a lone lion."

On Duryodhana's order, many powerful chariot warriors rode up to surround Bhishma. The army then moved off, shaking the earth.

On the other side of the field, the Pandava forces stood ready for battle. Cased in shining mail and arrayed in a counter-formation, they advanced toward their foe. Arjuna, riding alongside Dhristadyumna, said, "Today Bhishma, feeling that we deceived him, will be angry. Therefore let Shikhandi face that old hero. I will protect him."

Then the two armies clashed. Amid war cries and the blare of countless instruments, they met furiously. Above the soldiers hovered shrieking birds of prey. Jackals howled. All the points of the compass appeared as if ablaze, and showers of stones fell from the sky. The horses and other animals shed tears and stumbled as they ran. Despite these inauspicious omens, which portended a massacre, the warriors rushed into battle with full force. They drove remorselessly into one another, hacking, slicing and piercing. The chariot-warriors showered volleys of shafts that fell like grey clouds from the sky, while countless lances sped through the air like silver- and gold-winged serpents.

Breaking forward from the Pandava ranks, Abhimanyu displayed astonishing skill and power. Driven by tawny-colored horses he charged against Duryodhana and his division. He shot arrows at the prince and all his followers with such force and speed that they were stunned and unable to respond. Many heroic chariot fighters were slain by his unerring shafts. Chariots were smashed and elephants brought down. Abhimanyu's arrows flew like virulent serpents spitting fire. He scattered the Kaurava divisions like a wind scatters clouds. They could hardly look at him as he careered about the field, his bow drawn constantly to a circle. As Abhimanyu crushed them, the Kaurava warriors considered him another Arjuna. No one could detect any weakness in him. He even confounded Drona, Kripa and Ashvatthama, who all tried to check him. The Kauravas broke and fled in terror.

Seeing his troops' distress, Duryodhana called for Alambusha and instructed him, "Singlehandedly, Subhadra's son is destroying my troops. I do not see any way to stop him other than through yourself, O prince of Rakshasas. Go at once and slay him. In the meantime, Bhishma, Drona and I will slay Arjuna."

Alambusha bowed to the command and uttered a deafening roar that shook the earth. Upon hearing the roar, warriors fell stunned to the ground. Abhimanyu, however, was delighted to see the Rakshasa charge him. Grasping his tall bow, he urged his charioteer to approach him. He appeared to be dancing in his chariot as he released arrows at Alambusha and his followers.

The Rakshasas began crushing the divisions supporting Abhimanyu. Alambusha moved with such speed and power that he quickly killed thousands of warriors. His arrows fell like poisonous showers and consumed the Pandava forces. Seeing the Rakshasa's prowess, Draupadi's five sons rushed at him like five planets rushing at the sun. Yudhishthira's son, Prativindya, pierced his armor with a number of keen arrows that screamed through the air. Shining, blood flowing from his wounds, the Rakshasa was as beautiful as a dark cloud fringed with the sun's red rays. The Pandavas' sons continued to rain fierce shafts on Alambusha from all sides. Sorely afflicted and wounded, he became infuriated like a snake who had been carelessly kicked. Unable to gather his senses under the attack, he crouched down in his chariot and swooned for a few moments.

As the Rakshasa regained consciousness, he rose to his feet and swelled with anger. He shot long arrows decked with buzzard feathers that broke apart his adversaries' bows and standards. Every one of the five brothers standing against him was severely wounded. The frenzied Alambusha sent his deadly arrows with frightening force. The shafts slew the four horses drawing each of his opponents' chariots, and killed the charioteers. He pierced the brothers again and again with arrows that resembled fiery meteors.

With his bow working non-stop, Alambusha rushed against his foes, intent on slaying them, but as he approached them he was checked by a volley of arrows from Abhimanyu. The Rakshasa turned his attention to Subhadra's son, and a ferocious battle ensued between the two heroes. Their eyes red with rage, they gazed at each other for some moments. Both of them

roared and clutched their bows as they circled each other on their cars. Suddenly, they both released arrows, their bows twanging like thunderclaps. The Rakshasa employed his illusory powers and Abhimanyu countered with celestial weapons.

The sky between the two fighters was filled with clouds of arrows. Fire and smoke issued from them as they struck each other in mid-air and fell to the earth. Each seeking the weak point in the other, the two warriors pierced one another on the chest, arms and legs. Although hit with powerful shafts that stuck from their bodies like trees on a mountain, neither fighter flinched.

Abhimanyu then fired arrows that passed clean through the Rakshasa's body and entered the earth like red serpents going into a hole. Alambusha gasped in pain and turned his face away. By his mystic power he spread a cloak of darkness over the battlefield. No one could see anything in the gloom. Then Abhimanyu invoked the Surya-astra. As the effulgent weapon appeared, the battlefield was once again illuminated. Abhimanyu then covered his adversary with a network of golden arrows. Finding himself hard-pressed, the Rakshasa employed many kinds of illusion. He made strange beings appear on the field. Blazing weapons of all sorts fell on Abhimanyu from all sides.

Unperturbed, Abhimanyu countered the illusions with his celestial missiles. Alambusha, his mystic powers neutralized by Krishna's nephew, was overwhelmed. He leapt down from his chariot and fled.

After defeating the Rakshasa, Abhimanyu began crushing the Kaurava troops like an infuriated elephant crushes lotuses in a lake. Only Bhishma could check him. The Kuru grandfather was backed by many other powerful chariot fighters. Similarly, many Pandava warriors supported Abhimanyu and a general fight ensued.

Elsewhere on the battlefield, Duryodhana, Drona, Kripa, Susharma, and the Trigarta army encountered Arjuna. Both sides invoked their celestial weapons as they assailed one another to their full power. As they contended together Drona and Arjuna appeared like Shiva and Yamaraja. Forgetful of their relationship, they fought remorselessly.

Challenging Arjuna repeatedly, the Trigartas poured their arrows upon him from all sides. Although assailed by a thick shower of shafts,

Arjuna exhibited his lightness of hand by countering them. Even the celestials cheered Arjuna's skill.

Infuriated at being attacked by so many warriors at once, Arjuna invoked the Vayu-astra. That irresistible weapon created a tempest that hurled warriors, chariots and elephants all around the field. Seeing the destruction that weapon wrought, Drona countered it with the Saila missile. The wind subsided and men and horses fell from the sky.

Arjuna, moving with blinding speed, fired innumerable arrows that sent the Trigarta division reeling. The chariot fighters ranging against Arjuna fell screaming from their shattered cars. Quickly, he was surrounded by Duryodhana, Kripa, Ashvatthama, Salya, Bahlika, and a number of other Kaurava maharathas. Bhagadatta and Srutayush, heading an elephant division, surrounded Bhima, who was supporting his younger brother.

While numerous fighters held the two Pandavas at bay, Bhishma approached Yudhisthira. The Kuru chief knew that if he could capture Yudhisthira, the war would be over. He surrounded him with thousands of chariots and horsemen. The eldest Pandava, supported by Dhristadyumna, Satyaki, Shikhandi and other heroes, fought off his attack.

Seeing himself surrounded by many elephants, Bhima licked the corners of his mouth and smiled. He grasped his mace and leapt from his chariot with a roar. The elephant warriors closed in on him, goading their rocking beasts with their hooks. In the midst of the elephant division Bhima resembled the sun amid dark clouds. Then like a tempest scattering clouds, he moved swiftly among his opponents. Struck by Bhima's flailing mace, the elephants shrieked.

The elephants gored Bhima as he fought. The blood running from his wounds made him appear like a blossoming ashoka tree. Catching hold of the elephants' tusks he wrenched them out and felled the screaming beasts with blows from his mace. Although the elephants were highly trained in crushing and killing, Bhima was able to slaughter their entire division. The survivors ran frantically back through their own ranks, trampling soldiers and chariots as they fled.

In the meantime, Arjuna had repelled the warriors who surrounded him. The Kauravas had fled. Both Bhima and Arjuna then came to support Yudhisthira, who was still under Bhishma's attack. In his fury, Bhishma had

alone crushed a huge detachment of Somakas. Although the Somakas were fierce fighters, they could not face Bhishma.

Virata, Drupada and Drupada's two sons came before Bhishma and challenged him. They pierced him with arrows decked with gems. Shikhandi came forward and shouted out his challenge, firing a hundred shafts, but Bhishma did not respond. Turning from Shikhandi he attacked Drupada and Virata. Dhristadyumna brought his chariot to the fore and shot three arrows that penetrated Bhishma's armor and pierced his chest. Bathed in blood he shone all the more on the battlefield. Without flinching, he struck Dhristadyumna with twenty-five arrows, then fired an arrow which cut Drupada's bow.

At that time, Bhima and Arjuna arrived and the battle raged on between the two sides. Both armies were fearless. Embracing a hero's death, their minds fixed on heaven, they rushed at their foes with uplifted weapons. Many warriors fell to the ground and lay there laughing as they died. Horses dashed about wildly with their warriors hanging lifeless from the saddle. Chariot fighters fell from their cars with their armor smashed and their limbs severed. So many men were slain that it appeared as if a river of blood flowed across the earth, carrying heads, arms, legs and torsos. Heroes were cheered by the sight and cowards became afraid.

As the carnage increased, the kings and kshatriyas censured Duryodhana. "All this destruction has arisen through the folly of that prince and his blind father. Why did Dhritarastra, of crooked mind and intentions, infatuated by greed, harbor feelings of envy toward the sinless Pandavas?"

Hearing their cries, Duryodhana scowled. He looked at Bhishma and Drona, calling out, "Do not heed these shouts. Fight with determination and slay our enemies before they annihilate us. O Grandsire, why do you tarry?"

Bhishma turned to Duryodhana and raised his hand in silent assent. He gazed around the field. Some way off he could see Arjuna's standard rising above the battle. He could hear Hanuman crying on the flag. Bhishma again thought of Krishna. Soon the Yadava would see His dearest friend in danger. By his cunning he may have saved the Pandavas last night, but now he would need more than that to save Arjuna. Bhishma was filled with joy at the thought. Whatever Krishna decided would doubtlessly be for his good, and the good of the world.

Bhishma ordered his charioteer to move toward Arjuna. Remembering his promise he slew every soldier he saw. Arjuna was fighting with Susharma and his army when Bhishma arrived. Like the Destroyer himself, he was slaughtering their warriors mercilessly. No one could stand before him for even a moment before being struck by his shafts. Faced with the impossible task of fighting Arjuna, many warriors fled in terror. Some left their horses, others their chariots, and some their elephants, to escape on foot in their panic. Others galloped away at full speed, not looking back. Although Susharma tried to rally his troops, they paid him no heed. Soon the king stood in the battle with only his own brother supporting him. Duryodhana saw his plight and came to assist him. With Bhishma, they assailed Arjuna with volleys of shafts.

The other Pandavas then rushed to Arjuna's assistance. At the same time, other great fighters among the Kauravas came to Bhishma's side. Soon a mighty battle between the best warriors on both sides ensued. Satyaki and Kritavarma, disregarding their long friendship, battled together. Drona fought Drupada, while Bhima engaged with Bahlika. Duryodhana and Shakuni, along with some of Dhritarashtra's other sons, fought Yudhishthira and the twins.

Bhishma slew the Pandava troops with a vengeance. It appeared that even Death personified could not approach him. Ten thousand chariot warriors from the races of the Chedis, Kashis and Karushas, all fearless and unretreating in battle, rushed at Bhishma, but he killed them all.

Now the Pandava army began to flee. Seeing this, Krishna said, "O Partha, the hour which you have so ardently longed for has now arrived. Make good the words you spoke at Virata's palace. Before the assembled kings you said, 'I will slay any and all of Duryodhana's fighters, headed by Bhishma and Drona.' O grinder of foes, make true your words. Remembering the duties of your order, do not hesitate. Fight and slay Bhishma before he destroys our army."

Arjuna stood in his chariot, his head hung down. He knew it was indeed time to try to kill his grandfather. Heavy with sadness, he looked at Krishna and replied, "Burdensome is the duty of a kshatriya in this world. Killing those who ought not to be slain, he strives for wealth and power. Yet, O Janardana, I must do your bidding. That is my highest duty. Then drive my horses toward that virtuous man of irresistible splendor. Today I will kill

Bhishma."

Krishna took up the reins and the horses moved according to His will. The Pandava troops, seeing Arjuna rushing for an encounter with Bhishma, rallied.

Bhishma roared out his war cry and covered Arjuna's chariot with a blanket of arrows. Krishna dexterously drove the chariot out from under the attack and Arjuna fired a broad-headed shaft that split Bhishma's bow in two. Bhishma immediately strung another, but before he could fit an arrow to it, Arjuna again destroyed it. Bhishma smiled and cheered Arjuna. "Well done, well done, O mighty-armed one."

Evading Arjuna's arrows, the Kuru chief took up another bow, then spun around to fire dozens of shafts at his foe. Again Krishna baffled the attack by his expert chariot driving. None of Bhishma's arrows found their mark, and they whistled past harmlessly. Bhishma increased the intensity of his assault, anticipating Krishna's moves and striking both him and Arjuna with numerous shafts. Krishna and Arjuna, mangled by Bhishma's arrows, appeared beautiful, like a pair of heifers scratched by each other's horns. Arjuna countered Bhishma's attack, but found himself unable to strike his beloved grandfather with all his might.

Bhishma maintained a relentless assault on Arjuna. At the same time he attacked the surrounding Pandava troops. The twang of his bow made one continuous roaring sound. His shafts streaked in all directions. Passing through the bodies of warriors, horses and elephants and killing them, the fearful shafts then entered the earth.

Bhishma concentrated his attack on Arjuna's chariot. He struck Krishna with a number of shafts and the Yadava trembled in his seat as he guided the horses. Laughing loudly, Bhishma rained thousands of arrows on Arjuna. Still the Pandava resisted him only half-heartedly.

Krishna looked astonished to see Bhishma's prowess. It seemed like the Kuru warrior would consume the three worlds. Bhishma stood in battle like the Destroyer on the day of universal dissolution. Seeing him killing the foremost Pandava warriors, and that Arjuna was not fighting to his full power, Krishna became thoughtful. Bhishma could kill the combined armies of the gods and Asuras if left unchecked. Unless Arjuna did something, then even he would succumb to Bhishma's deadly shafts. Already he was sorely

afflicted.

Krishna reflected, "I will personally slay Bhishma. I cannot tolerate the slaughter of the Pandavas. Arjuna is not doing what he should do out of his respect for Bhishma. Therefore I will lighten the Pandavas' load by killing that best of men in battle."

Even as Krishna thought in this way, Bhishma stepped up his attack. By employing celestial weapons, he fired so many arrows that all points of the compass around Arjuna were covered. Neither the sky, the earth, nor the sun could be seen. Yudhisthira's troops were crushed and forced back by the irresistible wall of arrows. Jumping down from their cars, they fled in terror. Arjuna's chariot was entirely shrouded. Neither he nor Krishna were visible. Only his tall standard could be seen. Seeing him hard-pressed, Dhristadyumna blew his conch and came to his aid.

Krishna whirled Arjuna's chariot around and managed to evade Bhishma's attack. Seeing Dhristadyumna coming up, He called out, "O hero of the Sinis, our men are retreating. The grandfather is slaying them like a lion killing deer. Behold! I will myself kill that hero of fixed vows along with all his followers and the sons of Dhritarastra. O Satvata chief, no one can escape me when I am angry. With great joy I will secure the kingdom for Ajatasatru."

Krishna threw down the reins and leapt from the chariot. Taking up a nearby chariot wheel, He raised it above his head as if it were his own favorite weapon, the Sudarshana chakra. He ran toward Bhishma as a lion might run at an elephant. The end of his yellow silk garment fluttered in the dusty air, resembling lightning dancing in a dark cloud. The wheel in his hand seemed to glow with his own effulgence, and it looked as beautiful as the primeval lotus from which Brahma was born. Krishna's dark arm appeared like the stalk of the lotus, and his charming face, covered with beads of perspiration, was its filament.

Seeing Krishna intent on Bhishma's destruction, the Kurus felt their end was near. Krishna looked like the all-destroying Samvartaka cloud, which appears at the end of the millenium.

Bhishma's limbs trembled and his eyes flooded with tears. Here was the Lord of the universe, breaking his own promise to protect his devotee. The Kuru hero threw down his weapons and stretched out his arms. As

Krishna approached him he called out, "Come, come, my Lord. O Supreme Deity, Lord of all the gods, I bow to you. Seeing you forsake your vow to save your friend, and thus fulfilling my own desire, I am satisfied. Fell me from this chariot, Keshava. Killed by you, Janardana, I will obtain great good fortune. My fame and dignity will be celebrated throughout the worlds."

Arjuna was mortified to see Krishna breaking his promise not to fight. It was his fault. If he had exerted himself against Bhishma, this would not have been necessary. Of course, Krishna's promise had been that he would not wield weapons in the war, and a wheel was hardly a weapon, but still, he would be condemned by foolish men for his apparent dishonesty.

Arjuna put down his bow and jumped from the chariot. His armor flashing in the late afternoon sun, he ran after Krishna. Krishna had covered almost half the distance to Bhishma. As he ran with the upraised wheel, his upper garment fell from his body into the mud. Gazing at Bhishma with eyes red with anger, he shouted, "You are the root of this great slaughter. A wise minister who treads the path of virtue should restrain a wicked king by any means. If that is not possible, then such a wretched monarch should be abandoned."

Arjuna succeeding in reaching Krishna. Hurling himself forward, he caught hold of Krishna's legs. But even with Arjuna hanging onto his thighs, Krishna continued to run at Bhishma.

Bhishma bowed his head and replied to Krishna as he came near. "You forever speak the truth, my Lord. I told Dhritarastra to abandon Duryodhana, even as the Bhojas abandoned Kamsa, but he did not listen. Surely destiny is all-powerful."

Dragged by Krishna, Arjuna dug his feet into the ground. After taking ten steps with the Pandava gripping him tightly, Krishna was at last brought to a stop. Arjuna released his legs and fell at his feet. "Quell Your anger, O Keshava. You are the Pandavas' refuge, without doubt, but please do not violate your promise. These were your words, Lord: 'I will not take up arms.' Do not falsify your vow. I swear by my sons and brothers that I will make good my promise. You will see me fight as never before. O Krishna, at your command, I shall surely annihilate the Kurus, headed by Bhishma."

Hearing Arjuna's promise, Krishna was pacified. He lowered the chariot wheel. As Bhishma looked on in wonder, both Krishna and Arjuna

turned and walked back to their chariot. Even as they were returning, the sun set and the day's hostilities ended. Conches were blown on both sides and the two armies withdrew. The battle-weary warriors made their way to their camps, speaking of the wonderful incident between Krishna and Bhishma. The Kuru chief himself thought only of Krishna as he led his forces away for the night. The image of the Yadava hero running toward him with the upraised wheel would stay forever in his heart.

Chapter Eleven. Yudhishthira Approaches Bhishma

In the Pandava camp everyone was talking about Bhishma. The next day would be the tenth day of battle, and still the Kuru commander was scorching their army. It seemed there was no way to stop him. If Krishna had not taken matters into his own hands today, then even Arjuna might have been killed. Surely no fighter could equal him anywhere in the three worlds.

As the Pandavas consulted with their allies, Yudhishthira said, "O Keshava, Bhishma ranges across the battlefield like an all-consuming fire. We dare not even look at him as he stands with his weapons raised, his face blazing with anger. Even the god of death wielding his mace, or Varuna his noose, or Indra his thunderbolt might be overcome, but not Bhishma. O Krishna, I am again thinking of retiring from this battle. So many heroes have died. It is clear that none will survive this fight. Bhishma will destroy our forces. We are like insects rushing into a blazing fire. Thus it is preferable to stop now and spend the rest of my days practicing asceticism. What do you advise, O Janardana? My mind is afflicted by duality and doubt."

Even though he had spent the day exerting himself fully as Arjuna's charioteer, Krishna appeared fresh and spotless. A garland of unfading lotuses and necklaces of pearls and gems rested on his chest. Lifting a graceful hand he replied, "O son of Dharma, do not indulge in grief. On your side you have warriors equal to the gods. All of your brothers still stand ready to do your bidding in the battle, and all of them are invincible. I too am here to do you good, O mighty monarch. Simply order me and I will personally slay Bhishma. For your sake, O son of Pandu, what would I not do? I can challenge Bhishma and kill him before Duryodhana's eyes. Even if Arjuna is reluctant, you will not find me so. If you feel that by killing Bhishma victory will be attained, then riding out alone, I shall end his life."

Krishna glanced affectionately at all the Pandavas. "He who is inimical toward your brothers is my enemy. Your friends are as dear to me as my own relatives. Arjuna is my friend, relative and disciple. For him I would cut off and give away my own flesh. He too would lay down his own life for my sake. "Although I am ready to do whatever is necessary, I think Arjuna should keep his vow. He should slay the grandfather, not me. There is also the prophesy regarding Shikhandi. Somehow Shikhandi will be involved in Bhishma's destruction. The grandfather's death is imminent. He has lost his

good sense and no longer knows right from wrong. Let us therefore act now to bring about his end."

Yudhisthira replied, "It is exactly as you say, Madhusudana. You are capable of destroying the entire universe with all its moving and nonmoving creatures. With Your support alone I am sure to obtain everything I desire, but I cannot let your words be falsified for my sake. It is already enough that you came close to breaking your promise today. You must not kill Bhishma. I think we will be able to find some other means, my Lord."

Yudhisthira's brothers nodded their approval. Krishna was like their second self. They would never be able to tolerate hearing him criticized. Krishna's words were meant to guide all men. If he broke his word, then others would follow his example and the whole world would be ruined. People would disregard his instructions and end up in hell.

Remembering what Bhishma had said to him at the beginning of the battle, Yudhisthira said, "It is Bhishma himself who will tell us how to kill him. Alas, how vile is a kshatriya's duty that I must now seek to kill he who became our father when we were fatherless. That one who has always sought our good and loved us as his own, that aged grandsire, I now wish to kill."

Consoling the weeping Yudhisthira, Krishna said, "Take heart, O hero. The son of Ganga has chosen to follow Duryodhana and thus cannot avoid death in this battle. You have spoken rightly. We must hear from Bhishma himself how he may be slain. This was his promise to you. Let us go to him now and once more beseech him. If you question him, he will surely speak the truth. O Yudhisthira, take off your armor and we will go and see the son of Ganga."

Servants removed the Pandavas' armor and they then accompanied Krishna to the Kaurava camp. They were ushered into Bhishma's tent and they bowed at his feet. Bhishma's face lit up when he saw them. He bowed to Krishna with folded palms. "Welcome, O best of the Vrishnis. Welcome too, all you sons of Pandu."

Bhishma stood resplendent in his white silks. He waved his long arm toward the many fine golden seats arranged around him on the silk rugs in his tent. After his visitors were seated, he took his own seat and said, "What can I do for your delight? I will do it with all my soul, even if it is extremely difficult to accomplish."

Yudhisthira folded his palms. Looking at Bhishma he remembered their years together in Hastinapura. His heart melted and he could hardly speak. Glancing across at Krishna to gain strength, he took a deep breath and addressed the old Kuru leader. "O Bhishma, O highly learned man, please tell us how we may gain victory in this fight. How can we put an end to this slaughter? O lord, please tell us how we may vanquish you. You do not display even the slightest weakness in battle. Your bow is always drawn fully. No one can see when you take up your shafts, place them on your bow, and fire them. Who could dare face you when you blaze forth with such awful prowess? Each day you slaughter more of my army, and I fear that soon we shall be ruined. Thus I have come to you again, as you instructed me."

Bhishma was moved as he looked at Yudhisthira and his brothers. All of them carried scars from the wounds they had received in the battle. All of them were gazing reverentially at his face. How different they were from Duryodhana and his brothers! Bhishma knew that if he told Yudhisthira now to give up the fight and leave the kingdom to the Kauravas, he would obey. There was nothing the Pandavas would not do to satisfy their elders. If only Dhritarastra's sons were like these virtuous brothers this horrible carnage would never have happened. Yet here was Krishna. It was surely his desire and arrangement that all the earth's kings and warriors be destroyed. So many of them were, after all, demonic. Obviously, he wanted to relieve the earth's burden.

After a few moments, Bhishma said, "O son of Kunti, as long as I am alive you will not gain victory. I tell you this truly. Strike me down and victory will be yours. I will permit you, O sons of Kunti, to strike me as you please. When I am slaughtered, then all the others on our side will be overcome."

Yudhisthira spoke with difficulty. "Please tell us in detail how we may achieve this apparently impossible feat, O wise man. We could perhaps vanquish Indra, thunderbolt in hand, or Yamaraja wielding his mace, but you appear to be invincible."

Bhishma held up his hands. "It is as you say, O king. When with these hands I clutch weapons and stand to fight, none can withstand me. Only when I lower my weapons will I be approachable. Here is my vow, which I will not break: 'I will not raise weapons against one who is weaponless, one

whose armor and standard are shattered, one who flies away in fear, one who surrenders, one who has only one son, one who is disabled, a woman, or one who bears the name of a woman.' O son of Pandu, I will fight with none of these at any time."

Bhishma placed a hand on Yudhishthira's shoulder as he spelled out his meaning. "Drupada's valiant and wrathful son, who is known in your army as Shikhandi—it is he who will cause my fall. Formerly he was a woman, as everyone knows. Therefore, I will not strike him, even if he attacks me. Place him at the forefront of the fight and let Arjuna stand behind him. Only Dhananjaya or the illustrious Krishna can bring me down in battle. If Shikhandi faces me, I will not fight. Then it will be possible for Arjuna to slay me. Do this, O Yudhishthira, and gain victory."

When Bhishma stopped speaking the Pandavas rose from their seats. Bowing before him one by one, they touched his feet and asked his permission to leave. Krishna also placed His hands on Bhishma's feet and bowed to the floor before him. Then they all left the tent, leaving Bhishma alone. As they made their way back to their own camp, Arjuna spoke with Krishna. His face was flushed and his voice choked as he addressed his friend. "O Vasudeva, while playing in my childhood I would soil the high-souled Bhishma's garments by climbing onto his lap. Clambering on his body I would say, 'Father.' That hero would then gently reply, 'I am not your father, but your father's father, O Bharata.' How can I slay him, O Madhava? Let him kill our troops. I cannot kill him under any circumstances. What do you think, O Krishna?"

Krishna's voice was firm. "O Jishnu, having promised to kill Bhishma in battle, how can you now avoid that without transgressing your kshatriya duties? Overthrow him, O son of Kunti. Without slaying Ganga's son in battle, you can never hope to win this war. It has been ordained by the gods that Bhishma will soon go to Death's abode. Only you can bring him down. Do not hesitate.

"Hear from me an ancient instruction given by Brihaspati: 'One should slay even an aged man or an elder, or one endowed with all virtues, if he comes as an enemy, or indeed anyone else who comes for one's destruction.' This is the eternal duty of kshatriyas, O Dhananjaya. Fighting, protecting the subjects, and performing sacrifices—all without maliciousness—are their sacred duties."

Arjuna looked ahead into the darkness as they rode across the field. He knew he could not avoid this fight, especially as Krishna repeatedly urged him on. Clearly it was his duty. Only sentiment held him back. Somehow he had to get past that. Clutching the reins of his white horse, Arjuna replied dourly, "Surely, O Krishna, Shikhandi has been born for Bhishma's death. As soon as Bhishma sees him he will drop his weapons. Therefore, as Bhishma has suggested, let us place Shikhandi at the front as we attack the grandfather. I will then do the needful."

The Pandavas returned to their camp with mixed feelings. They now knew that victory would be theirs before long, but only at the cost of Bhishma's life. Censuring Duryodhana and his old father, they entered their tents to rest for the night.

* * *

After describing to Dhritarastra the fights that resulted in the death of his sons, Sanjaya fell silent. The blind king was weeping again, beating his chest and tossing about on his great throne. "Alas, everything is my fault. Why did I not listen to Vidura? Where is my learned brother now? Where will all this end, Sanjaya? What refuge is there for an old and weary man, bereft of his sons and other relations?"

Sanjaya tried to console the monarch as he vented his grief. He had little to say. The battle was taking its inevitable course. Dhritarastra had been told many times about the outcome. Now Bhima was systematically destroying his sons, just as he had vowed. But would even that make Dhritarastra realize his fault? His self-condemnation was certainly nothing new. Every time the Kauravas suffered a reverse he expressed his remorse, but those feelings dissolved whenever he heard that they had won a battle.

As the king's sobbing subsided, Sanjaya continued describing the battle in full. Sure enough, as he described how Bhishma was coursing through the battle like Death personified, the king was enlivened. He sat forward and listened carefully as Sanjaya told him how the grandfather had routed the Pandava troops.

Then Sanjaya told him of the episode in Bhishma's tent. Dhritarastra was aghast. "Why has our grandsire revealed how he may die? How can that be his duty? I think he has become weary of the fight. Surely he is favoring Pandu's sons over mine. Alas, I do not think I will be able to hear of the next day's fighting, bringing as it will the fall of such a hero."

Dhritarastra's wails again filled the empty chamber where he and Sanjaya sat. They echoed mournfully around the hall as Sanjaya looked across at the ornate seat where Bhishma used to sit.

Chapter Twelve. The Fall of Bhishma

As sunrise approached on the tenth day, the sounds of thousands of drums, cymbals, conches, and trumpets filled the air. Donning their armor and taking up their blood-stained weapons, the warriors came forward for battle. The Pandavas arranged for Shikhandi to ride in his chariot at the forefront of their formation. Bhima and Arjuna protected his two flanks and behind him came Abhimanyu and Draupadi's sons. Then, spreading out in a fan behind them, all the Panchalas, headed by Dhristadyumna, Satyaki and Chekitana, stood ready to fight. Other powerful rathas and maharathas protected the formation's key points. With a joyful roar they rushed at the Kauravas.

Bhishma stood at the center of the Kaurava formation. Duryodhana ordered his best fighters to surround and protect him. He knew the Pandavas would target him. Until they checked Bhishma, their success would be uncertain. Duryodhana himself stayed close to his grandfather, carefully watching the Pandavas' moves.

As the two armies clashed, the slaughter began. Knowing that it would likely be his last day, Bhishma made one final and supreme effort. If he were to fall, then he should go down fighting to the best of his ability. He let loose his arrows on the Pandava troops in incessant showers, and countless men, horses and elephants fell under his assault. It began to seem as if Bhishma was present everywhere as he wheeled about in the battle.

All five Pandavas went toward him, awed by his power. They honored him in their minds. With depressed hearts they gazed at him even as the gods had gazed at Vritrasura. He was consuming their forces like a fire swallowing a forest.

Standing between Bhima and Arjuna, Shikhandi roared out his challenge and sent three arrows at Bhishma. They struck him on the chest, penetrating his armor. Bhishma felt his anger rise, but with a slight smile he called out, "O Shikhandi, I will never strike you in this fight. You are even now the same person the Creator made you before and are no match for me."

Shikhandi was infuriated by Bhishma's words. "You are the destroyer of kshatriyas, O mighty-armed hero. I have heard of your fight with Parasurama and have seen for myself your prowess. Still, I will fight with

you. Whether you fight back or not, I will slay you in battle. Know this for certain, O afflicter of foes. Take a good view of this world while you can, for you will not escape from me with your life."

Shikhandi at once fired five more arrows that pierced Bhishma in the shoulder. Wincing, Bhishma turned away from Shikhandi and attacked the warriors surrounding him.

Arjuna came up next to Shikhandi and said, "Maintain your assault on the grandfather, mighty-armed hero. He will not be able to harm you. I will protect you from any other fighters who come to his aid. Today we must lay Bhishma low or face the derision of our own men."

Shikhandi longed for Bhishma to fight with him. He sent clusters of swift arrows at the Kuru commander, striking him all over, but Bhishma did not respond. Moving back and around in a circle, Bhishma avoided Shikhandi and at the same time rained down his shafts on the Pandavas. A huge division of elephant warriors and thousands of charioteers supported him. Duryodhana personally marshaled his forces around Bhishma, ensuring that he was carefully guarded on all sides.

With a roar Arjuna charged into the fray. Shooting countless arrows he carved a path through the Kauravas. As he ranged about, leaving in his wake a trail of destruction, Duryodhana was alarmed and approached Bhishma. "O sire, behold how my troops are being routed by the enraged Arjuna. As a herdsman belabors his herd with a cudgel, so Arjuna belabors my troops with his Gandiva. O mighty hero, I see no other shelter than your illustrious self."

Bhishma lowered his bow and looked at Duryodhana. "O best of men, hear my words. Before the battle began I vowed I would slaughter ten thousand men a day. I have kept my vow. Now I will make one final promise. Today, either I will kill the Pandavas or they will kill me. Thus I will liquidate the debt I owe you, arising from the food you gave me, by throwing off my mortal coil in the thick of battle."

Without another word Bhishma moved off and began scattering arrows among the Pandava forces. Like the sun drawing moisture with its rays, he robbed the strength of all heroes who approached him. Having slain ten thousand swift-moving elephants and ten thousand chargers with their riders, as well as a full one hundred thousand infantry, he stood on the field

like a smokeless fire. The Pandavas could not look at him.

Arjuna again enthused Shikhandi. "Go toward Bhishma, O hero. Do not fear. I will dislodge him from his chariot with my sharp arrows."

Shikhandi again challenged Bhishma, followed by Dhristadyumna, Abhimanyu, Drupada, and Virata. Arjuna, Yudhishthira, and the twins flanked them and joined the charge. The Kuru warriors, however, checked their advance. There was a terrible encounter between the enraged warriors. Arrows, lances, darts, and maces flew through the air, and the screams of the soldiers mixing with the clash of the weapons was intolerable.

With Shikhandi before him, Arjuna steadily approached Bhishma. Seeing him moving determinedly toward the grandfather, Dushashana came before him. He checked Arjuna with a volley of shafts. Dismissing fear from his mind, he withstood the Pandava like the shore resisting the ocean. The two fighters contended like Indra and Mayasura meeting in the celestial realm in the days of yore. Dushashana stopped Arjuna with twenty-five shafts, then struck Krishna with three more. Incensed at seeing Krishna attacked, Arjuna sped a hundred long shafts at Dushashana. Penetrating his armor they drank his blood and made him gasp with pain. Without delay he sent back three arrows that struck Arjuna on the forehead. As blood streamed down his face, Arjuna was as beautiful as Mount Meru with its towering crests stained with red oxides.

Laughing loudly, Arjuna cut Dushashana's bow with three crescent-headed shafts fired simultaneously. He followed that at once with fifty more hammer-headed arrows that smashed the Kaurava's chariot. Arjuna shot a hundred more spiked arrows toward Dushashana as his chariot fell apart around him. Without losing his composure, Dushashana resisted Arjuna's attack by firing his own razor-headed shafts, which cut down Arjuna's arrows in mid-air. All the warriors who saw this marvelous feat cheered Dushashana. The Kaurava prince felt encouraged and launched another twenty arrows at Arjuna. Struck by his shafts, Arjuna blazed up in fury. He sent so many arrows at Dushashana that the prince was forced to flee. With his body pierced all over, he ran three hundred paces and mounted Bhishma's chariot.

With all their principal warriors at their head, both armies faced each other for a violent exchange of weapons. Bhishma was backed by Duryodhana, Drona, Kripa, Ashvatthama, and all the other Kuru heroes,

while the five Pandavas, backed by Dhristadyumna, Shikhandi, Satyaki, Abhimanyu, and the other Pandava fighters, all stood against them. They fought like the gods and Asuras.

Watching the fight, Drona spoke to his son, who was stationed by his side, "It seems, my dear Ashvatthama, that Arjuna will exert himself fully to destroy Bhishma. See how he targets the grandfather again and again, keeping Shikhandi by his side. I am seeing many evil omens. My arrows seem to fall from my quiver and will not fit themselves to my bow. I feel my enthusiasm wane. All around us I hear the cries of carnivorous birds and beasts. Even the earth seems to cry out in pain and the sun is dimmed. Though clad in bright armor, the kings on our side do not shine. All these signs indicate that our illustrious sire will soon fall."

Drona urged his son to challenge Arjuna. "This is not the time when dependents should think of their own lives. Fixing your mind on heaven, dear son, confront the roaring Dhananjaya. That diadem-decked hero is agitating our army like a storm tossing the ocean. Listen to the cries of men and the constant crack of his bowstring. Go quickly and exert yourself fully to check your godbrother before he destroys us all."

Ashvatthama moved off at once, supported by Salya, Kripa, and Bhagadatta, along with another six Kaurava maharathas. All ten warriors advanced in a body toward Arjuna. Bhima challenged them when he saw their intention. All ten of them trained their weapons on the powerful Pandava, but he remained unmoved by their attack. He cheerfully assailed every one of them with his own arrows, each of which resembled one of Indra's blazing lances. The Kaurava warriors found themselves completely engaged by Bhima alone. With roars of delight he held them all at bay.

As other battles raged around him, Arjuna focused on Bhishma's chariot. After beating back an attack from Susharma and his brother Chitrasena, he rushed at Bhishma like an elephant rushing at another for the sake of a mate. Quickly, Bhagadatta placed his elephant in Arjuna's way, but the Pandava sent it reeling with a volley of swift arrows. Then Shikhandi was again before Bhishma. He rained countless arrows on his chariot. Still Bhishma refused to fight with him. Instead, he bore his attack patiently while maintaining his assault on the soldiers supporting him. Bhishma resembled Rudra at the end of the creation. No one who came within range of his arrows escaped. Only Arjuna was able to withstand his attack and approach him,

along with Shikhandi, who was still unharmed.

When only Arjuna and Shikhandi were left standing against Bhishma, Shikhandi pierced him in the chest with ten broad-headed arrows. Bhishma gazed at him as if to burn him by that look, but he did not attack. Urged on by Arjuna, Shikhandi attacked Bhishma more and more fiercely. Arjuna also shot his golden-winged arrows at the grandsire. Bhishma fought only Arjuna, disregarding Shikhandi's arrows, which wounded him in every part of his body.

As Arjuna and Shikhandi closed on Bhishma, Dushashana came again to protect him. Cheered by the Kauravas, he single-handedly resisted the arrows of Bhishma's two assailants. Other charioteers came up to support Arjuna, but Dushashana struck them down. Dhritarastra's second son exhibited his prowess, allowing Duryodhana to marshal more troops for Bhishma's protection.

Arjuna was infuriated. Losing all patience, he sent arrows that struck Dushashana like thunderbolts and tore off his armor, sending it crashing to the ground. The Kaurava fell from his chariot, then got up and ran. By then, a large force of Kaurava warriors had come to surround Bhishma. Numerous tribes of barbarians, clad in animal skins and clutching bludgeons and spears, rushed at Arjuna. Thousands of other soldiers galloped forward screaming their battle cries and hurling spiked lances. Not caring for their attack, Arjuna sent flaming arrows charged with mystic power. Sheets of fire-tipped shafts swept through the barbarian ranks. They fell by the thousands, making the ground impassable. Those that were not slain turned back and fled.

Arjuna again turned his attention to Bhishma, who was now supported by Duryodhana, Kripa, Salya, and a number of Dhritarastra's other sons. All those Kuru heroes trained their arrows on Arjuna.

The other four Pandavas attacked Bhishma's protectors. Numerous Kaurava fighters were struck down by Pandu's sons as they fired their searing shafts.

Bhishma and Arjuna contended like two lions. Neither could find any gap in their opponent's defenses. Both invoked celestial weapons that the other neutralized. Each praised the other's prowess as they fought.

Arjuna covered Bhishma's chariot with arrows. Taking the opportunity, other Pandava fighters came forward to support Arjuna. Backed

by innumerable chariots, Bhima, the twins, Dhristadyumna, Satyaki, Abhimanyu, Ghatotkacha, and other principal Pandava warriors pressed forward in the battle. Duryodhana and the best of the Kauravas' warriors met them.

Coming out from underneath Arjuna's attack, Bhishma assailed every one of the heroes who came toward him. With one razor-headed shaft he slew Satanika, Virata's beloved brother. Bhishma rained down death-dealing shafts that destroyed Satanika's entire division of chariot-warriors. At the same time he held off Arjuna's attack as well as the attacks of other fighters. The Kuru commander seemed to be sporting as he battled against the hundreds of warriors. He danced on the terrace of his chariot as if he had regained his youth. Like the rising sun dispersing clouds, he dispersed the Pandava forces with his sun-like arrows.

Untouched by Bhishma's attack, Shikhandi moved closer to his chariot. From time to time Bhishma threw a deriding glance at him, but he focused his energy on slaughtering the Pandava forces. He knew the Pandavas had decided to bring him down today, and they pressed in on him on all sides. Like clouds covering the sun, they surrounded the old Kuru fighter and trained their weapons on him. Spiked and razor-headed arrows, battle-axes, maces, mallets, lances, bludgeons, darts and javelins fell toward Bhishma, but Bhishma only smiled. His armor was shattered and he had been pierced many times. Oblivious to pain, he fought on, embracing a hero's end. His chariot wheeling in the midst of his attackers, he spun around and fired arrows in all directions.

Sensing that it was now time to defeat Bhishma, Arjuna again placed Shikhandi in front of him and rushed forward. With a perfectly aimed arrow he cut apart Bhishma's bow. As the maharathas of both armies engaged, Arjuna and Shikhandi came before Bhishma, both of them firing barbed arrows that pierced him deeply. Arjuna killed his horses and charioteer and brought his chariot to a halt. With a crescent-headed arrow he brought down his standard.

Bhishma took up another bow worked with gold and ivory, but Arjuna immediately shattered it. Without a second's delay, Bhishma hurled a lance at Arjuna, but Arjuna fired five broad-headed arrows that broke the lance into six pieces. They fell to earth like forks of lightning.

Arjuna thwarted all of Bhishma's weapons. Bhishma looked at Krishna, who was expertly guiding Arjuna's swift-footed horses. Bhishma knew it was the end, as fate had ordained. He could not win a battle when Krishna was on the opposite side. Even though Krishna was not fighting, his mere presence was sufficient to ensure the Pandavas' invincibility. Bhishma lowered his weapons. All his skill and power would prove to no avail now. Bhishma began to think of death. In the heavens the assembled rishis, along with the eight Vasus, addressed Bhishma. "We also desire that you stop fighting. Withdraw your heart from the battle. It is time." Bhishma alone heard the heavenly voices.

Suddenly a cool, fragrant breeze began to blow. Celestial drums resounded and flowers fell from the sky. As Bhishma stood in thought, Shikhandi raised his bow and shot nine shafts that struck him full on the chest. At the same time, Arjuna fired twenty-five short, thick arrows that struck Bhishma with tremendous power. Arjuna quickly followed them with a hundred steel shafts. Stunned, Bhishma resolved to make one final assault on Arjuna. He would go down fighting. There could be no other way. Firing a volley of shafts, Bhishma thwarted the attacks of both Arjuna and Shikhandi. Arjuna quickly cut Bhishma's bow. With hot tears pricking his eyes he fired thousands of straight shafts and pierced Bhishma's mighty frame, like snakes enter the holes in mountains.

Although both Arjuna and Shikhandi shot their arrows at Bhishma simultaneously, the Kuru hero considered that only Arjuna's shafts were capable of bringing him down. He called out to Dushashana, who had rushed to his side, "These arrows resembling thunderbolts and coming at me in a straight line end-to-end, are Arjuna's and not Shikhandi's. I can distinguish between them because they have the touch like a brahmin's rod, or of Indra's thunderbolt weapon. Even the gods could not resist them. Like furious snakes with protruding eyes, they penetrate my vital organs. Only Arjuna can bring me down. Even the world's monarchs united could not afflict me."

With one last supreme effort, Bhishma raised a massive lance and hurled it at Arjuna with all his strength. Arjuna cut it into a hundred pieces. Bending the Gandiva to a full circle, he fired arrows twenty at a time in a continuous line. Seeing Shikhandi directly before him, Bhishma lowered his weapons and did not resist Arjuna's attack. Arrows struck him in waves. There was no space thicker than two finger's width on his body that was not

pierced. Before the Kauravas' shocked eyes, he fell headlong from his chariot. With his head pointed toward the east he lay fully supported by Arjuna's arrows. No part of his body touched the earth.

The Kuru army was overwhelmed by sorrow. Cries of grief rippled across the field. From the sky a celestial voice resounded: "How can this hero, the illustrious son of Ganga, leave his body when the sun is in its inauspicious southern course?"

Hearing that voice, Bhishma replied, "I am still living." He had noted the course of the sun and, by his father's boon, had decided to wait until it moved toward the north before dying. He knew the Vedic instructions that a yogi should leave his body only when the sun was in its northern track. Until then he would lie on the battlefield, as befitted a warrior, awaiting his final moment. Death would not take him until he desired it.

Duryodhana and his followers were utterly confused. They did not know what to do or where to go. They dropped their weapons and wailed. As the sun reached the western horizon, the Kauravas stood about the battlefield dispirited and afflicted by grief. No one could find the strength to move for some time.

On the side of the Pandavas conches were blown and soldiers cheered. Thousands of drums were beaten and trumpets and horns sounded. Word of Bhishma's fall spread around the battlefield in moments. The warriors of both armies stopped fighting and stood wherever they were, their minds stunned by the impossible news. Some men wept aloud, others ran wildly around, and some swooned.

Assuming the forms of swans, celestial rishis descended from the heavens and walked around the fallen Bhishma, who lay with his mind absorbed in yogic meditation. Seers, Siddhas and Charanas praised Bhishma from the skies. As darkness fell, the earth seemed to cry out: "This one is the best of all Veda-knowing sages."

Duryodhana breathed long and heavy sighs. He rode swiftly to Drona, who had been taken to a distance from Bhishma, and told him of his fall. Hearing the news, Drona fell from his chariot in a faint. When he returned to his senses he ordered the Kauravas to withdraw. Duryodhana, Drona, Kripa, and all the other Kuru leaders made their way sorrowfully toward where Bhishma lay.

Seeing Bhishma at last felled, Bhima leapt from his chariot and danced on the battlefield. Arjuna, however, was sober. He asked Krishna to drive his chariot over to the Kuru chief. Dismounting with bow in hand he went over to the fallen warrior and knelt by his side. "Please instruct me what I can do for you, O sire," he asked, struggling to control his voice as his grief rose. "Command me at once and consider it done."

Bhishma opened his eyes. He spoke with difficulty. "O Phalguna, see how my head hangs down. Fetch me a suitable pillow, O hero. You alone are equal to this task."

Understanding Bhishma's desire, Arjuna lifted his bow and fired several arrows, charged by Vedic mantras. The arrows stuck in the ground beneath Bhishma's head and formed a headrest. Bhishma smiled. His arms were pierced all over and resting on arrows, but he raised his right hand from the wrist to bless Arjuna. "O son of Pandu, you have properly understood my desire. This is the only fitting pillow for a warrior slain on the battlefield."

Bhishma looked around. He was surrounded both by Pandavas and Kauravas. They stood with folded palms and gazed at his face. Duryodhana and his brothers were shamefaced. They had failed to protect their finest fighter and the leader of their forces. The old grandfather and Kuru guide had fallen. Remorse consumed Duryodhana's heart. It was by his insistence only that this war was being fought and Bhishma was now lying on the battlefield covered in arrows.

Seeing the Kauravas' shame and sorrow, Bhishma reassured them. "I have attained the end always sought by heroes. This bed is to me no less than an excellent bed of the finest down and silk. Soon I will see my ever-living ancestors in the blissful realms of paradise. Why should I lament?"

As Bhishma spoke, a number of skilled physicians arrived carrying herbs and balms. Bhishma raised his head to speak, his rasping voice barely rising above a whisper. "O kings of the earth, after paying proper respects to these brahmins who know mantras, and then rewarding them, please dismiss them. I have no more need of physicians. My end has come and I am ready for it. It is not my duty to allow myself to be treated by these physicians. I want to die from these arrows. Let me lie here until the sun reaches the point of the compass occupied by Vaishnavana. Then I will depart for the higher regions." Bhishma's head fell back onto the arrows and he closed his eyes.

Duryodhana sent the brahmins away. He stood for some time in silence, looking at the fallen hero. Then, sighing, he and his brothers and all the kings supporting the Kauravas circumambulated Bhishma with folded palms. They slowly made their way back to camp, seeing nothing but desolation before them.

The Pandavas also offered respects to Bhishma before returning to their camp. As they went, Yudhishthira said to Krishna , "O Janardana, surely victory comes to a man through your grace, and defeat overtakes him through your wrath. You are our sole refuge. You assure your devotees of your protection. Nothing is wonderful for one who has taken shelter of you, O Madhava."

Krishna replied, "These words, O foremost of all the earth's rulers, could only have fallen from your lips."

Feeling sure that they would soon attain victory, the Pandavas rested for the night while the Kauravas lay tossing in grief.

Chapter Thirteen. Drona in Command

Dhritarastra's pitiful voice echoed around his great chamber. "How has Bhishma fallen? He who had arrows for teeth, a bow for a mouth, a sword for a tongue—that chastiser of foes who spread terror and destruction among the enemy ranks as the sun destroys darkness, who was as invincible in battle as the mighty Indra, who could keep death itself under his control—how has he fallen? How did Shikhandhi and Arjuna bring about his end?"

The king was inconsolable. Sanjaya was himself grieving, and he sat at Dhritarastra's feet with his head bowed. Crying, the blind monarch continued. "After destroying the enemy troops for ten days, achieving the most difficult feats, he has now set like the sun. As a result of my evil councils, that scion of Bharata scattered an inexhaustible shower of arrows as Indra showers rain, killing in battle hundreds of thousands of warriors. He now lies on the bare ground like a great tree uprooted by the wind. How could he—whom even Parasurama could not master, that atiratha of boundless power—have been overcome in battle? O Sanjaya, surely nothing is wonderful in this world when I hear that Bhishma is fallen!"

The king asked Sanjaya to describe in detail how Bhishma had been brought down. Sanjaya had only told him the news of Bhishma's defeat and not the details of how it had come about. Dhritarastra listened in horror as Sanjaya related the events leading up to Bhishma's fall. Tears sprang from Sanjaya's eyes as he envisioned the scene again. When Sanjaya finished his description, Dhritarastra again lamented.

"Surely my heart is made of stone since it does not shatter upon hearing this news. Truth, intelligence, and political wisdom existed immeasurably in the illustrious Bhishma. Who could have defeated him? Surely my sons are crying in grief now that he is gone. Like men desiring to cross the ocean, but who see their boat sunk, they must be plunged in woe. Our army must be like a panic-stricken herd of cattle deprived of its herdsman. When we have caused the death of our powerful father, the foremost of virtuous men, what use are our lives?"

Dhritarastra sat in silence in the darkened chamber. His personal servants stood nearby, their camaras hanging limply by their sides. The soft strains of mournful music could be heard, along with the brahmins' continuous chanting of Vedic prayers in the palace temple.

After some minutes, the king asked Sanjaya to repeat the details of the battle. "I desire to know of all the particulars of Bhishma's final day. Who fought by his side and who at his rear? What did my sons do to protect that hero? What other fights took place as Bhishma faced the Pandavas? Without knowing every last detail I will not be able to rest, Sanjaya."

Sanjaya described everything again. Dhritarastra listened with rapt attention. When Sanjaya finished, it was almost morning. The king had no desire to go to his bed. He said, "Clearly we cannot avoid death by any means. All-powerful Time ultimately consumes all in this world. O Sanjaya, please tell me what my sons did after Bhishma's fall. Who did they select as their commander? How did they find the strength to continue?"

As the sunrise approached, Sanjaya told the king what had happened at the end of the tenth day. Then both men left to perform their ablutions, Dhritarastra being led away by his servants to his bath chamber. After their religious rituals and prayers, they returned to the hall and Sanjaya began to describe the events of the eleventh day.

* * *

After all the kings had left Bhishma, Karna quietly left his tent and rode across the battlefield. As the moon rose in the eastern sky, he picked his way on his red charger through the eerily lit scenes of destruction. Vultures flapped into the air and hyenas growled as he made his way toward the spot where Bhishma lay on his bed of arrows. It was easy to find; a hundred warriors surrounded him and had lit torches to keep the animals away.

Karna dismounted and fell at Bhishma's feet. He spoke in a choked voice. "I am Radha's son, O foremost of Kurus. I am he upon whom you always looked with enmity."

Bhishma opened his eyes and turned toward Karna. Dismissing the guards, he told him to come closer. He spoke affectionately. "Come, dear son. You were always my opponent because you sought always to outdo me. If you had not come here, then all would not have fared well for you."

Bhishma felt no anger toward Karna. He had reprimanded him only out of genuine concern for him. The old Kuru chief knew who Karna was and had always desired his welfare. He lifted his head slightly. "O mighty-armed

one, you are the son of Kunti—not Radha. Adiratha is not your father—the mighty sun-god sired you, O hero. This I have heard from both Narada and Vyasa. It cannot be false. O child, I bear you no malice. I spoke harshly only to check you. Seeing that you would abuse the Pandavas for no reason at all, I tried to curb a behavior that would lead only to your own grief."

Karna knelt by Bhishma's side, his eyes dim with tears at the sight of Bhishma's condition. Despite their many arguments, he had always respected the grandfather. He could not deny Bhishma's nobility and power, and he knew his words were never malicious, even if they were hard to accept.

Bhishma closed his eyes in pain, then continued. "O Karna, your birth was attended with sin. Thus your intellect has always been perverted through no fault of your own. For this reason I tried to correct you in the assembly of kshatriyas. Yet your prowess and might are equal to those of Arjuna. You are devoted to the brahmins, attached to the duties of your order, and are in no way inferior to a celestial. Today I relinquish any wrath I formerly felt for you. If you wish to do me good, then join with your brothers, the Pandavas. Let the hostilities cease with my fall. Along with Duryodhana, be reconciled with the Pandavas and let us see all the world's kings freed from anxiety and danger."

Karna's head fell. "I know all this, O mighty-armed hero. I know I am Kunti's son. But she disowned me and I was raised by a charioteer. Having enjoyed Duryodhana's wealth and friendship for so long, how can I disappoint his hopes? Setting at naught my wealth, sons, wife, and even my body and honor, I will strive for Duryodhana's good. To serve his interests I have incited the Pandavas against me. The result is inevitable and cannot now be avoided. What man ventures to overcome destiny by his own endeavor?"

Karna looked around the moonlit field. It was littered with bodies. The next day he would fight. He had waited long. Each day hearing of the fight and how many of Duryodhana's soldiers were being slaughtered, Karna had felt increasingly frustrated. He longed to show his friend his gratitude for everything he had done for him. Now his chance had come. Folding his palms, he said, "O sire, I cannot renounce the hostility I feel for the Pandavas. Although I know them to be invincible, protected by Vasudeva's powerful son, I will nevertheless fight against them. Please give me your permission. Please also forgive any cruel words I may have uttered against you."

Bhishma looked into Karna's face and saw his determination. "If you cannot give up your enmity for the Pandavas, then, O Karna, I grant you my permission. Fixing your mind on heaven, fight with them to the best of your power. Arjuna will deliver you to the blessed regions reserved for heroes who do not retreat. Casting off arrogance and depending on your own prowess, go forth and seek a warrior's death. What can be more glorious for a kshatriya? Go with my blessings. I forgive any harsh words you may have addressed to me."

Bhishma again closed his eyes. Karna rose and mounted his horse. In a few moments he had vanished into the darkness, leaving Bhishma lying once more in yogic meditation.

* * *

Immediately after sunrise on the eleventh day, both the Pandavas and Kauravas went to see Bhishma. After paying their obeisances, they stood by as maidservants smeared his forehead and temples with sandalwood paste. The servants also sprinkled him with unbroken paddy and placed fragrant garlands of forest flowers around his neck. Thousands of people came from the encampments to see Bhishma lying on his bed of arrows. They marveled at his fortitude and determination. Like a great ascetic who, having fasted for years, keeps his life force circling within his bones, the Kuru chief awaited his final moment.

Putting aside their armor and weapons, the soldiers of the two armies gathered around the fallen hero. Bhishma opened his eyes and looked around, moving his head slightly. He lifted his hand and said, "Please bring me water."

Hearing Bhishma address them in a rasping voice, the Kauravas quickly fetched jars of cool water. They also brought food, which they set out before him.

Bhishma shook his head. "I will no longer accept articles of human enjoyment. I have passed away from the society of men and am lying here on an arrow bed only until the moment is right for me to die. Where is Arjuna?"

Arjuna stepped forward and stood with folded hands before Bhishma. "What would you have me do, O grandsire?"

"My body is burning. I am pierced all over with your arrows and feeling extreme pain. My mouth is dry and I desire to drink water which only you can supply."

Taking the Gandiva from his shoulder, Arjuna said, "Yes, I will bring you water." He walked around Bhishma three times, then fixed a bright golden arrow to his bow. After chanting a number of Vedic aphorisms and empowering the arrow with the celestial Parjanya weapon, he fired it into the earth close to Bhishma's head. At once a jet of pure, cool water gushed out. The nectar-like water rose up in a fountain and went directly into Bhishma's mouth.

A gasp went up from the assembled kshatriyas. They cheered and waved their garments. The Kauravas shivered in fear as they saw Arjuna's skill.

After slaking his thirst, Bhishma said, "O mighty-armed hero, your act was not wonderful because you are the ancient sage Nara incarnate. You are the best of all archers and, along with Krishna, can perform deeds that even the gods cannot accomplish. You possess every celestial weapon."

Bhishma looked at Duryodhana. "O son of Dhritarastra, see here Arjuna's prowess. None can defeat him in battle, even if the combined forces of the gods and Asuras assist them. Therefore, let all enmity between you cease from today on. Let the war end with my fall. Give half the kingdom to Yudhisthira and live together in peace. This would be most beneficial to you and your dynasty. If through perverted understanding you do not heed my advice, you will soon regret your folly."

Bhishma was finding it a strain to speak. His voice trailed off and he closed his eyes. Duryodhana said nothing. Karna stood by his side, and he looked balefully at Arjuna. It was clear that the battle would continue. The kings paid their respects to Bhishma once more and returned to their camps. Pulling on their armor, cleaned and polished after the previous day's fight, they mounted their horses and chariots. They rode out solemnly toward the battlefield, followed by waves of infantry clad in mail and wielding spears and swords. Great elephants rocked about and trumpeted furiously. As the vast armies amassed, conches were blown and drums beaten.

In his tent Karna was attended by a number of servants. They fetched his effulgent armor, studded with hundreds of gems, and his bright helmet.

With his mouth set in a firm line, Karna fitted his iguana-skin gloves and leather arm protectors. The servants loaded his chariot with thousands of oil-soaked arrows, with their heads of iron and steel. They also loaded onto the chariot fifty bows of the finest make, as well as swords, maces, axes, darts and lances.

Smearred with red sandal paste and garlanded with fresh flowers, Karna climbed aboard his chariot. All around him brahmins performed Vedic rites to invoke auspiciousness. As he moved off, musicians beat kettledrums and blew trumpets. Standing on the broad terrace of his chariot, Karna said to his driver, "Take me at once to the place where Arjuna stands. Even if all-devouring Death protects him, he will not escape me. I will confront him in battle and either send him to the next world or go there myself, following Bhishma's trail."

Soon, Duryodhana joined Karna, and the two friends rode to the front of the Kuru forces. The other warriors were cheered by the sight, and they roared and twanged their bowstrings.

Seeing Karna shining like a smokeless fire, Duryodhana felt that his enemies were already slain. He smiled and said, "O foremost of men, in you I have found a suitable commander for my troops. Tell me now what you consider beneficial for our army. With Bhishma fallen, we have no leader. An army without a chief perishes like a rudderless boat on the high seas. Tell me who you feel should be commander-in-chief."

Karna waved an arm toward the leading chariot fighters. "Practically any of these great warriors could head your army. They are all acquainted with martial science and possessed of undaunting prowess. Still, only one man can be our leader. We must be cautious not to depress those who are not chosen. Therefore, I feel we should select Drona. He is the oldest and most experienced. Indeed, he is the preceptor of many heroes fighting in this war. None will object to his command. As the gods, hoping to defeat the demons, made Karttikeya their commander, so you should make Drona the chief of your army."

Duryodhana agreed. He rode over to Drona. As the two men were worshipped and eulogized by bards and singers, Duryodhana said, "O great hero, among all this host of kings none can be as good a protector as you. You are a brahmin and of noble birth. You know the Vedas, and your skill,

power, and wisdom are unparalleled. Like Indra leading the celestials, become our commander-in-chief. Who can match you on the battlefield? Even Arjuna will not dare approach us with you at our head."

Drona stood tall on his chariot, his great bow by his side. With his white hair and beard, and his silver armor, he shone like the moon on a clear night. Raising his hand in blessing, he replied, "I am versed in the Vedas and their six auxiliaries, and I know the science of weapons. I will therefore offer battle to Pandu's sons. Conquering the Panchala and Somaka armies, I will range across the field striking terror into our enemies' hearts. But, O monarch, I doubt I will be able to slay Dhristadyumna, for that hero was born to kill me."

Not caring for the prophesy, Duryodhana arranged for the ceremony to install Drona as commander. Duryodhana himself could ensure that Dhristadyumna was kept away from Drona. In any event, it was hard to believe that the Panchala prince had the power to kill Drona. The two had already met on several occasions and Drona had proved more powerful every time. Perhaps the so-called prophesy would prove to be nothing more than a rumor.

With the investiture complete, the Kaurava troops sent up a shout and played their instruments in unison. With his head still wet from the sacred waters used in the ritual, Drona remounted his chariot and led the army into battle. Duryodhana rode by Drona's side. As they proceeded toward the fight, Drona said, "O great king, I am honored by this office of commander-in-chief. I wish to repay you in some way. Please tell me what you desire and I will endeavor to accomplish it."

Duryodhana thought for a moment and replied, "O preceptor, if you would give me a boon, then capture Yudhishthira and bring him to me."

Drona looked surprised. "Fortunate is that eldest son of Kunti that you desire his capture and not his death. Surely it is wonderful that not even you can feel malice toward him. Why, O monarch, do you not wish to kill him? Would not his death end this conflict and bring you victory? Could it be that, rather than killing the Pandavas, you wish to re-establish brotherly feelings among you?"

A sly grin played around Duryodhana's mouth. "Yudhishthira's death, O teacher, would not bring me victory. If he were killed, Arjuna would be so

angry that he would utterly annihilate us. I have come to accept that even the immortals cannot slay all five brothers. Thus I see Yudhisthira's capture as the means to secure my victory. With him under our control, the war will end. Again challenging him to dice, I will send all five brothers back to the woods. Thus will my victory be established."

Drona gazed at the smiling Duryodhana for a moment. It was obvious he had experienced no change of heart. His mind was fixed. Still, Drona thought, he had a duty to perform. He took a deep breath. "If the heroic Arjuna does not protect Yudhisthira, then you may consider him captured; but if Arjuna stands before him, I will not be able to carry it out. Not even Indra with all the celestials could overpower Arjuna and capture Yudhisthira before his eyes. I may be his preceptor, but he is far younger in years and has acquired weapons known only to the best of the gods. You must somehow draw him away from Yudhisthira and then I will strive to take the king captive."

Duryodhana cheered Drona. Knowing that he was partial to the Pandavas, the Kaurava leader broadcast Drona's promise to all the other commanders. He wanted to ensure that Drona was held to his word. As the Kauravas heard of the plan, they shouted in joy. Surely victory would soon be theirs. Who could resist Drona?

The news of Duryodhana's plan soon reached Yudhisthira. He called Arjuna to his side and said, "O foremost of men, you must now ensure that you are never far from me in the fight. Drona will be looking for his chance. The moment you are gone, he will charge toward me like a lion seeking its prey."

Arjuna stood before his elder brother, clad from head to toe in his impenetrable armor. Lifting his Gandiva bow he replied, "I will not abandon you, O leader of men. Although I could never stand to see Drona killed, I will not allow him to take you captive as long as I live. The sky with all its stars may drop, the earth may shatter into fragments, but Drona will not capture you in my presence. Duryodhana's plan is futile. Rest assured. O king, I am always endeavoring to keep my vows. Do not be afraid, therefore, of Drona."

Arjuna mounted his chariot and took his place at the head of the army, along with Dhristadyumna and Abhimanyu. As they led their forces into battle, a deafening roar filled the four quarters. Surrounded by his other

brothers, Yudhishthira followed close behind Arjuna, with the huge Panchala forces following him.

Chapter Fourteen. "Yudhisthira Will Be Captured"

Again the armies collided on the field of Kurukshetra for the eleventh day of battle. Karna, coming fresh into the fight, carved a path of destruction through the Pandava forces. The Kaurava soldiers were delighted as they witnessed him causing havoc among their foes. "Surely the Pandavas will soon flee. Here is Karna, capable of crushing the celestial armies. Bhishma has treated Kunti's sons with tenderness, but Karna will not spare them."

The din of battle resounded for miles, sending animals in distant forests bounding away in fear. Billowing clouds of dust, like heaps of tawny silk, rose up and obscured the sun. Weapons fell in thick showers on both armies, and the terrifying slaughter began once again.

Drona charged headlong into the Pandava army. He fired thousands of razor-sharp arrows that tore apart the warriors who stood before him. The fighters fell like rows of cranes before a gale. Invoking celestial weapons, Drona destroyed his enemies as Indra destroys the Asuras. The Pandava army quaked before Drona as he ranged about like Yamaraja holding his death-dealing staff.

Yudhisthira, alarmed at the destruction of his forces, spoke to Dhristadyumna. "Check Drona's onslaught! No time should be lost!"

With a roar, Dhristadyumna charged Drona, followed by Bhima, the twins, Abhimanyu, and other warriors. They surrounded Drona and rained their arrows on his chariot. Drona's eyes rolled in anger. Working his bow with blinding speed, he repulsed his attackers like a storm blowing off clouds. He sent men and chariots reeling across the battlefield in all directions. Like one insane, he roamed the field releasing fire-like weapons. Beholding Drona rushing upon them like an angered Yamaraja, the Pandava forces fled in confusion and terror.

The terrific sound of Drona's bowstring was heard continuously. Just as Bhishma had done before him, he slaughtered the Pandava soldiers. At the same time, other great heroes among the Kauravas engaged with their counterparts. Many furious one-to-one battles took place between the leading warriors of both armies.

Drona, his mind fixed on his promise to Duryodhana, ploughed relentlessly into the Pandava forces. Yudhisthira was stationed in their midst,

protected by many maharathas who covered his chariot on all sides. Arjuna was close by, contending with a number of powerful chariot fighters who had been assigned the task of leading him away from his brother.

As Drona burst through the ranks of soldiers in front of Yudhisthira, he was met by Kumara, a Panchala prince protecting Yudhisthira's chariot wheels. As Yudhisthira fired his long shafts at Drona, Kumara rushed toward him. The prince sent a volley of arrows at Drona that checked his progress. He pierced the Kuru preceptor with hundreds of shafts, laughing and roaring all the while. Not tolerating his attack, Drona regained his senses and fixed a broad-headed arrow onto his bow. Drawing it back to his ear, he fired it with deadly accuracy, severing Kumara's head from his body. Another Panchala prince, Simhasena, then struck Drona with a hundred ferocious arrows, supported by his brother, Vyaghradatta, who came at Drona screaming out his fearful battle cry. They both pierced Drona's arms and chest with their steel shafts. Unperturbed, Drona sent two razor-headed arrows in swift succession that cut off their heads. As those handsome heads, decked with golden earrings and helmets, dropped to the earth, Drona pressed toward Yudhisthira. Seeing him approach the Pandava king, the Kaurava troops cried out, "Yudhisthira is captured!"

Cries of distress went up from the Pandava army as Drona came ever closer to Yudhisthira. Hearing the shouts, however, Arjuna rushed toward Drona, mercilessly mowing down the warriors who stood in his way. All that could be seen of Arjuna or his chariot as he fought his way toward his brother was a constantly spreading network of arrows. Above that shower flew Hanuman roaring frightfully from the banner.

Duryodhana ordered thousands of chariot fighters to charge Arjuna. Recklessly, they advanced toward him. The battlefield around Arjuna appeared to be one mass of arrows. Charging into the impenetrable wall of shafts, the Kauravas were cut down, their chariots smashed. Drona found it impossible to approach Yudhisthira. His supporting divisions could do nothing to help him. The inflamed Arjuna was destroying them. Those that were not killed turned and fled in fear.

As Arjuna created a fearful destruction among the Kaurava army, the sun touched the western horizon. Drona blew his conch to withdraw his troops. Gradually the two armies disengaged and returned to their camps, praising each other's heroism.

* * *

Drona was dejected as he took his place by Duryodhana's side in the tent. He had been helpless in the face of Arjuna's prowess. Shamed at his inability to contain his own disciple, he said to Duryodhana, "I told you already that when Arjuna is by Yudhishthira's side, I will not be able to capture him. You must contrive some means to take Arjuna from his brother. I will then snatch Yudhishthira, even before the eyes of Dhristadyumna and all the other troops. I will either achieve this or slay at least one of the Pandavas' greatest fighters—whoever comes to Yudhishthira's aid. However, you need to ensure that Arjuna is busy elsewhere on the field."

Hearing Drona speak Susharma said, "Arjuna has humiliated me many times. He bears malice toward my brothers and me. Remembering his antagonism I can hardly sleep at night. Let us therefore undertake the task tomorrow of contending with him. With fifty thousand chariot fighters who will not retreat behind us, we will challenge Arjuna to combat. Either he will lay prostrate on the field, or the earth will be relieved of the burden of my brothers and me and our entire army."

Duryodhana praised Susharma and a cheer went up from the other kings. With his four brothers, Susharma took an oath before the sacred fire that he would fight to the death with Arjuna the following day. After brahmins had sanctified his promise with mantras and holy water, he stood up and exclaimed, "If we do not slay Arjuna or become slain by him, let us attain the regions reserved for those who kill brahmins, for drunkards, for those who forsake one who has sought shelter, for those who have intercourse with another's wife, who are slayers of cattle, who abandon their own mother, or who are atheists. We claim those regions if we flee from Arjuna in battle tomorrow. Otherwise, may we attain the everlasting realms of happiness."

After taking this vow, Susharma and his brothers retired for the night, leaving Duryodhana enlivened and hopeful. Even if Susharma could not kill Arjuna, which seemed likely, he would at least give Drona the freedom he needed to capture Yudhishthira. Duryodhana smiled at Karna. Perhaps he would not need to slay Arjuna after all. Between the promises of Drona and Susharma, it seemed the war would end in another way. The Kaurava prince did not care. As long as he emerged victorious, by whatever means, that was all that mattered. He rose from his seat and swept out of the assembly with

his head held high, Karna following, grasping the hilt of his broad sword.

* * *

Early on the twelfth morning, news again reached Yudhishthira that Drona was intent on capturing him. He heard from his spies about Susharma's promise. When Arjuna was informed, he said to his brother, "Still you need not fear, O King. Here is Satyaki, my disciple and my equal in every respect. He will remain by your side at all times. Even if I am away, you cannot be captured while he is present."

Reassured, Yudhishthira issued orders for the day's battle. His forces were soon moving toward the fight, causing the earth to vibrate and raising clouds of dust as they proceeded in the formation shaped like an alligator.

As soon as Arjuna appeared before him, Susharma, who stood ahead of the Kaurava army, challenged him. Bound by kshatriya codes, Arjuna accepted the challenge and charged. The thirty thousand chariots of the Samshaptakas and Trigartas immediately surrounded him. As the rest of the Pandava forces moved on across the plain to engage with the other Kaurava troops, Arjuna began a furious battle with those fearless warriors. They let out deafening roars and hurled their weapons at him. Hearing their elated shouts, Arjuna said to Krishna, "Just see, O son of Devaki, how these men, who are about to fall in battle, are transported with joy when really they should be weeping. Or perhaps they are happy as they see before them heaven's glowing regions, which can never be attained by cowards."

Arjuna lifted his gold-encrusted celestial conch and let out a mighty blast. All four quarters were filled with the sound. Horses excreted and men fell from their chariots. Others were paralyzed with fear and stood motionless for a few moments. When the sound died away, they regained their senses and again roared. Taking up their bows, they fired thousands of shafts fletched with kanka feathers. In an instant Arjuna had shot arrows to counter every one of his opponents' swift-coursing shafts. They fell in pieces to the ground. Arjuna pierced all the foremost charioteers who were bearing down upon him. Susharma and his brothers responded with sharp-pointed arrows that struck Arjuna's arms and chest. A huge shower of other steel arrows fell on Arjuna's chariot, like a swarm of black bees going toward a tree full of blossoms.

Krishna drove the chariot and baffled the enemy attack. As he emerged from the hail of shafts, Arjuna fired razor-headed arrows that cut down his foes' standards. With arrows shot in swift succession he slew the four horses of Sudhaman, one of Susharma's brothers, and then cut off his head. As the prince fell from his chariot, his four brothers increased the fury of their attack. Tens of thousands of other chariot fighters and horsemen hurled their weapons at him from all sides. At the same time, the Narayana army from Dwaraka rushed into the fight with terrible cries. Arjuna was completely engaged in the battle as the rest of the Pandava forces met the Kauravas some distance away.

With their forces arrayed in a formation resembling an eagle, the Kauravas closed on their enemies. Drona, stationed at the head of the array, at once made for Yudhisthira. Satyaki charged Drona, releasing his swift arrows by the hundreds. He attacked the Kuru preceptor and rendered his two charioteers unconscious with a volley of arrows. Piercing his horses with even more arrows, he brought Drona's chariot to a halt.

Drona was filled with rage, and he gazed at his antagonist with bloodshot eyes. Considering that Satyaki's time had come, he shot a dozen snake-like shafts that sundered his bow and pierced his armor. Unperturbed, Satyaki grasped another bow and replied with thirty of his own arrows. They struck Drona and he spun round in his chariot and dropped his bow.

Seeing the preceptor hard-pressed by Satyaki, other Kaurava fighters came to his aid. At the same time, other Pandava warriors joined Satyaki and a fierce general fight followed. Drona quickly regained his senses and fought on in total rage. Thousands of Panchala and Matsya soldiers surrounded him and he killed them all, including the two powerful princes, Satyajit and Satanika.

Seeing his troops being mowed down, Dhristadyumna came forward with Shikhandhi. Along with Satyaki, Chekitana, and many other Pandava heroes, they managed to hold Drona in check. As that battle raged, the soldiers on both sides fell in waves. The battlefield was a morass of flesh and blood. Drona fought like a man possessed. The Pandava army quaked in fear as he released his celestial weapons that slew them by the thousands. Drona forced all his attackers to turn away from him in the fight. He could hardly be looked upon and the Pandavas surrounding him were routed.

Duryodhana laughed and spoke to Karna, who was there at his side. "Behold, Radheya, how these troops flee from the battle. They seem to spin around and around as they look for a path by which to escape from Drona. I think they have lost all taste for battle. Surely they are seeing the world as being full of Drona. How will they return to the fight? What can even Bhima do against the warlike preceptor?"

Karna was in a graver mood. "That Pandava hero will never abandon the fight so long as life remains in him. Nor will his brothers turn away from battle at any time. Remembering the woes you inflicted upon them, they will rush against us again and again. Even now the mighty Bhima is coming forward. Doubtlessly he will slay our forces in vast numbers. See too how Satyaki and Dhristadyumna are rallying back to the fight, along with the twins and numerous other maharathas among our foes. All of them are bearing down on Drona with a singleness of purpose. Let us prepare our forces without delay."

Duryodhana looked across the field. He saw Bhima's chariot, drawn by its four red horses, racing toward Drona. Dhristadyumna and Satyaki flanked Bhima. The three warriors roared like lions as they approached the Kuru commander. Behind them came a great wave of chariot fighters and horsemen, releasing showers of arrows as they charged. Duryodhana broke from Karna and raced across the field, issuing orders for Drona's protection. A number of Kaurava heroes came between the Kuru preceptor and his assailants and soon the fight resumed with full force.

Duryodhana personally attacked Bhima, his mind seized with anger. At the head of a massive elephant force, he challenged the Pandava with insulting words. Bhima laughingly shot spiked arrows at the elephants. Drawing his great bow back to his ear he sent his shafts with such force that they felled the elephants one after another. Bhima's chariot moved like the wind from side to side as he rained down his irresistible weapons. He dispersed his attackers like a tempest scattering clouds. The blood-soaked elephants, pierced all over, appeared beautiful, like dark clouds lit by the rays of the setting sun.

Excited, Duryodhana approached Bhima and pierced him with a number of shafts. Bhima turned his blood-red eyes toward the Kaurava and licked his lips. Instantly he shot dozens of gold-winged arrows, which pierced Duryodhana deeply. With a broad-headed shaft he brought down the black,

gem-encrusted serpent banner that flew above Duryodhana's chariot. He then severed Duryodhana's bow with another shaft and sent up a roar.

Seeing the Kaurava leader afflicted by Bhima, the barbarian king leading the elephant division came forward on his massive beast. Without delay Bhima struck the elephant between the eyes with a powerful shaft that stopped it in its tracks. With four more arrows he brought the elephant crashing to the ground. As it fell like a mountain struck by a thunderbolt, the barbarian chief tried to leap clear; but even as he jumped, Bhima cut off his head with a razor-headed arrow fired with deadly accuracy.

Seeing their leader slain, the other elephant warriors fled. Duryodhana tried to rally them, but without success. He moved away from Bhima and saw Bhagadatta coming up fast to assist him. The mighty fighter on his invincible elephant Supratika rushed toward Bhima, seeming to fly over the battlefield. Bhima fired his long shafts at the charging beast, but they fell harmlessly from its body. In a moment the elephant reached Bhima's chariot and crushed it along with its horses as Bhima threw himself clear.

Supratika reared up again and again, screaming in fury and looking around for Bhima. The Pandava ran beneath the beast and struck it with his bare arms. In pain the elephant whirled around like a potter's wheel. Bhima came out from beneath it and the elephant seized him in its trunk. Bhima spun round and freed himself from the twine of the trunk and again hid beneath the screaming beast that was endeavoring to kill him.

Yudhisthira saw Bhima and ordered a division of his own elephants to assist him. As Supratika was diverted by the attack of enemy elephants, Bhima saw his chance and he dashed away.

A battle then ensued between Bhagadatta and the Pandava forces mounted on elephants, led by the Dasharna king. They surrounded Bhagadatta and covered him with volleys of arrows. Bhagadatta fended off their shafts with his whirling hook. Goaded Supratika forward, he trampled and crushed the enemy forces like a storm crushing a forest. Chariots, horsemen and infantry were mangled as the great beast rampaged across the field. Impervious to its foes' weapons, the elephant caused chaos among the Pandava forces. Soldiers fled and their animals cried in terror. Rising above the sound were Supratika's frightful screams as it thundered about the field unchecked.

Some way off, Arjuna battled on alone against the Samshaptakas and the Narayana army. As he fought, he could hear Supratika's screams. Recognizing the sound he said, "O Madhusudana, it is clear that the Pragyotisha ruler is annihilating our army. I doubt if anyone can stop his elephant except us. What then is my duty, O Krishna? I think I should proceed at once to where Bhagadatta is roaring out his battle cry. Dispatching him and his beast to Death's abode, I will then return to this fight."

Krishna agreed and urged Arjuna's horses toward the rest of the Pandava army. As they raced away, however, the Samshaptakas called out from behind, "Why do you flee from the fight? Turn and face us again, for you have not yet defeated us."

Arjuna was caught in a dilemma. He wanted to save his army from Bhagadatta, but he could not avoid the Samshaptakas. No kshatriya worthy of the name could refuse a challenge. He told Krishna to stop the chariot and turn round. First he would wipe out the entire Samshaptaka force, then deal with Bhagadatta. As Krishna wheeled the chariot around Arjuna still could not fix his mind. There were hundreds of thousands of warriors supporting Susharma and his army. They were spread out over a large area and it would take hours to overcome them. By then, Bhagadatta and his unstoppable elephant might have done untold damage.

Suddenly the Samshaptakas launched a coordinated attack on Arjuna. Countless arrows descended upon his chariot, striking both him and Krishna. Krishna dropped the reins and fell back in a swoon as the barbed steel shafts covered Him. The chariot stopped and vanished beneath the hail of arrows. Losing his patience, Arjuna decided to invoke the brahmastra weapon. He fixed a golden arrow to his bow and chanted the sacred mantras to bring the awful weapon into being. With consummate skill he directed it at his foes, continuously firing long shafts imbued with the power of the brahmastra.

A solid wall of blazing arrows went toward the Samshaptakas. The warriors fell to earth with their heads, arms and legs severed. Chariots were smashed into fragments and elephants cut to pieces. Horses and riders fell dead by the thousands. The whole army appeared to be on fire, struck by the beautiful but deadly shafts shot by Arjuna's mystic powers.

Krishna returned to His senses and said, "Well done, Partha. I think this feat of weaponry would have been hard for Indra, Kuvera, or even

Yamaraja himself. Our enemies are routed. Those staying in the fight are being slain like insects entering a fire."

Arjuna asked Krishna to go quickly to Bhagadatta. He could return later to deal with the rest of the Samshaptakas and their supporting armies. As swift as the wind, the chariot flew over the battlefield and soon arrived where the battle with Bhagadatta was taking place. Seeing Arjuna entering the fight, Duryodhana detailed a large force of chariot fighters to attack him. They rushed in a body toward Arjuna and rained their arrows, darts and lances upon him. Bearing the attack with fortitude, Arjuna continuously worked the Gandiva bow and sent whistling shafts at all the warriors who came at him. Fearless of their lives, the Kaurava troops charged at Arjuna with shouts and roars. The Pandava cut them down with his arrows as a farmer cuts a field of wheat.

Seeing Arjuna annihilating the troops, Bhagadatta raced toward him. He showered a downpour of arrows onto Arjuna's chariot and directed Supratika to trample him. Arjuna calmly resisted his attack with volleys of his own shafts, even as the shore resists the ocean. The two warriors hurtled about the field, locked in deadly combat. Bhagadatta sent hundreds of arrows at both Arjuna and Krishna, but Kunti's son cut them down before they could reach him. Supratika charged at Arjuna like a mountain rocking across the field. Impervious to Arjuna's arrows the animal screamed in fury as it bore down on the golden chariot. Krishna masterfully drove the horses and evaded the charge, feinting to the left of the beast. As he passed to Bhagadatta's side, Arjuna saw his opportunity to slay the unprotected warrior and his animal, but remembering the rules of combat he desisted from the act.

Seeing Arjuna's chariot slipping past, Bhagadatta's elephant was overpowered by rage and ran pell mell through the Pandava forces. Hundreds of chariots, with their warriors, horses and charioteers, were crushed and slaughtered. Arjuna was infuriated by Bhagadatta's remorseless attack. Moving quickly to the front he sped four arrows at him that cut apart his bow. With two more arrows he slew the two warriors who sat behind Bhagadatta.

The Pragyotisha monarch threw fourteen lances at Arjuna in quick succession. Those jewel-encrusted javelins, with shining steel points, blazed as they sped toward the Pandava, their many small bells tinkling delightfully. Arjuna immediately shot arrows that cut each of the lances into three pieces. As the lances fell to the earth he fired another dozen shafts that broke

Supratika's armor. It fell from the elephant's body in fragments like meteors falling from heaven. The dark beast then appeared like a mountain suddenly freed of its surrounding clouds.

Bhagadatta hurled a long dart at Arjuna, its tip glowing red and emitting sparks as it flew. Arjuna calmly cut it in two with a single razor-headed shaft. He then cut the king's white umbrella and tall standard. With a further ten shafts he pierced Bhagadatta, who replied with another two dozen long lances. One of the lances struck Arjuna's diadem and knocked it from his head. Replacing his diadem, Arjuna gazed at Bhagadatta with steely eyes. He shouted out, "Take a last look at this world, O king."

Bhagadatta quickly took up a new bow and covered Arjuna and Krishna with a shower of barbed arrows. Arjuna released a cluster of flat-headed shafts that cut his bow to pieces and pierced all his limbs. Taking up his golden hook, Bhagadatta thought of the Vaishnava weapon, which was in his possession. Reciting the ancient aphorisms to invoke that irresistible weapon, he charged his elephant hook with its potency and hurled it at Arjuna. All the warriors witnessing the fight between Arjuna and Bhagadatta gasped as they saw the missile, capable of killing all creatures, fly toward Arjuna.

Suddenly Krishna stood up from his place on the chariot. Throwing out his arms he received the weapon full on the chest. As it struck him, it turned into a garland of celestial flowers and draped itself around His neck.

Arjuna was mortified. Why had Krishna interfered? Keeping his eyes on Bhagadatta, who had been stunned by Krishna's thwarting of the Vaishnava missile, he said, "O lotus-eyed one, your promise was that you would drive my horses and never enter the fight. Why have you interceded? I could understand you taking it upon yourself to protect me when I am incapable or about to fall, but here I stand with all my faculties and weapons. Not even the combined celestials and Asuras could defeat me. How have you felt it necessary to act as you just did?"

Slowly circling the chariot around Bhagadatta, Krishna replied, "Hear, O sinless one, the origin of the weapon that Bhagadatta released for your destruction. Long ago, when I awoke from slumber in my form as Mahavishnu, the Earth goddess came to me seeking a boon. Knowing that I was inclined to grant favors at that time, she said, 'Please bestow upon my

son Naraka the Vaishnava weapon. Let it be that he cannot be slain by any being.'

"I replied, 'O goddess, it shall be so. Your son will be invincible, protected by my weapon.' She then went away and her son received the weapon, which he later passed on to Bhagadatta. This weapon can slay any being within the three worlds, including Indra and Rudra. Therefore, for your sake, O Arjuna, I baffled the missile. Now you may slay your opponent, this implacable enemy of the gods Bhagadatta, even as in days gone by I slew Naraka in a great fight."

Understanding that Krishna had saved his life, Arjuna fixed his gaze on Bhagadatta. He swiftly covered him with hundreds of straight-flying shafts. As Bhagadatta parried the attack, Arjuna took up a long golden lance. He drew it back and, invoking the power of Indra, hurled it with all his strength at Supratika. It went into the elephant's head right up to its golden wings. Supratika stopped in its tracks, its limbs paralyzed. Although goaded by Bhagadatta, it slowly fell to the earth like an enormous hill uprooted by a thunderbolt. As his elephant screamed Bhagadatta leapt from its back.

Before Bhagadatta reached the ground, Arjuna shot a crescent-headed shaft that tore open his breast and cut his heart in two. His bright turban fell from his head like a petal falling from a lotus whose stem has been violently struck. He dropped to the earth with his golden garland broken and scattered. His arms and legs spread akimbo, he appeared like a god fallen from heaven when his pious credits have expired.

Arjuna circumambulated his foe in respect. Then, turning his chariot toward the Kaurava army, he rushed back into the battle.

Shakuni's two brothers then attacked Arjuna with mighty yells. A thousand Gandhara horsemen backed them. The warriors fell upon Arjuna, releasing hundreds of arrows. Unperturbed, Arjuna took up a couple of razor-headed shafts and beheaded both princes. The horrified Shakuni then charged at Arjuna. Invoking a mystical Asura weapon, he spread a fearful illusion that covered the Pandava. Clubs, iron balls, rocks, darts, barbed shafts, bludgeons, swords, tridents, axes, and other weapons fell on Arjuna from all sides. Ferocious animals, burning with hunger, attacked Arjuna along with Rakshasas, carnivorous birds and demons. A thick gloom enveloped his chariot and harsh voices reproached him from out of the darkness.

Arjuna invoked the lustrous celestial weapon known as the Gotishka and the darkness dispelled. All his illusory assailants vanished, but huge waves of water then appeared and rushed toward him. Arjuna quickly discharged the Aditya weapon to dry up the waters. Seeing his illusions nullified, Shakuni turned and took to his heels like a cowardly deserter. Arjuna turned on the Gandhara forces and slaughtered them like a lion killing small animals.

Other Kaurava warriors charged into the fray and a general fight ensued between the two armies. Yudhisthira remained near Arjuna, with Dhristadyumna and Satyaki by his side. The Kaurava forces were broken and dispersed by Arjuna and Bhima, who fought together like a couple of enraged gods.

Abhimanyu fought with Karna, keeping the powerful warrior engaged, while Dhristadyumna directed his weapons at Drona. As the foremost fighters contended, Arjuna drove back Duryodhana's huge army with his hundreds of thousands of shafts. Bhima spun around on foot, creating a carnage with his whirling mace.

Drona fought intensely, but he could not find any opportunity to seize Yudhisthira. He slew numerous powerful fighters and wrought a massive destruction among the soldiers, but the invincible Satyaki guarded Yudhisthira closely and, assisted by Dhristadyumna and the Panchala forces, kept Drona at bay.

As the sun reached the meridian, Drona, seeing the Kauravas getting the worst of the fight, decided to regroup. He sounded the retreat and recalled the vast army to the western side of the field, where they were encamped.

Duryodhana was angry. "O preceptor, why have you not fulfilled your vow? You did not capture Yudhisthira, and Arjuna ranges unchecked across the field. Are your words to prove false?"

Drona felt his patience tried. "It does not behoove you to address such harsh words to one who is always striving to serve you. I have told you many times that no one in the universe can conquer Arjuna. He has even held the three-eyed Mahadeva in battle. Now that Yudhisthira is aware of our aims, he is keeping himself well-guarded. It will be difficult to capture him, but I will try my utmost. My word that I will kill one mighty hero will be kept. I will now form an array that even the gods could not penetrate. The

remaining Samshaptakas should again challenge Arjuna and take him to the southern side of the field. We will then try to trap Yudhisthira and, in so doing, will at least take the life of someone who comes to protect him."

Drona gazed across at the Pandava army. If one of their principal fighters could be killed, it would be a blow to their morale. He decided to form the Kauravas into the chakravyuha, the circular array. That arrangement would likely result in one of the Pandava heroes being trapped, perhaps even Yudhisthira. Only Arjuna knew the secrets of that formation. No one else among the Pandavas could resist or break it. Unless, that was, Arjuna had taught it to someone. Drona began giving the commands. He would soon find out.

Chapter Fifteen. Abhimanyu's Incomparable Power

After deciding to regroup the Kauravas, Drona went over to Susharma and said, "O king, your vow remains unfulfilled. Arjuna will doubtlessly accept your challenge again. Go with your brothers and draw that hero toward the south. We will try again to trap Yudhisthira."

Susharma immediately left with his three remaining brothers. The surviving Samshaptakas, Trigartas and Narayanas followed them. All the warriors blew their conches and roared, their minds fixed on victory or death.

Seeing Susharma stationed across from him blowing his conch and shouting a challenge, Arjuna broke away from the Pandava army and rushed once more toward him. Gradual maneuvering brought him toward the south, as Drona arranged the rest of the Kaurava forces into the chakravyuha.

Soon the circular array was formed, with the invincible Kaurava chiefs stationed at its key points. In ranks the soldiers advanced toward the Pandavas. Duryodhana and his brothers stood in the center of the formation, supported by Karna and Kripa. At its head stood Drona and his son, backed by many kings and their forces, who spread out behind him in a vast circle.

As Drona closed on his foes, he let loose hundreds of winged arrows. Immediately, a massive wave of shafts flew toward the Pandava army, along with lances, darts, iron balls and battle-axes. The warriors' cries filled the air.

Seeing that his enemies had arranged themselves in the impenetrable chakravyuha, Yudhisthira became thoughtful. Only Arjuna knew how to break that array. He had mentioned it to his brothers, but he had not told them the secrets he had learned from Drona. But Yudhisthira recalled Arjuna saying how he had once discussed the knowledge with Subhadra and that Abhimanyu had overheard him speaking. The prince was their only chance. Yudhisthira called for him and said, "O son, I think that apart from yourself there are none in our army who can break the arrangement of troops now advancing toward us. Your father, Krishna and Pradyumna are the only warriors on earth who know the secret of breaking it—and I understand that you are a fourth knower of this secret, having heard it from your sire. O heroic prince, Drona surely intends to push through our forces with this unbreakable formation. Throwing us into disarray, he will then try to capture me. Tell me, dear child, can you smash through these troops today?"

Abhimanyu stood proudly in his chariot. Clad in bright armor, his bow clasped in his hand and his standard waving in the breeze, the handsome youth looked exactly like a powerful hero among the gods. Although only sixteen years old, he was already one of the foremost fighters in the Pandava army. But he seemed uncertain as he replied to Yudhisthira. "O king, what you say is true. I am conversant with the method of breaking and entering this array, but I do not think it possible for me to get out again. My father has not yet taught me that knowledge. I will be like an insect impelled by anger to rush into fire. If any danger should befall me, I will be trapped."

Yudhisthira reassured him. "Do not fear, O mighty-armed one. My brothers and I will be right behind you, along with Dhristadyumna, Satyaki, and all the Panchalas, Kekayas, Matsyas and Prabhadrakas. We will protect you from all sides."

Bhima, who had overheard the conversation, added, "We will follow you closely, O hero. Once we enter the array, we will smash it apart."

Hearing his uncles' assurances, Abhimanyu became confident. He raised his sword and loudly said, "Today I will achieve something that will glorify both my mother's and my father's family. I wish to please my father and my uncle. All creatures will see me, a single child of the Vrishnis, crush the enemy host. I will not consider myself the son of either Partha or Subhadra if anyone I encounter today escapes with his life, or if I fail to enter the array."

Yudhisthira blessed the prince. "May your words prove true, O son of Subhadra, and may your strength increase even as you speak. Go now and we shall be not far behind you, supported by troops who are no less than the celestials."

Abhimanyu looked at the advancing Kauravas. He ordered his charioteer, "O Sumitra, urge the horses toward Drona's divisions. I will break his formation apart as the sun dispels clouds."

Sumitra, the son of Krishna's charioteer, Daruka, drove toward Drona. As the chariot thundered across the field he spoke with apprehension. "It is my duty to protect you, O best of men. Consider carefully the heavy burden that has been placed upon you. Drona is adept at all kinds of weaponry. He is surrounded by warriors who have yet to be defeated, all arranged in a mighty formation. You, on the other hand, are a child raised in

luxury. You have not known the rigors of hard battle. This will certainly be your most difficult fight."

Abhimanyu laughed. "O charioteer, who is this Drona? Who indeed are all these kshatriyas supporting him? I would fight with Indra mounted on Airavata and attended by the immortals. How are these foes competent to fight a battle with even a sixteenth part of me? I, who have the world-conquering Vishnu as my uncle and the famous Arjuna as my father, will not quake with terror at the sight of any enemy within the three worlds. Drive on, O Sumitra. Make straight for Drona."

Sumitra looked at the solid wall of enemy troops. With a heavy heart he urged on the horses, which were caparisoned in gold and silver. The chariot raced toward Drona, with Abhimanyu firing volleys of arrows at him and all the warriors by his side.

Seeing the standard bearing the karnikara tree, Drona recognized Arjuna's son. As the prince charged toward the Kauravas, he seemed like a young lion attacking a herd of elephants. Drona issued orders and began the counterattack.

Abhimanyu carefully directed Sumitra, and his chariot feinted from side to side as he came at an oblique angle toward the Kaurava ranks. Maintaining his fierce attack on Drona, he simultaneously hurled arrows at the warriors fighting at his sides and rear. As they fell back under his assault, Abhimanyu suddenly veered away to the right. Stunning Drona with a hundred steel shafts, he raced past him and broke into the formation as the Kauravas looked on in amazement.

A frightful encounter ensued as the outer rank of the formation broke apart. The confused battle between the prince and the densely packed troops appeared like the eddies produced when the Ganges meets the ocean. Large numbers of elephant fighters, horsemen, charioteers and foot soldiers closed in around Abhimanyu, all roaring in delight.

Subhadra's son began to cut down his foes with his arrows. He rushed about amid his enemies like a whirlwind. It seemed to the Kauravas as if they were contending with hundreds of Abhimanyus. As various musical instruments sounded, shouts of "Slay him!" "Fight with me!" and "Where are you going?" mixed with battle cries, the twang of bowstrings, and the clash of weapons. The cries of elephants, the roar of warriors, the tinkling of

ornaments, and the clatter of chariot wheels combined to create a deafening and confused din that made everyone's hair stand on end.

Abhimanyu ranged about slaughtering the Kaurava warriors by the thousands. His speed and agility were incomparable. The soldiers who faced him were like moths flying into fire. Abhimanyu quickly covered the earth with the bodies of slain warriors, like a priest laying kusha grass on the ground during a sacrifice. Well-muscled arms graced with bracelets and gold bangles were lopped off, still clutching weapons. Other arms lay with their hands stretched out, looking like five-hooded serpents thrown about by Garuda. Handsome heads adorned with fine helmets and smeared with the best of perfumes rolled on the ground like ripe fruits fallen from trees.

Once within the Kauravas' vyuha, Arjuna's son careened in all directions. None of his foes could fix their aim on him, so swift was his momentum. His arrows flew like streams of golden sunlight. He brought down huge elephants with their riders, scattering their armors and caparisons. Horsemen fell from their saddles, slain by shafts that passed clean through their bodies. Their horses reared in fear and were cut down by Abhimanyu's relentless volleys. The animals lay about weltering in gore, their eyes bulging and tongues hanging out.

Sending men and beasts to the blissful regions of departed heroes, Abhimanyu charged repeatedly, uttering fearful war cries. As he displayed various maneuvers, the Kaurava heroes thought him beautiful. They shouted in appreciation. Despite their best efforts to train their weapons on him, they could find no gaps in his defenses. Rather, as they approached him they were struck by dozens of his speeding arrows.

The Kauravas appeared like the Asura army mangled by Skanda. Subhadra's son moved fearlessly and swiftly through them, leaving a trail of carnage. Thousands of Kaurava fighters threw down their weapons and fled the fight. Forsaking their wounded relatives and friends, they ran wildly in all directions. Elephants ran screaming and swift horses galloped at full tilt away from Abhimanyu, leaping over the fallen soldiers who filled the blood-soaked earth.

Duryodhana was incensed. Reckless of his own safety, he rushed at Abhimanyu with a roar. Seeing this, Drona was alarmed and he shouted to the warriors around him, "Save the king!" Ashvatthama, Kripa, Karna,

Shakuni, Salya, and another half dozen heroes all converged on Abhimanyu. The young prince was covered with a thick downpour of arrows. Spinning on the terrace of his chariot he countered the arrows with his own, as Sumitra maneuvered his chariot clear. He pierced every one of his assailants with stinging arrows that could hardly be seen as they flew.

The Kaurava warriors then attacked Abhimanyu on all sides. They rained down their shafts by the thousands, but the prince either warded them off or dexterously evaded them. Some shafts penetrated his defenses and pierced his armor, but he did not flinch. Taking careful aim, he sent a dozen arrows that broke apart the chariot of King Ashmaka, a powerful Kaurava ally. With a further six arrows he slew the king's four horses, his charioteer, and the king himself.

Seeing the monarch slain, the Kaurava soldiers turned and fled. Duryodhana and Karna fought side by side, sending their arrows at Abhimanyu in volleys. Bearing the arrows like a mountain bears showers of rain, Abhimanyu sped at Karna a powerful arrow capable of piercing his armor. It struck him on the shoulder and dug deep into his body. Pained, Karna shook like a hill in an earthquake and fell into a swoon.

Abhimanyu then stunned Duryodhana with sixteen arrows and followed that by slaying four more kings supporting the Kaurava. Salya and Ashvatthama assailed him from both flanks at once. Exhibiting the speed and skill of his father, Abhimanyu shot his steel-tipped shafts at Salya and sent him reeling in his chariot. As the arrows struck Salya, Abhimanyu spun around and released a dozen more at Ashvatthama. Their force rocked Drona's son and he squatted down on the terrace of his chariot.

The Kauravas facing Abhimanyu fled in greater and greater numbers. Only the foremost heroes could stand against him. Even they were soon overpowered by his furious attack. As he ranged about on his glittering chariot, Siddhas and Charanas praised him from the skies. The Kauravas also cheered him, feeling simultaneous awe and anger as they were forced back by his peerless martial skills.

Abhimanyu slew thousands of Kauravas—anyone who came before him. Salya's younger brother Madra, seeing Salya afflicted by Abhimanyu, rushed angrily at him. He hurled twenty blazing darts at him, but the prince cut them to pieces. Abhimanyu counterattacked Madra with long shafts that

shattered his chariot and cut off his arms, legs and head simultaneously. As Madra fell dead from his chariot, thousands of soldiers in his army charged angrily at Abhimanyu. Calling out their names as they attacked, they shouted, "You will not escape with your life today, even if it costs us our own lives."

Subhadra's son met their attack with a deadly volley of arrows. He invoked celestial missiles he had received from his father and uncle. His bow resembled the blazing summer sun as he sent waves of horseshoe-headed and calf-tooth-headed shafts slamming into the Kaurava warriors, tearing them apart. With crescent-headed and barbed shafts Abhimanyu mangled his foes mercilessly. He carved through their divisions unchecked, dispersing them as the sun disperses mist.

Drona could not conceal his admiration for Arjuna's son. Duryodhana had come up to him and the preceptor said, "Just see, O king, how this youthful prince advances against our forces, giving delight to his friends and relatives. I do not think any bowman is his equal. Surely he could annihilate our entire host, if he so desired."

Duryodhana was enraged. Still, he smiled and said to Karna, who had stopped next to him, "It is clear the preceptor is affectionate toward Arjuna's son. Otherwise, why does he not slay him? None can resist the angry Drona when he stands with his weapons in battle. He spares this youth out of love for Arjuna. Protected by Drona, Abhimanyu is able to exhibit his prowess. Well, the time has come to kill him. O Karna, waste no time in slaying this arrogant child. Crush him at once!"

Dushashana heard his brother's words and replied, "Leave this to me. I will slay him before the Pandavas' eyes. Hearing that I have killed this boy, Krishna and Arjuna, the two braggarts, will surely go to the regions of the departed. Without doubt, all their kinsmen will be consumed by grief and will follow their path. Wish me well, O king. I will now challenge Subhadra's overly proud son."

Dushashana rushed at Abhimanyu with a loud cry. He fired a shower of arrows decked with buzzard feathers that covered Abhimanyu's chariot. The young prince smiled as he recognized his antagonist—and he struck him at once with two dozen shafts. Not tolerating the attack, Dushashana increased the ferocity of his own assault. He fired at Abhimanyu arrows and darts that blazed brilliantly as they flew toward him. The prince countered the

missiles and returned his own in large numbers. Both combatants exhibited various maneuvers in their chariots, showing skills that delighted the onlookers. The Kauravas sounded all kinds of musical instruments and cheered as Dushashana pressed his attack on Abhimanyu.

Holding off his opponent's attack, Abhimanyu called out to him, "By good luck I find before me a vain warrior of cruel deeds and lost righteousness—he who ever brags of his own prowess and knows only sinful deeds. With joy you pierced Yudhisthira and Bhima with your wicked words. Pay for that crime now, O evil-minded one. Suffer for the sin of grasping the sinless Draupadi's hair. Reap the fatal fruits of your ignorance, violence, covetousness and persecution of others. I shall now chastise you severely before all these warriors, thus freeing myself from the burden of anger I bear against you."

In a matter of seconds Abhimanyu fixed an effulgent golden arrow on his bow and fired it with all his power. It dug deeply into Dushashana's shoulder and he dropped his bow. Abhimanyu struck him with a further twenty-five shafts that burned like fire. Pierced on his chest and arms, the Kaurava squatted in pain and fell into a swoon. His charioteer quickly carried him from the fight.

Seeing Dushashana overpowered, Karna came to challenge Abhimanyu, but he too could not defeat the young warrior. Abhimanyu gradually forced him back with dozens of arrows. With his standard cut down and his armor shattered, Karna fell back and turned away. Several sons of Adhiratha, whom Karna considered his own brothers, were supporting him. One of them rushed at Abhimanyu in a rage. He launched a hundred arrows at him and sent up his battle cry. Abhimanyu turned to face the impetuous warrior. The young prince, whose mind was free from malice, struck Karna's brother with thirty powerful arrows. He broke his standard, killed his horses, and shattered his chariot wheels. As his antagonist fired back, Abhimanyu lopped off his head with a crescent-headed shaft.

The Kaurava troops cried out in sorrow. None of them were able to face Abhimanyu, who stood on the field like a blazing sacrificial fire. He blew his conch and began to range among the Kauravas, sending deadly shafts in all directions. He slew thousands of men as he fought within the circle formation.

Yudhishthira, Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva, Dhristadyumna, Drupada, Virata and other chiefs among the Pandavas had watched Abhimanyu break into the Kauravas' midst. As he entered the vyuha like an elephant breaking through a copse of trees, he left a large gap in the outer ranks. The Pandavas made swiftly for the gap, intending to follow the boy into the formation.

Suddenly Jayadratha came forward and challenged the Pandavas. Placing himself between them and the smashed vyuha, the Sindhu king attacked all of them with profuse arrows. Empowered by Shiva's boon, Jayadratha fought fearlessly. He checked all four Pandavas. According to Shiva's boon, the Sindhu monarch did not encounter Arjuna, who was fighting with the Samshaptakas far away on the battlefield. Arjuna's brothers could not overpower Jayadratha as they hurried to follow Abhimanyu.

The Pandavas were astonished. Unaware of the boon, they were amazed at Jayadratha's ability to hold them all at bay. Even though the advancing Pandava warriors trained their weapons on him, they could not get the better of him. As they struggled to get past Jayadratha, the Kauravas reformed. The Pandavas looked on helplessly as the chakra vyuha closed, trapping Abhimanyu inside.

Dozens of powerful Kaurava heroes came up to assist Jayadratha, praising his prowess in holding off the Pandavas. A fight took place on the edge of the Kaurava formation, while Abhimanyu wrought havoc within it. Faced by impenetrable ranks of warriors, the Pandavas saw no way to reach Arjuna's son.

* * *

Within the formation Duryodhana grew increasingly anxious. No one seemed able to stop Abhimanyu. Whoever went before him was either immediately slain or forced to retreat. He had overpowered all the great Kaurava heroes, including Karna, Kripa, Ashvatthama, Salya, Kritavarma and Bahlika. Duryodhana himself had been stung by his shafts, and even Drona seemed unable to check him.

As Duryodhana gazed at Abhimanyu hurtling among his forces like a fireball consuming everything in its path, Shakuni said, "We will not be able to slay this prince by fair means. Find some other way to kill him. All of us together must assail him before he destroys everyone."

Hearing the suggestion, Karna said to Drona, "O preceptor, tell us how to kill Abhimanyu."

Drona looked at Abhimanyu with respect and admiration. "Have any of you seen any weakness in that prince? Although you have all attacked him with care, you have not seen the slightest gap in his defenses. Indeed, all you could see was his whirling bow, constantly drawn to a circle, firing flaming shafts. That slayer of hostile heroes is affording me great delight, even as he afflicts my limbs with his burning arrows. I see no difference between him and his illustrious father."

Karna grew impatient upon hearing Abhimanyu praised. His voice rang out again. "O brahmin, I too have been wounded by this boy. Only my adherence to kshatriya duty keeps me on the field. He has almost slain the king himself, and he is annihilating our troops. Please tell us how we can check him."

"Abhimanyu is virtuous and faithful," replied Drona. "He is powerful and has been taught by both Arjuna and Krishna. Arjuna has shown him how to encase himself in impenetrable armor. None of us will be able to strike him down."

Drona lowered his head as he went on, "There is, however, a way by which we may be able to overcome him. O Karna, listen carefully. If you can cut his bow, the reins of his horses and his chariot wheels, then at the same time Kritavarma can kill his horses and Ashvatthama can kill his charioteer, while Kripa, the king and I will attack him directly. Perhaps if six of us attack him simultaneously, we will be able to overpower him."

Drona knew his advice was not in keeping with the codes of combat, but there seemed no alternative. Ultimately, as the Kaurava commander it was his duty to protect the army by whatever means possible. Heavy-hearted, Drona prepared to attack Abhimanyu along with the other five Kaurava chiefs. They surrounded the prince and Karna cut apart his bow. Kritavarma then killed his steeds and Ashvatthama his driver. As Drona and Kripa assailed him from the front, Duryodhana attacked him from behind. With his horses killed and his chariot immobilized, the prince leapt down clutching his sword and buckler. Swiftly whirling his sword he cut down the arrows that sped toward him.

The six Kauravas closed on Abhimanyu as he fended off their attack

with his sword and shield. Realizing he was hemmed in, Abhimanyu suddenly leapt high into the air. By his mystic power he remained in the sky. With his golden armor gleaming in the afternoon sun, he appeared like a great eagle as he roved about in the air. He displayed various motions known as the Koriska and others, wheeled about, and brandished his brilliant blue sword. Beneath him, the Kaurava soldiers were filled with fear, expecting him to fall upon them at any moment.

Drona gazed up and fixed his aim on Abhimanyu's sword. With a razor-headed shaft he cut that weapon off at the hilt. At the same time, Karna broke apart his shield with four swift shafts. Abhimanyu descended weaponless from the sky and picked up a chariot wheel. Remembering how Krishna had run at Bhishma holding a chariot wheel, he rushed at Drona. Covered in blood, his long hair flying in the wind, and his handsome face covered with dust from the field, the prince was beautiful as he ran with the wheel raised above his head. Even though overpowered and outnumbered, the son of Krishna's sister showed no fear.

As the boy came rapidly toward them with the steel-rimmed wheel, Drona and Kripa broke it into many pieces with their arrows. Abhimanyu snatched up a heavy mace that lay near him and bounded toward Ashvatthama, whirling the mace over his head. Seeing him charging at him like the three-eyed Shiva at the end of the yuga, Ashvatthama jumped off his chariot. As he landed on the ground, Abhimanyu's mace descended like a blazing bolt and smashed the chariot to pieces, killing the horses and charioteer.

With arrows protruding from every part of his body, Abhimanyu whirled about, wielding his mace. In a matter of minutes he slew Shakuni's brother Kalikeya, along with eighty of his followers. He then slew ten chariot fighters, followed by a dozen elephants and fifty Kekaya warriors. Dushashana's son, Durjaya, charged on his chariot toward the prince. Abhimanyu quickly brought down his mace from above his head and killed Durjaya's four horses, pressing them into the earth. Durjaya leapt clear, taking his own mace with him. Landing on the earth near Abhimanyu, he bellowed out a challenge.

Abhimanyu ran straight at Durjaya. The two combatants fought angrily, striking each other with their maces and producing sounds like thunderclaps. Finally, in one wheeling maneuver, they struck each other on

the head and fell senseless to the ground.

After a few moments, Durjaya rose and lifted his mace again. Abhimanyu, fatigued from his long fight against so many opponents, slowly rose to his haunches. As he tried to get to his feet, Durjaya struck him on the crown of his head with his full force. Crushed by the blow, Abhimanyu dropped lifeless to the ground. As the Kauravas looked on, he fell backwards to the earth with his limbs thrown out.

Drona and the other Kuru chiefs surrounded the fallen prince. He appeared like a wild elephant slain by a hunter. Thousands of troops came around him. They looked on him as if he were a forest fire extinguished after consuming a forest during the summer season, or a tempest that had died down after crushing countless trees. He lay with a peaceful expression on his handsome face, his red eyes gazing up at the sky. Even in death he was as lustrous and splendid as the full moon in autumn.

The Kauravas roared with delight. Their indefatigable opponent was finally brought down. They danced about on the field waving their weapons. Overwhelmed with relief at being delivered from danger, they embraced one another and laughed loudly.

In the sky many rishis and Siddhas looked down on the prince, who seemed to them like the moon dropped from the heavens. They let out cries of woe and exclaimed, "Alas, assailed at once by six Kaurava maharathas, this hero now lies slain. This was highly unfair."

All around Abhimanyu was a scene of utter destruction. Innumerable men and animals lay slaughtered amid shattered chariots, weapons, armor and ornaments. The field was all but impassable, choked with the dead and the dying. Arms, legs and heads lay all around in a bloody mass. The battlefield assumed an awful appearance, which struck terror into the hearts of cowards.

The sun had reached the western horizon just as the prince was slain. With joy, the Kaurava troops withdrew from the field, leaving Abhimanyu lying amid the carnage he had created.

Hearing the Kauravas' cheers, Yudhisthira could guess what had happened. As soon as he saw Jayadratha holding him and his brothers back, he had feared the worst. His fears were confirmed as news of Abhimanyu's death reached him. Yudhisthira was distraught. He thought of Arjuna, still

contending with the Samshaptakas. Soon he would return. What would he say when he heard that his young son had been sent alone into the chakravyuha? Yudhisthira trembled. Why had he allowed the boy to go? Only because he feared his own capture, he had caused Abhimanyu's death. Turning to his other brothers, Yudhisthira said, "Subhadra's heroic son, having never shown his back in battle, has been slain. The child has now ascended to heaven. After slaying numerous warriors, he has followed in their wake. Doubtlessly the boy, who was equal in power to Krishna and Arjuna, has reached Indra's opulent mansion."

Although himself afflicted by grief, Yudhisthira tried to console his brothers and followers. "We should not grieve for this boy, who performed pious deeds. He has surely attained the regions of righteousness that are ever sought by the virtuous."

In silent grief the Pandavas withdrew. As they made their way to their tent, they moved like wooden dolls. They slumped into their seats and sat gazing at the ground. Yudhisthira wept. "Desiring to please me, the prince penetrated Drona's formation like a lion entering a herd of cattle. He forced the best of the Kurus, all accomplished in weapons and fighting, to turn back. After crossing the Kauravas' ocean-like array, killing many of their heroes, Krishna's nephew has gone to the next world. How can I even look at Arjuna or the auspicious Subhadra bereft now of their beloved son? What meaningless, disjointed, and incoherent words will we speak to Krishna and Arjuna when they return?"

Yudhisthira held his head in his hands. "Desiring only my own safety, I sent this child into battle. I have thereby injured Subhadra, Arjuna and Keshava. A foolish man seeks his own gain without seeing the painful consequences that will result. Thus did I act covetously, oblivious to what was sure to happen. How could I have placed that child, who deserved every luxury and indulgence, in the thick of battle? Now he lies slain on the cold earth. We too will soon have to join him, consumed by the grief-laden glances of Arjuna."

Yudhisthira's cries filled the tent. All the warriors and kings present also wept. Abhimanyu had been a great favorite among them. Even though he was only sixteen, he had not hesitated to join his father in the war. His guileless and cheerful attitude had endeared him to everyone.

"Although he was the son of one who could afford protection from the entire celestial host, still he has been killed. Surely now the Kauravas have become afraid. Filled with rage at the unfair killing of his son, Arjuna will annihilate them all. Soon the mean-minded Duryodhana, seeing his forces massacred, will give up his own life in grief. Alas, beholding the incomparable Abhimanyu fallen to earth, I can derive no pleasure either from victory, the kingdom, or even immortality itself."

As Yudhishthira lamented, Vyasadeva suddenly entered the tent. Yudhishthira composed himself and stood to receive the sage. Along with his brothers, he worshipped him and offered him a fine seat in their midst.

When Vyasadeva was seated at his ease, Yudhishthira said, "O great rishi, Subhadra's son has been slain in battle by a number of vicious bowmen who surrounded him on all sides. A mere child, he has been killed while contending with overwhelming numbers. Wishing to do us good, he penetrated the hostile array, but was trapped and slaughtered without mercy while the Sindhu king held us back. Alas, my heart has been seized by an unbearable sorrow."

Vyasadeva's reply was gentle. "O king, O son, you possess superior wisdom and should not lament like this. Men of your caliber are never confused by calamity. The heroic Abhimanyu has reached paradise after slaying numerous enemies. His deeds far exceeded his years and he has attained everlasting fame. Why do you grieve? O Yudhishthira, no creature can violate the law of death. Death takes gods, Gandharvas, Danavas, and all others away without fail."

Comforted by Vyasadeva's presence, the Pandavas listened to his soothing words. When he stopped speaking Yudhishthira said, "So many of the earth's rulers now lie shorn of pride and power. Striving in battle, filled with hopes of victory, they have fallen into the fire of their enemy's anger. Now they are motionless on the earth. Seeing such slaughter we have come to understand the meaning of death. O learned sage, why does death take men away? Wherefrom did death arise? O grandsire, please explain this to us."

Vyasadeva closed his eyes. Although he was emaciated and covered with dirt from his continuous austerities, he shone with a mystical effulgence that spread around him like the glow of the moon. Sitting cross-legged on the costly seat, he seemed like a dark gem set in gold. After a few moments, he

began to narrate the ancient history of the origin of death in the world—how Brahma first brought it into being. The sage then told the Pandavas about the many kings who had succumbed to death in the history of the world, even though they were rich in asceticism and pious merits.

After mentioning each of the departed kings and describing their sacrifices and pious acts, Vyasadeva concluded, "When such personalities had to die, each of them far superior to the prince in point of piety, you should not lament for the boy. By laying down his life in battle he has gone to regions only attained by those who perform the foremost of sacrifices. There he will reside in unending bliss. No enjoyment in this world would be able to entice him away from where he has now gone, O king. He shines like a god in a splendid new body. We should grieve for those still living rather than those who have attained such an end."

Vyasadeva exhorted Yudhisthira to remain firm and to finish the fight. Grief achieved nothing other than to reduce the energy of those who indulged in it. The sage concluded, "Know this as truth, dear child. Rise up and gird your loins. Having heard about death and about Abhimanyu's glorious end, give up your lamentation and remain firm in your duty."

Yudhisthira asked the sage how Jayadratha had been able to hold him and his brothers in check, and Vyasadeva told him about Shiva's boon. "Thus was that weak king able to achieve this astonishing feat. Had it not been for him, you would have followed the boy and saved his life. Destiny is supreme, O king. No man can change fate's course. Knowing this, take heart and perform your God-given duty. Surely the Lord's inscrutable will is meant for the world's welfare. If you simply follow his will, then you will understand everything in time."

Vyasadeva stood up and bade the Pandavas farewell, then disappeared. Yudhisthira was consoled, but he was still worried how to broach the news to Arjuna. He would be back at any moment. No one would have dared inform him of his son's death on his way back to the tent. They would leave it to Yudhisthira. The king looked at Abhimanyu's empty seat, now draped with his banner. Breathing heavily, Yudhisthira watched the tent entrance as it flapped in the evening breeze.

Chapter Sixteen. Arjuna's Great Vow

As the sun set Arjuna asked Krishna to drive him back to camp. After slaying thousands of Samshaptakas, he got down from his chariot and, along with Krishna, offered prayers to Sandhya, the goddess of twilight. The two friends then mounted the chariot and made their way through the deepening darkness toward Yudhisthira's tent. As they traveled Arjuna suddenly felt an inexplicable anxiety. He said, "O Govinda, why am I suddenly feeling misgivings? Why is my speech faltering? I see evil portents all around me and my limbs are becoming weak. I fear a great calamity has occurred. May all be well with the king, my venerable superior, and his followers."

Driving the chariot expertly through the day's carnage, Krishna replied, "Seeing all these slaughtered Kauravas I think everything fares well with your brothers and ministers. Do not give way to evil thoughts. Probably a trivial calamity has taken place."

Arjuna, still anxious, tried to accept Krishna's words. He said nothing as the chariot moved across the field. He thought of Drona. The preceptor had been intent on capturing Yudhisthira. Had he succeeded? Arjuna trembled at the thought. If anything had happened to Yudhisthira, or any of his brothers, he would be unable to live. Even if it were the dead of night he would challenge the entire Kaurava army to come out and fight, and he would exterminate every last one of them.

Within an hour they reached the camp. As they entered its perimeters, Arjuna looked around and said, "O Janardana, I do not hear the auspicious sounds of drums and other instruments signifying our success. The bards and minstrels are not singing songs describing our victories. Everyone is turning their faces away when they see me. No one has come forward to salute me in the usual way. O Madhava, is everything well with my brothers? Seeing these men so obviously distressed, my mind is disturbed. Is Drupada well? Has the Virata ruler encountered a calamity? O you of undeteriorating glory, what has happened to our warriors?"

Then Arjuna began to suspect the truth. Abhimanyu had always greeted him when he returned to camp, but today there was no sign of the boy. On his way back he had heard from some of his soldiers that Drona had formed the chakravyuha. He knew there were only two warriors on the field who could break into the array: Abhimanyu and himself.

Arriving at the royal tent, Arjuna dismounted and went in with Krishna by his side. As he entered, he saw his brothers sitting with downcast faces. No one said anything as Arjuna walked in. They could not hold his gaze and shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

Then Arjuna saw his son's empty seat. His heart stopped. He approached Yudhisthira and bowed at his feet. Standing, he looked into his brother's downcast face. "O king, you are pale. I also see that Abhimanyu is not here, nor does anyone welcome me. I heard that today the Kauravas formed the chakravyuha. Save and except Abhimanyu, no one could have penetrated that formation in my absence, but he did not know how to get out of it. Did you ask my son to enter that terrible arrangement? Has that fierce Bowman, that slayer of hostile heroes, after breaking into the enemy ranks and killing thousands, gone himself to Death's mansion?"

Arjuna began to cry. Falling to his knees, he cried out to Yudhisthira in a piteous voice. "Tell me how he fell, he who possessed mighty arms and red eyes, who was born into our race like a lion born on a mountainside and who resembled Indra himself. How was he slain in battle?"

Arjuna saw tears in Yudhisthira's eyes. His own eyes flooded as he realized what he had feared most was true. Yudhisthira's silence confirmed it. Taking a deep breath, Arjuna fought to control his mind. His head fell to his knees and he sobbed. After a few minutes, he looked up and continued in a broken voice. "What foolish warriors, urged on by their evil destiny, ventured to slay my son? How has that youth, who resembled the high-souled Krishna himself in prowess, generosity and Vedic knowledge, been killed? If I do not see that hero, who is my second self, Keshava's favorite, and so dearly loved by Krishna's sister, then I too will become a guest in Yamaraja's abode. If I cannot behold him, that modest boy of gentle speech and kind deeds, with curling dark locks, eyes like a young gazelle, the tread of a furious elephant, and shoulders like a mighty lion, then I will leave at once for Death's limitless domain."

Krishna stood by Arjuna's side and placed an arm around his shoulders. The Pandava grieved loudly for some time, describing his son's many qualities. His brothers and allies sat in silence, their hearts riven by grief as he continued.

"Although younger, that boy was my superior. He was virtuous,

grateful, obedient to his elders, and always desirous of doing us good. Self-controlled and sinless, he pursued only the path of piety and truth. He was faithful and devoted to serving God in all his acts. In battle he would never strike first, nor would he attack a helpless foe. He was the terror of his enemies and the shelter of his friends. How has such a boy been slain?"

Arjuna fell to the ground, repeatedly crying out his son's name. Composing himself with difficulty, he said, "Today my son lies on the bare earth like one forlorn, although he was always attended by the most beautiful women. He who was formerly attended by servants and bards chanting his glories is now attended by jackals and vultures. His face, which was worthy of being shaded by royal umbrellas, is now shaded by dust and dirt. Alas! How unfortunate I am to lose you, and how fortunate are the gods to gain you. Surely Yamaraja, Indra, Kuvera and Varuna, after receiving you as a welcome guest, are now making preparations for your worship."

Arjuna looked up at Yudhisthira, who looked back at his brother with compassion. His eyes bloodshot and his face streaked with tears, Arjuna asked, "Please tell me, O best of men, has my son gone to heaven? Did he have to contend single-handedly with numerous heroes and give up his life after killing them by the thousands? Surely he would have thought of me. Afflicted by the mean-minded Duryodhana, and by Drona, Karna, Kripa and others, he must have thought, 'My father will rescue me.' I think all those ruthless warriors felled him while he was calling out to me. Or it may be, as he was conceived in the womb of a Vrishni princess, that he did not make such exclamations."

Arjuna censured himself. How had he allowed himself to be taken away from the main fight? Obviously Duryodhana had concocted a plan that required his absence. Why had he not seen it? If he had, Abhimanyu would still be alive. Without thinking about his kinsmen's welfare, he had rushed off desiring glory in battle. Now his son was dead.

Arjuna cried out, "Without doubt, my heart is made of stone that it does not shatter into fragments. It will surely break apart when I hear the lamentations of Subhadra and Draupadi. What will I say to those gentle ladies? How can I tell them that Abhimanyu now embraces the cold ground, weltering in his own blood? What indeed will I say to Uttara, his chaste and beautiful wife? The Kauravas may rejoice only for as long as I do not return to the field. For slaying my son they will have to grieve as I do now."

Arjuna turned to Krishna. "Why did you not tell me what was happening today, O Madhava? Surely then I would have burnt the cruel Kauravas immediately. How could they aim their deadly shafts at such a tender boy, attacking him when I was absent? I do not think he found any protector while among those vicious men. How could you allow this, O Krishna?"

Krishna comforted his friend with sober words. "Do not give way to grief. This is the inevitable end of heroes who never think of retreating. Those who know the Vedas have said that this is the highest and most desirable goal for a kshatriya who knows his duty. Heroes always covet such an end. There is no better death for a warrior than to fall in battle while facing the enemy. Undoubtedly Abhimanyu has gone to regions only reached by the most pious men. Do not lament, for you are plunging your brothers and followers in sorrow. You know everything and it behooves you to console your kinsmen at this time. Take hold of yourself and throw off this grief."

Arjuna turned slowly to Yudhisthira. "O lord of the earth, tell me exactly how my lotus-eyed son was slain." His voice had become cold. His grief was giving way to an intense fury. "How did he fight our wicked foes? I will consume all of them with their elephants, chariots and horses. Why, O brother, did you not do so yourself? How was my son slain when you, Bhima, the twins, and so many other heroes were present? Surely you all possess no prowess. Before your eyes my son was killed."

Arjuna gazed at his son's empty seat. What was the use in blaming anyone for Abhimanyu's death? Destiny had willed it, as it willed the death of every living creature. Yet still it was hard not to see how things might have been different. Why had he not been by Abhimanyu's side when he needed him most? Arjuna shook his head as he continued. "I should rather blame myself. Knowing you all to be cowards, I went away. Alas, are your weapons and armor mere decorations? Are your bold words meant only to impress an assembly? All of you together could not protect my son."

No one spoke as Arjuna strode over to his seat, his long sword swinging by his side, the Gandiva in his hand. His eyes blazed and hot tears ran down his cheeks. He sighed repeatedly. No one dared to look at him. Only Yudhisthira and Krishna, who were always agreeable to Arjuna, were able to say anything. After a few moments Yudhisthira said, "O mighty-armed one, when you had gone to fight the Samshaptakas, Drona exerted

himself to capture me. He formed the unbreakable chakravyuha and advanced toward us, showering his fire-like shafts in all directions. At that time, I asked your son to penetrate the formation and allow us all to enter. Without delay the boy rushed forward and entered the array like Garuda entering the ocean. We followed him with upraised weapons, but somehow the puny Sindhu ruler held us in check. We have since heard from Vyasadeva that Jayadratha received a boon from Mahadeva that he would be able to stop us in battle. Your son was alone in the formation. Six Kaurava maharathas surrounded him. They destroyed his chariot, armor and weapons. Worn with fatigue, he was finally slain by a seventh, Dushashana's son."

Arjuna wailed. Yudhisthira paused, then went on. "Before dying, he slew countless heroes, many of them kings and maharathas. Now he has ascended to heaven. Through the inscrutable workings of fate, he has attained his destined end. Thus we have all been plunged into a burning grief."

Crying out, "O my son!" Arjuna rolled on the ground. Everyone gazed at each other with vacant eyes. They said nothing as Arjuna expressed his grief. Gradually, he composed himself and got to his feet. Shivering as if with fever and wringing his hands, he spoke in a low, controlled voice that seethed with rage. "I say this truly: tomorrow I will slay Jayadratha, if indeed he does not forsake Duryodhana in fear of his life. If he stays in the battle and does not seek shelter of either Krishna or yourself, O king, he will die tomorrow. Whoever tries to protect him—be it Drona, Kripa or anyone else—will find himself struck down by my arrows. That Sindhu ruler caused my son's death. For this act of violence toward Abhimanyu and I, he will die."

Arjuna felt all his anger directed toward Jayadratha, who had already shown himself to be a despicable wretch when he had assaulted Draupadi. This time he would not escape. Although Abhimanyu was assailed by six Kaurava warriors at once and finally slain by Durjaya, it was Jayadratha who was to blame. Many times warriors found themselves overwhelmed by superior odds, but their allies and supporters could always come to their rescue. Abhimanyu would surely have been saved if the Pandavas had been able to reach him. Jayadratha's act was mean and unforgivable. Arjuna clasped his Gandiva tightly. Soon that low-minded Sindhu ruler would reap the result of his hatred for the Pandavas.

Looking around at his brothers and allies, Arjuna went on. "If I do

not kill that wretch tomorrow, then may I never attain the regions meant for the righteous. Let me instead go to the hell reached by those who ravish their own mothers, or those who are malicious, ungrateful or miserly. Let me reach the dark worlds inhabited by rapists, slayers of brahmins, betrayers of trust, men who seduce other's wives, who are unkind to guests, and who deceive and cheat others. If I do not kill Jayadratha tomorrow, then such will be my end."

Arjuna's voice seemed to shake the earth. "Now listen to one more vow I will make. If I do not slay Jayadratha by sunset tomorrow, I will enter blazing fire. Neither the celestials, Asuras, mortals, winged creatures, Rakshasas, rishis, nor any other moving or unmoving creature will prevent me from achieving my aim. If Jayadratha enters the nether regions or somehow ascends to heaven, I will still find him and sever his head from his body. When this night passes away, Abhimanyu's enemy will see me as his death personified wherever he goes."

After solemnly speaking these words, Arjuna violently twanged his bowstring, producing sounds that reached the heavens. At the same time, Krishna, also excited with rage, blew his conch shell, creating a sound that seemed to make the universe vibrate.

As word of Arjuna's vow went round the camp, the sounds of numerous drums and other instruments could be heard, along with the fierce cries of many warriors. The whole camp was filled with a joyous uproar. Surely the next day the Kauravas would face their worst calamity so far. The enraged Arjuna was a foe to be feared indeed.

* * *

In the Kauravas' camp there was much rejoicing. Abhimanyu was one of the greatest warriors among the Pandava army. It was almost as if Arjuna himself had been slain. Surely Arjuna would now be discouraged and lose his taste for battle. Now that yet another of his sons was slain—this time the beloved Abhimanyu—Arjuna's energy would be sapped by grief. Duryodhana praised Drona and sat in his assembly to discuss the next day's strategy. It should prove easier to encounter their dispirited enemies. Perhaps the same formation could be employed again. Maybe another powerful fighter could be trapped and slain.

As the Kauravas were speaking, they heard the din from the Pandavas' camp, reverberating like the roar of the ocean. The Kauravas looked at each other in surprise. Why would the Pandavas be rejoicing? Should they not be feeling despair?

Suddenly Jayadratha burst into the tent. His face was a mask of terror. He stood panting before Duryodhana, sweat running down his face. The Kaurava chief saw him trembling like a sapling in a storm. He asked him the cause of his fear and Jayadratha replied, "He who was begotten on Pandu's wife by the lustful Indra, that one of perverse intellect, has vowed to kill me tomorrow. May good betide you all; I will now return to my home to save my life. Or, if you wish me to remain, you had better assure my safety. In my view, O king, you, Drona, Kripa, Karna, and all the other rulers here are capable of saving a man who is seized by Death himself."

Jayadratha looked around the assembly with wild eyes. His boon from Shiva could well prove to be his destruction. He had enjoyed his moment of glory, but now as a result he faced the most deadly danger. Arjuna was famous for keeping his vows, and he would now be furious. The Sindhu king continued. "Having heard the Pandavas' rejoicings, I am struck with anxiety. Our spies have told me that Arjuna has vowed either to kill me tomorrow or to enter fire. Thus the Pandavas are filled with joy rather than grief. I think it will be wisest for me to return to my own country. No one can prevent Arjuna from fulfilling his vow, not even the gods. We are about to suffer the greatest destruction of our forces yet. Let me now go, my identity concealed."

Duryodhana laughed. "O foremost of men, do not be afraid. What person can seek to slay you when you stand amid the kshatriyas assembled here? I will protect you, along with Drona, Kripa, Karna, Ashvatthama, Salya, Bahlika, and the other invincible heroes. Together with our troops we will stand between you and Arjuna. He will not even be able to get near you tomorrow. Drive the fear from your heart."

Duryodhana realized that it would be a formidable task to check Arjuna from fulfilling his vow. At the same time, this was a real opportunity to attain victory. If Arjuna failed, he would certainly remember his promise to take his own life. With both Abhimanyu and Arjuna dead, the Pandavas would then be finished. Duryodhana looked down at the quaking Jayadratha. It would be worth deploying the whole army to protect him.

Jayadratha went over to Drona. "What is the difference between me and Arjuna in the proficiency of arms? You have taught us both. How is Arjuna superior to me? Of what should I be wary when the battle comes tomorrow?"

Drona replied, "I have taught both you and Arjuna equally, but by his practice of yoga and asceticism, he has become superior to you. Still, I will do everything in my power to protect you from him. Tomorrow I will form such an array with all our troops that Arjuna will never reach its end. Even the gods will not be able to pass the arrangement I will create to protect you."

Drona smiled. Jayadratha had only himself to blame for his present predicament. Like Duryodhana, his hatred for the virtuous Pandavas would lead to his destruction before long. He placed a hand on Jayadratha's shoulder. "If somehow you should be slain, then you will attain heaven. Do not be afraid of death. You have performed sacrifices and carried out your sacred duty as a kshatriya. Therefore, fight without fear, your mind fixed on victory or paradise."

Although he assured Jayadratha and understood Duryodhana's mind, Drona knew that Jayadratha was as good as dead. Certainly Arjuna alone would not be able to cross the entire Kaurava army, but Arjuna was not alone. With Krishna driving his chariot, he could cross the universe, passing the four Lokapalas in order to steal the gods' divine nectar. Even without fighting, Krishna would no doubt find some way to protect his friend. And he would need to, for the Pandava hero would face an almost impossible task the next day.

Cheered on by Drona, the warriors shouted and blew their conches. The Kaurava leaders began to plan their strategy for the following day. Jayadratha felt his fear vanish and he set his heart on battle. Perhaps Arjuna's vow would be a blessing in disguise. Shiva's boon may yet prove to be a boon indeed if it ended up causing the Pandavas' destruction.

* * *

After hearing Arjuna make his vow, the Pandavas and their followers spent a little while discussing their strategy and then retired for the night. They would decide the next day's battle plans in the morning, after they received information from their spies as to how the Kauravas were reacting to

the news of Arjuna's promise.

Arjuna sat alone in his tent, burning with grief and anger. He could hardly wait for the battle to begin. For over an hour he sat on his bed without moving, his face covered by his two hands. As he sat shedding tears, Krishna came in and sat down by his side. He spoke softly, but reproachfully. "O Partha, without first seeking my advice you have made a difficult vow. That was rash. You have placed a heavy burden on your shoulders. Alas, how will we avoid becoming the butt of ridicule? I have heard from spies that Drona vows to protect Jayadratha. He will form a tremendous array guarded on all sides by the best of the Kauravas. Six mighty maharathas, namely, Karna, Ashvatthama, Bhurishrava, Kripa, Vrishasena and Salya, will stand in the van of that formation. Drona himself will stay within a secondary formation, Jayadratha by his side. You will first need to vanquish those six heroes and pass through a vast number of fighters before you can come anywhere near the Sindhu king. Then you will have to fight with the preceptor."

Arjuna did not reply. Krishna placed an arm around his shoulder. "In the morning we will consult with your brothers and allies. We need to come up with a strategy to ensure that your vow can be kept. However, O son of Pandu, it will not be easy to accomplish."

Arjuna lifted his head. His voice was almost a growl. "The six chariot fighters you have named are not equal to even half of my power. You will see me cut apart all their weapons. The Sindhu ruler is a dead man. Before the eyes of his wailing followers and of Drona I will sever his head from his body. Even if a celestial army headed by all the principal gods protects him, even if I must fight against the personified oceans, mountains, heaven, earth, quarters, their regents, and all mobile and immobile beings, still you will see him slain by my arrows. I swear by truth itself that nothing will stop me. Especially with you at my side, O Janardana, my success is certain."

Arjuna continued expressing his determination and confidence for several minutes. He was prepared to face even Death personified armed with his irresistible staff. "Tomorrow You will see me rip open the enemy ranks with blazing shafts, like thunderbolts rending a mountain. Arrows shot with the speed of the mind will fall by the tens of thousands from my Gandiva. I will not restrain myself at all. All men will witness the power of the weapons I have obtained from Yamaraja, Kuvera, Varuna, Indra and Maheshvara. I will throw the Brahma missile and annihilate anyone who tries to stand in my

way. The earth will be filled with the bodies of men, horses and elephants, all bleeding copiously and deprived of life."

Arjuna got to his feet and stood before Krishna with the Gandiva clasped in his hand. His face was flushed and his lips trembled. "The sinful Jayadratha has forgotten his kinship with us and bears us only hatred. I will strike him down tomorrow, making his friends and followers grieve."

Arjuna ached for the battle to begin. His arrows seemed ready to leap from his quivers and the Gandiva vibrated in his hand. He could not understand Krishna's apprehension. What possibility was there of the Kauravas standing against him in his present mood? He placed his bow in its golden case. Unfastening his gleaming armor, he asked, "O lord, master of the senses, why do you admonish me? You know my prowess and you know your own power. When we are together, what are we not able to achieve? Jayadratha may be counted among those already slain in battle. I am Arjuna, of unwavering vows, and you are Narayana. Truth resides in the brahmins, humility is seen in the pious, prosperity attends sacrifice, and victory, O Keshava, is always with you. When this night has passed, you should ready my chariot, filling it with every weapon. A great task is at hand."

Arjuna and Krishna sat together breathing like a pair of infuriated serpents. Afflicted by grief, Arjuna felt unable to rest. Krishna also displayed great sorrow. While the Pandavas had been in the forest he had helped raise Abhimanyu, acting as a loving father toward his nephew. The boy had always been with him. Krishna had personally taught him many of his martial skills, and they had often hunted and sported together in the forests around Dwaraka.

Seeing both Arjuna and Krishna excited with rage, the gods headed by Indra became anxious. Surely the universe might be destroyed if they both gave vent to their anger. Many ill omens were seen. Dry winds blew, thunder rumbled in the clear sky, and thunderbolts fell to earth. The earth trembled and rivers flowed backwards, while the cries of jackals and crows echoed everywhere.

Arjuna asked Krishna to go to the women's quarters and console Subhadra. The Vrishni princess, along with Draupadi and other royal ladies, had come to the battlefield to be with their husbands. Krishna went to her tent and found her lying on the ground, weeping like a female osprey. Taking a

seat near her, he spoke consolingly. "O daughter of the Vrishni race, do not give way to this grief. Abhimanyu has met the end always sought by heroes. After slaying the enemy by the thousands, he has ascended to the highest regions of heaven. Although a mere youth, he has attained a destination difficult to reach even for accomplished yogis. Surely this is his good fortune. O amiable one, you are the wife of a hero, the daughter of a hero, and the mother of a hero. Born also into a race of heroes, you should not lament one who has met a hero's death. Nor will his death go unavenged. Tomorrow you will hear that Arjuna has severed Jayadratha's head from his trunk. Rise up and renounce your fever of grief. You must now console your daughter-in-law, beloved sister."

Subhadra looked at Krishna from where she lay. Her eyes were red and her face streaked with mascara. Her ornaments were strewn around her on the floor. Nearby her garland lay crushed. Her words were frequently interrupted by sobs.

"Alas, son of my unfortunate self, why did you go to war? O son, equal to Arjuna in battle, how could you perish? How can I see your dark and handsome face now soiled with dust and smeared with blood as you lay on the cold ground? Having the Pandavas, Vrishnis and Panchalas as your protectors, by whom have you been slain like one helpless? Fie on Bhima's strength, Arjuna's prowess, and the Panchalas' might! What use is their power when they could not save a child from dying before their eyes? Today I see the earth vacant and destitute of all beauty for I cannot see my son. My eyes are blinded by grief and my mind is utterly confounded. O my child! You were like a hoard of treasure seen and lost in a dream. Alas, everything in this world is fleeting and unreal, like foam on an ocean."

Krishna remained silent as his sister poured out her sorrow. She tossed about on the costly carpet covering the floor of her tent. Her silk garments were in disarray and her raven-black hair hung loose and disheveled. Beating her breast, Subhadra cried out to her slain son. "O my child, how shall I comfort Uttara? Overwhelmed by sorrow she resembles a cow bereft of its calf. Surely the ways of destiny are mysterious, for even though you had Keshava as your protector, you have been slain by evil men. O beloved son, may you attain that end reached only by the most pious men, that end which is reached by those of the strictest vows, who are self-controlled, modest, truthful, charitable, and devoted to duty. May you ascend

to the eternal regions that belong to men who are faithful and always devoted to the Lord's service, who have given up all selfish thoughts and live only for the welfare of others."

As Subhadra rolled about in grief, Draupadi came into her tent, accompanied by Uttara. Also lamenting, they dropped to the ground next to Subhadra. The three ladies appeared like three mad creatures as they fell about uttering pitiful cries.

With tears in his eyes Krishna sprinkled cool water on their faces, his voice shaking as he addressed them. "O Subhadra, throw off this grief. O Panchali, O Uttara, take heart. O most beautiful ladies, rather than lament we should pray that all the members of our race attain the same state that Abhimanyu has attained. All other warriors united can only dream of achieving the feats he has single-handedly accomplished in battle."

Krishna took His leave from the ladies and went back to Arjuna's tent. It was past midnight and the servants had spread out an auspicious bed of kusha grass decorated with flower garlands and sprinkled with perfume on a thick rug. With His weapons by His side, Krishna reclined peacefully, placing His head on His arm. Within the tent brahmins performed the usual nightly ceremony of offering the victims of battle to Shiva, so that he might guide them safely to their next destination.

Arjuna worshiped Krishna with various offerings, then lay next to Him on his own bed. Krishna said, "O son of Prtha, rest now. You will have to achieve tremendous feats tomorrow."

Arjuna was assuaged by Krishna's care. He lay gazing up at the high roof of the tent. His mind flickered between thinking of Abhimanyu and thinking of Jayadratha. That sinful wretch should have been slain long ago when he first insulted Draupadi. This time Yudhisthira would not protect him. He would soon taste the fruits of his wicked inclinations. As Arjuna lay thinking in this way, he fell into a fitful sleep.

Chapter Seventeen. Arjuna Slaughters the Kauravas

Some time before sunrise on the thirteenth day of battle, Yudhisthira rose from his bed, awoken by bards and minstrels singing his praises. Melodious songs were played as the Pandava king performed his ablutions, assisted by a hundred servants who fetched water in golden jars as well as soaps, unguents, perfumes and other items. His limbs were daubed with pure sandalwood paste as brahmins chanted holy Vedic mantras. Servants then brought Yudhisthira his fine white garments and adorned him with fragrant lotus and champaka flower garlands.

Having bathed and dressed, the king faced east and worshipped Krishna with Vedic prayers, his heart absorbed in love. After this he went before the sacred fire and made offerings to Vishnu and the gods, invoking auspiciousness and praying for victory in battle.

Emerging from his tent, Yudhisthira saw a number of aged and venerable brahmins. The old sages, a thousand in number, were accompanied by a further eight thousand disciples. They uttered benedictions and blessed Yudhisthira, who distributed charity to them. The king gave away jars of gold to each of the brahmins, as well as cows, horses, cloth, honey, ghee, fruits, and other valuable items.

Then he entered the council chamber. He sat upon a throne made entirely of gold and covered with a precious silk carpet. When he had taken his seat, his orderlies came and decorated him with ornaments of pearl, gold, and priceless gems. The monarch shone like a mass of clouds emitting bright flashes of lightning. He was fanned by gold-handled yak-tail whisks as white as the moon. Bards again sang his praises and the music and voices of the Gandharvas could be heard in the sky. Outside the tent a tremendous clatter of chariot wheels and horses' hooves resounded as the other kings and warriors came to council. Conch-shell blasts filled the air, and the measured march of infantry seemed to shake the earth as the troops headed for the field.

As the kings took their places in Yudhisthira's council chamber after first bowing before him, a guard informed him that Krishna had arrived. Yudhisthira ordered that he be shown in immediately and offered a fine seat by his side. He personally stepped down from his throne as Krishna entered and showed him to his seat. Taking the offering of arghya held out by a brahmin, Yudhisthira performed the worship. Krishna waved to Satyaki to sit

with him, and the two Yadavas shared the same large throne next to Yudhisthira.

When he had again taken his seat, Yudhisthira began by addressing Krishna. "O Madhusudana, have you passed the night in happiness? Like celestials relying on the thousand-eyed Indra, we depend on you alone for victory and indeed for eternal happiness. Our very existence depends upon you. If it pleases you, therefore, we ask that you somehow manage things so that Arjuna's vow is fulfilled. Help us to cross this ocean of grief and wrath. O Madhava, become our raft so that we do not sink in the vast Kuru sea. All glories to you, O Krishna, O Hari, O Vishnu, O Janardana. You are the foremost of all men. Narada has pronounced you to be the best and most ancient of all beings. You always protect your surrendered servants, and we seek your protection today."

Krishna appeared pleased as Yudhisthira stopped speaking. He replied in a sonorous voice, "In all the worlds, including the heavens, there is no archer like Arjuna. That handsome hero will slay all your enemies. I will drive his chariot and will do everything in my power to assist him. Today you will see Jayadratha compelled to travel that road from which no traveler ever returns. Vultures, hawks and jackals will feast on his flesh tonight. O Yudhisthira, even if Indra and the gods come to his aid, he will still be delivered to Death's domain. Tonight, the victorious Arjuna will report to you that he has slain the Sindhu monarch. Dismiss your grief and be attended with prosperity, O king."

As Krishna spoke, Arjuna entered the assembly. He came and bowed before Yudhisthira, who immediately stood to embrace him. Still holding his brother, Yudhisthira said, "It is evident, O Dhananjaya, that you will achieve a great victory today. Your appearance at this moment portends it, as does Krishna's infallible blessing."

Arjuna touched his brother's feet and went over to Krishna, bowing low with folded palms. He then took his seat and the Pandavas discussed the day's strategy. They had heard from their spies of Drona's plans to create a formation surrounding Jayadratha, protected at every point by the foremost warriors. Deciding upon a suitable counter-array, the Pandavas got up and went out for the battle.

Krishna fetched Arjuna's chariot and equipped it with every kind of

weapon. Dressed in effulgent gold armor, He drove the chariot to the royal tent. Arjuna came out and circumambulated the chariot with his Gandiva in hand. He then mounted the chariot like the sun rising over the eastern mountains. Satyaki climbed aboard with him and the chariot moved off. Setting out to slay Jayadratha, Arjuna appeared like Indra accompanied by Varuna and Surya setting out to kill the Asuras.

Countless musical instruments rang out, while bards and brahmins sang Arjuna's glories and uttered benedictions. Hearing the chants and cheered by the other warriors as he went toward the battlefield, Arjuna felt confident and eager for the fight. From behind him a delightful breeze blew, bearing the fragrance of celestial blossoms.

Arjuna said to Satyaki, "I think my victory today is assured. These signs all around us point to it and my mind feels enthused. I will soon penetrate to the spot where Jayadratha stands, passing through all the heroes who desire to see my prowess and then go to Yamaraja's domain. O mighty-armed one, do not forget your prime duty to protect Yudhisthira. None can vanquish you in battle, and the king is as safe with you as he is with me. With you by his side, I will be able to attack Jayadratha with a peaceful mind."

Satyaki said that he would not leave Yudhisthira as far as he was able. The two heroes continued to talk as Krishna drove the chariot toward the Kurukshetra plain, where millions of men had already assembled for the battle.

* * *

As sunrise approached, Drona issued orders for his great formation. Calling for Jayadratha he said, "I will detail Karna to stand by your side. My own son, as well as Salya, Kripa and Vrishasena will support him. They will have with them a force of one hundred thousand horsemen, sixty thousand chariots, twenty thousand infantry, and fourteen thousand elephants. This detachment, with you in its midst, will form itself into an array shaped like a needle. The formation will be protected by a second, impenetrable array in the shape of a lotus. I will be at the head of that second formation. The king and his brothers, as well as numerous other powerful warriors, will stand in that array. At the front of these two formations I will create a semi-circular array filled with warriors who will not retreat. At the foremost point before

that will be an array resembling a cart, which will serve to draw in and capture any soldiers foolish enough to assail us from that direction. Indeed, I do not think that even Shakra, thunderbolt in hand, could reach you today."

Comforted, Jayadratha made his way to his position in the army. As he passed through the troops they shouted out their battle cries. "Where is Arjuna?" they cried. "Bring Bhima here, I am ready to do battle!" The warriors whirled their polished maces and brandished their swords. Maddened with pride, they roared tumultuously. They slapped their arms and blew their conches, proceeding swiftly and joyfully toward the battlefield.

Gradually, carefully following Drona's detailed directions, the Kauravas formed themselves into the strategic array he had designed. It stretched for miles and appeared like a collection of clouds covering the earth. The wonderful configuration appeared so formidable that no one could imagine penetrating it. At its rear stood Jayadratha, heavily guarded on all sides.

Drona, clad in a coat of white mail and a beautiful turban, moved about making the final arrangements. Seeing his shining chariot, with its crimson horses and its standard bearing the mark of a brahmin's waterpot and deerskin, the Kauravas were delighted.

In the sky the Siddhas and Charanas looked down with wonder at the Kauravas, spread out in their tremendous formation. "Surely they will devour the whole earth with its mountains, oceans and forests."

Duryodhana looked at his army with satisfaction. He still had many infantry, chariots, cavalry and elephants left. He gazed across at the advancing Pandava forces. How would Arjuna ever fulfill his vow? His promise had been rash. By sunset the war would be over. Taking up his ornate bow, Duryodhana ordered his charioteer to move off, eager for the battle to begin.

As the Pandavas approached their enemies they saw Drona's formation with amazement. It seemed to have no end and it appeared like the ocean rolling across the battlefield toward them. Undaunted, Arjuna said, "O Krishna, just see Drona's attempt to thwart my vow. The front lines are at least twenty miles across, and it must be twice that distance deep. But I will seek out its weak points and break it apart with fiery arrows. Before Drona's eyes I will cut down the sinful Jayadratha."

As the two armies converged, one of Duryodhana's brothers, Durmarshana, came to the front of the Kauravas. Roaring furiously he exclaimed, "Watch as I check Arjuna, like the shore resisting the ocean. Let everyone see the irate and indomitable Dhananjaya collide with me, like one mass of rocks colliding with another. O warriors, stay or turn back as you wish. I will fight with the Pandavas alone to enhance my glory and fame."

Durmarshana rushed across the field to begin the fight. He saw Arjuna's chariot at a distance, with Hanuman sitting on its towering standard. The roars of the celestial ape could be heard throughout the Kaurava forces. They mingled with the sounds of Arjuna's conch, which he blew repeatedly as he closed upon his foes. Both sounds filled the Kauravas' hearts with anxiety as they again remembered how fiercely Arjuna fought when he was angry. Drona had his musicians strike up cheering melodies, but a deafening clamor already filled the field.

Arjuna saw Durmarshana charging at him and he said, "Drive swiftly toward the Kaurava prince, O Madhava. I will meet his challenge and send him and all his followers reeling."

Krishna drove the chariot straight into the mouth of the cart formation at the Kauravas' head. As Arjuna faced Durmarshana he was immediately surrounded by thousands of chariot fighters. Thinking of his son he began to slay them mercilessly. Worked up to the highest pitch of fury, he scattered his shafts in all directions. The opposing warriors' heads fell like lotuses torn from their stems. Gold armor spattered with blood lay gleaming on the ground. Chariots were smashed, elephants slain, and horses deprived of their riders. Headless infantrymen ran about wildly, still clutching their swords, before falling lifeless to the earth.

After a brief fight, Durmarshana was routed and put to flight. Wounded all over his body, his armor shattered and standard broken, he raced away from his enemy. Arjuna spared his life only to honor Bhima's vow.

In a short time Arjuna had slain several thousand of his foes. His chariot hurtled about with such speed that the Kaurava troops felt there were hundreds of Arjunas. In their fear and confusion, they struck and killed each other. Crying in agony and steeped in blood, many heroes lay dying on the field. Whoever came toward Arjuna soon found himself pierced by a fatal

shaft. No one could detect any weakness in him as he danced on the terrace of his chariot, his bow always drawn to a circle. Krishna's driving was unrivalled and he constantly thwarted the Kauravas' attacks.

Drona and the other Kaurava chiefs were astonished to see Arjuna annihilating their troops, even as the sun destroys darkness. The killing of Abhimanyu had clearly turned him into a different person. He had been formidable before, but now he was fighting with a frenzied passion, showing no quarter. The warriors surrounding him broke and ran.

Seeing Arjuna pressing steadily through the Kaurava ranks, Dushashana came forward on his chariot and challenged him. A mighty division of elephants supported him and they quickly surrounded Arjuna. The tuskers had large bells around their necks that clanged as they raced about the field.

Arjuna sent up a fierce war cry and began to kill the elephants with winged arrows that pierced their tough hides. Like a killer whale plunging through the ocean, he penetrated the elephant division and brought them down one after another. He struck each elephant with a hundred shafts and they fell like cliffs broken by thunderbolts. Gushing streams of blood, they dropped, screaming, to the ground. The warriors fighting on their backs were swept off by Arjuna's shafts, which penetrated two or three of them at once.

Seeing the elephant force in disarray, Dushashana fled. It was impossible to face Arjuna in his present mood. The Kaurava raced up to Drona and sought his protection. Drona licked his lips and moved through his forces toward Arjuna. Seeing his preceptor advancing upon him with upraised weapons, Arjuna folded his palms and bowed his head. He called out, "O brahmin, wish me well and bless me. I desire to pass through this impenetrable array. You are the same to me as my own father, or as Yudhisthira or Krishna. Thus even as Ashvatthama deserves your protection, so do I. Let me pass. I wish to slay the Sindhu ruler. O lord, O best of men, see to it that my vow is fulfilled."

"O Bhibatsu, you will not be able to conquer Jayadratha without first defeating me."

Drona then shot a hundred arrows at Arjuna in swift succession. The Pandava skillfully countered them and replied with a hundred of his own. Drona warded off Arjuna's attack with ease and at once pierced both him and

Krishna with shafts resembling blazing tongues of fire. He cut Arjuna's bowstring and covered his chariot with arrows. Arjuna attacked him back with six hundred arrows fired with such speed that it appeared as if he had shot only one shaft. He followed that with another seven hundred, then a thousand, then ten thousand, training them on the warriors who supported Drona.

Seeing him again slaying large numbers of the Kaurava troops, Drona pierced Arjuna's chest with a powerful barbed arrow. Hit hard by that shaft, Arjuna trembled like a mountain during an earthquake. Quickly regaining his composure, he broke off the arrow which was embedded in his armor. He focused his attention on Drona and sent showers of arrows at him. Drona replied by covering Arjuna with shafts. Neither Arjuna nor Krishna nor their chariot was visible as Drona assailed them with countless arrows, which fell in unbroken lines.

Working hard, Krishna drove the chariot away from Drona's arrows. As the chariot came clear of the attack he said, "O Partha, there is no time to waste. Jayadratha still stands a great distance from here. This battle with Drona could go on all day. Leave him aside and proceed ahead with all speed."

Arjuna realized that Krishna was right. There was little chance of defeating Drona, nor did he relish fighting with him. Once again folding his palms, Arjuna called out, "O my lord, I will now take my leave. You are my preceptor and I do not wish to fight with you further. There exists no man in all the worlds who can vanquish you in battle. Please bless me. I am going on."

Krishna urged on Arjuna's horses and the chariot raced away, leaving Drona to the right. As they passed him he shouted, "Where are you going, Dhananjaya? Have you become afraid?"

Drona again released volleys of arrows at Arjuna, but Krishna drove the chariot so fast that all of his shafts fell short. With Drona still calling, Arjuna sped away, leaving him far behind. Yudhamanyu and Uttamaujas, two powerful Panchalas who had fought their way through to him joined him. They protected him on either side of his chariot as he rushed forward into the hostile array.

As Drona turned to chase Arjuna, the Pandava commander,

Dhrishtaketu, challenged him with a roar. Drona turned to face him and was immediately struck by a volley of shafts. Drona's horses, chariot, and charioteer were all covered by Dhrishtaketu's arrows. Drona blazed up like an infuriated mountain lion suddenly roused from slumber. He released a razor-faced arrow that cut apart his opponent's bow. Dhrishtaketu then took up another bow and in an instant fired a hundred more arrows. Not minding the attack, Drona shot four crescent-headed shafts that slew his enemy's horses and cut down his charioteer. Dhrishtaketu leapt from his stationary chariot, mace in hand, and charged Drona. Whirling about as he ran, he hurled the mace with all his power and it flew at Drona spitting fire. Drona at once shot dozens of hammer-headed shafts that smashed the mace to pieces. Dhrishtaketu then picked up a long lance from the earth and threw it violently, but again the Kuru preceptor cut it down in mid-flight. Drona then set a long, anjalika shaft on his bow. Empowering it with mantras, he fired it from his fully-drawn bow and it struck Dhrishtaketu on the chest. The shaft pierced right through the Chedi king and entered the earth behind him.

Seeing his foe falling to the ground, Drona looked around for Arjuna. The Pandava had disappeared into the throng. Drona decided to make his way swiftly toward Jayadratha. No doubt he would get his chance to meet Arjuna there before too long.

After leaving Drona, Arjuna plunged into the Kauravas. Like maladies afflicting the body, he afflicted his enemies with fiery shafts. Roaring and blowing his conch, he attacked the Kauravas as if demented. He launched blazing arrows from the Gandiva end to end. They fell unfailingly upon men, horses and elephants, leaving them floundering. Kritavarma challenged Arjuna, setting at nought their long-standing friendship. The Pandava and the Vrishni fought. No difference could be detected between the two as they matched weapon for weapon. It appeared as if Yamaraja were contending with Death personified. Arrows charged with mantras collided in mid-air with mighty explosions. Both men circled each other and released a continuous stream of shafts. Both were pierced in all parts of their bodies as they sought for weak spots in their foe.

Krishna again said to Arjuna. "Do not spare him. You are losing too much time. Forgetting your relationship with him, crush him at once."

Charged with Krishna's admonition, Arjuna shot a cluster of shafts at Kritavarma that broke his bow and sent him reeling. Taking his opportunity,

Arjuna rushed past him and pressed on into the Kaurava ranks. As Kritavarma came back to his senses, he was assailed by Arjuna's two protectors, who kept him at bay as Arjuna pushed forward.

Then the Kalinga king, Srutayush, charged Arjuna. Whirling a huge mace, he closed rapidly on the Pandava. Arjuna sped three dozen shafts at him and the king took up his own bow, sending fifty arrows back. After an exchange of shafts, Srutayush leapt down from his chariot and ran at Arjuna with his mace held aloft. Srutayush, the son of the River Parnasa, had received a boon from Varuna that his mace would prove irresistible to all. However, the god had warned him, "Do not attack anyone who is not fighting or this weapon will kill you."

In the heat of the battle, Srutayush's forgot Varuna's warning. As he reached Arjuna's chariot he swung his mace at Krishna and dealt him a great blow. Krishna received the blow on his broad shoulders without shaking, even as a mountain is unshaken by a tempest. In accord with Varuna's words, however, Srutayush's mace turned as he lifted it to again strike Krishna. It smashed into his own head and killed him. The Kauravas wailed on seeing the hero killed by his own weapon. His army fled, crying out in fear.

Sudakshina, a Kambhoja prince, challenged Arjuna and fired hundreds of arrows at him. Arjuna warded off the shafts and Sudakshina hurled a dreadful iron lance, furnished with bells and a long, spiked point. It blazed brilliantly and emitted sparks as it flew. Hit by the lance, Arjuna fell to his knees in a swoon. Krishna swiftly circled the chariot around as Arjuna recovered his senses.

Getting to his feet, Arjuna licked the corners of his mouth and glared at Sudakshina. He drew the Gandiva back to his ear and shot a volley of shafts that smashed the prince's chariot. Arjuna then struck him on the chest with an arrow charged with the force of a thunderbolt. With his chariot falling apart all around him, the prince dropped headlong to the earth like a tree cut at its root.

After killing the prince Arjuna encountered the armies of the Surasenas, Abhisahas, Sinis and Vasatis. Driving into their midst, he dispersed them with his weapons. Oblivious to the immense volumes of arrows that fell upon him, which were either struck down by Arjuna's own shafts or deflected from his impenetrable armor, he annihilated the warriors

as if appointed by Yamaraja to bring on the end of the yuga. Continuously pressing forward toward Jayadratha, he left a trail of devastation. Sixty thousand of his antagonists were slain in less than an hour. The survivors turned and fled, crying out to Duryodhana and Drona for protection.

Three of Srutayush's sons then attacked Arjuna, hoping to avenge their father. They were powerful fighters. For some time, Arjuna's chariot was hardly visible beneath the shower of weapons they launched at him. Arrows, darts and lances rained down on both Arjuna and Krishna. They appeared like the twin peaks of a great mountain lashed by a violent storm. Gradually, however, Arjuna checked his opponents' missiles and his chariot again appeared on the battlefield. Placing a long golden arrow onto the Gandiva, he invoked the Shakra weapon, presided over by the king of the gods. Thousands of shafts went toward the princes like streaks of lightning, cutting down all their arrows and other missiles. Those deadly shafts struck the princes with terrible force, severing their arms, legs and heads from their trunks. Many thousands of Kaurava warriors supporting the princes were also annihilated.

Having swept away the three Kalinga princes, Arjuna sent up a triumphant cry and charged into the thick array of Kauravas between himself and Jayadratha. While the other Pandavas and their forces engaged with the principal Kaurava warriors, Arjuna ploughed through their army like a raging fire. All the other Pandava fighters were left far behind as he battled his way through the enemy.

Hearing that Arjuna was steadily approaching the Sindhu ruler, Duryodhana spoke with Drona, who had resumed his position near the Kaurava prince. Drona had thought it best to stay near Jayadratha, supporting his generals. He would stand a better chance of checking Arjuna when flanked by Kripa, Karna and Ashvatthama. The Pandava would be hard-pressed to get past him again.

Duryodhana looked apprehensively at his commander, "O preceptor, Arjuna is crushing our forces. Like a fire among dry weeds, the Dhananjaya fire, strengthened by the wind of his anger, is swallowing up my forces. The warriors protecting Jayadratha are trembling with fear. You are our only shelter. Everyone came to the fight today believing that Arjuna would not escape with his life when you faced him. O illustrious one, it seems you are attached to the Pandavas and therefore I have become confused, not knowing

what to do next."

Duryodhana's tone was imploring. He looked anxiously about the field. Karna stood at a distance with his weapons at the ready, but even he would find it hard to check Arjuna in his present mood. Only Drona could stop him, if he so desired. There was not a warrior in all the worlds who could overpower Drona in battle. As Arjuna's instructor, he knew everything about his mode of fighting and any possible weakness. There could only be one reason why he had not already slain Arjuna.

Duryodhana frowned. "To the best of my ability I have always tried to please you, great brahmin, but it seems you do not value my service. O man of infinite prowess, although we are devoted to you, it appears you do not wish us well. Although you live on our bread, still you injure us. I now see that you are like a razor soaked in honey. If you had not assured me, I would not have prevented Jayadratha from returning to his kingdom. Fool that I am, I believed you, and as a result I have virtually offered him as a victim to Death. Indeed, a man might escape even when he enters Death's jaws, but there is no chance that Jayadratha will escape when he faces the infuriated Arjuna in battle."

Duryodhana wept tears of frustration, trying by any means to incite Drona to attack Arjuna. Afraid that he may have had the opposite effect, he spoke more gently. "O hero, forgive my ravings for I am afflicted by grief. I fall at your feet. Please save Jayadratha, and indeed our army, from the enraged and invincible Arjuna."

Drona looked wearied. How many times did Duryodhana have to be told? "I am not offended by your words, O ruler of men. You are the same to me as my own son. Thus I have tried in every way to assist you. I have tendered you wholesome advice, but you have not listened. I have made vows for your benefit, fully intent on keeping them. Before all men I promised to capture Yudhishthira, but it was to no avail. Again, I vowed to protect Jayadratha, but how is it possible when we face Arjuna and Krishna together on one chariot? I can only endeavor to my full extent; I cannot control the results. Destiny is the ultimate controller, despite man's exertion, and the Lord of destiny sits by Arjuna's side."

Drona shook his head and looked around at the thick ranks of warriors protecting Jayadratha. Doubtlessly they would all soon lie dead.

Arjuna would spare none in his efforts to slay the Sindhu king, and Krishna would do anything to protect his friend's promise. He had already shown that enough times. Duryodhana, however, was faithless and could not understand this simple truth.

With a sweep of his hand Drona indicated the forces surrounding him. "These troops are the last line of defense for Jayadratha. I will not personally confront Arjuna again, as I am needed here. Nor will he fight with me at present. When I tried engaging with him, he simply left me standing."

Drona could understand that the situation was desperate. The Pandavas had thought out their strategy well. Their forces had pressed ahead behind Arjuna, taking advantage of the chaos he was causing. All the chief Kaurava warriors were engaged in different parts of the field, either fighting or remaining in critical positions for Jayadratha's protection. Someone had to check Arjuna, but Duryodhana was the only one available.

Drona continued, "O great hero, you are a mighty maharatha, possessed of fame and skilled at defeating your enemies. Go to where Arjuna stands. Challenge him yourself and arrest his progress."

Duryodhana looked up in astonishment. "O preceptor, how do you honestly expect me to stop Arjuna? I may be able to conquer Indra, armed with his thunderbolt and heading the host of gods, but it will not be possible to conquer Arjuna. He has already overcome you and Kritavarma, as well as slaying all of the Kalinga rulers. He has also slaughtered myriads of fierce barbarian fighters. How will I face him? O great one, I am dependent on you. Please save my honor."

"What you say is true, O king. No one can defeat Arjuna. Under normal circumstances I would not risk you against him, but we face a dire calamity. Still, you need not fear. I will make you invincible even to Arjuna. I will secure your armor in such a way that will make it impenetrable to both human and celestial weapons. Even if the creatures of the three worlds come together against you, still you need not fear. Arjuna knows how to do this, but no one else on this battlefield. Take off your armor, O King, and I will tie it on again while reciting the ancient mantras uttered by Brahma himself. You may then proceed fearlessly against the mighty Pandava."

Duryodhana quickly removed his golden armor. After Drona had touched water for purification and rinsed his mouth, he replaced it while

intoning mantras. When he had finished he said, "You will now be able to face any foe with impunity. This celestial armor, invoked by my prayers, was originally given by Brahma to Indra. Clad in this armor, Indra fought and defeated Vrtrasura, who had overpowered all the other celestials. O King, go forward and face Arjuna. There is no time to lose."

* * *

As the sun reached the meridian on the thirteenth day, many terrific battles were being fought between the respected heroes on both sides. Dhristadyumna was steadily pressing forward, hoping to meet Drona in single combat. Bhima constantly sought out Dhritarastra's sons, while Yudhisthira engaged with Salya and his division of warriors. Satyaki encountered Bahlika, Sahadeva fought with Shakuni, Ghatotkacha and his Rakshasa hordes with Alambusha and his supporters, and the other chief fighters among the Pandavas fought opponents of equal might. Fighting with human and celestial weapons, the great warriors created a beautiful sight on the battlefield as they attacked and counterattacked each other, displaying all their skills.

Meanwhile, Arjuna continued to plow through the tightly packed Kaurava troops. Hearing news of his progress, Jayadratha shook with fear. Karna and Ashvatthama stood by his sides, grim-faced. Still some twenty miles from Jayadratha, Arjuna fought on remorselessly. With his fiery shafts he created breaches in the enemy defenses, and Krishna would then quickly drive the chariot through. Wherever the chariot went, the Kauravas were driven back like darkness at sunrise. Arjuna's arrows slew men standing a full two miles away. His well-tempered and polished steel shafts dropped from the sky like showers of meteors. As Arjuna annihilated the troops who opposed him, Krishna baffled their attacks by His skillful driving, exhibiting various expert maneuvers as the chariot moved with circular, backwards, and sideways motions.

Sometimes Arjuna's progress was swift and at other times slow, but no one saw him cease fighting for a moment. His bow was constantly drawn and arrows flew out in endless streams. It took great courage to even look at him. Thousands of warriors, careless of their lives, rushed against him and perished like insects falling into a fire.

As the sun began its downward course, Vinda and Anuvinda, the two princes of Avanti, attacked Arjuna. Both were maharathas and they came at Arjuna from both sides at once. Roaring in delight, the fearless warriors charged at Arjuna, releasing their long-shafted arrows by the hundreds.

Surprised by their sudden appearance, Arjuna was hit hard by more than sixty arrows. Krishna was pierced with the same number and the horses were all caught with twenty arrows each. Blazing in anger, Arjuna shook off their shafts and aimed his own arrows at his antagonists, looking for their vulnerable points. He struck both of them and stopped their forward charge. The two princes screamed out their battle cries and covered Arjuna with a downpour of arrows. Ignoring the attack, Arjuna carefully aimed a couple of broad-headed shafts and cut apart both their bows. With two more arrows he cut off their standards, and with another dozen he slew their charioteers and horses. All this happened in a matter of moments. Before the princes could do anything Arjuna shot a crescent-headed shaft with full force that severed Vinda's head.

Seeing his brother slain, Anuvinda leapt from his chariot bellowing with rage. Clutching his mace he raced toward Arjuna. Anuvinda swerved from side to side as he ran, determined to avenge Vinda's death. Reaching Arjuna's chariot, he brought the mace down with all his power onto Krishna's forehead. Krishna remained firm. Utterly enraged to see Anuvinda strike Krishna, Arjuna shot five short shafts that cut off his arms, legs and head. The prince fell down like fragments of rocks shattered by an explosion.

Seeing both their leaders killed, the Avanti army rushed in a body at Arjuna. The Pandava slew them with arrows shot from the Gandiva that appeared like showers of sparks flying up from a great fire. Whirling about in his chariot, he consumed the army like a fire consuming a forest at the end of the summer. Thousands of other troops then came at Arjuna. His chariot was completely lost in the enemy ranks. Krishna found it impossible to move in any direction. As the battle raged on, He said, "O Partha, such is the intensity of this fight that even our celestial horses are becoming weary. We are still far from Jayadratha and they need rest."

Fighting continuously, Arjuna replied, "O Madhava, I will create a path through these foes. You may then take the chariot through, unyoke the horses, and let them rest. Draw out the arrows from their bodies while I keep these warriors in check."

Arjuna directed a great stream of arrows at his enemies and forced them back. He then leapt down from the chariot, still releasing countless shafts, and Krishna drove away from him. The Kauravas, seeing Arjuna standing on the ground, felt that their opportunity for victory had arrived. Roaring even louder, they ignored Krishna and the chariot and trained all their weapons on Arjuna. Arjuna fought on foot against them. He spun around and shot searing arrows in all directions. The amazed Kauravas could not find any gap in his defenses. To approach him was to rush into a solid wall of arrows. The meeting of Arjuna's shafts with those of his adversaries created a sheet of fire in the sky. Scorched, the Kauravas fell back.

Arjuna ran over to where Krishna had released the horses. Krishna told him that they needed water and Arjuna replied, "It shall be done." Drawing back his bow with a golden arrow fixed to it, Arjuna uttered incantations to invoke the Varunastra. He shot the arrow at the earth and at once a large lake appeared, with swans, ducks, and other aquatic birds swimming amid lotuses and lilies. The clear pond had been transported from the heavenly regions and was cool and pleasing. A gentle breeze blew over it and celestial sages were seated on its banks.

Invoking another mystical weapon, Arjuna constructed a shelter on the lakeside made entirely of arrows. Krishna laughed and applauded him. He led the horses into the shelter where, after drinking their fill, they lay on the grassy ground. Krishna then removed their arrows and gently massaged their bodies.

The Kauravas had rallied and again surrounded Arjuna, who continued to fight on foot. Showers of arrows, darts and lances fell upon him, but he stood as firm as Mount Meru. He received the massive downpour of weapons like a mountain receiving rain. Even as the single fault of covetousness destroys all a man's good qualities, he single-handedly destroyed his enemies. Contending alone against countless warriors seated on chariots, horses and elephants, Arjuna appeared wonderful. Celestials praised him and the Kauravas themselves applauded his prowess. They marveled at the sight of the lake and the shelter he had created. Despite strenuous exertions, they could not overcome him even though he was disadvantaged by the loss of his chariot. His speed, lightness of hand and agility were too great. As he held off the Kaurava forces, Krishna harnessed the horses and drove up to Arjuna's side. As He did so, the mystical lake, with its birds,

aquatics and rishis, vanished.

Mounted again on his chariot, Arjuna sounded his conch. Krishna urged on the horses, and the chariot rushed into the thick of the Kauravas, with Arjuna spraying deadly shafts on all sides. Like a storm agitating the ocean, he created havoc among the enemy ranks. The Kauravas were beaten back and unable to check his progress. Some of them called out, "Fie upon Duryodhana! It is his fault that the earth now faces such a calamity. These two heroes will spare no one." Other Kauravas said, "Dhritarastra should begin the preparations for Jayadratha's last rites. The Sindhu ruler will be killed today."

Arjuna pressed forward relentlessly. Only four hours remained until sunset and he still had ten miles of troops to cross. The bravest of the Kauravas rushed against him, but like rivers entering the sea they did not return. Other cowardly warriors, like atheists turning away from scripture, turned back from the fight, thus incurring condemnation and sin.

The fire-colored chariot Krishna drove appeared like Surya's chariot driven by Aruna. It tore through the Kaurava ranks. Rested and refreshed, the horses raced ahead, seeming to rise up into the sky at every moment. Arjuna and Krishna appeared like two fiery suns risen together at the end of the age. Anyone coming near them was burnt by the fire of Arjuna's weapons and fell lifeless to the earth. The Kauravas facing Arjuna became dispirited and hopeless. They struggled vainly to check him from reaching Jayadratha, but in less than an hour Arjuna could see in the distance Drona's tall standard. With a triumphant shout he said, "See there the preceptor's banner, Madhava. I think we are drawing close to the Sindhu king. He cannot be more than a few miles away."

Krishna again advised Arjuna to circumvent Drona so as not to lose time, but Drona had already seen him and was shooting arrows that flew more than two miles and pierced both him and Krishna. Bleeding from their wounds, they appeared like two flowering karnikara trees. Krishna drove the chariot away from Drona's attack, placing a body of Kaurava troops between them. He then moved in a great circle around Drona's division. Arjuna continuously launched his blazing shafts in unending lines that struck down men, horses and elephants alike.

As Arjuna came within a few miles of Jayadratha, Duryodhana

suddenly met him. With his impenetrable armor shining brilliantly, the Kaurava prince sent up a mighty roar and charged. Drawing up his chariot at a short distance from his enemy, he shouted out a challenge.

Krishna stopped the chariot and said, "Behold Dhritarastra's powerful son standing fearlessly before you. He has constantly hated the Pandavas and is an accomplished warrior, capable of contending with innumerable warriors at once. I think, O sinless one, that the time has come when you should fight with him. Upon him rests victory or defeat. Vomit upon him the venom of your wrath, O Partha. It is your good fortune that has brought him before you alone. Why has he risked his life in this way? Surely he will soon regret his folly. Strike down this evil-hearted one and the war will be over. O Arjuna, kill him and cut the root of the wicked Kauravas."

Arjuna stared angrily at the bellowing Duryodhana. "Let it be so. Go closer to this wretch so that I may punish him with sharpened shafts. I will now avenge the wrongs he committed against Draupadi."

Krishna drove the chariot toward Duryodhana. Seeing the Kaurava chief exhibiting no fear, even though there was sufficient cause, many warriors looked on and applauded. Others cried out in sorrow, considering Duryodhana to be like a libation of ghee poured into a sacrificial fire. "The king is slain! The king is slain!" they cried in terror.

Hearing their cries, Duryodhana laughed. "Dispel your fears. I will soon send these two to Death's abode."

Duryodhana taunted Arjuna. "O Partha, let me see your prowess. Release all the weapons you have learned from Drona and received from the celestials. Watch as I repulse your attack. Then I will sever your head along with Krishna's."

Duryodhana immediately pierced Arjuna with three arrows that flew invisibly toward him. With four more he pierced each of his horses, and with another ten he struck Krishna. With another well-aimed arrow he cut the whip in Krishna's hand, which fell to the ground in two pieces. Arjuna drew the Gandiva back to his ear and fired four steel-headed shafts that screamed through the air. Hitting Duryodhana's armor they fell harmlessly to the earth. Arjuna released another sixteen arrows that were again deflected from his armor. He shot twenty more shafts with even more power, but these were also ineffective against Duryodhana's armor.

Seeing this, Krishna said with surprise, "I have not seen this before. Your arrows, capable of penetrating the earth, are falling uselessly from Duryodhana's armor. Is everything well with you, O Partha? Is the Gandiva losing its power? Why are you unable to pierce your enemy? This is not the time to fail. What is the cause?"

Arjuna understood. Looking at the laughing Duryodhana, he replied, "I think Drona has tied on Duryodhana's armor today. It contains the might of the three worlds. Only Drona knows its secret and he has taught it to me. No weapons can pierce this armor. Surely you know this, O Krishna, because you know everything. Yet see how this fool stands before me. He is like a woman clad in armor and does not know how to take advantage of his position. Even though he is protected by an impenetrable coat of mail, I will still defeat him. Watch as I send him reeling from my attack."

Duryodhana stood fearlessly in his chariot and called to Arjuna derisively, "Try again, O Partha. I think you are losing your touch." He fired a thick volley of shafts that covered both Arjuna and Krishna. The Kauravas watching the fight were delighted to see Duryodhana impervious to Arjuna's attack. They roared and beat their drums.

Fending off Duryodhana's arrows, Arjuna became incensed. With a taut smile he slew Duryodhana's four horses. He then broke apart his chariot with a hundred hammer-headed shafts. Taking another four arrows with extended points, he empowered them with mantras and aimed them carefully at the Kaurava. The arrows struck Duryodhana on the tips of his fingers, the only exposed part of his body, as he was releasing his own shafts. He screamed in pain as they went under his nails. Dropping his bow he jumped about on the terrace of his chariot, shaking his hand in agony.

Seeing their leader distressed, other Kaurava warriors rushed to his rescue. They surrounded Arjuna with chariots, elephants and horses. Kripa, who had come to Duryodhana's assistance, took him on his chariot, bearing the emblem of a bull, and carried him to safety.

Arjuna again set to slaying the Kaurava troops. He soon managed to break free from his assailants. As his chariot emerged from the enemy array, both he and Krishna blew their conchshells with full power. That sound filled the battlefield and terrified the Kauravas. Jayadratha also heard it in the distance and froze in his chariot, looking fearfully in the direction of the

sound.

Elsewhere on the field the other Pandavas had been fighting and destroying thousands of foes. The losses on both sides were great. The earth again assumed a terrible aspect, with the bodies of slain men and beasts lying about amid the wreckage of chariots, armor and weapons.

Chapter Eighteen. Krishna's Mystic Power

From some way off, Yudhishthira heard the blast of Arjuna's and Krishna's conchshells. Fearful that his brother might be in danger and signaling for help, he said to Satyaki, "O grandson of Sini, I think the hour has arrived when you must do the duty of a friend. You are wholly devoted to our welfare, and especially to Arjuna's. O hero, it is said that one who casts off his mortal frame while fighting for his friend's cause gets the same result as one who twice gives away the entire earth in charity. I think Arjuna may now need your help. He has single-handedly entered the Kaurava array. Please go to where he stands. There is no one else who can assist him better than you."

Satyaki felt torn. Arjuna had specifically ordered him to remain by Yudhishthira's side and to follow his instructions. Now Yudhishthira was asking him to leave. What would happen if while he was gone, Drona attacked and captured Yudhishthira? Arjuna would never forgive him. He revealed his doubts. "O lord of the earth, there is nothing I would not do at your command. As you have rightly said, I am ever devoted to Arjuna's service. Thus I am ready to penetrate even into the ranks of heavenly hosts to assist that foremost of fighters. However, I must remind you of Arjuna's words to me today. 'Protect Yudhishthira until I return from slaying Jayadratha.' How can I leave you? Surely Drona's threat still hangs over you since he vowed to take you captive.

Satyaki reassured Yudhishthira. "Arjuna could not possibly be in any danger because he is with Krishna. Who among the Kauravas could even threaten him? Surely he has blown his conch after achieving a great victory. Probably he has come close to Jayadratha. I am sure Arjuna is well, but if you cannot dispel your anxiety, I will follow him. Nevertheless, without leaving you in the care of someone able to protect you from Drona, I cannot leave. Therefore, command me as you will, O king."

Yudhishthira pointed to the many warriors surrounding him—Bhima, Dhristadyumna, the twins, Draupadi's sons, Ghatotkacha, and numerous others. They would surely be able to hold off Drona, should he attack. In any event, the preceptor was likely to be occupied in the attempt to protect Jayadratha.

Seeing Yudhishthira's determination that he go after Arjuna, Satyaki

felt impelled to leave. After all, what if the Pandava really did need help? Although it seemed unlikely that Arjuna was in trouble, Satyaki felt that if he did not follow him, he would be censured as a coward. Looking around at the Pandava warriors fighting near the king, he said, "In accordance with your order I will depart. May good betide you, O king. Plunging into the hostile army, an ocean teeming with arrows, darts and lances, I will soon reach my teacher and render him whatever assistance he may require. Let your fear be dispelled."

After going over to Bhima and asking him to take his place by Yudhisthira's side, Satyaki ordered his charioteer to drive into the Kaurava array in Arjuna's wake. He soon saw the trail of carnage the Pandava had left behind. Fighting his way past the remaining troops, Satyaki encountered Kritavarma and a terrible fight ensued between them. Satyaki fought intensely, determined to reach Arjuna as quickly as possible, and he soon overcame his opponent. Every Kaurava warrior who came against Satyaki was swiftly routed. Passing along Arjuna's path, he made rapid progress. Within an hour he sighted Arjuna's chariot in the distance, its tall standard appearing high above the battlefield. Seeing this he took out his conch shell and blew a great blast.

Even after sending Satyaki to assist Arjuna, Yudhisthira was still apprehensive. He spoke with Bhima. "Out of my own anxiety I have sent Sini's grandson into the hostile array formed by Drona. I now fear for both him and Arjuna. O mighty-armed hero, you alone are capable of holding the enemy at bay. Therefore, go swiftly after your brother and Satyaki. When you reach them and find them safe, let go a mighty roar. My mind will then be relieved. With you by their side, nothing will be impossible for Arjuna and his disciple. I will consider Jayadratha already slain."

Bhima laughed. "What danger can there be for Arjuna? But if it is your desire, then I will go after him. You will soon hear my shout. Let your mind be at ease."

Before leaving, Bhima went over to Dhristadyumna and said, "I am now proceeding after my brother. Remembering Drona's vow, stay close by the king's side. You are born for that brahmin's destruction. In your presence Yudhisthira can experience no danger."

Reassured by Dhristadyumna, Bhima charged into the Kaurava

ranks. Like Satyaki before him, he saw the slaughter Arjuna had wreaked. Going along the track made by both Arjuna and Satyaki, his progress toward his brother was swift. He quickly overcame the fighters who challenged him and soon reached his brother. Seeing Arjuna's standard at a distance, with Satyaki's chariot not far off, Bhima roared tremendously.

Arjuna, who had already met Satyaki, heard his brother's roar and said to Krishna, "Here now is the mighty Bhimasena. I do not see how the Kauravas will be able to protect Jayadratha from me when I am united with my brother and Satyaki."

Arjuna had been surprised to see his disciple. At first he had reproached him, fearful for Yudhisthira's welfare, but Satyaki had reassured him that the king was protected. He saw that Drona was also tied up in protecting Jayadratha, so there was no immediate danger for Yudhisthira. Arjuna had then embraced his beloved student, who had performed an amazing feat in passing through the Kauravas in such a short time. Praising his prowess, Arjuna told Satyaki to help him reach Jayadratha.

Only two hours remained until sunset. Arjuna still had to overcome Karna, Ashvatthama, and other powerful Kauravas before he could reach Jayadratha. Doubtlessly Drona himself would also fight to his full power to protect the Sindhu king. Duryodhana had recovered from his wounds and had come back to the fight with many of his brothers. All of them stood between Arjuna and Jayadratha. It was by no means certain that the Pandava would fulfill his vow. Now that Bhima had arrived, however, the Kauravas were shaking like a forest struck by a gale. Arjuna was bad enough, but when he fought with Bhima and Satyaki, no one would be able to stop him.

The three Pandava heroes advanced toward the division that formed Jayadratha's last line of defense. Karna came forward to meet them, and Bhima challenged him. Karna rushed at him, furiously releasing hundreds of arrows. Warding off the shafts, Bhima replied with a hundred of his own. Both warriors glared at each other with eyes like blazing coals. They circled one another in their chariots, their gaze fixed on the other and waiting for his move. The two antagonists suddenly began shooting showers of deadly shafts. Their bowstrings cracked like thunderclaps and their arrows struck each other's armor with resounding thuds. Neither flinched under their opponent's attack nor showed any quarter. The surrounding troops looked on in amazement. Some of them, seeing Karna's dazzling speed, considered

Bhima doomed, while others, seeing Bhima's uncontrolled rage, felt that Karna's end had arrived.

Bhima assailed Karna with all his power. He looked at him with unbridled contempt. Here was one of the prime causes of the Pandavas' suffering. This was the one who had laughed in the dice game and ordered Draupadi to find another husband. Indeed, it had been he who had suggested she be disrobed. He had always conspired with the Kauravas to bring about the Pandavas' downfall. His mocking words as they left for the forest still rang in Bhima's ears. Now at last he stood against him in battle. Fearlessly, Bhima closed on Karna, stretching his golden bow back to his ear as he discharged his arrows. He sent so many shafts at his enemy that they screened him from view. Karna countered the attack and quickly emerged from the network of shafts. He pierced Bhima with nine well-tempered steel arrows that flashed from his bow like lightning.

Undaunted, Bhima went even closer to Karna, constantly releasing steel shafts that struck him in every part of his body. Intent on smashing Karna with his mace, the Pandava brought his chariot right up to him. As they came together, Bhima's black-hued horses mingled with the milk-white horses of his enemy. The great horses merging together appeared like beautiful black and white clouds combining in the sky.

The Kauravas cried out in anguish as they saw the furious Bhima resolved on Karna's destruction. The Pandava swung his mace and Karna quickly countered with his own. The two maces collided with a shower of sparks and a sound that deafened the onlookers for some moments. Contending at close quarters, Bhima and Karna appeared like a couple of infuriated mountain lions fighting to the death. Their charioteers pulled back the horses and the two chariots again broke apart. Both men again took up their bows and fired short-shafted arrows and blazing darts at one another. As they circled each other, constantly discharging their weapons, they resembled two clouds discharging rain in the monsoon season. Their arrows, decked with gold, seemed like rows of maddened swans ranging through the heavens.

Krishna and Arjuna both felt that a heavy burden had been placed on Bhima. The enraged Karna was a formidable foe. Although he had encountered the Pandavas on several occasions, he had never been in his present mood. Now he seemed like the lord of death come for the destruction

of all creatures. But Bhima skillfully held off his attack. Everyone cheered him as he countered Karna's innumerable arrows with his own. As Bhima and Karna battled, Arjuna and Satyaki maintained a ceaseless attack on the Kauravas. Elephants, horses and men fell dead all around them, pierced by their irresistible shafts.

Bhima suddenly cut Karna's bow in two parts with a razor-faced arrow. He then struck down one of his two charioteers and launched fifty straight-flying shafts at his immobilized foe. Karna shrugged off the arrows and took up a lance. Like Indra hurling his thunderbolt, he threw the lance with all his might at Bhima. Inlaid with gold and gems, it flew with a glaring brilliance, its tip emitting orange flames. Seeing it leave Karna's hand, Bhima took out seven crescent-headed arrows and fired them in swift succession. They flew end-to-end and cut the lance into eight pieces. With a further twenty shafts Bhima then struck Karna on the chest and sent up a great roar.

Without a second's delay, Karna took up and strung another bow. He released a dozen swift arrows while Bhima was fixing more shafts on his own bow. Even the celestials were surprised to witness Karna's deftness and skill. Moving his chariot rapidly from side to side, Bhima's charioteer Vishoka evaded Karna's arrows, which whistled past the Pandava. The battle between the two heroes went on like a fight between two mighty elephants for the leadership of a herd. They assailed each other untiringly, roaring all the while. Sometimes they laughed, sometimes they reproached one another, and sometimes they blew their conches. They flashed scornful glances at each other as they fought, each seeking victory over the other.

Bhima once again cut apart Karna's bow, then immediately slew his four horses and his second charioteer. Summoning all his strength, he sent a terrific downpour of arrows that completely enveloped Karna. His horses and charioteers slain, and himself struck everywhere and continuously, Karna was confounded and did not know what to do. Seeing his friend in such a predicament, Duryodhana commanded his brother Durmukha to rescue him. Braving Bhima's deadly shafts, Durmukha raced over to Karna and quickly took him onto his chariot. But even as Karna leapt across to the chariot, with a series of swift arrows Bhima killed Durmukha along with his charioteer and horses.

Shocked, Karna quickly circumambulated the dead Kaurava and then ran across to another warrior's chariot. As a number of Duryodhana's other

brothers came to his support, he resumed his assault on the Pandava. Smiling to see so many of his sworn enemies before him, Bhima fought with greater intensity. He killed another three Kaurava princes and yelled out his battle cry, making the rest of them shake with fear. In the distance, Yudhisthira heard the victorious shout and was relieved. Everything was clearly well with Arjuna and Bhima.

So fierce was Bhima's attack that no one could stand before him. A single arrow from Bhima's bow killed each of another four of Dhritarastra's sons. Finally, even Karna himself was overpowered and pierced by so many shafts that he turned and fled.

Bhima fell upon the Kauravas with a manic fury. Targeting Duryodhana's brothers he began slaying them like a lion slaying deer. The Pandava's arrows fell on the Kauravas like poisonous serpents. Remembering all the wrongs they had committed against him and his brothers, he ruthlessly cut them down. As he ranged about the field Bhima came upon Vikarna. He remembered how he had fearlessly spoken in Draupadi's defense during the dice game. The Pandavas knew that Vikarna felt genuine affection for them and supported their cause, even against his elder brother, but duty had ultimately compelled him to fight for Duryodhana.

Bearing in mind his vow to kill all one hundred brothers, as well as his duty as a kshatriya, Bhima did not hesitate to attack Vikarna along with his brothers. With golden-winged shafts he cut down the brothers one after another. Finally he slew Vikarna with three arrows. As the prince fell to the earth, Bhima went over to him and circumambulated his body. He felt a twinge of sorrow, but thinking of the exalted destination he was sure to attain, he again became cheerful. The virtuous Kaurava hero had always performed his religious duties and had died in battle while facing his foes. Doubtlessly he had gone to the celestial regions.

After paying his last respects to Vikarna, Bhima again launched himself into the fight. Nearby, Satyaki was driving back Drona's troops, moving toward the preceptor himself, while Arjuna was pressing inexorably toward Jayadratha. Not much time remained until sunset, and the three Pandava heroes fought to the extreme limits of their power.

* * *

Duryodhana was grief-stricken. Bhima had just killed more than thirty of his brothers. He remembered Vidura's warnings. Why had he not heeded them? Surely Bhima was not human, nor was Arjuna. Both of them were annihilating his forces like Indra and Mahadeva wiping out the Asuras. Not far away, Satyaki was single-handedly destroying the Trigarta army. It seemed that all of the Pandava warriors were aided by divine power. It again crossed Duryodhana's mind that Krishna may actually be the Supreme Person. Duryodhana remembered the Danavas' assurances. Even if those celestial beings were assisting him, it would prove to no avail against an enemy assisted by God himself. Despite the overwhelming odds, the Pandavas were steadily crushing his forces. The greatest fighters in the three worlds were among his army, but they could make no impression on the Pandavas. He too could do nothing, it seemed, even while clad in Indra's celestial armor.

The prince looked at the sky. The sun was not far from the western horizon. Perhaps all was not yet lost. Arjuna still had to pass Drona and his son. If other invincible Kaurava warriors supported them, then Arjuna may well be thwarted. Duryodhana urged his charioteer to drive quickly to Drona. One last strategic effort was needed. He and the preceptor could form all the great fighters in the vicinity into a solid line to protect Jayadratha. Surely even Arjuna would not have enough time to fight his way past Drona, Karna, Kripa, Ashvatthama, Salya and a dozen other warriors, all standing together.

As Duryodhana raced toward Drona, Satyaki fought with the powerful Kuru hero, Bhurisrava. As they encountered each other both men bore in mind an old enmity between their two fathers. Satyaki's father, Sini, had once defeated Somadatta, Bhurisrava's father, in a fight at a svayamvara. Sini had dragged and kicked Somadatta in the presence of many kings. After this, Somadatta had pleased Shiva and received a boon that his son would do the same to Sini's son. Now the two sons were meeting in battle for the first time. They traded arrows by the thousands, but neither could gain an advantage over the other. Both warriors hurled lances and javelins with all their power, but saw their opponent unfailingly cut them down with well-aimed arrows. Roaring like a couple of bulls, they contended at close quarters. Both men's horses and charioteers were slain and their chariots smashed to pieces.

The two dauntless fighters jumped clear of their broken chariots.

They drew out their sky-blue swords from their jeweled scabbards. Holding bull-hide shields inlaid with gold and silver carvings, they slowly circled one another. As they came together they displayed various skillful motions, describing circles and moving swiftly from side to side. They leapt into the air and swung their great swords, striking each other with all their power. The clash of their swords rang out across the battlefield. Sparks flew up as the weapons collided or fell upon the fighters' armors. Both warriors thrust and parried with a speed and skill that amazed the onlookers, who shouted out praise and encouragement to both men. Suddenly, with one mighty blow, both swords shattered. Throwing them aside, the two men fell to wrestling. They struck and seized each other, rolling about on the ground with grunts and roars. Displaying every kind of wrestling skill, they fought on, each determined to kill the other.

Gradually, Satyaki tired. It had taken a superhuman effort to reach Arjuna, and that was now taking its toll. Bhurishrava saw his chance and he seized his opponent's hair. Dragging him across the field, the Kuru warrior repeatedly kicked and punched him.

Not far away Krishna saw what was about to happen and he said, "Quickly, save your disciple who has become exhausted while fighting for your good. See now the danger he faces."

Arjuna looked across at Satyaki. Bhurishrava had picked up a discarded sword and was raising it ready to cut off his enemy's head. Seeing Satyaki's perilous position Arjuna at once placed a razor-headed arrow on his bow. Releasing it with full force, he cut off Bhurishrava's arm just as he brought down the sword. The arm, still clutching the sword, dropped to the earth like a five-hooded serpent falling from heaven. Bhurishrava, with blood spurting from his shoulder, looked around in anger and surprise. Who could have so flagrantly ignored the rules of combat? To attack an enemy without warning was unthinkable.

Seeing Arjuna nearby, Bhurishrava realized it had been him. Shocked, he reproached the Pandava. "Alas, O son of Kunti, how could you perform such a cruel and heartless deed? You were not engaged with me, but still you covertly cut off my arm. Have you learned this from Drona, Kripa, or perhaps Indra? I think not, for none of those personalities could ever approve such an act. Nor could you, born in a noble line, have performed this mean deed of your own accord. I think rather that this was done at the instigation of the

deceitful Krishna. The Vrishnis are a race of low and mean-minded men, ever given to shameful conduct. Why have you chosen to befriend them, Arjuna? Just see the result."

Moving closer to Bhurisrava, Arjuna called out, "It is evident that with the body's decay the intellect also suffers, since, O hero, you have directed so many useless reproaches at us. You know well that I am fully aware of the codes of combat, as well as the meaning of all moral precepts. How could I commit a sinful act? Kshatriyas fight their foes while supported by their own men. Why then should I not protect Satyaki, who is fighting on my behalf, careless of his own life? Indeed, it is my first duty to afford him protection. Had I stood by and watched you kill him, then I would have been guilty of sin."

Bhurisrava dropped to his knees and held his wound. He listened in silence as Arjuna continued. "You were prepared to kill Satyaki when he was weaponless, fatigued, and fallen to the earth. Seeing this I acted swiftly to save him. As Satyaki was unprepared for your assault, so you were unprepared for mine. You should not censure me. Rather, you should reproach yourself for failing to guard against an attack while standing on the battlefield. Tell me, O mighty-armed warrior, how you would have acted toward your own dependent in such circumstances?"

Bhurisrava, whose lifeblood was quickly ebbing, made no reply. Deciding to give up his life while absorbed in mystic meditation, he used his left hand to spread out a bed of arrows. With difficulty he gathered the shafts and placed them together in a makeshift seat. As he sat on the arrows, his eyes fixed on the sun, all the other warriors on the battlefield stopped fighting out of respect. The Kauravas then rebuked Krishna and Arjuna.

Unable to tolerate their abuse, Arjuna shouted back, "It is my solemn vow that no one on my side shall be slain as long as I am in a position to protect them. It is surely not right for you or Bhurisrava to condemn me for saving an unarmed man from an armed antagonist. But, O great heroes, who would not condemn the killing of the unarmed and careless Abhimanyu by a group of powerfully armed warriors standing on their chariots?"

Bhurisrava remained silent. His anger had gone. He and Arjuna were friends from long ago and, hearing the Pandava's words, spoken without malice, he could see his own fault. Realizing that his destined end had

arrived, he closed his eyes and fixed his mind on Vishnu, preparing to observe the sacred Praya vow of meditating until death.

Arjuna spoke again to the fallen Kuru fighter, "O great one, the love I bear for you is equal to that I bear for my own brothers. With my permission, and also that of Krishna, go now to heaven."

Krishna added, "You have been devoted to sacrifice and worship of the Supreme Lord. Therefore go to my kingdom, ablaze with effulgence and coveted even by Brahma. Assuming a spiritual form equal to my own, mount upon the back of Garuda, who will carry you to that eternal abode."

As Krishna spoke, Satyaki recovered from his swoon and rose to his feet. Seeing his enemy seated nearby, he took up his discarded sword and rushed at him. As everyone present cried out to stop him, he swung the sword with all his strength and cut off Bhurisrava's head.

There was shocked silence. No one praised Satyaki for killing Bhurisrava, who had already been slain by Arjuna. Some of the Kaurava troops spoke among themselves. "Satyaki was only the instrument, for this hero's end had surely been ordained by fate. The Creator himself has moved Satyaki to kill Bhurisrava, and we should not give way to anger, which is always the cause of man's grief."

Others among the Kauravas, such as Duryodhana and Karna, rebuked Satyaki. Turning around with the bloodied sword still in his hand, Satyaki called out to them, "You sinful men can only speak of virtue, for your acts are never virtuous. Where was your righteousness when Abhimanyu was slain? I vowed long ago to slay any man who threw me down in battle and kicked me. I was always destined to kill Bhurisrava. It is the hand of fate that moves all men. Where is my fault? In ancient times the sage Valmiki said, 'One should always act in battle in ways which give pain to the enemy.'"

Everyone remained silent. None on either side considered Satyaki's act noble. They all praised Bhurisrava in their minds, for he had gone to the highest and most holy regions. They looked at his head lying on the ground, which, with its curling blue locks and eyes red like a pigeon's, was charming even in death.

After a moment of respectful silence, the warriors on both sides blew their conches and the battle began in earnest. Taking up the Gandiva, Arjuna said to Krishna, "Urge on the horses, O Madhava. The sun is fast falling

toward the western hills. The Sindhu ruler is well protected by the foremost Kuru fighters. My task will not be easy. O mighty-armed one, drive the horses in such a way that I may not be thwarted."

Arjuna's chariot rushed off toward Jayadratha, whose standard was just visible beyond the thick array of Kaurava troops. At once Duryodhana, Karna, Salya, Ashvatthama, Kripa and Vrishasena attacked. They were supported by tens of thousands of charioteers, horsemen and elephants. All the warriors charged Arjuna like a stormy sea crashing onto the shore. With his razor-headed arrows Arjuna at once severed the limbs of fighters all around him. As the sun assumed a crimson hue he relentlessly slaughtered the Kaurava troops. Although they were being decimated, the Kauravas were cheered to see the sun almost on the horizon. Surely the Pandava would fail in his vow.

Determined to hold Arjuna back, Kripa and Ashvatthama attacked him from both sides. They rained countless arrows on both him and Krishna. At the same time, Duryodhana, still encased in his impenetrable armor, assailed him from the front with Karna. From Arjuna's rear Salya roared out his challenge and immediately sent hundreds of shafts at him. Arjuna moved with blinding speed. Whirling about on the terrace of his chariot he sent arrows at every one of his assailants. All of them were either pierced or had their bows shattered by Arjuna's shafts. Bhima again tackled Karna, and at the same time annihilated the troops supporting him. Satyaki took on Salya and Vrishasena, killing thousands of their soldiers.

Arjuna slowly forced back the Kauravas who stood before him. Faced with an endless stream of blazing shafts, they struggled vainly to hold him in check. Both Ashvatthama and Kripa displayed masterful skills, but Arjuna checked every one of their weapons with his powerful arrows. He pierced his attackers with burning missiles launched from the Gandiva with all his power. The sky appeared as if illuminated by a constant shower of meteors. In his wrath, Arjuna resembled the eternal Shiva slaying the Asuras with his divine Ajagara bow.

Numerous monarchs and warriors came forward to attack Arjuna, clutching bows, lances, maces and swords. Advancing furiously on the Pandava, they were destroyed in moments by his irresistible arrows. The twang of the Gandiva, continuously resounding, resembled the roar of clouds seen in the sky at the end of the epoch. Warriors were dispatched to Death's

kingdom by the tens of thousands.

The Kauravas began to panic. They called to one another amid the confusion and carnage. Blood-spattered bodies lay everywhere in tangled and twisted heaps. The cries and moans of dying men mingled with the roars and battle cries of the surviving fighters. Wherever the warriors looked they saw Arjuna's standard carving through their ranks. His snake-like arrows fell from the sky as if rained down by Indra. Even Drona, coming against Arjuna with all his strength, could not check him. He called out to his troops, who were starting to flee, trying to rally them back to the battle.

Less than half an hour remained until sunset. Drona ordered his son, Kripa, Karna, Salya, Duryodhana, and a number of other maharatha warriors to stand before Arjuna, who could now see Jayadratha. They all began hurling weapons at the Pandava, screening him from Jayadratha. Arjuna, although so close to his foe, began to despair. Only minutes remained till sunset, and he could hardly see Jayadratha, so thick was the shower of arrows, darts and lances thrown by the Kaurava heroes.

Krishna saw His friend's predicament. He raised his right hand and immediately his Sudarsana chakra appeared at the end of his outstretched finger. Throwing that disc, he covered the sun like an eclipse and at once darkness enveloped the field. Thinking that the sun had set, the Kauravas cheered. Jayadratha was still alive. Now Arjuna would enter fire. Surely the war was over.

Confounded, Arjuna looked around, but Krishna reassured him. "O Partha, there is still time. Fix your eyes on the southern quarter, where Jayadratha stands. The Kauravas have lowered their weapons and the Sindhu ruler now stands unprotected. In a moment he will come before your sight. Place upon the Gandiva an arrow charged with Brahma's power and sever his head."

Arjuna immediately did as he was told. As he raised his bow with the brilliant golden shaft attached, Krishna said, "This monarch has received a boon from his father. The old Sindhu king, Vridhakshatra, blessed him that whoever makes his head fall to the earth will himself die, his own head shattered in a hundred pieces. I know that Vridhakshatra now sits some miles from here at Samantapanchaka Lake, deep in meditation. Therefore, empower your arrow to carry Jayadratha's head to his father's lap."

After saying this, Krishna withdrew his chakra. Suddenly it was light again, the sun clearly visible just above the western horizon. Arjuna instantly released his arrow. It flew like a comet straight at Jayadratha, who was standing fearlessly on his chariot, caught unawares by the sudden reappearance of the sun. Severing his head from his neck, the arrow carried it high into the sky and out of the sight of all the warriors. After traveling a great distance, it deposited the head on Vridhakshatra's lap. Startled, the monarch quickly stood up. As his son's head fell on the ground, his own head broke into a hundred pieces and he fell dead.

The Kauravas cried out in grief. They realized the darkness had been Krishna's illusion. Duryodhana fell to his knees in his chariot. He dropped his weapons and hot tears flowed from his eyes. All of his warriors were struck dumb as they slowly left the battlefield.

Overjoyed at the success of his friend, Krishna embraced Arjuna. "By good fortune you have slain Jayadratha and his wretched father, a constant enemy of the gods. I do not think that even Karttikeya could have achieved this. You killed an entire akshauhini of soldiers. Your prowess resembles Rudra's. Today Duryodhana and his followers are surely realizing that their end is near."

Still perspiring from his prodigious efforts, Arjuna smiled. "By your favor only has all this been achieved. O Krishna, it is no wonder that one whom you support gains victory. Yudhishthira will surely regain his kingdom. My brothers and I are ever at your service."

Krishna once again embraced Arjuna and then drove the chariot toward their camp. As they headed back, they surveyed the large number of warriors lying all over the field. The earth seemed to be filled with men, horses, elephants and chariots. Thousands of servants and physicians came from the camps to tend the wounded, who lay moaning with arrows and lances protruding from their bodies. Millions of shining arrows were strewn across the ground, along with broken maces, swords and armor. Bright gold ornaments gleamed amid fragments of shattered chariots. As darkness fell, the earth seemed as resplendent as the autumnal sky studded with countless stars.

Krishna blew his conch loudly, gladdening the hearts of the Pandava warriors. Reaching Yudhishthira, Arjuna folded his palms and worshipped him

with a joyful heart. Yudhisthira dismounted from his chariot and embraced Arjuna with tears in his eyes. Krishna got down from the chariot and touched Yudhisthira's feet in respect. The Pandava king embraced him and said, "O Govinda, it is by your grace that we stand victorious today. Our enemies are drowned in a sea of grief. Everything is certain for those you favor. Simply by seeking your shelter, one is assured of all good fortune. Those who desire to please you never meet with sin or reversal."

Trembling with transcendent happiness, Yudhisthira went on praising Krishna for some time. When he had finished, Krishna replied, "The wretched Jayadratha has been consumed by the fire of your anger. Duryodhana's vast and proud armies are gradually being annihilated, O Bharata. Having insulted and angered you, the low-minded Duryodhana faces destruction, along with his followers. Those who have chosen to become your enemies are already defeated, although you bear no malice toward any living being."

Bhima and Satyaki, their bodies covered with arrow wounds, came and stood before Arjuna. After embracing them both, Arjuna said tearfully, "By good fortune do I see you both, freed from the Kaurava ocean, in which Drona is an invincible alligator and Kritavarma an unassailable shark. It was fortunate that you made Karna, Kripa and Salya flee. Both of you are as dear to me as my own life. With you as my support and protectors, I have no fear."

The Pandavas headed joyfully back to their camp, blowing their conches and praised by bards and eulogists.

Chapter Nineteen. The Kauravas Rally

After Jayadratha's death, the Kaurava warriors expressed their sorrow. Seeing so many of their number slain, the soldiers condemned Dhritarastra and his son. Censuring them for their wicked policies, the warriors praised Yudhisthira and his brothers. Sunk in despair, Duryodhana rode back to his camp. He sat on the terrace of his chariot with his head lowered. Unable to look at anyone, his mind dwelt only on the day's events. Surely there was no warrior equal to Arjuna. Neither Drona, Kripa, nor even Karna could stand before him. Indeed, the whole army combined could not stop him from killing Jayadratha. Duryodhana wept in his agony. Entering his tent he took his seat, followed by Drona and his other generals. No music played in his camp, and the bards were silent.

Struggling to maintain his composure, the Kaurava prince addressed Drona in a voice strained with grief. "O preceptor, behold the carnage among the kings who have come to our side. Even the mighty Bhishma lies prostrate on the battlefield. The Pandavas have slaughtered seven akshauhinis of our troops. Today your disciple fulfilled his vow and killed Jayadratha, even though you opposed him with an impenetrable array of troops. Many lords of the earth, desiring to do us good, have gone to Yamaraja's abode. How can I repay my debt to them? Being nothing more than a coward, I have destroyed my friends and relatives. The earth should swallow me, covetous, sinful and opposed to virtue as I am. My own grandsire lies on a bed of arrows due to my wicked desires. What will he say when he meets me in the next world?"

Duryodhana stopped speaking and wept openly. He buried his head in his hands and cried out the names of his slain brothers. Karna came over and comforted him. Gradually he gained control of himself and sat up. He sat staring straight ahead for some time, wringing his hands and breathing heavily. His mind moved between despair and the desire for revenge. All was not lost. The Kauravas still had Drona, Karna, Ashvatthama, and other powerful heroes. Perhaps they could yet defeat the Pandavas, or at least capture or kill Yudhisthira. In any circumstance, surrender was impossible. It would be better to be slain down to the last man than to hand over the kingdom to the Pandavas after all this. That was the least the surviving Kauravas could do to repay their slain colleagues.

With tears running down his face, Duryodhana continued. "O

foremost of warriors, I swear that I will obtain peace only by slaying the Pandavas or by being slain by them. I will follow the path taken by our friends and relatives. Seeing us overpowered by our enemies, our partisans are losing faith in our power. They are openly praising the Pandavas. With Bhishma fallen and you fighting only mildly, O preceptor, our troops think we have no protector. It seems that Karna alone is anxious for our success. Like a fool I have depended on one who is a friend only in words. Greedy for wealth and sinful, my mind blinded by desire, I have placed my hopes where they were sure to be thwarted. As a result, Jayadratha and so many other great kings all lie dead on the battlefield. O Drona, permit me therefore to lay down my life in battle, just as all these men have done."

Drona removed his helmet and long gloves, placing them by his side. His sinewy arms were lacerated with arrow wounds, and skilled physicians applied herbal dressings to the cuts, but Duryodhana's reproachful words stung him more than the wounds. He turned to the prince. "Why, O king, do you pierce me with words as sharp as darts? I have repeatedly told you that no one can defeat Arjuna in battle. Seeing Bhishma brought down I am convinced that we are doomed. The dice Shakuni threw against the Pandavas have returned against us as blazing arrows. Vidura warned you of this, but you did not heed him. He who ignores his well-wishers and goes his own way is stupid and is soon reduced to a pitiable condition. You have brought about this calamity upon us all by dragging Draupadi into the Kuru assembly and insulting her. Such a sinful deed cannot go unpunished."

Drona had heard enough from Duryodhana. He reminded him of every wicked act he had performed against the Pandavas, making it clear that the Kauravas had no one to blame but themselves for their present suffering. They had been warned many times that fighting the Pandavas would not result in success. Drona looked at Duryodhana and his surviving brothers. Bhima had already slain half of them. The remainder were a sorry sight in their grief and frustration. Drona felt that it was still his duty to afford them whatever protection he could, but there was little hope. Standing up with his hand on his ivory-hilted sword, he said, "Seeing me sinking in the ocean of the Pandavas' prowess, you should not enhance my grief, O king. Hear now my final determination. I will not take off my armor again until all of the Panchalas are slain. My son will kill the Somakas. With those two armies gone, it may be possible for us to defeat the Pandavas."

Drona indicated Kripa. "Here is the invincible acharya. Our enemies cannot kill him. Let him exert his full power to kill the kings who have sided with the Pandavas. O Duryodhana, worship brahmins and offer them many gifts. Make offerings into the sacred fire and propitiate the deities. We will make one last great effort. Tomorrow I will ride at the head of your army with my weapons ablaze. You will see me penetrate the Pandava ranks like a lion entering a herd of cows."

Cheered by Drona's words, the Kauravas slowly retired for the night, exhausted from the day's fighting.

* * *

Dhritarastra sat silently on his throne. By his side Sanjaya gently dabbed his brow with a soft cloth soaked in cool water. The old king had lost consciousness when he heard how Bhima had slain over thirty of his sons in one day. Returning to consciousness he learned that Arjuna had succeeded in his vow to kill Jayadratha. Struck dumb with grief, he moaned softly. Was there any hope for the Kauravas when their entire force could not prevent Arjuna from reaching the Sindhu king? The blind monarch spoke in a voice barely rising above a whisper. "O best of all my servants, tell me how my surviving sons are now faring, having seen their army routed and Jayadratha slain. Day by day my fame dwindles. Numerous powerful warriors on my side are being killed. All this is due to the adverse influence of fate.

Dhritarastra broke off, shaking his head. "Arjuna smashed into our host, which was protected by Drona and Karna. Even the gods could not have stopped him. Surely he is as irresistible as the surging ocean. And then there is Bhima.

"Half my sons are dead. Bhima will not rest until he has killed the other half. In the meantime, Arjuna, aided by Dhristadyumna and Satyaki, will annihilate the other Kuru heroes. It is hard to believe. At the beginning of the war, our army outnumbered the Pandavas two to one. Now only four of our eleven divisions remain to the Pandavas' three. The odds are now almost equal."

His head down, Dhritarastra listened as Sanjaya described the conversation between Duryodhana and Drona. Hearing that the preceptor had again vowed to slay the Pandava forces, the old king became encouraged.

The war was not over. Drona and Karna were still alive, as well as Kripa, Ashvatthama, and a number of other warriors. They would be burning with anger and a desire to avenge Jayadratha's death. Perhaps, too, Arjuna would be fatigued after exerting himself so tremendously. Things may yet turn the other way. Wars had often been won by rallying troops when all had seemed hopeless.

Sanjaya, seeing Dhritarastra looking more hopeful, said, "O king, you should not forget that Krishna is the Pandavas' guide and protector. It was due to his help that Arjuna succeeded today. Your men have no hope if they oppose Keshava in battle. He is the unfailing defender of the righteous and the annihilator of the demonic. Steeped in sin and ignorant of virtue, your sons are bringing a terrible calamity upon themselves and their friends. Their single hope lies in returning the Pandavas' rightful property. However, O King, I fear the opportunity for that has passed. This is your fault. It will result in a massive destruction of kshatriyas."

Dhritarastra remembered the inconceivable form Krishna had displayed in the hall where he now sat. After that, he had heard about Krishna's many glories from the rishis—descriptions he had heard before. Trying to bring the king to his senses, the rishis had again reminded him how Krishna had killed numerous Asuras, who were capable of assuming forms at will and who had terrorized even the gods.

Feeling a strange sense of peace as he thought of Krishna, Dhritarastra said, "Even if by chance we are able to defeat the Pandavas, we will still have to contend with Keshava. For their interests he will take up His irresistible discus and rush against my forces like the all-consuming fire of universal destruction. After destroying the Kurus he will offer the earth to Kunti. I do not see how we can attain victory. Duryodhana is ignorant of Krishna's position and power. The faithless fool is a slave to his own senses. He can never understand the Absolute Truth. He is like a child who wishes to extinguish fire with his hands. Arjuna and Krishna are united as one soul. Their aims and desires are one, and even the mighty Shiva cannot thwart them."

Thinking of his son, the king again felt sorrow fill his heart. Would he ever see him again? It seemed unlikely. He would probably die in this battle. Yet the ways of fate were inscrutable. Even Krishna, it seemed, could not prevent Abhimanyu's death. Surely he could not have wanted that son of

his dear friend and sister to die. Gripped by the duality of realizing the inevitable and yet hoping to resist it, the king rose from his seat and his servants led him away. He told Sanjaya to return the next day and recount any events of the night, and how the battle began again.

* * *

As the sun rose on the fourteenth day, Duryodhana, seething as he recalled the events of the previous day, spoke with Karna. "How was it possible for Arjuna to penetrate our ranks yesterday? Before your eyes he slew Jayadratha. Even with Krishna's devious trick, it should still not have been possible. My once vast army has been reduced to a pitiable few by Shakra's son. Surely this must be Drona's desire. I cannot accept that the preceptor is fighting to his full power. If he had opposed Arjuna with all his strength yesterday, then Jayadratha would not have been killed. Arjuna is exceedingly dear to the magnanimous Drona. Fool that I was, I believed him when he promised to protect Jayadratha. Now I am despairing."

Karna did not agree. "I do not think you should blame the preceptor. Heedless of his own life he fights our enemies furiously. It is not his fault that he failed to prevent Arjuna, guided by Krishna, from fulfilling his vow. Clad in impenetrable armor and wielding the Gandiva bow, he is formidable. It was no wonder to me that he overcame Drona. Furthermore, the preceptor is old and not so agile or quick. How can he contend with Arjuna on equal terms?"

Karna and Duryodhana were riding out on their chariots as they spoke. Ahead of them in the distance they saw the Pandava forces spread across the horizon. With their armor and weapons glinting in the sun, their army appeared like a sparkling sea. Their roars and conch blasts were answered by the Kauravas' warriors.

Karna put on his helmet as he continued. "In my opinion, destiny is supreme. Despite our efforts and our numbers, and even though our army contains the greatest heroes, still, fate makes our endeavor futile. O king, a man afflicted by adverse fate finds all his exertions useless. We have constantly antagonized the Pandavas, yet they have always emerged unharmed. I do not see that they are superior to us in either intellect or power, nor do I feel that you have miscalculated through lack of understanding. It is

fate alone that controls everything. If destiny has decreed that we should suffer reversals, then nothing in our power can alter that fact."

Duryodhana remained silent. Perhaps Karna was right. Fortune had surely favored the Pandavas. But fortune was always flickering. Surely it was time it favored him. Drona had sworn to annihilate the Panchalas and Somakas, the major remnant of the Pandava army. If he kept his vow, then they might still attain victory. The prince clenched his teeth and looked at Drona, who was busy marshaling the troops into formation. It would not help if he censured him any more.

Duryodhana's chariot reached the other Kuru leaders and he issued orders and made arrangements. Having agreed upon a strategy for the day's fighting, the Kauravas formed themselves into an array shaped like a turtle. In response, the Pandavas aligned their troops in an arrangement resembling a shark. The two armies came together cheering, their weapons clashing as a huge cloud of dust rose above the battlefield.

Determined to end the conflict as quickly as possible, Bhima sought out the remaining Kaurava princes. He charged into the enemy ranks. Elephants and horsemen, who rained down their weapons on the roaring Pandava, immediately surrounded him. A fierce battle began. Dhristadyumna and the twins rushed against the Madraka army. Susharma and the remainder of the Samshaptakas, remembering their vow, challenged Arjuna. Satyaki stayed close to Yudhishthira, protecting him along with Shikhandhi and other chariot fighters.

Drona encountered the Panchalas and showered them with tens of thousands of arrows. Invoking celestial weapons, he swiftly cut them down. A powerful king named Sibi, charging at the head of the Somakas, roared out his battle cry and challenged Drona. He struck him with thirty arrows and slew his charioteer. Drona was infuriated and replied with ten arrows made of steel. He slew Sibi's four horses, cut down his standard, and severed the king's head as he stood in the fight.

Duryodhana ordered another charioteer onto Drona's chariot, and Drona continued to fight the Panchalas and Somakas together.

Bhima was surrounded by a number of Kaurava princes. They assailed him from all sides with arrows. Not concerned about their attack, Bhima jumped down from his chariot and ran over to one of them. Leaping

onto his chariot, he smashed him with his fists. With all his limbs broken the prince toppled lifeless from his chariot. Bhima leapt down and raced over to another prince, striking and killing him in the same way. Karna came to the Kauravas' protection, hurling a flaming dart at Bhima as he ran across the field. Bhima faced that dart and caught it, immediately hurling it back at Karna. As it flew toward Karna, Shakuni cut it down with a razor-headed shaft.

Oblivious to the Kauravas' arrows, Bhima caught hold of another prince and killed him with one mighty slap. He then remounted his chariot and blew his conch. With a volley of gold-winged shafts he smashed the chariot of Durmada, another of Duryodhana's brothers. Durmada ran over to his brother Duskarna's chariot and leapt aboard. Both princes stood together firing their straight-flying arrows at Bhima by the hundreds. Bhima rushed at Duskarna and demolished his chariot with a single mace blow. The two princes jumped clear, but Bhima leapt down and pounded them with his fists. Struck repeatedly by Bhima they both fell dead, their bodies pulverized.

Seeing Bhima ranging among them like an all-destroying tempest, the Kauravas cried out in fear. "Surely this is Rudra himself come as Bhima for our annihilation! Let us flee for our lives."

The soldiers ran wildly from Bhima. No two were seen to be running together as they fled without looking back. Returning to his chariot, Bhima fought with Duryodhana, Kripa and Karna. As he battled alone, a number of other Pandava warriors came to his support and a violent struggle ensued.

Elsewhere on the battlefield Somadatta encountered Satyaki. Enraged at his son's slaughter, the Kuru leader bellowed, "Why, O Satvata hero, have you forgotten the religious codes of warfare and taken to evil practices? How can a virtuous person strike one who has laid aside his weapons? This will lead to your downfall, O mean-minded one. You will now suffer the consequences of your vile act. I swear by my two sons that I will either kill you or be killed by you today. If this does not come to pass, then may I fall into a dreadful hell. Stand ready, wretch, for I will now let go my deadliest weapons."

Somadatta blew his conch and roared like a lion. Satyaki was infuriated by his speech and he thundered back, "O descendent of Kuru, I am not afraid of you or your empty words. Why should one conversant with

kshatriya duty quake when confronted by such threats? Fight to your utmost power, either alone or with your supporters, and I will slay you. I killed your son along with many other powerful Kurus. Indeed, they have all been slain by the anger of the virtuous and ever-truthful Yudhishthira. Having chosen him as your enemy, O lord of men, you too will follow the path they have taken. Guard yourself. I swear by Krishna's feet and by all my past pious acts that I will kill you today."

Both men began to discharge volleys of arrows. Observing the fight from a distance, Duryodhana sent a large division of horsemen to support his old uncle. Ten thousand of them hemmed in Satyaki and covered him with arrows. Dhristadyumna saw Satyaki's position and came to his aid, along with a great force of Pandava warriors. A deafening tumult arose as the two armies met. Somadatta concentrated his attack on Satyaki, sending a cluster of blood-sucking shafts at him. The Vrishni hero responded with arrows that pierced Somadatta's armor and made him swoon. His charioteer at once carried him away from the fight.

Drona rushed into the battle hoping to slay Satyaki. Shouting out his battle cry, he hurled powerful weapons at the Vrishni warrior, who was contending with the thousands of other fighters all around him. Yudhishthira and the twins, seeing Satyaki under attack by Drona, roared in anger and entered the fight. They assailed Drona from all sides and diverted his attack from Satyaki. Bhima and Dhristadyumna joined them, and Duryodhana, Karna and Kripa came to support the Kauravas. With the heroes on both sides backed by numerous troops, a fierce and confused fight ensued. Arrows, darts, lances and other weapons flew through the air. Maces collided in showers of sparks and swords clashed. Wrathful warriors hacked and lunged at each other. The heads, limbs and entrails of slain warriors covered the ground. With screams and roars they fell upon each other, blinded by rage.

Some way off, Ghatotkacha was moving across the field. The Rakshasa was mounted on an eight-wheeled chariot made of black iron and spread with bearskins. Furnished with all types of weapons, it emitted a terrifying noise as it moved across the field. It was a celestial chariot, drawn by beasts of the underworld who resembled elephants but who had horns and blazing red eyes. On its banner was a great black vulture with outspread wings and feet, and it gave off frightful screeches. Around its sides were red flags and rows of bones. Ghatotkacha stood on the chariot like a dark

mountain. With his long fangs, arrow-shaped ears, unnatural eyes and bald head, his sight sent the Kaurava troops dashing away in terror. He was surrounded by an akshauhini of Rakshasa warriors armed with maces, spears, rocks and trees. They advanced into battle with roars that shook the earth.

Seeing him advance, Ashvatthama came before him. Proud of his ability with weapons, he stood unmoving as the Rakshasas approached. Ghatotkacha laughed and used his mystic powers to make a shower of rocks fall on Ashvatthama and the soldiers supporting him. With the stones fell arrows, spears, axes and clubs. Releasing an arrow charged with mantras, Ashvatthama checked the downpour. Ghatotkacha then released fifty shafts that dug into Ashvatthama's armor and body. Drona's son, maintaining his equilibrium, replied with a dozen arrows that cut into the Rakshasa. Ghatotkacha, rocked by the assault, took up a thousand-spoked wheel with a razor-sharp edge. It shone like fire and was studded with gems. Spinning it, the Rakshasa hurled it at Ashvatthama.

With twenty crescent-headed shafts, Ashvatthama broke the wheel to pieces. It fell uselessly to the ground like the purposes of a man under the influence of adverse destiny. Ghatotkacha followed the attack with a volley of shafts that completely covered Ashvatthama. The Rakshasa's son, Anjanaparva, then came to his side and joined the assault on Ashvatthama. He attacked him with hundreds of long arrows fitted with barbed heads and soaked in oil.

Swallowed by shafts, Ashvatthama appeared like Mount Meru drenched by a shower of rain. His charioteer swiftly wheeled his chariot around, and as he came clear of the onslaught, he released an arrow that cut down Anjanaparva's standard. With two more shafts he slew his two charioteers. He then killed his horses, and with another razor-faced arrow cut apart his bow.

Anjanaparva leapt from his chariot brandishing a scimitar embellished with golden stars, but he had hardly fixed his gaze on Ashvatthama before Drona's son cut the weapon apart with three arrows. The Rakshasa took up a mace decked with gold. Swinging it around, he hurled it at Ashvatthama, who broke it to pieces with his arrows. Anjanaparva jumped into the sky and rained down trees and rocks onto his opponent. At the same time, Ghatotkacha fired thousands of fire-tipped shafts at Ashvatthama. Simultaneously countering Ghatotkacha's attack and fighting Anjanaparva,

Ashvatthama shot arrows into the air which pierced Anjanaparva all over his body. As the Rakshasa descended to the ground, Ashvatthama released a broad-headed shaft with all his strength. Empowered by mantras, the shaft tore off Anjanaparva's head, which fell to the earth like a black boulder, its bright earrings gleaming like seams of gold.

Shaking with grief and rage, Ghatotkacha roared, "Stand and fight! You will not escape alive from me today."

Ashvatthama lowered his bow and replied derisively, "O celestially powerful one, you should fight with others. As Bhima's offspring you are like my son. It is improper for me to fight you, nor do I feel angry with you. Leave now while I still feel kindly disposed toward you, for a man excited by rage may kill even his own self."

Ghatotkacha was even more incensed and he seemed to blaze as he bellowed, "What!? Am I like an ordinary man that you are trying to frighten me with your words? I am the emperor of the Rakshasas. My prowess is no less than that of the ten-headed Ravana. O son of Drona, stay for only a moment more in this fight and I will put an end to your life."

The maddened Rakshasa fired his long arrows at Ashvatthama, but Drona's son struck them all down before they could reach him. Both warriors released clouds of arrows that appeared to fight each other in the sky. The shafts collided, creating sparks and fire that illuminated the battlefield. By his mystic power, Ghatotkacha disappeared from view and suddenly assumed the shape of a towering mountain abounding in peaks and trees. At its summit was a fountain that incessantly showered spears, darts, swords and heavy clubs.

Remaining calm, Ashvatthama invoked the Vajra weapon which destroyed the Rakshasa's illusion. Ghatotkacha again appeared in the sky wielding his bow. With his numerous gold ornaments he seemed like a blue cloud adorned with a rainbow. He invoked a weapon that sent a thick shower of rocks onto Ashvatthama. The heavy stones shook the earth as they fell. Reciting ancient incantations, Ashvatthama at once invoked the Vayavya weapon. Unlimited numbers of arrows flew from his bow and smashed all the rocks as they fell from the sky. With the divine wind weapon Ashvatthama went on to assail the Rakshasa army and destroyed thousands of them.

Ghatotkacha returned to the ground and mounted his chariot.

Surrounded by a host of Rakshasas, who had the heads of lions and tigers and rode upon fearful-looking animals, he charged. Ashvatthama stood firm as the hordes rushed toward him screaming in discordant voices. Led by Bhima's son, they appeared like an army of hideous-looking ghosts and spirits with Rudra at their head.

Ghatotkacha released ten arrows that struck Ashvatthama like thunderbolts. Ashvatthama rocked in his chariot, but kept his balance. Ghatotkacha fired another shaft that broke Ashvatthama's bow, but he strung another one in a matter of seconds. By means of celestial weapons he shot hundreds of thousands of sky-ranging shafts with golden wings. Sorely oppressed by those arrows, the Rakshasa forces looked like a herd of elephants attacked by a lion. The shafts fell upon their broad chests and arms, piercing through their armor and digging into their leathery skins.

Ashvatthama became like Shiva when he had destroyed the powerful Asura Tripura in a long past age. His celestial weapons claimed the lives of countless Rakshasas. More and more of the demons appeared on the battlefield, rising up from the nether regions to join Ghatotkacha. They rushed in a body at Ashvatthama, wielding spiked maces, scimitars, clubs, lances, axes, and many weapons unknown to men. They hurled them at Drona's son and roared exultantly. Seeing all the weapons falling on Ashvatthama, the Kauravas felt distressed, but Drona's son soon dispelled the attack with thousands of his own shafts. He emerged from the shower of missiles and destroyed the Rakshasas by celestial weapons. Fiery darts from his bow consumed the Rakshasa army. Ashvatthama annihilated Ghatotkacha's forces.

With his eyes rolling in anger, Ghatotkacha ordered his charioteer to charge Ashvatthama. He discharged arrows like poisonous serpents at Ashvatthama and checked his attack. Completely covering Drona's son with shafts resembling long barbed poles, Ghatotkacha sent up a great roar. Other warriors entered the fight, some supporting Ghatotkacha and others Ashvatthama. Dhristadyumna came up to Ghatotkacha, while Shakuni and his followers supported Ashvatthama. Drupada and his army attacked the Kauravas surrounding Duryodhana, with Bhima following him on his chariot, his mace whirling as he rushed into battle.

As a fervent battle ensued between the armies, Ashvatthama suddenly released a shaft that looked like the rod held by Death personified.

Charged with the force of Indra's thunderbolt, it struck Ghatotkacha on the chest and threw him to the ground. Dhristadyumna saw him fall and he quickly took him up onto his own chariot and carried him away.

Chapter Twenty. The night battle.

As the sun approached the western hills, Satyaki once again encountered Somadatta. He told his charioteer to bear him toward the Kuru. "His time has come. I will not return from this battle without slaying him."

Somadatta confronted him without fear. The two kshatriyas pierced one another with snake-like arrows. They roared furiously and circled one another, each maintaining a fierce assault on his opponent. With blood running from their many wounds, they looked like a couple of kinshuka trees in full bloom. Casting angry glances, the heroes fought relentlessly, looking for weakness in the other.

Somadatta's father, Bahlika, rode up to assist his son. Seeing this, Bhima came to Satyaki's aid. Bahlika met him with a volley of arrows. Shrugging off the shafts, which were deflected by his thick armor, Bhima raised his bow. He shot hundreds of yard-long arrows at Bahlika, but the old warrior cut them down in mid-flight. He retaliated with a long steel shaft fitted with a barbed point. Fired with all Bahlika's power, the arrow struck Bhima on the chest and pierced his armor. Bhima trembled and swooned. Regaining his senses as Bahlika closed in to press his advantage, Bhima took up an iron mace and hurled it at his opponent. It sped through the air like a fireball and struck Bahlika on the forehead. The Kuru general died instantly and he fell headlong from his chariot.

Somadatta, still fighting with Satyaki, cried out in grief as his father died. He trained his arrows on Bhima, but Satyaki showered him with shafts and drew him away from the Pandava. Somadatta fought in a frenzy. He cut Satyaki's bow in two with a broad-headed arrow and struck him with countless more. Satyaki took up another bow and with a volley of shafts cut down Somadatta's standard and killed his charioteer and horses. Somadatta stood his ground and covered his foe with arrows that flew in straight lines from his bow. Satyaki raised a spear and hurled it at Somadatta's chest with all his power, but Somadatta cut that iron lance with arrows as it coursed toward him. Satyaki, screaming in anger, again sundered his opponent's bow. At the same time, he smashed his armor with a number of crescent-headed shafts.

Seeing his opponent momentarily stunned, Satyaki took up a long arrow resembling a golden spear. He fixed it to his bow and charged it with

mantras. The shaft hit Somadatta in the chest and split his heart in two. He fell from his chariot like a sal tree severed at its root. The Kauravas wailed in anguish. Seizing their advantage, the Pandava forces pressed them back with a brutal assault. Headed by Bhima, Yudhishthira and the twins, they flew against their dispirited foes with furious yells.

Duryodhana went over to Karna. "The time has now come, O you who are devoted to your friends, when your friends seek your assistance. O Karna, save my soldiers. The Pandavas are roaring in ecstasy and crushing our forces like Indra crushes the Asuras."

Karna reassured the anxious Kaurava. "O king, I will soon destroy the Pandavas. The time has come for me to kill Arjuna. With him gone, his brothers will be finished and your victory will be assured. I will employ the unfailing dart Indra gave me. Give up your sorrow. After killing Arjuna, I will destroy your other enemies and hand you the earth."

Karna broke away from Duryodhana and roared. He looked at the dart secure in its golden case at the front of his chariot. So far, no opportunity had arisen for him to use it. Arjuna had always been engaged in some other part of the field. But things were coming to a head. The war was reaching its climax and all the great fighters would soon meet in fights to the finish. He would challenge Arjuna to single combat. One way or another, it would be their final encounter.

Kripa was nearby and overheard Karna's words. He laughed. "Well spoken, son of Radha. If only words were sufficient, Duryodhana could consider himself successful. O hero, we have yet to see your words backed by action. Whenever you have encountered the Pandavas, you have been defeated."

Kripa reminded Karna of the incident with the Gandharvas in the forest and of the battle on Virata's field. "Your boasts are like the roaring of rainless autumn clouds. They will cease the moment you face Partha in battle. Roar now while you are still beyond the range of his arrows, for when you are pierced by his shafts, you will be silent forever."

Upset by Kripa's words, Karna replied, "Why do you revile me, O brahmin? Wise men who know their own power roar and speak of their strength. Thus they gain inspiration to perform great deeds. You will soon see the proof of my boasts when I slay Arjuna, together with Krishna,

Dhristadyumna and all their followers."

Kripa looked disdainfully at Karna. "Your words are little more than a madman's ravings. Arjuna cannot be slain by any creature within the three worlds, nor can the virtuous Yudhisthira be conquered. Simply by his angry glance he could, if he desired, consume all beings. It is only his compassion and piety that allows us to live. Krishna always protects him and his brothers, and no one can know or approach Krishna. It is only your impudence that allows you to think you can face Arjuna in battle."

Karna tried to smile through his rising anger. "No doubt your words are true, twice-born one. The Pandavas are all this and more. Yet I am greater and will still vanquish my enemy. Do not underestimate me and consider me an ordinary man. I still have in my possession Indra's infallible dart. It will kill anyone at whom it is hurled. Indra himself told me that. The gods' words are never futile. I plan to direct this dart at Arjuna. When I slay him, he will join his father in heaven. His brothers will then be incapable of continuing the fight. This is why I roar, O weak brahmin, seeing our imminent victory."

Karna lost control of his temper and insulted Kripa. He accused him of favoring the Pandavas and threatened to cut out his tongue if he again spoke in such a way. Raising his voice he went on, "I see no real prowess in the Pandavas' feats. We are also destroying their forces. The fact that great heroes like Bhishma, Bhagadatta, Bhurishrava, Somadatta, Jayadratha and others now lie on the battlefield is only due to fate. How could the Pandavas have slain such men, especially in the presence of Drona, you, the king, me, and other heroes? Only adverse destiny is to blame; but you, most base of men, choose to praise our enemies. You will soon see their actual power when they meet with me in battle."

Ashvatthama heard Karna insulting his maternal uncle. Drona's son had never had much time for Karna, who showed little respect for his elders. Now he had gone too far. Kripa was a brahmin and the Kurus' teacher. He did not deserve to be mistreated by the charioteer's son. Ashvatthama took out his sword and jumped from his chariot, roaring at Karna. "How dare you speak like that, fool! The acharya spoke the truth about Arjuna and his brothers, but because you are envious you could not tolerate it. O wretch of a charioteer, you brag too much and do little. We have already seen your power when matched against Arjuna. Even the celestials and Asuras could not overcome Arjuna. Still, you hope to somehow defeat him yourself. Besides his own

strength, Arjuna has the unconquerable Krishna as his ally. O vilest of men, I will not stand by as you insult my uncle. Stand before me and I will cut your head from your body."

Karna came down from his chariot to meet Ashvatthama's challenge. Seeing two of his most powerful fighters ready to fight to the death, Duryodhana became alarmed. He ran forward and stood between them, placing a hand on each of their shoulders.

Karna drew out his sword and said, "O best of the Kurus, stand aside. This one of evil understanding shall now taste my power."

Still holding onto both men, Duryodhana said, "O Ashvatthama, please forgive him. Do not be angry with Karna. The Pandavas are shouting out their battle cries and coming at us from all sides. I need you both if we are to overpower them. Be pacified."

Seeing Duryodhana's anxiety, Ashvatthama calmed himself and said, "I forgive you, Karna. Arjuna will soon enough crush your swelling pride."

Reluctantly, Karna pulled away from Duryodhana and lowered his sword. Still seething, he glared at Ashvatthama.

Kripa, who was naturally of a mild disposition, said, "O wicked-minded Karna, I also forgive you. It is a fact that Arjuna will soon destroy your arrogance."

While the Kuru chiefs had been speaking, the battle raged around them. The exultant Pandava forces had pushed forward and were routing the Kauravas.

Karna, still furious from Ashvatthama's rebuke, looked around at the Pandava troops. It was time to show his full power. He remounted his chariot and charged into the fray. Drawing his long bow back to his ear, he began to release shafts that flew like fire-tipped rockets. Charioteers and horsemen fell by the hundreds as the arrows whistled from his bow.

Some of the Pandava warriors shouted, "Here is Karna! O Karna, most sinful of men, give us battle." Others said, "This crooked-minded man is the root of all these evils. He deserves to be killed by every king who values virtue. Arrogant and sinful, he abides by Duryodhana's order. Slay him at once!"

Yudhisthira marshaled his troops into a force that surrounded Karna.

Thousands of warriors rained down arrows, darts, lances and iron balls covered with flaming oil. Seeing himself assailed by so many warriors, Karna displayed his skill as he whirled about on his chariot and countered their attack. Thousands of weapons dropped uselessly to the earth as Karna fearlessly cut them to pieces with his arrows.

Shaking their bows and roaring, the Pandavas stepped up their attack. They covered Karna with a mass of arrows that screened him from view, but Karna broke through the assault by firing his own shafts with blinding speed. Coming clear of the shower of weapons, he launched a counter-offensive. He mowed down the Pandava troops. Sending arrows inspired by mantras, he slew thousands of warriors at a time. As Karna ranged about like the sun pouring forth scorching rays at noon, the Pandava army cried out. They looked about for a protector and ran here and there in fear.

Bhima then rushed forward and challenged Karna. Karna clenched his teeth and shot a powerful shaft that cut down Bhima's standard. As the tall pole fell, he fired four more arrows that killed his horses. With another five shafts he pierced Vishoka, who leapt down and ran across to Satyaki's chariot, arrows protruding from his body.

Incensed, Bhima took up a long, steel-tipped lance. Balancing it in his hand he hurled it with all his power. Karna cut it down with ten arrows. As the fragments of the lance fell to the ground, Bhima took up a resplendent sword and a shield decorated with a hundred moons. He leapt from his chariot and rushed at Karna, who destroyed the shield with a dozen razor-faced arrows. Undaunted, Bhima flung the sword and it flew at Karna like a dart, hitting his bow and cutting it in half.

Karna took up another bow and aimed hundreds of shafts at Bhima. Bhima bounded high into the air and landed next to Karna's chariot. Seeing him appear like Yamaraja himself, Karna ducked down in his chariot. His charioteer urged on his horses and the chariot pulled away from Bhima. Karna stood again on the terrace of his chariot and launched fifty steel arrows at Bhima almost as if they were one. Pierced by those shafts, Bhima ran into the midst of an elephant division. With blows from his fists he felled a number of the beasts, surrounding himself with their bodies to protect himself from Karna's chariot. Seeing Karna still trying to reach him, Bhima lifted one of the elephants and tossed it at him. Karna cut the elephant to pieces with arrows and continued his attack. He rained down shafts, trying to slay Bhima,

who had no weapon, but Bhima nimbly dodged Karna's arrows and leapt into the air.

Maddened, Bhima hurled horses, chariots, elephant limbs, and anything else he could find on the field, but Karna cut everything to pieces with his arrows. Bhima practically breathed fire. He knew he could kill the charioteer's son with his bare hands, but he wanted to respect Arjuna's vow. Therefore, it was not yet time for Karna to die. Deciding to leave the fight, he came out from behind the elephants and ran toward the Pandava warriors. Karna did not relent. He struck Bhima with hundreds of powerful arrows that checked his progress on the field. Remembering his promise to Kunti, he did not attempt to kill Bhima. Karna knew he could kill only one Pandava: Arjuna.

Karna rode over to Bhima and hit him on the head with the end of his bow, laughing. "O ignorant and impotent fool, go and fight with others. You are no match for a real man. Your only prowess lies in eating. The battlefield is no place for a boy like you. Rather, you should renounce the warrior's life and remain in the forest. Go now while I am still favorably inclined toward you. Find Arjuna and Krishna and ask for their protection."

Controlling himself with difficulty, Bhima replied, "O wicked fool, I have repeatedly defeated you and it is only by your fate that you still live. How do you indulge in such vain bragging? Even if you defeated me, what would it prove? The ancients have seen even Indra's victories and defeats. Come down from your chariot and wrestle with me if you dare. I will show you how I killed Kichaka."

Suddenly, Arjuna appeared on the battlefield not far from Karna. Seeing him standing over Bhima, who was on foot, he sped a number of arrows at him. Bhima took the opportunity to escape. Karna looked up and saw his antagonist. Licking his lips he glanced down at his Shakti weapon. Soon the Pandavas would lament.

Arjuna struck Karna with a volley of shafts that made him wince and drop his bow. Quickly regaining his senses, he responded with a hundred straight-flying arrows. Arjuna cut them down and continuously struck his foe with countless other shafts. As Karna struggled to regain his composure, Arjuna released a long arrow resembling a serpent. Inspired with mantras the shaft flew straight at Karna with the speed of the wind. Ashvatthama saw the

arrow flying for Karna's destruction and, remembering his duty as a kshatriya and his debt to Duryodhana, cut it down with a razor-headed shaft inspired with mantras. He then turned to attack Arjuna and draw him away from Karna, who was fatigued from his fight with Bhima.

As the armies supporting the principal warriors surged forward, a general fight ensued. Karna lost sight of Arjuna as other Pandava warriors engaged him.

* * *

The sun was setting, but neither side sounded the retreat. As twilight set in, they continued fighting with full force. More than three-quarters of the warriors on both sides had been slain. It was obvious that the war would soon be over. Darkness fell with both armies frantically seeking victory, contending by the light of thousands of torches. Barely able to distinguish friend from foe, they savagely assailed another. Blazing arrows lit the sky, and the wreckage of burning chariots silhouetted soldiers locked in battle. The moon rose and cast an eerie glow across the battlefield, which rang out with the continuous clash of weapons and the cries of warriors.

Arjuna, having annihilated almost all of the Samshaptakas, turned the full force of his weapons onto the surviving Kauravas. Displaying his long-practiced skill of striking invisible targets, he destroyed his enemies like a fire destroys dry grass. The Kauravas screamed in terror as his arrows came out of the darkness and cut them to pieces. They fled, falling over one another in their haste to escape.

Duryodhana called to his fleeing troops, "Stop! Do not fear. I will destroy Partha along with all his brothers. Stand and fight, for you will now witness my incomparable prowess."

The prince shouted orders and charged in Arjuna's direction, followed by a large division of charioteers and horsemen. Seeing this, Kripa went to Ashvatthama and said, "The king has lost all caution in his rage. Recklessly, he is rushing at Arjuna. If he is not checked, Arjuna will burn him to ashes. Go and stop him."

Ashvatthama went after Duryodhana and called out, "O son of Gandhari, as long as I am living, you need not fight. I will check Partha. Why

did you not order me, who am always devoted to your welfare?"

Clutching his bow and a handful of arrows, Duryodhana shouted back, "It seems that your esteemed father is protecting the Pandavas like his own children. You too have not yet displayed your full power in battle. Otherwise, how could my enemies still survive? Fie on my avaricious self, for whose sake so many kings have died. O son of Kripa, be gratified. Slay my foes with your celestial weapons, which are equal to those of Shiva himself. Who is there who can stay within range of your missiles? O son of a brahmin, you are surely capable of routing the Pandavas and all their forces. Go speedily into battle and do us good. We now depend on you."

Duryodhana had stopped some distance from Arjuna. He could see Hanuman on his banner glowing in the darkness. Arjuna's chariot roved about the field leaving a trail of destruction as flaming arrows shot out in all directions.

Ashvatthama replied, "O Kaurava, it is true that the Pandavas are dear to my father, just as they are dear to me. We are also dear to them. But in battle, it is different. All friendships are forgotten. Karna, Salya, Kritavarma, Kripa, my father and I are doing all we can to defeat them."

Ashvatthama was tired of hearing Duryodhana's continuous accusations, especially against his father. Seeing the Kaurava prince as his equal in age and accomplishments—and his inferior in caste—he reproached him. "Surely you are mean-minded and possessed of crooked intelligence. Because you are conceited, sinful and avaricious, you trust nobody. Nevertheless, I will not abandon my duty. Today I will use all my power for your sake. You will see the Panchalas, Somakas and Chedis totally destroyed. I will send whoever confronts me to Yamaraja's mansion for their final reckoning."

Ashvatthama's chariot pulled away from Duryodhana and charged straight into the thick of the battle. Plunging into the Panchala forces, he called out, "O mighty chariot-warriors, strike me in a body and show your prowess. Stay in battle and be calm, because I will now display my power."

Great showers of arrows were immediately directed at Ashvatthama, who quickly countered the attack. Before the Pandavas' eyes he began annihilating the troops that surrounded him. Dhristadyumna approached him and shouted, "O preceptor's son, why are you slaying ordinary soldiers? Here

I am. If you are really a hero, then fight with me. I will soon dispatch you to Death's abode."

Dhristadyumna struck Ashvatthama with thick flights of dreadful-looking arrows. They pierced his body like maddened bees entering a flowering tree in search of honey. Ashvatthama became as furious as a kicked serpent. With blood running from his wounds, he dauntlessly resisted Dhristadyumna's attack with his own shafts. Rebuking him in harsh words, he covered him with a volley of steel arrows.

Dhristadyumna laughed. "O brahmin of wicked understanding, do you not know my origin and destiny? I will slay your father, and then I will kill you. You can leave today in safety. I will not kill you while your father still lives, for he deserves his death before you. When the sun rises tomorrow, I will cut him down with my arrows. A brahmin who forgets his duty and takes up arms is a sinful wretch who deserves to be killed by any honest kshatriya."

Beside himself with rage, Ashvatthama fired innumerable arrows at Dhristadyumna. The Panchala prince stood unmoving on his chariot and warded off Ashvatthama's attack. As the fight between the two heroes continued, the celestials watched in awe from the sky. Both men displayed mystical weapons, which lit up the heavens. Unable to gain the advantage over Dhristadyumna, Ashvatthama suddenly slew his horses and charioteer. He then rushed past him and slaughtered the Panchala troops by the thousands. Before anyone could check him, he had sent ten thousand horsemen and infantry to the next world.

Yudhisthira, Bhima and the twins came swiftly to protect the troops, and a general battle ensued by the light of the rising moon. Heroes engaged with heroes and troops battled troops. As they fought on into the night, they recognized each other only by their shouts as they called out their names. With the onset of night, Ghatotkacha felt his strength doubled. Having recovered from Ashvatthama's attack, he came back to the fight. Seeing him on the battlefield again, Krishna said to Arjuna, "Behold Bhima's mighty son. In my opinion, he is the only warrior, other than yourself, capable of defeating Karna. We should at once send him against the charioteer's son. Just see how Karna is destroying our troops. He is like the rising sun even at this grim hour. His arrows are mangling our troops. Look, they are fleeing in every direction."

Krishna pointed to Karna's standard, lit up by torches and visible in the distance. Bent on annihilating the remaining Pandava forces, he ranged about the field with his bow constantly drawn, sending out fire-tipped arrows in unending lines.

Krishna continued. "I do not think the time has come when you should confront Karna. He still has Indra's Shakti weapon, which he is preserving for you, O Partha. Therefore, summon Ghatotkacha and order him to check the arrogant suta's son. The Rakshasa chief is conversant with every kind of Asuric weapon and will surely be a great threat to Karna."

Arjuna looked across at Karna. He longed for the moment when he would be able to curb his pride once and for all. The Pandava knew about his Shakti weapon, but it did not bother him. He had faced every kind of celestial missile before in battle. Krishna's infallible advice, however, should be followed. Perhaps the Shakti was more powerful than he thought. Arjuna summoned Ghatotkacha and the Rakshasa soon appeared before him, encased in armor and ready with bow and sword. Offering obeisances before both Krishna and Arjuna, he said, "Here I am, O rulers of men. Please order me."

Krishna replied, "Take my blessings, O Ghatotkacha, and hear what must be done. The hour for you to display your prowess has arrived. I do not see another who can accomplish what you can do. Over there stands the powerful Karna, hurling his weapons and scorching our army. None can stand before him but you. Therefore, become the raft that will carry us across the frightful Kaurava ocean, where Karna is its shark. Rescue your fathers and uncles, for this is the reason why a man begets sons. You are indeed a worthy son of Bhima, O Rakshasa, as you always desire his welfare. Use your illusions and power to check the fierce bowman Karna. Pandu's sons, headed by Dhristadyumna, will engage with Drona and his forces."

Arjuna told Ghatotkacha that he would send Satyaki to protect him from other attacks as he fought with Karna. He should simply concentrate all his power on the suta's son and his followers.

Ghatotkacha was overjoyed at the opportunity to serve his uncle and Krishna. "I am up to this task, O Bharata. I am surely a match for Karna and any other powerful hero who cares to face me. As long as the world exists, men will speak of the battle I will fight tonight. Fighting in the Rakshasa mode, I will spare no one, even those who solicit mercy with folded palms."

Bowing again before Arjuna and Krishna, Ghatotkacha then left and rushed toward Karna. He launched flaming arrows at him from a distance of two miles and bellowed out his challenge. Seeing the huge Rakshasa bearing down upon him, Karna stopped slaughtering the Pandava troops and turned to face him. As a violent encounter took place, Alambusha approached Duryodhana and said, "Permit me to engage with the Pandavas, O king. I desire to slay them and offer their blood as an oblation to my deceased relatives. By some Rakshasa-killing charm they managed to kill my brother Baka and my father Jatasura, but they will not escape me, for this night hour has doubled my power."

Duryodhana smiled at the Rakshasa. "Go and challenge Ghatotkacha. He is of your race and is waging a terrible battle with Karna. Ever devoted to the interests of the Pandavas, he is creating carnage among my troops."

Alambusha looked across at Ghatotkacha and licked his lips. "I go at once." He mounted his iron chariot with its spikes protruding from the sides and, uttering a deafening roar, charged.

Ghatotkacha, screaming hideously, maintained an unending assault on Karna and, at the same time, destroyed thousands of the warriors who supported him. As Alambusha came at him, he laughed and released a powerful volley of long iron shafts with flaming points. The scorching arrows struck Alambusha and checked his progress. Employing his Rakshasa powers, Ghatotkacha then caused a tremendous downpour of shafts to appear on the battlefield. They fell on Karna, Alambusha, and all the Kauravas surrounding them. Alambusha displayed similar skills to produce arrows that countered those of his foe. For some time the two Rakshasas fought, both exhibiting mystical illusions. Flaming rocks and lances fell from the sky. Ferocious beasts and ghastly-looking wraiths and spirits rose from the ground, their screams terrifying the Kaurava soldiers who ran in fear. Even in the dark of night, an even denser darkness suddenly set in, making everything invisible.

As one Rakshasa created an illusion, the other countered it with his own power. They fired countless arrows at one another and hurled darts, maces, iron balls, axes and lances. They roared in fury, making the earth vibrate. Ghatotkacha succeeded in smashing his opponent's chariot with a number of steel shafts shot in swift succession. Alambusha leapt down and flew at Ghatotkacha with outstretched arms. He struck his antagonist with his

bare fists, and Ghatotkacha shook like a mountain in an earthquake. Raising his own bludgeon-like arm, he dealt a crushing blow to Alambusha that sent him sprawling. Ghatotkacha jumped onto his foe and pressed his neck, but Alambusha wrestled himself free. The two Rakshasas fought hand to hand as the hair of onlookers stood erect in fear. Striking and kicking, they threw each other to the ground. Both changed shapes—one becoming a great serpent and the other an eagle, one an elephant and the other a tiger, then a pair of sharabhas. Rising into the sky, they appeared like two planets colliding. They fought wonderfully, attacking each other with mallets, swords, spears, trees and mountain peaks.

Gradually, Ghatotkacha's superior strength began to tell. Seeing Alambusha tiring, he seized him by the hair. He dashed him to the ground and dealt him a great kick. Taking hold of a shining scimitar, he jerked his head upwards and severed it from his trunk. Ghatotkacha got onto his chariot still holding the head. He went over to Duryodhana and tossed it into his chariot. Seeing the blood-soaked head, its face contorted and hair disheveled, Duryodhana was shocked. He looked over at Ghatotkacha, who shouted, "Just see your friend, O king, whose great prowess you have personally witnessed. You are destined to see Karna and indeed yourself meet a similar end. The scriptures say that one should never go before a king with empty hands. Accept, then, this head as my gift to you. Be free from anxiety only for as long as I do not slay Karna."

Ghatotkacha turned away from Duryodhana and resumed his attack on Karna, who was hemmed in by Pandava warriors striving to hold him in check. The Rakshasa sent a stream of shafts at Karna and the fight between them carried on in earnest. Like two tigers tearing each other with their claws, they mangled each other with their lances, arrows and darts. Their blazing shafts lit up the battlefield. No one could look at them as they released their weapons. Covered with wounds and steeped in their own blood, they resembled two hills of red chalk with rivulets flowing down their sides. Even though both were endeavoring to their utmost, they could not make the other flinch. The twang of their bows filled the four quarters like the continuous rumbling of thunder.

Realizing that he could not overpower his foe with arrows, Ghatotkacha invoked the Rakshasa weapon. A force of demons armed with large rocks, lances, trees and clubs, immediately encircled Karna. Other

Rakshasas appeared in the sky and rained down an incessant shower of javelins, battle-axes and iron wheels on Karna and the Kaurava army. Everyone fled in alarm. Only Karna, proud of his strength, did not flee. With tens of thousands of arrows he checked the Rakshasa illusions and countered their weapons. Ghatotkacha rushed at Karna with his mace whirling above his head. Karna cut the mace apart with a dozen arrows and pierced his chest with twenty more. Stopped in his tracks, Ghatotkacha hurled at Karna a razor-edged discus adorned with jewels and shining brilliantly. Karna again cut the weapon to pieces almost as soon as it left the Rakshasa's hand.

Seeing his discus fall in fragments, Ghatotkacha blazed up in anger and covered Karna with arrows as Rahu covers the sun. Karna countered his attack and sent a similar number of shafts at his foe. Ghatotkacha rose into the sky and soared above Karna's head. He dropped rocks and trees on him by the hundreds, but Karna smashed them to pieces with his arrows. Invoking a celestial weapon, Karna pierced Ghatotkacha all over his body with so many arrows that he appeared like a porcupine with erect quills.

Ghatotkacha used his own illusory powers to counter Karna's weapon, then disappeared from view. Suddenly, showers of arrows began to appear from all parts of the sky and from every quarter. They fell upon the Kauravas and Karna from all sides. Karna invoked other divine weapons, but Ghatotkacha appeared in a form with many huge heads and swallowed them. He ranged about the heavens and on the ground, seeming to be in many places at once. At one moment he was seen in a vast form and in the next he was as small as a thumb. He entered the earth and went high into the sky. Appearing at a great distance, he suddenly reappeared right next to Karna.

Ghatotkacha created a mountain on the battlefield that issued forth a shower of weapons. Karna, unruffled, broke the mountain to pieces by means of a celestial missile. The Rakshasa then created a dense blue cloud above Karna that dropped a thick shower of boulders. Karna blew the cloud away with the Vayavya weapon. With limitless arrows, he continuously destroyed the Rakshasa illusions. Thousands of demons then attacked Karna with every kind of deadly weapon. Karna checked all his attackers with swift shafts shot with such speed that they could not be seen until they struck their target. The afflicted Rakshasa forces appeared like a host of wild elephants assailed by an angry lion. Karna destroyed them like the god of fire burning down all creatures at the end of creation. Only Ghatotkacha could stand before the

enraged Karna as he released his weapons.

Bhima's son then created a chariot created by his own powers of illusion. The chariot resembled a hill and was yoked to a hundred goblin-headed asses as big as elephants. They drew Ghatotkacha close to Karna, and the Rakshasa hurled a celestial lance at him that blazed through the sky like a lightning bolt. Amazing all the onlookers, Karna caught the lance and threw it back at Ghatotkacha. The surprised Rakshasa leapt clear and the lance hit his chariot, smashing it into a thousand flaming pieces and killing its horses and charioteer. As his chariot exploded, Ghatotkacha rose again into the sky. Karna directed numerous celestial weapons at him, but he avoided them all by his agility and illusory powers.

He multiplied himself into a hundred forms so that Karna could not distinguish which of them was actually his enemy. Then he made ferocious animals appear from all directions. Lions, tigers, hyenas, fire-tongued snakes and iron-beaked vultures issued forth and ran screaming or roaring at Karna and the other Kauravas. Packs of wolves and leopards with gruesome features rushed across the field, along with numerous ghosts, pishachas, jinn and men with beasts' heads. Karna remained steadfast on his chariot and struck all the creatures with straight-flying shafts. Uttering incantations sacred to the sun-god, he burned up his assailants by the tens of thousands. Struck by Karna's mantra-charged arrows, their bodies fell to the earth in charred and mutilated pieces.

Ghatotkacha vanished from sight and boomed out at Karna from across the sky, "Your end is near, wretch. Wait and I will slay you."

Karna, unable to see his opponent, covered the sky with arrows. Suddenly, a great red cloud appeared in the heavens, casting a red glow over the battlefield. It emitted flashes of lightning and tongues of fire. The cloud roared as if thousands of drums were being beaten simultaneously. From it fell countless gold-winged shafts, spears, heavy clubs, spiked bludgeons, razor-edged discuses and numerous other weapons. They dropped on the surviving Kauravas, who wailed in distress. From out of the cloud flew thousands of Rakshasas clutching spears and battle-axes. They ranged about the sky like flying mountains. With blazing faces and sharp teeth, the monstrous demons struck terror into the Kauravas' hearts. Descending onto the battlefield, they slaughtered Duryodhana's forces without mercy. A confused din arose in the gloom of the night battle as thousands of brave

warriors lost their lives. Unable to stand against their attackers, the Kauravas fled. As they ran they cried, "Run! All is lost! The gods with Indra at their head have come to destroy us."

Karna alone, covered by arrows, remained fearless. He fought back against the Rakshasas, warding off their attack and sending his blazing steel shafts into the sky and in all directions. Closing on his intrepid foe, Ghatotkacha hurled four irresistible lances that slew Karna's horses. Karna saw him swiftly approaching, his scimitar held high. All around him he heard the Kauravas' wails and cries: "O Karna, use Indra's weapon to slay this colossus. Otherwise, he will kill us all with his mighty illusions."

Karna reflected. There was no alternative. The Rakshasa was consuming all his celestial weapons. Nothing could stop him except the infallible Shakti. Seeing that Ghatotkacha would also slay him, he forgot about Arjuna and snatched the Shakti weapon from its gold case. Placing it on his bow he aimed it at the Rakshasa while uttering the mantras. The battlefield around him became brilliantly illuminated, as if the sun had risen. Fearful winds blew and thunder resounded in the heavens. Karna released the weapon and it flew like a fireball at Ghatotkacha. The Rakshasa saw his end approaching and suddenly expanded his body to an immense size. Towering above the battlefield, he was struck full on the chest by the Shakti. It passed clean through his body and flew up into the sky, disappearing into the heavens to return to Indra.

Slain instantly, Ghatotkacha fell toward the Kauravas. His huge frame crushed a complete division of warriors as he hit the ground. As he died, his frightful illusions vanished. Seeing his opponent killed, Karna roared with joy. Duryodhana and his brothers shouted with him and the Kauravas beat drums and blew conches. They surrounded Karna and praised him with cheerful voices.

Chapter Twenty One. Dhristadyumna Encounters

Drona

Beholding Bhima's son killed and laying like a hill on the battle-field, the Pandavas shed tears of grief. To everyone's amazement, however, Krishna uttered loud war cries and laughed. Dancing on the terrace of Arjuna's chariot, he clapped his arms in happiness. He embraced Arjuna with tears in his eyes.

Arjuna looked at Him with surprise. "Why, O Madhusudana, are you showing delight at such a time? Our troops are crying in sorrow. We also are grief-stricken to see Hidimbi's son slain. O all-knowing one, tell me truly why you have lost your mind. I consider your fickleness to be as incredible as the ocean drying up or Mount Meru walking."

With his hand on his friend's shoulder, Krishna replied, "O Dhananjaya, I feel an overwhelming happiness. Now that Karna has discharged his Shakti weapon, you may consider him dead. No person could have confronted him in battle if, like Karttikeya himself, he stood with the Shakti in hand. By good fortune he has been deprived of his natural armor and now of the dart he received in exchange for the invulnerable coat of mail. He is now like an infuriated, venomous serpent stupefied by incantations, or like a fire with quenched flames."

Krishna told Arjuna that ever since he had heard that Karna had received the Shakti, He had been in anxiety. He knew the weapon's terrible power. Even Arjuna would have been unable to check it. Now it had been spent. Karna could not use it again.

Arjuna looked at Ghatotkacha. The Shakti must surely be something extraordinary if it had brought down that mighty Rakshasa. Why, then, had Karna not used it earlier against him?

Seeing Arjuna's mystified expression and understanding his mind, Krishna said, "Each day Dhritarastra's sons would counsel Karna to use his Shakti and slay you, O Partha, and he would come out firmly resolved to do so. It was I who confounded his attempts. Keeping you at other parts of the battle, I gave him little chance to release the dart. He was always awaiting his chance. It would not have been long until he encountered you in single combat. O Partha, now you need have no fear of that encounter."

Arjuna realized that it must have been more than just Krishna's tactical maneuvers that had saved him. Karna had surely had opportunities to hurl the weapon. His intelligence and memory must have been confounded by the indwelling Supersoul. The Pandava looked with wonder at Krishna. If he desired one's protection, then how could one be killed? And if he wished for someone's death, then who could protect him?

Yudhisthira was sorrowful to witness Ghatotkacha's death. He sat down on the terrace of his chariot and wept. Bhima, his own heart rent with grief, tried to comfort him. Krishna went over to Yudhisthira and said, "O son of Kunti, do not give way to grief at such a critical time. In this dread hour of night, our roaring foes are cheering and rushing at us again. Seeing you dispirited, our own men will lose heart for the fight."

Yudhisthira wiped his eyes with his hands. "You always see the excellent path of duty, O Keshava. We must surely remain in battle, despite reverses. But remembering the many services and kindnesses Bhima's son rendered us, my heart aches. That mighty-armed hero was devoted to us and has laid down his life in our service. The affection I bore for him was no less than the affection I feel for Sahadeva. The suta's son slew him before our eyes. The evil-minded Karna was also instrumental in Abhimanyu's death."

As he spoke to Krishna, Yudhisthira looked out into the night. The battle still raged all around the fallen Ghatotkacha. Karna's illuminated standard could be seen moving among the Pandava forces, with fire-tipped arrows speeding away from him in all directions. Yudhisthira's face set into firm lines. He got to his feet and took hold of his bow, the hand-carved horn studded with glowing gems.

The Pandava king called out to Krishna as he moved off. "Karna and Drona are destroying our army like a pair of infuriated elephants destroying a forest of reeds. O Keshava, I think the time has come for them to die. I myself will advance against Karna. I cannot bear to see his prowess any longer. It seems Arjuna does not wish to kill him, so I will do it myself."

After ordering Bhima to engage with Drona and his supporters, Yudhisthira instructed his charioteer to take him toward Karna. As he left, blowing his conch and twanging his bow, Krishna said to Arjuna, "Lo, under the influence of anger your esteemed elder brother is advancing against Karna. It is not right that you should allow him to engage in a fight with the

suta, whose death you have sworn to accomplish."

Arjuna told Krishna to urge his horses on and to quickly follow Yudhisthira, but just at that moment, they saw Vyasadeva appear on the battlefield near Yudhisthira, who stopped his chariot next to the sage and got down to offer his obeisances. Vyasadeva touched his head in blessing and said, "O foremost of the Bharatas, it is fortunate that Arjuna still lives, although he encountered Karna several times in battle. The Shakti with which Karna slew Ghatotkacha was meant for Arjuna, and only by good fortune did he not use it on him. If a serious duel had taken place between Karna and Arjuna, he would surely have employed the Shakti. A great calamity would then have overtaken you. Ghatotkacha has saved you from that today. The Rakshasa's death was ordained by destiny. Do not give way to wrath or sorrow. All beings in this world must die."

Pacifying Yudhisthira, the sage told him that the war was almost over. "On the fifth day from now the earth will come under your sway. Meditate on virtue. Set your mind on forbearance, charity, truth and asceticism. O son of Kunti, victory always follows righteousness."

After comforting Yudhisthira the sage vanished. The Pandava king, his anger abated, then called for Dhristadyumna and said, "The time for which you were born has now come. Go and check the mighty Drona in battle. For this express purpose did you spring from fire, armed with a bow and sword, and encased in shining mail. Attack Drona at once. Do not fear. Let Shikhandhi, the twins, your father Drupada, Virata, Satyaki, and all the Panchalas and Kekayas go with you. Throw down the preceptor and end this ghastly war."

Arjuna came up to Yudhisthira, who said, "O Dhananjaya, I see now that you have been saved from disaster. It is Krishna alone who is our protector. You should now exert yourself to destroy Karna. Dhristadyumna is advancing against the preceptor. Only four or five akshauhinis remain on the field. This war cannot last much longer."

The two brothers looked around the battlefield. It was just past midnight and the troops were tired. Some of them had lain down to sleep wherever they had been fighting, unable to continue any longer. Others fought on, blinded by sleep and swinging out wildly with their weapons. Warriors were slain while almost unconscious from fatigue, not even feeling

the blows that ended their lives.

Seeing the soldiers' condition, Arjuna rode out into their midst and called out, "You men are all oppressed by drowsiness. If you like you may desist from the fight. Lay down your weapons and your bodies. When the sun rises we may resume the battle."

Praising Arjuna for his compassion, the troops stopped fighting and rested. The entire battlefield gradually became silent as the men lay down to sleep on the ground or on the backs of their slumbering elephants and horses. Others lay on the terraces of their chariots, their bows and swords lying next to them. Stilled by sleep, the powerful warriors and their animals lay with their many ornaments gleaming in the moonlight. The field appeared beautiful, like the work of a skilled artist.

Gradually the sky glowed red and the sun rose from the eastern hills. As the sun illuminated the field, the troops stirred and again rose for battle. The two sides were still intermingled in the positions where they had last fought. Stretching their bodies and rubbing their eyes, they bowed toward the east and offered prayers to the sun-god. Then, mounting their chariots and taking up their weapons, they regrouped into their respective divisions and waited for the order to recommence the fight.

* * *

Duryodhana had not been happy with the decision to rest for the night, but the other Kuru chiefs had disagreed with him. He had wanted to seize the advantage gained by Ghatotkacha's death. The huge Rakshasa had killed thousands of warriors as he fell, evening the odds between the two armies. Duryodhana was infuriated that the Kauravas had not been able to gain the upper hand when they had the chance. Going to Drona he said harshly, "You should have shown no quarter to our weakened enemy. You should not have permitted our troops to follow Arjuna's order. Again and again you have spared the Pandavas. This is my own ill luck."

Drona looked angrily at the prince. "Here I am, still clad in armor and striving to kill your enemies, and I will do whatever can be done by the might of one's arms. Still, I do not see that we will defeat the Pandavas, especially Arjuna. If he comes at us in a wrathful mood, we will all be swiftly dispatched to Yamaraja's mansion. How is it that you fail to understand this

truth, O king, when you have seen it so many times with your own eyes?"

Enraged to hear Drona praising Arjuna again, Duryodhana replied, barely able to control his voice, "O teacher, today, assisted by Dushashana, Karna and my uncle Shakuni, I will slay Arjuna in battle."

Drona laughed. "May good befall you, O Bharata. Your words befit a fool. What presumptuous kshatriya would venture to fight with Arjuna, who stands with Krishna by his side and the Gandiva in his hand? Has any man ever returned safely after challenging Arjuna? Surely you have no intelligence. Suspicious of everyone, you are cruel and rebuke even those who work for your cause. Go and fight, then, and prove your boastful words in battle. You have declared many times that you will crush the Pandavas. Today we will see you prove your claim. Take your uncle, who prefers to fight with dice, and the vain Karna, and stand before Arjuna and his brothers. There they are, waiting for you. Go and do what should be done by a brave kshatriya. You have enjoyed this life to the full. By offering sacrifices and giving charity, you have no debts. There is nothing to stop you. Go and fight without fear."

Drona turned away. Nothing gave him greater pain than fighting for this arrogant prince. What sinful acts had he performed in previous lives that he was now compelled to side with Duryodhana against the Pandavas? Riding into the remaining Kauravas, Drona gave the order to fight. The warriors cheered, blew on their conches, and beat their drums. Then they moved off in a body toward the Pandavas, determined to fight to the death.

On that fifteenth morning, Drona fought with Drupada and Virata. The two monarchs stood at the head of the Panchala and Chedi armies. Disregarding them both, Drona began slaughtering their troops. He quickly caused a terrible destruction among the warriors, annihilating five thousand chariot fighters in less than half an hour. The Pandavas looked at Drona as if he were fire. Whichever way he directed his weapons he routed the Pandava army. None could approach him as he let go his flaming arrows.

A group of three Panchala princes, sons of Dhristadyumna and Shikhandhi, valiantly charged at Drona. They struck him with hundreds of fierce shafts, but he did not waver. Licking his lips, Drona cut down all three princes at once with razor-headed arrows, and they fell headlong to the earth.

Drupada and Virata charged at Drona from both sides. They afflicted

him with long shafts that made him rock on the terrace of his chariot. Drupada hurled ten lances in swift succession, followed by ten steel shafts tipped with fire. Drona cut down all the missiles and struck Drupada on the chest with three arrows. Drupada angrily threw a dart, decked with gold and gems, at his foe, but Drona cut it to pieces with his shafts.

Deciding to slay his opponents, who themselves had killed so many of the Kauravas, Drona took out a couple of crescent-headed arrows forged entirely of steel. Uttering mantras, he released the arrows. Drupada and Virata's heads were severed. As the two old kings dropped lifeless from their chariots, Drona returned to slaughtering their armies.

Dhristadyumna, witnessing the deaths of both his sons and his father, screamed out to the troops, "Attack Drona! May any man who turns away from Drona today lose the merits of all his pious acts."

Cheered by Drona's killing of the two Pandava generals, Duryodhana came to his assistance with Karna and Shakuni. Duryodhana's remaining brothers also surrounded Drona to protect him from attack. The Kaurava warriors knew that Dhristadyumna would now try his utmost to fulfill the prophesy that said he would kill Drona.

In the meantime, Bhima became senseless with rage upon seeing Drona destroying the Pandava forces. He came up to Dhristadyumna and spoke harshly. "What man regarding himself a kshatriya would stand by and watch his sons and father being slain? Having uttered a terrible oath in the assembly of kings, why do you not act upon it? There stands your sworn enemy, like a sacred fire with arrows and darts for its fuel and the bodies of men for its libations. If you will not slay him, then I will do it myself. Stand aside. I will dispatch this old brahmin to Yamaraja's abode at once."

Bhima broke away from Dhristadyumna and rushed into the Kauravas' midst. He released torrents of shafts that swept away the fighters opposing him. Dhristadyumna, chastened by the rebuke, followed him, trying to fight his way through to Drona, who was now surrounded by a large number of Kauravas. The Pandava forces came up behind him and the two armies merged in a frenzied melee. As the two armies clashed, the sky was screened with dust and everyone thought night had again set in. The warriors climbed over dead bodies to reach their foes, swinging their swords and thrusting forward with sharp-tipped spears. Chariots could make no progress.

Horses reared, unable to move in any direction. Men screamed in pain and then fell, dying, calling out to their loved ones. Many brave warriors lay mortally wounded and filled with joy, awaiting their ascent to the celestial regions.

Arjuna, looking for his chance to confront Karna, encountered Drona first. As Bhima and Dhristadyumna beat a path through the Kauravas toward the preceptor, Arjuna came up behind them. While Bhima was engaged with Duryodhana and his brothers and Ashvatthama held Dhristadyumna, Arjuna sent his gold-winged arrows at Drona by the thousands. A mighty battle ensued between teacher and pupil that astonished the onlookers. They appeared like two dancers on a stage, exhibiting their most wonderful motions. Arrows flew through the sky like flocks of swans. Meeting in the heavens, the shafts exploded in showers of sparks and fire.

Drona invoked every celestial weapon he knew, but as soon as they issued from his bow Arjuna destroyed them. Drona smiled and applauded his prowess. In the sky Siddhas and Gandharvas watched in wonder and praised both warriors. They could not perceive any difference between them as they stood releasing their weapons without pause. Neither could gain an advantage over the other. The gods considered the fight to be as if Rudra had divided himself in two and waged war against himself. "These two are neither humans nor celestials," they declared. "This is a battle of brahma energy which transcends all earthly powers. If they desired, these warriors could destroy the universe."

While Arjuna and Drona fought, Dhristadyumna advanced steadily toward them, intent on killing Drona. He was followed by the twins, who were met by Kritavarma and Kripa. The heroes contended while the armies fought savagely around them.

Satyaki, following Arjuna's path, came upon Duryodhana. Long ago in Hastinapura, when Satyaki had come to Drona's school, they had been friends. Even though Satyaki had become Arjuna's disciple, he had maintained his relationship with Duryodhana. The two men gazed at one another across the field, remembering their youthful sports together. Duryodhana called out, "Ho there, dear friend. How cursed is the duty of kshatriyas. Fie upon might and the desire for wealth. O foremost of Sini's race, in the days of our childhood you were dearer to me than life itself. Alas, all those days of friendship become nothing on a battlefield. Impelled by rage

and covetousness we stand here bent on each other's death. Alas, where have the carefree days of our youth gone?"

Satyaki lowered his bow and called back, "That he must fight even with his preceptor has always been a kshatriya's duty. O king, do not hesitate. If you love me, then slay me without delay. By doing so, you will launch me into the regions of the righteous. Display your full prowess. I no longer wish to witness my friends' slaughter."

Tears fell from Satyaki's eyes as he spoke. He knew the days of friendship he had enjoyed with the Pandavas and Kauravas were gone. Their friendly fights of the past were now in earnest. Bending his bow he shot a series of long shafts at Duryodhana, who immediately replied with his own arrows. The two men pierced one another repeatedly and roared in anger. A battle resembling that between Arjuna and Drona developed. The sky was filled with arrows as both warriors invoked their celestial weapons. Gradually, Satyaki prevailed over the Kaurava and Karna came to Duryodhana's rescue. Assisted by Karna, the king pulled clear of Satyaki, his body lacerated by arrows.

Drona continued to destroy the Pandava army as if appointed by Death for their destruction. The oppressed troops' screams filled the air as he assailed them with countless blazing shafts. Witnessing Drona's power, Yudhishthira felt he could never become victorious. He met Arjuna and Bhima and revealed his anxiety. "It seems that Drona will consume us. No one can check that mighty hero."

Krishna replied, "What you say is true, O King. Drona cannot be checked as long as he stands with his weapons raised. But if he lowers them, he can be slain. I think if he hears that his son has been killed, he will lose all heart for the fight. Tell him that Ashvatthama is dead. Then he will lower his bow and we will kill him."

Arjuna was shocked. "I cannot accept this, O Madhava." But Bhima, upon hearing Krishna's words, immediately broke away. He raced into a nearby Kaurava elephant division. At its head rode Indravarma, the Malava ruler. Bhima knew his elephant was named Ashvatthama. Whirling his iron mace, the Pandava smashed the beast and slew it and its rider together. He then rushed over to Drona and bellowed out, "Ashvatthama is slain! Ashvatthama is slain!" As he deceived Drona, his voice was tremulous and

his heart wavered, but he knew it was Krishna's instruction, so he called out again and again, telling Drona that Ashvatthama was dead.

Hearing Bhima's words, Drona stopped fighting. His limbs seemed to dissolve like sand in water. However, recalling his son's prowess, he decided it could not be true. Bhima was known to be capricious. It would not be beyond him to speak an untruth in anger or in jest. Drona rallied himself and resumed his assault on the Pandavas. Dhristadyumna had reached him and they had begun to fight again. Holding off Dhristadyumna's attack, the Kuru general continued annihilating the Pandava forces. He invoked the terrible Brahma weapon. Warriors fell to the earth like trees uprooted in a tempest. Heads and arms flew about as Drona's arrows fell on his enemies. In a short time, he had killed ten thousand chariot fighters before Yudhishthira's eyes, even while Dhristadyumna assailed him with all his strength. Drona stood on the battlefield like a blazing fire without a single curl of smoke.

As Drona surveyed his ravaged foes, there suddenly appeared in the sky above him a group of rishis headed by Agni. His own father, Bharadvaja, along with Vashista, Vishvamitra, Gautama, Kashyapa, and many other celestial sages stood in the sky in subtle forms. They addressed Drona in a single voice that only he could hear. "You are fighting unfairly, O Drona, using celestial weapons against lesser warriors. It is now time for you to die. Cast away your weapons. You are a learned brahmin and such cruelty does not become you. By employing the Brahma weapon to kill ordinary men, you have earned disrepute. Stop these sinful acts and stop fighting. Your days are now at an end."

Drona looked around. Dhristadyumna was still near him, roaring out his challenge. Perhaps the time for the prophesy's fulfillment had arrived. Drona's arms fell to his side. He could not continue. Bhima's words still troubled him, and the sages' speech pained him even more. Could Ashvatthama actually be dead? Who could he ask and be sure to receive the truth? Seeing Yudhishthira not far away, the Kuru general went toward him. He was the one to ask—Yudhishthira would speak no lie.

Krishna saw Drona coming toward Yudhishthira and said, "Save us from Drona, O king. If he fights for even a half day more, your army will be finished. Under the circumstances, falsehood is better than truth. Speaking falsehood in order to preserve life is not a sin."

Krishna cited a scriptural passage that sanctioned lying under certain circumstances, including times when life was endangered. Yudhisthira reflected on Krishna's words. He could not ignore them. He had never in his life spoken even an ambiguity. The thought of a lie was difficult to face. Yet if Drona was not checked, his forces would be defeated. The Pandava remembered Drona's own prophetic statement at the beginning of the war: that he would be overpowered at a time when he heard something disagreeable from a creditable source. Reluctantly, Yudhisthira agreed to Krishna's suggestion. As the Kuru preceptor approached him, he gave him the false news. "Ashvatthama is dead," he called out, adding inaudibly at the end, "the elephant," as he could not tell an utter untruth under any circumstances.

Until that time, Yudhisthira's horses seemed to move across the field without touching the earth. After he lied to Drona, his horses descended to earth. The sages looking on wondered why that was so. Some said that Yudhisthira's lie had been the cause, while others argued that his reluctance to obey Krishna's order was the reason.

As soon as Yudhisthira spoke, Drona felt his heart sink into fathomless grief. His agony was compounded by the sages' words, which made him feel like he had offended the Pandavas. Distracted by sorrow, he moved away from Yudhisthira with his weapons lowered. Dhristadyumna attacked. Drona was struck all over, but he did not resist. He was plunged into despair. Dhristadyumna attacked him with even more force and the old Kuru chief, incited to anger, finally raised his bow to fight back. Displaying his incomparable lightness of hand, he cut down all of Dhristadyumna's arrows. He chanted mantras, invoking celestial weapons to destroy Dhristadyumna, but they no longer appeared at his command. Marveling, he fired volleys of ordinary arrows at his foe. Suddenly, he saw that his stock of shafts, inexhaustible for the last fifteen days, was empty.

Despondent, Drona decided to give up his life. He dropped his bow and repeatedly cried out his son's name. Looking over at the other Kurus, he called out, "O Duryodhana, O Karna, O Kripa, fight with all your power. I will now lay aside my weapons."

Drona sat down in his chariot and assumed a meditative posture. With his eyes half-closed and arms outstretched, he fixed his mind on Vishnu. As he entered into trance, he intoned the sacred syllable Om. The celestial sages, still stationed in the heavens, saw Drona leave his mortal

frame and ascend toward the higher regions. It seemed to them as if another sun was rising in the sky as the brahmin rose upwards.

Dhristadyumna, unaware that Drona had already departed, saw his chance. Taking up a razor-edged saber he jumped down from his chariot and ran toward the Kuru preceptor. All the warriors witnessing this called to him to stop, but he was not deterred. Amid cries of "Alas!" and "Fie!" he jumped onto Drona's chariot with the sword held high. Grabbing hold of Drona's knotted hair, he dragged him and, with a great sweep of his saber, severed his head. He then threw the head toward the Kauravas and roared in joy, whirling his blood-soaked sword in the air.

Arjuna had been shouting at Dhristadyumna to capture Drona and bring him alive to Yudhisthira. He was mortified by Dhristadyumna's viciousness. His heart melted with sorrow at the cruel killing of his beloved teacher. Bhima, however, cheered and ran over to joyfully embrace Dhristadyumna. Yudhisthira was afflicted by different emotions. Overjoyed that the hostilities would soon end, he was nevertheless full of misgivings that Drona's death had been brought about by deceit. Like Arjuna, he was also saddened to see Dhristadyumna mercilessly butcher his preceptor.

The Kauravas were struck by grief and fear. Their all-conquering general was dead. Unable to believe it, they fled. Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni, and the Kuru chiefs were overwhelmed by sorrow, and they ran along with their troops. As they rushed from the cheering Pandava forces, they encountered Ashvatthama moving in the opposite direction, like an alligator swimming against a river's current. Surprised to see the Kauravas retreating, he stopped Duryodhana and asked, "Why do I see our army flying, O king? Why are you and all of our other heroes running away? Surely some unthinkable calamity has befallen us."

Duryodhana could not tell Ashvatthama the news. He looked down and said nothing. Kripa came up to his side and Duryodhana said, "O son of Saradwata, tell Ashvatthama why we are fleeing."

With tears flowing down his face, Kripa said, "With that foremost of men Drona at our head, we have waged a great battle with the Panchalas, during which he has slain not less than fifty thousand of their number. Penetrating into the Pandava ranks, your father scorched our enemies like the Destroyer himself. None could stand before him. Therefore, the Pandavas

decided upon an unfair means to check your father. Informing him that you had been slain, O child, they deprived him of his senses and power. Dhristadyumna, when he saw him anxious and desisting from the fight, flew at him with sword held high. Even as the preceptor sat in mystic meditation, and as many warriors shouted at him to stop, Drupada's son lopped off his head. Thus did your father suffer death at the hands of a heartless warrior. This is why our troops are fleeing."

Ashvatthama cried out. His bow dropped from his hand and he fell to his knees. Insensible with rage, he shook like a tree in a tempest. His body burned and he knelt with his head between his knees for a few moments. Gradually regaining his composure, he stood up and said, "O Duryodhana, how have the so-called virtuous Pandavas committed such an act? Today they will reap the consequences. Disregarding me, Dhristadyumna has committed a heinous deed. I swear by truth that the earth will soon drink his blood, as well as that of Dharma's son. If I do not slay every last one of the Panchalas, I will not drag on my burdensome existence any longer. By any means, fair or foul, I will bring about the end of Dhristadyumna and his followers."

Ashvatthama's face glowed as he spat out the words. "Turn, O heroes, and fight our enemies. I will charge at your head and annihilate any who come before me. Today you will see me discharging fearful weapons equal to those of Rudra or Vishnu. I have in my possession the Narayana weapon, which my father gave me, and which was given to him by Shiva. That unfailing god told him that the weapon will destroy any at whom it is directed. I will use it today to crush the entire Pandava army. It can only be discharged once, and I have saved it for such a moment of desperation. Now the world shall see its power."

Ashvatthama roared repeatedly, inspiring new life into the Kauravas. They cheered him and rallied the retreating troops. To the beating of drums and the blasts of thousands of conchshells, the Kaurava army turned back toward the Pandavas.

Chapter Twenty-two. The Narayana Weapon

As the Kauravas fled, the Pandavas came together to discuss their next move. Arjuna was furious with Dhristadyumna. He smoldered as he spoke to Yudhisthira. "Drupada's son has committed a barbaric act. You too, O king, are stained by sin. The preceptor trusted you to speak truth, but you deceived him by uttering a lie garbed as truth. You will bear the shame of this act forever, like that borne by Rama for killing Vali. Alas, I too am guilty in that I stood by and suffered my teacher to be cheated and killed by his own disciples. Longing for sovereignty, we have killed our own guru by foul means. I think it better for me to die than to live on after being a party to such sin."

Arjuna lamented at length, but no one replied. Krishna looked at him with compassion. Arjuna's love for Drona was legendary. Unmanned by grief, he fell to his knees and wept.

Seeing his younger brother in the grip of sorrow, Bhima reproached him. "It is strange indeed that today you preach morality like a rishi living in the woods. Have you forgotten why we entered this war in the first place? Impelled by kshatriya duty, we have come to punish Duryodhana and his followers. Do you not recall how they abused the sinless Draupadi in our preceptor's presence? Have you forgotten how we were exiled to the forest even as Drona stood by and watched? For years we kept alive the flame of animosity so that we could mete out the proper consequences to our foes. Now that we are doing so, you lament in the name of virtue. If Drona's killing lacked virtue, then why did you swear you would hurl your blazing weapons upon the Kauravas, headed by Drona himself?"

Bhima's voice rose in anger. Arjuna looked at him in silence. He was never offended by his older brother's words. Controlling his emotions with difficulty, he listened as Bhima went on. "Dear brother, you are rending our hearts with your piteous lamentations and reprovals. At a time when praise is in order, you are issuing stern judgments. Surely it is fortunate for our enemies that you are now bent upon forbearance. For myself, however, I see Drona's death as fitting and just. Now we should waste no time in crushing the remaining Kauravas, headed as they will be by the vengeful Ashvatthama."

Arjuna clenched his teeth and said nothing. Dhristadyumna stood

nearby, unrepentant. Arjuna glanced at him with reddened eyes and the Panchala prince addressed him in conciliatory tones.

"O Bhibatsu, I do not feel I have committed any sin. Although a brahmin, Drona transgressed the duties of his order and thus became punishable by all virtuous kings. By using his brahma power, he slew countless ordinary soldiers with celestial weapons. In this way, he acted deceitfully and as a result has himself been slain by deceit. No other course was possible. You should not censure me for killing him; it was for that purpose that I took my birth from fire. I have slain the ruthless warrior by whatever means I could. Otherwise, he would have destroyed us all."

Bhima made sounds of approval as Dhristadyumna continued. "By killing Drona I am freed from my debt to my father and my kinsmen. It would have been sinful of me to have spared him. O Partha, you felled your aged grandsire. If that was not sinful, then why is my act condemned? Drona was a sinful wretch, given to serving sinful men. You should not censure me, Arjuna, but since you do, I forgive you from the love I bear for you and because you are Draupadi's husband. Be peaceful. Yudhisthira acted rightly and so did I. Between us we have slain one whose business was injuring his own disciples. Now fight and victory will soon be yours."

Arjuna fumed as Dhristadyumna insulted his teacher, but seeing both Yudhisthira and Krishna remaining silent, he controlled himself. He only glanced at Dhristadyumna, muttering, "Fie! Fie!" under his breath.

Satyaki, who had been seated on his chariot near Arjuna, suddenly leapt to his feet. Unable to tolerate Dhristadyumna's words he exclaimed, "Is there no one who will dispatch this sinful, low, and cursed wretch? O mean-minded one, how do you dare utter such words? It is a wonder that your head did not shatter into fragments when you were on the point of slaying your preceptor. You deserve the condemnation of all pious men. Having obtained you—the disgrace of their race—seven generations before and seven after you have sunk into hell, deprived of their glory. You accuse Arjuna of killing Bhishma, but was it not your own wicked brother Shikhandhi who caused his death? Surely there are no men more sinful than the Panchalas."

Satyaki raised his mace as he continued to censure Dhristadyumna. "If you again speak such words, I will knock off your head with my mace. Simply by looking at you, O killer of a brahmin, one has to look at the sun to

purify himself. If you have any prowess, then stand before me with your weapons raised. I cannot stand to hear you abuse both my teacher and my teacher's teacher."

Dhristadyumna laughed. "O son of Madhu's race, I forgive you for these words, although you are the most sinful of men. Really, no one should show forgiveness toward someone as wicked as you because forgiveness only leads people like you to think I have no power. Have you forgotten how you, O one who loves justice, slew Bhurishrava, even after he had defeated you and desisted from the fight? Hold your tongue. You should not say anything more to me. If you insist on uttering such words, I will dispatch you to Death's abode."

Dhristadyumna also reminded Satyaki of all the deceitful acts committed by the Kauravas. Even on the battlefield it had been Drona who had arranged for Abhimanyu to be slain by unfair means. In war it is inevitable that the rules are sometimes broken. Still, righteousness ultimately decides the victory. "Therefore, fight on against the Kauravas, O Vrishni hero. There is no doubt that they should be vanquished and slain by any means at our disposal."

Satyaki trembled with fury. His eyes bloodshot, he seized his mace and leapt down from his chariot. He rushed at Dhristadyumna. "I will waste no more words on you. You will now be crushed by my mace."

At a signal from Krishna, Bhima jumped from his chariot and stood between the two maddened warriors. He grabbed hold of Satyaki, who dragged him a few steps, roaring in fury. Sahadeva also sprang from his chariot and said, "O foremost of men, we have no better friends than you two. Your races are as dear to us as our own. You are dear friends to each other. Remember the duties of friends toward friends and exercise forgiveness. This is no time to quarrel among ourselves."

Dhristadyumna laughed. "Bhima, release Sini's grandson. Let him encounter me like the wind encounters the mountains. I will soon quell his desire for battle. Then I will destroy the remaining Kauravas. Or Arjuna can perform this feat. Let me cut off this one's head with my arrows. He takes me to be Bhurishrava with his arm lopped off. Leave him. Either I will slay him or he will slay me."

Satyaki swelled in Bhima's arms and bellowed. He struggled to break

free, but Bhima held him fast. Like the moon spreading its cooling rays at night, Krishna then spoke consoling words to the two antagonists. Yudhisthira also pacified them, and he and Krishna managed at last to allay their anger. As they both calmed down and remounted their chariots, the Pandavas suddenly heard the sound of joyous roaring from the Kauravas. They looked at each other in surprise. How were their enemies so enthused? After Drona's death their entire army had broken and fled.

Hearing the approaching sound, Arjuna smiled and said, "Doubtlessly, Ashvatthama has rallied our foes. He who upon his birth neighed like the celestial horse Uchhaishravas, and who has arms like elephant trunks and a face like a tiger, will soon come upon us in a rage. He will not tolerate his father's heinous killing. Dhristadyumna now faces great danger. Let us prepare ourselves for the fight."

The Pandavas saw the billowing clouds of dust rising as the Kauravas charged them once again. Forgetting their own disagreements, the warriors quickly moved into position, ready to receive the attack. They could see Ashvatthama's golden standard with its lion's-tail emblem waving at the head of the advancing Kaurava forces. Bhima and the twins deployed a large contingent of chariot fighters to surround and attack him before he reached Dhristadyumna.

* * *

As the Kauravas raced back to battle, intent on avenging Drona's death, the sun fell toward the west. Ashvatthama, having sworn to Duryodhana that he would annihilate both Dhristadyumna and the Panchala army, thought of the Narayana weapon. Coming to within a half mile of the Pandavas, he placed the celestial arrow on his bow and recited the sacred incantations to invoke the missile. A deep roar came from the sky as Drona's son summoned the weapon. Tens of thousands of fiery arrows appeared on the battlefield and flew toward the Pandava army like sunrays. Countless red-hot iron balls fell from the sky like lustrous meteors. Razor-edged discuses, axes, flaming spears, and spiked maces filled the air. The Kauravas could not perceive their foes as the hail of missiles fell toward them.

The Pandavas became anxious. It seemed that blazing missiles were springing into existence on every part of the battlefield. Wherever their

warriors were stationed a shower of weapons fell from the sky. The Pandava army was enveloped in a mass of arrows and darts. The troops fell by the thousands, cut to pieces by the relentless assault. The Pandava heroes tried to resist the attack, but the harder they tried, the worse it became. The more it was resisted, the more force the Narayana-astra seemed to have. Seeing his army being scorched, Yudhisthira shouted the order to retreat. His panic-stricken voice rose above the din of the falling missiles striking his soldiers' armor and shields. "Flee for your lives! Do not look back. This weapon cannot be repelled. Surely this is the result of killing our sinless preceptor. My brothers and I will enter blazing fire. O warriors, go back to your homes."

Krishna told Yudhisthira to remain calm. He knew how to resist the weapon. Standing on Arjuna's chariot He called, "All you kshatriyas, quickly throw aside your weapons and come down from your chariots and elephants. Lie flat on the ground without weapons. Do not attempt to fight this weapon, for that will only increase its power. If you even think of contending with the weapon, you will be slain."

Hearing Krishna's words, the warriors cast aside their weapons and threw themselves to the ground. The missiles generated by the Narayana weapon passed harmlessly over their heads.

Bhima saw the soldiers dropping their weapons and he shouted, "No one should lay aside his arms. Do not fear this weapon hurled by Ashvatthama. I will personally check its power with my swift-flying arrows. Striking Drona's son with countless shafts, I will send him along the path taken by his father. O Arjuna, how can you lay aside the Gandiva and lose your fame and glory? Stand and fight. I will bear the brunt of this weapon on my broad chest. Today you will all behold my prowess."

Arjuna called back, "Bhima, my vow is that I will not use the Gandiva against brahmins, cows, and any weapon of the holy Lord Narayana. Against all these will I lay it aside. You too should stand down, O hero. This all-devouring weapon cannot be checked by the force of arms."

Bhima paid no heed to Arjuna and rushed at the Kauravas. Oblivious to the thick shower of missiles filling the air, he stood on his chariot releasing fierce steel arrows at Ashvatthama. Drona's son smiled and resisted Bhima's attack, cutting down all his shafts as they came toward him. As all the Pandava warriors lay down on the field, the Narayana-astra concentrated its

full force on Bhima. He became completely shrouded by blazing missiles, appearing like a sacrificial fire suddenly sprung up on the field. No one could even look at him, so brilliant was his glowing effulgence beneath the attack of the Narayana-astra. Seeing his brother's plight, Arjuna invoked the Varuna weapon. The watery weapon covered Bhima, affording him protection from the ever-increasing power of the Narayana weapon. But Arjuna knew it would not be long before his impetuous brother was overpowered.

Krishna suddenly jumped down from His chariot and ran toward Bhima, telling Arjuna to come with Him. The two heroes plunged fearlessly into the mass of fire surrounding Bhima. They seized hold of him and dragged him from his chariot. Bhima roared in anger as Arjuna tore his weapons from his grasp. In an urgent voice Krishna said, "O son of Pandu, what do you think you are doing? If it were possible to check this weapon, we would all be fighting. Be still and do not act so foolishly."

Reluctantly, Bhima assented to Krishna's instructions. He lay still with his weapons put aside. The Narayana-astra receded. Its numerous missiles went into the sky and soon vanished. When the battlefield was again clear of the missiles, the Pandavas got to their feet and took up their weapons. Saved from a grave danger by Krishna's advice, they mounted their chariots and horses and roared out their battle cries.

Duryodhana was annoyed to see that his foes had escaped. He approached Ashvatthama and said, "Quickly send that weapon again, for the Pandavas have rallied and will attack with all their power."

Ashvatthama shook his head. "The Narayana weapon can be used only once by any man. If invoked again, it will slay the person using it. Krishna knew the secret of countering this weapon and it has thus been baffled."

Duryodhana cursed. "Then use whatever weapons you possess. Your power is equal to that of Mahadeva himself. O son of Drona, slay these murderers of their preceptor without delay."

Ashvatthama rushed into battle, seeking out Dhristadyumna. He assailed him with thousands of barbed arrows. Enraged, he bore down on his adversary with frightening force. He slew his charioteer and four horses and smashed his chariot. Dhristadyumna came down to the ground and warded off Ashvatthama's attack with his sword and shield.

Satyaki was near at hand and saw Dhristadyumna's predicament. Remembering his duty as a kshatriya, he came quickly to his comrade's assistance. He enveloped Ashvatthama in a network of arrows that killed his horses and charioteer. Drona's son then leapt from his chariot, still afflicted by Satyaki's shafts. Kripa came to his aid and took him onto his own chariot. Kripa and Karna then attacked Satyaki and Dhristadyumna, as many other Pandava and Kaurava heroes rushed into the fray.

Mounting a fresh chariot, Ashvatthama came again toward Dhristadyumna. Once again Satyaki came before him and Ashvatthama called out to the Vrishni warrior, "O grandson of Sini, I know the partiality you bear for this killer of his own teacher, but you shall not save him today. I swear by my life that I will slay all the Panchalas, headed by this sinful wretch. You too shall fall a victim to my arrows if you try to protect him, as will all the Pandavas and their entire army. I will not be stopped."

Ashvatthama pierced Satyaki with a volley of barbed arrows. As Satyaki reeled, Ashvatthama took up a long shaft that glowed with a brilliant effulgence. In an instant he released it with all his power. It penetrated Satyaki's armor and dug deeply into his shoulder. Stunned, the Vrishni fighter squatted on the terrace of his chariot, and his charioteer took him away from the battle to recover.

Ashvatthama turned his attention to Dhristadyumna, launching a vicious attack on the Panchala prince. Releasing his mantra-inspired shafts with all his power, he pierced every part of his body. Dhristadyumna was overpowered by the sheer ferocity of Ashvatthama's attack, and he leaned on his standard pole for support. A number of Pandava heroes rushed to his rescue. Headed by Bhima and Arjuna, they surrounded Ashvatthama, shooting arrows at him from all sides. Ashvatthama countered their arrows with astounding speed and skill. He struck all of his assailants with his own shafts and roared out his dreadful war cry.

Not caring for his own life, Ashvatthama fought in a frenzy. The thought of his father's death drove him on as he forced back his attackers. No one had ever seen him fight so fiercely. While holding the principal Pandava warriors in check, he simultaneously slew a large number of Panchala soldiers with his celestial weapons. Kings and princes of various domains came against Drona's son, but they were all quickly slain.

The Panchalas turned and fled as Ashvatthama wrought an awful carnage among them. But he killed them even as they ran in fear, their weapons cast aside. Arjuna shouted, "O son of Drona, stop killing ordinary soldiers. Here I am, ready to destroy your pride. Exhibit the full limit of your prowess, manliness and knowledge, and also of your partiality for Dhritarastra's sons and hatred for us. Dhristadyumna and I will crush you. He has already slain your father and now stands ready to kill you as well."

Ashvatthama writhed at Arjuna's harsh words. Their old friendship from the days in Drona's school was obviously forgotten. Now they were fighting to the death. Glaring at the Pandava, Ashvatthama thought of the Agneya weapon. He placed a golden shaft upon his bow, muttered the incantations with concentration, then let it go with a cry. At once a thick shower of arrows fell from the sky. A dense gloom enveloped the battlefield, and fiery meteors dropped down. Fierce winds blew in every direction, lashing the warriors with stones. The terrifying cries of Rakshasas and Pisachas resounded from the darkness, and jackals howled from all sides.

Afflicted by the celestial weapon, the Pandava forces shrieked in fear and pain. They were struck by blazing arrows that came at them from all directions. Ashvatthama's skill at the secret mystical sciences endowed the Agneya weapon with menacing power. Men, horses and elephants were slaughtered and burned to ashes as if caught in the final conflagration that burns the worlds. But Agni, remembering the incident at Khandavaprastha, had his fiery weapon pass harmlessly over Arjuna and Krishna.

Seeing the fire-god's irresistible energy summoned for the Pandavas' destruction, Arjuna composed his mind and thought of the brahmastra. Invoking the most powerful of all weapons, he at once dissipated the dense darkness. As Brahma's weapon neutralized Agni's, the sky cleared and a cool breeze blew. Tens of thousands of warriors lay on the battlefield, their bodies burned beyond recognition.

Ashvatthama was amazed to see his weapon checked and Arjuna emerging unscathed. How had he survived the Agneya weapon, which had killed tens of thousands of other warriors? Both Arjuna and Krishna had been right in the path of the weapon, but both were unharmed. Ashvatthama felt hopeless. First the Narayana-astra, and now the Agneya weapon—both had been foiled by Arjuna and Krishna. How could he contend with such foes? They were invincible. Throwing down his bow in despair, Ashvatthama

jumped from his chariot and ran from the battlefield. He cried out, "Everything is illusion!" and sped away from the fight, entering a copse of trees. His grief for his father overwhelmed him. He felt as if he would never be able to avenge him. Even his most powerful weapons were ineffectual against the Pandavas. What was the use of fighting them?

As Ashvatthama was running, he met Vyasadeva, who was approaching the battlefield. Drona's son stopped and bowed before the rishi. He asked him why his weapons were useless against Arjuna. Vyasadeva explained that Krishna was the Supreme Lord. He was Narayana, or Vishnu; indeed, the immortal Narayana was simply a part of Krishna. There was no living being anywhere who could overpower Krishna or anyone he protected. Even Shiva considered himself Krishna's servant. He too had once been bested by him in a fight.

Hearing Vyasadeva's descriptions, Ashvatthama thought better of Krishna. If Vyasadeva's words were true, then it was no surprise that his weapons had been baffled. As long as Arjuna had Krishna on his chariot, there would be little point in further encounters with him. Dispirited and sorrowful, Ashvatthama realized that all-powerful destiny was ultimately in control. In the face of fate, man could do nothing except execute his duty and leave the results to destiny. From Vyasadeva's words, it seemed as though the Kauravas would be defeated. But who could know ahead of time what destiny would finally decree?

Bowing again to the sage, Ashvatthama turned back toward the battlefield. It was still his duty to fight for Duryodhana and, especially, to honor his slain father. His enemies had to be punished. He could not leave the battle now.

As Ashvatthama returned, the sun was setting. The two armies retreated, exhausted after fighting for almost two days and a night. Despondent at Drona's death, the Kauravas returned sorrowfully to their camp, while the Pandavas returned to the sounds of trumpets, drums and conchshells.

When they reached their encampment, the Pandavas saw that Vyasadeva had arrived. Arjuna got down from his chariot and went over to the sage. Bowing and touching his feet, he said, "O all-opulent one, I have seen something today which inspired me with great wonder. As I released

arrows toward my foes, I saw before me a male being, shining like fire. He held a blazing trident and whichever way he turned, my enemies were burned and destroyed. Although he never hurled his trident, nor any other weapon, his energy alone seemed to annihilate my foes. Who is this personality, O great sage?"

Placing his hand on Arjuna's head, who still knelt before him, Vyasadeva replied, "O son of Kunti, you have seen Shankara, the great destroyer of the worlds. Out of his love and respect for Krishna, he walks before your chariot, scorching your enemies with his irresistible energy. Even the powerful universal protectors could not stand before him. Go forth and fight with confidence, O Dhananjaya. Defeat is not for one who has Janardana by his side."

After assuring the Pandavas that the war would soon be over, Vyasadeva left. Worn out from the fight, the warriors went straight to their tents to rest for the night.

Chapter Twenty-three. Karna in Command

In Duryodhana's tent the monarchs and warriors sat in silence, gazing at Drona's empty seat. Duryodhana himself was overcome by grief. He drew long breaths and stared at the ground. Some of his friends comforted him, citing Vedic verses about the eternality of the soul and the temporality of all things material. They also consoled Kripa, who was lamenting the death of his beloved friend and brother-in-law. Ashvatthama had gone to his tent, wanting to be alone.

After a while the kings departed, leaving Duryodhana alone with Karna, and Shakuni, and his brothers. They said little and sat remembering the miseries they had inflicted on the Pandavas, feeling deep regret. As the evening wore on, they lay down on costly couches. Tossing in anxiety, they could not rest. The night dragged on. Duryodhana thought again of the Danavas. It seemed they had kept their promise to assist him. Drona had fought demonically, but still he had been brought down. What power did the Pandavas have on their side? Could nothing stop them?

As the sun at last approached the eastern sky, the Kauravas rose listlessly and went about their morning rituals. Coming together again with the other monarchs, they decided to install Karna as their commander. The installation ceremony was performed, and after giving charity to the brahmins, they moved toward the battlefield for the sixteenth day.

Praised and blessed by the brahmins, the Kuru army marched out, determined to avenge Drona. Karna rode at their head, clad in brilliant armor and shining like his celestial father on his resplendent chariot. As he left for the battle, Karna cheered the Kauravas with his roars and shouts, while bards and poets sang his glories. By his side rode Duryodhana, his remaining brothers behind him. They were flanked by Ashvatthama, Kripa, Kritavarma and Salva. Other powerful kings followed those heroes, leading their armies and forming them into an array shaped like a bird. All the warriors then put aside their previous reverses. Hoping for victory, they charged into battle with loud cries.

Seeing their foes approaching in a heroic mood, the Pandavas arranged their troops into a half-moon formation. The two armies converged, yelling out war cries and blowing their conches. Of the original six million warriors, less than one million remained. They all knew that the war would

be over only when all of them were slain. Duryodhana would fight to the last and the Pandavas would not relinquish their claim to their kingdom. There were still invincible heroes on both sides who stood unflinching in battle. Thus it was certain the two armies would be annihilated, leaving the great heroes on either side to contend for the final victory.

Karna, fired by his position as the Kaurava commander-in-chief, began to slaughter the remaining Pandava forces. As he released his oil-soaked arrows in all directions, he seemed to his enemies to be like the blazing sun with its fierce rays. Indiscriminate about whom he attacked, he felled soldiers, horsemen, elephants, and chariot fighters alike. Bhima, Nakula and Satyaki rushed to check his progress. They rained weapons upon him and gradually forced him back. Other Kauravas came to Karna's assistance and a fierce battle ensued between the heroes of both sides.

A terrible encounter took place between Bhima and Ashvatthama which even the celestials watched with wonder. Finally, Bhima overpowered Ashvatthama, who was carried unconscious from the battlefield. Bhima was also wounded. He collapsed, exhausted, and was similarly borne away by his charioteer.

Karna, fighting his way free from his antagonists, careered again into the Pandava army. With innumerable arrows he crushed the troops, cutting through their ranks like fire through a dry forest. Pursued by a number of Pandava heroes, he ranged about causing carnage among their forces.

On another part of the field, Arjuna fought without mercy. Charging against the remaining Narayanas and the few surviving Samshaptakas, he ruthlessly cut them down with his unfailing shafts. The Kaurava forces under Arjuna's attack appeared like the ocean tossed by a raging storm. Longing for his chance to encounter Karna for their final fight, he wasted no time in slaying his unretreating foes.

Karna, as he slaughtered the Panchala and Somaka warriors, was caught and challenged by Nakula. That fearless Pandava warrior hurled a number of deadly darts at Karna, who responded by cutting them to pieces with swift arrows. He shot blazing shafts at Nakula, who in turn cut them down with his own. After fighting intensely for some time, the two men stood back and glared at each other.

Nakula called out, "By good fortune have I had this opportunity to

fight you today. You are the root of all the misery we have suffered, and you are also to blame for this great war. By your fault, so many great warriors now lie slain and the world is filled with widows and orphans. Take the consequences of your wickedness, O wretch. I am here to punish you."

Karna sneered. "O brave one, first strike me and then speak. Only after achieving great feats in battle do heroes utter bold words. Let us see your prowess. I will surely destroy your vanity."

Both warriors immediately pierced each other with winged arrows fired at blinding speed. They roared and circled one another. Both released countless arrows that the other countered. As they invoked celestial weapons, the sky was filled with shafts, casting a dark shadow over the battlefield. Gradually, Karna gained the upper hand. He slew Nakula's charioteer and four horses. Nakula took up a sword and shield, but Karna quickly cut them to pieces. The Pandava then grasped his spiked mace and jumped down. Karna broke the mace with straight-flying shafts. Laughing, he rode over to his disarmed foe and struck him with his bow. Nakula burned with shame and grief as Karna rebuked him.

"O child, go to your elder brothers. You should not wage war with the powerful. Your strength lies only in words."

Karna, remembering again his promise to Kunti, did not attempt to kill Nakula, who then ran to Yudhisthira in humiliation. Climbing aboard his brother's chariot, he shed hot tears of anger and sighed heavily. He thought of Arjuna and Krishna. Soon the cruel-minded Karna would meet his end. He could display his power only for as long as those two great souls did not charge at him in anger.

Karna continued to assail the Pandava forces. Circling around the field with his bow constantly sending forth flaming shafts, he appeared like a wheel of fire. He came against the Srnjayas and slaughtered them by the tens of thousands. As Karna annihilated his foes, other battles took place. Kripa contended with Dhristadyumna, Kritavarma with Satyaki, and Bhima battled Dhritarastra's sons and slew another twenty. Yudhisthira met Salva, and numerous other powerful heroes came together in a furious trial of arms. The celestials were awed by the encounters.

Arjuna single-handedly destroyed the Narayana army, even though many powerful ratha and maharatha warriors simultaneously surrounded him.

With crescent-tipped shafts he beheaded his foes and lopped off their limbs. Ranging about freely, he crushed the Kauravas with an endless stream of arrows from the Gandiva.

As the sun reached the western horizon, the battlefield presented a gruesome scene. Half of the warriors who had gone out to fight lay dead. The earth was strewn with carcasses and the wreckage of chariots and armor. Bodies lay burnt beyond all recognition. Flocks of vultures circled the field and jackals bayed. Seeing darkness enveloping the combatants, Karna ordered the Kaurava army to withdraw. He did not want another night battle. The soldiers pulled away from each other, praising their enemies' prowess, and headed back to their camps.

* * *

Duryodhana sat in his tent sighing and squeezing his hands. Of his eleven akshauhini divisions, only one remained. It was almost inconceivable. So many supposedly invincible heroes had been slain. Warriors who had never before tasted defeat now lay embracing the earth like men clasping their lovers. Arjuna and Bhima had done most of the damage. How much longer could it go on? Those two haughty Pandavas had to be killed. He would take care of Bhima, but why had Karna not yet killed Arjuna? Duryodhana looked at his friend.

Understanding Duryodhana's mind, Karna said, "Arjuna is always alert, persevering, skillful and intelligent. Even when an opportunity arises to overpower him, Krishna intervenes and saves him. Still, I will not be thwarted. Today he evaded me by various kinds of deceit, but tomorrow I will baffle all his attempts and slay him for sure."

Duryodhana was heartened by Karna's confidence. "So be it." He dismissed the assembly and told everyone to meet at dawn to decide their strategy for killing Arjuna.

The next morning, Karna came alone to Duryodhana. The Kaurava chief waved him to a fine seat as his attendants put on his armor. Tying on his leather finger guards, he said, "Well, dear friend, are you ready to face Arjuna?"

Karna replied somberly. "Today I will fight an unforgettable battle

with that famous hero. Either I will slay him or be slain by him. If I cannot kill him today, I will not return from the field. Even though I have been deprived of my Shakti weapon, I do not consider myself his inferior. I have received powerful celestial weapons from Parasurama and can match Arjuna in speed and lightness of hand. Today you will see me contend with Arjuna even as Indra fought with the Daityas. This whole earth, with its thorns removed, will soon be yours. There is no deed I cannot perform for you, O king, nor is there any man who can withstand me when I am angry. But I need something from you."

Karna explained how the one area where Arjuna was superior was that he had Krishna as his charioteer. "Krishna guides his chariot with superb skill. I need one who can match Krishna's ability at driving a chariot. I can only think of Salya for this task."

Duryodhana looked up sharply. Salya was one of the most powerful heroes still remaining among the Kauravas. It would be a shame to lose him. Neither would he take kindly to being asked to perform the lowly job of charioteer—especially for Karna. Moreover, Salya was the Pandavas' relative. Could he be trusted?

Seeing Duryodhana's doubtful expression, Karna said, "Assisted by Salya I see myself emerging victorious. He is famed throughout the world for his skill at handling chariots. There are none better than he at assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy. He has pledged himself to your cause, O king, because you satisfied him. As a man of unfailing virtue, he will do everything in his power to help me. Therefore, go to him and convince him to become my driver."

Duryodhana looked thoughtful. This was perhaps his only chance to win the war. Without overcoming Arjuna, defeat was certain. He nodded. "I will convince the Madras monarch to accept the office of charioteer. Numerous chariots will be placed at your disposal, each equipped with every weapon. I will also make available hundreds of cartloads of arrows."

Duryodhana knew that the battle with Arjuna would require a vast number of shafts to match his inexhaustible supply. He issued orders to his servants, then got up and left the tent. Seeing Salya in his tent, he approached him in a servile mood. "O mighty hero, best of men, O you of invincible prowess, I come with a humble request. Karna has asked that you become his

charioteer for today's fight with Arjuna. There is no other who can match your abilities in driving chariots. Indeed, you are Krishna's equal. O best of chariot-warriors, I therefore beg your assistance. Out of the affection you bear me, kindly accept this post."

Duryodhana continued to praise Salya's abilities, assuring him that there was no other warrior in the world who could ensure, by expert chariot driving, that Karna overcame Arjuna. The whole army was depending on him. If Arjuna were not checked soon, the Kauravas would shortly be annihilated.

Salya looked at Duryodhana in horror. He stood up suddenly and paced the floor of his tent. "O son of Gandhari, you offend me with such a request. How do you reckon me to be less than Karna? Are you suspecting my loyalty and endeavor in the battle? I am capable of performing any feat that the suta's son can do. Allot to me as my share any heroes you choose. After slaying them all, I will return to my own kingdom. If you wish me to fight alone against the Pandavas, I will do so. But this request is an insult. I should leave this war at once, having heard such words from you, but I will not abandon my duty out of passion or anger."

Salya was furious. As a kshatriya, it was his duty to fight and not to drive chariots. Driving chariots was the duty of sudras. It was ordained in scripture that sudras should serve kshatriyas, but never vice versa. Karna hailed from a family of sudras, and he, Salya, was the crowned monarch of a great country. Salya glared at Duryodhana. "I do not know how I can continue fighting for you now. After receiving this insult I feel more like returning home."

Salya stormed out of his tent and Duryodhana ran after him. The prince stopped him and reached down to touch his feet. "Please do not misunderstand me and take offense. I did not in any way mean to infer that you are less than Karna. Nor do I doubt your sincerity. Nor indeed do I desire the King of Madras to degrade himself by performing some inferior duty. There is no question of any of these. O lord of the earth, I see you as being in every way Karna's equal and more. Please let me explain my intentions."

Duryodhana told Salya that among all the warriors on the field no one could equal Krishna. He was far superior to all, yet he had accepted the role of Arjuna's charioteer. It was for this reason that Duryodhana had

thought of Salya, who was like a second Vasudeva. Karna could contend equally with Arjuna in a trial of arms, but he needed a charioteer comparable to Krishna. The prince said that both he and Karna could not think of anyone better than Salya.

Hearing Duryodhana praise Krishna, the Madras monarch was pacified. Like his nephews, the Pandavas, he loved Krishna. He remembered his promise to Yudhisthira. It had surely been ordained by fate that he should drive Karna's chariot for this battle. Making up his mind, Salya said, "Your glorification of Devaki's son has softened my heart. I will consider taking this role, but only on one condition: I must be allowed to speak whatever I please in Karna's presence."

Duryodhana breathed a sigh of relief. "So be it. Let us go to Karna."

Further encouraging Salya, Duryodhana recited an old history of how Mahadeva had once fought with the Danavas and Daityas. At that time, Brahma had served as his charioteer. There was no shame in a powerful hero taking the position when the need arose. When they reached Karna's tent, Duryodhana said, "See here this mighty hero, O monarch. Can it be that he is born of a suta? In my view he is the offspring of some great deity. Surely he was begotten in a race of kshatriyas and abandoned at birth. Look at his immense chest and his arms like tree trunks. See his handsome face, his regal stature and bearing. He resembles the sun in splendor. I cannot accept that he was born of a suta woman."

Salya greeted Karna and said, "I will become your charioteer for the great battle. However, I am doubtful about the outcome. Even if by some chance you manage to slay Arjuna, you will then see Keshava enter the fight, weapons in hand."

Salya turned to Duryodhana. "Without doubt Krishna will annihilate your race with all its allies and followers. What, then, will be the use of killing Arjuna?"

Duryodhana seemed unconcerned. "O King, I am not afraid of Krishna when I have both Karna and you on my side. How will Keshava overcome you in battle? Karna will surely slay Arjuna. Then you and he will be more than a match for Krishna, even if He is supported by His followers. And if Karna should be slain, then we will depend on you alone."

Salya looked at Karna, who was carefully tying his armor. It was

probably the last time he would ever do that, the king of Madras thought. "So be it, O Bharata ruler. I will drive Karna's chariot."

Karna thanked Salya and they both embraced Duryodhana. Then they left the tent together to meet with the other warriors. After agreeing on a strategy, the Kauravas mounted their chariots and horses, roared and blew their conchshells, and Salya took up the reins of Karna's great chariot and drove it out at the head of the army. Ten thousand drums and as many trumpets sounded as the Kaurava forces moved off for battle. As they went toward the battlefield, Karna said, "Take me at once to the place where the Pandavas stand. If necessary, I will fight with all five brothers. Drive the horses quickly, O great hero, so that I may kill Arjuna, Bhima, Yudhisthira, and the twins. Today the world will witness my incomparable prowess."

Salya laughed, "O son of a charioteer, why do you make light of the Pandavas? Those five heroes are unconquerable and have Krishna as guide and protector. O Karna, when you see them creating a canopy in the sky with innumerable shafts, you will not speak such words. When you hear the twang of the Gandiva, you will surely regret your proud utterances."

Karna, ignoring Salya, exclaimed, "Drive on!" and his chariot thundered forward toward the Pandavas.

As the two armies closed, dreadful portents were seen. Cloudless thunder resounded from the sky, and a shower of stones fell. Fierce winds blew in the Kauravas' faces. On their right they saw herds of animals moving past them, and jackals howled. Their horses shed tears and their standards trembled.

Paying no heed to the omens, the Kauravas rushed into the fight, driven by destiny. Seeing Karna blazing like a brilliant fire at their head, they felt victory to be theirs. They shouted out their war cries and waved their weapons in the air as they charged into battle.

Karna called out to the soldiers, "Any man who will show me the whereabouts of Arjuna will be richly rewarded. I will give gold, gems, and fine horses to he who points out the Pandava. Show me where Arjuna and Krishna are fighting and I will award you whatever wealth they leave after I slay them."

Hearing those words, Duryodhana cheered his friend. Cymbals clashed and thousands of drums were beaten.

Salya laughed again. "O suta's son, you are foolishly offering your wealth in charity as if you are Kuvera. Do not worry, you will find Arjuna easily. There is no need to give away your riches, especially to unworthy persons. Soon enough you will find him yourself. Your bragging is of no use. Never have I seen a fox overthrow a couple of lions. You are unable to see what should be done and what should not be done, and that is why it is obvious to me that your life is at its end. O Karna, it appears that you have no real friends to prevent you from hurling yourself into the fire. As your friend, I advise you to approach Arjuna with caution, backed by a large division of men. Do not rush against him alone, like a man trying to cross the ocean with only his two arms and a stone tied around his neck."

Karna scowled at Salya. "You are an enemy in the guise of a friend!" he barked. "I have no fear of Arjuna. Depending only on the strength of my arms, I will meet and overpower him. No man will shake me from this determination."

Salya again spoke derisively. "When keen-edged, kanka-feathered arrows strike you all over, you will repent your vanity. Like a child on his mother's lap seeking to catch the sun, you wish to defeat Savyasachin. You are challenging Arjuna like a young deer challenging an angry lion. Do not, out of folly, strike a black cobra with your bare hand. Do not shout at Arjuna like a frog croaking at a great cloud pouring showers of rain. As a jackal living among hares considers himself powerful until he meets a tiger, so you roar out your own praises until you encounter Arjuna and Krishna. Say whatever you will. Soon your mountain of pride will be broken by Arjuna's thunderbolt-like shafts."

Karna's breath came in short, heavy rasps. He burned under Salya's tirade. Although the Madras monarch had come to Duryodhana's side, it seemed his actual allegiance lay with the Pandavas.

Tightly clutching his bow, Karna responded harshly. "O king, only the meritorious can recognize the merits of others. Being bereft of all merits, you cannot see what is good and what is bad. I am fully aware of Arjuna's prowess, and I know my own power as well. Thus I have challenged the Pandava knowing full well my ability to defeat him. His Gandiva, his ape banner, and his charioteer Krishna may strike terror into the timid, but for me they are sources of joy. Today you will see me strike down both Arjuna and Krishna with a single shaft. They will look like two pearls on a string. Today,

everyone will see my birth, nobility and power. Do not mock me, foolish one."

Losing his temper, Karna rounded on Salya, his angry voice booming out as his chariot moved across the field. "You are wicked-minded and of bad character. Because you are afraid, you praise the enemy. Or perhaps you praise them for some other reason. Whatever it is, after killing my foes, I will also kill you and all your relatives. Born in a sinful land, you are a mean wretch among the kshatriyas. Do not try to frighten me with your empty words. I could slay a thousand Krishnas and hundreds of Arjunas. Hold your tongue, O you born in a sinful country."

Karna continued to insult Salya. He described Madras as a country populated by low-class and degraded people. Citing many popular sayings spoken by the Madrakas' enemies, he abused Salya and his homeland. He was not surprised that the Pandavas' uncle should have spoken to discourage him, but he was not prepared to tolerate it. Raising his mace he said, "O king of Madras, if you speak again in such strains I will crush your skull. Only out of regard for Duryodhana have I not done so already. Drive on toward Arjuna. Either the world will hear that I have slain Dhananjaya and Vasudeva, or they will hear that the brave Karna was killed by them."

Unruffled, Salya reminded Karna of Arjuna's feats of valor, including the occasion when he had overpowered all the Kurus, including Karna.

Karna snorted. "I will not be affected by your words, O man of evil intent. You cannot inspire me with fear. My only fear is the curse of the brahmins."

Karna knew he faced great peril due to a long-past mistake he had once committed. Realizing that it may well prove his undoing, he told Salya how he had accidentally slain a brahmin's cow when out hunting many years ago. The brahmin had cursed him, saying, "When you face your deadliest enemy, the earth will swallow your chariot wheel. You will then become afraid."

After describing the incident Karna said, "Still, I will not turn back. Accepting the brahmin's curse, I will stand against Arjuna and cut him down with my arrows. Even the angry words of my own preceptor will not stop me today."

Karna was thinking of Parasurama's curse. He would forget the

mantras for the brahmastra at the time when he needed it most. Careless of both imprecations and driven by his own destiny, Karna commanded Salya to drive on. Everything lay in the hands of fate. Victory or defeat were never certain for anyone. If fate decreed it, then despite impediments he would emerge victorious. If not, then despite his greatest endeavor and superior skills, he would lose the fight.

Karna and Salya continued to trade insults as they approached the battlefield. Duryodhana heard their raised voices and went up to them, beseeching Salya with folded palms not to discourage Karna and asking Karna to forgive him. Both men fell silent and sped on across the field, seeing the Pandava forces looming large in the distance.

Chapter Twenty-four. Karna's Prowess

Yudhishthira saw Karna charging at the head of the Kauravas. Turning to Arjuna he said, "Behold, Dhananjaya, the enemy's mighty formation which Karna has arranged. Take whatever steps are needed to check them. Today, you must slay the suta's son."

Arjuna smiled. At last he would get the chance to slay his mortal foe. He had been waiting for this moment since the day of the tournament in Hastinapura. He would have killed Karna then, had he had the opportunity. Perhaps all this death and destruction would have been avoided. Somehow, it had not been sanctioned by fate at that time.

Arjuna saw Karna's banner billowing in the distance. "Everything will be done as you say, my Lord. By killing Karna I will bring about the Kauravas' destruction."

As Arjuna went forward to encounter Karna, Yudhishthira ordered Bhima to confront Duryodhana and his brothers, Sahadeva to fight with Shakuni, Satyaki with Kritavarma, and Pandya, the king of southern Bharata, to fight with Ashvatthama. Yudhishthira decided to fight with Kripa.

The two armies converged. On Duryodhana's order, Arjuna was surrounded by thousands of troops. If possible, the Kaurava wanted to weaken him before he met Karna.

Karna charged into the midst of the Panchalas and slew them on all sides. Dhristadyumna, Shikhandhi and Draupadi's sons challenged him and fired thousands of shafts. Three of Karna's sons, Bhanusena, Sushena and Vrishasena, came to his assistance. They were all maharathas and they contended powerfully with the Pandava warriors. Soon Bhima entered the fray, and Dushashana joined Karna.

With a razor-headed shaft, Bhima slew Bhanusena in front of Karna. He then attacked Sushena, piercing his chest with three iron arrows that made the prince fall to his knees. Raging, Karna struck Bhima with hundreds of arrows. Oblivious to the attack, Bhima fired a razor-headed shaft to destroy Sushena, but Karna cut it down in mid-flight. Sushena recovered from Bhima's attack and rushed angrily against Nakula, who was challenging him.

Other great heroes from both sides entered the fight with joyous roars. In the melee, thousands of warriors were killed or mangled by the

deadly shafts that filled the air. Karna cut through his opponents and met Yudhisthira.

Seeing Karna before him, Yudhisthira called out, "O Karna, son of a charioteer, hear my words. Vain and arrogant, you always challenge Arjuna and foolishly consider yourself his equal. Now your pride will be crushed. Stand and fight with me. Display your prowess and your hatred for the Pandavas. I will soon destroy your desire for battle."

Without replying, Karna immediately fired a number of straight-flying arrows that pierced Yudhisthira's chest. Infuriated by Karna's contempt for him, Yudhisthira took up a long golden shaft that was capable of splitting a mountain. Charging it with mantras he released it from his fully drawn bow. It penetrated Karna's side, and Karna dropped to his knees and swooned.

The Kauravas cried out when they saw Karna's plight, but then he rose to his feet and stared at Yudhisthira. Breathing heavily, he released arrows end-to-end that completely covered the Pandava king. He slew the two warriors protecting Yudhisthira's chariot wheels and struck his charioteer with a dozen arrows.

Yudhisthira fought back valiantly and checked Karna's speeding arrows with his own. Karna laughed and stepped up his attack, sending volleys of barbed shafts. Numerous Pandava warriors surrounded him in order to protect Yudhisthira. They rained down arrows, darts, lances and spears on Karna, who then invoked a celestial missile that filled the sky with blazing shafts.

Coming clear of his assailants, Karna trained his attack on Yudhisthira. With deadly accuracy he cut off the Pandava's bejewelled armor. It fell from his body like a cloud decorated with lightning dropping from the sky.

Yudhisthira hurled a large iron dart at his antagonist, but Karna cut it to pieces before it could reach him. Yudhisthira followed it with four barbed lances that pierced Karna's armor and made blood spurt from his body.

Karna threw the lances aside and assailed Yudhisthira with countless shafts. Without his armor and with his charioteer slain, Yudhisthira was unable to stand before the attack. He jumped down from his chariot and fled from the fight. Karna pursued him and jeered, "In what family were you born, O hero? It seems you do not know the duties of kshatriyas. I think you are

better suited for the life of a brahmin in the forest. O son of Kunti, do not fight again with powerful warriors and use harsh language. Go and give yourself to the practice of asceticism."

Humiliated and angered, Yudhishthira ran over to Dhristadyumna's chariot and jumped aboard. Not knowing of Karna's promise to Kunti, he could not understand why he had been spared. Dhristadyumna bore him to safety in the midst of the Pandava forces, and other warriors attacked Karna.

Bhima, witnessing his elder brother's defeat and humiliation, was seized with an uncontrollable rage. He flew toward Karna screaming out his battle cry. Those warriors who came before him were instantly cut to pieces by his arrows or pounded to a pulp by his whirling mace. Seeing him approach, Salya said, "Here comes the second son of Pandu, raging out of control. I have never seen him display such a terrible form. It appears that he will annihilate the three worlds with all their mobile and immobile beings."

Karna smiled. "I will slay this one at once, and thus bring Arjuna to my presence for our final encounter."

Karna released a cluster of crooked arrows that flew with a twisting motion and had razor-sharp tips. Some of the shafts glanced off Bhima's armor, but others pierced his shoulders and arms. The fuming Pandava felt nothing. He responded with dreadful arrows shot from his fully drawn bow. Rocked by the power of Bhima's shafts, Karna released a broad-headed arrow that sundered his opponent's bow. But Bhima instantly took up another bow and again attacked Karna.

Karna hit Bhima with a hundred arrows as a hunter strikes a proud and infuriated elephant in the forest. Senseless with rage, Bhima took up a single long shaft that resembled a lance. He discharged it from his bow and it hit Karna like a thunderbolt hitting a mountain. Stupefied, Karna sat down on the terrace of his chariot.

Seeing Karna's condition, Salya, conscious of his duty as a charioteer, quickly carried him from the fight.

Duryodhana became fearful for Karna and he instructed his brothers to go to his assistance. The princes rushed at Bhima like a swarm of insects approaching a fire. Over twenty of them surrounded Bhima, backed by a large number of chariot fighters. They covered the Pandava with arrows, darts, lances and heavy clubs.

Smiling to see himself encircled by Dhritarastra's sons, Bhima set about killing them one by one. He beheaded some with crescent-headed shafts, and with long arrows he pierced the vital organs of others. Killing a dozen of the princes in a matter of minutes, Bhima sent up a roar that terrified the Kauravas. He appeared like Yamaraja himself. Impervious to all weapons, the marauding Pandava hurtled about the field shooting arrows on all sides.

Dhritarastra's surviving sons fled in terror. Bhima slaughtered their troops without mercy. He ranged among the Kaurava warriors spreading death and destruction wherever he went.

Regaining his senses, Karna re-entered the fray. He rushed against Bhima and assailed him with countless arrows. Another fierce encounter ensued between the two. Both men continued to slay the soldiers of the opposing army even as they attacked one another.

Some way off from the fight, Arjuna's great banner flew. He was surrounded by thousands of Kaurava troops. In the midst of those warriors, Arjuna and Krishna appeared like the sun and moon covered by dense clouds. The Gandiva's twang and Hanuman's roars combined to create a sound so terrifying that it paralyzed the Kauravas' horses.

Assailed by innumerable burning arrows, the Kaurava warriors pressed forward toward Arjuna like men advancing into a tempest. Hundreds of thousands were cut down, but they continued to close on Arjuna with their swords and maces held high. They began clambering up onto his chariot and dealing both Arjuna and Krishna violent blows. Dozens of warriors took hold of Arjuna, but he shook them off and fought back with his steel saber. Throwing the Kauravas down from his chariot, Arjuna took up a golden arrow decked with gems and invoked the Naga's Paridava weapon. Suddenly, the Kauravas found themselves bound by their legs and unable to move. Great snakes, brought into being by the celestial missile, held them fast as they struggled to get free.

Arjuna remorselessly slew his immobilized foes even as Indra formerly annihilated the demons with his Vajra weapon. Seeing his soldiers tied down, Susharma invoked the Suparna weapon. Suddenly, thousands of vultures descended from the sky and devoured the snakes holding the warriors. The serpents fled as the vultures came at them, their talons

outstretched.

Freed from their bonds, the Kauravas again assailed Arjuna with all their strength. The Pandava withstood their attack and invoked the Aindrastra. Waves of blazing shafts swept across the battlefield. Sorely afflicted, the Kauravas cried out and fell in lines as the flaming arrows tore into them.

Seeing his enemies routed and fleeing, Arjuna said, "It seems that this army has been overpowered, O Madhava. They are running like deer at the sight of a lion. Surely it is time I encountered the suta's son. I see his banner moving among Yudhisthira's division with alacrity. Leaving aside these warriors, O Govinda, take me to that mighty hero. I shall finish his battle career at once."

"Let it be so." Krishna then urged on the horses and the chariot moved off toward Karna, stationed two miles away. Many powerful Kauravas came before Arjuna to check his progress, but he swept them ruthlessly aside with his weapons. The Pandava steadily approached Karna, cutting down countless charioteers, horsemen and elephants on the way. Twenty-five thousand warriors soon lay slain by Arjuna. The fierce barbarian armies of the Kambhojas, Yavanas and Sakas were pressed back and crushed as Arjuna made his way across the field. Another twenty thousand of their number were cut to pieces by his straight-flying arrows.

Karna, having broken away from Bhima, slew the Pandava forces even as Arjuna killed the Kauravas. His arrows, with a touch like poison, felled his enemies by the thousands. Other Kaurava heroes supported him and rained down arrows on the Pandavas, who in turn sent an immeasurable volume of shafts back at their foes.

The battlefield presented a ghastly scene, with mutilated bodies lying in heaps. Headless torsos ran about with blood spurting from their necks. Their severed heads lay with staring eyes and clenched teeth. Warriors slipped and fell as they fought in the blood-soaked mire, pitilessly hacking at one another.

Karna once again attacked Yudhisthira. Seeing this, Madri's two sons challenged him and immediately covered him with arrows. Karna smiled and fearlessly fought against the three Pandavas together. He cut apart both Nakula and Sahadeva's bows and struck Yudhisthira on the chest with a

cluster of powerful shafts that rendered him senseless. With another dozen arrows, he killed Nakula's horses and charioteer. Striking both Nakula and Sahadeva with a relentless stream of shafts, Karna placed them both in difficulty.

Seeing the plight of his maternal nephews, Salya said, "Why are you wasting your time? You are supposed to fight with Arjuna, now that you have vaunted your prowess. It seems you are intent on avoiding him. Do you not see him coming toward you? If you are powerful, then train your weapons upon him. Do not tarry here with the others."

Karna looked across the field and saw Arjuna's chariot not far away. He also saw Bhima, who had been waging a battle with Duryodhana. Kunti's second son had overpowered the Kaurava prince and placed him in a precarious position.

Remembering again his promise to Kunti, and realizing that he could not kill any other Pandava than Arjuna, Karna raced to Duryodhana's assistance. At the same time, Ashvatthama, Kripa and Kritavarma came to support their king. Bhima, backed by Dhristadyumna and Satyaki, assailed the Kaurava heroes with arrows resembling steel spears.

Yudhishthira, afflicted by Karna's attack, left the battlefield with the twins protecting him. He made his way in shame back to his camp, unable to continue the fight. His armor was smashed and his body covered with wounds. As expert physicians tended him, he told the twins to return to the fight. They charged back to the battle, where they found Karna releasing the Bhargava missile. That celestial weapon caused thousands of arrows to shoot forth in streams from his bow. Those kanka and peacock-feathered shafts mowed down the Pandava soldiers. Nothing was visible on the battlefield except the dense sheet of arrows.

Under such a fierce attack, the Pandava forces cried out and ran about in terror. They repeatedly prayed to Arjuna and Krishna to save them. Hearing his troops' piteous cries, Arjuna said, "Behold the mighty Bhargava weapon, O Keshava. No one can withstand it in battle. See the charioteer's son resembling Death himself performing dreadful feats. The time for our final meeting has come. Death or victory are now the only options left for us both."

Krishna steered the chariot clear of Karna's hail of shafts and replied,

"Yudhisthira has left the field badly wounded. I think you should first see him and ensure that all is well. After that, kill Karna."

Krishna suggested that while they were seeing Yudhisthira, Karna would wear himself out by fighting others. He also desired to reassure Yudhisthira, whom he knew would be anxious after seeing the destruction caused by Karna. Agreeing to Krishna's suggestion, he went over to Bhima and asked him to protect the army in his absence. Bhima replied, "Go at once to see the king. I do not know if he survives. Have no fear for us. I will check all the suta's weapons. When you return, you can easily slay him."

Arjuna thanked his brother and went swiftly to Yudhisthira's tent. Finding him well and resting, he was relieved and bowed at his feet. As he rose, Yudhisthira, thinking that Karna must have been slain, said, "I am indeed glad to see you, O Arjuna. Pleasing too is the sight of Keshava. That both of you are hale and hearty even after standing before Karna is a wonder. That suta was like a deadly serpent with his fangs ever-exposed. Energetic and powerful, no one could resist him in battle any more than one could resist the ocean. O Achyuta, O Arjuna—Karna and I fought, but he reduced me to this pitiable condition. Addressing me in harsh words, he cut me to the quick. Now by good fortune you have slain him."

Arjuna was dumbfounded. He stepped back in surprise as Yudhisthira went on addressing him in joy. "O Dhananjaya, for thirteen years I have lost sleep thinking of Karna's prowess. Even while awake I would see an illusion of Karna. It appeared as if the whole universe was filled only with him. Surely I rushed at him impelled by Death himself. Vanquished by him, I was released and allowed to live. Alas, what use is my life after such humiliation? Only the fact that you have killed him gives me relief."

Yudhisthira smiled broadly at Arjuna. He forgot the pain of his wounds as he went on eagerly questioning him. "Tell me how you overcame the wicked one. I want to hear all the details. Tell me how he now lies besmeared in blood and mangled by your shafts. Without doubt, the fool Duryodhana now laments and sees his imminent defeat. That the dull-headed Karna, who insulted Draupadi so grievously, now lies killed gives me more pleasure than ascending to heaven. O Dhananjaya, describe everything to me."

Arjuna took a deep breath. "O King, you are not aware of the facts. I

have been under attack by hordes of Kaurava warriors. Numerous great heroes have charged at me roaring out their battle cries. Dispatching all those fighters to Yamaraja's mansion, I pressed on toward Karna. Finally reaching the indomitable hero, I found him annihilating our troops with his weapons. I then learned that you had been overpowered and made to retreat. Thus I came here at once to be sure of your welfare before killing Karna."

Yudhishthira's head fell to his chest. "Alas!" he cried.

Arjuna placed a hand on his elder brother's shoulder. "O illustrious king, do not despair. I will immediately carry out your heart's desire. Even as Shakra encountered Vritrasura, I will encounter Karna and end his life. Do not doubt it, for it is my solemn vow. Come and witness the fight. I beg your blessings, O king. Only say to me, 'May victory be thine' and Karna is as good as dead. Let me return to the fight."

Yudhishthira, still pained by his humiliation at Karna's hands, was suddenly seized by anger. Shaking his head, he said, "Your birth in Kunti's womb was in vain, my brother. How could you leave the field without killing Karna? Surely it was out of fear that you have come here, seeking to avoid the suta's son. How has your promise proved false? If you had told me in the forest that you could not kill Karna, then I would never have left that place. All our hopes have been frustrated, like a man expecting fruits from a tree and receiving flowers instead. For thirteen years we have expected much of you, like men who have sown seeds and await the rains to fall."

Yudhishthira got to his feet. The brahmins tending to his wounds stood back as he raised his voice against his brother. "Why, O wretch, did you not make over the Gandiva to Keshava? He would have slain Karna without delay. If you are unable to face him in battle, then give your famed bow to another warrior who may be equal to the task. Due to your failure, the world will see us with all our relatives sunk into the fathomless abyss of hell. It would have been better if you had come out of Kunti in the fifth month as an abortion rather than being born in a royal line and then showing your back on the battlefield. Fie on your Gandiva! Fie on the strength of your arms and your numberless arrows. Fie on your Hanuman emblem, and fie on Agni's chariot."

Yudhishthira slumped back onto his bed. He gazed up at his younger brother with eyes red with anger. Arjuna said nothing. He breathed heavily

and clenched his fist around the hilt of his sword. Pulling out the long gleaming blade, he raised it to kill his brother. Krishna quickly stepped in front of him and grasped his arm. Preventing him from advancing toward Yudhisthira he exclaimed, "Here, Dhananjaya, I see no adversary to try the strength of your steel. You have seen that Yudhisthira is well and should now be rejoicing. Why then do you suddenly seize your sword? What makes you yearn for fight at this time, or have you lost your mind? In a sullen mood you are drawing your sword with no apparent cause."

Arjuna stared past Krishna at his older brother. Breathing short and hot breaths, he replied, "I have made a vow to behead anyone who tells me to give up my Gandiva. In your presence the king has uttered these words and I cannot forgive him. I will run my sword through this pious king and redeem my vow. What else can be done now, O Keshava? You know everything. I depend on your advice."

Arjuna was now in a dilemma. His anger had abated when Krishna intervened, but he could not break a vow under any circumstances. But how could he kill Yudhisthira? Lowering his sword he waited for Krishna to speak.

"Fie on you, Arjuna! Now I can understand that you have never waited upon venerable elders, since, O mightiest of men, you give way to anger at an inappropriate time. Those versed in the subtleties of religion would never contemplate what you are considering, O Partha. One who performs such a heinous act is certainly the vilest of men. Surely you are a stranger to scripture as you do not know what is right and what is wrong. How can you rush upon your elder brother, intent on killing him, oblivious to the fact that he is your worshipable lord? He is neither an aggressor nor an enemy; he is not engaged in a fight and, as your superior, is seeking your shelter. For these as well as other cogent reasons, you cannot slay him without incurring sin."

Arjuna replaced his sword in its scabbard as Krishna continued. "O Partha, your vow was made out of childishness. Now hear from me about the higher principles of religion. Out of a desire to preserve truth, you are ready to kill your brother, but you do not know that even truth should not be uttered where it will produce an adverse result."

Krishna cited a Vedic verse that described instances when speaking

untruth was not considered sinful. In those instances, truth was actually considered untruth. Such times were when life was threatened, when a brahmin was in danger, or if one's entire fortune was at stake. At those times, to lie was not considered sinful.

Krishna added, "In all cases, Partha, the highest virtue lies in not harming other creatures. Killing in righteous battle and murdering another for one's own purposes are different and produce quite different results. Indeed, untruth that protects against the latter may be considered truth. Your adherence to so-called truth in this case simply shows your ignorance of true morality. Any act free from the motive to injure any being is surely true morality. The moral precepts exist for this purpose. Morality cannot be ascertained by logic, nor even in every case by a study of the scripture. One must seek the guidance of experienced and wise elders to learn its subtleties. All this I have heard from the rishis, O Partha."

Arjuna's head fell. His anger had completely subsided. Krishna raised His hand toward Yudhisthira and said, "Now tell me, O hero, if you feel this virtuous king deserves to be killed by you."

Tears fell from Arjuna's eyes as he replied. "O Krishna, you have spoken as a man of great wisdom and intelligence would speak. Who knows the subtleties of truth better than you? Surely you are like our father and mother. You are our only sanctuary and your words are always beneficial. Again you have saved us from a terrible calamity. I admit that the righteous Yudhisthira cannot be killed, but, O Keshava, I am in a dilemma. Whether my vow was right or wrong, it nevertheless stands. How will my words not prove false? All my vows will be worthless if I find reason to evade even one of them. At the same time, I cannot kill Yudhisthira and myself remain alive. How, then, can I preserve my vow and also the king's life?"

Krishna placed his arm around Arjuna's shoulder. "O valiant one, Karna has harassed the king. Heavy at heart, he spoke angrily to you. He also hoped to provoke you to slay the suta's son without delay. Dharmaraja sees none other capable of killing Karna. Thus he used harsh words out of frustration and disappointment. O Partha, you should fulfill his desire and slay the wicked-minded Karna in battle. As far as your promise is concerned, here is how you may be saved."

Krishna quoted a scriptural injunction that stated that an elder should

never be addressed disrespectfully. One so addressed by his inferior is said to die at heart. Krishna told Arjuna to insult his brother. "Thus you will kill him without taking his life. After this, you can gain his forgiveness by falling at his feet and worshipping him."

Realizing that this was his only recourse, Arjuna reluctantly agreed and insulted Yudhisthira. He compared him unfavorably with Bhima, deriding his power and calling him a coward. Accusing him of being addicted to gambling and of being the cause of the war, Arjuna suggested that he should not become the sovereign. As he spoke words he had never before uttered, his heart sank. He felt disconsolate and shameful, considering himself covered by sin. Sighing heavily, he again unsheathed his sword.

Seeing Arjuna with sword in hand once more, Krishna said in surprise, "What is this? Why do I again see your sword, lustrous like the blue skies, drawn? If you still have doubts, then speak them out. I will settle them for you."

Filled with remorse, Arjuna replied, "I will destroy my body, for it has sinned grievously against the pious king."

As Arjuna turned his sword toward his heart, Krishna said urgently, "Stop! O slayer of foes, this is an act as condemned as the killing of Yudhisthira. You are surely seized with some false religious zeal in that you were first ready to slay the king and now yourself. Do not give way to sin in the name of virtue. O Partha, if you loudly recount your own glories, that will be the same as self-destruction, for no cultured man glorifies himself."

Once more checked by Krishna, Arjuna sheathed his sword and did as Krishna suggested, speaking his own praises. He then hung his head in shame and said to Yudhisthira, "O king, be pleased with me. My life is devoted to you. Forgive my foolishness and my unwarranted words. I will now go forth and kill Karna."

Dropping to his knees, Arjuna took hold of Yudhisthira's feet. "Please bless me with success," he said, placing his head on his elder brother's feet.

Yudhisthira got up from his bed and spoke without cheer. "O Arjuna, dear brother, I am at fault. Because of me you have been put into danger. Only by Keshava's interference were you saved. I deserve to be killed. Who is more wretched than I? A dull-headed sinner and coward, I will repair at

once to the forest and let Bhima take the throne. Your harsh words rang true. I am unfit to rule the earth. Let me go to the forest."

Yudhisthira stood to leave. He tightened his cloth and walked toward the door of his tent. Krishna quickly stepped in front of him and bowed at his feet. As Yudhisthira reached down to lift him up, Krishna said, "O king, where are you going in such a somber mood? You should not take Arjuna's rebukes seriously. He could never hold such thoughts in his heart, and he spoke them only to avoid the unthinkable act of killing you. Both he and I have acted in an unmannerly fashion, O best of men. I beg your forgiveness. Be peaceful. Today the earth will drink Karna's blood. Do not doubt it."

Pacified, Yudhisthira replied, "O Govinda, I accept what you say. Indeed, you have saved me too. I was steeped in ignorance and you have rescued me, for you never lose your intelligence. You have carried Arjuna and I over the ocean of grief and remorse."

Turning to Arjuna, Yudhisthira said, "O hero, go and slay the suta's son with your infallible shafts. This will surely bring about our success and satisfy Keshava."

Arjuna was still consumed by shame for what he had said to Yudhisthira. Seeing his elder brother so deeply affected made it even worse. He fell at his feet weeping, begging his forgiveness in a choked voice. "O king, nothing of what I said was true. It was spoken only to save me from falsehood. I have hurt you most grievously. How can I ever be forgiven?"

Yudhisthira raised his brother and embraced him. He assured him that he had taken no offense. Arjuna then set his face in determined lines. Assuming a fearful expression, he said coldly, "The evil-minded one will reap the fruits of insulting you, dear brother. I swear by truth that he will fall in battle today, cut down by arrows released from the Gandiva."

Yudhisthira held up his hand to bless Arjuna. "May you attain unfading fame and eternal life. May victory attend you and may the gods grant you continuous prosperity. Go forth, my child, and shatter Duryodhana's hopes. I too will soon return to the fight."

Arjuna asked Krishna to prepare his chariot and then took his leave from Yudhisthira. After receiving blessings from numerous brahmins, he mounted his chariot and set off for the battlefield. He blew a terrific blast on his conch shell and repeatedly slapped his arms. Seeing the mighty archer

heading out in an angry mood, everyone felt that Karna was already slain. Various auspicious omens surrounded Arjuna as he rode out to the fight. Ahead of him flew a number of vultures, hawks and ravens in anticipation of food. Arjuna, impatient to meet Karna, clasped his Gandiva and stared ahead as the chariot picked up speed.

Chapter Twenty-five. Arjuna Encounters Karna

While Arjuna was seeing Yudhisthira, Bhima was locked in ardent battle with the Kauravas. Not caring for his own safety, he went into their midst, releasing blazing shafts in all directions. Satyaki, Shikhandhi and Uttamaejas followed him, beating back their foes with a furious assault.

Dushashana, Shakuni and a force of mountain warriors charged Bhima. The Pandava met them head on and struck them down on all sides. Uttamaejas then joined Bhima and was attacked by Sushena, Karna's eldest son. Using all his strength, Uttamaejas released an arrow that tore off Sushena's head. Seeing this, Karna was overwhelmed with grief and stood stunned for a few moments. Then he looked for vengeance. He turned his attention to Uttamaejas and quickly slew his horses and charioteer. With a volley of shafts he shattered his chariot and cut his standard to pieces.

Uttamaejas, countering Karna's arrows with shafts of his own, leapt from his broken chariot and ran over to Shikhandhi's chariot. Both men then contended with Kripa and Kritavarma. Rushing ahead of them, Bhima fell upon the Kaurava troops, spitting venom. They could hardly look at Bhima as he flew about like the mighty Rudra dealing destruction at the end of creation. A cry of woe rose from the Kauravas. Torn asunder by the noble-minded Bhima, they rushed pell-mell. Mangled by his arrows and crushed by his mace, they screamed and ran to Karna for protection.

After dispersing his enemies like a gale scatters clouds, Bhima said to his charioteer, "O Vishoka, I am afraid for Yudhisthira's life. Arjuna went to see him and has not returned, even though Karna is still releasing fearsome celestial weapons. Numerous Kaurava warriors, who are ready to tear out our lives at the first opportunity, surround us. All this weighs heavily on my mind. When will Arjuna return?"

Bhima had no time to find out. Dushashana and his brothers were coming at him again, backed by thousands of chariot fighters. He asked, "O Vishoka, I have hurled a huge number of arrows and other weapons at my foes today. Tell me, how much stock still remains? Should I attack my foes with arrows and darts, or simply grind them to a pulp with my mace?"

Vishoka replied, "O hero, you have sixty thousand arrows left, as well as twenty thousand of both razor-headed and broad-pointed shafts.

Therefore, attack your enemies without any restraint."

Bhima took up his bow and sent a hundred steel shafts at Dushashana and Shakuni, who charged toward him side by side, closely followed by Dhritarastra's remaining sons. As Bhima contended with the warriors, Vishoka said, "O hero, do you hear that sound? I think it is the Devadatta filling the four quarters with mighty blasts. Look south. The Kaurava forces are fleeing like animals that have seen a lion. There in the distance is Arjuna's ape banner. Surely the gods have favored us today, for Dhananjaya has come again to the battle."

Bhima paused and gazed south. Sure enough, there was Arjuna's celestial banner. Relieved, he said, "For this most welcome news, O charioteer, I will grant you a dozen villages, twenty of the finest chariots, and a hundred servants. Surely Yudhisthira is well because Arjuna blows his victorious conch again and again. This marks the end of Karna's career."

With joy Bhima resumed the fight with renewed power, spreading total confusion among the Kauravas.

* * *

After leaving the camp, Arjuna's chariot sped toward the fight. As it neared the battlefield, he wondered how he might kill Karna. It was already mid-afternoon. Karna would not be slain without a battle. Arjuna knew he would have to encounter him soon. He could not afford to be distracted by other Kaurava heroes, but Duryodhana would surely try to place obstacles in his way. Arjuna could hear the cries of the warriors and the clash of weapons ahead. No doubt Karna was ranging among the Pandava troops like Mahadeva among the demons.

Seeing his friend pensive, Krishna said, "O Partha, there is no man equal to you in prowess and vigor. I have seen many a hero, valiant like Indra, sent off to the highest regions after meeting you in battle. There is not a single warrior anywhere who can survive after encountering you in a fight. The son of Radha is not to be taken lightly, but I cannot see him emerging victorious from the impending contest. O hero, cut short that arrogant fool's days. He only disdains the Pandavas. Slay him and strike at the root of all evils. Frustrate the desires of Dhritarastra's sons and end this war. How can Karna live after meeting you with the Gandiva in hand?" As he drove the

chariot toward the thick of battle, Krishna continued to reassure Arjuna. He reminded him about the many all-but-invincible warriors who had already been defeated—Bhishma, Drona, Bhagadatta, and others. Hearing Krishna's assurances, Arjuna shook off his apprehension. He took out his conch shell and blew a blast that filled the four quarters. He then drew his bow to its full extent and twanged the string, sending forth a thunderous crash. Looking around the field at the startled soldiers he said, "My greatest assurance, O Govinda, is that I have you as my guide. With your assistance all things are possible. With you at my elbow, I can defy the three worlds marshaled in a mighty array and launch them into eternity—what to speak of Karna? I will doubtlessly lead him to his life's final goal. Duryodhana has accepted him as his protection, but I will shatter that hope; and he will recall his many wicked deeds toward us, especially his abuse of Draupadi. He is about to reap the results of that unforgivable sin."

Thinking back to the dice game and to Abhimanyu's killing, Arjuna felt his anger rise like a fire fed with oil. Just ahead of him he saw Bhima completely encircled by Kaurava warriors. He was waging a fearful battle, sending out fiery shafts that tore into his foes.

Arjuna rode straight into the fight and beat back the Kauravas with waves of arrows. Not far off, he could see Karna's tall standard and he made his way toward him. At once he was met by Kripa, Kritavarma, and a number of Duryodhana's brothers. Repelling their attacks, he moved steadily toward Karna. His long shafts flew from the Gandiva like lightning bolts, sending his aggressors reeling. Arrows shot at Arjuna fell uselessly from his impenetrable armor or were struck down mid-flight by Arjuna's own shafts. Pursing his lips and narrowing his eyes at Karna in the distance, he relentlessly drove into the Kaurava forces.

Arjuna struck down numerous elephants Duryodhana had directed against him. Rows of charioteers rushed at the Pandava only to be felled by thousands of arrows shot in straight lines. He crushed his foes like a maddened elephant trampling a lake full of lotuses.

After destroying four divisions of troops, each containing ten thousand brave warriors, Arjuna looked across at Karna and said, "O Keshava, I see Karna not far off. Duryodhana himself is protecting him, along with a number of other maharathas. Drive my chariot straight at them, O Krishna. I am not going to return today without slaying him. Go quickly,

before he destroys our entire host."

Krishna urged on the horses and the great chariot thundered toward Karna. Seeing them approach, Salya said, "Here at last comes Pandu's mighty son, shooting snake-like arrows from the Gandiva with the force of a thunderbolt. It appears that he is making straight for you, O hero. Save our troops by killing him, if it lies in your power. You have badly hurt the virtuous king Yudhishthira and have afflicted all of the other Pandavas. Arjuna will be swelling with wrath and vengeance. You are the only archer in the world who can face him. It appears that a furious cobra is advancing toward you, its tongue quivering. All the Kauravas are looking to you for protection. O Karna, rescue them from the Arjuna ocean into which they are fast sinking."

Salya knew the time for the final battle between the two heroes had arrived. It was not time to discourage Karna. His task was already great enough. Salya gazed at the dark-complexioned Krishna as he skillfully drove Arjuna's chariot through the Kauravas. He resembled a blackish cloud moving through the star-studded firmament. Behind him Arjuna looked like a second black cloud, sending out streaks of brilliant lightning as he fired his arrows.

Karna was cheered. "O strong-armed one, it seems you have shaken off your fear of Arjuna. You are now speaking words that are agreeable to me. Today you will witness what I have learned from my martial teachers. I will soon slay these two warriors, along with the entire Pandava force. But even if I fail—and victory in battle is never certain—my fame will be preserved by my achieving a hero's death."

Karna roared and went over to Duryodhana. After saluting the Kaurava he said, "O king, I will now encounter Dhananjaya. Close him in from all sides so that he cannot escape. Have the best of our fighters assail him with numerous weapons. An immense undertaking is upon me, and I will need whatever help you can muster."

Duryodhana detailed Kripa, Ashvatthama, Dushashana, and his remaining brothers to support Karna. They rushed in a body at Arjuna, followed by thousands of elephants, chariots and horsemen.

Arjuna met his assailants with volleys of whistling arrows. Bhima, blowing his conch and slapping his arms in joy, came to his side and targeted

Duryodhana's brothers with his deadly shafts. Little more than twenty princes remained, and they angrily attacked Bhima with all their strength, desiring to avenge their brothers' killings.

Dushashana, worked up to a fury, exhibited great prowess in the fight. He struck Bhima with a dozen arrows with such force that the Pandava was stunned, momentarily losing his grip on his bow. Taking advantage of his lapse, Dushashana sent at him a shaft as brilliant as the sun worked with diamonds and other shining gems. As powerful as thunder, the arrow hit Bhima on the chest and made him lose his senses. He dropped to his knees and held onto his standard pole for support.

Dushashana roared and blew his conch. His brothers all cheered and rained down shafts on the stricken Bhima. They considered their mortal enemy slain. Within moments, however, Bhima was again on his feet. He threw a dart at Dushashana, but the Kaurava cut it to pieces in mid-flight. Dushashana then struck Bhima with another barbed arrow that cut him deeply.

Consumed by wrath, Bhima thundered, "Strike me while you can, wretch. You have wounded me in this fight, but you will soon lay down your life. I will drink your life-blood. Feel now the force of my mace."

Bhima's chariot hurtled toward Dushashana. He whirled his huge iron mace over his head and roared furiously. Dushashana threw a blazing dart at him, but Bhima smashed it with his mace. In moments, he was upon Dushashana and he struck him a dreadful blow on his forehead. The prince was thrown twenty paces from his chariot. He thudded to the ground, his ornaments strewn, and lay stunned for some moments. Blood flowed from his head and his body shook.

Remembering his promise in the dice game, Bhima leapt down from his chariot and approached his fallen foe. As Dushashana struggled to his feet, Bhima struck him again and sent him flying. He dropped to the earth, gasping for breath. Bhima stood over him and unsheathed his sword. Looking down at the semi-conscious prince, he remembered all the evils he had committed—in particular his unforgivable treatment of Draupadi, and of the Pandavas as they had left for the forest.

Bhima seized his terrified foe by the arm and dragged him across the field. Dushashana tried to scramble free, kicking out frantically, but Bhima

twisted his arm till he screamed. The Pandava then brought his sword down in a flashing arc and cut off Dushashana's arm. His voice rang out across the battlefield, "Here is the arm that seized Draupadi's sanctified hair. Watch as I drink his blood."

Dushashana writhed in agony as blood pumped from his shoulder. Bhima kicked him onto his back and dropped onto him with his knees. The Pandava's roars reverberated for miles, petrifying the warriors on both sides. He grasped the ivory hilt of his sword with both hands. Dushashana's blood-smeared features contorted in terror. Bhima smiled, relishing the long-awaited moment of revenge, then suddenly plunged his sword into Dushashana's chest. As the Kaurava died screaming, Bhima ripped him open and tore out his heart. He leaned down and, with cupped hands, drank his foaming blood as it flowed from his chest. Standing up again, he shouted, "The taste of this blood is sweeter than my mother's milk, sweeter than honey, sweeter than pure water." His face smeared with blood, Bhima then looked down at Dushashana and said, "You are now safe since you are dead. There is nothing more I can do to you."

All the Kauravas who saw Bhima drinking Dushashana's blood were horrified. Many of them fell to the earth out of fear. Others ran away, crying, "He is not human! Save us from Bhima!"

Bhima laughed. "O Dushashana, you were the root of the evils we suffered. Now let us hear you again joyfully defy us with the words, 'O cow.'"

Turning toward Arjuna and Krishna, Bhima said, "O heroes, I have redeemed my pledge to kill Dushashana and drink his blood. Draupadi is avenged. Soon I will fulfill my other vow and crush Duryodhana. Then only will I know peace."

Ten of Dushashana's surviving brothers, shocked, rushed at Bhima hoping to kill him. Bhima quickly remounted his chariot and faced them with a smile. They hemmed him in and fired hundreds of barbed shafts at him. In swift succession Bhima sent a gold-winged and razor-headed shaft at each prince, severing his head.

Karna's mouth fell open. His weapons dropped to his side and he gazed at Bhima with undisguised fear. Covered in blood and roaring, the Pandava seemed like a monstrous Rakshasa. Surely an evil spirit of

inestimable power possessed him.

Salya, seeing Karna's terrified expression, said, "Come, O hero, do not be depressed. This is the way of war. Death and destruction are its ever-present features. Do not be afraid. Duryodhana is grieving to see the death of Dushashana and his other brothers, and the rest of the Kauravas are fleeing. Duryodhana has given you the responsibility for this war. Exert yourself and bear the burden to the best of your ability."

Urged on by Salya, Karna caught hold of himself and shook off his confusion. It was true. There was no alternative now but to finish this fight. Arjuna was nearby. This was not the time to hesitate.

Karna's son, Vrishasena, having seen his father shaken and holding back in battle, blew his conch and confronted Arjuna. He fired a powerful volley of barbed arrows that covered both him and Krishna. Fighting valiantly, he overpowered Nakula, who had come to Arjuna's support, smashing his chariot. Bhima shouted angrily to Arjuna, "I should kill this one immediately, but I will leave him for you. Dispatch him at once."

As Karna looked on, Arjuna attacked Vrishasena. Blazing shafts sped toward the prince like hissing snakes breathing fire. Four of them slew his horses, while another dislodged his charioteer and threw him to the earth. As he tried to jump clear from his immobilized chariot, Arjuna sped a crescent-headed shaft at him that severed his head. The prince fell to the earth like a tree felled by lightning.

Karna cried out in agony. Grasping hold of his bow, he advanced toward Arjuna, who turned to meet him. The lustrous golden chariots of the two heroes, covered in tiger skins, looked like two suns meeting. Like Indra encountering Bali, they approached one another for combat while both armies looked on in awe. As they shot their arrows at one another, the other warriors roared with excitement—some praising Arjuna and others Karna. Both armies struck up martial music from thousands of drums and trumpets. Conches sounded and the battlefield was filled with a deafening din.

The celestials looked on from the canopy of the sky. Seeing the two god-like heroes raising their weapons and roaring, they could not decide which of them would emerge victorious. They were reminded of the ancient battle between Parasurama and Kartivirya. The Siddhas and Charanas sounded their horns and showered flowers on the combatants. Indra blessed

his son for victory, while Surya shone down on Karna, wishing him well.

As they closed on one another, the troops of both armies came to offer support. Dhristadyumna with all the Pandava forces surrounded Arjuna, while Duryodhana backed up Karna with the Kauravas. A fierce battle raged between the soldiers surrounding the two warriors, who circled one another, firing their first salvos.

Hanuman suddenly leapt from Arjuna's banner and flew across to Karna's banner, which was emblazoned with a jeweled elephant's rope resembling Yamaraja's noose. The enraged monkey tore at the rope with his nails and teeth, screaming fearfully all the while. The horses of both fighters reared and neighed angrily. Krishna threw wrathful glances at Salya, who returned them in a like manner.

Karna said, "O Salya, my friend, the moment has arrived. Tell me truthfully—what will you do if I am slain by Partha?"

Salya replied, "I will rush at Keshava and Dhananjaya. What greater end is there for a warrior than death at the edge of weapons?"

Arjuna asked Krishna the same question and Krishna said, "O Dhananjaya, the sun may fall from the sky, the earth may shatter into a thousand fragments, fire may become cold, but Karna will not slay you. But if it should happen that you are slain, then know that the world's end is near. Both Karna and Salya will be sent to Yamaraja's abode, along with the entire host of kshatriyas."

Arjuna smiled, "O Keshava, have no fear. Karna and Salya are no match for me. As an elephant in the forest rends a tree, so I will crush Karna, his chariot, banners, horses, armor, bows and arrows. O Madhava, soon Karna's wives will be widows. Surely they dreamt of coming evil last night. I cannot check my rage when I think of the cruel acts Karna has committed against us, especially how he abused Draupadi and the harsh language he used at that time. Today I will console Abhimanyu's mother by repaying his enemies in their own coin. Today you too will be able to comfort Draupadi, from whose eyes fall large tears, remembering as she does the many woes she has suffered at the Kauravas' hands."

Both Arjuna and Karna then released shafts in volume. The sky was covered with flying arrows, creating a dark shadow over the battlefield. The two warriors countered each other's attacks, like the east and west wind

struggling with one another. As they struck down their opponent's arrows, they seemed like the sun and moon emerging from clouds. Surrounded by their troops, they resembled Indra and Bali surrounded by the gods and Asuras. Their golden bows, constantly drawn to a circle, looked like the sun's coronas and their arrows resembled sunbeams. Bent upon each other's destruction, they stood like two suns risen for the destruction of the universe at the end of a yuga.

As they fought they simultaneously slew thousands of troops, elephants and horses. Other warriors contended together as the battle raged between the foremost heroes on both sides. Duryodhana, Kripa, Shakuni and Ashvatthama rained down arrows on Arjuna, trying to distract him and to give Karna the advantage, but Arjuna dexterously cut all their shafts and beat them back with his own. Forced to a distance by Arjuna's searing arrows, Duryodhana and Ashvatthama came together to discuss their strategy.

Ashvatthama was still deeply affected by his father's death and Vyasadeva's words. Climbing onto Duryodhana's chariot he said, "O king, be pacified. There is no need to prolong this war. Enough men have died. Bhishma lies prostrate on the field and your own preceptor has been slain. Make peace with Yudhisthira, who always seeks the welfare of all beings. His brothers will accept his order. With the Pandavas as your allies, what can you not attain? How can anyone overpower Arjuna? What use is there in fighting him?"

Ashvatthama watched Karna and Arjuna fighting. Blazing arrows shot from the Gandiva and lit up the late afternoon sky. Arjuna's chariot moved swiftly from side to side, baffling Karna's attacks. Krishna stood with the reins in his hands, his face covered with perspiration, as he shouted out commands to the horses and expertly maneuvered the chariot.

"In my view we should stop this war. Friendship with the Pandavas will surely be in your best interests. Stop this fight and let the remaining kings return home. O monarch, I speak only as your friend and well-wisher. If you want, I can dissuade Karna from battle. Simply order me."

Duryodhana thought for a while without replying. Finally, he shook his head. "O friend, you have had your say and I have considered your words. Now hear my thoughts on the matter. Even as the might of a storm is checked by Mount Meru, so will Karna check Arjuna's prowess. Let the fight

continue. The Pandavas will never place confidence in me after the ills I have done them. You should not dissuade Karna. Arjuna is tired from his long day of fighting and will soon be overcome. O hero, go forward and fight our enemies. I am depending upon you as much as I am depending on Karna."

Ashvatthama sighed. He slowly returned to his own chariot and rode back into the battle. Duryodhana was grief-stricken over his brothers' deaths. He could hardly raise his weapons. He watched as Karna and Arjuna waged a fearful fight. It was so terrible that no other warriors would go near them. Anyone coming within the range of their arrows was instantly slain. Both men were lacerated by the other's shafts and blood flowed freely from their wounds. Krishna and Salva, with arrows protruding from their bodies, worked their horses and wheeled the chariots back and forth.

The Pandava troops shouted to Arjuna, "Kill Karna at once and dash Duryodhana's hopes for the empire." On the other side, the Kauravas encouraged Karna, "Quickly slay Arjuna and send the Pandavas back to the wilderness for good."

Smiling and licking his lips, Arjuna sent hosts of arrows with various points—some shaped like half-moons, some like boar's ears, and some like calf's teeth. Karna responded with similar numbers of crescent and razor-headed shafts that cut down Arjuna's arrows.

Suddenly invoking a powerful celestial weapon, Arjuna fired a shaft so brilliant that it lit up the sky in all directions. The heat from the missile ignited the clothes and chariots of the warriors nearby. It flew with a crackling sound resembling a forest of bamboos on fire. Karna, undaunted, at once released the Varuna weapon which immediately quenched Arjuna's missile. Huge clouds appeared in the sky, sending torrents of rain that extinguished the fire Arjuna had created.

Arjuna applauded Karna and sent another celestial weapon against him, this one dispersing the clouds. He then disappeared from Karna's view and invoked a weapon he had received from Indra. Thousands of glowing arrows adorned with vulture feathers flew from the Gandiva. They fell upon Karna's chariot, covering him, Salva, and his horses. Rolling his eyes in anger, Karna invoked the Bhargava weapon, which cut off all the missiles emanating from the Gandiva. The power of the Bhargava-astra spread out on the battlefield and afflicted the Pandava forces. Thousands fell dead, their

bodies hacked to pieces.

Seeing Karna's prowess, the Kauravas cheered and waved their weapons. Bhima, infuriated, called out to Arjuna, "How have you allowed this irreligious scoundrel to kill so many of our men even before your eyes? The gods themselves were not able to vanquish you before now. How has Karna been able to show such power? O Savyasachin, think deeply on the ills meted out by this sinful man. Remember Draupadi's suffering and Abhimanyu's death. Do not be mild with this wretch. Slay him at once by any means possible."

Krishna also spoke urgently. "O brave warrior, you appear like one confounded. How is Karna baffling your weapons? Display the fierce energy which has been displayed yuga after yuga when you slew Rakshasas and boon-proud Asuras. Take my razor-edged Sudarshana chakra and cut off Karna's head without delay. You will thus restore to Yudhisthira this earth with all her towns, villages and wealth, and you will earn undying fame."

Stirred to action, Arjuna gritted his teeth and glared at Karna. Taking out a shining golden shaft, he said, "Now, for the good of the world and with your permission, I will invoke the mighty Brahma weapon."

Krishna replied, "So be it," and Arjuna placed the arrow on his bow. Concentrating his mind, he invoked the brahmastra and shot the arrow with all his strength. As the shaft blazed into the sky, thousands of other arrows came into being and launched themselves from the Gandiva. Resembling ferocious snakes with bared fangs, they soared across the battlefield toward Karna. Thousands upon thousands of gold-winged shafts spread out from Arjuna's chariot and tore into the Kauravas. Darts, lances and battle-axes of frightening size and shape dropped onto Duryodhana's troops.

Karna replied with another celestial weapon, which sent innumerable arrows back at Arjuna. They came down on him, hissing, like a downpour of rain. The shafts also flew out at the Pandava troops, killing them in large numbers.

Arjuna lost all patience. He struck Karna on the chest with a group of six powerful steel shafts, then twelve, then twenty, then fifty. At the same time, he slew four hundred elephants with their riders and one thousand horsemen and their horses. Then he slew eight thousand infantry.

The Kauravas called out to Karna, "O hero, save us! Check Pandu's

son! He is annihilating us."

Exerting his utmost, Karna sent bloodsucking shafts in showers, completely covering Arjuna and simultaneously killing many Panchalas and Pandava troops. Arjuna, invisible beneath the assault, whirled on the terrace of his chariot, striking down Karna's shafts and shooting back another volley of fiery arrows.

As Arjuna and Karna attacked and counterattacked, exchanging all kinds of celestial weapons, Yudhishthira returned to the battlefield. His wounds tended and healed by mantras and herbs, he appeared again in brilliant golden armor like the full moon emerging from an eclipse. The Pandava forces cheered to see him as he stood by to witness the battle between Arjuna and Karna.

Arjuna fought in a frenzy, sending his shafts in immeasurable volumes. The Kauravas were unable to bear the force of his weapons and they fled in fear. Karna stood undaunted, resisting Arjuna's attack with supreme skill. He pressed back all the troops supporting Arjuna, and the two men soon faced each other alone.

The Pandavas and Kauravas watched with astonishment from a distance as every kind of celestial missile was released and countered. Sometimes it seemed that Karna had the advantage; at other times Arjuna appeared to gain the upper hand. The warriors of both sides cheered and blew their conches, and from the sky the celestials applauded both warriors and beat their drums.

While that awful fight was raging, and the earth seemed to be oppressed by the weight of the weapons being fired, a Naga named Ashvasena came to the battlefield. The celestial snake, son of Takshaka, bore Arjuna enmity for having slain his mother and brother in the Khandhava forest. Seeing his opportunity to gain revenge, he assumed the shape of an arrow and entered Karna's quiver. With his mind fixed on Arjuna's destruction, Ashvasena used his mystic power to inspire Karna with the thought of using the Nagashtra.

Karna saw that he could not overpower Arjuna by force of arms. It would take an inspired shot with a powerful celestial weapon. He then thought of the Nagashtra. If he could catch Arjuna off guard by cutting his bowstring and striking him at the same time with a cluster of shafts, he might

just have time to kill him with the snake weapon before he recovered.

Following his plan, Karna fired shafts with blinding speed and temporarily stunned Arjuna, sundering his bowstring with a razor-headed arrow. He then took out a golden arrow from his quiver of celestial weapons. It seemed to jump into his hand and almost place itself on his bowstring. Karna took careful aim at Arjuna's neck and drew his bow to its full. Unaware that Ashvasena had entered the arrow by yogic power, he shot it before Arjuna had a chance to restring his bow, calling out, "You are killed, O Partha."

As the arrow was released the celestials cried out in sorrow. The shaft sped toward Arjuna with a terrible sound, seeming to divide the sky as a woman parts her hair in the middle. Krishna saw the weapon approach and, leaning forward, pressed down the chariot with his foot. The horses were thrown to the ground and the chariot sank a cubit into the earth.

The snake arrow soared over Arjuna's head and struck his diadem, sending it spinning off his head like the sun falling from the heavens. It fell to the earth smoking and shattered by the force of the Naga weapon, which was enhanced by Ashvasena's personal power. Its brilliant celestial gems lay scattered about the ground, resembling stars shining in the night sky.

Seeing that Krishna had saved Arjuna from certain death, the gods cheered and showered him with flowers. Arjuna, standing like a mountain bereft of its snowy summit, thanked and praised Krishna, who told him what had happened. Arjuna quickly bound his loose hair with a white cloth and restrung the Gandiva to attack Karna.

Ashvasena, thwarted in his efforts to slay the Pandava, returned to Karna and said, "You did not know that I had entered your arrow. Know me to be Partha's enemy. He killed my mother. Shoot me again and I will avenge her and achieve your desired end."

Karna looked in surprise at that Naga. With a shake of his head he replied, "I will never seek victory depending upon another's strength, nor will I shoot the same arrow twice. I will slay Arjuna with my other weapons. Go now wherever you please."

Ashvasena turned back toward Arjuna. Launching himself into the air, he again assumed the shape of an arrow. Arjuna was ready for him. He swiftly fired six crescent-headed shafts that cut Ashvasena to pieces and the

Naga fell to earth like a number of burning firebrands.

Krishna jumped to the ground and with his own hands lifted Arjuna's chariot out of the earth. He quickly remounted and urged on the horses, circling Karna as Arjuna aimed deadly shafts at his vital organs. Completely furious, Arjuna relentlessly assailed his foe from all sides as Krishna drove the chariot. His arrows pierced Karna's armor and broke it to pieces. Arjuna struck off his helmet and headdress, leaving the wounded Karna standing like a mountain sending forth streams of red lava.

Seeing his foe stupefied and inactive, his bow falling from his grasp, Arjuna honored the codes of warfare and stopped his attack. Krishna said in surprise, "Why, O Partha, are you making such a mistake? The wise never spare their enemies no matter how weak they are. Learned men gain great merit by destroying wicked foes, even when those foes are distressed. Lose no time in killing him. When he recovers, he will again present you a difficult task."

Responding to Krishna's urging, Arjuna fired arrows fitted with calf's-tooth heads. They thudded into Karna's powerful frame. With blood running from his numerous wounds, he resembled a blossoming ashoka tree. Quickly recovering his senses, Karna took up his bow and discharged volumes of shafts at Arjuna and Krishna. Arjuna countered his arrows in mid-flight and continued to attack his unprotected enemy.

In his plight, Karna thought of again using the Bhargava weapon, inspired with Brahma's power. No one could resist such a mighty weapon, and it had already destroyed numberless Pandava troops. Karna thought it would be the only way he could hope to distract Arjuna and gain the space he needed to deal with his wounds and put on new armor. He began to chant the sacred incantations to invoke the weapon but found he could not remember them. He tried repeatedly to recite the mantras he knew so well, but they would not come to his mind. Sadly, Karna recalled his teacher's curse: "When your life depends on your most powerful weapon, you will not be able to summon it."

Unable to invoke the Bhargava-astra, Karna turned to repelling Arjuna's shafts with ordinary arrows. As he stood releasing shafts by the hundreds, he saw a black shadowy figure appear near his chariot. Karna recognized it as Kala, Time personified, who said, "The earth is devouring

your chariot wheel."

Karna looked down and saw that his chariot was sinking into the earth. Despite Salva's strenuous efforts, it could not be pulled out. Karna lamented, rebuking virtue. "It is said that you, O virtue, always protect the virtuous. I have always carefully observed my duties. How am I now being destroyed? Why are all my efforts in this battle thwarted?"

As he gave vent to his anguish, Arjuna attacked him more vigorously. Cursing virtue again and again, Karna fought back desperately. Arjuna's arrows pierced him deeply and he shook like a tall tree in a storm. Worked up to a frenzy, Karna released his arrows in a continuous stream. They flew off his bow like streaks of fire and struck down Arjuna's shafts. Some of them penetrated Arjuna's defenses and pierced both him and Krishna.

Seeing Karna still fighting furiously even though disadvantaged and badly wounded, Krishna said, "Discharge more powerful weapons, Arjuna. See how Karna remains bent on victory, rendering your arrows useless and striking us with all his power."

Arjuna recited mantras to invoke the Brahma weapon, but as he did so Karna sent an arrow that cut apart his bowstring. In a moment, Arjuna restrung his bow, but Karna immediately cut it again. Arjuna strung it for a second time, and Karna again cut it. They repeated this twelve more times, Arjuna stringing his bow quickly and Karna cutting the string.

Marveling at Arjuna's lightness of hand, Karna kept up his fierce assault. By the sheer force of his attack he temporarily stunned his opponent. Taking the opportunity, he leapt from his chariot and seized hold of the sunken wheel. He heaved at it with all his might. With his massive shoulders and heavily muscled arms, he resembled a sal tree with two huge trunks. Pulling with all his power, Karna shook the earth; it seemed to rise up with all its lands, mountains and seas. But the wheel would not come out.

Karna wept in frustration. Seeing Arjuna near him he called, "O Partha, wait for a moment while I extract my wheel. Do not cherish thoughts entertained only by cowards. Brave and pious persons never aim their arrows at those who are without weapons. You are the bravest and most pious of all warriors. Excuse me for a moment, standing helpless as I am. I will soon stand again for battle. Remembering virtue and the codes of warfare, hold off

your attack until then."

Hearing his agonized plea, Krishna smiled and replied, "It is fortunate indeed that you remember virtue, O Karna. Men in distress almost always censure Providence, forgetting their own evil deeds. Where, O Karna, was your virtue when Draupadi was brought weeping into the Kuru assembly? Where was it when Yudhisthira was robbed of his kingdom? When he asked for it to be returned, after spending his promised thirteen years in exile, did your virtue suggest that it be returned? Was it virtue that conspired to set fire to the wax house in Varanavata? Did virtue urge you to laughingly say to Draupadi, "O lady, choose another husband"? Was it that same virtue that ordered Dushashana to strip her naked? When you and six other brave heroes surrounded the boy Abhimanyu, did virtue then enter your mind?"

Karna's head fell and he made no reply. He struggled frantically to pull up his wheel, as Krishna continued. "If it was virtue acting on all these occasions, then do not waste your time summoning it now. You wish us to practice piety today, but you will not escape with your life. After vanquishing you and all their other enemies, the virtuous Pandavas will regain their kingdom."

Karna could not respond. He trembled with anger. His face was covered with perspiration as he wrestled with his wheel. Krishna moved the chariot away and said, "O Arjuna, strike Karna down at once with a celestial weapon."

Arjuna, reminded of Karna's many sins, was furious. Heat seemed to emanate from his pores. He raised the Gandiva and invoked the Agneyastra. Karna, unable to lift the chariot wheel, leapt back onto his chariot. Grasping his bow, he countered Arjuna's weapon with the Varunastra. In desperation he continued fighting, firing his powerful arrows by the hundreds. He took up a huge steel arrow worked with gold and fitted with a long, barbed point. As he discharged it from his drawn bow, uttering mantras all the while, the four quarters were suddenly shrouded with darkness. Violent winds blew and the celestials uttered cries of lamentation. The Pandavas were gripped with apprehension and they prayed to Krishna.

Karna's arrow flew off his bow like a thunderbolt. It struck Arjuna full on the chest and he reeled. Pierced even through his impenetrable armor,

he shook violently and dropped the Gandiva.

Karna again jumped down from his chariot and seized hold of the sunken wheel. He struggled furiously, but to no avail. As Karna roared in anger, Arjuna regained his senses and took out an anjalika arrow. Placing it upon his bow, he invested it with the celestial power of Indra's Vajra weapon. Krishna moved closer to Karna and said, "Arjuna, release this arrow at once and cut off your enemy's head before he remounts his chariot."

Arjuna drew the Gandiva back to his ear and took careful aim. All the warriors on the battlefield froze. The skies seemed to shake and the rishis watching from the skies cried out, "All peace to the universe!"

As he aimed the arrow Arjuna said, "If I have ever practiced penance, if I have ever respected my elders and listened to their wise counsel, then let this arrow kill Karna."

Arjuna let the arrow go and it flew from his bow shining like the sun. It lit up the field as it streaked toward Karna. The terrific shaft struck him as he still grappled with his chariot wheel. Catching him on his broad and powerful neck, it severed his head and threw it to the earth. As the handsome head fell to the ground, like the crimson setting sun going behind the western hills, his trunk collapsed, gushing streams of blood. Then, before everyone's eyes, a bright light came out of Karna's body and rose upward, entering the sun.

The Pandavas cheered, beat drums and sounded trumpets. Arjuna and Krishna, filled with joy, blew their conches. They were surrounded by warriors who praised them and danced on the field in happiness. They gazed in wonder at Karna's fallen body, which resembled an extinguished fire or a mountain struck down by the bolt of heaven.

Salya slowly drove Karna's chariot, bereft of its hero, away from the field. Seeing that sorrowful sight, the Kauravas fell about in grief, their hopes dashed. They fled in fear, looking back repeatedly at Arjuna's blazing standard.

Duryodhana was overwhelmed with grief. Tears flowed from his eyes and he sighed again and again. He and the other Kuru chiefs went over to Karna and stood around him. The Pandavas joined them to offer their last respects to the fallen hero.

Bhima roared like a thundercloud. He danced about slapping his arms in joy. Leaping high and circling in the air, he laughed and shouted out his battle cry. The Pandava troops embraced one another with tears in their eyes. Now the war was surely over. Duryodhana's greatest hope had just been shattered.

Chapter Twenty-six. Salya Leads the Kauravas

Less than two hours remained until sunset. Yudhisthira decided to press home his advantage. Seeing his enemies disarrayed, he ordered his troops to attack. Inspired by Karna's death, they fell upon the remaining Kauravas with loud shouts. The Kuru army lost all heart for the fight and ran in all directions like bulls with broken horns. They looked around in fear, expecting Arjuna or Bhima to pursue them at any moment. It seemed to them that those two Pandavas were everywhere today.

Then Duryodhana pulled himself together and came forward for battle. Breathing hard, his face covered in tears, he said to his charioteer, "Take me into the fight. I will avenge my friend's death. Kunti's son will no more be able to resist me than the ocean can go beyond its shore. Killing Arjuna and Govinda, the haughty Bhima, and my other enemies, I will repay my debt to Karna."

The Kauravas were rallied when they saw their leader riding into battle. Twenty-five thousand warriors came together to face the Pandava forces. Bhima, observing the rules of fair combat, got down from his chariot to contend with the foot soldiers. Roaring out their battle cries and fearless for their lives, they rushed upon Kunti's son with raised swords and maces.

Bhima laughed. Whirling his great iron mace, Shaikya, he moved among the Kauravas like a hawk. Heads, arms and legs flew about as he destroyed the troops. Soon, almost all of the twenty-five thousand were slain and the remainder had fled. Encountering the remnant of Duryodhana's brothers, he quickly dispatched all of them to Death's abode, either by smashing them with his mace or severing their heads with razor-faced shafts.

In a rage Duryodhana rushed against the Pandavas, discharging fiery arrows on all sides. He was immediately surrounded by thousands of chariot fighters who sent great showers of arrows at him. Countering the attack, the Kaurava prince slew the chariot-warriors in large numbers. He quickly struck down hundreds of fighters and sent up a great roar. Seeing his troops fleeing in fear of Bhima, he called out, "Where are you going, brave warriors? I see no place on earth, nor indeed the three worlds, where the Pandavas will not find and kill you if you flee. Their army is now quite small. If we stand together we will win. Follow your duties and fight. Death or glory are your only choices now. Slay your enemies, or be slain by them and thus attain

heaven."

Despite Duryodhana's exhortations, his troops continued to flee. Salya came up to the king and said, "O King, look at this dreadful scene. The earth is covered with the carcasses and mutilated limbs of slain warriors. Your warriors are falling over each other in fear. They can hardly move across the blood-soaked ground and are crying out for a protector. Retreat now, O Bharata hero. The sun is setting. Remember that you are the root of all these evils. Go back to your camp and give your men some respite."

Duryodhana looked across at Salya seated on Karna's empty chariot. He was seized again with grief and he cried out, "O Karna! O my friend!"

The sun-god, shedding his dying rays on his fallen son's body, went in grief to the western hills. Both armies withdrew from the fight, and the gods and rishis returned to their abodes. As the warriors moved through the twilight, they looked upon Karna, who seemed to light up the field even in death. He looked like a mass of pure gold or like a fire quenched by the shower of Arjuna's arrows. The earth seemed to send forth cries of 'Alas!' and 'Oh!'

But Yudhishthira was happy. At last Karna had been slain. The Pandava king felt as if a great weight had been lifted from him. As he stood on the field surrounded by his brothers, Krishna came before him and said, "By good fortune the suta's son lies dead, while you and your heroic brothers are all well. Arjuna has fulfilled his promise and the earth has drunk Karna's blood. That wretch of a man who laughed at Draupadi has received his reward. Surely your chaste queen will rejoice upon hearing this news. Soon she will sit by your side as you assume rulership over this prosperous earth."

Yudhishthira tearfully embraced Krishna. "O Keshava, it is no wonder that we have been successful with You as our support. O almighty one, the wise Rishi Narada has informed me of Your true identity, as well as that of my brother Arjuna. You two heroes are always engaged in maintaining virtue in the world."

Yudhishthira climbed onto his chariot and rode back to camp. He saw Karna's body lying on the field, lit up by a thousand oil lamps and surrounded by despondent Kaurava troops. The next morning they would perform his funeral rites, having left him for his final night on a hero's bed. Yudhishthira looked at him again and again. He could hardly believe his eyes. He said, "By

your favor, dear Krishna, we have achieved our object. Surely Duryodhana will now give up all hopes for victory and even life itself. For thirteen long years we have suffered and known only anxiety. Tonight we will sleep peacefully, freed of our burden."

Arjuna and Krishna went away from the battlefield like the sun and moon going down in the sky. They blew their conches, filling the four quarters with the tremendous blasts. Gandharvas, Charanas and Siddhas offered them praise and worship as they headed back to their camp, following in Yudhisthira's track like the gods follow Indra into Amaravati.

* * *

All the Kauravas left the field in despair. Kripa, Kritavarma and Ashvatthama headed the troops as they returned to camp. Duryodhana was crying. No one could console him and he fell to the ground weeping. The other Kuru leaders entered the royal tent and sat silently around him. All of them shed tears as they watched the king give vent to his sorrow. He rolled about on the ground repeatedly crying out, "O Karna, my friend!"

Gradually, Duryodhana's anger overcame his grief and he rose to his feet, his eyes coppery with rage. Taking his place on the throne, he wiped his face with his hands and said in a cold voice, "We cannot let this atrocity go unavenged. Karna, the best of warriors, was slain mercilessly by Arjuna as he stood helpless on the ground. How can we tolerate it? Selecting another commander for our forces, we will rush against the sinful Pandavas and wreak revenge. We have already almost destroyed their army, and they are weak from days of fighting. They have abandoned virtue and will thus lose all their power. Surely we will soon crush them. We owe it to Karna to either slay them to a man or to lay down our own lives, joining Karna in a hero's unending sleep."

Duryodhana trailed off as he thought of Karna lying on the battlefield. His head fell and he covered his face with his hands. He wept silently for some time. The anguished prince could not come to terms with his friend's death. He had never dared think that Arjuna might one day slay Karna. From the day he had first seen him, he had lived with the expectation that Karna would be Arjuna's destruction. That hope was now in ruins. Duryodhana gazed vacantly upwards, tears streaking down his dark face.

Was Arjuna truly invincible? Perhaps. But the war could not be stopped now. Karna had to be avenged. It was that or death. No other choice remained.

As Duryodhana gained control of himself, Kripa said gently, "O great king, consider carefully your best course now. Seventeen days of battle have passed and so many men have been killed. All your brothers are dead. We have still to see signs of weakness or laxity in Arjuna. He ranges about the field like a massive four-tusked elephant crushing our forces at will. Now he has killed Karna and, before that, Jayadratha, even though our whole army tried to protect him. Who is there among your troops who could face him, O Bharata? Who also could face the enraged Bhima? He and Satyaki are causing a carnage among our troops that makes our hairs stand on end."

Kripa looked earnestly at the Kaurava prince, who sat looking straight ahead and saying nothing. Kripa began to cry, but he continued. "You have committed so many sins against the Pandavas for which we are all now reaping the fruits. You mustered this huge army just to achieve your ends. Now it has been destroyed. We are actually in danger. We are weaker than the Pandavas. Policy dictates that peace be sought by diplomacy. Yudhisthira is ever-merciful and will surely accept peace on mutually agreeable terms. You will not lose your position as king, for neither Yudhisthira nor Arjuna nor indeed Krishna will disobey your father's orders."

Kripa implored Duryodhana to make peace. He wept to think of all the kings and warriors who had lost their lives for Duryodhana's cause. His voice trembled as he concluded, "I counsel that we stop the hostilities, O hero. This is in your best interests. I do not say it out of fear or with any malicious motive. Do not disregard my words. If you act otherwise, you will recall what I have said when you yourself are on the verge of death."

Duryodhana remained silent. Pale with grief, he screwed up his eyes and shook violently. He sobbed, unable to reply for some minutes. Finally he composed himself with difficulty and said, "You have doubtlessly spoken as a friend. Indeed, you have done for me everything a friend could do—going against my enemies and risking your life for my good. I know that your counsel is well-meant and beneficial, but it does not please me. Like medicine to a man on the brink of death, your words are quite unpalatable. In my opinion, Yudhisthira will not trust me even if I go to him and sue for peace. I have cheated him and inflicted him with all kinds of evil. So too have I pained Arjuna and Krishna. Since hearing of Abhimanyu's death, Keshava

has passed his nights in sorrow. We have offended him. How can he forgive us now? Peace is out of the question. The war will end only when the Kauravas or the Pandavas are dead. Things have already gone too far. The enmity is irreversible."

Thinking of Draupadi, he continued, "The Panchala princess, I have heard, is practicing austere vows to bring about my destruction. She sleeps on the bare ground and accepts only one meal a day. Subhadra, casting away all pride, serves her like a waiting maid. O Kripa, everything is on fire. It cannot be extinguished. How can I, having shone rays like the sun on the heads of all kings, walk behind Yudhishthira? I could never accept his sovereignty. After ruling this earth as its undisputed emperor, I cannot possibly face a miserable life of servitude."

The Kaurava made it clear that battle was the only choice. If he was slain, then he would at least retain his fame and go to the higher regions. Withdrawing now would mark him a coward and lead to ignominy and degradation.

Duryodhana looked at Karna's seat. Fighting back his grief, he concluded his speech in resolute tones. "No kshatriya desires a death at home in bed. It must come in battle, or his fame diminishes and dies. I have performed many a sacrifice and followed my duties faithfully. I do not fear death. Let me fight and win glory or ascend the path trodden by heroes who never retreat in battle. That path has become crowded with joyful kings, hurrying along after throwing down their bodies in this war. How can I give up the fight after seeing such noble fighters give their all on my behalf? I could not enjoy the kingdom with their blood on my hands unless I had exerted myself fully to avenge them. I will attain victory or heaven. It cannot be otherwise."

The warriors applauded Duryodhana's valorous speech. Shaking off their despair, they resolved to fight to the finish. They decided to select a new commander in the morning, then rose from their seats and retired to their beds for the night.

* * *

After hearing of Bhima's systematic slaughter of her sons, and especially of his brutal killing of Dushashana, Gandhari was distraught. Since

the war began she had absorbed herself in the practice of penance, praying that the hostilities might come to a quick end. Perhaps Duryodhana would come to his senses as he saw the futility of his cause. How was it possible for him to overpower the virtuous Pandavas aided by Krishna? But Gandhari knew of his obstinacy. It was improbable that he would end the war until every man in his army lay dead.

Although the Kuru queen understood that her sons were dying due to their own sinfulness, as a mother she could not tolerate it. Each evening she would receive news of the day's events and her heart would be wracked with pain. All the great Kuru heroes were being slaughtered one after another. When she heard that Bhima had slain almost all of her sons, she felt she could take no more. She had to do something. Her long practice of asceticism had given her great mystic power. If she went to the battlefield, she could use that power to make her last surviving sons invincible. Simply by glancing at them she could make their bodies invulnerable. Deciding to leave at once, she ordered her servants to prepare a chariot.

Travelling swiftly during the seventeenth day of the war, she finally arrived on the field at sunset. When she entered the ladies' tent she received the terrible news that all her sons were now dead, with the exception of Duryodhana alone. The old queen dropped to the ground in a swoon. Her servants quickly raised her and sat her upon a large couch, sprinkling her face with cool water. Coming back to her senses she wept for some time. Finally she composed herself and asked that Duryodhana be brought before her. At least she could save him. Maybe destiny would allow her to keep one son. Surely he was the cause of the war, but now that Karna was dead perhaps he would change. No doubt Shakuni would also soon be slain. It had been in their company that Duryodhana had hatched out all his evil schemes. Alone he might be a different person.

Within a short while the prince entered his mother's tent and bowed before her, his face drawn and darkened by grief. She blessed him and spoke consolingly for some time. Then she said, "Dear son, I had hoped that this war might end before all my sons were killed. Alas, it seems that that hope will be thwarted. But still you live. Dear son, I wish to help you. By my ascetic power I can make your body invincible. Come before me tomorrow morning naked. I will then bestow my power upon you."

Duryodhana went out of the tent feeling encouraged. It was surely

providential that his mother had come. Perhaps he would at last be able to overpower his rampant foes. He headed quickly through the darkness back towards his quarters.

The following morning before sunrise, Duryodhana took his bath and went back to his mother's tent. As he entered the outer section of the large tent, he took off his clothes and was about to go in when he saw Krishna coming out. The Yadava had heard that Gandhari had arrived, and he had gone to pay his respects. Seeing Duryodhana standing naked before him, he opened his eyes wide in surprise. "What is this, O hero? Why do I see you standing here without any clothes?"

Duryodhana explained that he was about to see his mother, and Krishna replied, "Have you not learned any culture from your elders, O Bharata? How can any civilized man go naked before his own mother? I am surprised. At least cover your loins."

Duryodhana looked down at his naked body in embarrassment. Krishna was right. He could not stand naked before his mother. As Krishna left the tent he wrapped a cloth around his loins and went in to see the queen. When she heard him enter, she asked him to stand immediately before her. Then she lifted the cloth that covered her eyes and looked straight at him. Duryodhana felt an energy suffusing him as his mother glanced over his body, but when Gandhari saw his cloth she was shocked. "Why, dear child, did you not follow my directions? I asked you to come naked. You have covered your loins and, although the rest of your body will be hard like iron, your loins and thighs will remain vulnerable to attack, for I did not see those parts."

Gandhari had summoned all her power before glancing over her son. She felt unable to do it a second time. When Duryodhana told her what had happened—how he had met Krishna as he came into the tent—the queen sighed. She slowly replaced the cloth over her eyes. Her last hope had been destroyed. Surely her son would die at Bhima's hands, as that Pandava had vowed so long ago in the Kuru assembly. Realizing that she could do nothing against all-powerful destiny, Gandhari finally smiled. It was Krishna again. As long as he was protecting the Pandavas, the Kauravas' cause was hopeless. The queen dismissed her son. She had best return to Hastinapura to be with her grief-stricken husband. The war would soon be over without a doubt.

* * *

As the sun rose on the eighteenth morning, the Kauravas, after cremating Karna and the other slain warriors, mounted their chariots and came together. Their grief had given way to the numbness born from seeing so much death and destruction. Almost mechanically they prepared for battle. Duryodhana looked around at the remaining fighters. Which of them should be the commander-in-chief for what would likely be the final day of the war? Kripa was the obvious choice, but he was clearly reluctant to continue the fight. The prince thought of Ashvatthama. As the preceptor's son, he was another possibility. But when Duryodhana asked him, he replied, "I think you should choose Salya. In birth, prowess, energy, fame, and every other accomplishment he is superior to us all. Renouncing his attachment for his kinsmen he has joined our side and fought relentlessly. Let him lead our troops, like Skanda leading the celestials."

Applauding Ashvatthama's words, the other warriors surrounded Salya and shouted, "Victory! Victory!" Duryodhana got down from his chariot and approached him with folded hands, saying, "O hero, once again I come to seek your favor. Become our commander. With you at our head we will strike terror into our foes. There are none among us as brave or powerful as you. O foremost of kings, take command of these forces, even as Karttikeya commands the armies of the gods."

Salya, having abandoned any hope of coming out of the battle alive, accepted Duryodhana's proposal. Folding his palms he replied, "O mighty-armed king, I will face the Pandavas without fear. Forming a mighty array, I shall defeat their assembled armies. Let us lose no time in going forth again for battle."

Duryodhana cheered Salya and had him installed as commander, personally pouring the sanctified water over his head. The Kauravas sent up lion-like roars and beat thousands of drums. Inspired with new hope, they moved toward the battlefield, spreading out into an eagle-shaped formation at Salya's command. Ten thousand elephants, eleven thousand charioteers, the same number of horsemen, and five hundred thousand infantry remained of the original four million Kaurava warriors. They fanned out and marched resolutely toward the battlefield, all of them determined to fight to the death.

Yudhisthira heard the Kauravas' joyous cries. Receiving the news

that Salva had been appointed commander, he said, "O Keshava, what do you think should be done? I depend fully on your advice."

Krishna appeared thoughtful. "I know Salva as the foremost fighter. He should not be underestimated. Empowered by the post of commander, he will be no less powerful than Bhishma, Drona, or even Karna. Still, I think you can kill him. I do not see another who will be able to kill him. Go forth, O hero, and slay him like Shakra slew the demon Shambara. Now that you have crossed the fathomless Kaurava ocean, do not sink into the small pond of Salva. Display in battle all your kshatriya strength and your ascetic power. Salva's time has surely come."

Yudhishthira mounted his chariot, thinking on Krishna's words. It must be as he had said. Yudhishthira recalled his promise to kill Salva. It was fitting that the Madras monarch should meet his end at the hands of his dear friend and nephew. It would be a hard fight. Both were past masters at spear fighting, and they had already met for several fierce encounters. The next one would be their last.

With Dhristadyumna at their head, the Pandava troops marched out for battle. Soon the fight began. Seeing Yudhishthira's white umbrella in the distance, Salva urged his charioteer to make straight for him. He was soon confronted by a large body of chariot fighters, who showered him with arrows and lances. The Madras king stood his ground and responded with volleys of gold-winged shafts that struck down dozens of those warriors.

Karna's two remaining sons, Satyasena and Chitrasena, charged at Nakula like a pair of tigers attacking an elephant in the forest. They covered him with keen arrows and sundered his bow, but the Pandava quickly strung another bow and returned the attack. Laughing all the while, he killed Satyasena's four horses and struck Chitrasena on the chest with three whetted shafts.

Satyasena jumped aboard his brother's chariot and the two princes stood side by side, shooting their arrows at Nakula. Unshaken, Nakula hurled a bright dart, steeped in oil and resembling a dreadful snake. It hit Satyasena and penetrated his heart. His brother roared in anger and increased his attack on Nakula, killing his horses and smashing his chariot.

Seeing his father careless and under attack, Nakula's son Sutasoma came to his aid. He took him onto his own chariot and Nakula carried on

fighting. After releasing a large number of shafts that baffled his opponent, the Pandava let go an arrow with a razor-sharp head shaped like a half moon. It struck Chitrasena in the neck and severed his head, sending it flying to the ground. The prince dropped forward from his chariot and fell to the earth like a hewn tree.

Witnessing Nakula killing Karna's two sons, the Kaurava soldiers retreated. Salya rallied them. He stood fearlessly in battle, faced by numbers of Pandava warriors. Headed by Kripa and Kritavarma, the Kauravas rushed at the Pandavas with loud cries. Solid lines of troops led by Dhristadyumna and Satyaki met them. The two armies clashed with a deafening clamor. The air was filled with smoke from fiery weapons released by powerful chariot-warriors, as well as with the stench of blood.

Fighting his way through the dense Pandava ranks, Salya approached Yudhisthira. He assailed him with a downpour of arrows, but Yudhisthira checked them all with his own. As the leading warriors on both sides contended with one another, Yudhisthira and Salya fought a violent duel. They exchanged arrows that collided in mid-air with showers of sparks. Appearing like Indra and Bali fighting for the sovereignty of the universe, the two mighty heroes shot blazing shafts off their bows that resembled thunderbolts.

Showing his intention to slay Salya, Yudhisthira suddenly released a broad-headed arrow that cut down his enemy's standard. Salya, raging, replied with thousands of straight shafts that struck Yudhisthira on every part of his body. The arrows completely covered the Pandava king as well as his horses, chariot and driver. Yudhisthira's brothers came to his assistance and rained down long, barbed arrows on Salya. Backed by Kripa and Ashvatthama, the Madras king put up a savage fight. The Pandavas had never before seen him so ferocious. His arrows found the weak points of his assailants, who fell back from his chariot, stunned by the force of his attack.

Salya resisted the combined assault of Yudhisthira, Satyaki, Bhima, and the two sons of his sister Madri. Duryodhana came to his support, with Kritavarma by his side. For a long time an awful battle raged between the mighty heroes, who angrily sought each other's destruction.

In the meantime, the remaining warriors of the Trigarta army had surrounded Arjuna. The Pandava slew them mercilessly, and they cried out in

distress. Hearing their cries, Ashvatthama raced over to support them. After failing in his attempt to make Duryodhana stop the war, he had resolved to fight to the end. His father and almost all his friends had been slain. Even if peace were made, what was there left to live for anyway? Careless of Vyasadeva's cautionary words, Drona's son attacked Arjuna with all his power. The two godbrothers, forgetting their former friendship, attacked one another like a couple of maddened bulls attempting to gore the other with their horns. The sky was filled with their arrows, and the battle between them was wonderful even to the celestials.

Gaining the upper hand, Arjuna slew his opponent's four horses and charioteer. Ashvatthama stood fearlessly on his immobile chariot, continuing to resist Arjuna's attack. Even as he fought with the Pandava, he rained his shafts on other Pandava soldiers and slew hundreds.

Suddenly Suratha, a powerful Pandava chariot-fighter, bore down upon Ashvatthama with a great shout. Ashvatthama jumped to the ground with his bow in hand. He placed a keen shaft on its string and drew it back to his ear. Shot with all his strength, the arrow went right through Suratha's chest. It split his heart and emerged from his back, entering the earth.

Ashvatthama quickly ran over and got up onto his slain foe's chariot. Many other Kaurava fighters, led by Shakuni and Uluka, raced to his assistance. A fierce battle then ensued between Arjuna and the Kaurava warriors, who were backed by thousands of troops.

Not far from Ashvatthama, Salya continued to fight with frightful force. Inspired by thoughts of a glorious victory, or death and elevation to the celestial regions, he encountered all the great Pandava heroes. No one could shake him as he stood on his chariot blazing like the sun-god. His arrows went out in endless lines in all directions. Thousands of brave Pandava fighters lost their lives as they tried to approach him in battle.

Remembering his vow and Krishna's words, Yudhisthira pressed forward toward Salya. The Madras monarch, standing near Yudhisthira, looked like the planet Saturn near the moon. Both men blew their conches, creating a roaring sound that shook the atmosphere. Gazing at each other with burning eyes, they yelled out their challenges and counter-challenges. They shrouded each other with waves of arrows. Wounded all over, they appeared like a kinshuka and a shalmali tree in full bloom.

The soldiers watching the battle could not decide who would win—whether Yudhisthira would gain the earth after slaying Salya; or if Salya, after killing the Pandava, would bestow the earth upon Duryodhana.

Salya sent steel shafts that tore into Yudhisthira's leather hand protectors and cut his bow in two. Yudhisthira spun round in his chariot and took up another bow, stringing it as he turned again to face his antagonist. He sent a number of swift arrows that killed Salya's four horses and his charioteer. The Pandava king then covered Salya with hundreds of searing shafts that rocked him as he stood on his stationary chariot. Ashvatthama sped over to rescue the afflicted Madras king, taking him onto his own chariot.

In moments, Duryodhana, observing the fight, had another great chariot brought for Salya. Mounting that chariot, Salya charged at Yudhisthira, his chariot's huge iron wheels resounding like thunder. Flanked by other warriors, he rushed forward into the flights of gold-winged arrows Yudhisthira was shooting. Bhima, Satyaki and the twins also challenged him and the Kaurava heroes backing him.

The fight between Yudhisthira and Salya was like a contest between young tigers in the jungle fighting for a piece of meat. They circled and feinted with speed and grace. Elated with the pride of prowess, they wounded each other with their arrows. Salya simultaneously attacked Yudhisthira and Bhima, cutting off the armor of both men. With well-aimed arrows, he slew Yudhisthira's four horses and killed his charioteer. Having stunned the king and his brother, he then began slaughtering the Pandava forces.

Bhima, beside himself with rage, shot long shafts that killed Salya's horses and stopped him in his tracks. He sent another hundred razor-faced arrows that cut apart his armor. Salya took up a burnished steel sword and a shield adorned with a thousand stars. Leaping down from his chariot, he rushed across the field toward Yudhisthira like a hawk swooping on its prey. Bhima took careful aim and, with a broad-headed shaft, cut Salya's sword in two. With another twenty arrows he broke apart his shield. Overjoyed, he roared out his battle cry. The other Pandavas laughed and blew their milk-white conches.

Seeing Salya without armor and on foot, deprived of his weapons, the Kauravas were filled with apprehension. Yudhisthira, remaining on his

horseless chariot, took up a large golden dart. It had a handle worked with coral and was set with gems. The Pandava raised the effulgent dart and gazed angrily at Salya, seeming to burn him with his glance. Uttering mantras and hurling the weapon with all his force, he cried out, "You are killed!"

The dart flew toward Salya like a meteor dropping from the sky. Salya cried out and tried to catch the dart as it fell upon him, but it slipped through his hands and struck him on the chest. It passed through him without obstruction and entered the earth. Blood shot out from Salya's mouth, nose and ears. His arms flew up and he fell to the earth like a mountain summit smashed by a thunderbolt. Like a dear wife rising to embrace her beloved spouse, the earth seemed to rise to meet him as he fell. That king, having enjoyed the earth for so long, finally fell into her embrace and died.

Yudhishthira and his brothers sent up triumphant shouts, while the Kauravas cried out in anguish. Dispirited, they fled from the fight. The Pandava troops, seizing their advantage, rushed with raised weapons at their despondent foes.

Salya's younger brother charged Yudhishthira. He struck the Pandava with a cluster of barbed arrows that pierced him. Not minding the attack, Yudhishthira quickly raised his bow and responded with razor-faced shafts that cut apart his attacker's bow. With one shaft he cut down his standard and with another arrow he severed his head from his body. Following the path taken by his elder brother, the handsome prince fell headlong from his chariot.

Duryodhana looked on in despair. All around him his troops were running in terror, leaving him alone to fight the Pandavas. Gripped by a wild rage, he fought in a frenzy to the limit of his power. His arrows flew like blazing comets in all directions. No one could approach him, and he single-handedly resisted all the great Pandava heroes.

Kritavarma, Kripa and Ashvatthama, seeing Duryodhana's brave stand against their foes, came quickly to his support. The four Kaurava warriors checked the Pandava army like the shore resisting the ocean. In a last desperate attempt to win the day, they pressed toward Yudhishthira, who still stood upon his immobilized chariot. Seeing this, Bhima, Satyaki, Dhristadyumna, and Draupadi's five sons surrounded the Pandava king. An exchange then took place between those warriors and the four Kauravas that

filled the heavens with fiery arrows.

Salya's army, the Madrakas, rushed back into the fight with loud shouts. They cried out, "Where is Yudhishthira? Where are Dhristadyumna and Bhima? We will slay them at once!" As those warriors charged into the fray, they were met by volleys of shafts discharged by the Pandavas. Cut to pieces, their chariots smashed and horses slain, they fell by the hundreds. As rows of brave fighters dropped to the ground, those following them stumbled and fell over their chariots. Horses screamed as their drivers pulled hard, trying to swerve clear of the melee. Fiery shafts rained relentlessly down. Well-muscled arms and heads graced with golden helmets dropped to the ground by the thousands.

Arjuna, having annihilated the remnants of the Trigarta army along with Shakuni's mountain warriors, turned his arrows on the Madrakas. With his unfailing and irresistible shafts he soon slew two thousand elephants with their riders. The Madrakas uttered cries of terror as Arjuna rode into their midst. Ruthlessly cut down by the Pandava and his brothers, they took to their heels, only to find other Pandava heroes standing in front of them. They cried out to Duryodhana for protection.

Shakuni, hearing their piteous cries, came up to Duryodhana's side and said, "Arjuna has killed my entire force of warriors. Now he is slaughtering the brave Madrakas. O king, rally our forces and go to their assistance at once."

Duryodhana looked vacantly at his old uncle. His mind was sunk in dejection. Few of his forces remained. Those not slain were fleeing. He had shouted himself hoarse trying to bring them back to the fight. The war could surely not last much longer. Duryodhana looked around at the desolate scene. The Pandava troops were chasing his fleeing soldiers with shouts of joy. Only a handful of his bravest fighters—Kripa, Ashvatthama, Kritavarma, about a dozen of his brothers—still survived, with less than twenty thousand troops to support them.

The prince said in a tearful voice, "O uncle, I repeatedly hear Vidura's words in my mind. Only out of ignorance did I ignore his wise counsel. Just see the course of destiny. Our once proud army has practically been annihilated. Bhima and Arjuna have wrought havoc among our men. What should be done? I cannot return from this war defeated. Victory or

death are my only choices. Keeping the duties of a kshatriya uppermost in our minds, let us go forward into the fight one final time. Put forth all your power, O son of Suvala. Maybe we will yet gain the day."

Ordering their charioteers to urge on their horses, the two Kauravas charged into the fray, roaring out their battle cries. But the Pandavas were ready. With victory in sight they stood firm against their desperate foes, releasing waves of deadly shafts that cut them down. Duryodhana looked on in horror as almost all of his remaining warriors were slaughtered.

Seeing the Kauravas practically defeated, Krishna said, "O Dhananjaya, this war is virtually over. Millions of warriors on both sides have been slain. Our forces are now superior to the Kauravas. All that is needed to secure our victory is Duryodhana's death. Without killing him, there will be no end to these hostilities, for he will never admit defeat. O Partha, exert yourself to kill Duryodhana and end this ghastly conflict."

Arjuna looked at Krishna who, although wounded, shone with splendor as he held the horses' reins. "O Madhava, you have spoken the truth. The evil-minded son of Dhritarastra will fight to the last man. It seems that none will escape death. Bhima has slain all of Duryodhana's brothers. Surely, in keeping with his promise, he will also kill Duryodhana himself. There stands Susharma, my old antagonist. His time has come. O Keshava, take my chariot toward that king."

Arjuna pointed to Susharma, who stood releasing flaming shafts at the Pandava troops. Krishna urged on his horses and in moments Arjuna stood before Susharma, who was supported by four Trigarta princes. They immediately attacked Arjuna in a body, striking him with hundreds of arrows. Moving with grace and skill, Arjuna assailed the princes like a hungry lion attacking deer. With razor-headed shafts he slew all four, then turned on Susharma. He struck the monarch on the chest with three powerful shafts, then killed his horses with four more. With another broad-faced arrow he cut down his standard. Then, with a long golden shaft inspired by mantras, he pierced Susharma through the heart.

As Susharma toppled from his chariot, Arjuna charged into the troops backing him. Nearby Bhima was roaring and whirling his mace as he rushed against Duryodhana. The Kaurava resisted him valiantly, shooting thousands of arrows and holding him at bay. A short distance away, Satyaki

fought Kritavarma while Dhristadyumna and the twins fought Kripa and Ashvatthama.

While those heroes engaged in combat, Sahadeva saw Shakuni assailing the Pandava army. Remembering his vow, the Pandava broke away from his fight with Kripa. He rushed toward Shakuni, shouting out a challenge. As Shakuni turned to face him, Sahadeva discharged fearful arrows that flew at the speed of the wind. He immediately cut Shakuni's bow apart and broke his standard. Undaunted, Shakuni took up another bow and fought back with great energy, striking his antagonist with a volley of powerful shafts.

Sahadeva expertly warded off Shakuni's attack and replied with sixty keen arrows that hit Shakuni on every part of his body. Sahadeva followed that with another eighty shafts that sent Shakuni spinning on the terrace of his chariot, his bow flying from his hand.

Uluka, seeing his father's plight, rushed at Sahadeva, releasing dozens of barbed arrows. In a moment, Sahadeva spun round to face Uluka. He discharged a crescent-headed shaft that screamed through the air and beheaded Uluka. The huge-bodied warrior fell from his chariot, his head rolling away with staring eyes and earrings that gleamed from the dusty ground.

Shakuni cried out and tears sprung to his eyes. He remembered Vidura's wise words. It had always been folly to nurture enmity with the Pandavas. The Suvala monarch, still under Sahadeva's attack, reflected sorrowfully on his life as he fought back. His original anger with Bhishma for giving his sister to the blind Dhritarastra was long forgotten. After befriending Duryodhana, he had become implicated in more and more treachery, even though in his heart he knew it would one day have fearful consequences. Yet anger and attachment had driven him. He had ignored the truth, hoping that by his cunning he could somehow destroy the Pandavas. Now he faced the results. The fire of the Pandavas' anger had blazed up into a conflagration. His entire army—his own son—had been killed before his eyes.

Remembering his duty as a warrior, Shakuni gazed wrathfully at Sahadeva. Perhaps he could at least avenge his son's death before dying himself. Shakuni raised his bow and placed a formidable looking shaft on its

string but, before he could release it, Sahadeva cut apart his bow with three razor-faced arrows.

Roaring in anger, Shakuni picked up a scimitar and hurled it at his foe. Sahadeva immediately cut the spinning sword to pieces before it reached him. As Sahadeva countered the scimitar, Shakuni let go a dreadful mace that flew at him with a loud, rushing sound. Sahadeva struck the mace with a cluster of shafts that smashed it to pieces. Shakuni then hurled a dart at him, which the Pandava also checked.

Seeing his weapons falling uselessly to earth like the hopes of an impious man, Shakuni became afraid. Dispirited, he fled from the fight. Sahadeva, remembering his vow to slay Shakuni, gave chase. He shouted at him to turn back and fight, but Shakuni did not listen.

Racing up to Shakuni's side, Sahadeva called, "Why are you abandoning your duty, fool? Do you recall how you rejoiced in the Kuru assembly, O wicked man? You and the wretched Duryodhana are the only survivors of those who ridiculed us and insulted our queen. Not for long. Receive now the fruits of your evil acts. Stand and face me in battle. I will cut off your head like a man plucking a ripe fruit."

Goaded by Sahadeva, Shakuni pulled up his chariot and turned to fight. He took up a lance adorned with gold and jewels, but it was cut to pieces even as he raised it over his shoulder. Sahadeva sent searing, razor-faced arrows that tore off Shakuni's arms. Then, with an arrow as bright as fire, he cut off his head.

As Shakuni fell, blood spurting from his trunk, the Kauravas wailed. Duryodhana cried out and dropped his bow. All the other warriors around him threw down their weapons and ran. Only a handful of Kaurava soldiers survived, and they found themselves surrounded by the Pandava forces. Unable to escape, they stood to fight but were soon killed.

Seeing himself alone, Duryodhana turned and fled from the battlefield. Jumping from his chariot, he dashed into the surrounding woods and ran until he reached a large lake. Bewildered, and with a desire to save his life, he entered the water. As he sank into the lake, keeping his life airs circulating within himself by yogic power, the Kaurava prince used mysticism to solidify the water around his body.

After Duryodhana's departure, only Kripa, Ashvatthama and

Kritavarma remained. With their leader gone, they too decided to flee. They raced from the battlefield. As they fled, they met Vyasadeva. The rishi told them where to find Duryodhana and then disappeared. The three warriors went to the lake and saw Duryodhana's upper garment nearby. Realizing he had entered the lake, they fell to the ground wailing. "Alas, the king did not know that we survived. He has entered this lake in despair without knowing that all was not yet lost."

They got to their feet slowly and returned to their chariots, deciding to make their way to the Kuru camp. Reaching the outpost they found the guards grieving. The three men carried on into the camp where they saw similar scenes. They heard the loud wails of the royal ladies in their tents, which sounded like the crying of flocks of ospreys. The ladies were being led out by their guards and placed on chariots, ready to return to the city. With their clothes and hair in disarray, their ornaments cast aside, they were a piteous sight. Many men were setting out for Hastinapura, unable to stay any longer in the desolate encampment. They rushed here and there in their haste to leave, fearful that the Pandavas might arrive at any moment to finish them off.

Unable to tolerate the mournful atmosphere, the three warriors returned to Duryodhana's hiding place. Kripa stood by the edge of the lake and called aloud, "O king, rise up and face your enemies. Just see how your men have given way to grief in your absence. The Pandavas are ranging about the field looking for you. Their armies have been destroyed. Fight with them and gain control of the earth or, slain by them, rise to heaven. Why do you tarry here? Ashvatthama, Kritavarma and I are here to help you. Surely you will win if you continue the fight."

Duryodhana heard Kripa as he sat at the bottom of the lake. He called out, "By good fortune have you three heroes survived, O foremost of men. Just let me rest here for awhile and then I will surely wage war again. You are also tired and should rest. Refreshed and renewed, we may proceed toward the battle. O mighty-armed ones, you are all noble and your devotion to me is great, but it is not now the proper time to display your power. Let us rest tonight. In the morning I will join you for the fight. Do not doubt it."

Ashvatthama replied, "Rise up, O King; may you fare well. We shall yet defeat the enemy. I swear by all my holy acts, by all my gifts, and by truth itself, that I will slay the remaining Pandavas. Indeed, if this night

passes without my killing them, I will not again enjoy the pleasure of performing sacrifices, a pleasure enjoyed by all pious men. O king, I will not loosen my armor until they are killed. This is certain."

As Ashvatthama called out to Duryodhana, a number of hunters arrived at the lake. Worn out with the day's hunting, they wanted to slake their thirst. Seeing the three powerful kshatriyas, they hid in the bushes and listened. They then understood that Duryodhana was hidden in the lake. Undetected by the three Kauravas, they listened as the warriors tried without success to convince Duryodhana to come out and resume the fight.

The hunters had observed the battle fought between the world's kshatriyas. They knew that the Pandavas would reward them richly if they told them of Duryodhana's whereabouts. Getting up quietly, they slipped away and went toward the Pandavas' camp to see Yudhisthira.

Chapter Twenty-seven. Bhima Fights Duryodhana

The Pandavas returned to their camp after their unsuccessful search for Duryodhana. After entering Yudhisthira's tent, they dispatched soldiers to search every part of the battlefield. As they sat awaiting news, guards ushered in the hunters. Falling at Yudhisthira's feet the hunters told him everything they had seen and heard. Yudhisthira rose with a smile. He immediately gave the hunters much wealth. After dismissing them, he went with his brothers to the lake, which was called Dwaipayana. All the Pandava warriors went with them, roaring out, "We have found Duryodhana. Let us finish him once and for all."

The three surviving Kauravas, still trying to convince Duryodhana to come out, heard the approaching Pandavas and called to Duryodhana, "Proud and victorious, the Pandavas are coming this way. We must leave."

The three men mounted their horses and rode into the forest just before the Pandavas reached the lake. They saw that the lake's waters were perfectly still, charmed by Duryodhana's mystical powers. Seeing that unusual sight, they realized Duryodhana was hiding like a coward within the lake. Yudhisthira said to Krishna, "Just see how this deceitful man has used his powers of deception to avoid defeat, but he will not escape me now. Even if Indra himself comes to his side, he will die today."

Krishna agreed. "With your own mystic powers, O king, destroy Duryodhana's illusion. One conversant with illusion should be destroyed by illusion. This is truth. The gods by means of illusion have killed so many Daityas and Danavas, all masters of mystic power. Therefore, act swiftly so that this wicked man meets his just end."

Yudhisthira called to Duryodhana. "Why, O hero, have you charmed this lake and hidden beneath its waters? How is that you now desire to save your own life, having brought about the destruction of your family and friends and, indeed, millions of kshatriyas? Arise and fight! Where is your honor? You have been described as a hero in all assemblies, but I think those descriptions have been false. You are nothing but a coward. Just see how you now hide from us to protect your life. O wicked fool, come out and face the consequences of all your evil acts. Do not cower here like a eunuch. Heroes never fly from battle. Rather, they prefer death to dishonor. Do not destroy your honor. Stand for battle. Either govern this earth after gaining victory or

sleep on the naked earth, killed by us."

Standing at the edge of the lake with his brothers and Krishna, with all the other Pandava warriors standing behind him, Yudhisthira waited for Duryodhana's reply. He looked around at his surroundings. The large lake gave respite from the heat and dust of the battlefield. Situated in a cool glade, it was shaded by tall trees with many colored blossoms hanging down to its surface. Varieties of water fowl sat in the trees, mystified by the lake's sudden transformation. A gentle breeze fanned the leaves, filling the air with a soothing rustle that was punctuated by the melodic cries of birds. The Pandavas felt refreshed simply by seeing the picturesque region, which was the resort of numerous yogis and ascetics.

After a wait of some moments, Duryodhana called out, "O king, it is no wonder that fear seizes all living beings, but I have not entered this lake out of fear. Bereft of my army and standing alone in the fight, I am tired. Therefore, I sought refuge in this lake to rest. O son of Kunti, you should also rest. In due course, I will surely fight with you all."

Yudhisthira laughed. "O Duryodhana, we have rested sufficiently. The time has arrived for our final battle. Come out and conclude the war either by slaying us or by dying a hero's death."

Duryodhana, still saddened by the deaths of Karna, Shakuni and all his brothers, spoke with anguish in his voice. "O scion of Kuru's race, I no longer desire to rule this world, deprived as I am of my kinsmen and friends. All those for whose sake I desired sovereignty now lie dead. I give you this empty earth. Although I wish to defeat you and humble your pride, even my desire for battle is gone when I think of Drona and Karna and our grandsire, Bhishma. I think I will enter the forest, clad in deerskin and bent on a life of asceticism. Go, O king, and rule the earth destitute of monarchs, warriors and wealth. I will remain here."

Duryodhana's words held a note of sarcasm that was not lost on Yudhisthira. Becoming impatient, Yudhisthira replied, "Do not rave so, O Duryodhana. I feel no pity for you. It was by your greed that everyone has died. I will not accept this earth as a gift, for that is not my duty as a kshatriya. Nor are you in a position to make such a gift. You have already lost everything."

Yudhisthira smiled at his brothers as he continued. "Why, O hero, did

you not make the offer when Krishna requested you to? How is it that you, who once denied me even as much land as could be pierced by a needle, now wish to give me the earth? It is not yours to give. Nor was it ever yours. Come out and win the world or go to the celestial regions after we kill you. For all your sins against us and against the chaste Draupadi, you deserve to die at our hands. I shall not spare you."

The other Pandavas then shouted at Duryodhana to come out of the lake. Angry, they rebuked him again and again. All the other warriors roared out their battle cries and waved their weapons.

Hearing the tumult and reflecting on Yudhisthira's words, Duryodhana became enraged. He decided to fight but was apprehensive. "O Pandavas, you have friends, chariots and animals. I am alone and without a chariot. How can I stand against all of you? I do not feel this to be fair or in keeping with kshatriya codes. Allow me to fight with you one at a time and I will come out. I am not afraid of any of you. Like the rising sun destroying starlight, I will rise up and destroy you all. Today I will release myself from the debt I owe to all the slain warriors."

The Pandavas cheered when they heard his valorous words. Yudhisthira replied, "By good fortune you have remembered your duty, O mighty-armed one. By good fortune have you inclined your mind toward battle. Choose any one of us and any weapon. I grant you that if you gain victory with any of us, you may become king. Otherwise, killed by us, go to heaven."

Duryodhana smiled within the lake. He fingered the mace by his side and said, "Brave as you are, O mighty ones, if you allow me the option of choosing my weapon, then I select the mace I have in my hands. Let any one of you who feels he is a match for me stand against me in battle. I will fight alone and on foot, armed only with a mace. Without doubt I will slay you all, one at a time. Not even Indra can face me when I stand armed with my mace."

"We will see. Come out and be a man. Death awaits you. Fight in any way you like. You will not escape."

Unable to tolerate Yudhisthira's goading, Duryodhana rose up from the waters. The Pandavas saw the surface ripple as he came up from the bottom. Emerging from the waters with his mace on his shoulders, he

appeared like a mountain crest rising out of the ocean.

The Pandavas and their followers embraced one other and shouted joyously to see Duryodhana emerge. Now the war could be concluded. The warriors waved their weapons and blew their conches.

Duryodhana glowered at his enemies, insulted by their exclamations of happiness. He bit his lips and breathed heavily. Standing on the shore of the lake with water running from his body, he looked around and thundered, "You will have to bear the consequences of all these insults. I will kill you all and send you to Yamaraja's abode."

As he spoke he brought his mace down from his shoulder and struck the earth, making the ground tremble. He stared angrily at Yudhisthira and said, "Here I am, O descendant of Kuru. Abide by your word and let me fight any one of you. I have only my mace. Send forward my opponent to fight on equal terms. You should referee our contest, because you are well qualified to judge what is right and what is wrong."

Duryodhana glanced at Bhima, who stared back at him with unbridled hatred. Both men knew the final contest would be between them. Bhima stood with his mace by his side, thinking of his vow to kill the Kaurava. He longed to leap forward at once, bringing his death-dealing mace down upon Duryodhana's head with all his power, but he checked himself, awaiting Yudhisthira's order.

Yudhisthira smiled wryly upon hearing Duryodhana's request that he judge the fight. The intelligent Pandava knew what he meant. Bhima's promise had been that he would smash his thighs, and in mace fighting blows beneath the belt were forbidden. But the Kaurava had been given ample warning. Bhima had made his intentions clear. He wanted to punish Duryodhana for his long-past crime against Draupadi—he would smash the thigh the prince had shamelessly exposed before her in the assembly hall. There would be no sin in meting out such a punishment.

Yudhisthira, moved to anger by his recollection of the dice game, replied sternly, "How is it, O Duryodhana, that you did not consider right or wrong when you and your followers killed Abhimanyu? Without doubt the duties of a kshatriya are harsh and merciless. Otherwise, how could you have slaughtered that child in such an unfair way? Why do you now ask that we fight you one by one? In difficulties, men are ever prone to forget virtue,

caring nothing for the consequences of their deeds. However, O hero, I will give you a fair chance. Select any of us as your opponent. If you can defeat any one of us, then you will be king. Otherwise, proceed to heaven."

Krishna looked questioningly at Yudhisthira. What had come over him? Duryodhana was famous throughout the world for his skill with a mace. Balarama himself, the unrivalled master of the mace, had said that Duryodhana was his best student. Perhaps Bhima could defeat him, but it would be a close contest. And if Duryodhana selected another opponent, then who knew what the outcome would be? It seemed that Yudhisthira had once again staked everything on a single throw.

Duryodhana laughed and stepped forward. The Pandava soldiers fetched him a suit of armor, which he quickly donned. Resplendent, he said, "O Yudhisthira, I will fight with any one of you brothers. What difference does it make? Who can match my strength? I will kill you one after another. There are none among you who can face me in a fair fight. It is not right for me to vaunt my own prowess, but I speak the truth. Within an hour you will see my words proven true. Let he among you who will fight me take up his mace."

Duryodhana's pride prevented him from selecting an easy opponent. He felt sure he would not be defeated, no matter who fought with him. He was not even afraid of Bhima, and his intense hatred for that particular Pandava made him hope Bhima would be selected to fight. It was likely. Who else could the Pandavas choose? Anticipating this day even while still in Hastinapura, Duryodhana had spent countless hours practicing beating an iron image of Bhima. Now he could exercise his skills against Bhima himself.

As Duryodhana spoke, Krishna went over to Yudhisthira and said quietly, "O king, you have made a rash promise. What will happen if Duryodhana decides to fight with you, Arjuna, or the twins? Only Bhima can face him with the mace, but even then the outcome is not certain. Although Bhima's strength is greater, Duryodhana's skills are better, and skill usually wins over strength. I think you have made a grave mistake. Who but you would relinquish a kingdom after winning such a great war and having only a single enemy left? It seems, O king, that Kunti's sons are not meant to enjoy sovereignty."

Bhima, standing by Yudhisthira's side, heard Krishna's words and said, "O Madhava, do not grieve. I will end this war. Yudhisthira's victory is certain because the wretched Duryodhana stands before me for battle. Allow me to fight with him. My mace is more powerful than his, and my skills are not lacking. What to speak of Duryodhana, armed with my mace I could fight with the celestials headed by Indra."

Krishna applauded Bhima and said, "Depending on you, O mighty-armed one, surely Yudhisthira will regain his prosperity. You have slain all of Duryodhana's brothers and uncountable numbers of his troops. Go forward and slay this wretch himself. Fulfill your promise, but fight with care. He is a formidable opponent with the mace."

Bhima laughed in derision and stepped toward Duryodhana with his mace resting on his shoulder. His brothers cheered him, and he thundered, "I dare to fight with this most arrogant and sinful one. He will not be able to defeat me. Today I will vomit forth the anger that has rankled in my bosom for many years. Today, dear brother, I will pluck out the dart that has long stuck in your heart. O virtuous one, today I will recover your garland of glory. Today Duryodhana will renounce his life, prosperity and kingdom. Today, hearing of his son's death, Dhritarastra will remember all his sins against us."

Bhima roared and whirled his mace, bringing it down with such force that the earth shook. Duryodhana could not brook the challenge and he stepped toward Bhima raising his fist. He glared at Bhima, who returned his venomous look. They appeared like a lion and a king of elephants facing one another in the forest.

Staring into Duryodhana's smoldering eyes, Bhima went on, "Do you recall how you insulted Draupadi, O sinful man, and how you deceived the pious king Yudhisthira. Receive now the consequences of those acts and of the other wrongs you inflicted upon us. It is by your fault that Bhishma now lies prostrate on the field, that Drona has been killed, and that so many other valiant heroes are slain. All your brothers are dead, including the despicable one who seized Draupadi's sanctified hair. Now you will follow them. Today your pride will be crushed along with your hope for sovereignty. Prepare to pay for your misdeeds."

Duryodhana sneered. "What is the use of your bold words? I will

quell your desire for battle. Why do you disregard me? See my mace, like the summit of Mount Himavat. Not even Purandara, lord of the heavens, could defeat me in a fair fight. Who cares for all my so-called misdeeds? What can you or anyone else do about them? By my might you have already had to suffer so much, even becoming a cook in Virata's house while Arjuna became a eunuch. I have killed most of your allies and you will be the next to die."

Bhima was ready. He seemed to be on fire as he glared at Duryodhana. The Kaurava, remembering Bhima's vow, said, "Do not gain victory by unfair means, Bhima, for that will deprive you of your reputation. Fight honestly with all your strength. Then, defeated by me, you will gain everlasting fame."

Krishna suggested that the fight to death take place near Lake Samantapanchaka, a sacred place created by Parasurama. The warriors agreed and made their way to that site. As they moved across the battlefield, Balarama arrived, just returned from his pilgrimage to the holy places. Yudhisthira and his brothers greeted him with affection. Krishna bowed before him and touched his feet, saying, "Witness the skill of your two disciples, O Rama. Just now they are proceeding to Samantapanchaka for battle."

The white-complexioned Balarama looked like the full moon risen on the battlefield. Clad in blue silks and adorned with gold ornaments, a garland of red lotuses on his chest, he shone as he embraced both Bhima and Duryodhana, who each offered him their obeisances.

After inquiring about the welfare of all the kings and kshatriyas, and hearing how almost all of them had been slain, Balarama said, "I have already received news of the war from Narada, who told me that the fight between these two heroes was about to take place. Thus I have come. Some weeks ago I left for my tour, deciding to side with neither party. I have not changed my decision. I will watch the fight with a neutral heart."

Balarama joined the warriors as they went on foot the short distance to Samantapanchaka. Bhima and Duryodhana, both breathing heavily, strode angrily next to each other, staring ahead with their maces resting on their shoulders.

Reaching Samantapanchaka, where Parasurama had excavated a lake and filled it with the blood of slain warriors, they formed a circle around a

large expanse of flat, sandy ground. Bhima and Duryodhana stood facing each other in the center. They challenged one another in harsh tones and roared in anger. Both were joyful at the prospect of the fight, each expecting a quick victory. They looked like an eastern and western cloud, coming together in the heavens and thundering terribly. They hurled insults at each other, circling with maces held at the ready.

As the fight was about to commence, awful omens were seen. Fierce winds blew up and a shower of dust fell from the sky. Claps of thunder resounded in the cloudless sky. Meteors fell and a dark circle surrounded the sun. Jackals howled and the vultures and crows cried. Loud voices seemed to boom out, suddenly rising and falling in a fearful cacophony.

Disregarding the omens, the two enraged fighters rushed at one another with their maces raised high. They met like two furious bulls fighting with their horns. The two maces collided with a deafening crash, sending up a shower of sparks. Cheered by the watching warriors, they exhibited graceful maneuvers, whirling their weapons and spinning around as they fought.

The gods, Gandharvas and rishis came to witness the battle. The celestial beings marveled at the speed and skill of the two fighters as they sought out each other's weaknesses. For some time, neither could penetrate the other's defenses and their maces clashed again and again, sounding like thunderclaps.

As the fight wore on, however, they began to strike each other great blows on the arms and shoulders. Hit hard by his opponent, each would reel back, then quickly recover, returning swift blows to his unguarded foe. Both knew every move and displayed the full range of their skills, to the onlookers' wonder. Everyone who watched the fight gasped and cheered as the two warriors fought.

Bhima's flying mace resembled Yamaraja's rod of death raised for the destruction of all creatures. It fell upon Duryodhana with a sound like the rushing wind. The Kaurava moved about with astonishing dexterity, evading Bhima's strokes and countering with terrific speed. His own mace moved with such velocity that it created flames of fire in the air. By his superior skill, Duryodhana began to prevail over Bhima, repeatedly smashing him with forceful blows.

Although struck again and again, Bhima stood his ground and

appeared unshaken. Brought to the pitch of wrath, he tried to strike back at his opponent with his iron mace, swinging it around with such speed that it could hardly be seen. But Duryodhana expertly baffled Bhima by leaping high and dodging those blows. He spun around in the air and turned in somersaults as he eluded Bhima's wheeling mace. Laughing as he dropped back to the earth, he brought his own mace down on Bhima's head with great force. Although struck with such violence, Bhima did not move, making all the spectators cry out in amazement.

Duryodhana seemed to dance on the field, his mace continuously circling around him and protecting him on every side. Bhima found all his attacks thwarted and immediately answered by heavy counter-blows from Duryodhana. Balarama applauded his skill, but the Pandavas and their followers felt dispirited. They watched in apprehension as Bhima took a beating from the Kaurava prince.

Bhima was infuriated by Duryodhana's evasive tactics. After being struck again by the Kaurava's mace, he took several steps backwards and then suddenly spun round whirling his mace at waist height. Letting go of the mace, he swung it by its long sling and it rushed through the air with a roaring sound. Duryodhana was caught on his side and he dropped to his knees in pain. A great cheer went up from the Pandavas, but Duryodhana, unable to tolerate the shouting and empowered by his mother's glance, immediately got to his feet, shaking off his pain. Screaming in fury he ran at Bhima and, with a sudden maneuver, struck the Pandava on the forehead.

Bhima stood unmoved. Blood flowed from his forehead like temporal fluid trickling from the head of an elephant. Duryodhana was stunned to see his opponent still standing. He took a step backward and Bhima, seizing his opportunity, struck him powerfully on the shoulder. Duryodhana fell to the earth like an uprooted oak tree. He lay there for a moment in a swoon as the Pandavas cheered and waved their weapons.

Bhima waited for his dazed foe to regain his senses. He was amazed that his blow, which could have smashed down a mountain peak, had not killed him outright. Within a minute, Duryodhana leapt to his feet. He was uninjured. His eyes gloated as he saw Bhima's astonishment. The queen's ascetic power was something indeed. Duryodhana laughed loudly, then suddenly darted forward. Dodging Bhima's whirling mace, the Kaurava spun around in a complete circle and struck him full on the chest. Bhima's armor

burst open and he flew backwards, falling to the earth with a thud. Awed, the celestials shouted and rained fragrant flowers on the fighters.

Fear possessed the Pandavas' hearts as they saw Bhima lying on the ground, but in a few moments he sprang to his feet. Wiping the blood from his face, he gazed at Duryodhana with bloodshot eyes. The two men paced, regarding each other with cautious respect and looking for an opportunity to strike.

As they circled, Arjuna said quietly to Krishna, "Who do you think is superior in this contest, O Janardana? What is their respective merit?"

Arjuna, himself an accomplished mace fighter, felt anxious for Bhima. He had also noticed Duryodhana's apparent invulnerability and could not see how Bhima would overpower him. It seemed as if the Kaurava had the upper hand. But Krishna, who had saved Arjuna from many such situations, would surely know what to do.

Krishna replied with a slight smile, "These two have received equal training. Bhima is stronger, but Duryodhana's skill is greater and he has practiced much more. He has also been blessed by his mother's ascetic power, making the contest uneven. Bhima will not win a fair fight; but if he resorts to unfair tactics, he will be victorious. Deceit in battle is acceptable against a deceitful foe. Even Indra used deceit to overcome the mighty asuras Virochana and Vritra."

Watching as the two combatants rushed again at one another, Krishna reminded Arjuna of Bhima's promise to break Duryodhana's thigh, a promise later reinforced by Maitreya's curse. He made it clear that this was the only way Bhima could gain victory.

"The Pandavas have again been placed in a perilous position due to Yudhisthira's fault," Krishna continued. "The learned Shukra has stated that the remnant of a defeated army, rallied and returned to the fight, are always to be feared, being desperate and fixed in their determination. Duryodhana had lost everything and was ready to enter the forest. Yudhisthira should not have challenged him. Now Bhima must surely use unfair means to end this fight, otherwise the kingdom will again be lost, O hero."

Krishna knew that Bhima was endeavoring to defeat Duryodhana by fair means before fulfilling his vow of breaking the prince's thigh. Arjuna understood his meaning and, catching Bhima's eye, he slapped his thigh.

Bhima nodded slightly in understanding. This must be a message from Krishna. He had not wanted to strike Duryodhana below the belt until he was overpowered, but perhaps there was no alternative. The Kaurava was fighting with demonic fury, exhibiting every skill and showing no sign of fatigue. Nor did it seem possible to make any impression on him no matter how hard he was struck. Krishna's advice was his only chance.

Bhima moved about rapidly in front of Duryodhana, displaying his maneuvers and baffling his foe. Duryodhana in turn showed the full range of moves described in the ancient martial scriptures. The two men met savagely, their maces colliding with showers of sparks and huge cracks that momentarily deafened the observers. They fought like a pair of maddened tigers, sweat pouring from their faces and blood running down their bodies.

Again separating, they stood for some moments to lean on their maces and regain their breath. Then they flew at one another with great yells. Both had smashed the other's armor and now fought only in their loin cloths. Their well-muscled frames gleamed in the late afternoon sun as they swung and lunged and parried.

Taking a step backwards as if to avoid Duryodhana's mace, Bhima suddenly hurled his weapon at the Kaurava, keeping hold of its sling. Duryodhana anticipated the blow and sidestepped it. Catching Bhima with his arms outstretched, he struck him a powerful blow on his side. Bhima was winded but showed no sign, summoning his patience as he pulled back his mace. Duryodhana did not realize that his opponent was disadvantaged. Exercising caution, he did not aim a second stroke at him.

Bhima, recovering, narrowed his eyes and rushed forward. He swung his mace and, as he expected, Duryodhana leapt upwards in the maneuver known as *avasthana*. Bhima suddenly stopped in front of Duryodhana and swung his mace chest-high in a rapid arc. As the Kaurava dropped back to the ground he was struck across the thighs. The blow carried the momentum of Bhima's forward dash, as well as the full power of his two arms. Bhima's mace, which could only be lifted by three strong men, smashed Duryodhana's thighs like a thunderbolt breaking a pair of huge trees.

The ground shook as Duryodhana fell flat, screaming. He lay there writhing in pain. It was obvious that the fight was over. All the Pandava forces roared in joy. Yudhisthira embraced his brothers and Krishna

applauded Bhima.

The air was again filled with strange omens. Showers of dust and bones fell from the sky. Fierce winds gusted, and a terrific noise issued from the bowels of the earth. The sky was filled with the frightful roaring of Rakshasas, Yakshas and Danavas. Darkness enveloped the four quarters and fierce beasts yelled on all sides.

Bhima, still seething, approached his fallen foe. "O wretch, recall now how you insulted Draupadi and how you committed so many sins against the sinless Yudhisthira. Accept the fruits of your actions."

Bhima lifted his left foot and kicked Duryodhana. With his foot placed on the Kaurava's head, he continued, his voice harsh. "By the ascetic penance of Drupada's daughter you lie here and your army is crushed. Let all those who saw her dragged into the assembly hall witness your defeat. All those who insulted and disregarded the Pandavas are slain."

Seeing Bhima standing with his foot on Duryodhana's head, many of the Pandava warriors were shocked and cried out, "Shame!"

Balarama, witnessing Bhima's abuse, was filled with rage. Already aghast at the way Bhima had struck the Kaurava down, he called out, "Fie on Bhima! How has he struck such a blow in a fair fight? No stroke should ever be aimed beneath the belt. This is the ancient rule, but this wretch has broken it. Such an act cannot go unpunished."

Balarama raised his plow weapon and ran at Bhima, appearing like Mount Kailasa rushing toward the Himavat. Krishna quickly pursued him and caught hold of him. Encircling his elder brother with his powerful arms, Krishna stopped him before he could reach Bhima. The two Yadu heroes shone beautifully and looked like the sun and moon conjoining in the evening sky.

As Balarama struggled against His brother's grasp, Krishna said, "O hero, You should not act in this way. Bhima has served even our interests. The Pandavas are our friends. Indeed, they are the children of our father's sister. Duryodhana was their sworn enemy and thus our enemy as well. His death was to be sought by us by any means. Furthermore, it was Bhima's solemn vow that he would break Duryodhana's thighs and slay him. The keeping of vows is always a sacred duty, and Bhima's vow was confirmed by the words of the infallible rishi Maitreya. For all this, O slayer of Pralamba, I

do not see any fault in Bhima. Give up your anger and be peaceful, O foremost of men."

Balarama laughed dryly. Krishna was always expert in providing arguments. But he was not convinced. Still held by Krishna he replied, "In my view, Bhima has sacrificed religion for the sake of material gain. This can never lead to success and happiness."

"Surely you are famous for your devotion to righteousness," Krishna answered, "but there is no unrighteousness in Bhima. He has carried out his promise and requited the debt he owed his enemy. Know, O powerful brother, that the terrible age of Kali is at hand, marked by fierce acts and the loss of religion."

Balarama slackened and Krishna released his grip on him. Still angry, he said in a resounding voice, "For this dishonest act, Bhima will henceforward be known as a cunning warrior. The righteous Duryodhana, on the other hand, will be known as a fair fighter. The Kaurava king has performed sacrifice and given much charity to the brahmins. Having at last offered his life as a libation into the fire of his foes, he will attain the regions of lasting happiness."

With that, Balarama strode away from Krishna and mounted his chariot. His charioteer urged on his horses and he sped away, like a white cloud speeding through the heavens.

Bhima folded his palms and bowed his head as his martial teacher left. He had stood passively as Balarama had rushed toward him. Death at his hands would have been glorious. After watching him ride swiftly away, Bhima turned again to Duryodhana, who was almost fainting from the pain. He raised his foot to kick him one more time. But Yudhisthira caught hold of Bhima and said, "Desist, O mighty hero. You have wreaked your vengeance and gained your ends either by fair or foul means. Let him be. Do not act sinfully. Duryodhana is a king, he is your kinsman, and lord of the Kurus. He is ruined—his brothers are slain, his kingdom is lost, his troops are destroyed, and he is reduced to a pitiable condition. How can you offer him more insult? People always say that Bhima is righteous. Do not act in a way that is not becoming, dear brother."

Restraining Bhima and kneeling by Duryodhana's side, Yudhisthira said to the Kaurava, "O brother, you should not grieve. Truly you are

suffering now the terrible consequences of your own deeds. This, O king, is the universal law. None can avoid the results of their acts, either in this life or the next. Surely everything has been ordained by the Creator, responding to our own desires. Through your avarice, pride and folly, you have suffered this calamity. Having caused the death of all your brothers, sons, companions and followers, you must now meet death yourself. Millions of heroes have gone to death's abode. You must follow them, O hero. Such is the course of destiny."

Yudhisthira felt genuine compassion for Duryodhana, seeing him as a foolish younger brother. Wanting to comfort and console him, he went on, "You are not to be pitied, O Kaurava, for you have met an enviable death in righteous battle. It is we who should be pitied. We will have to drag on a miserable existence devoid of our friends and kinsmen. Alas, how will I see my relatives' widows overwhelmed with grief? You, O king, are departing from this world and going to regions of bliss. On the other hand, we will have to remain in this world of pain and suffering."

Yudhisthira sighed and tears rolled down his cheeks. He stood up and walked away from Duryodhana, who said nothing. Yudhisthira's sentiments were noble, but they only gave the Kaurava more pain. He did not want to be pitied. Screwing up his eyes, he lay gasping.

Krishna, who had also disapproved of Bhima's abuse of the fallen Duryodhana, went to Yudhisthira's side and spoke consolingly. Placing his arm round his shoulder, he said, "O king, you have won a great victory. Do not grieve. All this has come about ordained by Time. The fire of Bhima's anger has consumed Duryodhana. The war is over."

Bhima, his anger subsiding, moved away from Duryodhana and stood before Yudhisthira, addressing him with folded hands. "O king, the earth is now yours with all its thorns removed. He who was the root of these hostilities, that wretched and deceitful being, now lies on the bare ground. All those sinful men who supported him and uttered cruel words toward us are slain. The earth, filled with riches, today approaches you as her lord."

Yudhisthira embraced his brother and replied, "The war is now over. Duryodhana is overcome and we have conquered the entire earth through Krishna's instructions. By good luck you have paid off your debt to your mother and to your anger. By good luck you are victorious and your enemy is

killed."

All the Pandava warriors roared and waved their upper garments. Some twanged their bowstrings and others blew their conches. Others beat drums and laughed loudly. Jumping about and sporting, they praised Bhima, applauding him for striking down Duryodhana and even for placing his foot on his head.

Krishna held up his hand disapprovingly. "O kings, it is not right to kill an already slain enemy with such words. This sinful, shameless and covetous wretch has received the results of his own folly. Now he is no more. He has become like a piece of wood. We should regard him as neither friend nor foe. No further energy or thought should be expended on him. Let us leave this place at once. By good luck the wicked and cruel-hearted Duryodhana is killed, with all his ministers and counselors."

Duryodhana heard Krishna's words from where he lay and hauled himself onto his elbows. Supporting himself with difficulty, he contracted his eyebrows and looked angrily at Krishna. Like a snake spitting out venom, he said, "O son of Kamsa's slave, it seems you have no shame. Have you forgotten the sinful way by which I was defeated? How could you? It was on your instigation that Bhima struck his sinful blow. Do you think I did not notice? It has been by your deceitful machinations that so many heroes have been unfairly killed. Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Bhurisrava were all killed thanks to your cunning. Without your wily advice, the Pandavas would have stood no chance in the war."

Duryodhana gasped in pain and dropped back to the ground, his face covered in perspiration. As he lay there panting, Krishna replied, "You, O son of Gandhari, have been killed with your brothers, sons and kinsmen only because of your own sinful deeds. O fool, it was I who requested you to return the Pandavas' share of the kingdom, but out of sheer avarice you refused. You have committed so many wicked acts against your cousins. When you insulted the sinless Draupadi in the assembly hall, you should have been slain then and there. For that crime you are now killed. O sinful wretch, for the crime of assailing Abhimanyu in an unfair encounter you are slain. You have never respected your elders and heeded their advice. Thus do you now lie here on the bare earth. Do not rail uselessly. You are suffering nothing but the consequences of your own evil acts."

Duryodhana's voice, wracked with pain, croaked in response. "What do I care for your words? Having studied the Vedas, performed sacrifice, given charity and governed the earth, I am now dying a glorious death. That end which is always sought by virtuous kshatriyas is mine. I have enjoyed pleasures worthy of the gods and attained the highest prosperity. Who is as fortunate as me? With all my brothers I will ascend to heaven, while you Pandavas will remain here, torn by grief and continuing to suffer."

As Duryodhana spoke, a shower of fragrant blossoms dropped from the sky. The Gandharvas and Apsaras played musical instruments and sang, while the Siddhas cried out, "Praise be to King Duryodhana."

The celestials looked with wonder at the scene below. Duryodhana's fall before Krishna was all-auspicious. Although the Kaurava remained envious toward Krishna, the mere fact of his contact with that eternal Supreme Deity conferred upon him the greatest possible blessing. Everyone killed in Krishna's presence doubtlessly reached regions of everlasting happiness.

As celestial music filled the sky, a disembodied voice called out that Duryodhana had been unfairly killed, as had Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Bhurisrava. Hearing the invisible voice, the Pandavas felt ashamed. Remorseful for the way the five heroes had been slain, they looked at Krishna. Seeing their affliction, Krishna reassured them, speaking in a grave voice as deep as the rumbling of clouds. "Do not grieve, O best of men. There was no other way these men could have been slain. For doing you good, as well as for lifting the burden of the earth, I applied my illusory powers so that victory would be yours. In a fair fight it would have been impossible to slay those atirathas. Even the guardians of the universe would not have succeeded. Do not feel guilty for the deceitful way they were killed. Such means are acceptable when one faces a powerful enemy, and especially when that enemy is himself deceitful. Ultimately, all the Kauravas were Duryodhana's followers and thus were as sinful as he was. For this reason they have been defeated and you, O virtuous men, have been crowned with success."

Krishna's heartening words were met with roars of approval from the Pandava warriors. All five brothers, who were ever acquiescent to Krishna, felt consoled by His arguments. Seeing that the sun had set, Krishna suggested that they return to camp. Headed by Yudhisthira and Krishna, the Pandavas slowly departed, leaving Duryodhana where he lay. With both

thighs shattered, he would not live much longer. Awaiting death, the prince lay back, moaning in pain.

Chapter Twenty-eight. Massacre by Night

After leaving the battlefield the Pandavas went to Duryodhana's camp, as was the custom, to seek the spoils of war; but they found it deserted, except for a few servants. They rode in their chariots up to Duryodhana's royal tent and dismounted. As Arjuna was about to climb down from his chariot, Krishna said, "Take the Gandiva and your two quivers, O Partha. I will get down after you."

Arjuna looked curiously at Krishna, but he did as he was requested. After he had got down, Krishna jumped clear of the chariot. At that moment, Hanuman left the banner and vanished. As he did so, the chariot suddenly caught fire without any apparent cause. In moments it was a pile of ashes.

The Pandavas gazed in amazement at the charred and smoldering remains. Arjuna asked Krishna what had happened and he replied, "The chariot was struck by the most powerful celestial weapons. Only because of my presence was it not previously incinerated."

Krishna went over to Yudhisthira and embraced him with a smile. "O King, by good fortune you have gained victory. By good fortune you and all your brothers are well. Now do what should be done to rule the earth."

Placing an arm around Arjuna's shoulder, Krishna continued, "Previously, this Dhananjaya greeted me when I came to Virata, offering me worship and love. He said, 'O Keshava, You are my brother and friend. Indeed, You are the Lord of my life. Therefore, you should always protect me.' I responded, 'So be it!' and have kept my word."

Tears fell from the Pandavas' eyes as Krishna spoke. In a choked voice Yudhisthira replied, "Surely we owe our lives, wealth and kingdom to you, O Janardana. Everything is due only to your favor. Who but you could have withstood the weapons of Bhishma, Drona and Karna? Only because of your protection was Arjuna able to defeat so many invincible heroes. The great rishi Vyasadeva told me that wherever you are, there will always be righteousness and victory."

Krishna smiled. With an arm around both Yudhisthira and Arjuna he entered Duryodhana's tent, followed by the other Pandavas. The empty tent resembled a city devoid of festivities. Duryodhana's golden throne looked desolate. His counselors' seats surrounded it. The Kuru chiefs in their silk

robes and golden ornaments had formerly occupied those fine seats. Now they looked like abandoned mansions. As the Pandavas moved through the tent they came upon Yuyutsu. He was Dhritarastra's only surviving son. Filled with sorrow and realizing that the responsibility of leadership had fallen to him, he sat pondering what he should do.

Seeing that the Pandavas had arrived, he stood and offered them respects. Yudhisthira embraced him and spoke gentle words of consolation. He told him to return to Hastinapura and to comfort his father and Gandhari, who would surely be overpowered by unbearable grief. Yuyutsu bowed to Yudhisthira and left the tent. Mounting his chariot he left at once, making his way to Hastinapura along the moonlit forest paths.

In one huge section of the royal tent the Pandavas found the immense wealth Duryodhana had brought from Hastinapura. Gold, silver, jewels, pearls, rich ornaments, blankets and skins lay in heaps on the rugged floor. After loading the wealth onto their chariots, the Pandavas rested for a while on the many silk-covered couches in the tent.

As the evening wore on, Krishna said to Yudhisthira, "O king, in accord with sacred tradition, you and your brothers should remain here for the first night of victory. The rest of the army may return to our camp."

Agreeing, Yudhisthira told his men to return to camp and take rest, while he and his brothers remained. After the warriors had left, the Pandava spoke again with Krishna. He wanted Krishna to be the first among his party to meet Gandhari in Hastinapura. Yudhisthira feared her ascetic powers. Revealing his anxiety, he said, "When the pious queen hears how Bhima slew her son, she will surely release the fire of her anger. She could destroy the three worlds with her accumulated ascetic powers. That blessed lady is always engaged in severe austerities. I fear she will reduce us to ashes when she learns what has happened. O Keshava, I think only you will be capable of pacifying her. Eternal and possessed of unfading glories, you are the creator and destroyer of everything. With reasonable arguments, O Madhava, you should remove her anger."

Hearing his anxious request, Krishna turned to Daruka and said, "Prepare my chariot." Then he left for the city. Arriving at sunrise, Krishna went straight to Dhritarastra's palace, where he first saw Vyasadeva. He immediately offered his prostrated obeisances, clasping the rishi's feet, and

then went with him into Dhritarastra's chamber. The blind king sat silent with Gandhari by his side. Having been announced by Vyasadeva, Krishna went over and took Dhritarastra's hand. Krishna wept openly for some time without saying anything.

Then Krishna washed his eyes and face with cool water fetched by a servant. Still holding onto Dhritarastra's hand, he said gently, "O Bharata monarch, you know everything past and future. You are well aware of the course of time. All that is brought into being will again be destroyed in due course. This no man can change. O king, out of respect for you the Pandavas tried repeatedly to make peace in order to prevent this destruction. The virtuous Yudhisthira tolerated all kinds of suffering, even going into exile and living in concealment. He and his brothers endured all kinds of miseries, as if helpless, hoping that peace would be maintained."

Krishna looked around Dhritarastra's chamber. The first rays of the sun were shining through the lattices, picking out the numerous empty seats around the hall. Curls of frankincense smoke were caught in the bright beams of light. From outside in the palace gardens the sounds of various birds could be heard. The sweet sounds contrasted with the rising and falling cries of women in the palace's inner apartments, wailing for their slain husbands and sons.

Seated at the king's side, Krishna continued. "Remembering all this and how you caused it, O mighty one, do not harbor ill feelings toward the Pandavas. You know of Yudhisthira's devotion for you. He is consumed by grief, feeling himself responsible for the death of all his kinsmen. Out of shame he does not want to appear before you now, although he shares your sorrow."

Krishna looked across at the blindfolded Gandhari, addressing her softly. "O daughter of Suvala, O lady of excellent vows, hear what I say. There is no woman like you in the world. Do you recall how you reprimanded your sinful son when you told him that victory follows righteousness? He did not heed you. Now it has come to pass, exactly as you said. Knowing all this, O auspicious queen, you should not grieve. Do not curse the Pandavas. Let not your heart be bent toward their destruction. Surely with your angry eyes you could annihilate the entire world, if you so desired."

Tears flowed from under the silk wrapper around Gandhari's eyes. She remained silent, unable to find her voice. Finally, she said, "What you have said is true, O Keshava. My mind is unhinged by grief, but on hearing your words I am pacified. O Janardana, this old monarch has no more sons. You and the sons of Pandu are now his only refuge."

Gandhari buried her face in a cloth and wept aloud. Krishna consoled her and her husband, speaking wisdom from the Vedas. After spending some time with them, He rose and said, "I will come to see you again. Pray grant me leave now to return to the Pandavas."

Both Dhritarastra and the queen offered him their respects and gave Him permission to leave. Krishna then left the chamber and met Daruka, ordering him to carry him back to the Pandavas' camp. Watched by thousands of cheering citizens who had heard of his arrival, Krishna went swiftly out of the northern gate and back to Kurukshetra.

* * *

After the Pandavas had left Duryodhana, the three surviving Kauravas came out of hiding and went to see the fallen prince. He looked like a gigantic sal tree felled by a storm. Covered in blood and breathing heavily, he was obviously in pain. All around him carnivorous beasts ranged like men seeking wealth from a king. Furrows of rage contracted his brow, and his eyes were red with anger.

Finding their king in that condition, the three warriors got down quickly from their chariots and ran over to him. They cried out and fell to the ground by his side. Leaning on his elbows, Duryodhana half raised a hand in greeting.

Ashvatthama knelt in front of him with tears streaming down his face. "Truly there is nothing permanent in this world, O king, since we see you lying here on the cold earth, covered with dust. You who issued commands to all the earth's rulers are now reduced to this pitiable plight. Alas, where are Dushashana, Shakuni and Karna? What has happened? Surely it is difficult to know the ways of Yamaraja, the lord of karma, since you, O mighty emperor, have been brought to such a state."

All three men cried and rolled on the ground. The war had taken a

terrible toll on the world's kshatriyas. Now the great Kuru leader was himself destroyed. Clearly he was close to death. The war was over. As the detachment and callousness born of battle left them, the awful consequences of the long conflict struck home. They were the only survivors of the Kuru army. Most of their relatives and friends had been slain. How could they continue to live? What would they say to their women?

Ashvatthama continued. "Alas, this great king who would trample on the heads of all other kings now eats dust. Witness the reverses time brings. Where is your pure white umbrella, O king? Where are the yak-tail whisks and the countless servants? Where is your immense army? Without doubt the prosperity of all mortals is unstable, since you, who were equal to Indra, are now in this miserable condition."

Grimacing in pain, Duryodhana rolled onto his side. Lifting his head from the ground he replied in a strained voice, "All living beings are subject to death. The Creator has ordained it. Death has now come to me, before all of you. By good fortune I have been killed in battle while I fought without showing my back. Struck down by a low blow from Bhima's mace, I was finally killed by deceit. By good luck you three have survived. Do not grieve for me. If the Vedas are at all authoritative, then I have attained the blissful regions. Destiny is all-powerful. In accordance with my fate I lie here, deprived of opulence. Leave me be. Soon I will embrace death and rise up to the heavens."

Duryodhana's head fell back and he sighed heavily. He thought of Krishna. There could be no doubt that he was a powerful personality of some sort. Only by his power and contrivances had the Pandavas been successful. Duryodhana wondered again if he might actually be the Supreme Lord. If that were true, then his partiality toward the Pandavas surely seemed unbecoming. It was hard to understand.

A spasm of pain wracked his body and he cried out. Tears flowed down his face as he slumped to the ground.

Ashvatthama ground his teeth and stared into the distance. Still furious about the way his father had been killed, he was even further incensed to hear that Bhima had slain Duryodhana with an unfair blow. Breathing heavily, his eyes red with anger, he declared, "Listen to my words, O king, which I swear by truth itself and by all my acts of religion. Today, in

Krishna's presence, I will dispatch the Pandavas to Yamaraja's abode. Grant me your permission, O lord."

Smiling through his pain, Duryodhana said, "O Kripa, quickly fetch me a pot of water. O preceptor, appoint Drona's son commander-in-chief of our army. Let the hostilities end with the death of our enemies."

Saying, "So be it," Kripa went to the lake and brought a pot of water. After a short ceremony, Duryodhana installed Ashvatthama as the Kaurava commander. He roared and mounted his chariot.

Kripa and Kritavarma blew their conches and climbed onto their chariots. They knew that victory against the Pandavas was unlikely, but death at their hands would be preferable to living after the annihilation of the other warriors.

Leaving the dying Duryodhana where he lay, the three warriors rode south through the darkness, their hearts aching with sorrow. They soon reached a spot close to the Pandavas' camp. Entering a copse of trees, they dismounted and discussed their strategy. All three were exhausted and they slumped beneath the spreading boughs of a banyan tree. They could hear the sounds of the Pandava army's celebrations. Deciding to challenge the warriors after sunrise, they said their evening prayers and lay down to sleep under the tree.

Kripa and Kritavarma soon fell asleep, but Ashvatthama was too angry to sleep. He stared up at the branches of the banyan silhouetted against the moon. The sounds of bats and owls filled the air. Ashvatthama tossed and turned, his mind filled with thoughts of revenge. As he looked up he could see the dark bodies of thousands of crows sleeping on the tree. Suddenly, a great owl swooped down from the sky, its green eyes flashing and its talons extended. It descended onto the branches of the tree and began silently killing the crows. In minutes it had slain many of the birds, which fell to the earth near Ashvatthama. In fear the other crows rose up, squawking and beating their wings as they fled.

Ashvatthama began to reflect. Surely this was a sign from destiny. What better way to deal with a large number of foes than to catch them asleep? Although keen to fight, there was little chance he and his two companions would overpower the Pandavas. But he had promised to kill them. Although it was sinful to kill sleeping men, it would nevertheless be an

appropriate end for them since they themselves had resorted to so much deceit and trickery during the war. If there was to be any chance of success, there was no alternative but to attack them while they slept, their weapons put aside and believing their enemies defeated.

Determining to go at once into the Pandavas' camp, Ashvatthama woke up the other two men. They sat up and shook off their sleep, listening as Ashvatthama explained his intentions. When he had finished speaking, they sat silently, filled with shame and unable to reply.

Seeing this, Ashvatthama defended his plan. "We should not hesitate. Duryodhana has been slain unfairly, as was my father and the Kuru grandsire. The Pandavas have not hesitated to use unfair or wicked tactics. What need have we to discuss this further? We are now the only survivors among the Kauravas. If we do not adopt cunning, then we too will follow our comrades to Death's abode. Roaring in joy and beating their victory drums, the Pandavas have fallen into the embrace of sleep. This is our only chance to defeat them. What do you say, O heroic men?"

Kripa shook his head slowly. "Two factors influence the outcome of all acts: endeavor and destiny. Without both there is no success. A man who does not work but who depends on destiny alone will be ruined. Sometimes, however, despite one's best endeavor, destiny delivers only adverse results. O brahmin, we have tried our best and we have not been successful. It is therefore clear that we are under the influence of adverse destiny. The foolish Duryodhana, moved only by covetousness, acted without regard for virtue or the advice of his elders. Thus he has met with calamity and we, his followers, have sunk into sorrow. In my view, our best course now is to seek the shelter and advice of others. Let us go to Hastinapura and speak to Dhritarastra and Vidura. They will offer us wise counsel."

Ashvatthama slapped his leg. He looked down at the slain crows littering the ground. Overcome by anger and grief, he could not accept Kripa's advice. He stood and paced back and forth, his hand clenching his sword hilt. His voice was cold and emotionless. "The understandings of different men inevitably differ. Everyone believes his own opinion to be right and that of others who differ to be mistaken. Even then the understanding of a man changes with changing circumstances. It is always difficult to ascertain one's best course. Therefore, by listening to wisdom and then acting in accord with one's own understanding of virtue, one should make his determination. I

am of the firm opinion that my plan is compatible with our duty as kshatriyas. We should show our enemies no mercy. We must destroy them by any means."

Ashvatthama made it clear that he would carry out his plan, with or without the assistance of his colleagues. His voice rose. "Like Indra killing the Danavas, I will range among the Panchalas and Pandavas. Ruthlessly cutting them down, I will pay the debt I owe my father. Today the Pandavas will follow the path he has taken and the path of all the other heroes they so treacherously killed. I will then be happy, considering myself to have done my duty."

Seeing Ashvatthama's determination, Kripa replied, "By good luck do we see you resolute. Clearly you cannot be dissuaded. With your heart bent on vengeance I do not think even Indra could withstand you in battle. Therefore, let us await the dawn and then ride out for an encounter with the Pandavas. Kritavarma and I will accompany you. For now, though, take off your armor and rest. Refreshed and renewed, you will surely conquer the enemy in honest warfare. There is no need to adopt mean tactics which will only incur the censure of all men."

Ashvatthama dismissed Kripa's suggestion. His mind was fixed on his dark plan. There was no question of waiting until morning. Rousing his sleeping horses, he said, "My heart is afflicted with desire and my mind with thoughts of vengeance. How can I sleep? Thinking of my father's death, I cannot find peace. Indeed, I will not rest until Dhristadyumna has paid the full price for his heinous act. O twice-born one, how can a person like me even live while that Panchala prince still breathes? How can any of us rest while the king cries in agony, his thighs broken by the wicked Bhima? We will not be able to gain victory on the battlefield against the Pandavas, protected as they are by Krishna. Let us kill them as they sleep. This is the only way we will achieve our cherished end."

Kripa watched with dismay as Ashvatthama yoked his horses to his chariot. His face was set in hard lines, picked out by the dancing rays of moonlight coming through the banyan's branches. Kripa tried again to dissuade Drona's son.

"Dear nephew, think hard before you do this. Only a sinful person would even contemplate what you propose. Have you lost sight of

righteousness? Surely one who does not control his senses cannot understand morality, even if he serves learned superiors, just as a wooden spoon cannot taste the soup. A humble man, however, with his senses in check, can immediately understand his duties when he serves his elders, just like the tongue tasting the soup. As your well-wisher, I am trying to restrain you from something that will result only in your condemnation and which will leave you repenting afterwards. You are celebrated in this world as a great warrior. Do not destroy your good reputation. Do not sink into a limitless hell by killing sleeping men, who are as good as dead already. Fight fairly and win everlasting fame. We will help you without doubt. This is my opinion, O mighty-armed one."

Ashvatthama mounted his chariot and looked down at Kripa. "What you say is true, O uncle, but in my view it is fitting that the Pandavas meet such an end. They have acted heinously themselves and now deserve no mercy. I cannot stand the thought of Duryodhana lying in agony, nor of the wicked Panchalas sleeping in peace after the sinful slaughter of my father. Having killed those vile men, I do not care if I am born as a worm or an insect in my next birth. You cannot frustrate my resolution. I am going—with or without you."

Kripa and Kritavarma looked at each other and shook their heads. They could not stop him. It seemed as if destiny had ordained that the final act of the war would be played out that night. They were the only surviving Kauravas and Ashvatthama was their commander. Considering this, both men finally decided to accompany him. If there was to be a fight, then it was their duty to assist him. They had already committed themselves to Duryodhana's cause, killing countless warriors on the enemy's side. There was no point now in abandoning the fight when the Kauravas' last hope depended upon them. Resigned, they yoked their chariots and followed Ashvatthama, who had by this time already driven away.

* * *

As he approached the camp's northern gate, Ashvatthama saw before him a strange being with a blood-soaked tiger skin wrapped around his loins. His upper garment was a black deerskin, and he had a large snake draped around his shoulders as a sacred thread. Around his biceps he wore two snakes as armlets, and in his hands he held fierce-looking weapons. His

mouth seemed ablaze, and in his fearful face he had a hundred eyes.

Seeing the terrible being, Ashvatthama, who was beyond fear, raised his bow and shot numerous celestial weapons at him; but the being absorbed them all and stood unaffected. Ashvatthama released a long steel dart that flew like a blazing comet toward the being, only to shatter into pieces when it struck him. Drona's son then hurled his scimitar and then his mace, but those weapons were also absorbed into the being's body.

Having exhausted his weapons, Ashvatthama saw that the being was still standing before him. He sensed it was Shiva, whom he had worshipped throughout his life. Only that unlimited deity could have withstood his most powerful attack. Ashvatthama threw down his weapons and jumped from his chariot. Trembling, he knelt before the god. Surely he should have heeded Kripa's admonition. Now the powerful Mahadeva, no doubt protecting the Pandavas on Krishna's order, would kill him for his sinful intentions.

Bowing his head to the ground, Ashvatthama offered numerous prayers to the powerful divinity. After praying and supplicating Shiva for some time, Shiva spoke in a thunderous voice. "O child, all through the war I have protected Pandu's sons. Out of my love for Krishna, I am always inclined to his worshippers. Now the Pandava warriors are being assailed by Time. They have carried out the desires and plan of supreme Providence, freeing the world of its great burden. Now their own destined end is near. O son of Drona, it is ordained that you will be the instrument of their destruction. I will empower you. Take this sword and use it to slay the remaining Pandava troops."

Shiva held out a great sword, which shone brilliantly and had a handle set with bright gems. After handing the sword to Ashvatthama, he vanished from the spot.

Suddenly, Ashvatthama felt himself infused with tremendous energy. His body seemed to burn with power and his eyes glowed. As he remounted his chariot and moved toward the entrance of the Pandavas' camp, both Kripa and Kritavarma caught up with him. Ashvatthama was overjoyed to see them joining him. Without telling them of the episode with Shiva, which had almost seemed to be a dream, he said, "O heroes, it is good that you have remembered your duties. We will now end the conflict by slaying the wicked Pandavas. I will enter the camp and range about like Yamaraja himself. You

two should remain outside. If anyone tries to escape, slay them."

After the plan had been agreed upon, Ashvatthama went quietly toward the camp. Clutching Shiva's effulgent sword, he got down from his chariot and leapt over the surrounding wall. Guided by signs, he stealthily made his way to Dhristadyumna's tent. The whole camp was silent and still, the exhausted warriors sunk in sleep.

Ashvatthama carefully entered Dhristadyumna's tent and saw him lying in sleep on a rich silken bed. Moving swiftly, Ashvatthama kicked him. Dhristadyumna awoke and sat up. Ashvatthama caught him by the hair and dragged him from the bed, still kicking his head and chest.

Dhristadyumna, surprised and still half-asleep, was unable to overpower his aggressor, suffused as he was with Shiva's mighty energy. Ashvatthama threw him to the ground and stamped on his neck. Dhristadyumna tore at his attacker with his nails and cried out, "O Ashvatthama, kill me with a weapon. Let me thus, through you, reach the blessed regions reserved for those who die in battle."

Ashvatthama laughed hideously. "O wretch, there is no bliss for those who kill their preceptors. Nor do you deserve a warrior's death. I will slay you like the animal you are."

Ashvatthama repeatedly stamped on Dhristadyumna with his heel, killing him mercilessly. Hearing the Panchala prince's cries, the guards and women who were in the tent came running.

Ashvatthama left the tent quickly, looking for the Pandavas themselves. Coming next to a large tent close to Dhristadyumna's, he guessed he had found them. The tent was decorated with numerous flags and garlands and had the finest of golden chariots standing nearby. Ashvatthama entered and, going into the inner section of the tent, saw five warriors asleep next to one another.

Ashvatthama felt a surge of joy. Here were the brothers! Raising his sword, he brought it down on the first of the five men and killed him with one stroke. He then similarly killed the other four before anyone awoke.

Outside the tent he could hear the clamor of the warriors looking for him. He rushed out with his fearful sword raised high, roaring like an infuriated lion. Seeing him advance like Death personified with his sword

dripping blood, the warriors fell back in fear. Ashvatthama ran at them and slaughtered them as a lion kills deer in the forest.

Quickly putting on their armor, other kshatriyas came out of their tents and surrounded Ashvatthama. Charged with Shiva's power, however, and filled with his own wrath, Ashvatthama quickly slew them. He rushed into the next tent and found Uttamaujas just rising from bed in surprise at the clamor outside. Ashvatthama ran over and kicked him, killing him in the same way as he had killed Dhristadyumna.

Ashvatthama then encountered Yudhamanyu, who rushed at him whirling a mace. Yudhamanyu struck Ashvatthama full on the chest, but Drona's son was not affected. Seizing his assailant, he threw him to the ground and killed him with powerful kicks and punches.

Numerous other warriors attacked Ashvatthama, but they were all savagely slain. Relentlessly hacking at the Pandava troops with his celestial sword, he slew many while they lay on their beds and hundreds of others who tried to resist him with weapons. Possessed by a frenzy of anger and bloodlust, he moved through the camp killing every warrior he would encounter.

As the piteous cries of the women filled the air, Ashvatthama went swiftly through the encampment, leaving a trail of death behind him. Caught unawares and shocked by his intensity and power, none among the Pandava forces could resist him. Covered in blood and screaming out his battle cry, he seemed like the mighty Yamaraja bent on killing all creatures.

Ashvatthama slew all of the surviving warriors. Like an elephant crushing lotuses in a lake, he moved about with his flashing sword, resisting all attempts to check him. Many invisible Rakshasas flew around the camp, filled with joy to see so many corpses pouring forth fresh blood. Their terrible cries resounded and mixed with the frightful howls of thousands of jackals.

Horses and elephants, terror-stricken, ran about wildly. Confused warriors came out of their quarters and looked around in the darkness to see what was happening. Seeing Ashvatthama whirling his bloodied sword, many of them mounted horses and sped toward the camp's gates. Others ran on foot, trying to escape. As the men left the camp, Kripa and Kritavarma met them and killed them. Having no weapons, with dishevelled hair and

garments and crying in fear, they were cruelly butchered even as they fled crying for mercy.

Kripa and Kritavarma, abandoning their shame, killed every last man they found. They then set fire to the tents. Men dashed about in confusion and terror and were cut down ruthlessly by the three Kaurava warriors. Calling out for the Pandavas, they fell to the earth, cut to pieces by the Kauravas' weapons.

As twilight approached, Ashvatthama, seeing that no warriors had survived his rampage, decided to leave. Drenched in blood, and with his sword seeming like a grotesque extension of his arm, he appeared dreadful. Having slaughtered all the Panchala and Pandava troops, he felt he had avenged his father's death.

Again the camp was silent. The women and the few servants who had not been killed were struck dumb with grief and terror. They hid themselves as Drona's son left again by the northern gate. His two companions were waiting for him. When they informed him that no one had escaped, he praised them.

After mounting his chariot, Ashvatthama considered how best to inform Duryodhana. He wanted to cheer the defeated prince before he died, but Duryodhana would hardly be able to believe that the Pandavas and all their troops had been slain. Ashvatthama thought he should show him the Pandavas' heads. That would convince him. He rode swiftly back into the camp. Going quickly into the tent where the five dead brothers lay, he took out his sword to sever their heads. The first light of dawn was entering the tent and, as he approached the bodies, he realized with dismay that they were not the Pandavas at all. These were Draupadi's five sons. The Pandavas must not even have been present, since no warrior in the camp had escaped.

Ashvatthama's sword dropped to his side. Deeply disappointed, he wondered what to do. After some thought he decided to take the five heads anyway and convince Duryodhana that they were in fact the Pandavas. At least he could bring some happiness to the fallen Kuru leader before he died. He took the five heads and placed them on his chariot, then drove out of the camp toward Duryodhana. The sun had just risen as his party reached him.

The three men saw Duryodhana lying surrounded by carnivorous beasts. He was pale and clearly on the verge of death. With difficulty he

scared away the wolves and hyenas that kept coming up to him. Ashvatthama leapt down from his chariot. After chasing the beasts away, he knelt before Duryodhana. Kripa also got down and stood by the dying prince's side. He addressed him in a sorrowful voice.

"Surely nothing is difficult for destiny to achieve. See how this once great king now lies here. He who would walk on the heads of all other kings now lies in the dust, struck down by the foe and bathed in blood. His golden mace, so dear to him, lies by his side like a faithful wife by the side of her husband. He who was formerly attended by brahmins seeking wealth is now attended by vicious beasts and birds, seeking to eat his flesh. Witness the reverses brought about by time."

Ashvatthama spoke more joyfully, telling Duryodhana how he had slaughtered the Pandavas and their warriors. "I have killed them all. See here the heads of the five brothers, O king."

As Ashvatthama climbed onto his chariot to fetch the heads, Duryodhana opened his eyes and sat up, leaning on his elbows. "O son of Drona, you have accomplished what not even Bhishma, Karna, or even your own father could achieve." His voice was barely above a whisper. "This has filled me with happiness. I will go now to the heavens where we will all meet again."

Ashvatthama came down from his chariot, holding the five heads by the hair. He placed them by Duryodhana's side and said, "Here are your sworn enemies, O King."

Duryodhana reached over and felt the heads. He found it hard to believe that they could be the Pandavas. They looked like them, but perhaps they were their sons. Duryodhana knew how to tell the difference. He squeezed the skulls with his powerful hands, exerting the last of his strength. As he did so, the heads collapsed. He could understand that these were the heads of the Pandavas' teenage sons.

Duryodhana fell to the ground with a sigh. "These are Draupadi's sons, O brahmin, and not the Pandavas. The heads of those five heroes are as hard as iron, but I have easily crushed these heads even in my weakened condition. Alas, what a terrible act you have performed! These boys were the future hope of the Kuru house. Now everything is lost."

Duryodhana lay lamenting, his eyes closed in pain. Although he

hated the Pandavas, he was not pleased to see their sons murdered. Who now would carry on what was, after all, his own family line? All his own brothers were dead. Now by killing Draupadi's sons, Ashvatthama had practically ended the Kuru dynasty.

Gasping, "Alas, alas," Duryodhana gave up his life. His head slumped to the side as his last breath came out. The three Kauravas cried out in distress. Seeing that he had died in acute disappointment rather than the joy for which he had hoped, Ashvatthama immediately felt remorse.

After gazing with tear-filled eyes at the king, the three men built a large funeral pyre. Placing Duryodhana's body on it, they recited prayers and carried out his last rites, sprinkling his body with sacred water fetched from the Ganges. They then set light to the pyre and wailed in grief as the fire consumed him. When the flames expired, Kripa gathered up the last remains of the body and carried them to the river, placing them in the water while chanting Vedic mantras.

Having completed the rituals, the three warriors mounted their chariots and set off in silence toward Hastinapura.

Chapter Twenty-nine. Ashvatthama Punished

In the Kaurava camp, the Pandavas had risen before sunrise to say their prayers and perform their morning rites. As Yudhishthira completed his ablutions, Dhristadyumna's panicked chariot driver ran into his tent. After he had been calmed, he described the night's events.

"O king, Draupadi's sons as well as those of Drupada have all been slain. Ashvatthama, Kripa and Kritavarma have committed a most cruel act. Even as our men slept, they were killed without mercy. Ashvatthama came like Death himself and slashed at everyone with his sword. Anyone who tried to flee was cut down by the arrows of the other two. I think I am the only survivor. Somehow I managed to escape from the camp and have come here to tell you."

Yudhishthira dropped to the ground and cried out. Upon hearing their brother's distress cry, the other Pandava brothers ran in to him and he informed them of what had happened. They too began to cry and fell to the earth. Yudhishthira's voice rose above the others. "Alas, after defeating our enemies we are now defeated. An already bitter victory, gained at the cost of the lives of so many kinsmen, has become still more bitter. What happiness can we now enjoy with all our sons, friends and followers slain? Alas, they have died like merchants in a boat, who, having crossed the ocean, are wrecked in a shallow river. What will become of Draupadi? How will she live after hearing that her sons were so brutally slaughtered?"

Yudhishthira turned to Nakula and asked him to bring Draupadi to the Pandava camp so that he could break the terrible news to her. After Nakula left, the other brothers comforted Yudhishthira, who then left the tent and mounted his chariot. Accompanied by his brothers and Satyaki, who had stayed with them in the Kaurava camp, he made his way to his own camp.

As Yudhishthira entered the camp he saw the ground littered by bodies. Severed heads and limbs lay strewn about, birds picking at them and beasts tearing them apart. Seeing how the men had been slain without armor or weapons, the Pandavas seized their weapons and looked about wildly for signs of the killers. Upon not finding Ashvatthama or his party, they tearfully entered their sons' tent and found the five headless corpses still lying on their beds. Horrified, they wailed in sorrow. Yudhishthira, feeling responsible for all the deaths, fell trembling to the ground.

As Yudhisthira's brothers tried to comfort him, Nakula entered the tent with Draupadi. As soon as she saw her sons' bodies she dropped senseless to the earth. Sprinkling her face with cool water, Bhima raised her and held onto her as she stood shaking uncontrollably. Her delicate face was darkened with grief, resembling the sun covered by storm clouds.

Supported by Bhima, the Panchala princess said, "By good luck, O king, you have regained the earth after conquering your enemies. By good luck your thoughts do not dwell on Subhadra's son, that mighty-armed hero who was so cruelly killed by the Kauravas. Now it is my own sons who have been slain through sin. Seeing how Drona's vicious son has killed them even while they slept, I burn with unbearable grief. If that wretch does not pay for this crime, then I will die. I promise to observe the Praya vow and fast until death."

Draupadi sat down and assumed a yogic posture, her legs folded by her side and her arms outstretched. "I will not move from this spot until you bring me the shining jewel from Ashvatthama's head, having slain him like a beast."

Yudhisthira consoled the weeping princess. Draupadi looked up at Bhima and implored, "Mindful of a kshatriya's duties, O Bhima, kill that wretch like Indra killed Shambara. There is no man in the world who can equal your prowess. Again and again you have been my refuge, and indeed the refuge of all your brothers. Remembering those deeds, kill Drona's son and be happy."

Draupadi's voice was a wail. She covered her tear-streaked face with her hands. Her head fell to her breast and she wailed piteously. She could not get the sight of her five headless sons out of her mind. Repeatedly beating her chest, she filled the tent with her loud sobs.

Bhima looked around at the carnage caused by Ashvatthama. His eyes blazed and his huge chest rose and fell rapidly. He lifted his mace, still bloodstained from his battle with Duryodhana. Asking Nakula to become his charioteer, he ran out of the tent and leapt aboard his chariot. Within moments he was speeding out of the camp. He knew Ashvatthama would have first gone to see the dying Duryodhana and would then head for Hastinapura. Nakula drove his chariot like the wind toward the road to Hastinapura.

Soon after, Krishna arrived and discovered the grisly scene. After being informed that Bhima had set off in pursuit of Ashvatthama, he said, "O Yudhisthira, Bhima is dearer to you than life. Why do you stand here without acting? Surely you know that Drona gave Ashvatthama the Brahmashira, capable of consuming all three worlds. Although his father ordered him to never use that weapon against men, I am sure that in his desperation he will release it against Bhima. Only Arjuna, who also received the weapon from Drona, can check it. Do not delay. Order him to go after his brother. I will go with him."

Krishna reminded Yudhisthira of an incident which had occurred many years ago in Dwaraka, which indicated Ashvatthama's shameless and brazen nature. Knowing that there was no weapon more powerful than Krishna's Sudarshan discus, he had gone to Dwaraka and asked Krishna to exchange it for the Brahmashira. Krishna had said, smiling, "The discus is here by my side, O hero. You may take it freely. I do not wish to have your weapon in exchange." But even after exerting all his strength, Ashvatthama could not move the discus. When he gave up, Krishna asked why he desired the discus. Ashvatthama replied, "If I had managed to take it, I would have challenged you to battle, O Yadu hero. After defeating you, and holding your discus, I would then have been the most powerful man on earth."

"You must stop him at once," Krishna concluded. "He is wrathful, wicked and cruel. Let us leave immediately."

Yudhisthira agreed. Krishna spoke consoling words to Draupadi and, after bowing to Yudhisthira, headed out of the tent. Preparing to follow him, Arjuna said to Draupadi, "O gentle lady, when I behead that brahmin, I will present you with his head. Then I will wipe the tears from your eyes and pacify you. After burning your sons' bodies, you can then take your bath standing on his head."

Arjuna spat out the words "that brahmin." He knew it was forbidden to kill a brahmin, but by his behavior Ashvatthama had shown himself to have fallen far from the path of brahminical life.

Krishna's charioteer, Daruka, still ready, stood just outside the tent. The chariot was yoked to his four horses: Shaibya, Sugriva, Meghapushpa and Balahaka. They stood still as Krishna and Arjuna climbed onto the chariot. Daruka gave the command and the chariot moved off, quickly and

smoothly picking up speed. The celestial standard, bearing the emblem of Garuda and decked with gold and gems, fluttered in the breeze as the chariot traveled rapidly toward Ashvatthama.

Within a short time they caught up with Bhima, who could not be deterred from pursuing Ashvatthama. Thinking only of the grieving Draupadi, he raced on with his mace held aloft.

The two chariots sped toward the Ganges. When they reached its banks they saw Ashvatthama amid the rishis. Drona's son had sought their shelter in hopes of being protected from the Pandavas. He knew there was nowhere within all the three worlds where he could hide from Arjuna and Krishna. He had thus entered among the brahmins, knowing of the Pandavas' respect for them. He sat in their midst, clad in only a deerskin.

Bhima leapt from his chariot and ran toward him with a roar. Ashvatthama looked up and saw the furious Pandava charging, as well as Arjuna and Krishna standing on their chariot nearby. Shiva's terrible power had left him as soon as he had emerged from the Pandavas' camp, and he was terror-stricken when he saw the two mighty Pandavas and Krishna. He thought of the Brahmashira. That irresistible weapon was his only hope.

Taking up a reed of kusha grass, Ashvatthama recited the incantations to invoke the Brahmashira. Seeing this, Krishna shouted to Bhima to stop. The Pandava obediently halted in his tracks.

As Ashvatthama invoked his weapon, a glaring light spread in all directions. Witnessing the blinding force of the most powerful of all the Brahma missiles, which even he had never seen before, Arjuna offered prayers to Krishna. "My dear Lord Krishna, you are the almighty Personality of Godhead. There is no limit to your different energies. Therefore, only you are capable of instilling fearlessness in the hearts of your devotees. Everyone in the flames of material miseries can find the path of liberation in you only. You are beyond the illusion of this world and nothing is unknown to you. Therefore kindly tell me, what is this blazing light which threatens to consume everything?"

"Know from me that this is the all-powerful Brahmashira. This wicked man, afraid of imminent death, has thrown the weapon. But, O Partha, he has no knowledge of how to withdraw it."

Krishna knew that Drona had not fully instructed his son on how to

use the weapon, realizing that he would likely abuse its power. Now he had desperately released it, not caring that it could destroy the world even with himself in it.

Krishna urged Arjuna to counter the weapon. "Release your own Brahma missile, O Partha, which will combine with Ashvatthama's. Then you may withdraw both."

Arjuna immediately touched Krishna's feet and thought of the mantras to invoke the weapon. He released the missile and it met with Ashvatthama's in the sky. A great circle of blazing light filled the heavens. It appeared as if a second brilliant sun had risen and was about to burn the universe to ashes.

Vyasadeva was sitting among the rishis on the bank of the river. Witnessing the combined power of the two Brahma weapons, he became alarmed. He ran over to Ashvatthama and said, "O brahmin, what are you doing? Why have you thrown this weapon? It will destroy the world. Withdraw it at once."

Ashvatthama looked at the rishi but made no reply. He was unable to withdraw the weapon, but he could redirect it to another target. Ashvatthama saw that his attempt to kill Arjuna and Krishna was being thwarted. His own powers were no match for Arjuna's superior military skills.

Ashvatthama realized that death now stared him in the face. Surely the Pandavas would show him no mercy. Frustrated and filled with despair, he remembered that Uttara, Abhimanyu's wife, was pregnant with the child conceived before the prince's death. She was carrying the last of the Kuru line. Ashvatthama's mind raced. It was the proud Kurus who had killed his father, and who were about to kill him too. Deciding that if he was to die he would take the last hopes of the Kuru house with him, Ashvatthama concentrated on Uttara—and, in particular, on the child in her womb. He uttered mantras to redirect the Brahmashira and it flew toward the Pandavas' camp, where Uttara had gone with Draupadi.

Unaware of Ashvatthama's evil desire, Arjuna chanted the mantras to withdraw his own weapon and the brilliant glare in the sky gradually subsided. Seeing that the danger had passed, Vyasadeva returned to his place amid the sages, who were in the midst of performing a sacrifice to Vishnu.

In the Pandavas' camp, Uttara suddenly felt herself in danger. She

was not sure of the cause, but could sense the approach of something. The beautiful princess, still only a young girl, fell to the ground. Her limbs trembled and she felt apprehensive. Terrified, she offered prayers to Krishna, whom she saw as her only shelter. Folding her palms and bowing her head, she said, "O Lord of lords, Lord of the universe! You are the greatest of mystics. Please protect me, for there is no one else who can save me from the clutches of death in this world of duality."

Hearing her heartfelt prayer even as he sat on the chariot with Arjuna, Krishna, who understood Ashvatthama's intentions, at once expanded his personal energy to protect Uttara. He entered her womb in a mystical form and covered the child. As the Brahmashira approached, it was neutralized by Krishna and sent harmlessly into the sky. Uttara and the other Pandava ladies looked with wonder at the missile as it rose upwards like a blazing comet. Surely Krishna had saved them all from certain death.

After withdrawing his celestial Brahma weapon, Arjuna fired another weapon at Ashvatthama that immediately bound him with strong cords. Leaping from Krishna's chariot, he ran over to Ashvatthama and seized him by the hair, dragging him up onto the chariot. Although capable, Arjuna was reluctant to kill the son of his teacher.

Seeing Arjuna sparing Ashvatthama's life, Krishna said, "O Partha, you should not show mercy to him. He is no brahmin—he has killed innocent boys in their sleep. This is always against religious codes. His sins have been great. You should kill him for his own good. Otherwise, he will descend into hell. Furthermore, you have promised Draupadi that you will bring her the head of her sons' killer. Do not hesitate. He has brutally murdered your family members and deserves death at your hands without doubt. Having blighted his own family name, he is but the burnt remnants of his dynasty. Kill him at once!"

Throwing Ashvatthama to the chariot floor, Arjuna replied, "I do not feel able to kill him, O Krishna. How could I perpetrate an act so painful to my own guru's heart? If it is your order, then it will be done; but for myself, I would rather take him to Yudhisthira to hear his judgment. Draupadi, too, may decide what should be done with this wretch."

Krishna nodded. Daruka urged on his horses and in a short while they arrived at the camp, Bhima following just behind.

Arjuna dragged Ashvatthama before Yudhishthira and Draupadi, saying, "Here is the killer of our sons. What should be done with him now?"

The soft-hearted Draupadi felt compassion for Ashvatthama, who sat with his head down. As he was a brahmin she folded her palms in respect and said, "Release him, Arjuna, for he is the son of your martial teacher. It is said that the son is one with his father, and thus it is as if Drona himself were here. Indeed, Drona's wife did not ascend his funeral pyre because she had a son. Killing Ashvatthama will cause her, our worshipful superior, grief and cannot be in accord with religious principles. My lord, do not make her cry like me. Nor should we, the kingly order, become guilty of the sin of needlessly slaying brahmins. Such a sin can burn the whole body of a royal family to ashes."

Yudhishthira, approving Draupadi's words, said, "Excellent, excellent. O gentle lady, your words are quite in accord with the sacred teachings of the Vedas."

Arjuna and the twins also expressed their agreement—but not Bhima. "We need show this man no mercy. He has mercilessly killed sleeping men for no purpose other than his own interests. Killing him is the only fitting punishment."

Bhima advanced menacingly toward Ashvatthama with his fists clenched. His eyes were wide with fury and he ground his teeth. Draupadi quickly came between him and Ashvatthama, who still said nothing and stared at the ground.

Seeing the conflict, Krishna moved forward and placed a hand on Bhima's shoulder, telling him to be peaceful. Turning to Arjuna, He said, "A brahmin, even when guilty of sin, is not to be killed; but if he is an aggressor, he must be killed. All these rulings are in the scriptures. You should act accordingly. You have to fulfill your promise to your wife, and you must also act to Bhimasena's satisfaction -- and mine. We both want you to kill this culprit."

Arjuna looked at Krishna, who appeared to have four arms as he stood holding Bhima at bay and comforting Draupadi. He could understand Krishna's equivocal instructions. Ashvatthama should both be killed and not killed. Taking out his razor-edged sword, he grabbed hold of Ashvatthama's top-knot and severed the hair along with the shining jewel that bound it. The

jewel was the repository of Ashvatthama's mystic power, and as it was removed, he shriveled and collapsed.

Presenting the jewel to Draupadi, Arjuna said, "Here is the gem you desired, O beautiful lady. Ashvatthama is now as good as dead, for to cut off the hair of a powerful warrior is equal to killing him. Indeed, the Vedas also prescribe such punishment for fallen brahmins, but they never sanction killing the body."

Bhima praised Arjuna for his intelligent act that had satisfied everyone. He led Draupadi to a nearby couch and sat her down as Krishna spoke to Ashvatthama. "O son of Drona, all wise men will know you as a coward and a wretch from now on. You will have to endure the fruits of your sinful acts. For three thousand years you will wander the earth, afflicted by disease and completely alone, unable to speak to anyone. Wretched and foul-smelling, you will dwell in deep forests and dreary wastelands. At the end of this period, purified at last of your sins, you will ascend to the higher regions. Go now, wicked man."

Arjuna and Bhima dragged Ashvatthama to his feet and, unbinding him, drove him from the camp. Deprived of his jewel and cursed by Krishna, his power was gone and he disappeared into the woods to begin his lonely exile.

After his departure, Yudhishthira sorrowfully asked Krishna how Drona's son had been able to kill the warriors in their camp. "I cannot see how it was possible that the sinful Ashvatthama could slay Dhristadyumna and so many other powerful fighters. Tell me, O Krishna, what power possessed him?"

Krishna explained how Ashvatthama had worshipped Shiva and obtained from him the power to kill the warriors. "But know from me that their time had come. Having carried out my will, they have now reached everlasting regions of bliss. Therefore, O king, you need not lament for them." Krishna consoled Yudhishthira with Vedic wisdom, while the other Pandavas and their women listened to his words. The sun was approaching the meridian and Yudhishthira, feeling comforted, told his brothers that they should go to the Ganges to perform the last rites of their sons and other relatives. Wrapped in simple cotton cloths, the bodies of all the slain men were carried to the river bank, followed by the mournful procession of the

Pandavas. The women walked at the head of the procession, followed by hundreds of brahmins who were reciting Vedic mantras and throwing kusha grass on the ground.

Gradually they approached the river and began the funeral ceremonies. The many servants who had been brought from the city placed the thousands of corpses on large pyres built along the river bank. As the women's piteous wails carried into the breeze, the brahmins performed the rituals and the pyres were ignited. Everyone then entered the water and offered prayers for the departed souls.

After the funerals were complete, the Pandavas and Krishna slowly began the journey to Hastinapura.

* * *

Dhritarastra and Gandhari sat alone in their chamber. After Krishna had left them, they were once again overcome by grief. The blind king sat with his head fallen to his chest, his breath coming in tearful sighs. He looked like a once-great tree shorn of its branches. Sanjaya entered the chamber. As he announced himself, Dhritarastra stood to greet him, then collapsed.

Sanjaya lifted the old king gently and said, "Why do you grieve, O monarch? Grief is useless. Eighteen akshauhinis have been killed and the earth divested of hundreds of kings. All your sons have been slain, along with so many of their kinsmen, friends and counselors. You should now perform their funeral rites. What is the use of lying here shedding tears?"

Dhritarastra cried out and dropped back onto the silk rug spread over the floor of his darkened chamber. Sanjaya pulled back the heavy drapes from the nearby window and sunshine poured into the room. The king and queen both appeared disheveled and withered by grief. Neither had slept for days.

Sanjaya again helped Dhritarastra to his feet and the old king fell back onto his throne. In a choked voice he said, "Bereft as I am of sons, friends and counselors, I will have to wander the earth in a wretched state. What is the use of living? Alas, I did not heed my advisors' words and now I lament. Krishna told me to make peace with the Pandavas and rule the earth without a rival. Bhishma and Vidura agreed. I chose to follow my wicked

son. Now he is dead and I am experiencing an ocean of grief. Surely my sins in previous lives have been great and thus I suffer now. Who on earth is more afflicted than me? Destiny has dealt me unbearable blows. I will end my life. Let the Pandavas come here and see me bent upon taking that final great journey toward the eternal Brahman."

Sanjaya shook his head. He had heard Dhritarastra's empty lamentations so many times. Taking hold of the king's hand, he replied, "Cast off your grief, O king. You are well acquainted with Vedic instructions regarding the certainty of death and the eternality of the soul. Everything happens as it should. All men receive the proper results of their own acts. For your fault your sons have been destroyed. Only out of covetousness did you follow your son, who was ever guided by wicked men. Thus has your own perverted intelligence cut you, exactly like a sharp sword. So many people tried to redirect you to the path of virtue, but you would not listen. Although learned and intelligent, you were not qualified to be emperor of the earth, for you lacked discrimination."

As he had done on previous occasions, Sanjaya made it clear to Dhritarastra that he had only himself to blame. Now he was forced to repent. "A man who keeps a burning coal in the folds of his cloth and then is burned by the fire is simply a fool if he laments. You and your son kept that Pandava fire in your midst and fanned it with your words and deeds. Now your sons have fallen into the blaze like insects. Why do you weep?"

Since Vidura had left the palace to go on pilgrimage, Sanjaya had more and more assumed the role of the king's advisor. As Vidura had always done, he spoke frankly and without fear. "Rise up, O monarch, and attend your duties. Why do you cry for that which can no longer be avoided? All created beings will be destroyed, everything high will eventually fall, union always ends in separation, and life always ends in death. All creatures are like members of a caravan bound for the same country. Death will meet each of them in turn; none will escape. Thus it is immaterial who goes first. Your sons, meeting a glorious death in the thick of battle, have surely gone to higher places. The scriptures state this clearly. For a kshatriya, there is no better death than in battle. Your grief for your sons is unwarranted and meaningless. It will only increase if you indulge it. Only the less intelligent allow themselves to be overcome by grief. It does not bestow any benefit upon the grief-stricken; rather, it deviates him from his duty and thwarts his

aims in life."

Sanjaya had never stopped advising Dhritarastra for his own good, despite the fact that his advice was ignored. Now that the king had lost everything, he would be far more likely to take good counsel seriously. Sanjaya spoke for some time, repeating the wisdom he had heard from the rishis. Dhritarastra listened attentively, encouraging him to continue and feeling a sense of relief from his words.

"O king, all men receive the results of their own actions alone. By acting with a desire for profit, one attains only repeated births in this world along with their concomitant sufferings. Those who are wise act only to achieve liberation. By surrendering their acts unto the Supreme, they free themselves from the bondage of work. One who does his duty only as a sacrifice for the pleasure of Vishnu will surely rise to regions of deathlessness where eternal happiness is enjoyed. Those whose hearts are possessed by lust and greed for material enjoyment, however, will continue to suffer."

Dhritarastra felt Sanjaya's reprimand. Repenting his foolishness, he rose from his throne and again fell to the floor. Gandhari wept silently as Sanjaya attended to him by sprinkling cool, perfumed water on his face.

While the old charioteer consoled Dhritarastra, Vyasadeva entered the chamber. He shone with spiritual effulgence, seeming almost to float across the chamber as he approached the king.

Hearing that the sage was present, Dhritarastra got up to welcome him and said, "Alas, O lord, I am undone. Fie on this world and fie on humanity. All our pains have their root in the state of human existence. How can one tolerate the pain of losing one's wealth and all one's loved ones? The calamity that has befallen me will only end with life itself. Therefore, I shall end my miserable existence today."

Dhritarastra again fell sobbing to the ground. Seeing him in that state, Vyasadeva said, "O mighty monarch, hear my words. You are learned and intelligent. You know everything, so take recourse in that wisdom now. When everything in this world is temporary, why do you grieve for that which is lost? Time itself, making your son the cause, has brought about this destruction. No one can change destiny. I have known destiny's course, settled by the celestials, and I will explain it to you now so that you may find

peace of mind."

Vyasadeva explained how he had attended an assembly in Indra's court some time ago. There he had seen many great rishis, headed by Narada, and also the Goddess Earth herself. The all-powerful Vishnu had come to the assembly, where Earth had beseeched him: "My dear lord, you have promised to relieve my burden. Let that come to pass soon."

Vishnu had replied, "The eldest of Dhritarastra's one hundred sons will accomplish your desire. Through that king, your object will be achieved. Fighting for his cause, all the kings who are exploiting your resources will meet in a fierce battle and slay one another. O beautiful damsel, return and continue to bear the weight of all creatures. Your burden will soon be lightened by the battle."

Vyasadeva went on to explain that Duryodhana was an incarnation of Kali, the deity presiding over the impending age of quarrel and suffering. It was by his dark influence that the slaughter had been brought about. Dhritarastra should not blame the Pandavas. They too had been told by Narada of the arrangement made by the celestials. Filled with grief to hear that they would be involved in such carnage, they had endeavored to avoid it—but Duryodhana would not be swayed.

Vyasadeva concluded, "I have thus revealed to you the gods' secret, O King. You should not grieve. All the warriors who died are now living in the higher planets in joy. The earth is no longer feeling the burden of them, and a righteous monarch has assumed rulership in the form of Yudhisthira. Thus the world will now be led on the path of virtue. Cast off your sorrow. If the compassionate Yudhisthira sees you in this state, he will give up his life. Take hold of yourself. Spend your remaining days in asceticism and attain the goal of life."

Dhritarastra sighed. Getting to his feet with Sanjaya's assistance, he replied, "O best of rishis, thinking of my sons I am sunk in grief and almost losing consciousness, but your words have convinced me to continue living. Understanding that the gods have ordained everything, I will endeavor to put aside my sorrow. Thus will I live."

Vyasadeva then disappeared. Feeling comforted, Dhritarastra and Gandhari retired to their private quarters to rest, having spent the night grieving.

Chapter Thirty. Yudhishthira's Sorrow

Just before noon, Dhritarastra called for his servants and asked to be taken to the Ganges to perform the funeral rites for his departed relatives. He also asked that the Kuru ladies attend, and the servants went out to fetch them and arrange for their journey.

The ladies left their quarter wailing. Crying and beating their breasts, they mounted chariots that would transport them to the river. With their hair disheveled and their ornaments abandoned, they had left their houses like deer leaving a mountain cave after their leader's fall. Calling out the names of their husbands and sons, they proceeded toward the river. Upon hearing their anguished cries, people felt that the hour of universal destruction was at hand.

Dhritarastra and Sanjaya rode just behind the ladies, followed by many servants. Two miles later they encountered Kripa and Kritavarma. With choked voices they told the king how Bhima had killed Duryodhana. They then informed Dhritarastra of Ashvatthama's night massacre. Both warriors looked ashamed.

Finally, Kripa said, "We are now fleeing. Ashvatthama has been captured and released by Arjuna. Krishna cursed him to wander the earth for three thousand years in exile, and he has left for the forest. Grant us your permission, O King, and we will return to our homes."

Dhritarastra felt his heart sink even further. He told the two men to return to their abodes and ordered the procession to continue. They soon reached the Ganges.

Word that they were on their way to the Ganges had reached Yudhishthira, so the Pandavas and Krishna decided to meet them at the river. Draupadi and the Panchala ladies, their hearts heavy, also went.

As the Pandavas approached the Ganges they saw thousands of Kuru ladies mourning. Yudhishthira walked toward them and they surrounded him, crying out. Some of them censured him. "Where is your righteousness, O King? Where is your truth and compassion? You have mercilessly slain sires, brothers, preceptors, sons and friends. What is the use of sovereignty now that even your own sons and allies are dead? Alas, the war has brought nothing but grief to everyone."

Passing silently among the ladies, Yudhishthira made his way to

Dhritarastra and bowed at his feet. Each of his brothers followed suit, announcing their names as they offered obeisances. With difficulty, Dhritarastra embraced Yudhisthira and blessed his brothers. When he heard Bhima's name, however, his heart blazed with anger. Concealing his feelings, he called Bhima forward so that he could embrace him as he had Yudhisthira.

Krishna understood Dhritarastra's intentions. He touched Bhima on the shoulder to indicate that he should wait. Exercising the mystic prapti power, he brought the iron image of Bhima from Duryodhana's gymnasium in Hastinapura. He pushed the statue forward into Dhritarastra's open arms. The blind king, possessed of the strength of ten thousand elephants and burning with fury, squeezed the statue with all his power. Taking it to be Bhima himself, the king shattered the iron form into many pieces.

As the statue fell apart, Dhritarastra's chest was severely bruised and he vomited blood. Exhausted from his effort and soaked in blood, he dropped to the ground like a blossoming parijata tree. Sanjaya knelt by his side and lifted him, saying, "Do not act like this, O king."

Having released his anger, Dhritarastra was instantly remorseful. He thought he had killed Bhima.

Seeing that the king's anger had abated, Krishna said, "Do not grieve, O Bharata. Knowing you were angry, I dragged Bhima from certain destruction. You have only broken his statue form. Who could escape from your angry embrace, which is as tight as the embrace of Death? In any case, how would killing Bhima do you any good? It will not revive your sons, O king. Give up your spite and be peaceful."

Dhritarastra hung his head in shame. His servants helped him to his feet and they took him to the river to change his clothes and wash him. After this, when the blind king was seated on a fine rug by the riverside, Krishna said, "You are learned in all the scriptures and aware of morality. Why do you harbor anger against the Pandavas? Everything that has happened has been caused by your folly. I myself tried to warn you before the battle, but to no avail. You have repeatedly ignored the advice of Vidura, Bhishma, Drona, and Sanjaya. Only a king who sees his own shortcomings can enjoy prosperity, but he who acts by his own judgment alone and who does not follow well-wishing advisors has to suffer. Bhima has rightfully slain your crooked son, that mean wretch who dragged Panchali into the assembly.

Remembering both his and your antagonism toward the Pandavas, govern your anger."

Dhritarastra was subdued. "It is just as you say, O Madhava. I have been deviated from virtue by a father's affection. I am no longer angry. Let me embrace both Bhima and Arjuna in love. With all my sons dead, my happiness now depends on the Pandavas, who are no less to me than my own sons. Alas, I have acted like an enemy to those whom I should have nurtured and protected."

After embracing them all, Dhritarastra asked the Pandavas to go and see Gandhari. Before they came before her, Vyasadeva went to the queen. The rishi could see into the hearts and minds of all beings and, understanding that she was intending to curse Yudhisthira, he said, "Do not harm the Pandavas, O Gandhari. Take this opportunity instead to exercise forgiveness. Remember, O queen, that it was you who blessed Duryodhana with the statement, 'Victory always attends righteousness.' Your words have not proven false. Certainly the Pandavas are endowed with all virtuous qualities. Cast away your evil desire."

As Vyasadeva spoke, the Pandavas arrived before Gandhari and offered their respects, touching her feet one by one.

Shedding tears, Gandhari said to Vyasadeva, "I do not entertain any ill feelings for the Pandavas, O sage, but grief has shaken my heart. Surely the Kauravas, puffed up with pride and arrogance, have perished due to Duryodhana's folly and the foolishness of his advisors. I do not blame the Pandavas, but they have done something I cannot accept. Bhima struck my son down with an unfair blow. Surely this was not consistent with virtue."

Bhima, having learned from Krishna of Gandhari's empowering glance over her son, replied to her. "Whether or not the blow was fair, it was the only way your son could be killed. Surely you know this, O queen. The sinful prince acted so treacherously toward us and without thought of virtue on many occasions. Thus he deserved to be slain by whatever means possible. Without killing him, Yudhisthira could not have established a righteous rule. Therefore I did what was in my power and felled him in battle, exactly as I had promised. Were I not restrained by Yudhisthira I would have done that long ago—on the day he insulted Drupada's daughter."

Bhima felt that the real reason his killing of Duryodhana with a low

blow was not sinful was because Krishna had ordered it. After all, virtue had its root in Krishna and was meant only for His pleasure. Knowing that Gandhari's faith in Krishna was not the same as his own, Bhima did not present her with this reason. It would only diminish whatever respect she had for Krishna.

Gandhari's voice wavered. "You have been most inhumane, Bhima. How could you drink Dushashana's blood. Surely only a Rakshasa would do such a thing."

Bhima felt no remorse, but he reassured the queen. "O chaste lady, you should know that I did not allow his blood to pass my teeth. When Dushashana committed his sins against Draupadi, I made a terrible vow under anger's influence. Without fulfilling that vow, my reputation would have been sullied and my truthfulness compromised. You should not attribute any fault to me, O Gandhari. Without having checked your sons previously, you should not now blame we who are innocent."

Gandhari wept silently, thinking of her sons. Her frail body shook and maidservants came up to support her. After some time she regained her composure and said, "Why, O Bhima, could you not have spared even a single one of our sons? How will we survive without support in this world?"

Her anger rising again, the queen asked, "Where is Yudhisthira? I wish to address Pandu's eldest son."

Trembling, with his palms folded, Yudhisthira stood before Gandhari and said, "Here he is, O queen, the cruel destroyer of your sons. I deserve your curse, for I am the root of this great destruction. Curse me at once. I care not for kingdom, wealth, nor even life itself. By bringing about the slaughter of kinsmen and friends, I have proved myself a fool and as one who hates his own family."

Gandhari fought to control her anger. Aware of her husband's weakness and her sons' sinfulness, and thinking of Vyasadeva's words, she restrained herself from uttering a curse. It was obvious that Yudhisthira felt more than enough remorse and pain. Still, he should not have allowed Bhima to have perpetrated his vicious acts against her two eldest sons. Behind the blindfold around her head, Gandhari felt her eyes burn with anger. Although she had used much of her ascetic power when she had blessed Duryodhana, it had not been exhausted. She lifted the blindfold slightly and looked down at

Yudhisthira's feet. As she glanced down, Yudhisthira's toes, with their perfectly manicured nails, were singed and his nails turned brown.

Seeing this, Arjuna stepped back behind Krishna. Yudhisthira, however, did not react. Gandhari, gaining control of herself, spoke reassuringly to the brothers. She told them to go to Kunti, who was longing to see them again.

The brothers then presented themselves before their mother. Seeing them for the first time since their exile, Kunti cried, covering her face with a cloth. After weeping for some time, she repeatedly embraced and patted her sons, lamenting as she saw the wounds and scars on their bodies.

Draupadi fell before Kunti, her tears wetting Kunti's feet. "O venerable lady, where have all your grandsons gone? Seeing you in such distress, why are they not coming before you? O Mother, how can I live and what do I care now for any kingdom? Alas my sons are no more."

Kunti raised Draupadi and consoled her. As she spoke to the Pandavas' grieving wife, Dhritarastra and Gandhari were led up to them. Hearing Draupadi weep, Gandhari said, "Do not grieve so, dear daughter. This terrible slaughter has been brought about by the irresistible course of time. Everything was foretold by Vidura and Krishna, both of whom tried in vain to sue for peace."

As she thought of Krishna, Gandhari felt her anger rise once more. Although he had tried unsuccessfully to bring about peace, he could have forced the issue if he had desired. He had at his command a vast army containing many of the most powerful warriors on earth. But more than that, he was said to be an incarnation of the Supreme Lord. Surely nothing was beyond his capabilities. Gandhari felt that, ultimately, everything was Krishna's fault. The rishis had even said that the destruction of the warriors had been his divine arrangement.

Asking for Krishna to come before her, Gandhari said, "The Pandavas and Kauravas have been rooted out, O Krishna, even before your eyes. Why were you indifferent to them? You could have prevented the slaughter. O Madhava, since you deliberately allowed this universal destruction, you should now feel the consequences. By whatever little merit I have acquired by serving my husband, I curse You, O holder of the discus. Since you callously allowed the Kurus and Pandavas to kill one another, so

you will be the destroyer of your own kinsmen. O Govinda, on the thirty-sixth year from now you will kill your own family members in a fratricidal fight, finally dying yourself by foul means. The ladies of your family will thus weep even as the Kuru ladies are now doing."

Krishna bowed His head and folded His palms. "Your words will be true, O chaste lady. There are none in this world who can exterminate the Vrishnis and Yadavas. In delivering this curse you have assisted me, for I have been wondering how to take my kinsmen back out of this world. Neither gods, Gandharvas, nor Asuras can kill them. They will therefore slay each other."

The Pandavas, upon hearing Gandhari's curse and Krishna's reply, gazed mutely at one another. They were stupefied. The thought of Krishna's departure, even though thirty-six years away, was unbearable. How would they live in his absence? They looked at him with tears in their eyes.

Glancing affectionately at the Pandavas, Krishna said, "Arise, O Gandhari, and shake off your grief. Your son Duryodhana, whom neither you nor your husband stopped, was malicious, envious and arrogant. Why do you blame others for your own fault? From the beginning you should not have allowed your son to live. He was the embodiment of hostility and disobedient to his elders. Thus he has met a fitting end. Give up your useless grief, for by indulging it, it simply increases. As a brahmin woman brings forth children to practice austerity and a vaishya bears offspring for keeping cows, so a kshatriya woman brings forth sons to be killed in battle and for no other reason."

When Krishna was finished, Gandhari remained silent. Dhritarastra then asked Yudhisthira where he felt the fallen warriors went after dying in battle. Yudhisthira replied, "By the grace of Lomasa Rishi I have been granted the vision to see where the heroes have gone. All of them have attained the gods' celestial abodes. Even those who fell while fleeing or turning their faces from the fight have gone upwards to regions of enduring pleasure. Indeed, having died in Krishna's presence, the dead warriors have doubtlessly all reached auspicious destinations."

Comforted by Yudhisthira's assurance, Dhritarastra gave orders that the funeral rites be performed for his sons and their followers. Thousands of brahmins chanted hymns from the Sama and Rg Vedas, while funeral pyres

blazed all along the river bank. The Kurus entered the river and stood waist deep to offer oblations of sacred water to their departed relatives. Women's cries filled the air, drowning out the brahmins' mantras.

As the Pandavas were about to enter the river to make their funeral offerings, Kunti came to them and said quietly, "O heroes, offer an oblation for Karna. That effulgent fighter, the ornament of battle who ever delighted in fight, was Surya's son and my own firstborn child. He was your eldest brother."

The five brothers were shocked. Yudhisthira and Arjuna glanced at one another. They had long suspected that Karna was of divine origin. It was hardly possible that such a warrior could have sprung from a sudra. But the son of their own mother? How had they never discovered it? Why had Kunti not told them?

Yudhisthira cried out in anguish. It was certain that his mother had, as always, spoken the truth. The Pandava spoke in surprise. "O noble lady, were you the mother of that Karna who was like a sea having arrows for its billows, mighty arms for its sharks, and the sounds of his bowstring for its roar? Were you the mother of that one who swore constant enmity with Arjuna and whom no one but Arjuna could resist? How did you conceal this fact, like a man hiding fire in the folds of his cloth? Tell us how he became your son and why you hid this from us? Alas, I am undone with an even greater grief upon hearing this news than I was upon hearing of Abhimanyu's death."

Yudhisthira dropped to his knees. Along with all the other respectable personalities killed in the war, he had also brought about the death of his elder brother. Had he known of Karna's identity, then the war could have been averted. Duryodhana would not have even considered fighting without him. United with Karna, the Pandavas would have been invincible.

Trembling, Kunti said, "Alas, dear son, I have long kept this secret, unable from fear to speak it to anyone. Even while a maiden did I bring forth that mighty warrior. Sometimes I thought of telling you, but something always made me hesitate. Now seeing that he has died along with his sons and has none to offer his last rites, I cannot conceal the truth any longer."

Kunti's mind returned to the fateful day when Surya had entered her

chamber. She looked at the Ganges, flowing gently now as it had the day she pushed the basket containing Karna into her waters. She fell sobbing to the ground. Yudhisthira lifted her up, running his cool hand across her forehead. "O mother, how much pain you must have suffered. O Karna! Where have you gone without greeting us as your younger brothers?"

Yudhisthira looked at Krishna, who stood waist-deep in the river making offerings to the departed souls. Surely it was for His own inscrutable reasons that he had not told them the truth about Karna. But Kunti should have trusted them. She could have revealed Karna's identity long ago and saved so much bloodshed. In a trembling voice, his mind clouded by grief, Yudhisthira said, "O mother, tell me how Karna took birth and why he was cast away. Surely the gods must have executed some plan through you, O gentle lady."

Kunti told her sons the story. They listened in amazement. It was a strange destiny that had caused him, the eldest Pandava and the son of the most powerful sun-god, to be separated at birth from his heritage and cast in the role of enemy to his own brothers. The brothers all looked at Krishna, who was coming out of the water. With water running down his body, he shone in the bright afternoon sunshine. As he came over to Kunti and the Pandavas, Yudhisthira told him what Kunti had just said. Folding his palms he asked, "O Lord, why were we never informed?"

Krishna replied, "It was out of my love for my aunt that I did not reveal her secret. But, O king, Karna knew the truth. Still, he could not be swayed from his loyalty to Duryodhana although he understood the consequences. With your brothers you should now offer him his due rites."

Kunti and her sons entered the river and stood there for some time, silently making their offerings to Karna and all their other dead relatives. When they were finished, Yudhisthira made arrangements for them to stay on the river bank for the coming month. In accordance with scriptural injunctions, he ordered that everyone live there for thirty days to make daily offerings for the dead.

As evening fell, the Pandavas sat with Krishna. They were surrounded by numerous rishis, headed by Narada. Yudhisthira questioned Narada about Karna. He wanted to know every detail of his life. Narada narrated the story in full. He told him how Adhiratha and Radha had raised

Karna. Due to his powerful nature, he had sought the best training in martial arts. His enmity for Arjuna had been born when Drona refused to teach him, seeing him as the son of a charioteer. Karna had left Drona, resolved to return and humiliate him by defeating his best student. It was then that he had gone to Parasurama and been taught, only to be later cursed for his deceit.

After hearing about Karna, including his promise to Kunti not to kill any of his brothers but Arjuna, Yudhisthira cried. He turned to Kunti and said, "If only Karna had come to me as a brother. Surely I would have given him the earth and averted this calamity. Becoming the leader of the Pandavas, he would have shone in this world like Indra shines in the heavens."

Kunti pulled her white sari over her head. Tears ran freely from her eyes as she replied. "O child, O great hero, you should not think in this way. I tried my best to convince Karna of what was in his best interests, but he would not listen. Even his father, the mighty Surya, came to him in a dream and tried, without success, to persuade him. Neither Surya nor myself could sway him from his enmity against the Pandavas. Seeing him firmly under the influence of destiny and bent upon doing you harm, I gave up my attempt to change his mind and left him. It would only have made matters worse if I had then informed you of his identity."

Yudhisthira covered his face with his hands and sighed. "O mother, I do not blame you for your silence. Surely you were moved by supreme destiny. Still, I feel you should have confided in me. I therefore say that from this day on no woman will be able to hold a secret."

Seeing Yudhisthira mournful, Narada said, "O king, do not give way to sorrow. You have righteously acquired the earth by the strength of your arms. Ever abiding by your duties, you have escaped with life from the battle and now stand as the undisputed ruler of the world. Why do you not rejoice? I hope everything is well with you. Rise up and take your rightful position. Give joy to your friends and lead this world to the path of virtue."

But Yudhisthira was downcast. The rishi's words did not cheer him. His mother's revelation about Karna had only compounded his remorse. Certainly the slain warriors had reached higher regions, but what of their widows and orphans who numbered in the millions? Yudhisthira cared for the people like a loving father. The world was now full of grief-stricken women and children who had no protectors.

Soberly, he said, "O best of sages, I have conquered the world by relying on Krishna, by the brahmin's favor, and by the might of Bhima and Arjuna. Still, a heavy sorrow preys on my mind. I have killed all my kinsmen only because I wanted the kingdom. Having caused the death of Subhadra's darling son and of Draupadi's sons, my victory, O holy one, seems little better than defeat. Those gentle ladies' grief cuts my heart. Thanks to me, there are now so many women in the same state. How can I possibly enjoy the earth?"

Yudhisthira vented his anguish. Praising forgiveness and self-control, he censured the kshatriya's life, which was always violent and angry. Although he had scrupulously executed his duties, his nature was more that of a brahmin than of a warrior. Before Krishna and his brothers he stated his intentions to spend the rest of his life in penance.

"We have waged war like dogs fighting for a piece of meat. Now we no longer desire that meat. I will throw it aside. The endeavor was useless. We have not gained our object and our enemies have not gained theirs. The evil Kauravas, indulged by the foolish king Dhritarashtra, have met with destruction and we are left with the burnt remnants. I will go to the forest, abandoning my attachment for this world. With my mind fixed on renunciation, I will attain to the goal ever sought by ascetics and sages. Let Bhima become king. Or you, Arjuna, with Krishna as your dear friend, may rule the earth. I do not wish to be king any longer."

Yudhisthira fell silent. Arjuna looked at Krishna and then back at Yudhisthira. He licked the corners of his lips and frowned. Night had fallen, and the flames of the sacred fire by which they were sitting cast an orange glow on his handsome face, which flushed as he replied.

"How, O lord, have you spoken such words? Having conquered your enemies, you are now the world's rightful ruler. You are a kshatriya. It is your duty to protect the people. Poverty befits rishis, but not kings. Rather, kings must perform sacrifices and then distribute wealth to those in need. Indeed, by using wealth properly, pious kings increase their virtue and fame. The world stands in need of a leader. It is your religious obligation to fulfill that role. Following in the footsteps of Dilipa, Nahusha, Ambarisa, and so many other great monarchs in our line, you should become emperor of the earth. How could any like you accept any other path?"

Yudhisthira remained silent. He was not convinced. Finally, he said,

"I cannot accept your praise of wealth and worldly attachment. Focus your mind on your inner self and you will understand what I am saying. My only desire is to give up materialistic life and to take the path trodden by mendicants. This world is an illusion only foolish men desire. From now on I will take only what is absolutely necessary to survive, passing my time in austerity and meditation. Even as I contemplate such a life, I feel the happiness born of detachment. Let me go to the forest and aim for the eternal abode of the Supreme Spirit."

Then Bhima spoke. Like Arjuna, he was frustrated by Yudhisthira's reluctance to rule after endeavoring so hard to regain the kingdom. His voice rang out into the still night.

"Surely, O king, your understanding of truth in this case is like one who foolishly recites the Vedas but knows nothing of their meaning. Censuring the duties of kings, you wish to lead an idle life. Had we known that this was your intention, we would not have fought. But we did fight. If you now abandon your duty, then killing Dhritarastra's sons was a senseless act.

"Yet the wise have said that killing our enemies and leading a righteous government is our proper course. Kshatriyas possess forgiveness and self-control, and they exercise those qualities by doing their own duties and not those of others. Your withdrawal now would be like one who, having slain his many foes, finally dies by his own hand, or like a person who has climbed a tree to get the honey but falls before tasting it, or like a starving man who obtains food but then refuses to eat."

Bhima continued to cite similes and denounce Yudhisthira's planned renunciation. He pointed out that a king's duties were ordained by the Supreme Lord himself and were therefore not reproachable. Renunciation was only approved for kings when they became old or defeated. As long as he had strength and ability, a virtuous kshatriya should exert himself to rule and protect the people.

Bhima concluded, "If, O king, one could attain perfection simply by renunciation, then the mountains and trees would be perfected beings. They all lead lives of abstention; they do not harm anyone and they practice celibacy. Real renunciation means performing one's duty as the Supreme Lord desires. The world moves with all beings acting according to their God-

given natures. One who abstains from action can never achieve success."

Yudhisthira did not break his silence. Arjuna said, "O king, there is an ancient history mentioned in the Vedas regarding the relative merits of renunciation and action. Listen as I repeat it now."

Arjuna told a story about some young brahmins who had gone to the forest, having abandoned their duties and resolving to live a renounced life. Indra came to them in the form of a bird and asked what they were doing. When they told him, he replied, "This course of action is not approved by scripture. The Vedas define the brahmin's duty. A man who gives up his duty is condemned and defeated. On the other hand, one who performs his duty only because it ought to be done, and who lives on the remnants of sacrifice after he has made offerings to the Supreme and to kinsmen, ancestors, gods and guests—that man attains to goals which are normally difficult to achieve. Indeed, there is nothing more difficult than the life of a dutiful householder, which in the end leads to genuine detachment from all worldliness. This is the surest path of righteousness."

Arjuna explained how the brahmins then gave up their lives of premature renunciation and returned to their duty and achieved success.

Yudhisthira still said nothing. Nakula then also tried to encourage his elder brother to accept his duty of kingship. Citing Vedic injunctions, he described the sacrifices meant for kshatriyas. Kings were enjoined to renounce their wealth by distributing it in charity to the brahmins and the people in general at great sacrifices. Leaving everything behind and going to the forest was simply not in accord with Vedic principles for a king. He must perform sacrifices for the good of the people and act as their protector. If he gave up such duties in the name of renunciation, it would simply result in disaster for himself and his subjects. Real renunciation was something internal, not external. One who did his duty in a mood of detachment was the true renunciant, not the man who gave up his duty.

Then Sahadeva spoke, concurring with his brothers. As Yudhisthira sat in silence amid the rishis tending their sacrificial fire, Sahadeva said, "O king, it is difficult to renounce material attachments by stopping work. May our enemies have the merit that goes to one who renounces work but whose mind still covets material pleasure. On the other hand, may our friends have the merit earned by he who rules the world having shaken off internal

attachments. The word mama, mine, is death; while its opposite, nama, is eternal Brahman. It is death and Brahman which impel all men to action. The wise man, free from false conceptions of the self and realizing himself to be eternal spirit, works without being attached to the results. Thus his work is spiritual and he attains the Brahman. That man who still desires the fruits of his action, however, even if he lives in the forest, lives within the jaws of death. In truth, O king, even inaction is considered action if one desires a result. Therefore, do your duty in a detached mood and earn everlasting virtue."

Even after his brothers had spoken, Yudhisthira said nothing. He already knew what they were saying and could not deny the truth of it. Still, his heart was not inclined toward ruling the world. He sat staring at the ground. The compassionate Pandava thought of Bhishma, still lying on the battlefield on his bed of arrows; of Drona, whom they had ruthlessly killed; and of Karna, his own brother whom he had killed before he even knew his identity. Yudhisthira thought of Abhimanyu and Draupadi's sons, of their young wives, all grieving for their husbands. If he had given up his desire for half the kingdom, none of them would have died. Duryodhana, for all his faults, was an efficient administrator. What need was there to destroy so many lives?

Seeing her husband's melancholy, Draupadi said soothingly, "O king, your brothers are crying themselves hoarse trying to do you good, but you do not reply. O lord, when we were dwelling in the forest, suffering from cold and wind and sun, you said to your brothers, 'Soon we shall slay Duryodhana in battle and win back our kingdom.' O best of the virtuous, that has now come to pass and yet you are depressing our hearts by your reluctance. All of you brothers are like celestials. Each of you is capable of ruling the universe with all its moving and nonmoving beings. If I had married only one of you, my happiness would have been complete. Surely it is a kind of madness that now possesses you. Why else would you be prepared to renounce your prescribed duties? Do not give way to folly. Take up the scepter and the rod of chastisement! Rule Goddess Earth with righteousness. Worship the gods with sacrifices. Give charity and subdue the wicked. In this way, my lord, become happy and give joy to your brothers."

Yudhisthira still showed no signs of having heard. Crickets could be heard from the nearby forest as the Pandavas sat in silence. In the sacrificial

compound, brahmins murmured Vedic mantras and chanted the holy names of the Supreme. Krishna looked at Yudhisthira with compassion, but said nothing. Bhima, growing impatient with his elder brother, spoke again, trying to change his mind.

"Please forgive me, O king, but I cannot silently tolerate your weakness. Everything we have worked so hard to achieve is now threatened by your bewilderment. You seem to have lost your good sense. Surely you know right from wrong. Why are you hesitating to do your duty? You have never displayed such faintness of heart before, allowing yourself to be overpowered by sentiment. Have you forgotten the Kauravas' sins? Have you forgotten the ills inflicted upon us and Draupadi? Do you not recall the miseries we endured in exile, awaiting this day? You have won one war, O king. Now you face an even greater battle—the battle with your mind. If you expire before gaining victory in that fight, then you will have to take another birth and resume the battle until you win."

Yudhisthira stiffened. Bhima's suggestion that he was not able to control his mind was painful. Taking a deep breath, he replied, "O Bhima, I think it is you who is overcome by his mind. Surely you are afflicted by the sins of discontent, worldly attachment, greed, vanity and ignorance. You urge me to accept the earth and abandon my desire for renunciation, but how will that satisfy my soul or even my senses? Desires for enjoyment can never be satisfied, and they stand as impediments on the spiritual path. Only those able to give up all such desires can attain life's perfection. One free from all desire becomes eligible to enter eternal regions of bliss, but those who remain entangled in the vain quest for worldly pleasure are most certainly obliged to remain in this world of suffering."

Feeling reprimanded, Bhima made no reply. Arjuna spoke again, reciting an ancient history from the Vedas concerning the famous king Janaka. He too had once decided to abandon his kingdom and wealth, adopting a life of asceticism in the forest. At that time his wife had spoken to him strongly, bringing him back to the path of duty. She argued that, although he wanted to leave the kingdom in a mood of detachment, if he were actually detached, then it would not matter to him whether he was a mendicant or a king. If he still coveted material possessions, then even his mendicant's waterpot and staff would become objects of attachment.

Yudhisthira listened as his brother narrated the story. He enjoyed

hearing the narration, even though he had heard it many times—but it did not change his mind. There were many different instructions in the Vedas, each meant for a different time or circumstance. Considering the present situation, Yudhisthira remained convinced that renunciation was the only course possible for him. He looked at Arjuna with affection. "I know you are speaking with a desire to do me good, dear brother, but your words do not touch my heart. Although you are expert in martial sciences, you are not conversant with the subtler spiritual subjects. Unless you serve a self-realized soul, you cannot understand the true path of religion. Like Bhima, you see wealth and worldliness as superior to asceticism. But while the path of worldly duties has its place, it serves only as a means to attain the higher path of renunciation. It is the soul that must be sought, and ultimately the Supreme Soul, both of whom are quite separate from matter. Thus must all materialism be utterly renounced."

Fascinated by the arguments between Yudhisthira and his brothers, the rishis smiled and nodded in approval as each one spoke. They looked at Krishna, who was also enjoying the discussion but who chose to remain silent. One of the rishis, Devasthana, spoke to Yudhisthira, describing the ascetic life. He explained that even a life of asceticism was not devoid of action. Indeed, the ascetics in the forest worked hard in order to perform sacrifices and worship the deities. Nor was it certain that even they would achieve perfection by their work. Devasthana said that the life of a pious king, who performed sacrifice and carefully practiced his duty, was no less religious than that of the ascetic brahmins, and no less likely to lead to life's perfection.

Yudhisthira did not respond. Vyasadeva also spoke at length about the duties and glories of the kshatriyas. He condemned the kings who failed to discharge their duties. If a kingdom went unprotected and the people suffered, the king would be visited by sins. He would also be culpable for the crimes committed in the kingdom. The right course for a king was to carry out the function of ruler and protector, taking to renunciation only at the end of his life.

Yudhisthira did not like to disobey Vyasadeva or the other rishis, but he still had no heart for the ruler's role. Folding his palms, he said to Vyasadeva, "My lord, the thought of sovereignty, with all its objects of enjoyment, does not give me joy. I am still grieving. Hearing the

lamentations of all the women who have lost their men, I cannot feel peace."

The immortal sage smiled. "Do not be concerned with happiness or distress, for both are ephemeral. By the influence of time one meets with joy and suffering one after the other. Pleasure begets misery and from misery pleasure is again born. In this world there are only two kinds of happy men: the complete fools and those who have mastered the mind and senses. Those between these two must suffer. Therefore, a wise man abandons attachment and aversion and simply does his duty to please the Supreme. Your duty is to rule this earth, O Bharata. By performing that duty you will gain undying fame and virtue, rising up in the end to the highest regions hereafter."

Yudhisthira was torn. It was against his nature to deny the sages' advice, but his doubts persisted. How could he take the throne after causing so much destruction? With tears running down his face he looked up at Vyasadeva and said, "I am the most sinful man! Just see my heart, so full of ignorance! This body, which is meant for serving others, has killed many, many phalanxes of men. I have directly or indirectly killed boys, brahmins, well-wishers, friends, parents, preceptors and brothers. Even if I live for millions of years, I will not be relieved from the hell that awaits me for these sins. Although there is no sin for a king who kills to maintain his citizens or some other righteous cause, this injunction does not apply to me in this case."

Yudhisthira knew that for a king to kill while executing his duties was not sinful, but he had not been a king when the war was fought. All the killing had come about simply to make him the king instead of Duryodhana. Such selfishness was surely sinful.

"The path of sacrifice will not save me from the hell which now awaits me. As it is not possible to filter muddy water through mud or purify a wine-stained pot with wine, it is not possible to counteract the killing of men by sacrificing animals."

Seeing Yudhisthira sunk in remorse, Krishna moved closer to him. He took his hand, covered with sandal-paste and resembling marble, and smiled. "Do not grieve so, O best of men, for you will become ill. Grieving cannot bring those who have lost their lives back. All of them are like objects obtained in a dream that disappear when one awakens. Purified by the striking of weapons, they have thrown down their bodies and ascended to heaven. Who will lament for them? Their women should also rejoice that

they have attained such exalted destinations. And now you should take your rightful position as king."

Both Narada and Vyasadeva spoke next. They tried at length to convince the Pandava to shake off his grief and to assume the throne. But after everything was said, Yudhisthira still could not agree. He took up a handful of earth and let it run through his fingers. He wanted to please Krishna and to satisfy the rishis, but he felt stained by sin. He was not convinced that performing his duty would purify him.

He looked up at Vyasadeva. "O great sage, surely it is true that one who performs his duties in accordance with scriptural injunctions does not accrue sin. This I understand, but it is the sins I have already committed that burn and consume me. How will I be freed from them? Having committed genocide, I will doubtlessly fall into hell. I think it best that I atone by abstaining from food and drink, and reduce my body until my life airs depart. Surely I can be released by no other means."

Vyasadeva said that there were many factors that had brought about the kshatriyas' death. Principally, their previous acts were the ultimate cause, but it had also been the influence of all-powerful time moving under God's will which had decreed they must die. The Pandavas had been nothing more than instruments of Providence.

"Men like you do not go to hell. You have followed the path of the gods and will attain an exalted destination. Sometimes virtue appears like sin while at other times sin resembles virtue. Only the learned know the difference. In your case, you should not fear, dear child. Even if there were some irregularities on the battlefield, you should not fear. Only he who deliberately sins without compunction or regret is bound by the fetters of sin and falls into hell. This was not your mood. Only with reluctance did you fight, and now you are repentant. That repentance will purify you. Still, you may perform, if you desire, acts of atonement. Although your belief that you have been sinful is delusion, you may perform the expiatory rites meant for kings."

Yudhisthira questioned Vyasadeva about the rites of atonement and the sage described them. When he was finished, Yudhisthira said, "You have pleased me with your instructions, O sage. I understand that there are methods of atonement that will help me. I still have doubts about becoming

king, however. How can I ensure that I am not touched by further sin? Please tell me in detail about a king's duties. I need to be instructed how such duties can always be consistent with virtue. It seems to me that the acts a king must perform are often vicious and dangerous."

After looking at Krishna, who seemed to light up the night with His radiance, Vyasadeva replied, "If, O king, you wish to hear of morality and the duties of kings at length, you should approach Bhishma. I do not think there is anyone who exceeds his knowledge in this regard. He has been instructed by Brihaspati in the heavens as well as by Vasishtha and Chyavana Rishis here on earth. He has also heard from Sanat Kumara, Markandeya, Parasurama, and even Indra. Surely he will clear your doubts. Go to him where he lies on the battlefield, for his time of death has not yet come."

Hearing Bhishma's name, Yudhisthira only felt the more aggrieved. Tears again sprang from his eyes. "How will I approach the grandsire after I have killed him so deceitfully?"

Krishna placed His hand on Yudhisthira's shoulder. "Do not indulge in grief. O best of kings, you should do what the holy rishi has said. Go to Bhishma and hear from him about your duties. With your doubts cleared by that great man, you should then satisfy the brahmins and your brothers and become king."

The discussions had gone all night. As the first light of dawn appeared on the horizon, Yudhisthira decided to accept Vyasadeva's advice and to go and see Bhishma. Rising up for the good of the world, he said, "So be it. After getting myself duly consecrated by the brahmins, I will approach the wise Kuru grandfather."

Yudhisthira was still reluctant, but he would not go against Krishna's desire. He was prepared to be coronated as emperor, but he would need to hear further instructions from Bhishma before he could give his heart to the task.

Seeing Yudhisthira standing at last, the other Pandavas looked at one another with relief. Arrangements were made to fetch everyone to the city so that the installation ceremony could take place. Like the moon conjoined with the sun and surrounded by stars, Yudhisthira accompanied by Krishna and his brothers proceeded toward Hastinapura. Praised by bards and singers, he rode upon a white chariot covered with deerskins and yoked to sixteen white

bullocks. Bhima held the reins while Arjuna held a beautiful white umbrella over his head. On either side of Yudhisthira stood the twins, fanning him with gold-handled camaras.

Yudhisthira had Dhritarastra go at the head of the procession and the old Kuru monarch sat with Gandhari on a golden chariot. Immediately behind Yudhisthira came Krishna on His own chariot driven by Daruka and drawn by His four lustrous horses. Satyaki sat by Krishna's side. A large number of elephants and chariots made up the rest of the procession. They left the forest region of the Ganges and moved slowly along the smooth road toward the city. As they entered Hastinapura they were met by the sound of drums and conchshells, as well as the cheers of thousands of joyous citizens.

Chapter Thirty-one. Bhishma's instructions

Having heard that the Pandavas were returning, Hastinapura's citizens had quickly decorated the city with colorful festoons and garlands. They then lined the streets and threw flowers and rice as the procession passed. Seeing the five brothers again, the people felt as if their consciousness had returned to their bodies. Everyone shed tears and called out in happiness.

As the procession made its way along the road, wealthy ladies threw down silk cloths and gems from the balconies of mansions. The ladies also called to Draupadi, who rode behind her brothers on a chariot covered with a silk canopy, "You are worthy of praise, O blessed princess, who waits by the side of these heroes like Gautami by the side of the seven celestial rishis. Surely your religious acts and vows have borne fruit."

Yudhishthira made his way toward the Kuru palace, where he was greeted by pleasing speeches made by leading citizens. "By good luck you have returned to us after defeating your enemies. O best of kings, having regained your kingdom by virtue and prowess, may you remain as our ruler for a century. Protect your subjects like Indra protects the gods."

Yudhishthira's chariot then took him through the broad palace gates and into the compound. Brahmins chanted Vedic mantras to invoke auspiciousness as Yudhishthira stepped down from his car and went into the temple. He bowed before the Deities, worshipping them with gems, garlands and incense. When he emerged from the temple, he saw Brahmins waiting and carrying sacred articles. They uttered blessings and worshipped him as he made his way to the assembly hall.

Among the Brahmins was a Rakshasa in disguise. His name was Charvaka, and he was Duryodhana's old friend. Although he was dressed like a Brahmin, he reviled Yudhishthira. "O son of Kunti, all these ascetics have made me their spokesman. They say, 'Fie on Yudhishthira! He is a wicked king and he destroyed his kinsmen. It would be best if he now gave up his life.'"

Hearing Charvaka's words, the Brahmins set up an angry uproar. They then fell silent in shame. None of them agreed with Charvaka, and they looked anxiously at Yudhishthira, who bowed his head and said, "O Brahmins,

be pleased. It is exactly as you say. Do not cry fire upon me, for I will soon cast off my life."

"These are not our words, O King. We have not said anything of the kind. All prosperity to you."

Some of the leading sages looked carefully at Charvaka. By their spiritual vision they understood his identity. "This is the wicked Rakshasa, Charvaka, Duryodhana's friend."

With their eyes red with anger, the sages held their sacred threads and uttered the Vedic syllable 'Hun!' Charvaka fell like a tree blasted to the roots by Indra's thunderbolt.

Praised and reassured by the brahmins, Yudhishthira entered the assembly hall with a cheerful mind and took his place on a golden throne. On two more golden seats facing him sat Krishna and Satyaki, while Bhima and Arjuna sat at his sides. Kunti sat on a white ivory throne with the twins by her side. Dhritarastra and other Kuru elders sat nearby on seats as effulgent as fire.

The hall filled with the sound of sacred chants and the ceremony began. Yudhishthira was anointed with holy water from golden vessels, as well as with milk, honey, yogurt, and ghee. After he had dressed in pure white silks and put on golden ornaments and bright garlands, he was seated by Draumya on a handsome seat spread with tiger skins. With Draupadi by his side, he made offerings into the sacrificial fire. When the ceremony was complete, Krishna concluded the rituals by sprinkling sanctified water from a large white conch onto Yudhishthira's crowned head.

Yudhishthira rose, king of the Kurus. Thousands of drums sounded and the hall was filled with cheers and shouts of approval. Yudhishthira distributed charity to the many brahmins present, beginning with Draumya and the priests who had conducted the ceremony. He gave away heaps of gold and gems and was repeatedly blessed and eulogized.

After giving abundant charity, Yudhishthira took his place on the royal throne and began to speak. "Great indeed must be that man who receives such praise and worship from all these learned brahmins. I do not feel worthy of such words. Surely we are your favorites, since you describe us as having accomplished so much. King Dhritarastra is, however, our father and our god. If you wish to please me, obey him and do what he desires. He is the master

of the world, of you, and of me. Do not treat him differently than you did in the past."

The noble Yudhisthira was concerned that Dhritarastra would now be disregarded or even ill-treated. Most people blamed him for the devastation. After making it clear that he would not accept such behavior toward the blind monarch, Yudhisthira appointed his ministers. Bhima became Prince Regent, Arjuna commander of the army, and the twins as administrators of justice. Dhaumya was made head priest, and Sanjaya royal counselor. Yudhisthira then instructed Yuyutsu to care for Dhritarastra and carry out his commands as to any state administration he ordered in his role as ruler of Hastinapura.

Yudhisthira then arranged for the brahmins to perform the sraddha ceremonies for the departed, and ordered that the many widows be given adequate provisions. Yudhisthira also asked that houses for food distribution, as well as public baths and monuments, be constructed in the names of the slain warriors. Dhritarastra, on behalf of his departed relatives, distributed wealth to the brahmins.

Bhima was given the splendid palace which was formerly occupied by Duryodhana, and he entered it joyfully like a mighty mountain lion entering a cave. Dushashana's more splendid palace was given to Arjuna, and he and Krishna went there to rest after the ceremony. Nakula and Sahadeva were given the palaces of Durmarshana and Durmukha, respectively. All of the Pandavas were as pleased as the gods in heaven as they entered their new abodes.

* * *

The morning following the installation, Yudhisthira thought again of Bhishma. It was time to return to the battlefield. The Pandava king went to consult with Krishna. When he entered Arjuna's palace, he found Krishna sitting on a large white sofa bedecked with gems. The dark-hued Krishna, clad in yellow silk and adorned with celestial ornaments, resembled a sapphire set in pure gold. Yudhisthira said, "O foremost of intelligent persons, have You rested well? Are Your faculties fully invigorated? O divine Lord, by your favor we have regained the world and have not transgressed the duties of our order. Please tell me what should now be done."

Krishna made no reply. He appeared to be in meditation. Surprised,

Yudhisthira said, "Wonderful it is, O You of immeasurable power, that You are rapt in meditation. Seeing that You have withdrawn Yourself from the world and adopted the fourth state of absorption in the self, I am filled with wonder. As calm as a lamp in a windless place, You appear as immobile as rock, Your bodily hairs standing erect on Your body. If I am fit to understand the cause, O Govinda, be pleased to tell me."

Returning to external consciousness, Krishna replied, "That foremost of men, Bhishma, who now lies on a bed of arrows and is like a fire about to be extinguished, is thinking only of me. Thus is My mind also concentrated on him. My mind is fixed in him, the twang of whose bow and the slaps of whose palms not even Indra could bear. I was thinking of him who carried away the three princesses of Kosala after defeating the world's kings. I was rapt in thought of he who fought for twenty-three days with Parasurama, before the sage finally admitted his inability to overcome that best of his own disciples. Controlling his senses and concentrating his mind fully on me, Ganga's son seeks My refuge. It was for this reason that I fixed My mind on him."

Krishna told Yudhisthira that Bhishma would soon depart and thus he and his brothers should leave at once to see him. "When that great man leaves, so all kinds of knowledge about morality and duty will leave with him. No one can deliver instructions comparable to his, not even me."

Suppressing his tears, Yudhisthira replied, "What You have said about Bhishma is true. I have heard of his greatness from the brahmins. Now You, whose words are truth itself, have confirmed the same. If You are pleased to show us favor, O Madhava, then accompany us as we proceed to where Bhishma lays. When the sun turns toward the north some days from now, he will leave for the heavens by his own sweet will. Let him see You one more time before then, dear Krishna. You are the shelter of the eternal Brahman and the final resting place of all beings."

Krishna turned toward Satyaki sitting nearby. "Let my chariot be yoked. We will leave at once."

Yudhisthira touched Krishna's feet, who then stood up and embraced the Pandava. He went out of the palace and immediately made arrangements to go to the battlefield. Mounting his chariot, he was driven along Hastinapura's central highway, followed by his brothers and Krishna, each

mounted on their own chariots. They soon arrived at Kurukshetra, witnessing again the awful scene of the eighteen-day war. The field was littered with the wreckage of weapons and chariots. Skulls as white as conches were lying everywhere. Animal bones lay in heaps. The field looked like an abandoned sporting ground used by the Destroyer.

Bhishma, however, was surrounded by ascetics. His body shone like the setting sun. Seeing him from a distance, the five Pandavas and Krishna got down from their chariots and approached him on foot. They offered their obeisances to the rishis and prayed for their blessings, then took seats around Bhishma, who lay perfectly still on his arrow bed.

Krishna, tears running down his cheeks, said, "O hero, is your mind and understanding still as clear now as before? I hope you are not overwhelmed by pain or grief. Surely it is wonderful that you have been able to maintain your life in such a condition. I do not think anyone else in all the worlds could do it, nor have I heard of anyone as devoted to truth, penance, charity, sacrifice and virtue. None can equal you in prowess nor in Vedic or moral knowledge. O mighty-armed Bhishma, the brahmins have described you as a Vasu, but I consider you more powerful than those gods. Indeed, you are equal to Vasava himself, the great king of the gods."

Krishna had told the Pandavas how Bhishma had formerly been Dyau, the leader of the Vasus. By Vasistha's curse, whom the Vasus had offended, they had been obliged to take birth on earth. Although the rishi had granted that they could soon return to heaven, he ordered that Dyau remain on earth for some time, as he was the Vasus' leader. The Vasus were born as Ganga's sons, but she had cast each of them into the Ganges at birth so that they could quickly return to heaven. When Bhishma was born, however, she had not cast him into the river. Rather, the other Vasus had endowed him with their own power and he had become equal to all of them combined. Thus he was invincible on earth.

After praising Bhishma at length, Krishna asked him to remove Yudhisthira's doubts about his duty. "Dispel the sorrow of Pandu's eldest son. He is distracted by grief because so many of his kinsmen were slain in the battle. Other than you, O foremost of orators, none can destroy the doubts that arise regarding duty. Persons like you live only for other's benefit. Solace Prtha's virtuous son, whose mind is heavy with anguish."

Bhishma raised his head a little and looked into Krishna's face. "Obeisances to you, O divine Krishna. You are the creator and destroyer of all things. Everything material and spiritual emanates from and rests upon you eternally. I can now see Your universal form with all its divine attributes. I take refuge in You, O Lord, and beseech your mercy. Tell me, O all-powerful Supreme Person, what will be best for me now? I desire only to reach your blissful abode."

Krishna gently stroked Bhishma's head. "I know of your devotion to me, O foremost of men. Thus I have allowed you to see My divine form, which is only revealed to my devoted servants. You are pure-hearted and have never swayed in your faith or love. You will therefore attain those regions from which one never returns. Fifty-six days remain of your life, O Bhishma, after which you will doubtlessly come to me. When the sun turns to the north, you will quit your body, taking with you your extensive knowledge. Therefore we have all come to hear from you. Be pleased to speak and remove Yudhisthira's grief."

Bhishma's head fell back and he closed his eyes. His face was covered with tears. The Pandavas were filled with sorrow to see him so pained. They sat with their heads bowed and their palms folded as Bhishma replied. "O great one, O Narayana. O Lord of all the worlds, my heart is filled with joy upon hearing your words, but how can I say anything in your presence? You are the reservoir of knowledge. He who can speak on heaven before Indra will be able to speak about morality and duty in your presence. Furthermore, O Keshava, I am in too much pain. I am weak and can barely speak. My strength is leaving me and my understanding is clouded. I can hardly discern anything. I think it is only through your power that I live at all. You should therefore speak for Yudhisthira's benefit and for the benefit of the world. How can I speak, a disciple before his guru?"

The autumn sun was warm and Bhishma was shaded with a large umbrella. The cries of vultures and hyenas still ranging about the battlefield was covered by the brahmins chanting auspicious mantras. The Kuru grandfather, who was being fanned with a white chamara, felt overwhelmed by divine love as he gazed at Krishna.

Krishna smiled. "Your words become you, O powerful one, who are a great soul and the foremost of Kuru's race. Regarding your pain, hear now the boon I will grant you out of love. From now until you die, you will be

free of pain, hunger, thirst and bewilderment. Your perception and memory will remain unclouded and your mind will be peaceful. Your knowledge will be as clear to you as fishes in a still lake. Thus you will be able to answer all of Yudhisthira's questions."

As Krishna spoke a shower of flowers fell from the sky. The rishis praised Krishna, while the gods played divine instruments. A cool, fragrant breeze blew and everything became peaceful. Even the animals and birds were silent.

The sun was setting. Krishna told Bhishma that he and the Pandavas would return the next morning to hear him speak. After they had bowed before the grandfather, they left on their shining chariots, going to their nearby riverside encampment to spend the night.

* * *

The next day, Dhaumya led the Pandavas and Krishna back to Bhishma. As he rode out from his camp on a chariot as bright as fire, Yudhisthira resembled Kuvera surrounded by the Guhyakas. Krishna and Arjuna were seated on the same chariot and they appeared like a couple of resplendent gods. All three were worshipped by brahmins as they headed out followed by Dhritarastra and Gandhari and thousands of other citizens, all of whom desired to see Bhishma one last time before he departed.

When the Pandavas arrived, they dismounted from their chariots and bowed at his feet. Krishna bowed with them. The hundreds of rishis surrounding Bhishma stood aside to allow Yudhisthira and his companions to approach. The Pandavas saw that almost every famous sage from all parts of the universe had now arrived. There was Parvata, Narada, Vyasadeva, Bharadvaja, Parasurama, Asita, Gautama, Atri, Kasyapa, Angirasha and many others, all of them shining like sacrificial fires.

Bhishma, who had received and worshipped the sages with his words, also respectfully greeted the Pandavas and Krishna as they took their places near him. Krishna inquired how he was feeling, and Bhishma told Him that his pain and fatigue were gone. "Indeed, O Madhava, by Your grace my mind is perfectly calm and clear. I see all things -- past, present and future -- as clearly as I would a fruit held in my hand. Soon I will depart from this world, thinking only of You, O Govinda."

Pandu's sons sat silently, overtaken with affection for their dying

grandfather. Seeing this, Bhishmadeva was himself overwhelmed with love. Tears sprang to his eyes and he said, trembling, "Oh, my dear son Yudhisthira, what terrible sufferings and injustices you good souls have suffered, even though you are the son of religion personified. Only because you were protected by the brahmins, religion and the Supreme Lord himself did you manage to survive."

Bhishma spoke reassuringly, trying to dispel Yudhisthira's despondency by pointing out how he was under divine protection. Everything was going on according to the Supreme Lord's will, and no one should grieve for such inevitabilities.

As everyone listened respectfully, Bhishma continued. "The many miseries endured by your mother and my daughter-in-law Kunti are especially lamentable. Upon the great King Pandu's death, she became a widow with many children, thus suffering. Later, she suffered more due to your sufferings. In my opinion, this is all due to inevitable time, under whose control everyone in every planet is carried, just as the clouds are carried by the wind. Surely the effects of time are irreversible and all-powerful. How else could there have been such difficulties in the presence of Yudhisthira, the son of Dharma, and the invincible Bhima and Arjuna? Above all, how can one suffer when he has as a well-wisher the Supreme Lord?"

Bhishma turned his head slightly and fixed his gaze on Krishna. "It is this divine and unknowable Krishna who controls everything. Time is simply His energy. Surely even the greatest seers and rishis cannot understand His plans. Despite their exhaustive inquiries about Krishna's activities, they remain bewildered. O Yudhisthira, best among the Bharatas, I therefore maintain that all this destruction is within the Supreme Lord's plan. Accepting His inconceivable will, you must follow it. You are now the appointed administrative head and thus you should take care of those subjects who have been rendered helpless."

Bhishma knew that this argument would be the most effective in convincing Yudhisthira to do his duty. All of the Pandavas were devoted to Krishna, but sometimes their intense, intimate love for Him made them forget that, after all, He was the supreme controller of all the events in the universe. Bhishma was simply reminding Yudhisthira of what he already knew. If the Pandava became fully convinced that the war and its outcome had been Krishna's own plan, he would not hesitate to perform his kingly duties.

Thanks to Krishna's boon, Bhishma's voice had recovered its former resonance. He continued to look at Krishna as he spoke. "This Govinda is none other than the supremely powerful original person. From Him comes Narayana and all other deities. Still, He has appeared among the descendants of King Vrishni and moves about this world like one of us. Thus He bewilders us with His own self-created energy."

Bhishma turned his face back toward Yudhisthira. "O King, only great personalities such as Shiva, the godly Rishi Narada, and Kapila, the divine sage incarnation, know about Krishna's confidential glories by their own direct relationship with Him. My dear child Yudhisthira, that personality whom, out of ignorance, you thought to be your maternal cousin, your very dear friend, well-wisher, counselor, messenger and benefactor, is in fact the Supreme Lord of the entire material and spiritual creation."

Bhishma went on describing Krishna's position, whom he explained was present in everyone's heart as the Supersoul. Equally kind to everyone, He was free from the false concept of differentiation. He did not see other creatures in terms of the body they inhabited. Thus whatever He did was free from material consideration.

Bhishma stopped for a moment, overcome by spiritual ecstasy. Tears flowed freely down his face, and Yudhisthira wiped them away gently with a soft cloth. Recovering his composure, Bhishma concluded. "Yet despite being equally disposed toward everyone, that very Krishna has graciously come before me while I am ending my life, for I am His unflinching servant. That Supreme Person, who appears in the mind by attentive devotion and meditation, releases the devotee from the bondage of karma when he leaves his material body. May my Lord, who is four-handed and has a beautifully decorated lotus face with eyes as red as the rising sun, kindly await me at that final moment of my life."

Bhishma spoke in a voice that touched the hearts of all present. Krishna returned his affectionate gaze and raised His hand in blessing. He glanced across at Yudhisthira and nodded slightly, indicating that the Pandava monarch should now place his doubts before Bhishma.

Yudhisthira then began to ask about the essential principles of various religious duties. Bhishma responded in detail, repeating the Vedic knowledge which he had imbibed from the celestial rishis and had personally

realized. He cited many examples from the ancient histories to illustrate his points, and his audience was spellbound. Even the gods assembled to hear his instructions, and the day soon passed.

At sunset, everyone retired to their encampment, planning to return at sunrise the next day. For more than fifty days, the conversation continued. Bhishma first defined all the classifications and duties of the four castes and orders of life in terms of the individual's qualifications. Then he systematically described how one could become free from material entanglement even while still engaged in work. He further explained acts of charity, a king's practical duties, and which activities led to salvation.

Bhishma answered Yudhisthira's questions to the Pandava's full satisfaction. At the end of the fifty days, Yudhisthira felt his doubts and uncertainty cleared. Gradually, the sun moved toward its northern declination. As it passed into the northern hemisphere, the time favored by perfected yogis for leaving the world, Bhishma ended his instructions to Yudhisthira and thought of departing. Being completely free of material attachment, he withdrew his mind from everything else and fixed his eyes upon Krishna, who stood before him, displaying four hands and dressed in glittering yellow garments. Bhishma then stopped his sense activity, and he began to pray to the controller of all living beings.

"Let me now invest my thinking, feeling and willing, which were so long engaged in different subjects and occupational duties, in the all-powerful Lord Krishna. He is always self-satisfied; but sometimes, being the leader of the devotees, He enjoys transcendental pleasure by coming to the material world -- although He Himself creates the material world. He has appeared on earth in His transcendental body, which is blue like a tamala tree. That divine body attracts everyone in the three planetary systems. May His lotus face, decorated with sandalwood pulp, be the constant object of my attraction, and may I not desire any material results for my acts."

Remembering his encounters with Krishna during the war, Bhishma continued. "On the battlefield Krishna drove the chariot of His intimate friend Arjuna, His flowing hair ash-colored due to dust raised by the horses' hooves. Because of His labor, beads of sweat wetted His face. He enjoyed all these decorations, intensified by the wounds dealt by my sharp arrows. Let my mind be ever fixed in this remembrance."

Bhishma knew that Krishna's engagement in the battle was simply an aspect of His transcendental enjoyment. Krishna enjoyed showing His love for Arjuna by assisting him in ways that reciprocated with Arjuna's desire. He had enjoyed a similar reciprocation with Bhishma, who had relished the sight of Krishna rushing toward him in anger. Remembering that loving exchange, Bhishma recounted the pastime.

"Fulfilling my desire and sacrificing His own promise, He got down from the chariot, took up a wheel, and ran toward me just as a lion goes to kill an elephant. That image is forever fixed in my mind -- Krishna's beautiful blackish face smoldering in anger as He charged toward me with His bright yellow garment falling to the ground. His armor was shattered by my arrows and His body was smeared with the blood of His wounds. May that Lord Krishna, the Supreme Person who awards salvation, be my ultimate destination."

The old Kuru hero felt sorry that he had attacked Krishna, although he knew that his arrows could not have harmed Him. Becoming silent for some time, he meditated deeply upon the incident. He had felt an intense ecstasy when Krishna had come at him in anger. Krishna Himself had obviously been experiencing pleasure, enjoying the mood of chivalry created by the fight. Bhishma found himself swimming in the remembrance of that feeling. Surely the exchange with Krishna on the battlefield had been the most sublime moment of his life. Now here was that same Supreme Person, mercifully standing before him despite the fact that Bhishma had assailed both Him and His intimate friend Arjuna during the war.

The sun was reaching the meridian and Bhishma knew his departure was near. He controlled his mind, absorbing it in thoughts of Krishna alone. Thinking of Krishna's many divine pastimes during His presence on earth, he spoke one final time.

"I can now meditate with full concentration upon that one Lord, Krishna, visible before me, because I have transcended the misconception of duality. It is this Krishna who is present in everyone's heart and who is the ultimate destination for all transcendentalists, including those who accept the absolute truth as being simply the Brahman. Even though the sun may be perceived differently by different people in different parts of the world, the sun is one. I therefore surrender myself fully to that all-powerful, omnipresent Krishna. May all be well with the worlds."

After saying farewell to Yudhisthira and his brothers, and instructing them to always worship the brahmins and remain fixed in truth, Bhishma fell silent and stopped breathing. Suddenly his life air shot out from the crown of his head and went into the sky like a blazing comet. The rishis present could see that he had left his body in a brilliant spiritual form and entered into Krishna, thus going to the eternal transcendental atmosphere where Krishna forever displays His loving pastimes. They folded their palms and uttered praises of Krishna, then became silent out of respect for Bhishma. The Pandavas sat silently shedding tears, seeing that their beloved grandfather had departed.

A few minutes later, the gods sounded their drums to honor Bhishma. The kshatriyas blew their conchshells and also beat drums. Demonstrations of honor and respect were made by all present, and showers of flowers fell from the sky.

The Pandavas gazed mutely at the old Kuru leader, unable to move for some time. Finally they fought back their tears and personally collected the wood to build the funeral pyre. Bhishma's body, wrapped in a silken cloth, garlanded, and smeared with fragrant scents and sandalwood pulp, was placed on the pyre. Yuyutsu stood at his head holding a shining white umbrella. Bhima and Arjuna fanned him on either side with camaras, while Yudhisthira and Dhritarastra fanned him at his feet.

The brahmins performed the last rites, offering libations into the fire on Bhishma's behalf and chanting hymns from the Sama Veda. They then handed a flaming torch to Yudhisthira, who lit the pyre. As the flames consumed Bhishma's body, the women cried out in grief.

After Bhishma had been cremated, the Kurus and the Pandavas returned to the Ganges. Bhishma's ashes were cast into the holy waters and everyone made offerings. Suddenly, the goddess Ganga rose up from the river. Radiant in her white silks and gold ornaments, she wept for the death of her son.

"Alas, where has my son gone? Of royal conduct and disposition, he was devoted to virtue and to serving his elders. Even the great Parasurama could not defeat him. In Kashi he single-handedly overpowered the world's kings and took away the princesses. Now he has been slain by the heartless Shikhandhi."

Seeing Ganga grieving, Krishna spoke to her and consoled her. He reassured her that Bhishma had attained the highest destination. His fame on earth would last forever, and now he was gone to a place from which no one returns.

Comforted, the goddess cast off her grief. The Kurus then worshipped her and obtained her permission to return to the city.

Chapter Thirty-two. Krishna Returns to Dwaraka

Yudhisthira began ruling the earth as lord of the Kurus. Surrounded by his brothers, he resembled Indra seated in Amaravati. Yudhisthira had arranged that Dhritarastra continue as chief administrator of Hastinapura. The blind king, attended by Sanjaya and Yuyutsu, gave orders which even the Pandavas followed out of deference. Draupadi, Subhadra and the other ladies treated Dhritarastra and Gandhari as father and mother. Even Kunti behaved toward Gandhari as one would act toward a senior. Kripa had returned to the city and become Dhritarastra's trusted counselor, and Vyasadeva and other rishis also advised him.

Yudhisthira, however, still felt a deep sense of guilt and shame. Seeing the thousands of bereaved women and children in the city, he was consumed by sorrow. Krishna, who at Yudhisthira's request had agreed to live in Hastinapura for some time, spoke to the mourning king. "Do not indulge your grief, O best of men, for by so doing you will increase the grief of your people and even give pain to your departed relatives. You should celebrate and perform sacrifices. Give joy to your subjects. Make profuse offerings to your forefathers and distribute charity to the brahmins. Thus any trace of sin caused by the war will be washed off. Perform the Ashvamedha sacrifice, O King, and renounce this useless grief."

Sighing, Yudhisthira replied, "O Govinda, I know You are fond of me. You have always favored me and my brothers. O Janardana, speak again of eternal spiritual truths, for my mind is still heavy. Reassured by Your words, which I imbibe like nectar, I will become enthused to carry out my duties."

Krishna was always inclined to satisfy Yudhisthira's desires. He knew that the Pandava monarch had no other refuge. Although Krishna wanted to return to Dwaraka to see his relatives, he had acceded to Yudhisthira's repeated pleas that he stay in Hastinapura. Now, seeing his dejection, Krishna spoke once more to assuage his sorrow.

"O foremost of Bharata's race, you must now contend with the most powerful enemy of all: your mind. Your only weapon in this battle is knowledge, and you have no army to assist you. O King, you already know everything. You know that all beings are undying, spiritual entities, that this material world is nothing more than a temporary illusion, and that the

primary aim of life is to seek spiritual emancipation. Stand firm on this knowledge, O Yudhisthira, and do your duty."

Krishna explained how one desiring liberation must become free from attachment and aversion to material objects, which included the material body and all its designations. Yudhisthira's lamentation was based on seeing only the external situation. He was grieving for matter without seeing spirit. All those who had been killed were still existing in new bodies. Those who were grieving for them would also soon die, forgetting their present sorrow. The prime duty of every man is to realize his true identity as an eternal part of the Supreme. That realization would bring complete freedom from the material misery caused by ignorance.

"By doing your material duties only for God's pleasure will you gain this realization, O King, for such actions are on the spiritual platform and will soon raise you to spiritual consciousness. Throw off your ignorance and do what must be done. Prepare for the sacrifice, please the gods and Vishnu, satisfy the brahmins, and rule this world with justice and compassion."

Solaced, and instructed by Dhaumya and other rishis, Yudhisthira gradually gave up his anguish. He thanked Krishna, who then asked if He may go to Indraprastha with Arjuna. The two friends wanted to spend some time together in that beautiful city, especially in the celestial Mayasabha. Yudhisthira gave his permission and soon they were traveling in Krishna's chariot, moving swiftly along the broad highway that went from Hastinapura toward the north.

Arjuna and Krishna spent weeks at Indraprastha. Upon their arrival they were greeted by thousands of overjoyed citizens. Arjuna and Krishna then retired to the Mayasabha and also spent time together in the delightful, wooded regions surrounding the city. They spoke together about the many battles that had been fought and which the Pandavas had won. Krishna could see that Arjuna too was grieving for the loss of his sons and friends and thus He consoled him.

After some weeks, Krishna again wanted to return to Dwaraka and he asked Arjuna to secure Yudhisthira's permission. "You should know that I am unable to do anything which may displease your brother. My life, wealth and followers are at his disposal. But I think I should return to see my aging father Vasudeva and My other relatives. The earth with her belt of seas and

mountains, mines, and forests has come under Yudhisthira's sway. I have spoken words of reason and wisdom to comfort him. He is now determined to do his duty. Therefore, I think it is time for me to go. Let us approach Yudhisthira together and seek his approval."

Arjuna's heart sank at the thought of Krishna's departure, but he knew it was time. Krishna had not seen His relatives since the war. They would surely be grieving for Abhimanyu, and would be missing Krishna Himself. Reluctantly, Arjuna assented to Krishna's request. Early the next day, they made their way back to Hastinapura.

As they traveled Arjuna said, "Dear Madhava, I have come to know your true identity from your profound instructions delivered on the first day of the war, but, my Lord, I find it difficult to recall those instructions. Indeed, my mind is confused now that you are about to leave us. Please, if you are agreeable, repeat that knowledge to me."

Krishna smiled affectionately, "Surely you are fickle-minded, O son of Pandu. Those truths I spoke were confidential and unknown even to the gods. I am not pleased that you have forgotten them, and I do not think I can repeat them now. But I will recite an ancient history on the same subject. Focus your mind and try to understand, O Partha, for this knowledge will free you from material bondage."

As Daruka drove the chariot to Hastinapura, Krishna narrated the history. Lost in his love for Krishna, Arjuna was captivated by His eloquent speech. The chariot moved swiftly along the smooth road, passing through various villages and alongside fields full of crops or grazing cattle. When the day's journey was almost over, Krishna concluded His instructions and said, "If you have any love for me, O scion of Kuru, you will lead your life according to these instructions. Always remember your actual identity as soul and remain fixed in rendering service to the Supreme Soul. In that way, you will never fall into illusion again."

Arjuna replied that as far as he was concerned, Krishna was the Supreme Soul. Remembrance of Him was all that was required to achieve perfection in life. "I am convinced of your glories, O Govinda. Indeed, I could not reach the end of your glories if I were to recite them continuously with a thousand mouths and for a thousand years. You are the one Lord of all creatures, known variously only due to the various perceptions of different

men. Everything that we, the Pandavas, have achieved is simply due to your favor."

Krishna embraced Arjuna, who assured Him that he would gain Yudhisthira's permission for His departure. "Although my heart is breaking at the thought of you leaving, I understand that you must return to your family. We have already been favored by your long presence here."

The chariot entered Hastinapura, passing throngs of cheering citizens who rushed to the roadside to watch it go by. Arjuna and Krishna smiled at the people and received their worship by offering them blessings. They soon reached the royal palace and went quickly before Yudhisthira, bowing at his feet and greeting him with affection. They then offered their obeisances to Dhritarastra and Gandhari, who occupied thrones close to Yudhisthira's.

When the formal greetings were over, Arjuna and Krishna sat before Yudhisthira, being fanned by maidservants with chamara whisks. Seeing them both looking up at him, Yudhisthira said, "It appears you have something on your minds. Speak it out, O heroes. Whatever you desire, I will satisfy it. Do not hesitate to reveal your minds."

Arjuna, who had expected his brother to say just that, smiled. "The lord of the Vrishnis and Yadus, Keshava, wishes to see His father and other relatives in Dwaraka. O King, if you think it proper, then please let Him go. Grant him permission to repair to His own city."

Yudhisthira and his brothers gazed at Krishna, who had been with them now for months. As soon as He had heard of their coming out of exile, He had left Dwaraka to be with them, guiding them back toward their former positions as rulers of the world. All the brothers knew that without Krishna they could not possibly have succeeded. Now His work was done. Duryodhana and his army of invincible warriors had been overcome. The Pandavas were now the undisputed monarchs, their position better now than before their exile. Both Hastinapura and Indraprastha, the two great capitals of the earth, were now under their command.

But the Pandavas cared little for power and opulence. For them, Krishna's presence and love was more valuable than rulership of the earth. Yudhisthira's acceptance of the throne, and even his declaring war against the Kauravas, had been due ultimately to his understanding that it was Krishna's desire. Hearing that He now desired to return to Dwaraka, Yudhisthira said,

"O lotus-eyed one, O Madhava, I will allow you to go. Go and see my maternal uncle and the goddess Devaki. You have been away for a long time. Offer them my deepest respects, and also Balarama, who is ever worthy of the world's worship. Think of us daily, and if it pleases you, return when we perform the Ashvamedha. Everything we possess is simply due to your favor."

Yudhisthira immediately dispatched swift messengers to Dwaraka to inform the citizens of Krishna's impending arrival. He also ordered that Krishna be given gems and gold in large amounts. Graciously accepting the gifts, Krishna said, "O mighty-armed one, you are the lord of the earth. Whatever I possess is yours and you may do with it as you wish. I will go now, but I will surely return to see your sacrifice."

Krishna decided to leave for Dwaraka early the next morning. He rose from His seat like the sun rising above the eastern hills and left the assembly hall with Arjuna and Satyaki at His side. Yudhisthira and the other Pandavas followed Him as He mounted His chariot, going with His two friends to Arjuna's palace for the night.

After sunrise Krishna prepared to leave. Mounting His jeweled chariot, He proceeded to Yudhisthira's palace to say His final farewells. Hearing that He was about to depart, Kunti and the other Kuru ladies came out to see Him. The noble ladies, resplendent in silk, stood with tears in their eyes, mentally offering their obeisances at Krishna's feet again and again.

Remembering the many times that Krishna had protected her and her sons, Kunti stood by the side of His chariot with folded palms and offered prayers.

"O Krishna, You are the original personality, unaffected by anything in this material world. You exist within and without, yet you are invisible to all. Foolish men fail to recognize your identity as the Supersoul in all beings, for you cannot be known by the material senses. Only those who are free from lust and avarice can approach and know you, for otherwise you remain covered by your own illusory energy. Yet you reciprocate with those who come to you in love, acting from within their hearts to free them from illusion."

Standing outside the great royal palace, which towered above her like a white mountain, Kunti praised Krishna for some time. She described the

many occasions that she and her sons had been in danger and how Krishna had saved them. Her voice trembled with a sublime joy. "O Govinda, I wish that all those calamities would happen again and again so that we could see you again and again, for seeing you means that we will no longer see repeated birth and death."

During her sons' exile, Kunti had devoted herself to fasts and asceticism. She was a self-realized soul and understood that the ultimate aim of life was to achieve freedom from rebirth in the material world. Realizing that her many difficulties in life had forced her to meditate on Krishna, she felt that those difficulties had been a great blessing, for she had come to know Krishna as the final goal of all spiritual practices. Kunti had cultivated detachment from matter and prayed that Krishna would sever her last attachments to the world in the form of her feelings of affection for her sons and other relatives. Kunti knew that in order to achieve complete liberation, she had to see all living beings, including her own family, as eternal spirit souls. One in true knowledge sees and loves all creatures equally, knowing them to be parts of the Supreme. Bodily designations are temporary and, ultimately, meaningless.

After describing Krishna's transcendental qualities, Kunti concluded her prayers with a heartfelt plea. "O Lord of Madhu, as the Ganges forever flows to the sea without hindrance, let my attraction be constantly drawn to You without being diverted to anyone else. You are my and my sons' only shelter. How are you leaving us today, even though we are completely dependent on You and have no one else to protect us, especially now that so many kings are at enmity with us?"

Kunti knew that although the Pandavas had conquered their enemies, they would soon have to contend with the sons and followers of the kings they had killed. Those kings had only brought some of their forces to fight at Kurukshetra, leaving sons or brothers to rule in their absence. Thus there were still many rulers around the world who commanded armies and who would likely be antagonistic to the Pandavas.

With her gaze fixed on Krishna's face, she added, "As the name and fame of a particular body is finished with the disappearance of the living spirit, similarly, if you do not look upon us, all our fame and activities will end at once. O Krishna, You possess all mystic powers, and you are the preceptor of the entire universe. You are the almighty God, and I offer You

my respectful obeisances."

Krishna held up His hand, decorated with jewels and red sandalwood paste, in blessing as Kunti ended her prayers, enchanting all who saw Him with His beauty and grace. He told Kunti that just as she was always thinking of Him, He never forgot her or her sons.

Then it was time for Krishna to leave. Satyaki mounted the chariot, and the royal escort Yudhisthira had arranged led Him from the city. Yudhisthira and his brothers climbed up on Krishna's chariot and embraced him. The palace ladies praised Krishna from the balconies, showering Him with flowers. The streets were lined with citizens longing for one final sight of Krishna. After the Pandavas had said their farewells and dismounted, Daruka commanded Krishna's celestial horses and His chariot moved off.

The Pandavas stood gazing after the chariot as it went along the red stone road leading from the city. When it was out of sight, they slowly and silently made their way back into the palace.

* * *

When Krishna was alone on His chariot, Daruka urged on the horses. The chariot quickly reached the speed of the wind. Passing lakes, rivers, forests and hills, as well as towns and hamlets, it finally arrived in Dwaraka. As He approached the city, Krishna blew a blast on His conch shell. The guards heard the sound and threw open the city gates with shouts of joy. They announced Krishna's imminent arrival and the citizens ran out of the city. Seeing Krishna returning after so long, they felt as if they had woken from a long sleep. They offered Him cows, gold and gems, and cheered and beat drums as He passed.

Tall flags lined the roofs of mansions, and the ground was strewn with flower petals. As Krishna's chariot moved slowly along the road, the citizens waved branches of palm, banana and mango trees. In every doorway stood golden waterpots, baskets of fruit, sugarcane, pots of milk, and other auspicious articles. Incense billowed from every house and hundreds of thousands of candles burned.

As He moved toward His father's palace, Krishna saw the opulence of His city -- the orchards and flower gardens, the beautiful lakes teeming with swans and thick with red and blue lotuses. Golden archways studded with precious stones stood at every crossroad, and white mansions lined the

roads.

Numerous brahmins worshipped Krishna, and Krishna heard them praising Him as He passed. In voices suffused with ecstasy they said, "O Almighty One, You are worshipable by even the gods and are the ultimate goal of life for all transcendentalists. You are our protector, guide and worshipable Lord. By good fortune have we seen You again, for You rarely visit even the denizens of heaven."

The brahmins prayed that Krishna not leave Dwaraka again, saying that each day He was absent felt like thousands of years.

Krishna received their prayers and worship by glancing at them affectionately. As the chariot moved forward, a number of powerful men went ahead to clear the road. Followed by a procession of elephants, chariots and walking citizens, Krishna's chariot gradually made its way through the dense crowds and arrived at Vasudeva's palace. In the courtyard He saw colorfully dressed dancers and actors expertly enacting His pastimes with grace, while singers and poets glorified Him to musical instruments.

Pleased, Krishna dismounted from His chariot and met the leading citizens. According to their status He bowed before them, embraced them, or offered them His blessings. He exchanged greetings, shook hands, and offered benedictions to hundreds of citizens. Then he entered His father's house.

Devaki was the first to greet Krishna as he came into the house. After he had placed his head at her feet, she embraced Him and sat him upon her lap, stroking his head and offering him her blessings.

Krishna then greeted all the senior palace ladies, seeing them as mothers, and then went before Vasudeva. After He had touched his father's feet and received his embrace, Krishna sat by his side and told him the news from Hastinapura. Vasudeva had not heard much about the war, and he asked Krishna to tell him everything that had happened since His departure.

Surrounded by other Vrishni elders, Vasudeva listened to Krishna's narration. Krishna deliberately avoided telling his father about Abhimanyu's death.

When Krishna stopped speaking, Subhadra, present by her father's side, asked, "Why, O Krishna, have You not told Your father about my son's

death?" After saying this, she dropped to the palace floor in a swoon.

When Vasudeva heard her words, he also fell, overcome by grief. Krishna quickly took them both up and consoled them. "My dear father, dearest sister, how could I speak that which would only give you sorrow? You should know that the heroic Abhimanyu died in the thick of battle. While contending with numerous invincible fighters, never once showing his back, he finally gave up his life. Only due to the inevitable influence of time did the mighty hero fall in battle. None could have slain him. He has now reached regions of undying happiness. Cast off your burning grief and we will make his funeral offerings."

After going to a sanctified spot in the palace compound, Krishna, along with Balarama and aided by the brahmins, personally performed Abhimanyu's sraddha ceremony. On behalf of his departed nephew he gave charity to millions of brahmins. He distributed heaps of gold and gems, along with hundreds of thousands of cows. The ceremony was attended by all the leading Vrishnis, headed by their king, Ugrasena, and all of Krishna's thousands of sons and other relatives.

After the ceremony, Krishna retired to his personal quarters in Rukmini's palace, and the citizens of Dwaraka returned home feeling both joy and sorrow.

Chapter Thirty-three. Yudhisthira's Ashvamedha Sacrifice

In Hastinapura the Pandavas settled into their lives as rulers. Yudhisthira was the embodiment of justice and virtue. None could fault him. Due to the gods' cooperation, who were pleased by the people's piety under Yudhisthira's care, there was never a shortage of rain. The earth produced abundant crops and supported countless cows, who moistened the ground with the milk that dripped from their full milk bags. The people felt they had everything they desired and were free from anxiety. They were not afflicted by disease, mental agony, or excessive heat and cold. Sons always outlived their fathers and no women became widows.

Some months after Krishna's departure, Uttara, who was staying with Kunti and Draupadi, gave birth to her son. She named him Pariksit. After Dhaumya had performed his birth and naming ceremonies, Yudhisthira asked them, "O brahmins, please tell me if this child will become a saintly king, as famous and glorified in his achievements as his noble predecessors?"

Dhaumya replied that the boy, who had been saved from death by Krishna while still in the womb, would certainly be famous as a great devotee of the Supreme Lord. "He will be known as Vishnurata, or one who is always protected by the Lord. Endowed with all good qualities, he will be exactly like Ikshvaku, Manu's famous son, in maintaining the people. For following religious principles and for his truthfulness, he will be exactly like Rama, the son of king Dasaratha. He will give charity and protect the helpless. As a warrior, he will be as irresistible as the mighty ocean, possessing skills in archery equal to those of Arjuna. Indeed, O King, he will expand the fame of his family like Bharata himself."

Yudhisthira was overjoyed. Here was a worthy heir to the Kuru line. The Pandavas still sorrowed at the loss of their own sons, but seeing Pariksit solaced them. He was clearly marked by auspicious lines on his body. Yudhisthira arranged for much charity to be distributed on the boy's behalf. The sages who had attended the birth ceremony received the wealth but gave most of it away. Then they left for the mountains, their minds set on their ascetic practices.

Soon after Pariksit's birth, Yudhisthira began to think of the sacrifice

he would like to perform. He still desired to atone for the killing at Kurukshetra, and the rishis had recommended that he perform the Ashvamedha. As with the Rajasuya, the sacrifice would give him the opportunity to again establish his position as the earth's emperor. He would have to send out the sacrificial horse to all parts of the land. Anyone not accepting his rule would be obliged to fight.

Although he had no personal ambition to rule the earth, Yudhisthira wanted to ensure that the world was on the path of peace and religion. There could not be another Kurukshetra. It was also Krishna's desire that the virtuous Yudhisthira and his brothers be clearly established as the earth's foremost rulers. Yudhisthira thus set about making his preparations.

Knowing that the performance of an Ashvamedha requires immense wealth, Yudhisthira was anxious. The treasury had been seriously depleted by the war. The Pandava revealed his anxiety to Vyasadeva, who told him of a great store of wealth lying in the North. The sage told Yudhisthira about a former emperor of the earth, named Marutta, who had possessed almost unlimited wealth. He had pleased Shiva by performing a sacrifice and the god had given him a mountain made of gold. From that mountain he had fashioned sacrificial altars of pure gold, as well as vast numbers of gold plates and other utensils. These were now lying in a cave in the Himalayas. Vyasadeva instructed Arjuna how to find the cave and Arjuna left at once, returning after a month with the immense riches carried on a seemingly endless line of bullocks and elephants.

Yudhisthira then invited rulers from around the world to attend the sacrifice. He wanted to establish peaceful relations with all kings, but he knew that there would be a lot of inimical feelings left from the war. There were many kings who had not participated in the Kurukshetra war who would likely be neutral, but there were also some kings whose fathers or brothers had been killed by the Pandavas and who harbored enmity with them. Knowing this, Yudhisthira asked Arjuna to follow the sacrificial horse. Anyone seeing the horse and not agreeing to Yudhisthira's rule would have to face Arjuna. The Pandava put on his golden armor and prepared himself for the expedition.

After being blessed by the brahmins, Arjuna set off in pursuit of the horse. He was followed by a large body of warriors, as well as a number of sages who would perform the sacred rites to invoke auspiciousness and

ensure his success. Yudhishthira had earnestly entreated Arjuna not to kill anyone unless it was absolutely unavoidable. Remembering this, he first tried to establish peaceful relations through diplomacy; but in some cases, he was forced to take up arms. He fought a battle with the Trigartas, who bore him enmity for having slain their king and his brothers during the war. After they had been overpowered, another fierce fight took place between Arjuna and king Vajradatta, the son of Bhagadatta. That battle lasted for three days, with Arjuna finally defeating Vajradatta but sparing his life. After the king had agreed to bring tribute for Yudhishthira's sacrifice, Arjuna moved south.

A powerful battle took place with the Sindhus, who were grieving Jayadratha's death. Tens of thousands of warriors came out to contend with Arjuna. He attacked them with arrows from the Gandiva, cutting their weapons to pieces and forcing them to flee.

In the Sindhu capital, Duryodhana's sister Dushala lived. When she saw that Arjuna was crushing her troops, she came hastily out of the city holding an infant in her arms. Seeing her rushing onto the field with her child, the warriors lowered their weapons. She fell before Arjuna, crying. "Stop, O hero! Do not destroy the last of our race. See here this child, who is your own relative, the son of my son. Out of sheer grief for Jayadratha's death, the father of this boy has given up his life. Now you, Jayadratha's killer, are bent upon annihilating the rest of his family and followers. O Arjuna, pray forget the sins of this child's grandfather and have mercy on him."

Seeing the weeping Dushala, whom he regarded as a sister, Arjuna cast aside his bow. He censured the life of a kshatriya and cried out, "Fie on the wicked Duryodhana! That mean person, so covetous of the kingdom, has brought about the death of all my kinsmen."

Arjuna got down from his chariot and consoled Dushala. She turned to the Sindhu warriors and told them to put down their weapons and make peace with Arjuna. They complied. Arjuna then dismissed her and she returned to the city, leaving him to continue his travels.

The horse reached Manipur, where Arjuna was greeted peacefully by his own son Babhruvahana, whom he had conceived with the princess Citrangada. As Arjuna had agreed at the time of his birth, Babhruvahana had remained at Manipur, ruling that kingdom and not taking any part in the great

war. He came to Arjuna with offerings of gold and gems, but Arjuna was nevertheless clearly displeased. His mind was seized with anger and he shouted out to his son, "Why, O child, have you come in peace when an antagonist has entered your land? This is never in keeping with kshatriya duties. You have acted like a woman! I have come here bearing arms and you should have challenged me with heroic words. O wretched boy, take up your weapons and give me battle."

Babhruvahana was surprised by his father's reaction. He tried to appease him, but Arjuna would not listen. He repeatedly goaded his son to fight.

As that exchange was taking place, Ulupi suddenly appeared from the earth. The daughter of the Naga king, and Arjuna's wife, stood before Babhruvahana and said, "Listen, O prince. I am Ulupi, your mother, and have come here desiring to do both you and your father good. Fight with him, for this will please him and you will then acquire merit."

Hearing his stepmother's words as well as the repeated urgings of his father, the prince agreed. After putting on his blazing armor and mounting a chariot, he stood before his father ready for battle. Seeing the sacrificial horse nearby, Babhruvahana had some of his men seize it and take it into his city. Arjuna was incensed and he rained down arrows on his powerful son.

A terrible fight took place between father and son. Both showed no quarter, releasing countless arrows at one another. Arjuna was suddenly struck on the shoulder by a steel shaft that pierced him deeply and made him almost lose consciousness. He leaned on his standard pole. When he regained his senses, he praised his son. "Excellent! Well done! O son of Citrangada, I am pleased with you for your prowess and power. Now stand fearlessly, for I will let loose my terrible shafts."

Arjuna fought relentlessly, shooting arrows which smashed his son's chariot and killed his horses. Jumping to the ground, the prince stood fearlessly before his father. In a moment he took out a long golden arrow bedecked with jewels and kanka feathers and fired it from his fully drawn bow. That arrow sped toward Arjuna and struck him on the chest, piercing his armor.

Gasping in pain, Arjuna fell from his car and lay on the earth. Babhruvahana, himself pierced all over by Arjuna's shafts, was seized with

grief upon seeing his father killed. Overpowered, he too fell to the ground.

Citrangada heard that her husband and son had both fallen on the battlefield. She rushed out of the city. Seeing them lying there, she too fainted. When she had recovered her senses, she saw Ulupi standing before her. Knowing that Babhruvahana had fought his father at her behest, she said, "O Ulupi, see our ever-victorious husband slain as a result of your instructions to my son. Do you not know the practices of respectable women? Are you not devoted to your husband? If Arjuna has offended you in some way, you should have forgiven him. Why are you not grieving? O snake-lady, you are a goddess. I beseech you to revive our husband."

Citrangada ran over to Arjuna and fell to the ground weeping. With the arrow protruding from his chest and blood seeping from the wound, he seemed like a hill with a tree on the summit and its rocks running with red oxide. The Manipur princess placed Arjuna's feet in her lap and cried uncontrollably.

Regaining consciousness, Babhruvahana got to his feet and ran over to his father. Along with his mother, he too began to cry. In a choked voice he lamented, "Alas, what have I done? What is the atonement for one who has killed his father? I should doubtlessly suffer every sort of misery for such a sin. Indeed, I cannot continue my life. I will sit by my father's side, abstaining from food and drink, until death takes me. Let me follow the path taken by Arjuna."

The prince cried for some time, then fell silent. He sat in a yogic posture next to Arjuna and prepared to observe the Praya vow of fasting until death.

Seeing both her co-wife and stepson overcome by sorrow, Ulupi approached them. By her mystic power she fetched from the Naga kingdom a celestial gem that had the power to revive the dead. Taking the effulgent gem, which shone with a hundred different hues, she went over to Babhruvahana and said, "Rise up, O son. You have not killed Arjuna. Indeed, neither man nor god can slay him. He is an eternal rishi of indestructible soul. His apparent death is simply illusion. O child, take this gem and place it on your father's chest and he will rise."

The prince did as he was told and, almost at once, Arjuna opened his eyes. His wound healed and he sat up and looked around. Babhruvahana

sighed with relief. He bowed at his father's feet and begged forgiveness. Kettledrums resounded in the sky and a shower of flowers fell. Voices in the heavens called out, "Excellent! Excellent!"

Arjuna stood up and embraced his son with affection. "What is the cause of all these signs?" he asked. "Why has your mother Citrangada come onto the field? Why do I also see the Naga princess here?"

Babhruvahana told his father to ask Ulupi. Arjuna looked at her, the question in his eyes. "What brings you here, O daughter of the Nagas? Have you come here desiring to do us good? I hope neither I nor my son have done you any injury."

Ulupi smiled and reassured Arjuna that she had not been offended. She had urged the prince to fight to serve both him and Arjuna. "Listen to my words, O mighty-armed Arjuna. During the war you deceitfully killed Bhishma, placing Shikhandhi before you when you approached him. For that sin you would have fallen into hell, but your sin has been expiated by your son's actions."

Ulupi explained that soon after Bhishma's fall, she had seen the Vasus come to the river Ganges to bathe. While they were there, they called for the goddess Ganga and said, "Arjuna has unfairly slain your son. For this we will curse him to die." Ganga had agreed. Seeing all this, Ulupi had gone before her father in anxiety. She told him what she had seen and her father, king of the Nagas, went at once to the Vasus. He begged them to be merciful to Arjuna, his son-in-law, and they replied, "Dhananjaya has a youthful son who is now king of Manipur. That king will cast his father down in battle and free him from our curse."

Ulupi continued, "It is for this reason that you were slain by your son. Indeed, not even Indra could kill you, but it is said that the son is one's own self. After he killed you, I revived you with this celestial gem."

Ulupi showed Arjuna the brilliant jewel and he cheerfully replied, "Everything you have done is agreeable to me, O goddess. You have not committed any fault."

Babhruvahana beseeched Arjuna to spend a night in the city with his two wives, but Arjuna declined, saying that he could not rest until the sacrificial horse returned to Hastinapura. He took leave from his wives and his son, who said he would soon come to Yudhisthira's sacrifice. After telling

his wives to join him in Hastinapura, he continued on his way in pursuit of the horse.

Arjuna next came to Rajagriha, the city where he had long ago gone with Bhima and Krishna to kill Jarasandha. Jarasandha's grandson, Meghasandhi, still only a boy, but observing the duty of a kshatriya, came out and offered to fight with Arjuna with bold and heroic words. "It seems this horse is protected only by women," he challenged, and a great fight ensued. During the battle, Meghasandhi's chariot was smashed and he was finally overpowered. Arjuna said, "At the command of Yudhisthira I will not slay those kings whom I defeat if they acquiesce to his rule."

Meghasandhi agreed to attend Yudhisthira's sacrifice and offer tribute, and Arjuna continued on his way. He fought with several other monarchs, obliging them to accept Yudhisthira as emperor, before the horse at last reached the road leading back to Hastinapura.

Chapter Thirty-four. Vidura Instructs Dhritarastra

In Hastinapura, Yudhishthira heard from his men that Arjuna was approaching the city. Hearing that all was well with his brother, he joyfully set about making preparations for his sacrifice. His priests had arranged for the sacrifice to be performed on the full moon day in the month of Magha. They selected an auspicious spot on a large, level plain outside the city, and sanctified it with Vedic rites. A golden altar was constructed, and numerous mansions were built for the visiting kings. Messengers were then dispatched to all parts of the land to invite them.

Soon numerous monarchs began to arrive, as well as thousands of ascetics. The Pandavas greeted them all warmly and offered them the finest accommodation. As the day of the sacrifice approached, Yudhishthira himself went out of the city and entered the royal pavilion. As he proceeded, he saw the sacrificial arena, resembling Indra's heavenly capital. Triumphal arches had been built, and the ground was paved with gold bricks. Jars, jugs, ladles, seats, and other necessary paraphernalia had been arranged around the fire altars which surrounded the main altar. The main altar shone like the sun. Yudhishthira did not see anything that was not made of gold.

The guests were filled with wonder at its opulence. They were fed sumptuously by thousands of servants, and provided with anything they desired. Yudhishthira arranged that drums and cymbals should be sounded each time a hundred thousand brahmins had been fed. The crash and clash of those instruments was heard again and again throughout the day. There were hills of food, huge tanks of ghee, and lakes filled with milk. The citizens joyfully came out to attend the sacrifice, dressed in colorful silks and adorned with burnished golden earrings. The women were decorated with jewels and ornaments, and their faces shone like radiant moons.

A few days before the sacrifice, Krishna arrived with His son Pradyumna, and Satyaki and Balarama. Numerous other Yadus and Vrishnis accompanied Him and they all entered the sacrificial arena like gods descending from heaven. Yudhishthira and his brothers worshipped Krishna and Balarama and offered Them the best mansions for Their residence. Krishna spoke about Arjuna, who had not yet returned from his expedition. He told the other Pandavas that He had received news about him and that he would be arriving the next day.

After the Pandavas and their guests had spent the night in their mansions outside the city, they went the following day to greet Arjuna. With Dhritarastra at their head, they proceeded with a large number of brahmins and citizens. In a short while, they saw the sacrificial horse, looking as beautiful as the celestial horse Uchchaisravas, followed by Arjuna on his blazing chariot.

Yudhishthira and his brothers welcomed Arjuna with affection, praising his feat in subduing the world's kings and bringing the horse back safely. Krishna embraced him and went with him into his mansion, where they spent a pleasant evening together.

When the day of the sacrifice arrived, Vyasadeva came to Yudhishthira and said, "The time for the sacrifice has come. The priests await you. O King, you should make offerings three times greater than are required by the ordinance. Give three times the required charity to the priests at the end. In this way, you will acquire the merit of three Ashvamedhas. This will certainly free you from any sin that may have accrued from the war.

Attended by Krishna and thousands of kings, the sacrifice was duly performed according to the instructions of Vyasadeva and Dhaumya. Everyone present considered it no less magnificent than the Rajasuya had been years before. When it was complete, and the time had come to give daksina, Yudhishthira offered the entire earth to Vyasadeva, saying, "O great sage, this is the proper daksina ordained for this sacrifice. Take this earth, conquered by Arjuna, and divide it among the rishis. I will enter the forest, for I cannot take the property of brahmins."

The crowd buzzed with excitement at Yudhishthira's announcement. Everyone applauded him. Even the gods praised him. Vyasadeva, pleased, replied, "The earth is now mine. O King, I now give it back to you. What need does an ascetic have for this world? How can brahmins rule the world? Take it back and rule over it as enjoined by scripture."

Hearing Krishna confirming Vyasadeva's words, Yudhishthira replied, "Let it be so." He then arranged for all the golden sacrificial utensils to be distributed among the brahmins, along with heaps of gems and millions of milking cows. The frugal brahmins accepted only enough for their survival. Large amounts of wealth were left, which Yudhishthira then distributed to the kshatriyas, vaisyas and sudras. No one attending the sacrifice left without a

valuable gift, and everyone went home praising Yudhisthira.

Krishna and His followers stayed for a few days after the sacrifice, enjoying the Pandavas' company. Then, after being worshipped by Yudhisthira, they returned to Dwaraka. Yudhisthira now felt free of sin. Having made arrangements for the world to be properly governed by pious kings, he continued to live happily with his brothers in Hastinapura.

* * *

The years passed quickly for the Pandavas after the sacrifice. Although they thought constantly of Gandhari's curse, dreading the day that Krishna would leave the world, they treated her and her old husband with the highest respect. Dhritarastra felt as if he was lord of the earth. Hundreds of servants waited upon him and provided him with anything he desired. All the kings who came to Hastinapura with tribute for Yudhisthira were asked to offer their respects and worship to Dhritarastra. The blind monarch, receiving treatment like Indra in heaven, forgot his grief and was happy. Gandhari was also attended and served with respect by Kunti and Draupadi, as well as Ulupi, Citrangada, and the other Pandava ladies.

With the exception of Bhima, Yudhisthira and his brothers acted toward Dhritarastra like disciples toward their guru. Seeing their humility and obedience to his commands, Dhritarastra regarded the brothers like his own sons. He felt only shame when he remembered Duryodhana, who had destroyed their family and had never been so respectful toward him as were Pandu's sons .

But Bhima could not forget the ills the Pandavas had experienced at the Kauravas' hands. Unable to forgive the blind king, he reluctantly offered him respect, but inwardly seethed at seeing the royal treatment accorded him by Yudhisthira. Dhritarastra also could not feel much love for Bhima, who had killed his sons. He tried to offer the Pandava his blessings, but his mind was still filled with malice toward him.

Through his own servants, Bhima arranged for many deeds that were disagreeable to Dhritarastra. He caused the commands of the old Kuru chief to be disobeyed and looked for opportunities to give him pain. Out of anger he would stand within Dhritarastra's hearing and utter hurtful words. Slapping his arms, he would say, "With these two mace-like arms I have crushed all

the blind king's sons. Due to coming within the reach of these arms, the wicked Kauravas have all been dispatched to Death's abode." Or he would speak other words offensive to Dhritarastra.

Although hurt by Bhima's words, Dhritarastra said nothing about the situation to Yudhishthira. He felt too indebted to the Pandava king to disturb him in any way. Gandhari also tolerated Bhima's painful utterances, considering them the inevitable reactions to her and her husband's past actions.

Thirty-five years went by with Yudhishthira ruling the world. The Pandavas thought always of Krishna and became increasingly concerned as the day approached when Gandhari's curse would take effect. Seeing Parikshit grown into a powerful prince, exhibiting all virtuous qualities, they began to think of retiring. They knew that although death in battle was the best way for a kshatriya to give up the body, death in the forest while practicing asceticism was an honorable second best. Pious kings always spent their last years in the forest seeking spiritual perfection.

One day, the Pandavas heard that Vidura had returned to Hastinapura. The Kuru minister had been gone for many years on pilgrimage, practicing austerities. Although the Pandavas occasionally received word of him, they had not seen him since he had left. They often remembered their uncle with affection. When he returned, they ran toward him, overwhelmed with happiness and love. One by one the five brothers fell at his feet and clasped them.

Vidura was met by Dhritarastra, Kripa, Sanjaya, Gandhari, Kunti, Draupadi, and all the other palace residents. Vidura appeared emaciated by his long practice of asceticism, but he shone with spiritual energy. He had spent much time in the company of brahmins, hearing extensive spiritual instructions from the powerful Maitreya Rishi. Desiring to see Dhritarastra and the Pandavas before the end of his life, he had come for a final visit to Hastinapura.

Yudhishthira and his brothers worshipped him with offerings of arghya and other auspicious items. After feeding him sumptuously, they had him seated in the royal assembly hall, where he would always sit when he had acted as Dhritarastra's prime minister.

Recalling the many times that Vidura had helped them when they

were young and suffering from Duryodhana's antagonism, Yudhisthira sat at his feet and said, "My Uncle, do you remember how you always protected us, along with our mother, from calamity? Your partiality, like the wings of a bird covering her fledglings, saved us from destruction. While traveling across the earth, how did you maintain yourself? At which holy places did you render service?"

By his own developed spiritual power, Yudhisthira could understand that his uncle had achieved a high level of spiritual realization. Like himself, Vidura had always taken pleasure in hearing from rishis and practicing asceticism. He had not been sorry to leave the city, but had accepted it as a providential arrangement for him to perfect his life.

Seeing that the old Kuru minister had achieved that perfection, Yudhisthira said with folded palms, "My lord, saints like your good self are holy places personified. Because you carry the Personality of Godhead within your heart, you turn every place into a place of pilgrimage."

Yudhisthira asked Vidura what he had seen on his long pilgrimage, and Vidura gradually described everything. Having become self-realized, he was experiencing the highest transcendental happiness and was ready to give up his material body and assume his eternal spiritual identity. Out of compassion for his brother Dhritarastra, however, whom he could understand was still materially attached, he decided to remain for some time in the city first. Realizing that the blind king was fast approaching the end of his life while still living in spiritual ignorance, Vidura wanted to instruct him one last time in order to break his attachments to sense pleasure.

A few days later, Vidura found an opportunity to speak with Dhritarastra. In the presence of all the Pandavas and their wives, he addressed him with strong words. "My dear king, you should get out of here immediately. Do not delay. Just see how fear has overtaken you."

Vidura sarcastically addressed Dhritarastra as king. Since arriving back in Hastinapura, he had understood the situation. He saw how Dhritarastra was enjoying the respect and honor Yudhisthira offered him, and considered himself king. Now, as he faced the last years of his life, he was becoming afraid. Death would take from him all his power, and where would he go? So many sins had been perpetrated under his rule. Vidura was frank. "This frightful situation cannot be remedied by any person in this material

world. My lord, the Supreme Personality of Godhead in his form as eternal time has approached us. Whoever is under the influence of supreme time must surrender his dear life, what to speak of his wealth, honor, children, land and home. Your father, brother, well-wishers and sons are all dead. You have expended the major portion of your life. You are invalid and you are living in another's home. Decrepitude is fast overpowering you, yet still you try to enjoy life, living at Bhima's expense."

Vidura had seen the tension between Dhritarastra and Bhima. He mentioned it to provide the necessary impetus for Dhritarastra to renounce his position and to practice asceticism.

Trying to invoke Dhritarastra's shame and also his self-respect, Vidura continued, "Your life is little better than that of a household dog. What need is there to live such a life, subsisting as you do on the charity of those you tried to kill by arson and poisoning? You insulted their wife and usurped their kingdom and wealth. Now you are dependent on them. O Bharata leader, despite your unwillingness to die and your desire to live even at the cost of your honor, your miserly body will certainly deteriorate like an old garment. Nothing in this world is permanent."

The Pandavas listened in silence. Vidura was as sharp as ever. Yudhisthira reflected on his profound counsel. If only Dhritarastra had been wise enough to take it years ago, how different things might have been. Surely now, though, Dhritarastra would heed his brother's words. He had absolutely nothing left for which to live.

"That man is called undisturbed who goes to an unknown, remote place and, freed from all ties, quits his material body when it has become useless. He is certainly a first-class man who awakens and understands, either by himself or from others, the falsity and misery of the material world and thus leaves home, depending fully on the Personality of Godhead residing in his heart. Please, therefore, leave for the northern hills immediately. Soon the iron age of Kali will set in, and the atmosphere will be opposed to the practice of spiritual life."

Vidura's words cut into Dhritarastra. The old king silently digested his instructions. As always, his intelligent minister spoke the truth. What was the point of continuing his useless and broken life? Certainly no auspicious destinations were achieved by the man who attempted to enjoy his senses

until the last minute of his life. As Vidura correctly pointed out, where was his shame? How had he continued to live in the Pandavas' house after everything he had done to them? And the unforgiving Bhima took every opportunity to remind him of that.

Dhritarastra felt his attachment and fear give way to detachment. He made up his mind to leave for the forest. Knowing that Yudhishthira would not easily accede to him going alone as an ascetic into the wild, he did not reply to Vidura. His departure would have to be secret. He folded his palms and bowed his head to his brother, calling for his servants to take him to his chamber.

Vidura followed his brother, leading Gandhari back to the chamber. He spoke alone with them and arranged a day when they would leave for the forest together. Vidura too desired to end his days while practicing asceticism. Wanting to avoid scenes of grief and difficult farewells, they decided to leave secretly on the next full moon night.

* * *

In his assembly hall, Yudhishthira thought of Vidura. It had been months since Vidura had delivered his instructions to Dhritarastra, and neither of them had been seen since. Dhritarastra had left instructions that he did not want to be disturbed, being attended only by Sanjaya and one or two other intimate servants. Yudhishthira guessed that he had wanted to be alone with Vidura and receive further instructions. Perhaps he would think of retiring to the forest. But today was the annual sraddha ceremony in honor of his sons. He would surely wish to be present.

Yudhishthira decided to go and see him. Accompanied by his brothers, he made his way to Dhritarastra's quarters in the palace gardens. The fragrance of exotic blossoms carried on the warm breeze as he walked through the manicured lawns and flower beds. Varieties of birds filled the air with delightful sounds, and beautiful maidservants sat in groups around lotus-filled ponds.

The brothers entered Dhritarastra's chamber and found Sanjaya sitting alone. Seeing his despondent expression, Yudhishthira felt anxious. Yudhishthira could understand that Dhritarastra had left. "O Sanjaya, where is our old uncle? Where is my well-wisher, Uncle Vidura, and my mother Gandhari, who is afflicted still due to her sons' demise? My uncle

Dhritarastra was also mortified due to the death of his sons and grandsons. That great man took care of us when we were rendered fatherless as children. Undoubtedly, I am ungrateful, for I repaid him by killing his sons. Has he taken my offenses seriously and, along with his wife, finally drowned himself in the Ganges?"

That Dhritarastra had gone without telling him filled him with sorrow. Out of humility the Pandava king considered that it could only be due to his own offenses. With tears welling up in his eyes, he looked at Sanjaya, who covered his face with his hands and said nothing. The old charioteer was grief-stricken and unable to speak. His master had left without saying anything even to him.

Sanjaya gradually pacified his mind with his own intelligence and wiped away his tears. Looking up at Yudhisthira he said, "My dear descendent of the Kuru dynasty, I have no information about your two uncles and Gandhari. O King, I have been cheated by those great souls. Although I remained Dhritarastra's obedient and most confidential servant, he has gone without telling me anything."

Yudhisthira looked at Dhritarastra's altar, where he had sat each night with Gandhari, making offerings to the deities. The sacrificial fire had gone out and the deities had been removed. Controlling his sorrow, Yudhisthira moved closer to the distraught Sanjaya and gently consoled him.

At that moment, Narada Rishi suddenly appeared before them. Yudhisthira and his brothers, along with Sanjaya, offered their obeisances at his feet. Obviously, he had come with a message. After offering him a seat, Yudhisthira said, "O godly personality, I do not know where my two uncles have gone. Nor can I find my ascetic aunt who is grief-stricken by the loss of her sons. Without doubt, you know everything, including even the Lord's plan. Please soothe our sorrow with your profound words."

Narada replied, "O pious king, do not lament for anyone, for everyone is under the Supreme Lord's control. Therefore, all living beings should worship only Him to be well-protected. As a bull, bound through its nose, is held fast, so all men are bound by God's laws. Even as a player sets up and disperses his playthings according to his own will, so the supreme will of the Lord brings men together and disperses them. O King, in all circumstances, whether you consider the soul to be an eternal principle or

not, or everything to exist in some impersonal absolute, or to be an inexplicable combination of matter and spirit, feelings of separation are due only to illusory affection and nothing more."

Narada looked compassionately at the Pandavas. Knowing them to be important instruments in the Lord's arrangements, he had often come to them with his instructions. The brothers listened in respect as he reassured them with eternal truths from the Vedas. He told them to give up their anxiety for Dhritarastra, which was based on ignorance. They could do nothing for the blind king now. Every living being was moved by the force of God and should therefore depend on Him alone. Ultimately, no man could protect or shelter another unless it was also the Lord's desire. Even the man who wanted to give shelter to another was himself in need of protection, being held in the jaws of inevitable death. Thus all intelligent men should worship the Lord as their only assurance of safety.

Narada continued, "The Supreme Person, Krishna, in the guise of all-devouring time, has now descended on earth to eliminate the atheistic demons from the world. His work is almost complete and He will soon depart. You Pandavas may wait here simply as long as the Lord remains on earth."

Narada then informed the Pandavas that Dhritarastra, accompanied by his wife and Vidura, had gone to the southern side of the Himalayas to a mountain where there were many ashrams. He had engaged in mystic yoga, bringing his mind and senses under control. Soon he would attain samadhi and leave his material body, burning it to ashes by invoking the fire element from within himself. Gandhari would enter the fire and follow him to his next destination. Then Vidura, seized both by delight and grief at his brother's departure, would himself leave that place to end his own days.

Narada stopped speaking and indicated that he was ready to leave. After being worshipped by the Pandavas, he rose into the sky and vanished. Yudhisthira thought about what he had said. It was glorious that Dhritarastra had accepted such an end to his life. There was no point in lamenting, nor was there any need to fear that he might have taken offense. The old king had given up material affinities. He would no longer be thinking of material relationships and the politics associated with them. As Narada had made clear, Dhritarastra was meditating on his pure spiritual identity, free of mundane attachments.

As the Pandavas made their way back to their palace, they met Vyasadeva. He told them that Kunti had also gone with Dhritarastra. The brothers were moved by grief to hear the news, but it was not a surprise. For a long time their mother had withdrawn herself from the world. Since she had prayed to Krishna that day He had left for Dwaraka, she had been spending her days in meditation and prayer. She had eaten frugally, finally coming to the point where she took her food once every thirty days. Now she was gone. Thinking again of Narada's instructions, and of all the wisdom they had heard from the other rishis, they controlled their minds. Their mother had acted rightly. It was always the accepted custom to leave for the forest without announcement. After all, death never made announcements when it arrived.

Chapter Thirty-five. The Pandavas Retire

As the thirty-sixth year of Yudhisthira's rule approached, Arjuna visited Dwaraka. He knew Krishna's departure was close at hand, and he wanted to see Him one last time. His brothers were hoping that he might persuade Krishna to make a final visit to Hastinapura. Maybe Krishna could even be convinced to counter Gandhari's curse and remain on earth. Surely that was within His power.

Arjuna had been gone for a few months and Yudhisthira began to observe inauspicious omens. The seasons appeared out of order, and men were abandoning their prescribed duties. There were constant disputes arising between the citizens, and people were cheating each other everywhere. Seeing that the people were overwhelmed by pride, anger and greed, Yudhisthira spoke to Bhima.

"My dear brother, it is now some time since Arjuna left for Dwaraka. I see many portents which indicate that a great calamity has occurred. Has the time for Krishna's departure arrived, as the godly Rishi Narada indicated? What else could account for the many signs of irreligion which we now see? All our good fortune and everything auspicious has come only from Krishna. In His absence, everything will be lost."

Yudhisthira pointed out to Bhima the various omens he had witnessed: the jackals that howled at the rising sun, the dogs that barked fearlessly at him, his horses that appeared to weep. He could hear the shrieks of crows and owls at all times, and thunder constantly filled the sky. The earth seemed to tremble and the wind blew violently, carrying clouds of dust. Deities in the temple seemed to cry and perspire. It appeared as if they were about to leave.

Yudhisthira concluded, "I think that all these disturbances indicate a great loss to the earth's good fortune. The world was fortunate to have been marked with the Lord's footprints. These signs indicate that this will no longer be."

Even as Yudhisthira spoke, a messenger came to inform him that Arjuna had returned. Yudhisthira had him enter at once and Arjuna was soon bowing at his feet and embracing him. Yudhisthira saw that he was dejected. Tears flowed from his eyes and his face was pale. He could barely look at his

brother.

Feeling even more disquieted, Yudhisthira said, "My dear brother, please tell me whether our friends and relatives in Dwaraka are all passing their days in happiness. Is my respectable grandfather, Surasena, happy? Are my maternal uncle Vasudeva and his younger brothers doing well? Are Ugrasena and his younger brother still living? How are Hridika and his son, Kritavarma? Are Akrura, Jayanta, Gada, Sarana and Satrajit all happy? How is Balarama, the Personality of Godhead and the protector of all devotees?"

Yudhisthira went on naming their friends in Dwaraka and asking after their welfare. The Pandavas had often visited Dwaraka and spent happy days there. After listing the chief residents of Krishna's city, Yudhisthira finally asked about Krishna. "Is Lord Krishna, the original Supreme Person, who is always affectionate toward His devotees, enjoying the pious assembly at Dwaraka surrounded by His friends? That all-powerful person, along with Balarama, who is the primeval Lord Ananta, is staying in the ocean of the Yadu dynasty for the welfare, protection and general progress of the entire universe. The members of the Yadu dynasty, being protected by the Lord's arms, enjoy life like the residents of the eternal spiritual world. Under Krishna's protection, they live without fear, surpassing even the gods in their power and opulence."

Looking at Arjuna's downcast face, Yudhisthira asked if he was well. Although the Pandava king suspected that Krishna and His family had departed, he continued to inquire from Arjuna, hoping that there was some other reason for his brother's moroseness.

"My brother Arjuna, please tell me whether your health is all right. You appear to have lost your luster. Is this due to others disrespecting and neglecting you because of your long stay at Dwaraka? Has someone addressed you with unfriendly words or threatened you? Could you not give charity to one who asked, or could you not keep your promise to someone? Could you, a great protector of the people, not give protection to some helpless persons when they approached you for shelter? Have you contacted a woman of questionable character, or have you not properly treated a deserving woman? Have you been defeated on the way by someone who is inferior or equal to you? Have you committed an unpardonable or abominable mistake?" Yudhisthira paused, not wanting to express his greatest fear. Bhima and the twins shed tears as they too guessed the truth. After a

moment of silence, Yudhisthira concluded, "Or, my dear brother, are you now feeling empty for all time because you have lost your most intimate friend, Lord Krishna? O my brother Arjuna, I can think of no other reason for your becoming so sorrowful."

Arjuna could not reply. His mouth was dry and his limbs trembled. He buried his face in his hands and wept. At last he managed to check his tears and said, "O King, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Krishna, who treated me like an intimate friend, has left me alone. Thus my incomparable power, which astonished even the demigods, is gone. I have just lost him whose separation for a moment would render all the universes inauspicious and void, like bodies without life. Only by his merciful strength was I able to vanquish the lusty princes assembled at king Drupada's svayamvara."

Arjuna then described the many incidents where he had been able to achieve incredible feats of prowess due to Krishna's grace. Recounting the numerous occasions when the Pandavas had escaped from precarious and dangerous situations, Arjuna continued in a doleful voice. "The military strength of the Kauravas was like an ocean in which there dwelt many fearsome aquatics. It was insurmountable, but because of Krishna's friendship, I was able to cross it. Great generals like Bhishma, Drona, Karna and others all directed their invincible weapons against me. Yet by the Lord's grace they could hardly touch a hair on my head. Surely it was only due to my lack of esteem for him that I dared engage him as my chariot driver, for he is worshipped and offered services by the best of men who desire to attain salvation.

"O King, his joking and frank talks were pleasing and beautifully decorated with smiles. His affectionate addresses unto me as 'O Partha, O friend, O son of the Kuru dynasty' and all such intimacies I now remember, and thus I am overwhelmed. We used to sleep, sit and loiter together. When we boasted about our chivalry, if he exaggerated, I would reproach him by saying, 'My friend, You are very truthful.' Even in those hours when His value was minimized, He would tolerate my utterings, excusing me exactly as a friend excuses his friend or a father excuses his son."

Arjuna broke off, unable to continue. His brothers all sat stupefied, also saying nothing. The unthinkable had finally happened and Krishna had left. They listened as Arjuna, regaining his composure, went on to describe how, in Krishna's absence, he had been overpowered by a group of cowherds

when he was trying to protect Krishna's wives.

Arjuna looked at his two hands. "Where has my wondrous power gone? I have the same Gandiva, the same arrows, the same chariot drawn by the same horses, and I use them as the same Arjuna to whom all kings offer their respects. But in Krishna's absence, all of them have at once become useless."

Yudhishthira embraced his distraught brother. He sat him on a throne and had servants fan him. After Arjuna had sipped a little water, he told his brothers what had transpired in Dwaraka. "O King, since you have asked me about our friends and relatives in that holy city, I will inform you that all of them were afflicted by the brahmins' curse. As a result, they became intoxicated with wine and fought among themselves with sticks, not even recognizing one another. Now they are all dead."

Arjuna related the details of the terrible event. He explained how years ago a number of boys in Dwaraka had played a joke on some powerful rishis, headed by Narada, when the sages were visiting the city. The boys had dressed up Krishna's son Samba as a woman and placed an iron ball under his clothes, making him appear pregnant. They had then asked the sages, "Will this lady give birth to a girl or a boy?" The rishis, angered by the boys' insolence, answered, "This one will give birth to an iron ball which will destroy your dynasty. Only Krishna and Balarama will survive."

When the Yadu king, Ugrasena, heard about the curse, he had the iron ball ground into a powder and thrown into the ocean. Later, the Yadus observed fearful omens in Dwaraka. They saw the embodied form of Time, black and terrible, moving about the city. The powerful Yadu and Vrishni bowmen shot hundreds of thousands of arrows at him, but none could strike him. Day by day, stronger and stronger winds blew, and the streets swarmed with rats and mice. Earthen pots cracked with no visible cause, wells spewed out their water, and the bodies of men trembled. All sorts of inauspicious creatures—crows, owls and jackals—filled the air with their cries. Asses were born of cows and mules from elephants. Clean, well-cooked food, when served, was covered with worms. The heavy tread of running men was constantly heard, but no one could be observed running. The citizens committed sinful acts without shame. They disregarded the brahmins, forgot to worship the temple deities, and insulted their elders and preceptors. Only Krishna and Balarama did not behave in these ways. When they observed the

fearful portents and heard how the citizens were having frightening dreams, They called an assembly.

With everyone present, Krishna said, "O leaders of the Yadu dynasty, please note these terrible omens that have appeared in Dwaraka, just like flags of Death. We should not remain here any longer. The women, children, and old men should leave the city and go to Sankhoddara. We ourselves will go to the holy Prabhasa, where the river Sarasvati flows toward the west. There we should bathe for purification, fast and fix our minds in meditation. Let us then worship the gods and present them with rich offerings. Then we should worship the brahmins and offer them charity. In this way, we may be able to counteract what these signs portend."

The assembly signaled their agreement and arrangements were made. The Yadava warriors mounted their chariots and set out for Prabhasa, on the seacoast. The women traveled in their midst. When the procession reached Sankhoddara, halfway between Dwaraka and Prabhasa, the women remained while the men continued.

With a loud blast of conchshells and the blare of thousands of trumpets the Yadavas arrived at Prabhasa. They took up their residence in palaces and mansions and performed sacrifices to worship the gods. At the end of the second day, influenced by destiny, they drank large quantities of maireya wine, which had been prepared for the sacrifices. Intoxicated, they began to joke.

Satyaki then insulted Kritavarma, whom he had never forgiven for helping Ashvatthama kill the sleeping Pandava troops. In a mocking voice he said, "What kshatriya possessed of prowess would kill men embraced by sleep? Were they not already dead? O son of Hridika, your action cannot be tolerated."

Kritavarma's anger blazed. Pointing at Satyaki with his left hand as a way to disregard him, he thundered, "Professing yourself a hero, how could you cruelly kill the armless Bhurisrava even as he sat in meditation with his weapons cast aside?"

Krishna threw an angry glance at Kritavarma. Satyaki leapt to his feet. Pulling out his sword he bellowed, "I swear by truth that I will send Kritavarma along the path taken by Dhristadyumna and Shikhandhi. His life and fame have come to an end."

Satyaki ran at Kritavarma, whose reflexes had been dulled by the wine, and with a sweep of his sword beheaded him. Kritavarma's friends then attacked Satyaki and assailed him with iron cooking pots. Pradyumna came to his aid, and the two men stood back to back as a large number of warriors closed on them. Although they put up a brave fight, they were soon overwhelmed and slain.

When He saw His son Pradyumna killed, Krishna became angry. He took up a handful of reeds that were growing nearby. The reeds had grown from the iron powder that had been cast into the ocean on Ugrasena's order. They were like iron rods and Krishna wielded them like deadly weapons. He quickly slew all the men who had killed His son.

Other Yadavas and Vrishnis took up their weapons and entered the fray. Soon a violent battle was raging. When their weapons had been smashed, they too took up the reeds. Bewildered by wine and influenced by Gandhari's and the rishis' curses, they killed one another without compunction. Father killed son, son slew father, and brother killed brother. Like insects flying into a fire, they destroyed one another. In less than an hour, millions of men were dead. Only Krishna and Balarama survived, along with Daruka, who carried the news back to Dwaraka.

Arjuna paused in his narration. His mind was confounded as he recounted the story. He knew that it had been Krishna's desire. The Lord had wanted His own family and followers to leave the world. With the onset of the Kali age, they might create a greater disturbance than the atheistic demons. After all, they were far more powerful than the demons. No one could have checked them. Only if they slew one another could they be killed.

Taking a deep breath, Arjuna continued. He described how Krishna himself had departed. When all the Yadavas and other warriors died, Krishna had watched Balarama sit down in meditation on the seashore. As Balarama became absorbed in trance, the many-hooded divine serpent Ananta-sesha had come out of his mouth. Worshipped by Varuna and other gods, the serpent went toward the ocean and vanished.

Seeing Balarama depart, Krishna entered a nearby forest. He sat beneath a pipkala tree in meditation. As he did so, the principal gods all approached him invisibly. They all desired to see his last pastime on earth. Not far from where Krishna sat there was a hunter. The man had caught a

large fish and found in its belly a lump of iron, the last remnant of the iron ball thrown into the sea. With that lump he had fashioned an arrowhead. While hunting with the arrow, he came across Krishna. By Krishna's own illusory energy, he mistook Krishna's foot to be an animal, seeing it from a distance through the bushes. He released the arrow and struck Krishna's foot, whereupon the Lord departed from the world, worshipped by the gods with Brahma at their head.

Arjuna then told how Daruka had returned to Dwaraka. He had been told that he would find Arjuna there and that he should ask him to take the women to Indraprastha. When Daruka reached the city, he went to Krishna's father Vasudeva and told him the heartbreaking news. Along with Devaki, Vasudeva fell to the ground in a faint. Tormented by separation from Krishna, they both gave up their lives.

Arjuna, who had only recently arrived in Dwaraka, was himself overpowered by sorrow when he heard what had happened, but he tried to follow Krishna's directions. He had first arranged for Vasudeva and Devaki's funeral ceremonies, however. When the funeral pyre was ablaze, Vasudeva's other wives entered the fire, rapt in thought of Krishna.

Arjuna then traveled to Prabhasa in order to perform the last rites for all the slain warriors. Millions of men had died, and it took weeks for Arjuna to arrange for funeral ceremonies for those who had no male members left in the family. The womenfolk were brought from Sankhoddhara, and as the cremations took place many widows entered the fire embracing their lords, thus attaining the same destinations reached by those men.

Finding Krishna and Balarama's bodies, Arjuna marveled at the sight. Their bodies still shone with the same brilliant effulgence as They had in life. Arjuna could understand that it was not possible for Them to die. Their apparent death was simply a display of Krishna's illusory energy. Both Krishna and Balarama were manifestations of the original, transcendent Supreme. Arjuna concluded that the material bodies They left behind were simply meant to bewilder the faithless. The Lord was merciful even to those who desired to be atheists. Stupefied by grief and moving like a wooden doll, Arjuna arranged for expert priests to cremate the bodies of the two Lords. Rukmini and Krishna's other principal queens ascended the funeral pyre and gave up their lives.

When all the funeral ceremonies were completed, Arjuna returned to Dwaraka. He arranged for the remaining women and children, and the brahmins, vaisyas, and sudras, to be taken in chariots to Indraprastha. Krishna had told Daruka that the city would soon be inundated by the sea, and Arjuna was concerned to get everyone out first. They made a sorry procession, wailing and calling out Krishna's names as they left Dwaraka. Even while they were leaving the city, the ocean began to flood the land. Looking behind them they saw waves crashing into the great island fortress and swirling through its streets and houses.

The procession, bereft of heroes, proceeded by slow marches toward Indraprastha. After some days, they reached the Panchajala province. Arjuna decided to camp there for a while. The region was infested with robbers, and when they saw the thousands of richly adorned ladies from Dwaraka, they decided to attack the camp. Coming together in a force, the robbers, dressed as cowherds, rushed at the camp with loud cries. Armed with clubs and bows, they fell upon the ladies and led them away, looting as they went.

Arjuna mounted his chariot and rode toward them, calling out, "O sinful wretches, stop at once. Flee from here now if you have any love of life. Wait only a moment and I will cut your bodies to pieces."

Urged by destiny, the robbers disregarded Arjuna and carried on with their plundering. Arjuna raised his Gandiva but, to his amazement, he found himself barely able to string it. His strength seemed to have disappeared. With great difficulty he drew back the bow and fired his arrows, but they fell short of their targets. The Pandava then tried to invoke the celestial weapons, but they would not appear. In frustration and anger he ran after the robbers and struck them with his bow, but despite his efforts, he was unable to prevent them from taking away many of the Yadu ladies.

Sighing with sorrow, Arjuna could understand that it was somehow the Lord's arrangement. Now that Krishna had departed, his great power had vanished. In a state of complete dejection, he resumed the march toward Indraprastha. When they arrived at the city, Arjuna installed Vajra, the son of Krishna's son Aniruddha, as king. Still only a boy, the prince had not gone to Prabhasa with the older kshatriyas. He was filled with grief for the death of all his relatives, but counseled by learned brahmins, he began to rule over the city.

Once he had ensured that everything was in order, Arjuna decided to return to Hastinapura to see Yudhishthira. As he was about to leave, he heard that Vyasadeva was present in a hermitage near the city and went to visit him. Falling at his feet, Arjuna shed tears, unable to speak.

As Arjuna lay there almost devoid of life, Vyasadeva said, "O child, what is the cause of this sorrow? Have you accidentally slain a brahmin or been defeated in battle? Did you know an untouchable woman or have you fallen in some other way from religious practices? I do not think any of this possible. You should tell me what ails you, O son of Prtha, if you feel able."

Regaining his composure, Arjuna knelt before the rishi. In agony he said, "O great sage, He whose complexion resembled a dark cloud, whose eyes were like a pair of lotus petals, has, together with the lordly Rama, left this world. At Prabhasa, through iron bolts created by the brahmins' curse, all the Vrishni heroes have been slain. Not a single one escaped. Those mighty men killed one another in a fit of anger."

Arjuna broke down and wept as he thought of Krishna and His many friends. The slaughter at Prabhasa reminded him of the awful night at Kurukshetra when Ashvatthama had slain the sleeping Pandavas. Arjuna had lost so many of his family members and friends at that time, and now the remainder of his friends were gone. There was nothing left for which to live.

"O brahmin, just see the perverse course of time. Thinking of this tragedy I cannot find peace of mind. Krishna's death is as incredible as the drying up of the ocean, the falling down of heaven, or the splitting of Mount Himavat. Without Him I cannot maintain my life. And there is yet another calamity which rends my heart."

Arjuna related how he had been unable to protect the Yadu ladies from the robbers. "Right before my eyes, thousands of women were carried away by robbers from the Abhiras tribe. I could do nothing. Alas, this is surely due to Krishna's absence. How can I drag on my useless existence without Him? He who used to drive my chariot, that divine one gifted with splendor and unfading power, that unlimited Govinda -- I will no longer see Him. I am filled with despair and my head swims. I dare not live without the heroic Janardana. As soon as I heard He had gone, my eyes dimmed and I could no longer see anything. O best of men, please tell me what is best for me now, a wanderer with an empty heart, bereft of my kinsmen and friends."

Vyasadeva replied, "Do not grieve. Everything has been ordained by the Lord. Krishna allowed it to happen, although He was capable of preventing it. Indeed, Govinda could alter the course of the universe -- what then of a curse? He who sat upon your chariot and guided you through every calamity was the all-powerful Supreme Himself. Having lightened the earth's burden, He has now ended His human-like pastimes. Through you and your brothers He has achieved the work of the gods. You are crowned with success, for you have pleased the immortal and inconceivable Keshava. Surely now you should think of your own departure. When the hour of adversity arrives, everything is lost. Thus one's prowess, understanding and vision all disappear. This is due only to the influence of irresistible time. Do not lament, O hero. The time has come when you Pandavas should attain the highest end. This is what I consider most beneficial."

Consoled by Vyasadeva's words, Arjuna took his permission and left for Hastinapura.

* * *

When Arjuna finished his narration, his four brothers were stunned. They thought only of Krishna. None could contemplate life without Him. Tears ran down their faces. Distraught, Yudhisthira said, "O best of men, we should understand that time is cooking all creatures in a cauldron. Even the invincible Vrishnis have been rooted out. Even Krishna has left. Now we should act upon Vyasadeva's instructions. There is no point in remaining here. Indeed, the dark age of Kali is already making its entrance. Just see how the citizens are becoming sinful, driven by the influence of the age. We should depart, for the powerful Pariksit, who is ever-protected by the Lord, is qualified to rule the earth."

Yudhisthira's brothers agreed. They knew it was time for them to retire. Pariksit could replace them. Yudhisthira conferred with the brahmins and decided upon a day when he would leave for the forest. When the citizens heard of his determination, they cried out in sorrow and tried to dissuade him, but Yudhisthira's mind would not be changed. On an auspicious day, he installed Pariksit as king, and Kripa as his chief counselor.

The five brothers distributed wealth to the brahmins, performed rituals in honor of Krishna, and gave away heaps of gold and gems in His

name. When all the ceremonies were complete, Yudhishthira took off his royal garments and ornaments and dressed in tree bark. His brothers followed his example. The five of them came out of the royal palace looking like five ascetics. The people cried in grief and were reminded of the terrible day when the brothers had been exiled. This time, they would not return.

Ignoring the citizens' cries, Yudhishthira walked toward the northern gate, his four brothers close behind. Draupadi, seeing her husbands' resolve, hurried along behind them. She had never been separated from her husbands, even when they entered the forest, and she would have died of unbearable grief had she been left behind. After bidding her last, tearful farewells to Subhadra and the other Pandava ladies, who were all given to the constant practice of asceticism and prayer, she set her mind upon renunciation. Like her husbands, her mind was filled with joy as she left the city for the final great journey to the north.

Accepting simple food and water only once a day, the brothers and Draupadi walked steadily toward the Himalayas. They spoke with no one and remained absorbed in thoughts of Krishna. After many days traveling, they reached a great lake at the foot of the mountains. As they approached the lake, they saw ahead of them Agni's brilliant form. The deity addressed them in a booming voice. "O foremost of Kuru's race, listen to my words. I am the god of fire whom Arjuna pleased at Khandava. At that time I gave him the Gandiva. He should now return it. Let him cast it, along with the two inexhaustible quivers, into these waters and Varuna will take it back."

Arjuna bowed to Agni and took his bow and quivers from his shoulder. He had not been able to leave them behind, but now, on Agni's order, he threw them into the water. Agni then disappeared and the brothers continued their journey, seeing in the distance the cloud-covered peak of Mount Himavat. Eventually passing that great mountain, they crossed over a desert and came at last to Mount Meru where lay the abode of the gods. As they made their way through the hilly region, they were joined by a dog, who stayed with them day and night. Soon they reached the foothills of Gandhamadana Mountain, where they had spent much of their exile. They bowed down and offered prayers to the sacred mountain, then began their ascent.

The brothers had been walking for months, and their bodies were emaciated. Weakened and weary, they climbed with difficulty. Suddenly, as

they were ascending a steep mountain pass, Draupadi fell to the ground and gave up her life. Bhima, who was walking immediately behind Yudhisthira, said, "O crusher of enemies, although she never committed any sinful deeds, the delicate princess has fallen to the earth. Tell me why she has been obliged to drop down here." Without stopping or looking back, Yudhisthira replied, "Although married to all five of us, Panchali was always partial to Arjuna. This is why she has fallen."

After they climbed a little farther, Sahadeva fell and died. Bhima again asked Yudhisthira why his virtuous brother had fallen. Yudhisthira replied, "Gifted with knowledge, he always considered himself without compare in wisdom. For this reason he has fallen."

Leaving Sahadeva where he lay, the four brothers continued upwards, still followed by the dog. Soon Nakula, overpowered by sorrow upon seeing Draupadi and Sahadeva die, himself fell. Once more Bhima asked Yudhisthira to explain. "Our righteous brother was the most intelligent of men. However, he felt himself matchless in bodily beauty, and thus he has fallen."

Arjuna was the next to fall, grief-stricken to see his brothers and Draupadi die. In sorrow Bhima asked Yudhisthira why the ever-truthful Arjuna had fallen. "Just before the war, Arjuna had promised to kill all the Kauravas in a single day. For failing to keep this promise, made out of pride, he has been obliged to fall to the earth."

The remaining two brothers and the dog continued their ascent. Before reaching the summit, Bhima fell. As he was lying on the ground, about to give up his life, he asked Yudhisthira what had been his fault. Yudhisthira replied, "O Vrkodara, you were a great eater and you did not consider others while eating. Thus have you fallen."

Fixing his mind in yogic meditation, Yudhisthira went on alone. As he approached the summit he heard a great sound fill the sky. He looked up and saw Indra's chariot descending toward him. "Climb onto my car, O Bharata, and I will take you to heaven."

Yudhisthira bowed to the god. "I have no desire for heaven, O Sakra, nor can I leave my brothers and chaste wife Draupadi behind. They have all fallen on this mountain."

Indra assured him that he would soon see his wife and brothers in

their self-same bodies, but Yudhisthira was still unwilling to leave. "See here this dog," he said, pointing to the animal that was ever at his heels. "It has taken shelter of me and cannot be abandoned. O great god, I will only accompany you if you allow it to also come."

Indra replied that there was no place in heaven for dogs. He told Yudhisthira that there would be no sin in leaving it behind, but the Pandava would not agree. "It is my vow that I will never abandon one who is terrified, who seeks my shelter, who is devoted, who is afflicted or weak, or who begs for life. I cannot leave this creature here."

Despite Indra's entreaties, Yudhisthira would not leave the dog. Suddenly, before Yudhisthira's eyes, the animal transformed into the god of justice, Dharmaraja. Seeing his father, Yudhisthira fell to the ground in obeisance. Dharmaraja raised him up and said, "O king of kings, there are none on earth who can display such virtue. Formerly, I examined you at the Dwaitavana, and again today I have found you to be the greatest exponent of morality. What to speak of the earth, there is no one in heaven who equals you. Unending regions of celestial bliss await you, O King. Quickly, mount Indra's car."

Yudhisthira ascended Indra's chariot. As it rose swiftly into the sky, he was surrounded by celestial beings who praised both himself and Indra. He also saw the godly sage Narada floating in space by his own divine power. The rishi said, "This royal sage Yudhisthira has transcended the achievements of all other kings in heaven. Covering the worlds with his fame and splendor, he has attained the highest region in his human body. Who else has ever been known to achieve such a feat?"

The chariot entered the heavenly planets and, as it descended into a shining mansion, Yudhisthira saw Duryodhana seated on a golden throne. He turned to Narada in surprise and the rishi said, "This king has reached heaven by virtue of his kshatriya practices. He fought fearlessly and gave up his body in battle. Thus he has been promoted to this abode, where he will remain for some time."

Yudhisthira asked where his brothers had gone. He had no wish to remain in heaven, being not attracted to celestial pleasures. Even on earth he had given up his material attachments and desires for sensual enjoyment, preferring instead the transcendental service of the Supreme Lord, Krishna.

That service had given him a sublime pleasure thousands of times superior to material happiness. Yudhisthira looked with disdain at the heavenly opulences Duryodhana was enjoying. His only desire was to remain in Krishna's association along with his brothers and Draupadi. Like himself, they too were devoted to the loving service of Krishna, and he longed to be with them again. Duryodhana could keep heaven, Yudhisthira thought. Without Krishna and His servants, it would be no different than hell.

Indra commanded the celestials to take Yudhisthira to his brothers and Draupadi. They led the Pandava on a path away from heaven. As they proceeded, they were suddenly enveloped by darkness. Through the gloom, Yudhisthira could see wastelands covered with rotting corpses. The air was filled with a fetid smell, and flies, wasps, and gnats flew about. A blazing fire bounded the region. Yudhisthira saw crows and vultures with iron beaks, and evil spirits with needle-like mouths. He saw a river of boiling water full of screaming people, and another of feces and mucus. Trees with razor-sharp leaves lined the path, which was becoming hot as Yudhisthira traveled upon it. Looking around he saw men being tortured.

Astonished by what he was seeing, Yudhisthira asked the guides, "What place is this? Why have you brought me to hell? I wish to see my brothers and Draupadi."

The messengers replied, "We have brought you here at Indra's command, O Bharata, according to your own desire. If you wish to return, we will leave."

Yudhisthira asked to be returned to Indra, and they turned to head back. Just as he did so, he heard voices all around him. "O King, do not leave us! By your presence we are feeling our suffering relieved. Cool breezes blow and our minds are made peaceful by seeing you."

Yudhisthira called out, "Who are you and why do you stay here?"

"I am Bhima!" "I am Arjuna!" "I am Nakula!" "I am Sahadeva!" the voices called back. Yudhisthira heard Draupadi's name, as well as that of Dhristadyumna and other virtuous kings and princes who had followed him on earth. Shocked, he said to his guides, "What perverse destiny is this, that these virtuous men are in hell? I do not believe my senses. Surely this is a hallucination. Am I asleep or awake? Have I become insane or am I simply dreaming? O celestials, hearing the voices of my brothers and friends, I

cannot leave this place. Indeed, they have asked me to stay and give them comfort. Therefore, go back to your own abode and leave me here."

The celestials accompanying Yudhishthira disappeared, leaving him to his thoughts. He could not understand why his brothers were in hell. As he stood in amazement, he suddenly saw Indra and the other principal gods approaching him. By their bodily radiance the whole region was lit up. All the gruesome sights of hell disappeared and were replaced by heavenly landscapes. Yudhishthira saw that he was standing in beautiful gardens of celestial flowers and blossoming trees. A cool, gentle breeze was blowing, carrying exquisite fragrances.

Indra addressed Yudhishthira, "O best of men, be peaceful. Neither you nor your brothers are in hell. Only by an act of deception have you all been shown that region. Every king and indeed every being living in the world of men will see hell, for none can perform only good deeds. Those whose piety is great will receive the fruits of their sins first and then will enjoy great happiness for a long time. Only a slight stain of sin touched you, O King, when you lied to kill Drona. For this you have seen hell, as have your brothers and friends. Now you may enjoy unending happiness."

Indra told Yudhishthira that by performing the Rajasuya he had earned a place in heaven equal to that of Hariscandra, the celebrated king of ancient times who now shared the same opulence as Indra himself. Placing Yudhishthira on his chariot, Indra took him to his assembly hall. There Yudhishthira saw his brothers, exactly as he had known them, shining with splendor and surrounded by celestials—the Maruts, Vasus, Ashvins and Rudras. Draupadi was also there, appearing like the goddess Laksmi herself.

Yudhishthira was shown how all of the warriors who had died at Kurukshetra had attained the heavens. Karna was residing in happiness with his father, Surya. Even the Kauravas had achieved auspicious lives for their performance of religious duties.

Leading the Pandava to a beautiful river of clear, gentle waters, Indra said, "Here flows the Ganga, known in heaven as the Mandakini. Bathe in her waters, O King, and you will acquire a shining celestial form."

Yudhishthira entered the water and emerged with a resplendent god-like form. All his grief and anxiety vanished. As he came out of the waters he was honored and worshipped by the Siddhas and Charanas. He then saw

Krishna seated in Indra's palace manifesting a four-armed form of astonishing beauty and splendor. Arjuna was worshipping Him. When Krishna saw Yudhisthira, He smiled and lifted a hand to bless him.

Seeing Narada nearby, Yudhisthira approached him and asked him how long he and his brothers would dwell in heaven. The sage replied that by their meritorious acts the Pandavas had earned an almost endless stay. "But you brothers are eternal associates of the all-powerful Lord Krishna. Thus wherever He goes for his pastimes, you will also go. Indeed, for the good of all beings, Krishna is forever appearing in some world to display his human-like activities. Just as you cannot be without him, so he also desires to always be with you. Thus your stay in these regions will not be for long. It has only been to show you the destinations of those whom you knew on earth. Pure souls like you reside eternally with the Lord. Only by his illusory potency does it sometimes seem otherwise. Like a magician he creates the material universe, enters it for some time, then winds it up."

Narada concluded that the Lord's only business was to bring all suffering souls back to their eternal positions as his loving servants. He only seemed to become involved in the affairs of the world, but in truth he was always aloof. Under illusion, men become bewildered and indulge in material pleasure, imagining themselves independent enjoyers. In reality, they were parts of the Supreme, dependent upon him for everything. Actual happiness could only be found when one once again gave up his desires to be independent of God. God himself, however, was obviously never influenced by his own illusion. His appearance in the world was to free people from their misconceptions and bring them back to him.

"Those who are too attached to matter cannot understand this knowledge. They must remain in mortal spheres, sometimes coming to heaven and sometimes descending to hell. As long as one does not awaken his original, pure consciousness, realizing his eternal spiritual nature, he is bound in the cycle of birth and death. You Pandavas are fixed in service to Krishna and are liberated. In bringing you to the material world, the Lord simply used you as his instruments. This is understood only by those who are free from illusion."

Yudhisthira felt joy. He gazed at Krishna. Surely nothing in heaven could compare with seeing him. What then of assisting Him in a capacity as servant, friend, and even relative? Absorbed in transcendental happiness,

Yudhisthira could not take his gaze from Krishna. What worlds awaited him now? It did not matter. As long as Krishna was present, he was ready to go anywhere.

The end

Appendix One. Karna's Birth

Once the great sage Durvasa visited King Kuntibhoja. He stayed for some days in the king's palace and was attended by Kunti, then a young girl. Due to her expert service and humble attitude, the sage became pleased with her. He gave her a mantra with which she could summon any god and have him do her bidding.

After the sage had left, Kunti was sitting alone in her room. She gazed out her window and saw the sun rising. Suddenly, she found herself gifted with celestial sight. She was able to see the personified form of the sun. Seeing the effulgent and beautiful deity, her mind became attracted. She began to wonder about the mantra. Did it actually work? Could she summon the sun-god himself? The girl recited the mantra as she thought of Surya. To her amazement, he appeared before her, filling her room with brilliance. The deity, who had a complexion like molten gold and was adorned with shining bracelets and a diadem, smiled at the astonished maiden. "What would you have me do?" he asked.

Kunti almost cowered before the god. "O lord, go back to the place from where you came," she replied in a bashful voice. "It was only childish curiosity that made me call you. Pray forgive me for my folly."

"O slender-waisted girl, I will return as you request, but first I must do something for you. It is not proper that my visit should go in vain. Indeed, the gods' acts always bear fruit. You have desired me. I will therefore bestow upon you a splendid child, furnished with his own armor and celestial earrings to endow him with full power."

Kunti's mouth fell open in horror as the god continued. "O maiden, I will only leave after having enjoyed you. If you do not comply with my words and gratify my desire, then I will curse you, your father, and the brahmin who foolishly gave you the mantra without knowing your character."

Surya told Kunti that all the other gods were laughing at him to see his plight. The girl had called him with desire in her heart and was now rejecting him. He would not leave without giving her a son.

Kunti spoke in an imploring voice. "O great lord of rays, please go to your own abode. Surely such an outrage is not befitting you. I am a maiden and cannot surrender myself to a man until I am properly married. My father,

mother, or other superiors must first bestow me upon another. I will not abandon virtue. In this world, keeping her body pure is considered a woman's highest duty."

Kunti again explained that it had only been childishness and naivete that had made her use the mantra. She begged the god to forgive her and to leave.

Surya would not relent. "It is because you are only a girl that I am already so lenient. Where others might have been punished for insulting me so, I am instead offering you the boon of a powerful child like myself. If I go without enjoying you, I will be the object of ridicule among the celestials. Therefore, surrender yourself to me and receive a son who will be extolled in all the worlds."

Afraid to commit sin, Kunti repeatedly tried to sway the god from his purpose, but to no avail. He remained unmoved. Finally she said, "O lord of the world, how will I be saved from sin and the world's censure? How will the reputation of my house be protected? It seems that my surrendering to you is an act condemned by scripture. Please instruct me how it may be done without my losing my chastity. Surely the virtue, reputation and, indeed, the life of all beings rests in you. Tell me how your proposal may be consistent with virtue."

Surya assured her that there would be no sin in her having intercourse with him. "How could I, who desires the welfare of all beings, cause anyone to commit a sinful act, which leads only to suffering? Do not fear. Even after uniting with me, you will remain a virgin. O fair-complexioned girl, you need have no doubt."

Assured and seeing that she had no choice, Kunti assented to the god's request. He at once entered her by his yogic power and, overwhelmed by his energy, she fell senseless to her bed. The god then departed. Ten months later, Kunti gave birth to a son as beautiful as a celestial. No one but one or two of her most trusted servants knew of her pregnancy and of the birth.

When the child was born, Kunti saw that he was adorned with bright earrings and a natural coat of mail. His eyes resembled those of a lion and his shoulders, even as a newborn baby, were broad. Kunti consulted with her nurse as to what to do with the boy. She was torn. This was her first-born son,

the offspring of the powerful sun-god, but how could she keep him? Although the deity had assured her that she would remain a virgin, who would believe it? How could it ever be acceptable for a maiden to have a child? Who would accept her as a wife if she had already given birth?

Kunti finally concluded that the baby had to be cast away. He was the great Surya's son. Surely Surya would protect him. Kunti also prayed to Vishnu for the boy's welfare. Then, along with her nurse, she took the child in a large wicker basket to the bank of the Ganges. She sat on the river bank gazing at the baby for some time. Tears fell from her eyes and she cried out in pain as she contemplated losing the child. Her anguished voice carried across the water.

"O my son, may all the creatures inhabiting the earth, heavens and waters protect you. May Varuna, god of the waters, and Pavana, god of the winds, carry you safely away. May your powerful father, the god of shining rays, watch over you."

Kunti beseeched many of the gods to look after her son and prayed that he would find a good father and mother. "What a dream she has dreamed who will adopt you as her son," she cried. "Blessed is that lady who will see you crawl on the ground, your radiant face covered in dust and your dark and curling locks strewn about. Fortunate are they who will hear your inarticulate speech and who will see you grow to manhood, like a lion in the Himalayan forests."

Having wept long and bitterly, Kunti at last closed the basket and pushed it out into the flowing river. She watched as it bobbed away on the waters. Then, supported by her nurse, she made her way back to the palace.

The basket finally came to rest in still waters near the city of Champa. There, Adhiratha, leader of the suta tribe, had gone to the river with his wife, Radha. The lady saw the basket and had it brought onto the bank. When it was opened, the couple saw with amazement the effulgent child lying there. Radha at once took the infant onto her lap and asked her husband if she could take him home. She had been praying to the gods for a son and considered that this baby must be a gift from them. With her husband's permission, she brought the child home and raised him with tenderness as her own son. They named him Vasusena, but later he became known as Karna and Radheya.

Appendix Two. Karna Cursed

When Karna attained manhood he approached Drona in order to learn the secrets of the brahmastra. Drona replied, however, that the knowledge he desired should only be given to a qualified brahmin who had practiced vows, or to an accomplished kshatriya who had undergone penance. "O Radheya, you are neither. Indeed, you hail from the suta class of sudras. I will not instruct you."

Burning with anger, Karna bowed before Drona and left for the Mahendra mountain, where he knew he would find Parasurama. When he found the sage, Karna bowed at his feet and said, "I am a brahmin from Bhrgu's race. Kindly instruct me in weaponry. I desire to know the brahmastra."

Parasurama received him kindly and agreed to teach him. Karna then lived at the sage's ashram and learned many types of warfare and weaponry from him. While residing on the heavenly mountain, he became a favorite of the many Siddhas and Gandharvas who sported there. He would often go about with his bow and sword, hunting game and the wild beasts.

Once, while hunting, he accidentally slew a brahmin's cow. Distraught, he went at once to the brahmin and told him what had happened. Dropping to the ground before the sage, he said in a tearful voice, "O best of men, I have killed your cow quite against my will and desire. Forgive me! Please allow me to make some recompense."

But the brahmin, seeing his beloved cow lying dead, was filled with anger. His face turned red and he took hold of his sacred thread, signifying his intention to curse Karna. "O wicked one, you deserve death for this crime. You will suffer the fruit of your foolishness even in this life. When you finally meet in battle with your mortal enemy, your chariot will be swallowed by the earth. As you have carelessly cut down my cow, so will your head be cut off by your foe. Go now, O vile man!"

Karna tried to appease the brahmin, but he would not relent. "My words will not prove false," he replied. Finally Karna went away, hanging his head in sorrow.

Karna remained in Parasurama's ashram for some time, pleasing the sage by his aptitude for learning and by his humble service attitude.

Parasurama taught him everything about the Brahma weapon, as well as other powerful missiles, such as the mighty Bhargava astra.

One day, the sage took a walk in the woods, taking Karna with him. After some time, he became tired and lay down to rest on a grassy slope, placing his head on Karna's lap. As the rishi slept, a large insect crawled onto Karna's leg and began to burrow into his flesh. Digging deeply, the insect drank Karna's blood. Not wanting to disturb his guru, Karna did not move. He sat without showing the least sign of pain.

After some minutes his warm blood ran onto Parasurama's face and awakened him. When he saw the eight-legged insect on Karna's leg, he melted it with his glance. A Rakshasa suddenly rose into the sky and addressed Parasurama with folded palms. "O best of ascetics, you have saved me from a hellish existence. Formerly I lived in the higher planets, but one day I assaulted Bhrgu's wife, who cursed me to become an insect. When I begged for mercy, he told me I would be released from the curse when I came in contact with Rama, the son of Jamadagni. You have rescued me. Thank you, O sage. I will now depart."

The Rakshasa vanished, leaving the rishi glaring at Karna. "O wretch!" he exclaimed. "How can you be a brahmin? No brahmin could tolerate such pain. Only a kshatriya has such patience. Tell me the truth—who are you?"

Trembling, Karna replied, "O lord, I am Karna and I have been born in the suta race, a mixture of brahmins and kshatriyas. Coming to you as my teacher, O scion of Bhrgu's line, I saw you as my father. Thus did I call myself a member of Bhrgu's family. Forgive me, for I am your humble servant."

Parasurama smiled through his anger. Looking down at Karna, who had prostrated himself on the earth with folded palms, the sage said, "Greedy for weapons, you have lied to me. Therefore, I say this: When you face your greatest danger and desperately need your most powerful celestial weapon, you will not be able to remember the mantras. Otherwise, you will be peerless in weaponry. Now leave at once, for this is no place for one who behaves falsely."

Karna went shamefacedly away and later joined Duryodhana in Hastinapura.

Appendix Three. Bhishma's Heavenly Origin

In ancient times there lived a king named Mahavisha. During his long life he performed great sacrifices and, as a result, ascended to Indra's abode at the end of his life. Once in an assembly of the gods, with Brahma present, Mahavisha saw the divinely beautiful Ganga. As he looked at her, a gust of wind suddenly blew away her garments. All the celestials looked away, but Mahavisha continued to gaze at her, captivated by her beauty. For this rudeness, Brahma cursed him as follows: "You will again be born on earth, but you will return here after one life."

Mahavisha thought for a moment, remembering all the monarchs on earth. Among them all he considered a king named Pratipa to be the most pious. He therefore asked Brahma if he might become Pratipa's son, to which Brahma agreed.

Ganga, having seen Mahavisha's unashamed attraction for her, left the assembly thinking of him. As she went away she came across the Vasus, who looked dejected. When she asked them the cause of their despondency, they replied, "We have been cursed by the powerful Rishi Vasista. Thus we must soon take birth as men on earth. For this we are sorry."

Ganga heard how the eight Vasus had tried to take from Vasista his heavenly cow, Nandini. Their leader, Dyau, had been implored by his wife to seize the cow, which was able to give anything one desired. Dyau had assented to his wife's request and, with his brothers' assistance, had stolen the cow. When Vasista discovered the theft, he was furious. Understanding by his mystic power that the Vasus were responsible, he touched holy water and uttered his curse.

The Vasus soon learned of the curse and went before the rishi, remorsefully returning the cow and begging his forgiveness; but Vasista said his words could not prove false. Repeatedly requested for mercy, he finally said, "You eight Vasus will all be born on earth, but you will be freed from the curse quickly. Only Dyau, the chief culprit, will have to remain on earth for a full lifetime. He will be virtuous, powerful and learned in the Vedas, but he will not beget offspring. Indeed, he will have to abstain from the pleasures of women."

The Vasus asked Ganga to go to earth as a woman and become their

mother as they did not wish to enter the womb of any human woman. When Ganga asked who they would choose as their father, they replied, "There is a king named Pratipa who will soon have a son named Santanu. That prince is destined to become our father."

Ganga was delighted. Santanu would be an incarnation of Mahavisha. She smiled. "I will surely become your mother. Go where you will. We will soon meet again."

In due course, the Vasus fell from heaven and Ganga left for earth. Soon after, Santanu, while wandering along the banks of the Ganges, met the goddess. Struck by her beauty, he felt his hair stand on end. Her features were flawless and she was adorned with fine silk robes as beautiful as the filaments of lotus flowers. His mouth dropped open and he could not take his eyes from her.

Ganga was also attracted to the handsome monarch, and she returned his gaze, her dark eyes meeting his and sending a thrill through his body. Moving closer to her, Santanu said, "O beautiful one, whether you are a goddess, a Gandharvi, a Danava, an Asura, or an Apsara, I beg you to become my wife. You seem to have no protector. Allow me to become your shelter."

Ganga glanced down demurely. "O King, I will become your wife and obey your commands, but I will make one condition: you must not interfere with my acts, whether they are agreeable or not. You must also never address me in harsh words. If you act in this way, I will remain with you; but if you act otherwise, I will leave immediately."

The king hardly gave any thought to her request. "Be it so," he replied at once. He brought her back to Hastinapura and the marriage ceremony was performed that day.

Absorbed in Ganga's celestial beauty, Santanu did not notice the passage of time. After a year together, which seemed to him like a few days, Ganga gave birth to a son. But within days of the birth she threw the baby into the Ganges, where it was swept away by the waters. Although horrified, Santanu remembered Ganga's conditions and kept silent, not wanting to lose her.

Each year for seven years a boy was born, and each time Ganga took the child to the river and cast him into the water. The king managed to

restrain himself, but when Ganga was about to drown the eighth child, he could take no more. He ran after her, shouting, "Stop! O cruel woman, why are you killing our children? Murderess of your sons, you are earning great sins by your acts."

Ganga stopped by the river bank and turned toward Santanu. "As you desire a child, I will not kill this one. O King, take the child and raise him as your son. He will doubtlessly bring glory to your line. But in accordance with our agreement, I must now leave."

Ganga then revealed her identity to the mystified king. She told him about Vasistha's cursing of the Vasus. "I have thus released the gods from the rishi's curse. This eighth child is Dyau, who must remain on earth for a full lifetime."

Understanding the situation, and realizing that everything had been ordained by destiny, Santanu tried to change Ganga's mind, but she was resolute. The king then asked that she take the baby with her to the celestial regions. When the child became a young man, he could return to earth. Ganga agreed. Holding the baby close to her breast, she vanished into the river.

Santanu returned in sorrow to his capital, Hastinapura. He continued ruling the people, becoming famous for his virtue. He was loved by the citizens and ruled the world with justice and compassion. It was said that if he simply placed his hand on someone, that person would immediately be relieved of all material pains and anxiety.

One day, some years after Ganga had left, the king was hunting near the Ganges. As he pursued a deer along the river bank he noticed that the river water, which had previously been deep and flowing, had become a trickle. Marveling, the king made his way upriver to find the cause. He soon came across a godlike youth who resembled Indra himself. The amiable-looking boy was holding a large bow. It seemed he had checked the river's flow by damming it with arrows. The king was astonished at this remarkable feat and gazed at the youth, trying to ascertain his identity. The boy suddenly disappeared, and the king, suspecting that it was his son, said to the river, "O Ganga, show me my child."

As soon as he spoke, the goddess rose from the waters holding the boy by his hand. She approached the king and said, "Here is the eighth son

whom we conceived together. O great king, take him now. I have reared him carefully. Instructed by rishis such as Vasista, Shukra and Parasurama, he has become proficient in all aspects of Vedic knowledge and is expert in arms and warfare."

Ganga then vanished, leaving the boy with Santanu. The king took him back to the city, where he would later become famous as Bhishma.

Appendix Four. Questions Posed by Dharma to Yudhisthira

The following questions and answers are not included in the main text:

"What makes one learned? How does one attain an exalted status? What is one's second self and by what does one become wise?"

"By study of the Vedas one becomes learned. Asceticism raises one to an exalted status. Intelligence is his second self, and serving elders makes one wise."

"What is the brahmins' divine attribute? What is their virtuous practice resembling that of the pious, what is their human attribute, and what practice of theirs resembles that of the impious?"

"Study of the Vedas is the brahmins' divine attribute. Their asceticism is like the virtuous practice of the pious, death is their human attribute, and slander by them is their impiety."

"What is the divine attribute of kshatriyas, what is their piety and impiety, and what is their human failing?"

"Arrows and weapons constitute their divinity, sacrifice is their piety and abandoning the distressed their impiety. Fear is their human failing."

"What is the Sama of sacrifice, what is its Yajur and what can it not do without?"

"Life is the sacrificial Sama, mind is its Yajur and it is the Rg which it cannot do without."

Yudhisthira understood his actual meaning. By sacrifice he meant the spiritual sacrifice for obtaining pure knowledge. In the objective sacrifice which one normally performs with fire and mantras, the three Vedas—Sama, Yajur and Rg—are required. In the subjective, spiritual sacrifice, the acquisition of true knowledge, along with life and mind, are as necessary as the mantras of the three Vedas are for the objective sacrifice. Particularly spiritual sacrifice depends upon prayer, which is represented by the Rg mantras.

The Yaksha went on without pause. "What is of greatest value to

cultivators, to those that sow, to those wishing for prosperity and to those who bring forth?"

"Rain is the most valuable thing for cultivators, for showers it is the seed, for those desiring prosperity it is the cow and for those who bring forth it is the son."

"What person, although breathing, endowed with intelligence, respected by the world and enjoying sensual pleasures, is nevertheless said to be not alive?"

"The person who does not satisfy the gods, guests, servants, ancestors and his own self with offerings of sanctified food is said to be dead even though breathing."

"What is weightier than the earth? What is higher than the sky? What is fleeter than the wind? And what is more numerous than grass?"

"The mother is weightier than the earth. The father is higher than the sky. Mind is fleeter than the wind and thoughts are more numerous than grass."

Yudhisthira understood that by serving the mother one was said to obtain the earth and by serving the father one could rise to heaven.

The Yaksha continued, "What does not close its eyes when sleeping? What does not move after birth? What has no heart, and what swells with its own force?"

"Fish do not close their eyes when sleeping. Eggs do not move after birth. A stone has no heart and a river swells with its own force."

"Who is the friend of an exile, of a householder, of a sick person and of a dying man?"

"An exile's friend is his companion, that of a householder is his wife, the physician is a sick person's friend and charity is a dying man's friend."

"Who is the guest of all creatures? What is the eternal religion? O king of kings, what is life-giving nectar, and what pervades this entire universe?"

"Agni is the guest of all creatures. Cows' milk is life-giving nectar. Offering ghee into fire sacrifices made to the Lord is the eternal religion, and this entire universe is pervaded by air."

"What is it that wanders alone? What is born again after its birth? What is the antidote to cold, and what is the largest field?"

"The sun wanders alone. The moon is repeatedly born. Agni is cold's antidote, and the earth is the largest field."

"What is the highest refuge of virtue? What of fame? What of heaven, and what of happiness?"

"Liberality is virtue's highest refuge, of fame it is charity, of heaven it is truth, and of happiness the highest refuge is good conduct."

"What is the soul of a man? Who is the friend given to him by destiny? What is his chief support, and what is his chief refuge?"

"The soul of a man is his son, his wife is the friend given by destiny, clouds are his principal support, and charity his best refuge."

"What is the best of all laudable objects, of all sorts of wealth and of all kinds of happiness? And what is the most important of all gains?"

"Skillfulness is the most laudable object. Knowledge is the greatest wealth. Health is the greatest gain, and contentment is the highest happiness."

"What is the greatest virtue in the world? What religion always bears fruits? What is it that which if controlled never leads men to misery? And with whom does friendship never break?"

"Abstention from harming any creature is the greatest virtue. The religion of the three Vedas is always fruitful. The mind if controlled never leads to misery, and friendship with the righteous never breaks."

"What is it that, by renouncing, makes a man dear to others? What is it which if given up never leads to misery? What is it which if renounced leads to wealth, and what is it which if renounced leads to happiness."

"Giving up pride makes one dear. Abandoning anger never leads to misery. Desire, if renounced, makes one wealthy, and abandonment of avarice leads to happiness."

"For what does one give charity to brahmins, to dancers, to servants, and to kings?"

"One gives to brahmins for religious merit, to dancers for renown, to servants for their support, and one gives to kings for freedom from fear."

"What is it that envelops the world? What prevents a thing from discovering itself? Why are friends forsaken, and what prevents one from going to heaven?"

"The world is enveloped with darkness. Spiritual ignorance prevents self-discovery. Friends are forsaken due to avarice, and connection with the world bars one from heaven."

"For what is a person regarded as dead? What causes a kingdom to be seen as dead, and what makes a sacrifice dead?"

"A poor person, although living, is considered as good as dead. A kingdom without a king is considered dead, and a sacrifice without charity is dead."

"What is the path one should follow? What is spoken of as water, as food, and as poison? What is the proper time for a sraddha?"

"Following in the footsteps of the righteous constitutes the proper path. Space is spoken of as water in the Vedic texts on cosmogony. The cow is considered as food, as it is from milk that ghee is obtained; ghee is then used in sacrifices, and thanks to sacrifices there is rainfall, from which we get food grains. A request is poison. The proper time for a sraddha is whenever a qualified brahmin is available."

Yudhisthira was unsure if his answers were satisfying the Yaksha. He looked at him quizzically. "What is your opinion, O Yaksha?" But the Yaksha simply went on placing more questions.

"What is the characteristic of true asceticism? What of self-control? What constitutes forgiveness and shame?"

"Following one's religious duties is asceticism. Self-control means keeping the mind fixed in remembrance of the Lord. Forgiveness consists of tolerating enmity, and freedom from shame means abstaining from all vile acts."

"O King, what is said to be knowledge? What is tranquility? What is known as the greatest kindness, and what is simplicity?"

"Understanding Brahman is true knowledge. A peaceful heart is tranquility. Kindness consists of a desire for the welfare of all creatures, and simplicity means equanimity of mind."

"What is man's invincible enemy? What is his incurable disease? What man is regarded as honest, and what as dishonest?"

"Anger is the invincible enemy. Covetousness is the incurable disease. A man who is friendly to all creatures is honest, and the cruel man is dishonest."

"What, O great monarch, is known as ignorance? What is spoken of as pride? What is understood to be idleness? And what is called grief?"

"Not knowing one's religious duties is ignorance. Pride means thinking oneself to be the doer of acts in this world, without recognizing that there is a supreme power in control of everything. Idleness is not performing one's religious duty, and ignorance is grief."

"What is known by the rishis as steadiness, and what as patience? What is said to be the best ablution, and what is spoken of as charity?"

"Steadiness means adhering firmly to one's religious duties. Patience is controlling the senses. The highest ablution is to cleanse the mind of all impurities, and charity means to protect all creatures."

"Who is considered learned? Who is an atheist? Who is ignorant? What is spoken of as desire, and what as envy?"

"One who knows his duties is learned. An ignorant man is an atheist, and thus is an atheist ignorant. Desire means longing for worldly things, and envy is nothing more than grief of the heart."

"What is hypocrisy? What is the grace of the gods? What is called wickedness?"

"Falsely posing as a religious man is called hypocrisy. The grace of the gods is the result of charity. Wickedness means slandering others."

"Virtue, profit and pleasure are opposed to one another. How then can these three co-exist?"

"When a husband and wife are happily united for the purposes of performing religious duties, then these three can exist together harmoniously."

"Who, O best of the Bharatas, is doomed to eternal damnation? Speedily answer this question of mine."

"One who summons a brahmin for alms, but then gives nothing, is condemned to everlasting hell. He also goes to unending hell who denies the truth of the Vedas, the brahmins, the gods and the religion of his forefathers. Also that man who although wealthy refuses to give charity must suffer everlasting damnation."

"O King, tell me with certainty what makes one a brahmin? Is it birth, good character, learning or study of the Vedas?"

"Hear, O Yaksha, O worshipable one, what are the true characteristics of a brahmin? It is by behavior alone that he is recognized. Birth and learning, even knowledge of all the Vedas, are useless if there is no good character. He alone is a brahmin who performs his religious duties, offering sacrifices and keeping his senses under control. Otherwise he must be considered no better than a sudra."

"What is gained by agreeable speech? What is gained by he who acts only after careful thought? What does the man with many friends gain? And what does he gain who is given to virtue?"

"One who speaks agreeably becomes dear to all. One who acts with care obtains whatever he seeks. The man with many friends lives happily in this life, and the virtuous man obtains happiness in the next life."

Appendix Five. Brief Biographies of Main Characters

ABHIMANYU: The son of Arjuna and Subhadra. Said to be an incarnation of the moon-god Soma's son. He was slain in the battle of Kurukshetra when just sixteen. He married Uttara, King Virata's daughter, and fathered Pariksit.

ADHIRATHA: A leader of the sutas, the caste generally employed as charioteers. He found Karna after Kunti had cast him away in a basket and raised him as his own son. His wife's name was Radha, and thus Karna was known as Radheya.

AGNIVESHA: A rishi who underwent severe austerities on Mount Mahendra. He was expert in the use of weapons, and both Drona and Drupada studied under him. He received the Agneyastra (fire weapon) from the Rishi Bharadvaja, and passed it on to Drona.

AKRURA: Krishna's uncle and a famous Vrishni. He was a commander of the Yadava army and also acted as one of Krishna's advisors.

ALAMBUSHA: A rakshasa who fought for Duryodhana in the Kurukshetra war. He was Baka's brother, and bore enmity toward Bhima because Bhima slew his brother. He killed Arjuna's son Iravan, and was himself killed by Bhima's son, Ghatotkacha.

AMBA: The king of Kashi's eldest daughter. Bhishma abducted her from her svayamvara to be his brother's bride. Having already committed herself to Shalva, Bhishma released her. When Shalva rejected her as a wife because she had been touched by another, she developed an intense hatred for Bhishma. She worshipped Shiva and obtained a boon that she would kill Bhishma in her next life. She was then reborn as Shikhandhi.

AMBALIKA: The king of Kashi's youngest daughter. She was abducted by Bhishma from her svayamvara and married Vicitravirya. Later she became Pandu's mother by union with Vyasadeva.

AMBIKA: Second daughter of the king of Kashi, abducted from her svayamvara by Bhishma. She married Vicitravirya and, after his death,

became Dhritarastra's mother by union with Vyasadeva.

ANGARAPARNA: A Gandharva chief; also known as Citraratha, who met the Pandavas when they were fleeing from Varanavata after the burning of the lac house.

ARJUNA: Third son of Pandu and Kunti, begotten by Indra. He is famous as Krishna's dear friend and he heard the Bhagavad-gita from Him. He is known by nine other names: Dhananjaya (winner of wealth), Vijaya (always victorious), Swetavahana (he whose chariot is drawn by white horses), Phalgun (born under the auspicious star of the same name), Kiriti (he who wears the diadem), Bhibatsu (terrifying to behold in battle), Savyasachi (able to wield a bow with both hands), Jisnu (unconquerable), and Krishna (dark-complexioned). The name Arjuna means "one of pure deeds." He is said to be an incarnation of the ancient sage Nara.

ASHVINI KUMARAS: Twin gods who act as celestial physicians. They fathered Nakula and Sahadeva through Madri.

ASHVATTHAMA: Son of Drona and Kripa. When he was young, his father was impoverished. Some of Ashvatthama's friends, knowing that he had never tasted milk, once gave him a cup of water mixed with flour and told him it was milk. The boy drank it and danced in glee, saying "I have tasted milk!" His father saw this and was cut to the quick. It was this incident that inspired him to go to his old friend Drupada and beg. Ashvatthama is said to be a partial expansion of Shiva.

BABRUVAHANA: Son of Arjuna and Citrangada, who became the ruler of Manipura.

BAHLIKA: Younger brother of Santanu. He lived a long life and was an advisor to Dhritarastra. He became a commander in Duryodhana's army during the Kurukshetra war. He was finally killed by Bhima.

BALARAMA: Son of Vasudeva and Rohini. Said by the Vedas to be an eternal form of the Supreme Lord who sometimes appears in the material world to enact pastimes. More information about Him can be found in the Bhagavata Purana (Srimad-Bhagavatam).

BHARATA: A king in the dynasty of the moon-god (all kshatriyas are descendents either of Chandra, the moon-god, or Surya, the sun-god) who ruled the earth for thousands of years. The earth planet has been named after him, and it was common during the Mahabharata era to call his descendents by his name. Bharata was born from the union of King Dushyanta and the daughter of Kanva Rishi, named Shakuntala. The story of their marriage and Bharata's birth is recounted in the Mahabharata's Adi Parva.

BHIMASENA: Pandu and Kunti's second son, sired by Vayu, the wind-god. After the great war he was installed by Yudhishthira as crown prince. A story is told in the Skanda Purana that Bhima became a little proud after the war, considering that it was by his own power that he had achieved success in the war. All his brothers attributed their success to Krishna. Wanting to curb Bhima's pride, Krishna took him on Garuda and traveled a long way to the south, where they came to a great lake many miles wide. Krishna sent Bhima to find the source of the lake. Bhima ran around its perimeter, but could not discover its source. As he ran he encountered a number of powerful Asuras. Bhima found himself unable to defeat them and he ran to Krishna for shelter. Krishna lifted and threw the lake away and dispersed the Asuras. He said to Bhima, "This lake was contained in Kumbhakarna's skull, the Rakshasa killed by Rama in a previous age. The warriors who attacked you were from a race of demons who fought with Ravana against Rama." Bhima's pride was thus curbed.

BHISHMA: Son of Santanu, known as the "grandfather" of the Kurus. Although he never became king, he officiated at Hastinapura as regent until Vicitravirya was of age. He is said to be an incarnation of Dyau, the chief Vasu (see Appendix Three). The original text of the Mahabharata contains an entire Parva, the Shanti Parva, devoted to Bhishma's instructions on religion and morality, which he delivered while lying on the bed of arrows.

CHITRASENA: King of the Gandharvas who taught Arjuna the arts of singing and dancing while he was in heaven. He later captured Duryodhana, whom Arjuna and Bhima had released. Chitrasena was also the name of a king of Trigarta who fought with the Kauravas, and also the name of one of Karna's sons.

DEVAKI: Krishna's mother and the wife of Vasudeva, a chief of the Vrishni clan. Details of her life can be found in the Bhagavata Purana.

DHAUMYA: An ascetic rishi who became the Pandavas' guru and guide. The younger brother of Devala, another famous rishi.

DHRISTADYUMNA: Son of Drupada, born from the sacrificial fire. Said in the Vedas to be an expansion of the fire-god, Agni.

DHRISTAKETU: A son of Sisupala, king of the Cedis, who befriended the Pandavas and supplied them with an akshauhini division of troops for the Kurukshetra war. He was slain by Drona. After the war, his sister married Nakula. He was said to be one of the celestial Visvadevas incarnating on earth.

DHRITARASTRA: The blind son of Vyasadeva, born of Ambika after the death of her husband, Vicitravirya. He became king in Hastinapura after Pandu retired to the forest. He was the father of the Kauravas. In the Bhagavata Purana it is said that, after practicing yoga, he achieved liberation, merging into the Supreme Brahman at the end of his life.

DRAUPADI: Daughter of Drupada, king of Panchala, and wife of the five Pandavas. In her previous life she was an ascetic woman named Nalayani who received a boon from Shiva that she would have five husbands in her next life. The epitome of womanly skills, she once gave advice on how to serve a husband to Satyawidha, one of Krishna's principal wives. She was said to be an expansion of the Goddess Lakshmi. Also known as Panchali.

DRONA (DRONACHARYA): The Kurus' martial teacher. The sage Bharadvaja once caught sight of the Apsara Ghrtachi and, as a result, semen fell from his body, which he caught in a pot. Drona was later born from that pot. He was taught by Agnivesya and Parasurama. Said to be an expansion of Brhaspati, the celestial seer and preceptor of the gods.

DRUPADA: King of the Panchala province in Bharata. He was a staunch ally of the Pandavas, respected as the senior most king among their allies. He formed an enmity with Drona after the latter had come to him for charity and had been refused. Drona finally killed him in the Kurukshetra

war. Drupada was also known as Yajnasena, and is said to be an expansion of the celestial Maruts.

DURVASA: A powerful rishi famous for his quick temper. The Puranas and Mahabharata contain many stories about Durvasa. He is particularly famous for having granted Kunti the boon that she could summon any god to do her will, which resulted in the births of the Pandavas from five principal deities. He is said to be an expansion of Shiva.

DURYODHANA: Eldest of Dhritarashtra's sons and leader of the Kauravas. From childhood he formed an enmity with the Pandavas, which later resulted in the Kurukshetra war. He was killed by Bhima and went to the heavenly planets as a result of his adherence to kshatriya duties. He was said to be an expansion of Kali, the god presiding over the dark age.

DUSHASHANA: Duryodhana's eldest brother and one of his inner circle of close advisors. He grievously offended Draupadi and the Pandavas, and as a result Bhima vowed to kill him and drink his blood. He did so during the great war.

EKALAVYA: Son of Hiranyadhanu, a Nisadha tribal chief. He became quite skilled in archery by worshipping Drona, but he was ultimately cursed by him. He was killed by Krishna.

GANDHARI: Daughter of the king of Gandhara, who became Dhritarashtra's wife. Having once pleased Vyasadeva by her service, she was blessed by the sage that she would have one hundred sons. After marrying the blind Dhritarashtra, she covered her own eyes with a cloth for the rest of her life. She is thus famous as one of the most chaste ladies in Vedic history. She died in the forest with her husband and Kunti.

GANGA: A goddess who appears in this world as the river Ganges. She was Bhishma's mother (see Appendix Three). Her origin is described in various Vedic texts, including Bhagavata Purana and Ramayana. The river water descends from the spiritual world after touching Lord Vishnu's foot and is thus considered sacred.

GHATOTKACHA: The son of Bhima and the Rakshashi Hidimbi.

He became a leader of the Rakshasas and assisted the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra war. Karna killed him with Indra's celestial Shakti weapon.

INDRA: King of the gods, also known as Purandara and Sakra. The Vedas contain numerous stories about this deity, who became Arjuna's father.

JARASANDHA: King of Magadha and a powerful enemy of Krishna. His father, Brhadratha, once approached a sage to seek a blessing to have a son. The sage gave him a mango, which the king divided into two, giving half to each of his wives. They each gave birth to half a child, and the king threw away the halves. A Rakshashi named Jara later found the two halves and joined them together, whereupon the body came to life. The child was then named Jarasandha, meaning 'joined by Jara.' The Bhagavata Purana describes the history of his inimical relationship with Krishna. He was killed in a wrestling match with Bhima.

JAYADRATHA: King of Sindhu who married Dhritarastra's daughter Dushala. When he was born, a heavenly voice announced that he would be a powerful warrior but would be beheaded by an enemy of unparalleled strength. His father, Vridhakshetra, then cursed whomever would cause his son's head to fall to the ground to himself die, his own head shattering into a hundred fragments. He was killed by Arjuna at Kurukshetra.

KAMSA: Maternal uncle of Krishna who usurped the throne from his father, Ugrasena. He was killed by Krishna. Details of his life are found in the Bhagavata Purana.

KARNA: Firstborn son of the Pandavas' mother Kunti from her union with the sun-god (see Appendix One). He became the chief support and best friend of Duryodhana, who made him king of Anga. He was killed by Arjuna at Kurukshetra and went to the sun planet. Other names of Karna include Vasusena, Vaikartha and Radheya.

KRIPA (KRIPACHARYA): Son of the sage Saradvan, who was once practicing asceticism in the forest when he saw the Apsara Janapadi. He passed semen, which fell into a clump of reeds, and a boy and girl were born from it. They were named Kripa and Kripa. They were found and brought to Santanu, who was later told of their origin by Saradvan. Kripa was taught

Dhanurveda, the martial arts, by his father, and he became one of the Kurus' martial teachers. He survived the Kurukshetra war and counseled the Pandavas when they ruled the world. Later, they appointed him preceptor of their grandson, Pariksit.

KRISHNA: Said by the Vedas to be God, the Supreme Person, who is the origin of all other incarnations of the Godhead such as Vishnu and Narayana. The Bhagavata Purana contains extensive descriptions of His qualities and activities. He spoke the Bhagavad-gita to Arjuna at the beginning of the Kurukshetra war.

KRITAVARMA: A chief in the Yadu dynasty. A devotee of Krishna, he was the commander of the Yadu army. Krishna offered the army to Duryodhana for the Kurukshetra war, and thus they and Kritavarma fought against the Pandavas. Kritavarma survived the war, but was later killed at Prabhasa during a fratricidal quarrel among the Yadus.

KUNTI: The Pandavas' mother. She was the sister of Vasudeva, Krishna's father. Her own father, Surasena, had given her as a baby to his close friend King Kuntibhoja, who had no children. She was named Prtha at birth, but became better known as Kunti after being raised by Kuntibhoja.

KURU: Ancient king and founder of the Kuru dynasty (see family tree in Appendix Four). Due to his performance of sacrifice and asceticism at the site, the place known as Kurukshetra, named after Kuru, is considered sacred.

KUVERA (VAISHRAVANA): God of riches and one of the four universal protectors or Lokapalas. Known as the celestial treasurer.

MARKENDEYA: An ancient rishi said to have lived through thousands of ages. The Mahabharata contains many stories about him.

NAKULA: One of the twin sons of Pandu and Madri, begotten by the twin Asvini gods. He was a maharatha warrior renowned for his expertise with a sword. He conquered the western regions of Bharata, before Yudhisthira's Rajasuya sacrifice. Along with Draupadi, he married a princess of Chedi named Karenumati.

NARADA: A celestial sage also known as Devarshi, or the rishi among the gods. He is famous as a devotee of Krishna and frequently assists Him in His pastimes on earth. The Vedas contain innumerable references to Narada's activities and teachings.

PANDU: Father of the Pandavas born to Vicitravirya's widow queen Ambalika by the grace of Vyasadeva.

PARASARA: A powerful rishi, grandson of Vasista, who fathered Vyasadeva by conceiving him with Satyawati when she was still a maiden. Once Satyawati ferried the sage across a river and he was attracted by her beauty. He asked if he could have union with her, promising that by his mystic power she would not lose her virginity. She agreed and they united on an island in the middle of the river, which Parasara shrouded from view by creating volumes of mist. Vyasadeva was immediately born and grew at once to manhood.

PARASURAMA: A rishi said to be an empowered incarnation of Vishnu. He is famous for having annihilated all the kshatriyas of the world after his father, Jamadagni, had been killed by a king named Kartavirya. An expert in the Vedic military arts, he was the martial teacher of Bhishma, Drona and Karna. The Mahabharata contains various stories about his exploits.

PARIKSIT: Posthumous son of Abhimanyu, the Pandavas installed him as king in Hastinapura when they retired. He was named Pariksit, meaning 'the examiner', as the brahmins said he would come to examine all men in his search for the Supreme Lord, whom he saw while still an embryo in his mother's womb. He became famous as the hearer of the Bhagavata Purana from the sage Sukadeva Goswami.

SAHADEVA: The youngest Pandava. One of the two twin sons of Madri fathered by the Asvini gods. He conquered southern Bharata before Yudhisthira's Rajasuya sacrifice. Famous for his perceptive powers and intelligence, he was appointed as Yudhisthira's personal advisor after the Kurukshetra war. Besides being married to Draupadi, he married a princess of Madra named Vijaya.

SANJAYA: Dhritarastra's charioteer and secretary. Although he belonged to the suta caste, he was a spiritually advanced disciple of Vyasadeva, who gave him the power to see the events during the Kurukshetra war. Consequently, he narrated all the battle scenes to Dhritarastra.

SATYAKI: A Vrishni hero who became Arjuna's martial disciple. He was a close friend of Krishna. A powerful maharatha, he fought for the Pandavas at Kurukshetra, surviving both the war and subsequent massacre of sleeping soldiers by Ashvatthama. He died at Prabhasa during the fratricidal battle among the Yadus.

SHAKUNI: Son of King Suvala and brother of Gandhari. Acted as close confidant and mentor to Duryodhana. Although a powerful kshatriya, he preferred cunning and underhanded methods to open combat. Said to be an expansion of the deity presiding over the Dvapara age (third in the cycle of four ages), he was slain at Kurukshetra by Sahadeva.

SHALVA: King of Saubha. He fought Bhishma for Amba's hand after Bhishma kidnapped her from her svayamvara. Due to his strong friendship with Sisupala, whom Krishna killed, he became Krishna's enemy. He attacked Dwaraka in the huge airplane he had received from Shiva. Said to be an incarnation of the Asura Ajaka, Krishna killed him.

SHALYA: Ruler of Madra and brother of Pandu's second wife Madri. Although the Pandavas' friend, and having a particular friendship with Yudhisthira, he was tricked by Duryodhana into fighting for the Kauravas at Kurukshetra. Said to be an incarnation of the Daitya Samhlada, Yudhisthira killed him in the war.

SANTANU: Great grandfather of the Pandavas and Kauravas, and Bhishma's father from his union with Ganga (see Appendix Three). After retirement, he went to Mount Archika in the Himalayas and practiced asceticism, finally attaining liberation. It is said in the Bhagavata Purana that his elder brother, Devapi, still lives on earth in a place called Kalapa, awaiting the commencement of the next Satya-yuga (golden age) when he will become king.

SHIKHANDHI: Son of Drupada and a reincarnation of Amba. He

was born as a woman and later became a man by the grace of a Yaksha named Sthunakarna. Remembering his enmity from his previous life, he vowed to kill Bhishma. It was due to him that Arjuna was able to approach and finally slay Bhishma. Ashvatthama killed him during the night slaughter of the sleeping Pandava warriors.

SISHUPALA: King of Chedi and an avowed enemy of Krishna. The Bhagavata Purana describes his previous existence as Jaya, a gatekeeper in the spiritual Vaikuntha world. Due to a curse, he and his brother Vijaya had to take birth in the material world for three lives as demons (his other two incarnations were Hiranyaksha and Ravana). Krishna killed him at Yudhisthira's Rajasuya sacrifice.

SUBHADRA: Krishna's sister, said to be an incarnation of Yogamaya, the Lord's personified spiritual energy. Her birth is described in the Bhagavata Purana. She married Arjuna and they had a son named Abhimanyu. Unlike her co-wife Draupadi, no details are given in the original text about how she ended her life.

SUSHARMA: King of Trigarta and brother of Duryodhana's wife, Bhanumati. He led a huge army and concentrated on fighting Arjuna during the Kurukshetra war, having taken a vow to kill him. He was slain by Arjuna.

ULUPI: Daughter of the Naga king Kauravya, who became Arjuna's wife. They had a son named Iravan, who was killed at Kurukshetra. She married Arjuna during his one year exile from Indraprastha, only spending one day with him after their wedding. She was reunited with him in Hastinapura after the war.

UTTARA: A princess of Virata whom Arjuna taught dancing during his final year of exile. She married Abhimanyu and their son was named Parikshit.

VASUDEVA: Krishna's father, after whom Krishna Himself is named. Details of his life and previous births are given in the Bhagavata Purana.

VIDURA: Son of Vyasadeva and a palace maidservant. He was said

to be an expansion of Yamaraja, the lord of justice. Once a rishi named Mandavya was mistaken for a robber. The king arrested and punished him by having him pierced by a lance. The sage later went to Yamaraja and asked why this had happened and was told that in his childhood he had pierced an insect with a blade of grass. Hearing that he had received punishment for a mistake made when he was still an ignorant child, the sage cursed Yamaraja to take birth on earth as a sudra. Thus he became Vidura.

VIRATA: King of Matsya, where the Pandavas spent their final year in exile. He joined with the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra war, bringing an akshauhini division of warriors. Drona killed him in the battle. He was said to be an expansion of the celestial Maruts.

VYASADEVA: The sage who authored the Mahabharata. Born from the union of Parasara Rishi and Satyawati, he is known as Dwaipayana because he was born on an island (see Parasara). He compiled the Vedas and is said to be an empowered incarnation of Vishnu. His son's name is Sukadeva, the famous reciter of the Bhagavata Purana.

YADU: Ancient king and founder of the Yadu dynasty, in which Krishna appeared (see family tree in Appendix Four). Details of Yadu's birth and life are given in the original text of the Mahabharata and also the Bhagavata Purana.

YUDHISTHIRA: Eldest Pandava, born from the union of Kunti and the god Dharma. He performed a Rajasuya sacrifice which established him as world emperor. Famous for his adherence to virtue and truth, he is also known as Dharmaraja, as well as Ajatasatru, which means "one who has no enemies." After the war he ruled the world for thirty-six years and was succeeded by Pariksit.

Author's Note

As I stated in my Introduction, I have tried my best to remain faithful to the original text of the Mahabharata, working mainly from Sri Manmatha Dutt's translation (the Calcutta edition of the northern manuscript). I am most grateful to that scholar for producing his excellent text. Of course, after five thousand years and at least as many retellings, one would expect there to be variations in the details of the story. The reader may thus have heard other details. Still, I think it is fair to say that the central story is common to almost all versions.

One of my main aims was to make the work accessible without losing the spiritual message, a message given its fullest expression in the Bhagavad-gita. I would recommend everyone to read the complete text of Bhagavad-gita; I have presented it only in an abbreviated form in this book. My own references to the Bhagavad-gita text were taken from the translation with elaborate purports by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (Bhagavad-gita As It Is).

In parts, I found the Mahabharata translations in conflict with the Bhagavata Purana, and in such cases I deferred to the Puranic version (again I used as my reference Bhaktivedanta Swami's translation, published as *Srimad Bhagavatam*). The Mahabharata is a Vaishnava text, intended to give us a better understanding of -- and attraction for -- the Supreme Lord, particularly in His original form as Krishna. The Bhagavata Purana deals specifically with the Lord's many incarnations, culminating in a description of Krishna's pastimes on earth. I was concerned to properly present this aspect of the Mahabharata, and therefore felt the Bhagavata Purana's version would be best. The differences are minimal, however, and occur mainly in the final chapter.

As with Ramayana, my earlier work, I have used the omniscient voice. This is also how the original is presented. The book was first written by the Rishi Vyasadeva, who is said in the Bhagavata Purana to be the "literary incarnation" of God. He was specifically empowered by the Lord to compile the Vedic literature. Even now he is said to be still residing somewhere in the Himalayas, practicing asceticism.

In order to keep the story flowing I have abridged some sections and omitted others. For example, there are lengthy narrations unrelated to the

story of the Pandavas, such as the famous tale of Savitri. I omitted such sections. Perhaps in a later work I will present these stories separately. There is also one complete and lengthy parva devoted to Bhishma's instructions (Shanti parva) delivered on the bed of arrows. I have also omitted that. His instructions formed two full books in my translation, worthy itself of a separate study.

This is not an academic work. I have tried to present the original as transparently as possible but, inevitably, in presenting the story I comment on the characters and action. I pray that by the grace of the great saints in our disciplic succession, which descends from Vyasadeva, my perspective has been consistent with his intended meaning.

I hope in my attempt to share Mahabharata with others I have not unwittingly offended anyone. I am open to hearing from my readers; and if any errors are found, then I will correct them in future printings.

Thank you for reading the book. I hope you found it enjoyable.

Om Tat Sat.

About the Author

Krishna Dharma is the author of a number of English versions of Ancient Indian classics including Bhagavat Purana, Ramayana, Panchatantra and other literatures. He is also a broadcaster, appearing regularly on the BBC's 'Pause for Thought', and has written many published articles giving the Vedic spiritual perspective on current events. Since 1979 he has been a student of His Divine Grace A.C.Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (Srila Prabhupada), the Founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and author of many acclaimed English translations of the Vedic scriptures. Krishna Dharma's main aim is to make these ancient teachings accessible and relevant to today's world. His motto is 'Spiritual Solutions for Material Problems', which sums up his overall writing mission, namely to address the dilemmas facing society with the profound teachings found in the Vedic scriptures.

He lives in Bushey, England with his wife Chintamani and three children Madhva, Radhika and Janaki. You can find him on Twitter (@krishnadharma) and Facebook. His personal website and blog is at www.krishnadharma.com