

## CHAPTER 14

### THE EXIT OF PANDAVAS

**I**t was a pitiable sight. Parikshit, the little boy with the crown on his head, plaintively approached his grandfather and others, and holding their feet fast, he prayed that he too might accompany them to the forests. He would gladly eat roots and fruits, engage himself in sacred ceremonials, and be happy. “Please entrust the kingdom to some virtuous minister and allow me to come with you, so that I might serve you and make my life worthwhile,” he appealed. Those around him in the hall were moved to tears by his agony at being left behind. Rocks would have melted in sympathy, had they listened to his anguish.

Dharmaraja managed heroically to suppress his emotions. He lifted the boy and placed him on his lap. He poured consolation and courage into his ear. “Dear child!

Don’t become so weak-minded. You are a child born in the dynasty of Bharatha; can a sheep be born in a dynasty of lions? Your father, mother and grandfathers are full of courage, bold champions of truth, who made their names famous in the world. So, it is not fit that you should weep thus. Henceforward, these Brahmins are your grandfathers, your parents. Take their advice and rule this land accordingly. Live up to the grandeur and glory of your name. Stop grieving over us.”

But the boy was lovingly adamant in spite of all the persuasive advice of the elders. He lamented, “Grandpa! I am too young to convince you with my pleading. I know it. But listen, I lost my father, even before I was born. You brought me up with the care and affection that my father would have showered upon me had he lived. And now, when I love to sing and play and roam about with my companions, you hoist on my head this great empire. Can this be right? Is it justice? Instead of leaving me alone steeped in sorrow, you could leave, after severing my head with your sword. Alas! what harm have I done to you that you should punish me thus? Could you not have scotched me in my mother’s womb, on the day my father died? Was my lifeless body resuscitated in order that you may inflict this assignment on me?” Parikshit continued to condemn himself for his fate, in this strain, for long.

Arjuna could not stand it any longer. He covered the boy’s mouth with his palm. He caressed the child with sweet

affection. He pressed his lips on his head. “Child! It is a disgrace to the Kshatriya clan that you should behave like a coward. We too lost our father; we too grew up under the fostering care of ascetics and monks. At last, we were able to win the affection of our uncle and, after overcoming many a formidable handicap, we established our sovereignty over this kingdom. He who guarded us, guided us and directed our steps throughout will certainly be your guardian and guide. Don’t lose heart; follow the advice which these Brahmins and Ministers will render, for some years. Later, you will be able to solve the problems of empire yourself,” he said.

Parikshit could not be assuaged. He said, “Grandpa! Are you now discarding the throne and the kingdom and placing them on my head? Well, be with me for some years more, teach me the art of government and the principles and then you can leave. I was happy and free, romping and roaming with no trace of care, for I was confident I had grandfathers to guard me, though I had lost my father. Now, if you too desert me, what will be my fate? You were the centre of all my hopes, the support on which I relied; and, you are plunging me suddenly into despair and deserting me.” He wept aloud, rending the hearts of all who saw and heard. He rolled on the ground, holding the feet of the elders.

Arjuna lifted him up with both hands and embraced him. He kept him on his shoulders and fondled him. He wiped the strings of pearly tears that rolled down his cheeks. He could not arrest his own tears while doing so. Turning

to the Brahmins standing around gazing at all this, Arjuna asked them why they were only silent witnesses, not attempting to console the boy.

They were really too full of grief themselves to think of assuaging Parikshit. They said, “The sharp words this child is lisping are wounding us like arrows; his anguish is petrifying us. What can we tell him? How can we console him? What can instil courage into him now?” They too were overcome with grief.

Kripacharya, the teacher of the family, succeeded at last in suppressing his grief. He wiped off the tears from his own eyes with the ends of his garment. He spoke to Arjuna thus: “What do you want us to tell this boy? We do not feel like saying anything. We are struck dumb. You are this day renouncing the empire which you gained after a victory for which rivers of blood flowed, for which millions laid down their lives, for which you strove for years. You have not ruled over it for a thousand years, no, not even for a couple of centuries, or even for seventy years. Who can say what lies in the womb of time? Of course, the actions of the great will have some inner purpose. Pardon us, you are our overlords; you know best.” Kripacharya stood with head bent, for he was heavy with grief.

Dharmaraja came forward a few steps and addressed the *Acharya* (Guru). “Every act of mine was according to the command of Krishna, as you know. I dedicated all my activity to Him. I played my role as He dictated. I did not

desire or retain any individuality. All my duties and obligations have faded out with departure of the Lord. Of what use is the survival of Dharmaraja alone now? I cannot continue on this land even for a minute, since Kali has come to sway. It is your duty now to guard this boy, guide and train him so that he may be secure on the throne. Preserve the adherence to Dharma; continue the dynastic traditions; maintain the honour and fair name of the line. Love him and foster him as your own son.” Thus saying, he placed the hands of Parikshit in the hands of Kripacharya. All those who were there, including Dharmaraja and the Acharya were in tears that moment.

In a few minutes, Vajra was called in. He was informed that from that very day, the Emperor of Bharath was Parikshit. So, Vajra paid homage to him as befits the suzerain of the continent. The Ministers and the Brahmins too honoured him as their ruler with due ceremony. Afterwards, Dharmaraja held the hands of Parikshit and placing on them the hand of Vajra, he announced, “This is Vajra, the Lord of the Yadavas. I now install him as the King of Mathura and of the Surasena State.” He placed on Vajra’s head a diamond-studded golden crown. “Be brothers both of you, staunch allies in peace and war, inseparable in friendship,” he exhorted. He called Vajra aside and advised him to treat Parikshit as his own paternal uncle. He advised Parikshit to revere Vajra as he would revere Aniruddha himself. He told both of them that they ought to ensure the continuance of Dharma unimpaired and to consider the welfare of their subjects as the very breath of life.

Then, the Pandava Brothers showered auspicious rice grains on the heads of both Vajra and Parikshit. The Brahmin priests recited appropriate mantras. Trumpets flared and drums were beaten. With tears in their eyes, Vajra and Parikshit prostrated before Dharmaraja and the rest. The Pandava brothers could not look the two dear darlings in the face; they were so overcome with detachment. They just held them in one quick embrace and spoke just one word of loving farewell, before they filed out into the beyond, with nothing on, except the clothes they wore.

At this, the kith and kin, the citizens, the queens and others in the zenana, the courtiers and the maids all raised pathetic wails. The citizens fell across the path of the ruler and tried to hold fast to his feet. They prayed piteously that he should stay. They appealed to them to take them also with them. Some brushed aside objections and ran along with the royal party. The Pandavas, however, never turned back; they never spoke a word. Their ears were closed to entreaties. Their minds were fixed on Krishna. For the rest, they moved straight on, like men blinded by a fanatic resolve, heeding none, observing none.

Draupadi, with her maids, came running behind them calling on her lords one by one separately by name. Parikshit too pursued them along the streets; but he was caught and carried away by the Ministers who tried to pacify him, though they were themselves greatly affected. But the Pandavas walked unconcerned, neither asking those who followed, to stop nor permitting those who desired to join to come along.

Hundreds of men and women had to stop when they were too tired and they mournfully returned to the capital. Others who were hardier kept on. The women of the zenana, unused to sun and winds, were exhausted quickly and they fell fainting on the road. Maids lamenting the terrible events brought relief to them. Some ventured even into the forest, but had to return fast, after encountering the horrors of the wilderness. When dust storms rose, many citizens placed the dust reverentially on their foreheads, taking it to be the dust of the feet of Dharmaraja. Thus, passing through bush and briar, the brothers soon got out of sight. What then could the people do? They returned to Hasthinapura heavy with unbearable grief.

The Pandavas stuck to the vow of *Mahaprasthanam*. That vow required that they should not eat or drink anything on the way, they should not rest, they must proceed straight on, in the northern direction, until they fell dead. This is the vow they observed, so grim and tight.