

CHAPTER 18

THE ESCAPE OF TAKSHAKA

When Vyasa yielded thus to his importunity, Parikshit who was all attention, replied in a voice stuttering with emotion. “Master, I do not see clearly the reason why my grandfather destroyed the *Khandava Vana* (the Khandava Forest) by means of a conflagration. Tell me how the Lord Krishna helped him in the exploit. Make me happy by relating to me this episode.” Parikshit fell at the sage’s feet and prayed that this may be described to him. Vyasa complimented him and said, “Right, you have made a request which does credit to you. I shall comply.”

He continued, “Once, when Krishna and Arjuna were resting happily on the sands of Yamuna, oblivious of the world and its tangles, an aged Brahmin approached them

and said, ‘Son, I am very hungry. Give me a little food to appease it. I cannot keep alive, unless you give me this.’ At these words, they were suddenly made aware of a strange presence. Though outwardly he appeared natural, there was a divine effulgence around him which marked him out as someone apart. Meanwhile, Krishna came forward and accosted him. ‘Great Brahmin, you do not appear merely human. You will not be satisfied with ordinary food, I can surmise. Ask me for the food that you desire; I shall certainly give you that.’ Arjuna stood at a distance watching this conversation with amazement. For, he heard Krishna, who allayed the hunger of all beings in all the worlds, asking this lean hungry Brahmin, what food will satisfy him! Krishna was enquiring so quietly and with so much consideration that Arjuna was filled with curiosity and surprise.

‘The Brahmin suddenly burst into laughter and said, ‘Lord, do you not recognise me? There is nothing in this world—nay—in all the fourteen worlds that is beyond your ken. I am Prana, one vital principle, in your Creation. I am Agni the Fire-principle. I regret to inform you that even I have fallen ill. To cure my indigestion I feel I must consume the arboreal juice of the Khandava Forest. That forest must be burnt in flames. That alone can appease my hunger and restore my appetite.’

“At this, Krishna asked him, ‘Well, consume it. Why did you come to Me for this? This is indeed amazing. You have the power to reduce the universe into ash! Why do

you crave another's help?' When Krishna asked him thus, pretending that he did not know, Agni answered, 'Lord! You know everything. Does not the great serpent, Thakshaka live in this Khandava Vana, with his kith and kin, his attendants and associates? Indra, the God of Rain, is his close friend, so He has undertaken the responsibility of guarding that forest against fire and other calamities. He has given his word of honour that he will save the forest and thus, save Thakshaka. So, as soon as I start eating up the forest, Indra will send his minions and soak the place with rain. I will be scotched into inaction; I cannot eat any more. So, I am taking refuge in You.'

"Krishna laughed at his fears. He said, 'If so, we shall help you out. Tell us what we should do and we are ready.' Agni was delighted. He exclaimed, 'I am indeed blessed. I am saved. You can, if you only decide to keep back the rain that Indra showers by covering the forest with a roof of arrows that will allow me to consume the Vana undisturbed.' Krishna assured him that his request will be fulfilled. Your grandfather addressed Agni thus: 'You can burn up the Vana without hesitation. My arms have enough strength to oppose and overwhelm not one Indra but even ten millions of them. But I have not got with me the arrows necessary for this operation and the chariot that can carry all that weight. If these are supplied, I shall carry out your task, with the gracious permission of Krishna.'

"Angideva, the God of Fire, was gladdened at this. He granted Arjuna the two boons: an inexhaustible arrow-sheath

from which he could draw out a continuous supply of arrows and a chariot with the Maruthi Flag. Besides, He created the *Aagneyaasthra*, the Weapon of Fire, and placing it in the hands of Krishna, took leave of them both.

"Son, Parikshit! Krishna, you must remember, accepted that weapon only to satisfy the God of Fire. He has no need of such weapons. There is no weapon more effective than His Will. It can, in the fraction of a second, transform the earth into sky and the sky into the earth. He acts the human role when He moves among people and so, men frame their own guesses without understanding the inner significance of His acts. That is but the consequence of the delusion that veils the vision of man.

"After taking leave of Krishna in this manner, Agnideva started consuming the Khandava Forest. Just then, exactly as anticipated, Indra sent His attendants on the mission of saving the Forest from destruction. Their efforts failed to rescue it. They returned to their Master and reported their discomfiture. So Indra Himself with His stalwart followers rushed to the scene, to save the Khandava Vana, and fell upon your grandfather, Arjuna.

"Arjuna received Him with a shower of arrows from his famous Gandiva bow. Indra, too, fought with all His might. Within minutes the followers of Indra turned back, unable to withstand the rain of arrows which pelted them from all sides. Indra realised that the person who inflicted

the defeat was His own son, Arjuna. He was overcome with shame at this. He regretted that He could not defeat His own progeny, and returned sad and chastened.

“Meanwhile, the God of Fire consumed the Forest merrily and with hearty appetite, swallowing everything with His thousand red tongues and raising a huge conflagration. Only ash was left behind. Seeing this, the birds and beasts of the forest tried in vain to escape from the holocaust, but they could not. They were caught by the flames and roasted alive. Krishna was going round the Forest in His chariot to prevent any denizen from running out into the open for safety, especially the animals and the snakes. He discovered the snake Thakshaka, a great friend of Indra, in the act of escaping from the fire. Krishna called Arjuna near Him to point this out to him. That gave Thakshaka the chance to wriggle out and speed towards Kurukshetra.

“Agni pursued the snake. He sought the help of the Wind God to catch up with his fleeing speed. So, Thakshaka sought refuge with Maya the architect of the Devas and the Danavas; he and Maya were moving fast towards Kurukshetra. Krishna noticed this and He pursued them. Just then, Maya surrendered to Arjuna and sought his protection for himself and his protégé, Thakshaka. Arjuna granted his wish and so, Maya, out of a sense of gratefulness, fell at his feet and said, ‘Oh, son of Pandu, I will never forget this kindness. Whatever is in my power, I shall gladly do for you. You have only to indicate your desire.’

“Your grandfather reflected for a while and replied, ‘Maya! If you yearn to satisfy me, I demand but one thing: build a *Sabha* (Assembly Hall) for my brother to hold court, the like of which is not to be found on earth. It must be so grand that no Deva or *Danava* (ogre) or *Gandharva* (Heavenly angels) can ever hope to build such a one for himself. It must fill all who see it with amazement. I have no desire, other than this.’ Krishna too added a suggestion. ‘In that hall of wonder, you must establish a Throne of Wonder for Dharmaraja to be seated. Then only will the Hall be fully magnificent.’

“Did you note, Parikshit, how much Krishna loved your grandfather? Do you need any more convincing proof than this to know that He is ever mindful of the welfare of His devotees? The wicked Duryodhana was overcome with envy, at the sight of that amazing Hall. Duryodhana and Dussasana and their companions were puzzled and discomfited into humiliation, when they were led to believe that there was water where there was none and that there were doors, in places where there were no doors! They fell in so many places and knocked their heads against so many walls that they nurtured unquenchable hatred against the Pandavas. The Kauravas plotted incessantly to destroy the Pandavas. But since the Pandavas had the Grace of Krishna in a large measure, they were able to overcome them as if they were mere child’s play and to enjoy varied manifestations of His Mercy. The Kauravas developed violent hatred against Krishna too, for they knew that the son of Yasoda was the

bestower of Fortune on the Pandavas. But what can anyone do to the very Lord of all Creation? To cultivate hatred against Him is a sign of their ignorance, that is all.”

When Vyasa was thus relating the story of Thakshaka, Parikshit was listening with rapt attention. When he finished, Parikshit queried in wonder, “What was the reason which provoked the wicked Kaurava to ill-treat and insult my grandmother, Draupadi? How did grandfathers bear the insults they heaped on their spouse? How did it happen that they were mere onlookers, unable to retaliate or punish, in spite of their prowess and undoubted manliness, when their spouse was dishonoured publicly, in the royal court? I find it beyond me to understand how these incidents came about. Tell me the real facts, and enlighten me. You can clear my doubts, I am sure.”