

CHAPTER 22

ARJUNA'S FIGHT WITH GODS

Vyasa continued: “Oh King, your grandfathers were ready to renounce everything to God if the need arose; they were prepared also to fight with God if the need arose, for they were only observing Kshatriya Dharma when they fought so. You must have heard the story of your grandfather fighting against Siva and winning from Him the Divine Weapon of *Pasupatha-asthra*.” At this, the King suddenly raised his head and asked, “Master! What did you say? Did my grandfather wage battle against Siva? I have not heard about it so far. Tell me all about it. Satisfy my thirst to know about it.” Parikshit fell at Vyasa’s Feet, importuning him to narrate the story.

Vyasa cleared his throat. “Son! How many stories have I to narrate to you? The relationship between the Pandavas

and the Gods need for its full elaboration not hours, not even months, but years! Still, since you implore I shall tell as many as possible, within the time available. Listen, Oh King! The Pandavas were living in the forest. One day, Dharmaraja was overcome with anxiety. He felt the wicked cousins, the Kauravas, may not allow him to rest in peace even after the period of exile is over. It was very doubtful if they will give them their share of the empire. Dharmaraja was afraid that war was inevitable and that the great bowmen of the age, Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Aswatthama will then range themselves on the side of the Kaurava hordes. He apprehended that the Pandavas may not be able to overcome such a galaxy of strength. He feared that the war might end in defeat and that the Pandavas might have to spend their years in the jungle itself. Seeing him in the depth of woe, Arjuna approached him and craved for his blessings and permission to go forth and win, by asceticism, weapons from the Gods to defeat the foe. Dharmaraja directed him to proceed, and please the Gods, and win through their Grace, weapons to win the war.

“Arjuna went into the Gandhamadana area, which was inaccessible even to the most enterprising ascetic and did Thapas (ascetic practices), to propitiate Indra, the Sovereign of the Gods. Heaven was amazed at the rigours of that Thapas and his steady persistence. So, Indra appeared before him, saying, ‘Son, I am pleased by your Thapas. But if your desire is to be fulfilled, first win the Grace of Siva; thereafter I shall take you to heaven and arm you with all weapons heaven can confer.’

“In accordance with Indra’s advice, Arjuna sat meditating on Siva in order to win His Grace. Meanwhile, Siva resolved upon a drama of his own. I shall tell you what it was: A huge wild boar, ferociously enraged, ran across the place where Arjuna was observing penance. He saw it, and though during the penance one had to desist from injuring any living being, he hastily took up his bow and arrows, when the boar was about to fall upon him. Just at this moment, a Bhil of the forest, also armed with bow and arrows appeared before Arjuna with his wife! Arjuna was amazed that a woman was accompanying the Bhil in that thick forest where no person could safely move about. But when he observed more closely, he found a huge retinue behind the Bhil, consisting of men and women of fierce appearance yelling and shouting in strange ways. Arjuna was perplexed and astonished.

“The person who first appeared, the huntsman with the fierce face and the red glowing eyes, spoke to Arjuna: ‘You, there! Who are you? Why have you come to this place? You shall not live if you shoot an arrow against that boar, even by mistake, be warned. I have pursued it and made it run thither; what right have you to take up your bow and arrow against it?’ These words that he spoke entered Arjuna’s heart like a sheaf of arrows. He felt terribly hurt for a common huntsman had insulted him.

“‘The fellow does not know my name or fame or else he would not have challenged me,’ he said to himself. He

raised his bow and shot an arrow at the boar. That very moment, the Bhil too shot an arrow at it.

“The boar rolled on the ground, dead. The huntsman was in the throes of anger. He showered abuses on Arjuna. ‘You there, you do not know the rules of hunting. When I have set my eyes on it, pursued it and selected it as the prey for my arrows, how dare you aim your arrow at it? You are a greedy barbarian.’ His eyes were casting sparks, so uncontrollable was his rage. Arjuna too was enraged. He shouted back, ‘Shut up, you scoundrel. Or else, I will despatch you to the Domain of Death. Save yourself by stopping your wagging tongue. Get back the way you came.’

“The Bhil stood up to that threat; he did not quail. ‘Whoever you are, I am not afraid. You may have three hundred and thirty *crores* of gods on your side, but I shall not yield. Take care, you are an interloper. Who gave you permission to enter here? Who are you to order me out? This forest is ours. You are a thief who has sneaked in, and you have the audacity to ask us to get away!’ he replied.

“At this, Arjuna guessed that he was no ordinary huntsman. He spoke in a calmer tone. ‘The forest is the property of all. You have come to hunt. I have come to do penance to please Siva. I shot that boar only to save myself from its rage.’ The huntsman however, was not softened. ‘I don’t care whom you adore, whom you desire to please. Accept the wrong that you have done. Why did you shoot the animal I was stalking? Accept and apologise, make

amends,' he insisted. Arjuna lost all patience. This fellow's life, too, is to end like that of the boar, he told himself. He is not to be cured by soft words, he felt.

“So he selected a sharp arrow and placing it on the bow, shot it at him. It hit him; but like a thorn on rock, it fell on the ground, bent by the impact! So, the astonished Arjuna had to shoot a crescent headed arrow, which will sever his head. But this was brushed aside by the huntsman, with his left hand like a blade of grass.

“At last, Arjuna let go the unending shower of arrows from his ever-full shoulder-bag. This too had no effect; Arjuna became desperate like a man robbed of all his possessions and deprived of all means of resistance. He stood helpless and filled with rage. He was like a bird with clipped wings, a tiger whose teeth have been pulled out and claws cut, a ship without sails and rudder.

“He made an effort to beat the huntsman with the bow itself. It broke into fragments at the impact. Startled at this, Arjuna decided to use his fists, for they were the only weapons left. Girding up his loins, he fell upon the Bhil, and wrestled furiously, for sheer victory. The huntsman welcomed this new move with a hearty laugh. They struggled to overpower each other with such terrific holds and blows that it appeared as if two mountains were in mortal conflict. The birds of the forest were so frightened at the unusual din that they flew in terror far up into the sky. The animal denizens of the jungle stood and stared sensing some great

calamity that hovered over them. The earth shook, unable to bear the burden of the encounter.

“Despite everything, the Bhil was evincing no trace of exhaustion. He was laughing in absolute unconcern. He was as active as when the fight first began. Arjuna, however, was bathed in perspiration. He was gasping for breath. His fist was jammed and bleeding! The Bhil was unhurt and not in the least affected! Besides, when the Bhil once caught Arjuna in a light hold, Arjuna vomited blood. At this, the Bhil burst into a cruel laugh, and exulted before his consort with a meaning look, ‘Did you notice that?’

“Arjuna reeled and was in great confusion. He lost his moorings. He whispered to himself, ‘Krishna! Why have you humiliated me thus? Ah, is this too a scene in your drama? Truly, this Bhil is no ordinary mortal. Perhaps, you yourself have come in this Form to trample on my pride. Alas! To be overwhelmed by a forest-dwelling huntsman! No, this is your stratagem, your play. This Bhil is no ordinary fellow. Save me, for I believe this is, you yourself.’

“When he said this and turned to the couple in front of him, he saw there, not the Bhil and his wife but Siva and His consort, Gowri. They were blessing him with a captivating smile; their hand was raised, with the palm towards him in the *Abhaya* (fearlessness) pose, assuring him that he had no reason to fear.

“Arjuna was overcome with delight. He ran towards them, exclaiming, ‘Oh Sankara, Mother Gowri!’ and fell at

their Feet. He prayed that They should pardon him for his rashness and ignorance. Gowri and Sankara, who are the embodiments of Grace, lifted him by the shoulders lovingly and stroked his head affectionately. ‘Son,’ they said, ‘You have attained the fruition of your life. You did your duty as you were bound to do. That is not wrong, at all. Now, take this; here is the sign of Our Grace’—and he got from the Hand of Siva Himself the Divine Pasupatha Asthra.

“Oh, Maharaja! How can I extol the prowess of your grandfather who combated with Siva, armed with the invincible Trident. The source of that courage and daring lay in the Grace that the Lord Krishna showered on him. Your grandfathers never thought of even the slightest activity, without His specific order. Indeed in the Mahabharatha battle, His Grace was bestowed unasked, every moment in ample measure. The depth of Love that prompted that Grace was known only to them, others cannot gauge it.” When Vyasa was remembering this, he shed tears of joy at the good fortune of the Pandava Brothers; and, not he alone.

The person who listened, namely, Parikshit was even more overcome with admiration and thankfulness. He was shedding tears of joy. His lips quivered with emotion. His voice was broken by excitement. He could not contain himself. He exclaimed, “Ah, how fortunate I am, that I am born in this lineage! How brave, how devoted, how redoubtable were my forefathers! And imagine my luck, that I am able to hear their glories from the lips of divine

sages like you! Oh, I am indeed thrice-blessed. When I listen to the exploits of my grandfathers and the glories of the Lord Krishna, I can never say I have heard enough. I long to hear more.

“Pray tell how the Lord saved and guarded my grandfathers in battle. It will be some source of contentment for my hunger, some quench for my thirst.”