

## CHAPTER 23

### GUARDIAN ON THE BATTLEFIELD

**W**hen the King prayed like this, Vyasa said, “Oh King! The Pandavas, as agreed upon, lived through the twelve years of exile in the forest and also completed one full year of ‘life in incognito.’ When at last, they revealed themselves (on the occasion of the Rape of Kine from the Virata domain by the wicked Kauravas) Duryodhana, the eldest of the cruel clan, that monster of guile, swore that the full year had not elapsed and that the Pandavas had broken their contract; so he said, they were bound by the penal clause, a further twelve-year exile and a further one-year-of-incognito life! He was adamant in that conclusion.

“The elders, Bhishma and others, asserted that the Pandavas *had* scrupulously fulfilled the terms of the contract.

the Pandavas had not disclosed their place of stay during the entire year; they had stayed in exile for the full twelve years. But the Kauravas did not accept the patent truth. They prepared the path for their own downfall and destruction! They listened to none, they gave ear to no counsel. They swore that the battlefield alone can settle the issue.

“What can anyone do, in the face of that royal decree? So, both parties engaged themselves in preparing for war—the King endowed with sovereign sway, Duryodhana; and the claimants in exile, the Pandavas! But truth and justice allied themselves with the exiles, and so, a few kings who were motivated by moral principles joined them. The others, in very large numbers, sided with the ruling monarch, and so the Kauravas were able to command eleven *akshauhini*s while the Pandavas could collect just seven only. (An *akshauhini* consists of 109350 foot-soldiers, 65610 horses and horsemen, 21870 elephants and elephant warriors, and 21870 chariots and their human equipment).

“Listen! The chariot of Arjuna had the Lord Krishna, the Gopivallabha, as its charioteer. Not only that, He became the charioteer of the destiny of the Pandavas. The Pandavas had, therefore, no weak spot in their armour; He was all the strength they needed. But yet, in the grand drama of the Lord, the role of Arjuna took a sudden unexpected turn which astounded all.”

“When the Lord commanded Arjuna to examine, from the chariot which He kept stationary between the two armies

ranged for battle, the enemy leaders whom he had to encounter, Arjuna allowed his eyes to spot out in a flash the heroes eager to meet him in contest; tears flowed immediately from his eyes! He crumbled with despondency and disinclination. It was a scene that filled spectators with shame.

“But note that your grandfather was not afflicted or affected with fear or cowardice. He saw before him Bhishma, the revered grandparent who had loved to keep him on his lap and who caressed him as his own child. He saw his respected teacher, Drona, from whom he had learnt archery from A to Z; so, his heart lamented, ‘Alas! Has this too to be endured by me, this bloody warfare with these great elders, persons whom I ought really to worship with tender lovely flowers? How can I shoot arrows at them? Have I to wound the very feet which I must really place reverentially on my head, when I dutifully prostrate before them?’ The sentiment that overpowered him was really this emotion of adoration. It was this that rendered him despondent, and not any other weakening emotion.

“The feelings ‘I’ and ‘Mine’ grew so intense in him that he turned to Krishna and said, ‘Krishna, set the chariot back towards Hasthinapura, I wish to go away from all this.’ Krishna laughed in derision, and commented with scarcely concealed scorn, ‘My dear brother-in-law, evidently you seem to be scared of fighting. Well, I shall take you back to Hasthinapura, and bring instead, your consort, Draupadi. She has no fear. Come, we shall return. I did not realise you

are such a coward; or else, I would not have accepted this position as charioteer for you. It is a gross error of judgement on my part.’

“While Krishna was saying thus, and many other harsh statements besides, Arjuna retorted: ‘Do you think that I, who fought with God Siva and won the Pasupatha weapon from Him will quail before these common mortals? It is a sense of reverence and mercy that makes me desist from killing these kinsmen. It is not fear that holds me back.’ Arjuna spoke for long arguing on the lines of ‘I’ and ‘Mine,’ but Krishna did not appreciate his arguments. He explained to him the basic principles of all activity and morality and made him take up the arms he had laid down. He induced him to follow the dictates of the moral and social obligations of the Kshatriya caste to which he belonged.

“When in the midst of battle, the Kaurava warriors all in one gang rained arrows simultaneously on Arjuna, Krishna saved him from the shower, as He had done earlier when He lifted the Govardhana Hill to save the villagers of Gokula and the cattle from the floods of hail rained on them by the angry God Indra. He drew all weapons on Himself and rescued Arjuna, seated behind him in the chariot, from the deadly onslaught. Blood flowed from the wounds on His body; but nevertheless, He held it against the shower of fiery arrows let loose by the enemy. His aim was that Arjuna must be preserved from harm. He intended also to reduce the might and pride of the wicked opponent, and heighten the glory and reputation of Arjuna.

“He held no weapon Himself; but He brought about the annihilation of the enemies and proclaimed before the world the magnificence of the path of Dharma, which the Pandava brothers adhered to. Often during the battle, your grandfather was pained at the role that Krishna had taken on Himself. ‘Alas, that we are using You for this insignificant purpose. You whom we ought to install in the Lotus of the Heart, we are seating you on the charioteer’s plank! We have reduced you to the status of a servant! We have devalued the Lord so meanly; alas, that we are reduced to such straits!’ he used to lament within himself.

“More distressing than all was another painful act that Arjuna had perforce to do, off and on. Whenever he had to do that act, poor Arjuna was overcome with unbearable remorse.” Saying this, Vyasa held his head down as if he wished to desist from mentioning it. This aroused the curiosity of Parikshit even more and he appealed, “Master! What exactly was that inevitable harm, he had to do, in spite of its sacrilege?”

At this, he said, “Oh King, in the thick of battle, when the master has to give an indication to the man who acts as the charioteer which way to turn, he cannot hope to be heard, if he calls out, right or left. The din will be too loud and confusing. So while totally immersed in the wild excitement of coming to grips with the enemy, he has to prod the charioteer’s brows with the right or left toe of his feet. He keeps the toes always in touch with the sides of the

brow, for this purpose. His plank is on a deeper level. If the chariot is to be driven straight, both toes have to be pressed with equal force. That was the convention. Since such pressure had to be applied with heavily shod feet, both sides of the brow of the Lord daily showed marks of scrape. Arjuna cursed himself for sheer shame. He hated the very idea of war and prayed that the wicked game ceased that very moment. He used to be terribly upset with agony, that he had to touch with his feet, the Head that sages and saints adored.

“The palms of Krishna, soft and tender like lotus petals, developed boils all over, since they had to hold the reins tight and since the steeds strained their hardest, when they were restrained or controlled. The Lord forsook food and sleep, performed services both high and low, and kept ready both horses and chariot in perfect trim. He also went on various other sundry errands, which were fundamental to victory. He bathed the horses in the river, attended to their wounds and applied balm to cure them. Why go on with the entire list? He acted as a menial in the household of your grandfathers! He never assumed the role of the Universal Sovereign that is His real nature and status. That was the measure of His affection for those devoted to Him,” said Vyasa, the Sage, to the King.