

## Chapter 8. Dhritharashtra Transformed

**D**hritharashtra, Gandhari, and Vidura reached the forest. Vidura searched for a site where they could practise austerities. He also advised them on the best means of seeking self-realisation. They spent the days in holy company and holy thoughts.

### **Dharmaraja finds Dhritharashtra missing**

Meanwhile, in Hasthinapura, as soon as the sun rose, Dharmaraja woke up, finished his ablutions, and performed the ritual worship of the “household fire”. He gave away in charity the usual daily gifts to the needy. He then went on foot toward the palace of Dhritharashtra, his paternal uncle, as was his wont, for he never began his daily round of duties without taking on his head the dust of his uncle’s feet.

The king and queen were not in their chambers. So he waited for some little time, expecting them to return, looking for them all around, even while he was waiting anxiously for their return. But he noticed that the beds were not slept upon, the pillows didn’t bear marks of use, and the furniture was undisturbed. He thought for a moment that the rooms had been reset by someone after use, but no, some fear got hold of him that they must have left. So he hurried toward Vidura’s room only to discover that he too had fled; his bed was unused.

The attendants reported that the sage hadn’t returned from his visit to the king and queen. This shocked Dharmaraja. He went back to the palace and searched every room with great care, and his worst fears were confirmed. His hands and feet shivered in despair; his tongue became dry; words did not emerge from his mouth. He fell on the floor, as if life had ebbed out. Recovering, he blabbered indistinctly. He called on Vidura more than once, and the officers around him became afraid of his future. Everyone rushed to his presence, asking, “What happened?” sensing some calamity. They stood in a circle, awaiting orders from the master.

### **Sanjaya and Dharmaraja in deep distress**

Suddenly, Sanjaya appeared. Dharmaraja rose and held both his hands. “My parents have gone; alas, I found their chambers empty. Why did they do this? Did they tell you anything? Tell me. If I knew where they went, I could fall at their feet and crave pardon for all my failings. Tell me quick, Sanjaya, where did they go?”

Sanjaya also had no knowledge of their whereabouts. He knew only that Vidura must be at the bottom of the whole affair. He too shed tears, and, holding Dharmaraja’s hands in his, said in a voice that shook with tremor, “Lord and Master, believe me, I speak the truth. Dhritharashtra used to consult me and ask for my suggestions even in small matters, but in this affair he acted without discussing with me or even informing me. I am struck with wonder at this act. Though I was near him, I didn’t in the least know about his journey. I can’t guess why he did this. I never dreamed that he would deceive me thus. He showed me some respect and had some confidence in me. But he has played me false. I can only say that this is my bad luck.” Sanjaya started weeping like a child.

Dharmaraja consoled him, saying that it was really the consequence of his own sins and not Sanjaya’s. “The extent of our bad luck can be gauged from this. Our father left us even while we were children; this uncle brought us up from that tender age. We revered him and tended him as both father and uncle. I must have perpetrated some error out of ignorance, for I am incapable of doing so, consciously. Both uncle and aunt were broiling in the

agony of the loss of their hundred sons. I was eager to offer them some little peace, so my four brothers and I were wholeheartedly serving them so that they might forget the anguish of their terrible loss. We took care that no little point was missed while serving them. There was no diminution of reverence or affection. Alas, that they should have left this place! What a tragedy, what a terrible blow!” lamented Dharmaraja.

“My uncle and aunt are old and weak; besides, they are blind. I can’t understand how they managed to leave this place. How they must be suffering now! Not even one attendant accompanied them. What good are all my servants? Groping along, the two might have fallen into the Ganga, by now. O, how unlucky I am! I fostered them both like the apple of the eye, but at the end, I allowed them to meet this tragic fate.” Dharmaraja beat his breast and expressed his deep distress.

### **The Pandavas search for the missing three**

The brothers heard the lamentation and flew fast to the side of the weeping Dharmaraja. Mother Kunthi also asked anxiously for the reason for the grief. She peeped into the chambers and, not finding Gandhari or Dhritharashtra, asked Sanjaya what had happened to them. Sanjaya couldn’t reply; he could only shed tears. “Where have they gone, in their aged and helpless condition? Tell me!” she cried. But, no one could answer.

Meanwhile, Dharmaraja called the brothers to his side and made some gestures, which they could not understand aright. Then, he mustered courage and rose from the ground. He managed to tell them of the happenings since sunrise. He asked Bhima to send forces in all directions to search for them and find them, for they couldn’t have gone far, since they were blind and couldn’t travel fast—they must be groping their way.

Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva obeyed their brother’s order and sent troops in all directions. They rummaged all the roads, lanes, and by-lanes, peeped into wells, and looked in all tanks and lakes, but they could find no trace of the blind couple. Believing that they must have fallen into the Ganga, they got experts to scour the banks and even dive into the waters to discover their fate. All their efforts were in vain. The Pandava brothers were sunk in grief that they couldn’t save the king and queen from that horrid fate.

### **The three leave their bodies**

Meanwhile, Dhritharashtra and Gandhari were joyfully contemplating on God, seated in prescribed postures with their minds rigorously under control. While they were lost in divine contemplation and immersed in that supreme joy, a huge forest fire swept along, consuming them also in its fierce onslaught.

Vidura had a great desire to cast off his body at the holy centre of Prabhasa-kshetra, so he escaped the fire and, filled with joy at the immense good fortune of the couple, continued his pilgrimage and reached the place that he had chosen as the scene of his exit. There, he cast off his body, which was composed of the five elements and which therefore was material and momentary.