

Chapter 11. The Pandavas' Grief

Krishna commands Arjuna to protect Yadava survivors

Dharmaraja, who was lost in contemplation, recapitulating the advice, help, grace, love, and sympathy that they had earned from Lord Krishna, suddenly raised his head and asked, “Arjuna, what did you say? What calamity overtook you on the way? Tell us in full, dear brother!” He slowly lifted Arjuna’s chin while asking so.

Arjuna looked his brother in the face and said, “Brother, all my skill and attainments have departed with Lord Arjuna. I am now without any powers, incapable of any achievement, weaker than the weakest, indeed lifeless.

“Brother, listen. This most unlucky fellow did not have the chance to be with Lord Vaasudeva when He left for His Abode, even though he was in Dwaraka at that time. I hadn’t earned enough merit to get that chance. I couldn’t have the sight (*darshan*) of our divine Father before He left. Later, the charioteer of the Lord, Daruka, gave me the message He had given for me when He departed. He wrote this message with His own Hand.”

Arjuna took from the folds of his dress the letter that he considered more precious even than life, for it was written by Krishna’s own Hand. He gave it to Dharmaraja, who received it reverentially with alacrity and anxiety. He pressed it on his eyes, which were full of tears. He tried to decipher the writing through the curtain of tears, but with no success.

It began, “Arjuna! This is my command; carry it out without demur and to the full. Execute this task with courage and earnestness.”

After this express injunction, Krishna had elaborated on the task in the following words, “I have accomplished the mission on which I had come. I shall no longer be in this world, with body. I am departing. Seven days from today, Dwaraka will sink into the sea; the sea will swallow everything except the house I had occupied. Therefore, you have to take the queens and other women who survive to Indraprastha City, along with the children and babies and the old and decrepit. I am leaving, placing all responsibility for the women and other Yadava survivors in your hands. Care for them as you care for your own life; arrange for them at Indraprastha and protect them from danger.” The postscript said, “Thus writes Gopala on leaving for His Home.”

Dharmaraja finished reading. Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva were shedding copious tears and squatting like rocks, oblivious to everything else.

Arjuna is overwhelmed by wild band of nomads

Arjuna said, “Brother, I had no desire to live for a moment more without the Lord in our midst, so I resolved to drown myself in the sea that was to swallow Dwaraka. I decided to split my own head with this bow and die. But this command forced me to desist. The order from Him who ordains the universe tied me to this earth. I had no time to plan any line of action; everything had to be done quickly.

“So, I got the last rites done for the dead, according to the scriptures. Then in great anxiety, lest the sea swallow Dwaraka before the women, children, and old people were evacuated, I hurried them to come and started for Indraprastha, as commanded by Krishna. We left Dwaraka with no mind to leave it. We managed to reach the

borders of Panchanada (Punjab) with hearts heavy on account of Krishna's absence, but I was urged forward by the need to obey the divine injunction and to carry the burden of those people according to that injunction,

“The sun was setting one day. At that late hour, we dared not cross a flooded river that impeded our progress. I decided to encamp on the bank of that river for the night. We collected the jewels and valuables of all the women and kept them in a secure place; the queens alighted from the palanquins, and the maids scattered themselves for rest. I approached the river for the evening rites, dragging myself along with the sadness of separation from Krishna. Meanwhile, pitch darkness pervaded the place, and soon we heard wild barbarian war cries from the surrounding darkness. I peered into the night and found a horde of forest-dwelling nomads rushing upon us with sticks, spears, and daggers. They laid hands on the jewels and valuables and started dragging away the women, binding them hand and foot.

“I shouted and threatened them with dire consequences. ‘Why do you fall like moths into fire,’ I asked them. ‘Why be like fish that meet death craving for the angler’s worm?’ I told them. ‘Don’t meet death in this vain attempt to collect loot,’ I warned them. ‘I imagine you don’t know who I am. Haven’t you heard of the redoubtable bowman, Pandu’s son Arjuna, who overwhelmed and defeated the three world-conquerors, Drona, Bhishma, and Karna? I’ll dispatch the whole lot of you to the Kingdom of Death with a twang of this bow, my incomparable Gandiva. Flee before you meet destruction, or else feed this hungry bow with your lives.’

Arjuna’s weaponry fails with his loss of memory

“But they went about their nefarious task undismayed. Their cruel attack didn’t abate; they fell upon our camp and dared attack even me. I held myself in readiness and fitted divine arrows to efface them all. But alas, a terrible thing happened; I can’t explain how or why! I couldn’t remember a single sacred formulae to fill the missile with potency! I forgot the processes of invocation and revocation. I was helpless.

“Before my very eyes, the robbers dragged away the queens, maids, and others. They were screaming in agony, calling on me by name, ‘Arjuna! Arjuna! Save us; rescue us; don’t you hear us? Why are you deaf to our cries? Are you giving us over to these brigands? Had we known that this would be our fate, we would have died in the sea like our city, Dwaraka.’ I heard it all, in terrible agony; I saw it all. They were screaming and fleeing in all directions —women, children, the aged, and the infirm. Like a lion whose teeth have been plucked out and whose claws have been sheared, I couldn’t harm the ruffians. I couldn’t string my bow. I attacked them with the arrows in my clasp. Very soon, even the stock of arrows was exhausted. My heart was burning with anger and shame. I became disgusted with my own pusillanimity. I felt as if I was dead. All my efforts were in vain. The greatly blessed ‘inexhaustible’ receptacle of arrows had failed me after Vaasudeva had left.

“My might and skill had gone with Krishna when He went from here. Or else, how did this misfortune occur of my being a helpless witness of this kidnapping of women and children entrusted to my care? I was tortured on one side by the separation from Krishna and on the other by the agony of not carrying out His orders. Like a strong wind that fans the fire, this calamity added fuel to the anguish of my heart. And the queens —those who were living in golden palaces in the height of luxury! When I contemplate their fate in the hands of those fierce savages, my heart is reduced to ashes. O Lord! O Krishna! Is it for this that you rescued us from danger in the past —to inflict this drastic punishment on us ?”

Arjuna wept aloud and beat his head against the wall in despair, and the room was filled with grief. Everyone

shivered in despair. The hardest rock would have melted in sympathy. Streams of hot tears flowed from Bhima's eyes. Dharmaraja was overpowered with fear when he saw him weeping so. He went to Bhima and spoke lovingly and tenderly to him in order to console him. Bhima came to himself after some time. He fell at Dharmaraja's feet and said, "Brother! I don't want to live any more. Give me leave. I'll go into the forest and immolate myself with the name of Krishna on my lips and reach Home. Without Krishna, this world, is hell to me." He wiped the hot tears with the cloth in his hand.