

Chapter 18. The Escape of Takshaka

When Vyasa yielded to his importunity, Parikshith who was all attention, replied in a voice that stuttered with emotion. “Master, I don’t see clearly why my grandfather destroyed the Khandava Forest with a fire. Tell me how Lord Krishna helped him in the exploit. Make me happy by telling me the story.” Parikshith fell at the sage’s feet and prayed that this may be described to him.

Krishna and Arjuna meet hungry Fire God

Vyasa complimented him and said, “Right, you have made a request that does you credit. I’ll comply.”

“Once, when Krishna and Arjuna were resting happily on the sands of the 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 me. I can’t keep alive unless you do.’

“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.

“Krishna came forward and accosted him. ‘Great *brahmin*, you don’t appear merely human. I assume that you won’t be satisfied with ordinary food. Ask me what food you want, I’ll certainly give it you.’

“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 would satisfy him! Krishna was asking so quietly and with so much consideration that Arjuna was filled with curiosity and surprise.

“The *brahmin* suddenly burst into laughter and said, ‘Lord, don’t you recognise me? There’s nothing in this world —nay, in all the fourteen worlds— that is beyond your ken. I’m one vital principle (*prana*) 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. The forest must be burned in flames. That alone can appease my hunger and restore my appetite.’

“Krishna replied, ‘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, so why do you crave my help?’

“When Krishna pretended that He didn’t know, Agni answered, ‘Lord! You know everything. Doesn’t the great serpent, Takshaka, live in this Khandava Forest with his kith and kin, attendants, and associates? Indra, the god of rain, is his close friend, so he’s 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 Takshaka. As soon as I start eating up the forest, Indra will send his minions and soak the place with rain. I’ll be forced into inaction; I won’t be able to eat any more. So I’m taking refuge in You.’

“Krishna laughed at his fears. ‘If so, we’ll help you out. Tell us what to do; we’re ready.’

Agni was delighted. ‘I am indeed blessed! I am saved! You can help by keeping back the rain that Indra showers, by covering the forest with a roof of arrows that will allow me to consume the forest undisturbed.’ Krishna assured him that his request would be fulfilled.

“Your grandfather addressed Agni. ‘You can burn up the forest without hesitation. I have enough strength

to oppose and overwhelm not one Indra but ten million of them. But I don't have with me the arrows necessary for this operation and the chariot that can carry all that weight. If these are supplied, I'll carry out your task, with Krishna's gracious permission.'

“*Agnideva*, the god of fire, was gladdened at this. He granted Arjuna the two boons: an inexhaustible arrow-sheath, from which he could draw a continuous supply of arrows, and a chariot with the Maruthi Flag. He also created the weapon of fire (*agni-astra*). Placing it in Krishna's hands, he took leave of them both.

Agni consumes the forest while Arjuna battles Indra

“Son, Parikshith! You must remember that Krishna accepted that weapon only to satisfy the god of fire. He has no need of such weapons. No weapon is more effective than His will, which can transform the earth into sky and the sky into the earth in a fraction of a second. He acts the human role when He moves among people, 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 to save the forest from destruction. Their efforts failed to rescue it. They returned to their master and reported their discomfiture. So Indra himself rushed to the scene with His stalwart followers to save the Khandava Forest, and he fell upon your grandfather, Arjuna.

“Arjuna received Him with a shower of arrows from his famous Gandiva bow. Indra fought with all His might. Within minutes, Indra's followers turned back, unable to withstand the rain of arrows that pelted them from all sides. Indra realised that the person who was inflicting defeat on them was his own son, Arjuna! He was overcome with shame. He regretted that He couldn't defeat His own progeny and returned, sad and chastened.

“Meanwhile, the god of fire merrily and with hearty appetite consumed the forest, swallowing everything with His thousand red tongues and raising a huge conflagration. Only ash was left behind. The birds and beasts of the forest tried in vain to escape from the holocaust but 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 Takshaka, a great friend of Indra, in the act of escaping from the fire. Krishna called Arjuna to point this out to him, and this gave Takshaka the chance to wriggle out and speed toward *Kurukshetra*.

Takshaka, the serpent, is saved

“But Agni pursued the snake, and He sought the help of the wind god to catch up with his fleeing speed. So Takshaka sought refuge with Maya, the architect of the gods (*devas*) and the demons (*danavas*). He and Maya were moving fast toward *Kurukshetra*. Krishna noticed this and pursued them. Just then, Maya surrendered to Arjuna and sought his protection for himself and his protégé, Takshaka. Arjuna granted his wish.

“Maya, out of a sense of gratefulness, fell at his feet and said, ‘O, son of Pandu, I will never forget this kindness. I'll gladly do whatever is in my power for you. You have only to ask.’

“Your grandfather reflected for a while and replied, ‘Maya! If you yearn to satisfy me, I demand but one thing: build an 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 god (*deva*) or demon (*danavas*) or *Gandharva* 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 added a suggestion. ‘In that hall of wonder, you must establish a throne of wonder for Dharmaraja; then only will the hall be fully magnificent.’

“Did you note, Parikshith, 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?”

What can one do to the Lord of creation?

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 Krishna’s grace in large measure, they were able to overcome the Kauravas as if it were mere child’s play and to enjoy varied manifestations of His mercy. The Kauravas also developed violent hatred against Krishna, 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’s all.”

When Vyasa was relating Takshaka’s story, Parikshith was listening with rapt attention. When he had finished, Parikshith asked in wonder, “What provoked the wicked Kaurava to ill-treat and insult my grandmother, Droupadi? How did my grandfathers bear the insults they heaped on their spouse? Why were they 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? It’s beyond me to understand how these incidents came about. Tell me the real facts; enlighten me. You can clear my doubts, I am sure.”