

## Chapter 23. Guardian on the Battlefield

### Preparing for war

When the King prayed like this, Vyasa said, “O 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 stealing of cattle 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 oneyear-of-incognito life! He was adamant about it.

“The elders, Bhishma, and others, claimed the Pandavas had scrupulously fulfilled the terms of the contract. They had stayed in exile for a full twelve years and had not disclosed their place of stay during the entire last year. But the Kauravas didn’t accept the patent truth. They prepared the path for their own downfall and destruction! They listened to no one, they gave ear to no counsel. They swore that the battlefield alone could settle the issue.

“What can anyone do in the face of that royal decree? So both parties prepared 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, so a few kings who were motivated by moral principles joined them. The others, in large numbers, sided with the king. Thus, the Kauravas commanded eleven *akshauhinis*; the Pandavas, only seven. (An *akshauhini* consists of 109,350 foot soldiers, 65,610 horses and horsemen, 21,870 elephants and elephant warriors, and 21,870 chariots and their human equipment).

### Arjuna’s lamentation on the eve of battle

“Listen! Arjuna’s chariot had Lord Krishna, the beloved of the cowherd maidens, as its charioteer. Not only that, He became the charioteer of the destiny of the Pandavas. Therefore, the Pandavas had no weak spot in their armour; He was all the strength they needed. Yet, Arjuna’s role in the grand drama of the Lord took a sudden unexpected turn, which astounded all.”

“The Lord and Arjuna were in the chariot, which Krishna kept stationary between the two armies ranged for battle. When the Lord commanded Arjuna to examine the enemy leaders whom he had to encounter, Arjuna allowed his eyes to spot 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 your grandfather was not afflicted or affected with fear or cowardice. He saw before him Bhishma, the reverend grandparent who had loved to keep him on his lap and who had caressed him as his own child. He saw his respected teacher, Drona, from whom he had learned archery from A to Z. So his heart lamented, ‘Alas! Do I have to endure this too, this bloody warfare with these great elders, people whom I ought really to worship with tender lovely flowers? How can I shoot arrows at them? Do I have to wound the very feet that 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 of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ grew so intense in him that he turned to Krishna, ‘Krishna, set the chariot back

toward Hasthinapura, I want to go away from all this’.

### **Krishna explains the duty to fight for dharma**

“Krishna laughed in derision and commented with unconcealed scorn, ‘My dear brother-in-law, evidently you seem to be scared of fighting. Well, I’ll take you back to Hasthinapura and bring your consort, Droupadi, instead. She has no fear. Come, we’ll return. I didn’t realise you were such a coward, or else I would not have accepted this position as your charioteer. It is a gross error of judgement on my part.’

“While Krishna was saying this, 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, would quail before these common mortals? A sense of reverence and mercy makes me desist from killing my kinsmen. Fear doesn’t hold me back.’

“Arjuna argued for long on the lines of ‘I’ and ‘mine,’ but Krishna didn’t appreciate the arguments. He explained 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 warrior caste, to which he belonged.

### **Krishna rescues Arjuna by drawing weapons to Himself**

“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. Krishna 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. Nevertheless, He held it against the shower of fiery arrows let loose by the enemy. His aim was to preserve Arjuna from harm. He intended also to reduce the might and pride of the wicked opponent and heighten Arjuna’s glory and reputation.

“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*, to which the Pandava brothers adhered. Often during the battle, your grandfather was pained at the role Krishna had taken on Himself. ‘Alas, we’re using You for this insignificant purpose. You, whom we ought to install in the lotus of the heart, are seated on the charioteer’s plank! We’ve reduced you to the status of a servant! We’ve devalued the Lord so meanly! Alas, that we are reduced to such straits!’ he used to lament within himself.

### **Krishna as charioteer bears Arjuna’s toe signals**

“More distressing than all was another painful act that Arjuna had to do, on and off. Whenever he had to do this act, poor Arjuna was overcome with unbearable remorse.” Saying this, Vyasa held his head down as if he wished not to mention it. Parikshith’s curiosity was aroused even more, and he appealed, “Master! What inevitable harm did he have to do, in spite of its sacrilege?”

Vyasa replied, “O King, in the thick of battle, when the master has to give an indication which way to turn, he cannot hope to be heard if he calls out right or left. The din is 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; 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 are 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 idea of war and prayed that the wicked game would cease that very moment. He used to be terribly upset that he had to touch with his feet the Head that sages and saints adored.

“Krishna’s palms, soft and tender like lotus petals, developed boils, 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 both horses and chariot ready and in perfect trim. He also went on sundry errands that 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.”