

The Song of Bhishmation

RAJENDRA KHER



A NOVEL OF THE BHAGAVAD-GITA



the
Song
of
Ishvaran

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the
इन्द्र
of
इश्वरान

A NOVEL OF THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

BY

राजेंद्रा र्हेर

TRANS. BY G. V. Khare



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THE SONG OF SALVATION

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dedication

To Rev. Pandurangshastri Athavale who not only preached but also practiced Gita in his own illustrious life and has created ripples of the Gita philosophy in the hearts of millions of people in the world.

acknowledgments

Deepest thanks to the late Mr. G. V. Khare, without whose extraordinary skills as translator and consultant this book would not have been possible

background

IN ANCIENT TIMES, A BRAVE KING, PRATIP, FROM THE KURU FAMILY, RULED THE kingdom of Hastinapur. After his death, his able successors – Bharat, Shantanu and others – also ruled that kingdom competently.

King Shantanu was in love with Satyawati, the daughter of King Daash, who had given his consent for their marriage. However, his assent was subject to the fulfillment of a condition that any son born to Satyawati would become the King of Hastinapur.

King Shantanu became very nervous on hearing this condition because he already had a son, named Devavrata. A son of Satyawati could not supersede the claim of Devavrata, the elder son, and become king.

But his love for Satyawati was so overpowering that he could not forget her easily. He thus became aggrieved and was in great mental pain. When Devavrata learned about the love his father suffered, he promptly went to see King Daash. He promised Daash that he would not claim the throne of Hastinapur. Not only that, he took a solemn vow that he would never marry and would remain celibate throughout his life, so that no one in a future generation of his lineage would have an opportunity to claim the throne of Hastinapur. Devavrata was thereafter known by the name Bhishmacharya, and his unprecedented promise become famous as the Bhishma-vow.

Shantanu and Satyawati were married in due course. They begot two sons; the elder one was named Chitrangada and the younger Vichitravirya. Chitrangada became the King of Hastinapur after the death of Shantanu but unfortunately was soon killed in a battle. Vichitravirya, the younger

brother, then occupied the throne, he being the next legal heir. After some lapse of time, Bhishmacharya got his half-brother married to Ambika and Ambalika, the two daughters of the King of Kashi.

Vichitravirya, however, could not manage the administration of his kingdom because he was more interested in spending his time in the company of women. Consequently, he contracted tuberculosis and ultimately died without having children. There was, therefore, no successor to the throne of Hastinapur.

Thus, a religious calamity befell the Kuru family. The Queen Mother Satyavati was worried and became grief-stricken. She insistently requested that Bhishma break his vow and get married. Bhishma, however, was firm about his vow of celibacy. Seeing this, Satyavati thought of a clever plan to obtain a successor to the throne of Hastinapur.

Prior to her marriage to Shantanu, Satyavati had given birth to a son named Krishnadwaipayana, whose father was the Sage Parashara. Krishnadwaipayana was of mixed lineage, the son of a Brahmin father and a Kshatriya mother who had acquired all the qualities of his father and had accepted a life of strict penance. Later, he became very famous as Vyas Maharshi, author of the great epic *Mahabharata* and also the *Bhagvata*.

In the course of time, Vyas Maharshi went with his father into seclusion to observe penance and meditation. Before departing for his journey, he promised his mother that wherever and whenever she would think of him with great intensity he would be instantly present before her.

Bhishmacharya was extremely surprised to hear this information. He immediately advised Satyavati to recall Vyas in her mind, and she very happily agreed to do so. Vyas presented himself in Hastinapur, and Satyavati informed him that she desired the two queens of Vichitravirya should each bear a son to him.

At first, Vyas Maharshi rejected her request; but he had, perforce, to obey his beloved mother's order and did what she desired. He then took leave of Satyavati and withdrew to the Himalayas again to resume his life of strict penance and celibacy.

Ambika gave birth to a son, who was named Dhritarashtra. He was born blind. Ambalika also bore a son, who was named Pandu, but he was afflicted with anemia. In addition, a maidservant had a son who was named Vidura. Dhritarashtra, because he was born blind, was not eligible for the throne, according to the prevailing religious traditions. Therefore, Pandu, the younger brother, became the legal heir to the throne of Hastinapur.

King Pandu looked after affairs of state very well and developed Hastinapur into one of the most progressive and prosperous kingdoms in Bharat. In his prime, he married Princess Kunti, the daughter of King Kuntibhoja. He also married Maadri, the Princess of Madradesh.

Earlier, Dhritarashtra had married Princess Gandhari, the daughter of the King of Gandhar. Being conscious that her husband was blind, she

tied a white band around her own eyes, permanently, as a gesture of integrity and respect. This action of Gandhari's was an extreme personal sacrifice, yet one she suffered for her husband throughout her life willingly and in great faith.

Dhritarashtra and Gandhari had one hundred sons and a daughter. The births of these children were accomplished through a specific process. Gandhari had been pregnant for an amazing two years. When she heard that Kunti had given birth to a son, she began to beat her own belly, and gave birth to a lump of flesh. The *rishis*—the learned sages of that time—processed that lump of flesh with some specific treatment and out of it were born one hundred and one children—one hundred sons and a daughter. These became known as the Kauravas.

Likewise, Pandu also obtained sons in a mysterious way. After he had ruled for a considerable period, an urge to go hunting possessed his mind. He decided to go to a dense forest in the distant Himalayas with both of his queens.

Some years before Kunti married Pandu, the sage Durvasa had visited King Kuntibhoja's kingdom for a short stay. Kunti, who was then a virgin girl, served him with devotion and extreme sincerity. Durvasa Rishi was very contented and happy. He endowed Kunti with a blessing that she would bear a son possessing the same divine qualities of the gods she invoked.

Kunti desired to test this and straightaway invoked the sun god. As a result, she gave birth to a son. Because she was a virgin, she became fear-stricken at the thought of the possible scandalous rumors among the people. She therefore decided to give up the child to protect herself from disrepute. She placed her newborn son in a wooden case and put it in a wooden boat, which was carried away by the forceful current of the river. Adhirath, a charioteer, seized the drifting boat. Being childless, he decided to bring up this bright-looking and handsome child. He named the boy Karna.

Karna grew at Adhirath's house until he reached youth, and eventually he established a friendship with Duryodhana, the eldest son of Dhritarashtra.

On that day King Pandu went to the forest to hunt, his arrow struck a doe that was deeply involved in mating. However, the stag was not a real deer but Rishi Kindam in disguise. The rishi cast away his disguise and stood before Pandu in extreme rage. He was obsessed with grief for the sudden death of his mate. He uttered a curse and said, "King Pandu, you have killed my wife when she was in deep union with me. You will also receive a similar death at such time when you will be engrossed in a sexual act..."

On hearing the ghastly curse, Pandu was terribly shocked and became nervous. He was aggrieved. In that state of nervous mind, he returned to

his residence and narrated the entire episode to his queens. There was only one way available to save the life of the king, and that was for him to refrain from any sexual enjoyment with them.

Both queens agreed to complete abstinence. The king now only worried about acquiring an heir. He gave his consent for Kunti, under the rule of *niyoga*, to conceive a son with someone else—a sage, Brahmin, or learned person.

Kunti then told him about the mantra given her by Rishi Durvasa. With his consent she prayed to three gods and, as a consequence, bore three sons: Yudhisthira, with Yama, the god of death; Bhimasena, with Vaayu, the god of air; and Arjuna, with Indra, the king of the gods.

Maadri requested Kunti teach her the specific mantra so that she, too, would be able to acquire sons. She then invoked Ashwini Kumaras, with whom she got twin sons named Nakul and Sahadev. Because of the blessing of Durvasa Rishi, Pandu now had five sons.

All these children of King Pandu grew up in the beautiful surroundings of the Himalayas. Then, one pleasant day, King Pandu noticed Maadri following him, and his sexual urge was suddenly aroused. Maadri made all efforts to resist him, but without heeding her objection, he embraced her. The curse of the rishi took effect, and King Pandu died instantly.

Kunti, with a sorrowful heart, returned to Hastinapur with her five sons—the Pandavas. Yudhisthira, the eldest of the five, should have inherited the throne of Hastinapur, as he was the legal heir. But he was of minor age; and so Bhishmacharya, as an interim measure, authorized Dhru-tarashtra to act as regent until Yudhisthira reached his majority. This became the major cause of the rift between the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

As the five boys grew in age the differences among them also grew. The two factions agreed only on their disagreement. Bhishmacharya made proper arrangements for their education, appointing the best and most worthy teachers, like Dronacharya, who was a great archer, a brave warrior, and well-versed in ancient scriptures. The education of the Kauravas and Pandavas began under the care of this great guru.

The Pandavas, being sharper and possessing outstanding qualities, made impressive progress and gained fame. Arjuna became the most skilled archer; Bhimasena turned out to be an expert in club combat. Their constant progress made Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, jealous. He was always thinking how could he acquire the throne of Hastinapur before Yudhisthira was old enough to occupy it. To achieve this, he often used malicious plans to keep the Pandavas away from Hastinapur. Joining him in his wicked plan were his younger brother Dussasana, his friend Karna, and his maternal uncle Shakuni.

Knowing the rift between the two groups, Bhishmacharya created a separate independent state for the Pandavas, where they established a beautiful city they called Indraprastha. There, they became close friends

with Lord Krishna from Dwarka, who supported them and gave them aid in their efforts to retain the throne.

The Pandavas were content to rule Indraprastha, but something different was in store for them. One day, the sage Narada visited their city. He was a sage of the gods and was the mediator of three worlds— heaven, earth and the netherworld. A humorous character, he would travel through these worlds to help righteous people. He had traveled to Indraprastha to guide Yudhisthira.

On his advice Yudhisthira performed *Rajasuya yajnya*— a great sacrifice. He then conquered many kings and amassed tremendous wealth. The Pandavas prospered and grew in power because they ruled with justice, morality and righteousness. Their treasury was full with abundant wealth.

It was during this time that the Pandavas constructed a mysterious conference hall—Mayasabha. This fabulous structure was built by using marble crystals. Those who passed through its halls and magnificent rooms might come upon a pool and seek to dive in, only to discover solid floor where there had seemed to be rippling water. Others found themselves soaking when they stepped on what appeared to be the floor only to be revealed as water. More than one visitor nursed a bruised nose after trying to walk through a door that was nothing more than a mural, while others searched endlessly for doors that were hidden in the guise of solid walls.

Mayasur the demon architect had constructed this magnificent, magical hall of crystals. After Yudhisthira's sacrifice was over, the Kauravas went to see it; and Duryodhana often dashed against the walls and fell into water. Seeing his pathetic condition, Princess Draupadi, who was married to all five Pandavas, laughed profusely. Bhimasena also enjoyed this humorous sight, and others present could not withhold their derisive laughter.

Duryodhana was extremely annoyed at being made the target of jest and derision. He was already obsessed with hatred of the Pandavas' wealth, their honorable status, and their bountiful holdings. This newest insult only added fuel to the fire. He therefore hastily returned to Hastinapur with greedy thoughts about how he might gain for himself that abundant wealth and send the Pandavas into exile.

However, he could not find a way to achieve his goal—he knew he could never defeat them in a straight battle. Seeing his frustration, his uncle Shakuni, an expert, crafty dice player, promptly came to his aid. He agreed with Duryodhana that it was not possible to win on the battlefield, but convinced him it was quite possible to defeat them at dice. So, Dhritarashtra invited Yudhisthira to play a dice game.

Yudhisthira accepted that invitation, and all the Pandavas arrived at Hastinapur. They had already been apprised of the malicious intention of

the Kauravas, but Yudhisthira was ready to play to honor the invitation as custom required.

Shakuni played on behalf of the Kauravas. He allowed Yudhisthira to win the first few games then won all the rest one after another in quick succession. In every new game Yudhisthira placed another wager, and Shakuni won them all. Eventually, Yudhisthira became desperate and, as all addicted gamblers do, continued to play with a hope he would regain many times his losses in later games.

But such hopes ultimately come to nothing, and those who cling to them lose everything they possess. It is as if their reasoning and thinking powers have forsaken them.

The same thing happened to Yudhisthira. He pledged all his wealth and assets. He even put his kingdom at stake. Shakuni won all those things. When he had nothing else to bet, Yudhisthira wagered all five Pandavas. Shakuni's winning that game made them Duryodhana's slaves.

At last, the only thing that remained for Yudhisthira to wager was his beloved wife Draupadi, whom he also pledged. Shakuni won that round of the game, too.

In this way the Kauravas enslaved all the Pandavas.

Duryodhana wickedly laughed and cried in a demonic voice for his younger brother Dussasana to fetch Draupadi to the royal meeting hall. Dussasana dragged Draupadi, who wailed loudly and demanded in outrage of the eminent elders gathered there, "Am I in bondage or a free person? Am I a slave or free woman?"

It was, in fact, a very appropriate question. Yudhisthira, who was already a slave by that point, had had no right to offer Draupadi as a wager. However, the eminent learned elders and gurus, including Bhishmacharya, Dronacharya, and Kripacharya, only sat with bent heads and mouths shut in silence.

Duryodhana told Dussasana to strip off Draupadi's clothes. Dussasana instantly rushed forward to obey. He grabbed Draupadi's sari and pulled it off so that she stood naked, giving the Pandavas a grievous insult. Draupadi cried and wailed. Bhima raged mightily, as he could not bear this ghastly scene. All those present in the meeting hall had lost their sense of morality. He vowed over and over to punish Dussasana and Duryodhana on the battlefield.

At last Dhritarashtra, realizing the seriousness of the situation, stopped this deplorable incident at the instance of Gandhari. He freed Draupadi from her bondage and asked her to demand three blessed things by way of reparation. With the help of two of the blessings she won back her five husbands and their kingdom of Indraprastha. The Pandavas returned home to Indraprastha rather in a dejected mood.

Before they could reach their city, however, Duryodhana and his three cohorts met with Dhritarashtra. They requested that he concede to their

request to invite the Pandavas once again to a dice game. Dhritarashtra did so, and the Pandavas were again invited for dice.

It was a moral convention then not to refuse an invitation to play dice. So, the Pandavas, who were halfway through their journey to Indraprastha, had to return to Hastinapur. This time it was decided they would play only one game, with the condition that the loser would give up his kingdom and go into the forest for twelve years then live incognito for one more year. If, during that year, they were recognized, they would be required to spend an additional twelve years exile in the forest.

Unfortunately for the Pandavas, they again lost their game, which Shakuni won easily.

They suffered greatly living in the forest, yet they overcame many hurdles with great courage. Arjuna acquired skills in various kinds of charmed weapons; and Krishna, who was their mentor and friend, often met with and guided them.

After passing their year of incognito living in the city of Virat, the Pandavas revealed themselves. Then, while living in the realm of King Drupada, they made just claim for their state of Indraprastha from the Kauravas, who vehemently declined it, stating they would not part even with a speck of land sufficient to cover the tip of a needle.

The situation thus grew outrageous. The Pandavas thought that war with the Kauravas, who were behaving unlawfully, was inevitable. Krishna made a great effort to prevent the war by playing a mediatory role to try and bring about a compromise. He personally went to Hastinapur to hold talks with the Kauravas, but his mission failed. Both the parties armed for the combat and arranged to get military help from kings of different states. Nearly all the kings joined one of the two parties, so that several millions of soldiers came to stand opposite each other on and around the two-hundred-mile area of battlefield of Kurukshetra.

Before the battle, Arjuna was engulfed in despair. He was the most skillful archer in the world. He was well-equipped with arms. But he was also a deeply religious man. Seeing his brothers, gurus, cousins, and other kin standing ready to do go to war, he became perplexed and extremely anxious. His mouth grew parched, and his limbs lost all vigor. As a result, the bow in his hand fell to the ground.

In order to clear the mind of Arjuna, Krishna narrated the philosophy of the *Gita*. He taught Arjuna the importance of adhering to his *swadharma*—his personal duty as a member of the warrior class. He tried to encourage him to take up to arms and fight the war, which was for a just and righteous cause.

The *Gita* is a handbook of spiritual teachings directly come from Bhagwan Krishna. There were a number of parallel philosophies and thoughts, but the *Gita* brought conciliation and coordination. It advocates humanity, and teaches how to live a practical life successfully. It does not pro-

mote blind faith, but instead teaches how one can learn to accept both pain and pleasure equally to maintain equilibrium of mind and reach the spiritual heights.

When there is ecstasy in life, agony is bound to come. How one can go beyond this and acquire the highest happiness? It is possible when soul merges in super-soul. How to achieve this?

One can join two pieces of something by using adhesive. Similarly, Krishna recommended the practices of *karmayoga*, *dnyanayoga*, and *bhaktiyoga* as an “adhesive” to join soul and Supersoul. *Yoga* means “to join.” Using any of these *yogas*—these ways of joining—the seeker can practice the merging of these two aspects all human beings possess and acquire ultimate happiness.

Of course, there is science behind it.

Everybody in this universe wants total liberation, which is considered impossible. The *Gita* illuminates a path to liberation. To place it in scientific language, consider the electron and the positron. They are charged particles of exceedingly small mass. Yet when an electron and its counterpart positron come together, their charges are neutralized; and energy photons are liberated. Thus, neutralization implies energy liberation.

Karma—action performed with desire—binds humankind in the birth-and-death cycle. They cannot liberate themselves from that cycle. If they desire to be free, then work with desire and its counterpart *nishkam karma*—desireless work—should come together. Then, the momentum of *karma* will be neutralized.

So, humankind should increase the actions they perform without attaching any desire to them. They will thus be liberated. Lord Krishna preaches this philosophy.

The Song of Salvation is based on the philosophy of the *Gita* and is woven from various interesting episodes, flashbacks, stories, and relevant characters that provide a vivid spectrum of the ancient people and their lives, their customs and different ways of behavior.

chapter i

AS THE EASTERN SKY BLAZED IN DELICIOUS SHADES OF SCARLET AND PINK, THE aroma of incense permeated the grounds of the palace of the Kauravas. Although it was still relatively early, servants and court heralds were already beginning their day's tasks. The sacred fire burned brightly in its hearth at the *yajnyashala* – the place of sacrifice – where the palace clerics had performed the necessary daily religious rituals. Bearers brought warm water to the large copper pots in the bathroom, and some of the Kuru family were already bathing. Palace singers sang praises to the Kurus, accompanied by a woman playing the *veena* and three percussionists. Behind them, the oil lamps lighting the platform they performed on grew hazy in the morning light.

Maidservants carried horse-tail *chowries* to the Royal female quarters to fan the royal family when the day began to heat, while the menservants hastened to carry out their assigned duties. The servants were clad richly, as befitted those who served a family so rich and powerful. The women, clad in wrapped garments of fine cloth, their skirts held in place with golden belts, had adorned their hair and ears with ornaments of gold, diamond, and pearl, and wore garlands of flowers around their necks that draped to touch their breasts. Their hair, fastened in ornate braids, also glistened with pearls, and they had decorated their parts with saffron and *kumkum*.

The men, too, were finely garbed. Their garments were made of fine cotton embroidered in gold, their right shoulder bare; the heavy soles of their leather sandals made a soft clatter on the floors. They wore earrings of simple designs, and turbans, and garlands of flowers hung around their

necks as well among strings of pearls and gold. They all had ritual dots of sandalwood paste on their forehead.

Yet despite the bustle as the royal staff attended to their routine duties, the servants' faces revealed a mood of dejection.

Sanjaya, stepbrother of King Dhritarashtra, seemed almost out of place in this scene. His austere red-and-white headdress and pale, lusterless face set him apart from the others; and unlike them, his mind was far from the palace walls. He paid no attention to the singers; and as he strode through the palace, a herald and a servant stopped to bow to him, but he did not notice.

It was not that Sanjaya thought himself above acknowledging their respect, but rather that the responsibility that went with the respect weighed heavily on him today. He continued silently, his head bent, until he reached the *yajnyashala* in the third, innermost compartment of the palace. The song was fainter here, replaced in part by the chanting of the sacred Vedic mantras by the Brahmin priests around the fire.

Sanjaya moved closer to the altar. As he gazed into the flame, he could not help thinking of the fierce battle that was soon to take place. As the thin wooden *samidhas* were consumed in the fire, so would thousands of brave warriors be consumed in the coming war, a fraternal conflict soon to begin at Kurukshetra.

The sound of the mantras brought Sanjaya's mind back to the present. He looked to his side and saw Dhritarashtra sitting on the raised seat beside the priests. White turban on his head, face eastward, the blind king offered more *samidhas* to the fire as a religious offering.

Absent today was the pleasant scent that normally hovered around Dhritarashtra's body. He usually took his bath ceremonially, attended by one hundred and eight young servants clad in white garments, who would cleanse his body with scented water. This ritual bath usually took a considerable amount of time. But today Dhritarashtra had finished his bath quickly and come to the place of sacrifice to offer his morning oblation to the sacred fire.

Sanjaya watched a brightly clad officer of the palace direct the king's hand. *How many more*, he wondered. *How many more samidhas for the fire? How many more lives for the war?*

It was one thing that Dhritarashtra was blind in his body but another that he was blind in his very soul because of his obsessive love for his sons. That's what had started this horrible calamity.

They're his sons, and he loves them, a voice inside Sanjaya replied. *What can he do? This is putting him through hell!*

The whole story came flooding back to him. Bhismaacharya, the great-grandfather of both the Kauravas and Pandavas, had offered the throne of Hastinapur to Vichitravirya, father of Dhritarashtra and Pandu. After the death of Vichitravirya, the throne would have normally gone to

Dhritarashtra. But because the elder son was blind, religious law said he could not inherit, and the powerful counselor Bhishmacharya offered the crown to Pandu, the younger brother.

Eventually, Pandu had five sons, the Pandavas, while Dhritarashtra's extended family consisted of one hundred sons and a daughter, known as the Kauravas. After Pandu's untimely death as the result of a curse, the legal claimant of the throne was his eldest son Yudhishthira. At that time, the Pandavas, with their mother Kunti, were away in the Himalayas. Dhritarashtra took advantage of this situation and commenced ruling Hastinapur unlawfully.

When the Pandavas came back to Hastinapur, they claimed their right to the throne. Dhritarashtra, with the help of his sons, rejected their claim, and the conflict started. To try and satisfy the Pandavas, Dhritarashtra gave them land to establish a new kingdom, where they constructed a new city named Indraprastha.

Over the course of time, the Pandavas grew in power and wealth. This created a strong malice and envy in the minds of the Kauravas. Determined to have that wealth and power, Duryodhana, the eldest son of Dhritarashtra, came up with a plot that began with an invitation to Yudhishthira to play a game of dice a little more than thirteen years earlier.

With the aid of a skilled dice player, Duryodhana had won the game. The Pandavas agreed to leave their kingdom for twelve years and live in the forest. In addition, they would have to spend one year living incognito. No one had believed they would survive. Somehow, they had.

Now, they were back to claim the kingdom that was rightfully theirs. Duryodhana, however, had other plans. He refused to return what he no longer had a right to, as well as any attempt at mediation. Dhritarashtra had, in the end, sided with his sons. This led inexorably to the war that was beginning even as Sanjaya stood by the sacred fire.

Sanjaya's own involvement in the conflict had not begun until two days ago, when Vyas Maharshi, the great sage, had come to Hastinapur for a secret meeting with Dhritarashtra. Sanjaya didn't know what had happened in that meeting, but Vyas Maharshi looked sad when it ended. That was when Dhritarashtra had called Sanjaya into his private suite...



Vyas Maharshi looked him up and down.

"This is your choice?" he asked.

"Yes," Dhritarashtra replied.

The sage's gray beard shook as he nodded his approval.

"Yes," he said, "he should be quite competent."

Sanjaya gave them a questioning look. He dared not speak without permission.

Both men smiled.

“Excuse us, Sanjaya,” the king said. “We do not mean to exclude you from our conversation. There is an important choice for you to make now. Perhaps my friend could explain it better than I, though.”

“We would like,” Vyas Maharshi continued, “to endow you with the Divine Sight. You’ll be able to see the whole war from any part of the battlefield, and tell your king everything that happens. Not only that, but you’ll be able to see into the minds of the warriors. No weapon will be able to harm you.”

Sanjaya felt his blood run cold. It was no special privilege, he reasoned, to feel the pain of hundreds of men as they fought and killed their own kin—and were killed in return.



Still, Vyas Maharshi had done as he said, and Sanjaya had been powerless to deny him. There was, of course, the point that one simply does not refuse one’s king, but there was more to it than that. Everything that Sanjaya was, he owed to king and kingdom, and, although he did not choose to make a lot of noise about it, he was a patriot, after a fashion. He believed in what he was doing.

So, the necessary ceremony had been performed; the rest had been utterly predictable.

A messenger stepped up to his side, and Sanjaya turned to face him. “May I announce the news of your arrival?”

Sanjaya sighed.

“Not yet,” he replied. “The king has to finish his rituals. I’ll wait in the hall. Let him know I’m here when he’s done.”

Outside the *yajnyashala*, raised wooden seats, ornately decorated in ivory and gold, stood against the wall. Sanjaya left the sacred fire and found a place on the square white cushion that covered one of these seats and waited. As he sat, he surveyed the hall.

It was nearly twenty feet high, and the pillars and beams that traversed its length were richly decorated. About halfway down, two huge doors were set into the wall. Adorned with garlands of emeralds and diamonds, their panels were painted with captivating scenes from the *puranas*, seen sporadically behind silk curtains that fluttered slightly in the morning breeze. Through the window in front of him, Sanjaya could see the door to the fourth hall about two hundred feet away. Clad in red uniforms, two heralds guarded it, one on each side, rigidly still, each with an upright spear in one hand. Other guards, similarly dressed, stood at intervals between his seat and the fourth hall.

Sanjaya looked up, and a feeling of gloom threatened to overwhelm him. A fine, black soot—no doubt from the smoke of the sacrificial fire—coated the carvings on the ceiling. Another poetic irony.

Kauravas and Pandavas...fighting, he thought. *No quarter given for even your own kin. How can I go through with this? Why did Vyas Maharshi choose*

me to report the battles? There were others – Lord Vidura, Kripacharya...oh, no! How he can be here? All those Aacharyas, including Bhishmacharya, have gone onto the battlefield. Is this their age to fight? That wicked Duryodhana started all this, and now we all have to suffer the consequences. How many innocent lives...?

“Will somebody stop those singers? This isn’t a coronation, it’s a war! Is there even anybody left in this palace to hear them?” It was Dhruatarashtra who spoke. The song soon quieted. As it did, an officer from the inner hall walked up to Sanjaya.

“The king is waiting for you in his private conference room,” the man humbly informed him.

Sanjaya was instantly on his feet and, the court herald at his side, on his way down the hall toward the doors on the far side of the window. The fourth hall was reserved for important members of the royal family. There was a hush in the atmosphere—even the normal chatter of the inner compartments had fallen victim to the gloom the war had engendered. It was evident in a multitude of details—the flowers in the garden had faded, and the songbirds that usually chorused there were unnaturally quiet. Sanjaya noted the absence of *madhu* and *shuka* birds—only the clattering, ominous voices of *kunk* birds were heard.

King Dhruatarashtra turned toward the door as Sanjaya entered the room.

“Is that you, Sanjaya?” the old man asked as he heard the footsteps stop.

“Yes, Highness.”

“You have the gift. Vyas Maharshi wanted to give the Divine Sight to me, but I wouldn’t let him. Please be seated,” the king said.

Sanjaya complied. He bowed then got himself firmly seated.

“What do you see?”

Sanjaya considered for a moment telling the king what he looked like. After his morning offerings, Dhruatarashtra had changed to more luxuriant apparel. In the place of simple clothes now sparkled pearls and diamonds. In place of a white turban was a crown of gold. Blue light filtering in from the skylight above brightened the man’s face—and allowed Sanjaya to see the interplay of emotions, the hope and despair, the eagerness and gloom, the impatience and dejection, all clearly.

Mostly, there was weariness. The face was enmeshed with wrinkles, and the gray hair fell back against the nape of the king’s neck. For a moment, Sanjaya even felt something akin to pity. He decided not to relate these observations. He took a breath to speak.

Dhruatarashtra turned his head.

“Fan me!” he commanded. “Fan me now!”

The maidservants behind him fanned faster. Feeling the stronger breeze, he quieted.

“Lord,” Sanjaya said, “if Vyas Maharshi was willing to give you the Divine Sight, why did you not take it?”

The blind king blinked. When he spoke again, his voice was unsteady.

“Yes,” he said, “I suppose I owe you that much. The day before yesterday, Vyas Maharshi came here. He told me that a time of war was upon us all. He told me that my sons would destroy each other in war, that all of our warriors would perish. He offered me the Divine Sight, but made it clear that it would put me in the minds of my own sons at the hour of their deaths. How could I accept such a thing?”

“Was that all he told you, Highness?”

“No. He spoke of ill omens that even I can clearly see. Every night, I hear the feud between *varaha*—hog—and *marjara*—cat. Every sunrise, a swarm of locusts darkens the sky. The heavens thunder when there are no clouds. He described to me many more ominous events like these at length. His words are still ringing in my ears. My mind can hear what my ears hear, and my vision can perceive what is thus reflected in the mind. Knowing these things, I have no need of Divine Sight.

“That’s why I gave him your name, Sanjaya. You are a good man, and your mind is not burdened by the things that I have seen. I have also noticed your penchant for observation. You would have made a fine historian, you know. That is why I asked that the Divine Sight be given to you.

“And now, I must ask a question of you. I’m worried, Sanjaya, not just for myself nor even my family, but for the whole of the kingdom. Maharshi told me that my family will not survive this conflict. We possess enormous strength of arms, and our warriors are men of unmatched skill, but I don’t know what will happen. Will our Kuru family be destroyed?”

“It’s very possible,” Sanjaya replied.

“Explain.”

“There’s no question that we have the better army, Highness, but there’s something we’re missing.”

“What?”

“We don’t have Sri Krishna with us. I don’t need to remind you of his prowess as a soldier. His ethics, however, are what will determine his course of action. He only does what he feels is right, and I don’t know how he could see what we are doing as the right thing. Remember, Krishna is there where righteousness is.”

Dhrutarashtra sighed heavily and lowered his head. His hands shook as he rested them on the arms of his throne.

“Vyas Maharshi said the same thing,” he said. “It doesn’t take a guru,” the king continued, “to tell that a lot of good people are going to die in this war. I can feel it, Sanjaya, and it’s worse than anything I’ve ever felt. Regardless of my sons’ actions, I need to know if the choice I made was right. I need you to tell me, one way or the other.”

"It doesn't matter, Highness," Sanjaya replied. "Second-guessing yourself won't stop the war anymore. Nothing will. The camps are on the battlefield, the soldiers girding for the fight. I can see it from here—"

"Sanjaya," Dhruatarashtra interrupted, "you don't understand. I've never seen bloodshed—in fact, I don't even know what color blood is—but, with my mind's eye, I see a huge pool of blood before me. I see my sons drowning in the pool. I see it when I dream at night—and then I wake up, and when I open my eyes, I can see only darkness."

Sanjaya let him grieve. The king spoke this openly to most of his subjects—by showing that he was concerned for his people, he had earned their respect. He frowned now and, slumping, looked immeasurably old and burdened.

Then, his resolve returned. He sat up and looked his old friend in the eye—a strange gesture, Sanjaya noted, for a blind man.

"You said there was commotion in the war camps," he said. "Can you tell me what's going on there?"

"Of course, Lord."

"I need to know as much detail as you can spare. Please begin."

"Certainly, Lord..."

Sanjaya closed his eyes for a moment and concentrated. It still surprised him how easy the power was for him to control once it had been acquired. In an instant, he no longer saw the king or the palace as he entered the faraway battle scene. Both sides were rushing to make their last-minute preparations, and his voice reflected the hurry as he spoke.

"They must've been awake since early dawn—in fact, I doubt that anybody on either side got any sleep last night. It's still dark. The torches they use to light their camps are still burning. They come and go through the lights—both the Kauravas and the Pandavas have made their religious offerings already. The Brahmins are chanting their mantras behind the noise of clattering armaments."

"Clattering arms! Has the battle begun?"

"No, Lord. They are waiting until after sunrise. Right now, the infantry is loading the armory."

"Please describe the battle camps."

Sanjaya drew his vision back a bit and looked the camps over.

"They're breathtaking, Lord. Ours was only constructed some days ago, but it's fully stocked and carefully planned. The area was chosen specifically so that it could supply the combatants with everything they need. It was also chosen because there are no cemeteries, civilization, or hermitages within its borders."

"Everything they need?"

"The facility was first built, then stocked. In the Pandava camp, there are hospital facilities located at strategic points. Doctors and surgeons were brought in, and their surgical instruments have been set up. There are

good stocks of food and water, and plenty of firewood for the cooking stoves. They have large stocks of honey, hot butter, and fire-starting powder. They have a variety of weapons—bows and arrows, swords, spears, clubs, lances—even a few things I’ve never seen before. They’ve even brought spare parts for the chariots.

“The Kaurava camp is similar, but they’ve dug trenches around it. They really scoured the woods, too. They’re fielding soldiers from every race, every color. Some of these men have walked hundreds of miles to join this battle! The soldiers aren’t just grunts, either. Every one of them has some form of military training.”

“Wonderful,” the king said. “I had no idea they’d go to such lengths. How could they...?”

“They’re on a crusade, Lord. Many of them feel that this is a war between the servants of God and His enemies.”

“Funny how religion always seems to enter into things,” Dhritarashtra said. “How many troops do we have?”

“About three million.”

“And the Pandavas?”

“A little over two million.”

“That’s quite an advantage, no?”

“I don’t know, Lord. Their soldiers are better trained, and they have Sri Krishna of Dwarka with them.”

“But he promised not to take up arms—”

“And he fully intends to keep his promise, but he will still be giving the Pandavas strategic and tactical advice, and he’s already set himself up in their camp. I’m sure I don’t need to remind you of how he can motivate people.”

“Well, when it comes to strategy and tactics, our people are no slouches, either.” A hint of a smile formed on Dhritarashtra’s face. “When does the battle begin?”

“The preparations are done, Lord,” Sanjaya replied. “They’re starting to the battlefield even as we speak.”

“You know, Sanjaya,” Dhritarashtra said, “your Divine Sight could really provide quite an opportunity. I was born blind. I’ve never had the chance to move beyond my kingdom, learn of other cultures, other religions. You’ve told me that men from distant lands have come to the Pandava camps. Can you tell me about the places where they come from? About their cultures, their religions?”

“I tried something like that yesterday, Lord. I entered a man’s mind and tried to learn as much about him as I could from it. It was impossible. I couldn’t break through my own biases. I can see, Lord,” Sanjaya replied. “I cannot interpret. I wish I could help you, Lord, but it is beyond my power. I can tell you what these men’s homes look like, and how they go about the process of worship, but I cannot tell you what they believe.”

Dhrutarashtra smiled again. "That is still more than I could accomplish, unaided, in a lifetime. Please begin."

"Very well, Lord. I will do what I can."

"There are men within the Pandava camp who have skin the color of gold and come from a land many hundreds of miles to the east. It is a conflict between the Aryans of the north and the Aryans from south Bharata. It is a conflict between the Lunar Race and the Solar Race. In a deeper sense, it is a conflict between the people who have faith in God and those who have no faith in Him..."

Sanjaya's voice droned on until the sun was well up in the sky. Maid-servants came and put out the lamps that were no longer necessary. The king was spellbound. He asked an occasional question, but it was quite plain he was able to understand everything Sanjaya told him, even after almost an hour of lecture.

Still, the usual freshness that comes with the morning had fled. Even the breeze had quieted down to only a faint hint of itself, as if the tension of the impending battle had somehow infiltrated the very air.

Sanjaya took a deep breath.

"Lord, it's starting," he said. "They're walking up to the battlefield."

"Thank you, Sanjaya," Dhrutarashtra said. "From now on, I'm going to need you to concentrate on the battle."

"Yes, Lord."

"Tell me what's going on. Please."

"Certainly, Lord."

Sanjaya began to speak again, and the king sat silently transfixed. As his friend spoke, scenes from the battle played out in his mind...

chapter 5

IT WAS A HOT DAY IN OCTOBER IN THE YEAR 3101 B.C. THE SUN HAD NOT YET risen when Arjuna awoke. He bathed, walked to the place of sacrifice and made his morning offering. When he had finished, the eastern sky was clothed in a garment of scarlet splendor. A new and very fateful day was about to dawn.

To aid morale, Arjuna had dressed resplendently. His military uniform alternated shades of red and yellow. Matching gold armlets reflected the light of nearby torches. The golden armor that protected his arms and chest accentuated his athletic build. His helmet was made of finely polished gold and studded with diamonds that enhanced the luster in his gray eyes. A straight nose and neatly trimmed mustache put the finishing touches on the brave and dashing look he would take into battle—if he made it into battle.

As Arjuna took his place in the front line, just outside of the battle camp, Krishna rode up in a war chariot from the area in the camp where they were parked. The vehicle was as distinctive as its rider.

Arjuna bowed before the chariot with folded hands, studied it with the precision of a master soldier. Like all war chariots, it was high-domed and spacious, with plenty of room for implements of war. This one was entirely overlaid with gold. Its dome was rounder than most—almost temple-like—and a Hanuman flag fluttered from a small pole at its summit. A kettledrum was tied on either side, rigged to automatically beat a cadence when the chariot was in motion. Small bells fastened at various points jingled when it moved as well. Across its golden length was in-

scribed a repeated design – wheels pulled by four horses. The horses that drew this chariot were the purest snow-white.

Krishna was a handsome man, with large, serene lotus-like eyes and full lips. His complexion was a dusky blue, and he wore a golden crown with a peacock feather adding to its grace. He, too, had put on golden body armor and carried a whip. A thigh-length garland of white flowers around his neck enhanced his charm. Although he was not uncommonly large, he had such strength that Arjuna would not have been surprised to see him break the chariot over his knee. He was clothed much like Arjuna, except that, where Arjuna's clothing was brightly colored, Krishna's was the yellow of a noncombatant.

"Done with your religious chores?" he asked, the hint of a smile playing across his face.

"Haven't missed one yet," Arjuna replied.

"Good," Krishna said, the smile now coming into full bloom. "Keep up the good work. Now, here is your chariot, quite ready for the fight. I thought you might need something to ride in today. It's fully stocked. I hope it'll be adequate."

Krishna was being facetious, Arjuna noted. The chariot he was riding in was fit for a king! Still, if he, and not Krishna, was to ride in it, there would be certain things he would have to check – the strength and stiffness of the suspension, for example – that he could not observe at a mere glance. There were also...other things on Arjuna's mind. He walked over to the vehicle and gave it a closer inspection. Krishna stayed in the chariot, his friendly smile hardly fading.

"Is it to your liking?" he asked.

Arjuna remained silent and continued his scrutiny.

"Better not take too long," Krishna continued. "Look, over there! All the *rathis* and *maharathis* are taking their chariots out, too!"

Arjuna stepped up into the chariot and sat in its rear seat. The car saw-sawed slightly from his weight, but it was firm, and would take the bumps out of the landscape, making bowshot easier, as a proper war chariot should.

He surveyed the surrounding area. The *rathis* and *maharathis* were, indeed, hastening to their chariots. He noted that his four brothers were already at their stations, ready to begin the march to the battlefield. Foot soldiers by the hundreds of thousands had lined up in formation, anxiously awaiting their general's commands. Arjuna could hear the martial melody of the war vehicles – the chariots, the supply wagons, and even a few catapults – as they began moving into their places behind the lines. Trumpeting elephants, commands from the military chiefs, and the neighing of horses joined in the music to make it a bizarre but mighty chorus.

The final voice, without which none of it would be complete, was the sound of the Brahmins and the hermits reading scripture and chanting wartime mantras and praying for the Pandavas' victory in the war.

Arjuna looked back at the camp. Draupadi stood there, just outside her suite. Her long black hair was loosened and fell over her shoulders and down her back, setting off her bold neckline and striking figure. As he noticed that she was, in turn, gazing at him, Arjuna smiled. She returned his smile with her own—a smile of approval.

Commander-in-chief Dhrushtadyumna gave the order. The Army of the Pandavas, Arjuna among them, started the slow, deliberate journey to the battlefield. The drums on the chariots began to beat in time with the chants of the Brahmins, until the army was far enough from camp the soldiers could no longer hear the chanting.

At last, they reached their destination—the plains on the summit. Krishna pulled on the reins, and the horses jerked to a halt, the bells chiming. They reared, their shadows blending with that of the chariot's flag that fluttered in the morning breeze.

The Plain of Kurukshetra stretched over one hundred square miles. It was situated in the Panchanad area of Balhik south of the Saraswati River and extended along the entire mountainside. The peaks at its far end were smoky green in the morning light, and groves and lakes carved it into natural segments. There were neither fields nor villages nearby.

Great sages and kings had performed many religious rituals and sacrifices on this land, so that it had come to be known as a *dharmakshetra*—sacred ground. Indeed, it was held as a strong belief that one who died in this region while fighting would go directly to heaven, and it was for this reason it had been selected as the proper site for the forthcoming battle.

Arjuna looked intently at the army of the Kauravas on the far side of the field. As he did, a change came over him. He stood up slowly, the sun playing across the dark plains of his face.

There were laws that governed the waging of war. It could begin only after sunrise, and there were rules of conduct to be observed during the battle. Infantry, charioteers, elephanters—none of these could engage in combat except with their opposing counterparts. One couldn't use poisoned arrows, nor arrows with reverse blades. A group of soldiers could not attack a single isolated man. The extent to which these laws would be obeyed in this battle, however, remained to be seen.

Arjuna glanced anxiously at the rising sun. It seemed surrounded by ominous black rings even in the morning's glow. Dark clouds crowded around it on the horizon; one of them spiraled down its center, seeming to split it in half. The birds that normally took to the air with the morning's first light now crept silently through the trees. Other birds—white cranes, vultures, and crows—competed for the few slender perches that remained.

The cacophony of warfare unfulfilled rose from the battlefield. The armies were huge! The battle lines stretched nearly two hundred miles, and divisions had even occupied distant villages

Arjuna took up his gandiva bow in his left hand and held it upright. Although it was nearly twelve feet long, he hoisted it into the air with the strength of a lion. In the sunlight, his golden armor contrasted with the dark tan of his skin.

Yet...he was uncertain.

Krishna turned to Arjuna and smiled. The warrior stiffened for a moment.

"You're thinking hard," Krishna said. "What about?"

Arjuna studied his revered friend's face and, finding it yet again trustworthy, gave his best answer.

"You know why we're here?"

"Of course, I know. We're here to fight a war, and to make some evil men pay with their lives for what they've done." Krishna's smile vanished as he said those last words.

"Do you remember the last time the Kauravas, we Pandavas, and you Yadavas were here? On the day of the solar eclipse?"

"Yes, I do."

"We bathed in the holy waters of Sannihati Lake."

"One can earn the spiritual blessings of a thousand *ashwamedha* sacrifices by bathing in those waters just after an eclipse," Krishna reminded him. "Once, an ancient Kuru king plowed and tilled this land. He sowed orchards of fruit here. He worked so selflessly and so humbly that even the god Indra was pleased with his devotion.

"Seeing that Indra was satisfied, the king asked him to bless the land, to make it holy and to endow it to him. The king's only desire was to make this place, Kurukshetra, an abode fit for Lord Shiva and the deities. Indra granted the king his wish, and now Kurukshetra is a sacred place where one performs Vedic rituals."

"So, how is it that this place of holiness can be turned into a place of death?" Arjuna demanded. "What are we doing to ourselves?"

Krishna frowned. He adjusted his sash as if he were nervous and needed something to occupy his hands.

"Have you lost your nerve, man? A moment ago, I told you that Lord Shiva lives here. Destruction is what he does."

"It's just that..."

"I see. Yesterday, when Uluka came with Duryodhana's message, you bragged about how brave you were, but today, when the war's about to start, your bravery vanishes?"

Arjuna remembered...



Uluka was Shakuni's son, and the day before, when he entered the Pandavas' camp, he had worn the same jaundiced look on his chubby brown face his father always did—as if there were nothing either man could do to keep their inborn arrogance from distorting their features.

He had entered the Pandava camp under a flag of truce. It was evening. Torches hung from the light-colored walls, filled the room with a warm orange-yellow glow. Looking around him, Arjuna noticed that many of his Pandava kinsmen were still dressed in the garments they had worn to their evening prayers, a sign that, out of respect, they had found their seats with some haste for this impromptu court session.

In the center of the room sat Uluka, his gaudy, jewel-laden pendant and armbands glittering in the torchlight.

"Your Majesty King Yudhishthira, I, Uluka, present myself before Your Highness as an emissary from our most honored King Duryodhana for the purpose of communicating messages from him to the various members of this court. I am duty-bound to convey these messages exactly as they were given to me. I request Your Majesty's permission to do so."

Yudhishthira, attired in a simple bronze crown and blue robes, answered immediately, "This is an upright court. I know well the duties of a political messenger. Please convey your messages. You have my permission."

Uluka stood to face him.

"Your Highness, my master, King Duryodhana, has instructed me to convey to you that the time is ripe to fulfill your dreams. 'If, as you claim, you strictly follow the scriptures, then why are you involved in unrighteous acts? For you, reciting the Vedas and praying for peace are nothing but empty gestures. Your claim that you harbor no ill will toward us is a sham.' Thus concludes the message."

Although his younger brothers' eyes enflamed with rage, Yudhishthira remained the picture of placidity. He knew what was in his heart. He also knew, as Arjuna did, that the message said more about Duryodhana than it did about him — only a man drunk on his own power would claim to understand another man's soul better than the man who owned it.

"Brothers," he said, "Be still. Our turn will come."

"I have another message," Uluka said. He turned to Krishna.

"Lord Krishna," he said, "this message is special for you. You will recall the time when you assumed an illusory form in King Duryodhana's court. King Duryodhana has asked me to convey that he had no fear of you in that form. It could never harm him. Thus concludes this message."

When Duryodhana had first refused to return the Pandavas' land, Krishna had served as a mediator, trying to negotiate peace. Having no intentions of keeping the peace and knowing full well that having Krishna champion his cause would all but guarantee a military victory, Duryodhana tried to take him hostage, using the negotiations as a ruse. But Krishna saw through Duryodhana's deceit and foiled the plot. When the Kauravas met in conference, Krishna had appeared before them in his divine and powerful form.

They were struck with fear and wonder — and none of them had been any less dumbfounded than King Duryodhana himself. It had been plain

to anyone who saw him. Despite this, he now had the gall to openly lie about it, and to attempt spitefully to provoke Krishna's anger.

Krishna winked and gave a cursory smile. It was plain he knew the truth and that it was so obvious Uluka's lie needed no refutation.

Uluka turned again. "Bhima, brother of Yudhisthira, this message is for you. 'You have vowed to drink the blood of Dussasana. The time has come for you to live up to your vow.'"

As Bhima was about to reply, Uluka cut him off by turning to Arjuna.

"Arjuna, this message is for you. King Duryodhana wishes you to know that unless you can defeat us—which is highly unlikely—you should be ready to face your death. 'How can you expect to win without the bravery of the maharathis like Karna and Dronacharya? I have usurped your kingdom. I have enjoyed the life of royalty for thirteen long years while you were groveling in the depths of the forests. You are pitiful, and I'm going to kill you and every other pitiful Pandava weakling until the earth is scoured of your pathetic ilk.' Thus ends the message."

By the time he was finished, not a Pandava was left sitting. It was as if, in their fury, they were ready to fall on Uluka and kill him there and then.

"Uluka," Arjuna spat out, holding back his anger—if only just barely, "I have a message for you to take back to your so-called master. Tell him that I will answer his questions with my *gandiva* bow. Tell him that I will be at the front of our army tomorrow, and that he had better be ready for a rain of arrows like he has never seen in his lifetime.

"Tell him that, for all his specious talk, he has shown himself for the coward that he is. If he truly had any valor in so much as a finger of his gauntlet, he would adhere to the Kshatriya *dharma* and throw that gauntlet at us with his own strength. And if he thinks I'll stay my hand against Bhishma and Drona, he is sadly, sadly mistaken. Though they are my guru and my great-grandfather, I promise you I'll shoot arrows and deliver *astras* on them, if that's what it takes to put a coward like him in his place."



"Take a look, Arjuna," Krishna said, as the great warrior's mind returned to the present. "Remember that man, Bhishmacharya? The one whose bones you said you'd attack? Well, there he is, the commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army, sitting right in front in his chariot."

Arjuna looked. Sure enough, he plainly recognized his great-grandfather's plain white helmet and the five-starred flag that flew from his war chariot. The snow-white horses that drew it stood impassively before him. Although he was over a hundred and fifty years old, he was still a valiant maharathi, and the years had honed him into a masterful field general. Arjuna could see he had wasted no time in arranging the Kaurava

army for battle. They were spread over the battlefield like a sea of men, yet they remained in strict formation.

Krishna had not mentioned him, but Arjuna also recognized Dronacharya, standing in the chariot alongside Bhishma. His metal chestplate shone in the sun.

“You were brave yesterday. Where’s your courage today, man?”

Arjuna looked the battlefield over. Drona’s son, Ashwatthama, was with them. Behind them, Dhritarashtra’s children and the royalty of more than fifteen kingdoms, judging by the flags he saw hanging from their chariots, stood at their back to protect them. He saw the Magadhraj’s army, flying the Great Bull as their standard. Farther off, Duryodhana himself sat atop a bluish elephant. Over the dome of his howdah fluttered a flag studded with precious stones, their glitter visible even from this distance.

Arjuna looked over his foes’ battle formation. At the front were thousands of elephants, their huge bodies looking like giant steel-gray clouds. It was more than their natural body coloring. Spiked steel covers on their backs, trunks and legs rendered them even more imposing, although the greater spectacle still were the warriors who waited in the center of the army. In rows, visible in the gaps between the war machines and animals, almost anywhere there was space, stood a sea of infantry. Arjuna could make out virtually every type of weapon he knew of—shields, swords, and spears—in their possession.

There were one hundred thousand elephants in the Kaurava army. For each elephant, there were one hundred chariots. With each chariot, one hundred cavalry horses. Each horse bore an archer. With each archer stood one hundred foot soldiers, each with shield and sword in hand. The chariots were well-stocked, and had standing guards to protect their wheels. Arjuna had to hand it to Bhishmacharya. The man had a numerical edge, and he wasn’t making any fuss about using it.

King Yudhishthira glared across the open space between the two armies at Bhishmacharya—the old general was putting on an awe-inspiring show of force. Moving up, he parked his chariot next to Arjuna’s and, jumping out, spoke with Krishna.

“It seems our foes are already positioned for the battle,” he said. “I’m not one to discount our chances, but I can’t find a weakness in their lines. They look as close to impregnable as anything I’ve ever seen. It’s one thing to fight my own grandfathers. It’s another to lose to them.”

“What’s to worry?” Krishna replied in a firm, confident tone. “Look who’s on your side! There’s nothing there Arjuna can’t handle, and I’m sure he’s not the only one here who can take care of himself. You’ll do all right, Dharmaraja.”

Encouraged by Krishna’s words, Arjuna joined the conversation.

“They’re doing it by the book, Yudhishthira, so let’s take a page out of their manual. According to the sage Brihaspati, a larger army should spread

out to flank its foes, while a stronger army should bunch together and concentrate their firepower. We need to set up a formation like the tip of a needle. That way, we can take the offensive, force them to react to us."

Yudhishthira smiled grimly. "Yes," he said, "it sounds like it just might work. I'm sorry that I doubted."

As the king went to align his troops according to his brother's suggestion, Krishna turned toward Arjuna.

"Be pious now," he said, "and offer prayer to the goddess Durga while you stand facing the battlefield."

Arjuna cast a look at the sky.

"Durga, Goddess of War, provider of victory, most beloved deity of warriors. You are the supreme goddess of all knowledge. I humbly bow down to you, Great Goddess. I worship you with clear mind, clear heart. Please bless me with the glory of victory. You have defeated the demons in battle. You love your devotees as a mother loves her children. You are happiness, bravery and prosperity incarnate. You are the flame of flames. You cause the sun and the moon to shine more brightly. I pray to you now, bless me with success in this war."

From behind the clouds, the goddess Durga appeared.

"Unconquerable Pandava," she said, "you are manhood incarnate. Lord Narayana is at your hand, and even if Indra, the god of all heaven, is at your enemies' side, you will remain unconquered."

Lowering his eyes, Arjuna returned to his chariot. As he was about to tell Krishna how Durga had appeared to him, a thunderous noise arose from the Kaurava army.

"Hear the sound of Bhishmacharya's conch?" Krishna said. "Now, there is a man who will never lose his youth!"

Before he could continue, other musical instruments—more conches, kettledrums, tabors, bugles—joined the song. The sound filled the air. It did not, however, disturb the Pandava army.

Instead, the Pandavas raised a noise of their own. First, Krishna sounded a note with his conch, called Panchajanya. Then Arjuna blew his, named Devadatta. His brothers in turn joined them; soon, the chorus became a tumultuous racket, overwhelming the Kauravas' sounds and making the earth vibrate with a roar like thunder. Miles away, flocks of birds fled the sky for the shelter of the trees. The horses and elephants nervously joined the ruckus. For a moment, it was almost as if the natural world itself trembled from the force of the song. Time seemed to stand still as the world waited for the moment when the terrible battle would begin.

Arjuna put down his conch and turned to Krishna.

"I've never heard anything like that before," he said. "Is this the sound of the end of the world? The sound of doom?"

Krishna returned his look.

"Oh, the world isn't ending," he said, "but this is the beginning of dissolution."

Arjuna went pale, and he lowered his bow.

"Krishna," he said, "can't this war be stopped?"

Krishna was dumbfounded. The last person he expected to hear that question from was the unconquerable Arjuna. Still, he maintained an air of calm as he replied.

"No," he said. "Once you beach on the shores of death, there's no way to swim back up the river. You might as well try to go back in time. Better not to let the past burden you and get ready for the fight."

"But, Krishna," Arjuna argued, "we have a quarrel with maybe ten people—Duryodhana, Dussasana, Shakuni and Karna, maybe a few of their closer advisers. What about the others? Why should we waste the lives of so many people for the sake of just a handful of men? We could save millions by stopping this thing!"

He was worried about his soul. To his way of seeing it, the sin of killing millions over a family squabble would damn him to hell for eternity.

Krishna knew this.

"When the earth is polluted with corruption and immorality," he said, "there's no sin in cleaning it up. In such times, the Supreme Lord Brahma-deva uses destruction to start the clean-up. We're in one of those times now. Do you understand that, Arjuna?"

Arjuna's earrings swung as he shook his head.

"All right, then," Krishna said, "I guess it's time for a little explanation.

"Look across the battle lines, Arjuna. You see the people standing there? You know what it's like in their kingdom, the Kaurava kingdom? The jackasses breed more prolifically than the cows. The trees bear their fruits out of season. Infertile women conceive and give birth to monstrous children. Sons have incestuous affairs with their mothers. The lame and disabled sing and dance in lunacy. Queer animals, some with three horns, four eyes, five legs, two heads and two tails are born there."

"Enough," Arjuna said through gritted teeth. "I don't need to hear any more."

"Good," Krishna replied. "It's almost time for Lord Shiva to act. Remember this, Arjuna—this war is only the mechanism through which these sins will be righted. You'd better be ready for it."

"Yes, I am," Arjuna said. He picked up his gandiva bow again. "Since you're still in the driver's seat, I'd appreciate it if you'd take this chariot to the front of the lines."

Krishna smiled. Arjuna smiled back. Krishna loosened the reins and set the horses going, and it wasn't long before they were in full gallop. The bells jingled, and the kettledrums began to beat. The Hanuman flag on top of the dome snapped in the breeze as the chariot sprang towards

the Kaurava army. At last, when the enemy was so close Arjuna could make out the features of the nearest soldiers, Krishna drew to a stop.

“Look at the chiefs of the Kauravas army now,” he said. “This will be the last time you see most of them alive.”

Arjuna did not hear his words. He was too busy looking at the faces of his great-grandfather, his guru, his maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, even some of his grandsons. They were standing across the battle line from him, and seeing it tore at the warrior’s big heart. Gloomily, he let his gandiva bow slip from his hand. It fell from the chariot.

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