

Ashes of Kurukshetra

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Introduction: The Longest Game

There is a darkness that comes from the absence of light, and there is a darkness that comes from the crushing weight of impending grief. In the innermost chambers of the royal palace at Hastinapura, the blind king Dhritarashtra sat drowning in both.

Though his eyes had been sealed by milky cataracts since the moment of his birth, the chamber was not devoid of light for those who could see. Heavy iron braziers in the four corners of the room burned with a low, sullen, orange glow, casting long, wavering shadows that danced across the intricately carved mahogany walls. The heat in the room was stifling, pressing against the skin like a physical weight. The air was thick with the suffocating, heavy scent of burning camphor, crushed sandalwood, and night-blooming jasmine—fragrances meant to soothe the royal mind, but which instead masked the faint, coppery scent of anxiety that seemed to seep from the very stones of the palace.

A war was beginning on the plains of Kurukshetra, a brutal, uncompromising clash that would decide the fate of the Bharata dynasty and force the absolute, irreversible transition of millions from life to death.

For years, the great conflict had been building, a slow, inevitable accumulation of slights, broken oaths, and deeply entrenched pride. Now, the talking was over. The armies were massed on a pitch of baked red clay. Yet Dhritarashtra, the father of a hundred doomed sons, was condemned to experience the apocalypse not through the visceral clash of bronze and bone, but through the agonizing, delayed echo of the spoken word.

The sage Vyasa, in his infinite and terrible mercy, had offered the king the gift of sight to witness the carnage himself. Dhritarashtra had refused. To see his children slaughtered was a horror his mind could not bear; yet to remain in ignorance was an even greater torture. Thus, the divine vision was granted to his charioteer, Sanjaya. But as the morning of the first day broke, a deeper, stranger magic took hold of the chamber. The traditional epic, a narrative of pure righteousness and divine will, began to fracture.

The epic of Kurukshetra is, at its core, a story of unbearable endurance. It is a grueling, multi-day test of technique, psychology, and stamina, where the conditions of the earth dictate the survival of the combatants. To truly comprehend a battle that stretches across eighteen agonizing days, the gods required a different kind of chronicler. They required men who understood the attritional psychology of the long game—men who knew how to read a deteriorating pitch, how to interpret the shifting momentum of a grueling afternoon session, and how to articulate the silent, internal collapse of a warrior's concentration.

And so, across the gulf of centuries, pulling from a future age where battles are waged with leather and willow upon fields of green, eighteen distinct voices were summoned to the blind king's side. They arrived not as physical men, but as resonant frequencies in the heavy, perfumed air. They brought with them the bright, sharp vocabulary of the sporting arena, seamlessly merging it with the ancient, bloody reality of the epic.

As the first conch shells blared across the distant plain—a sound that reached the royal chamber as a faint, mournful vibration through the floorboards—Dhritarashtra leaned forward on his ivory throne. The heavy silence of the room was broken by a sudden, sharp crack of static, like dry lightning, carrying the scent of ozone and freshly cut grass.

The game was about to begin. And the king, trapped in his eternal midnight, prepared to listen to the first ball.

Chapter 1

Good morning, Your Majesty.

I trust the night has treated you kindly, though I suspect kindness is a rare visitor in these halls just now. Marvellous light out on the field this morning—clear, hard, the sort of light that reveals everything and forgives nothing. As the sun crested the eastern ridge, it threw long, razor-sharp shadows across the baked clay of Kurukshetra, turning the dew-soaked grass into a glittering carpet of crushed diamonds. The sky above us is a brilliant, unforgiving cobalt blue, entirely free of cloud, promising a punishing heat by the afternoon session. The sheer scale of the color before us is staggering. We have the deep, bruised purples and rich crimson silks of the Kaurava flags snapping sharply in the dawn breeze, juxtaposed against the pure, blinding whites and burnished golds of the Pandava encampment.

The two sides have taken their positions, and the noise is already something you feel in your chest rather than hear with your ears. A moment ago, the conches were blown—Panchajanya leading the chorus with a deep, bone-rattling boom that seemed to echo off the very vault of the sky, followed by the high, piercing shrieks of the war elephants and the metallic clatter of ten thousand spears striking bronze shields. It is a deafening, terrifying symphony, but right now, out in the middle, a profound and heavy silence has fallen.

You can smell the morning, Majesty. It is a complex bouquet. There is the scent of wet earth rapidly drying into dust, the sharp, pungent tang of oiled leather and horse sweat, and underneath it all, the heavy, sweet aroma of burning sandalwood from the morning rituals, masking the inevitable metallic scent of iron that waits to taste the air.

Bhishma, that great captain of captains, has set his field with the quiet authority of a man who has studied the contours of this

particular pitch for generations. You can almost see the geometry of it, outlined in the gleaming silver of polished armor and the bristling lines of drawn bows. Close catchers under the helmet, a short mid-wicket waiting for the mistimed pull, the slips cordon curved like a question mark around the chariot tracks. No extravagance. No wasted men. Just the pure, economical placement of a mind that understands the long game, a mind that knows this contest is not merely for a trophy, but an absolute transition from life to death.

Arjuna walks out with Krishna beside him. The visual contrast is magnificent. Arjuna is clad in mail that catches the morning sun, flashing like a beacon, while Krishna, his skin the color of a dark thundercloud, handles the reins of four milk-white horses with hands as steady as carved mahogany. There is a stillness around those two that reminds me of the great opening pairs—the ones who know the first hour can shape an entire series. Krishna, of course, is not merely the non-striker; he is the ultimate coach, the man who sees the whole field while the batsman is still adjusting his grip. I shall not rush the description. Let the moment breathe. That is a lesson I learned long ago: if the picture is complete, words become surplus. Yet since you cannot see the picture, I must paint with care, capturing every glint of light and every shift of the wind.

Bhishma takes the new ball—or rather, the first arrow of the morning. It is a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, its steel tip gleaming like a trapped star, the peacock feathers at its base a blur of emerald and sapphire. He runs in with that familiar, measured stride, his white robes flowing around him like water over smooth stones, the same rhythm that once dismantled batting line-ups across seasons. The release is perfect. The sound of his bowstring is a sharp, percussive *crack* that slices through the ambient hum of the battlefield.

Length on a sixpence, just outside the off stump of destiny. The arrow hisses as it cuts the air, a high-pitched whistling sound that makes the hairs on the back of the neck stand up. Arjuna, to his credit, shoulders arms. Leaves it alone. Sensible. The arrow buries itself in the hard-packed earth with a dull *thud*, throwing up a tiny plume of ochre dust. In a contest of this magnitude, the ability to leave the good ones is often more valuable than the ability to hit the bad ones for six.

The second delivery is fuller. You can see the shift in Bhishma's wrist, the slight adjustment of his weight. Arjuna meets it with the full face of the Gandiva. The sound is clean, resonant, a musical *clack* of arrow on shield that rings out like a bell across the plain. The deflected shaft races away past a diving mid-off, spinning through the dust and flashing silver as it goes. Four runs to the Pandavas, if one is keeping conventional score. But of course, we are not. The true scoreboard here is written in the hearts of men and the memory of the gods.

I watch Bhishma adjust his field by a single step, his hand raising briefly, catching the light. That is the mark of the great captain. He does not panic. He does not fling men about in theatrical despair. He makes the smallest possible change that restores the balance. Marvellous. Absolutely marvellous.

All morning the pattern holds. The light loses its golden hue and hardens into a blinding, flat glare. The scent of ozone and friction fills the air, the unmistakable smell of high-velocity impact. Bhishma bowls with the old sting, his silver hair catching the sun, the Pandava top order playing with disciplined respect. There are moments of quiet brilliance—Yudhishtira's late dab past slip, a deft deflection that sends an incoming shaft spiraling into the dirt; Bhima's heavy-footed drive through the covers, a swing of his mace

that sounds like a thunderclap and kicks up a cloud of rust-colored dust—but nothing yet that fractures the contest.

The pitch, if I may extend the metaphor, is still fresh. The grass is green where it hasn't been trampled, the bounce true, the movement available to the man who lands the ball in the right place. Bhishma is that man. He is a master of the micro-climate of the pitch, exploiting the cross-breeze that carries the scent of distant pines, making the arrows dip and swerve late in their flight.

As the session draws toward its close, the shadows have retreated, huddling directly beneath the chariots. The heat is beginning to rise, shimmering in waves above the soil, distorting the figures on the boundary into wavering mirages. I find myself thinking of the long days ahead. Eighteen of them, Your Majesty. A proper marathon. The sort of contest that reveals character more surely than any highlight reel ever could. There will be collapses, counter-attacks, periods of grinding attrition, and sudden explosions of brilliance, all played out against a canvas of blood-red earth and blinding bronze. Through it all, the wise observer remembers one thing: the game is never over until the final wicket falls.

And so, as the players leave the field for the interval, their armor clinking, horses snorting, the smell of sweat finally overpowering the morning incense, I leave you with that thought. Marvellous discipline from the old warrior. Marvellous resolve from the young ones. The series—forgive me, the war—has only just begun.

Chapter 2

The light, Majesty, is the colour of ancient parchment left too long in the sun—pale gold at the edges, deepening toward the horizon into the soft brown of well-thumbed manuscript. It is a melancholic,