Sootputra: The Unsung Hero

Chapter 20: Change

“So that’s how you became a king!”

“Yeah. I guess I did.”

“Fascinating story. Quite different from mine.”

“Yeah I know. Yours have a little more…….. girls.”

He chuckles.

“You could say that. Though I am sad to hear that Vrushali hated me in the end.

I would’ve become a good husband. I already have some expierence, you know.”

“I think that’s the exact thing that pissed her off.”

The air wasn’t cold any more. It wasn’t flowing like it did before. The piles of bodies now came into light as the clouds covering the moon faded away. Though the smell of blood wasn’t present as it was a couple seconds ago. The reflection from swords, shields and armors all along the battlefield was like glittering stars. This was the first time Karna despised the thought of stars.

“But I think you owned another kingdom. Right?”

“I protected, keshav. I didn’t owned it.

The kingdom you are talking about is Malini.

Jarasandh gave it to me.”

“Aah,yess my long distant relative and a sore enemy.

That was a feat to be honored.

You know, Bheema barely beat that guy.

Even I was forced to flee the battlefield against him.

He was the one who name me Ranchor(One who deserts battle.), you know.”

“Yeah, After you defeated him Sixteen times.”

Hari had a smirk on his face. His eyes didn’t even flinched a bit.

“Yeah, That Guy is persistent.

What can I say? But he sure is strong. And his boon of dying by only splitting his body made him almost immortal.

His persistence is the reason I had to shift my kingdom to the Island of Dwarka.”

“Why didn’t you kill him then?”

“It wasn’t my place to kill him. It was yours.

If you had just finished him that day, I wouldn’t have had to use Bheema for it.”

The mood turned alittle serious as the memories of the fight flashed in my mind. The price I had to pay to win it was a little high.

“Things were a little……. complicated than that.

I just ….couldn’t.” I said

“Tell me?”

“I will when we reach that part.

Just know that something along the way changed…..”

“Change! Huh?

That’s the thing my friend.

The Karna that you are telling me about, he seems like a different person.

He seems to only wish to be acknowledged by everyone.

All his life he struggled, worked the hardest, to be the best…

But the Karna I knew, only wanted to be better.

He always carried a face of grim, sadness like a whirlpool sucking all brightness away. Even though he always radiated so much. You turned to a lamp, always shining for others but staying in the dark yourself.

What changed? ”

“Times, change keshav.”

“At which point, Friend?”

“I can’t say

Bit by bit, little by little. It just chewed out my believes, my soul.

I don’t even know if the man who died was the karna, that I am telling you about.”

My body was numb but my soul rolled inside as though a baby in his mother’s womb. A cold wind blew and I desperately wanted ablanket.

There were times at which I wondered if the decisions I make will lead me to a justified end but then the curses came to mind and I gathered that the end may be a mystery but it certainly won’t be a good one. Still I did what I believe right, without breaking the promises I had made.

“Karna?”

“I know. Keshav.

Don’t worry. I’m still here.” I took a long breath and sighed.

“Soon after, A Genral came from Hastinapur. Duryodhan said that he is more than capable of handling royal and courtly matter’s. He was trained by Bhisma and Drona themselves.

He took an interest in me on the day of tournament and himself volunteered for the post. So I can rely on him for some time as I learned to control the horse named the kingdom of Anga. I ruled on Anga for some time only to be called by the prince after 6 months.

It was the first time my friend had called for me.

Bearing the things he had done I reached the capital palace as soon as the horses allowed.”…..

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The room was large. It had a lavish bed and looked out towards the city as the holy river cuts the under the bridge to the entrance and went beyond the nearby forest. It felt good to once again look at the city where I played once. Being the king of Anga was an exhausting process in all. And the fact that I am a Sootputra doesn’t help at all. Any minister that hears about by origin refuses to obey me. Citizens all around express their shame on having me as their king.

But still their responsibilities and the kingdom’s are on my shoulders. Thank the gods that the helpful general is not like them or this would have turned into a nightmare. In fact He was the one who told me about Duryodhan’s call.

Shon and Vrushali were also enjoying themselves up. They both go to the city market, take in the scenery and spend a lot of time together exploring the every nooks and cranny of the capital. For the first time they didn’t accompanied me to somewhere. In fact they both pressed on staying at the kingdom. It was a little weird.

The villainous smile on their faces scared me a bit as I left the castle’s gate. I wondered if something was up between the two of them. It would be great for Shon to finally have a girl of his own. In fact I think it would be his first time having a girl who loves him. The long walk from the room to the hall felt like a mere moments as I comprehended both my brother and childhood friend together.

The thought of Vrushali moving on from me after that day stings a bit but it was soon covered by the veil of anxiousness that if this comes to be true then things between me and her will get even more awkward. We may not even be able to see each other. I was only praying to the gods that please don’t make my thoughts become reality.

I had reached the gates of Eldest kauravs room. I entered following a Daasi who was carrying a plate of jug and glasses.

“Hah… Karna, you’re here. Come sit.”

There were 6 men sitting in the room. Some at the couch, some on mat and Duryodhan at his bed.

5 of them I recognized instantly, including one of them was Shakuni but there was a new person sitting at the chausar table. His back was turned towards me, He had black hairs and only wore an citrus colored robe.

“Have you met him yet?” Duryodhan said pointing out the man.

“Who is he?”

“hmmm…..Oi, Ashwathama! He’s here.”

My eyes widened on hearing that name. He was here. Ashwathama was here. But He was completely unrecognizable. He had a muscular build much finer than mine. Instead of a pony tail, he now had full grown hairs although short in size. And the Ever present Ruby in his forehead had grew a little larger than before. It reminded me of the common divine grounds on which we became friends.

As his steps came forward mine stood there like a rock going under a quicksand. I didn’t know what to say to him after such a long time. His face showed little to no excitement. But at least there was a little. I didn’t know if mine showed the same or not. Sure it was great to see him and all. My hearts strings were even pulled on hearing his name but there was a hint of sadness that he will see me as a betrayer. A friend who used him and left without a word.

He was here. Standing just before me. Both of us stood in front. His height has outgrown mine and I was looking up to meet his eyes. As his arms raised, I too raised mine for a hug as this seemed appropriate for a friend to greet one other after so many time. But Ashwatham wasn’t going for a hug. He instead joined his hands in two and…..

“I’m sorry, Vasu.

I am a friend that no one deserves.”

“What are you saying, Ashwathama?”

“It was because of me you left. Because my father refused to teach you.

And after all these years when you returned he insulted you yet again.

I can’t repent for that sin. I didn’t think you even thought of me as a friend until Duryodhan told me otherwise.”

Here I was thinking that I should be sorry but everything was reversed here. Why is he asking for forgiveness for the sins he didn’t even do.

“You are not responsible for your father Ashwathama.

I always thought of you as a friend. You were my first one after all.

How could I forget you? You were the reason I fell in love with Archery.

You taught me that skill.

I was just a little disappointed when you didn’t come to see me even after all the commotion at the arena.” I said

“I couldn’t. I was too scared to face you. How could I after what my father had done?

I just thought that you would…… ”

Although his build and height was like a giants but his face and voice was still like of a boy. He was still in his late teen age. Facing down he said all those things to me. And I just wondered why and when has he grown so much. He was still a kid but his sense was that of a mature man.

Only one thing I could do to lift this sadness from air. I hugged him and patted his back.

“Let visit Ganga today.

Our usual spot.”

“The time we saw each other last?”

“yess, lets resume it from there.

And also I told you before.

Call me Karna.” I said.

“To do that you both have to go to the river, but it looks like you will create a new one here.” Duryodhan stood up.

“A friend is someone you can always trust, who never betrays you.

Always stands by you. That’s friendship.” Duryodhan stood and patted both of us.

“You both are great friends. You’ve proven that.

I just hope we could be too.”

“You already are my friend. ” I said.

“Let’s celebrate today.”

“Not now, I have to go home.

Mata and father must be waiting.”

“Then tonight perhaps.” Ashwatham said.

“Heh.. tomorrow perhaps.” I said.

“Fine it works either way. Tomorrow then.”

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“Maa enough! I’ve already eaten twice the plate.

My stomach doesn’t have an inch to move.”

“just shut up and eat.” Maa said.

“But……..” But of course even before I could stop her she had already placed enough rice to fill the plate again.

“Fuh….Okay.

Hey mahadev give me strength and a little brain to my Maa.” She asked me a lot about anga as I digested third serving. Anymore and I swear, fainting will be the least of the problem.

“How is Shon?”

“He is enjoying himself. In fact we both do. We play with bali. Race around in the stable grounds and he loves taking care of the horses. One time we visited the bazaar and all he bought was just horse gear. ”

“Take care of him, okay. He is a workaholic sometimes. Can get tied up in his work only.”

“I know that’s why I’m training him or more like with him.

Every morning we get up and I teach him to fight. But he always persists on learning the sword even though I tell him that his body will be more suitable for spear.

In the end he wins the argument and we train with the sword. He enjoys the fullest at that time.

The smile on his face, you should see maa.”

“What about Vrushali?”

“Oh she is happy too (I think she is!). Although I see less of her than shon. But she usually comes when there is a meeting in the court or when there’s dinner time. Me and Shon usually have dinner together and Vrushali is the one serving us. I have assigned her as the chambermaid and in charge of the rest of the daasis. ”

“That’s a lot of responsibility for a little girl.”

“She is handling it well. ”

“And have you accepted?” Maa said while pouring water.

“Accepted what?”

“her!”

“Oviously!” I mean that’s why she is there with me isn’t that.

“Great! Now we can finally prepare for the wedding.” Maa’s eyes glittered like snow in a daylight.

Cough, cough. Water spilled all over my food as I choked on it.

“Cough…..Wedding?” I said clearing my voice.

“Whose?”

“Yours!”

“Maa, that wasn’t what I meant. I can’t.”

After a pause of silent and an uncontrollable grin widening on her face, she chuckled.

“Should’ve looked at your face.”

“Woof….Man! I thought that you were serious.

Don’t do that again, ever.” I said washing my hands

“What shouldn’t be done?” father said as he walked in.

“hah…. Good to see you father.” I bent and touched his feet.

“Hah.. it’s nothing.”

“Man I am famished.” Father said.

“They’ve increased your work hours I see.” I said to him. He has returned way late.

“yeah ever since you left. It’s been that way.”

“It’s because of me isn’t it. I can’t believe Pitama Bhisma can do that.”

“It wasn’t Bhsima.

I heard from soldiers that the crowned prince has extended the work hours of all the soots for the additional caring of the horses.” Maa said.

“Radha?” Father said.

“You don’t have to worry about it Karna. It’s nothing. Anyway, I will be too old for work soon and then I’ll just stay at home for as long as she wants.”

“Maa, I am done. Serve father. That is if there’s any food left.”

Father’s raised eyebrows were a sight to be seen as I passed that statement over his head.

“I am going to bed.” As I left the room I saw form the corner of my eye, Maa’s face abandoning the smile and sheltering the dejected look on her face.

I Knew Maa wanted it desperately. But she wouldn’t force it on me. She was not like that. She always stood for me. Gave me anything I wanted. And still now she was waiting for my yes to wedding.

But I wasn’t ready, not yet.

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Duryodhan then explained him the plan and he protested.

Instead of a plot to burn them alive he demanded a war but Duryodhan rejected his thought instead going with Mama Shkuni’s plot.

//Then he warned Vidur about the plot with a signal.

//Introduce vidur.

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