Sootputra: The Unsung Hero

Chapter 21: Nobility….

“I would understand if you have any bitterness in you. You don’t have to hide it. You can let it out.”

“What are you saying? Bitterness towards you!? Sure towards your father but I can’t have an ounce of hostility against you. And I‘m not the only one who is carrying bitter feelings. Am I?”

“True, there were some unsorted strings in me when you left without saying a word. I even practiced my archery, sometimes imagining you at the end of it. But more than hatred, more than enmity, it was like a guilt, frustration and regret that I am the one who forced you to leave. Because of my family you had to leave yours. “ He eyes had drowned in tears when he closed them.

“My father had yet again ruined another boy’s life. Just to make sure that his favorite student gets to be on the top. I heard that Eklavya also left soon after you. Where’d he go, no one knows. “ He was gritting his teeth with every word he spoke. I saw his palms from into a fist.

“My father is the worst, the worst of the teacher of all. He ignores his own son and ruins the life of boys who are not his disciples. How can I love a man like that? What qualities does he have to be proud on him? To be looked upon” I patted his shoulder. His both hands were busy wiping his eyes. There were callouses on his palm. He must have trained hard these past years. With this up close, I could see his fingers. The index and middle fingers of his right hand had scars of cutting like mine, from pulling too much bow string.

“At least his Guru isn’t like that.” He was now stable though his eyes were still a little wet.

“Actually he is. Or he was. ” I told Ashwatham the whole story without hiding anything from him. About the lying, about the training and about the curse. I don’t know if I made the right choice by telling him. My intuition just said that it would make him feel better.

“Infact I think it’s inherent. Parshuram and all of his previous disciples including Bhisma are like that.

You don’t know the way he looks at me. That discriminating look, like he is disappointed in me. But he barely knows me. I just can’t stand it. Someday I just wish we have a battle and I would get to show that old man the worth of my bow.”

“Vas….Karna, I’m sorry.

Your story is heart breaking.

How can he do that? All those years of devotion, hard work, penance and worship. Just in the end to get cursed. That’s propostrus.” At least now he was focusing on something else.

“I think it was more like a fit of rage.” I said

“But didn’t all these years of service meant nothing to him. Did he forget, he himself told you that you were equal to Bhisma in being his student.”

“That’s all in the past, I don’t want to dwell on it.

So, I request we just stop here.”

“Oh…Sorry.” Ashwatham sadly said facing the rippling water.

We walked on the bank of Ganga as if tracing it to its origin. The water today had some speed. It made the clucking sounds as it hopped on the rocks. The short cold breezes of air swirled around us. The fresh air of the morning was full of flowery scent. We both were carrying some flat stones in our hands and went on skipping them on water as we walked. Ashwathama’s face has turned to like of an old woman. Like it would sag out from all over. He was still dwelling on the past. No matter what I told him, he just can’t forgive his father. I’ve never seen a boy who was so angry on the man who cared for him his whole life.

“He did give me his vijaya bow, though.” I said tryng to improve the mood.

“What?” his eyes lit up. His mouth gaped open when the shinning blue color sparkled in his eyes as I manifested the sky crystal bow in my hand.

“Whoa….amazing.

Father told me about Parshuram’s bow. Once a time it belonged to Lord Shiva himself. He could pierce the earth with it.

After his axe, this bow was the most powerful arsenal he has…..I’m mean had.

And he gave it to you?” he said gasping.

“Like you said, I was a good student.

And also he regretted cursing me a second later.

But while handing me the bow he said to use it on an opponent I recognize as stronger.

Cause this bow always….”

“Always brings victory.” He finished my sentence.

“Father used to say that.

Even normal arrows from this bow is equal or stronger than that of elemental arrows.

And not any one can just lift Shiva’s bow.

But you are holding it like it’s a twig.”

“Well, it is light. And I like the grip. It feels well fitted in my hand.”

“Of course, that’s why he gave it to you. He knew you would be able to use it.

Can you show me a shot?”

“This bow is dangerous Ashwathama.

I don’t intend to use it until I find a worthy foe.”

“But this is an Ultimate rare chance for anyone to see it in action. Let alone me.

Please just once…..”

“No.” But he kept nagging. I dissolved the bow in the air like a powder of stars.

“I SAID NO.

This bow is a responsibility. I won’t unless it is needed.” I regretted yelling at him but it was for protecting my promise. He was a little shocked by this.

“But…….”

“What’s going on? Reminiscing the old memories. Or quarrelling like two old hags, about who remembers it better.” Duryodhan said as he walked into the fray.

“Nah, just synchronizing again.” I said.

“Come on the breakfast’s ready.

Today we are celebrating reunion.”

“How do we intend to celebrate it?” Ashwathama asked.

“Well we drink of course. There will be food, drinks and……..girls.

I had heard that some new ones have been brought specially for us.” Duryodhan said winking at me.

I was familiar with Ashwathama’s face. I had that once too. All too familiar with his predicament. The change in atmosphere, feelings and excessive heartbeat. Poor guy doesn’t know that a big battle was ahead of him. I wanted to help him but it would be like a blind helping another. Still……

“Ashwathama, don’t worry just talk and everything will be fine.”

“And if the worse come to pass. Then what do I do?” he said, nervously.

“The just… Run.”

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We were near the gates palace when I saw a few chariots parked right outside. Things were being loaded up in it. Two boys were helping to organize the items given by the servants. I knew them. They were the youngest pandavs.

What were their names again? Hah..yes. Nakul and Sahadeva, the twins. But where were they going? As we entered the gates ignoring them, we saw the rest of the party. The Largest Pandu’s son was helping his mother. The Crown prince and supposed greatest archer were walking side by side dressed in for a big occasion. It looked like a marriage was taking place. Behind them were servants carrying huge amounts of wrapped things.

We tried to ignore them as well but couldn’t as Rajmata kunti(Crowned prince’s mother) had just stood right in front of us breaking her hands from Bheema. We were all suspended for a second in air.

“Maa, what are you doing?” Yudhister said as he catches her up.

“No..nothing, I just saw Duryodhan and thought that it would be a good chance to say goodbye.

We are going for a while after all.”

“You never dared to talk to me ever before but now suddenly you want to give me blessings. That’s …….weird.”

“Don’t say that Duri.” Rajmata said.

“Why shouldn’t I?

Looking by the spectacle and the bags, it looks like you are going your precious nephew in Dwarka.

It’s good. At least now there will be peace for some days, without you lot.

Go before the brother of the stolen wife catches up to him. He will need your help defending his city.

Piss off now. ”

“Hey, you have no right to talk to her like that. In fact you have no right at all.” Bheema stepped in pushing his mother to the back. “Talk to me. If you want.”

“Oh, I will, you son of-” Duryodhan’s rage blowed the lid the covering it. He didn’t even gave a thought of what he was saying as he leaned forward as if climbing on the towering Bhima.

“Duryodhan, stop.

We shouldn’t. Just take her blessing and go.” I said grabbing his arm.

Duryodhan’s well was filled with bitterness for them, He couldn’t see anything beyond the darkness that filled it. His temper however calmed down and he listened to my voice (at least this time). We three bent down and took rajmata’s blessings.

“At least the soot has some sense of resemblance. Has the kingdom of Anga accepted this insult yet?” Said Bheema, with taunt in his eyes.

“You are talking to my friend, an classmate and your elder brother. At least talk with respect, you brat.” Duryodhan said.

“Don’t talk to me about respect. For you are no brothers of mine. And this dog doesn’t deserve any. He doesn’t even know how a king acts. Look at him still wearing simple cloths like a peasant. He has no right to stand within this castle.”

“I am equal to any man in here, Bheema. And if you don’t agree, I’ll write my proof in your blood.” I said holding my rage in for rajmata’s sake.

Yudhister came in and stopped raging bull like Bheema in time.

“Karna, I ask forgiveness for my little brother’s hostility.” He said bowing down with his hands closed.

“But…..His words are true.

You are not worthy to be here.” He rose up. A coldness emanating from his eyes. I kept seeing him meet mine. Like giving me a challenge and him an excuse to fight.

“Worthy? You don’t even know the meaning of the word, crowned prince.” Duryodhan growled.

“The man is no noble, brother. He is not permitted.”

“What is nobility, if not courage, honor and skill?

One doesn’t need to be born with a silver spoon to be a Noble.”

“Can’t you see, he is just using you? His loyalty isn’t true.

He has no family, no lineage.

He has no name.” He pointed at to all of me from head to toe.

“My name is Karna, Prince.

You would do well to remember it.” He retracted his hands. A wide eyed, scared look for a second but it quickly turned to one with a smile and confident one.

“What do you want Karna? If your loyalty is defined by kingdoms, I’ve more kingdoms than Duryodhan. Bigger and grander than measly Anga. Come to me.

And I’ll give anything to you.” The prince is thinking of my friendship very cheap. But if he really wants to know my price then……

My reply came quick and swift. “I want nothing prince………… Except to fight him.” I pointed my finger to the only prince who was standing behind Rajmata. Arjuna.

“It can’t be done.” Yudhister said. His fist clenched. Hair on the back of my head rose as the intense aura of their stares attacked me.

“Then I am afraid you have lost a loyal Dog.” I said joining my hands asking to leave.

We all walked away from there. There was nothing left to say and hear. The true nature of the righteous princes lay bare in front of my eyes. Was no one in this castle as pure as the ballads stories? Even the heroes turned out to be no better than the villains. And the villains were as much of a good as heroes. At least for me they were. No one here was good or bad, black or white they were all a dark shades of grey.

So what is my color? White or Black.

What will the ballads calling me?

A hero or a villain………..