Sootputra: The Unsung Hero.

Chapter 23: The Uncles

My heart was still feeling a little uneasy even after convincing Duryodhan to revoke his plans regarding Varnavrat. The palace was still being built up at the location. Pandavs have just returned yesterday from their visit to Dwarka. The king had ordered them to visit the newly built palace as being the crowned prince it was the duty to inaugurate the new palace.

I knew that all of this was just a false charade to lure them in trap but all the while I was helpless to do anything. My vow to Duryodhan for being ever so loyal was the biggest hindrance.

The castle was abuzz today with servants roaming from one place to the other. It was like ants in their anthill.

Stopping one such ant in her tracks I enquired about the situation. She told me that the Pandav princes were leaving today for the Vranavrat and that the king had ordered for a grand departure. A whirlpool of guilt arose in my heart. It was sucking me in it. I wanted to say to her to stop them but the power of the words wasn’t enough to propel them out of me. The glittering drapes and shining marble looked dull that day. It was like a tug between views in here. One portion of my conciseness told me to tell the truth, burn the curtains of trap. But the other told me to uphold the friend. Stay true to him. Don’t break his trust. Besides those people deserve it, they never viewed you with an equal eye.

Which was right to pursue, which not? Is it right to be silent or will it be a betrayal for telling the truth to the whole courtiers.

Doing the latter will result in my friends permanent removal from the race of the throne. He will lose every claim he has after everyone comes to know about his plan. Will it be right to take everything away from a man who gave me everything?

Still I can’t just let them die like a brick in a stove.

What to do? Isn’t there any way to help them?

I was swirling in the waves of emotions when I bumped into the man I was looking for.

“Oh, Sorry. I didn’t saw you. ”

I bend to help him pick up the scrolls that have fallen to the ground. Strangely they had drawings of several things like cows, village, battle formation and even one with a semi bare woman.

“Are you Karna?”

The man asked me. He had long hairs that were held back with the help of a forehead band. A big mustache with no beard. His face that of an elderly with an ink like fragrance.

“How do you….”

“You don’t have to ask. Everyone knows you.

My, my. You look more fairer than that daasi described. And those scars too. Exactly like how she said.”

I got up having picked all the papers and handed them over to him.

My name is Vidur, he said. My eyes widened on hearing that name. He was the person Duryodhan talked about. A clever man, and one to be careful of.

“You don’t have to be wary about me.

I’m sure Duryodhan had at least told you about me a bit.”

“Yeah, a bit.” It was like he was reading my mind.

“Heh…. I am sure it was interesting.

But don’t worry, as long as you don’t work against Hastinapuir you are safe.”

A disturbing vibe came from him as he uttered the last sentence. AS if he was pressing for every word in it.

“You don’t seem to be…….as wary of me as the others.” I said

“You mean that I don’t look down upon you. That I don’t treat you like a dog.

Ha…..hahah.

Don’t take that seriously.”

“That will depend on your justification.”

“Hmm….” He went into thinking or at least I think he pretended to. The thing that was most clear about him was that he was a very shrewd guy and one have to be wary of what to say in front of him.

“Let’s just say that I too have felt what you have.

Let’s just leave it at that.”

He turned and started walking away.

“Ummm……wait.

I saw some pictures of battle formation in them. Do you study them?”

“A little.” He said in an inquisitive voice.

“I….I need your opinion on something.”

“Sure… I mean OK. Ask away.”

“What is the best way to defeat an enemy?”

He rose and eyebrow at my question but after examining me from head to toe through his eyes he again went to thinking.

“Break them. Emotionally , Physically. Make them helpless, in war.”

“But what if you defeat them before the war?

Kill them, Burn them before it even begins.”

“What do you mean?”

The curiosity was lit in him. I didn’t know if it was enough but if anyone can help them, then who better than the advisor to the king and Pandavs themselves.

“Let’s just leave it at that” I said, mimicking him.

It was my turn to go away before he starts to suspects more before time. I made my hurried exit not knowing if the doubt I created would be enough or not.

I went straight to home. Today, I felt like that a lap of a mother would be the only place I would find some sleep.

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The rest of my days went on staying at my home in the village. The palace didn’t felt like a place where one could stay peacefully. The constant interaction with people there felt like a web in which one would get stuck if they tangle with it for too long.

The home was so peaceful. The only disturbance in the air was my Maa’s voice who kept asking about Shon. The worried tone and the longing to see her other son was making her anxious. The daily reminder to not forget about the pickles that she had specifically made for him. And also to bring both Vrushali and Shon next time. It felt like my time left here was short. It had already been a month since I came to Hastinapur. And I have a kingdom to take care of. Last week a letter came asking about me and elaborating the status of Anga. The Handwriting was none other than Vrushali herself.

A guilt was trapping me for not bringing them along. I shouldn’t have listened to them and forced them to come with me.

“Don’t forget about the Pot of pickle when you leave.”

And there it was the daily reminder about the pickle. I wonder what would Shon feel when he learns about the Maa’s worry about him. Would he would even believe that Radha maa nagged so much about him?

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn’t notice the hoofing sound of the horse in front of the house. Father had hurriedly entered in and went straight to Maa.

“Father? ” I tried to get his attention.

“Karna….Oh Thank god you are here.

Son, don’t leave for yet another two or three days.” He said giving me just a second of eye contact.

“Sure, but what happened. You look worried.”

“The news is bad. ” he said.

We sat down to eat as Maa served us.

“Tell me what happened.”

But he didn’t flinched his lips. He was barely moving his hands for the food.

“Father!!!”

He snapped from his contusive state. Like his head has just realized that the dinner has been served.

“Bishma…

I mean Pitama Bhisma came in today to the stables.”

“Personally, He?”

“Yess, that was a little odd too. But he was too worried . His face looked like he has failed at something.”

“What happened?

Please tell me.”

I forced him as he was barely sharing anything about the matter. But I gave him my swear and he loosened up.

“I’m only telling you this because of the vow that you gave me. You can’t tell anyone about this. The state of the situation is not confirmed yet.

We are leaving today to verify just that. I was told to prepare in a hurry for a two day ride. And only Our chariot will be leaving in secret.”

“To Where?” I asked

“Varnavrat”

The name sent a jolt down my spine. All the hairs on my body sprang up. Is what I was thinking truly had happened? But he said he would not go through with the plan.

“Bhisma had just received word from the king that the new Palace of Vranavrat has burnt down. The pandavs who left for it’s inauguration last week, are supposedly caught up in the accident. There are said to be no survivors from it. ”

My breathing became heavy. I was trying to calm my heartbeat as it went irradical and jumped like a hopper. Trying too hard to maintain my composure. But inside dying like a coward. If this news is really true then I have already lost before the start of any battle.

Only one person can bring peace to my heart or bring more devastation to it. Either way, I have to confirm it from him.

“I will return before the week ends. ”

As we got up after eating our supper, the faces of those dead came to my mind. The 5 brave brothers and their mother. The dead bodies lying on the pyres burning away until not a single ash remains of them. And I was just standing, watching them die. Their faces covered my view, Yudhister, Bhima, The twins Nakula Sahadeva, There Mother Kunti and also … Arjuna. For the first time I didn’t felt any enmity, any rivalry towards him. I just wanted him to be standing in front of me. Gripping a bow and aiming for my chest.

What have we done?

Slamming the doors I entered in the chambers of the old man. But the room was silent. He was not here. Only darkness greeted me. So I went on a spree, searching the entire castle for him. And then after a while My eyes caught him. In the most unexpected place their was in it. The chambers of advisor Vidur. I saw him talking to the man. Limping on his leg he barely came to the shoulders height of him.

He noticed me coming his way. They both disbanded and his feet turned to me. As I approached him he signaled me to follow him.

But I wasn’t in a mood to take orders.

“Did you do it?” I asked.

“What?” he said.

“Don’t play games with me. Did you go through with the plan?

Why was the palace burnt down even after the talk?”

“How do you know that?”

“That doesn’t matter, answer me dammit!!” enraged with anger like a raging bull I leaned on him, grabbing him by his scarf.

“Enough with the blaming already.

Why does everyone thinks that I did it , huh?

First him, then you.” Shakuni said.

“I can’t even breath in this castle, let alone ……”

His words stopped, looking at the guards surrounding us, we both thought it best to take the conversation to private. A place we both were familiar with.

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“Yes, I gave the order.” Duryodhan said.

“Why? WHY?” I asked

“Don’t take me wrong friend.

I hate him. In fact I hate every son of Pandu.

I can’t even think the son of the thief who stole the crown from my father,

Sitting on the same throne that belongs to me.

I’d sooner see you sitting on it then him.

And since it wasn’t going to happen through normal ways, I had to be a little clever.

The palace was already half built so I wasn’t going to let the opportunity go away.”

“Duryodhan, what have you done. We can’t look in our eyes anymore.

I’ll regret this every single day of my life. Waking up I will always see their faces.

Demanding a fair chance, calling me a wimp, a coward.”

“Come on , Karna. You are being over reactive.

We don’t even need to mourn them. They don’t deserve it.” Shakuni said.

“Every warrior who is killed by treachery needs to be mourned, And here are five. How can I not?”

“Whatever you say, Karna?

Those things only sound right in songs and plays.

They got what was coming to them. They deserved it.”

“What about Rajamata? What about Kunti?

Did she deserved it.?” I said.

“She…….She….

She was an unavoidable casualty. I regret her death.” He choked saying it.

“Unavoidable? That’s how you justify her death.”

My legs lost their strength. Hearing my friend’s cold words. An unmourning response, as it found a way through my ears to my consciousness. As a big tree that have been pulled from it’s root in a storm I fell down, looking below hiding my expression.

“Karna, will you leave me? ”

“I…I…” My lips fluttered. As if they would fall off like petals from a dead flower. How coldly he was asking me about our friendship. Did he really just used me for his gain?

“Karna, Now that you know, I have done it .

Will you be at my side or will you betray me?”

“I..I gave you a vow, Fri…” My heart forbid me to say that word but…

“Friend.

I will be by your side no matter what.”

That was the first time I killed my sense of righteousness. Calling him ‘friend’ even after all of that, that was the hardest think I had ever done in my life. If only the people knew, they would cuss at me, Provoke me, abuse my name. They would call me an enemy of Dharma.

But I still won’t leave him. The man who saved me. It was my turn to save him now. I am the only ray of hope in his darkness filled life. I am the only one who can show him the path of righteousness. If I leave him now, The vultures like Shakuni and Dushasan will devour him in an instant. I can’t let that happen.

I will make sure that he follows his own path, free from any influence.

And what happened today will remain a secret. I will bury it in the depths of my memories like a treasure at the bottom of the sea.

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Now I just waited for the news to be confirmed. A week later father came back. A grimm look on his face. Like that of a man who has seen a ghost. Father was not a strangers to dead bodies, being the charioteer of Bhisma. It meant that he had seen countless battles and seen him triumph over many enemies.

But today was different. Even he was speechless. Not saying a single word. Next day the news spread like a fire that the pandavs with their mother have died in an accidental fire in the palace of Varnavrat. Father told us that they have found six bodies from the royal chambers. One was of a female and the rest were males. The bodies were charred to the bones. The ashes were still roaming in the air when they reached the palace. Some of them were missing their limbs and others were left with only black coal skin on top. The palace on the other hand was burned to the ground with no place left intact. Bhisma cried so hard that the ear drum of a man would rupture if he stood too close. He packed all of the bones from the royal chambers in a his white draping cloth, and carried them all the way to the kingdom. The cremation and immersion ritual was going to take place tomorrow with the whole kingdom as witness.

The whole city including my family was mourning the loss of their crowned prince, but while they were sinking in grief I was packing and planning to leave this kingdom as soon as possible.

“Maa, why don’t you come with me?

Father please let us go. I even have a palace now. I will take care of both of you.

Please come with me. There is nothing left for you in this kingdom. Come live with both of your son’s.”

“Radheya, I would have come with you the first time you asked, but my reason hasn’t changed.

I can’t leave Bhisma, as long as I am able, I will be his charioter. You have chosen your duty son, and I have chosen mine. We both should honor each other.”

“But what about Maa, father. She can’t come with me because of you.

As long as you are here, she is here.”

“Vasu, Don’t worry about me, son. I’m happy where I am. Just seeing your face and knowing that you both have each other. That makes this helpless mother have tears with a smile on her face. I will stay with your father. Cause I know that I don’t have to worry about you two anymore.

Specially Shon, you are more like a father to him than Adhirath.

Keep him in line. Take care of him. But most importantly, keep him safe.”

“I will. I promise.”

“Oh, and don’t forget about the pickle pot.” Father said.

And that ruined the special emotional moment.

“Thank you, father.” I said in a satirical form.

Leaving the kingdom I was thinking about the dead. The courage that I lacked to face their immolation ritual in the holy river. It was eating me from inside. This visit to Hastinapur felt like it had teared a little part of my soul away. And many more were to come.