Sootputra: The Unsung Hero

Chapter 31 : My Reward

*I have done it.*

*I have passed the test.*

*The person I love,*

*The one heavens made for me will finally be mine.*

*I will love her eternally.*

*I will respect her my whole life.*

*I will protect her dignity and honor her with my life.*

*I will care for her, take her every need away.*

*Cause she is the one for me,*

*Because she is the one I love,*

*She is my Draupadi.*

These are the kind of vows one makes when they choose a soul mate to spend their rest of the lives with. In my mind I had already thought of her as my wife. The daughter-in-law of my parents. The sister that my brother never had. The mother of my children. Maybe the happiest imagination I have ever forged.

But maybe the pit in which they were forged had too much heat.

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I was there, down on one knee. Keeping my head down.

Extending my hands towards the bride. I waited, Oh god I waited.

For her to reach me. To grasp it. The excitement was getting a little harder to control now. Maybe this is the moment my fate changes. The time has come for me to be recognized, to be acknowledged by everyone. My valor, my strength and my love has surpassed everyone else’s. Today I’ll get everything.

And it all will be because of her. When a child, Maa always used to say that a woman in your life is the greatest treasure of all. She is like a goddess, that brings with her eternal Happiness, Respect, Money, Fame, Stability and love. All the things that a man could hope for.

Like the calm spot in the eye of a hurricane, she holds you to the ground. Telling you that there is a reason for you to return home.

Finally I knew the meaning of those things. She is the woman that will be the Goddess for my home. The once emotionless stone heart that started to beat again because of her. The love that all these years eluded me, suddenly found it’s way back when I saw her eyes. The smile on my face that wasn’t a fake one this time. Maybe with her by my side, I will again know what it feels like to live for oneself and not just for others.

Even Duryodhan was smiling. I saw him gently bow when I was climbing the stairs. In fact all of them were now standing on their seats with their jaws dropped to the floor. Their eyes glued on the moment when she will grab my hand. This chance that heaven gave me. It was good decision to come here. I will eternally be grateful to my friend for bringing me here, even if it was a little forceful. Cause of him I had a chance to stumble upon her.

And it will be because of her that from this moment on I will have fame, glory and ….. Love in my life. All the things that I desired will be within my reach in just mere moments.

My hands still couldn’t feel her embrace at this point. I looked up and got scared of the scene that dropped on my eyes. Her face was boiling like lava. Her narrow knife like eyes were ready to rip me to shreds. In her fiery crackling words she whispered “No!”

“Princess!?” I said, confused.

“I SAID NO!!!” She yelled.

“I can’t marry the son of a mere chariot driver.

Your ambitions are too high sootputra. ” She gritted her teeth. The entire hall echoed with her voice. Like a Eagle she rose, like a tigress she roared. Her brother had one hand ready on his spear and the other at the sword.

“You can’t hope that a princess like me can marry anyone lesser than a kshatriya.

And you are just a mere sootputra, who doesn’t have a right to even stand in the hall let alone marry me.

Just because you are a king, that doesn’t mean that you forget where you came from, Angraaj.” Her finger pointed at me as I was still on my one knee.

Like the glare of the sun which triggers an avalanche on the mountain, all My dreams, my hopes and my dignity all came tumbling down. The shattered pieces of it all laid in the memories of everyone who has witnessed it.

Sootputra!?

Sootputra? Sootputra again!!

Even now when I have proven myself, even now when I deserve her, even now when I am superior to every other.

Even then I am looked down upon.

A fire burned the core of my heart. The gentleness from a moment ago had left or hidden itself from the fear of anger that had suddenly come out.

Why? Whyyyyy? I asked myself.

“I have every right to take your hand, Oh princess.” My anger was getting uncontrollable now. I leaned on her a little.

“My curse gives me the right to marry you.

My guru Parshuram saw with his divine sense that I am a kshatriya thus giving me the right to make you my bride. My wife!!

If anyone has any objection to that in this court come out now or stay silent for the rest of your lives.” I said looking at Dhristadumnya, who was trembling and sweating, feared and confused whether to attack or back off.

I extended my hands again towards her.

This time she grabbed it. I was so overjoyed. Her hands were still so soft, soothingly cold. Finally, I thought……

“Then tell me this ,Oh Kshatriya.” Draupadi spoke without changing her tone. Looking down on me with sharp eyes coated in that thick black mascara.

“Tell me the name of your father!!

For surely for a girl who is going to leave her family and her home to be part of another.

She must know the name she is going to adopt.

Name of the khsatriya’s father that was going to become part of her life now.

Tell me, Oh mighty Kshatriya.”

My mind gone numb, she has asked the single question that had destroyed my meaning, my existence.

What do I answer, I have never thought of any body except pita Adhirath as my father. Then how can I give any other man’s name.

“My father is Adhirath.

The one and only I ever had.”

“So you are indeed a Sootputra.” She chuckled.

“Stop acting high and mighty , Oh charioteer.

And go grab the seat beside the king you serve.

You weren’t even a contestant to begin with.”

I looked at Dhristadumnya who had just uttered these sharp words to me. If this had been a battleground I would have buried him in the earth before his sentence had finished. But in this case………..

I lost the princesses hand and started retreating my reluctant steps back.

“I am not a contestant you say.” I said to Dhrisdumnya. Looking him directly in the eye.

“Look at these people.

Look at their faces.” I pointed my both hands wide as I walked backwards. “The so called eligible ones.

If they are the participants then, Am I not the better.

Have I not proven that I am better than all of them.”

I shifted my gaze to Draupadi.

“I am going now, but If I do

Who will marry you?

What will this swayamvar be for?

Where you rejected the only eligible candidate.”

“That’s not true.” A voice echoed in the hall.

My gaze went back.

They were searching for the source of the sound that had just came.

One of the standing Brahmins came forward. He was one of those that were standing in the back. One of the Brahmins from the group that have come to bless and eat food. He had a long lock of hair tied in a bundle on his head. The black moustache and long beard were enough to cover half his face. His build was strong, muscular. His height around the same as Shon. He had an aura around him though. One that was exceeded the rest (Except maybe keshav.).

“I know a thing or two about fishing too, Angraaj” He said in his young voice.

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I turned, hiding my gaze and started walking away.

I never looked back, How could I? I knew I would break the instant I do. The misery in my eyes would be clear.

For the first time I felt vulnerable. Is this the moment That Guru Parshurama mentioned about. Is this the moment that I would forget all of his teachings and my skills.

It felt like so.

I didn't wanted to cry. I just wanted to walk away from all of this as soon as possible. I didn't even looked back at her.

Was she happy? Was she sad as me?

No, How could she be sad? She was the one who rejected me. She was the one who chose him.

It was all a fake. All the words yesterday. All the feelings, it was all fake. She didn't even liked me, let alone love. She always viewed me through that narrow slit of status. She just played with my feelings and threw them away as soon as they got unnecessary.

How can I be this foolish? How can I walk straight into her trap? I never even questioned or argued when the king provoked me to participate as a candidate. I never should’ve let this cold stone heart melt like a wax. But I couldn’t stop, when it did. Where was my thinking, my reasoning that time? Did I lose it all or forsake it all for her?

I walked towards Duryodhan crossing the fish on the floor, struck by the Brahmin. It was still flaling, even though an arrow had just pierced it through.

I stood beside Duryodhan's chair and took my place behind him as before.

The Brahmin and Princess......no.....

Now she was Draupadi for me...........

Someone else's Draupadi..........

They both came closer to the King and bowed down to take his blessing.

Suddenly, Duryodhan stood up. He placed his hands on my shoulder and shook his head a little in approval. I was stumped, I had an intuition what he was going to do. But I didn't had the courage to stop him or maybe I didn't wanted to.

"KING DRUPAD!!!!" He shouted while looking at my face.

"Is this the justice of your kingdom?

Is this how a king and a suitor is treated under your care?

My friend is more than eligible for this test.” He hands were pointing at me.

“In fact he is more than credible than anyone here including myself for your daughter's hand, yet you still deny him.

Not only that but your ignorant daughter even undermined him.

He has surppassed even harder obstacles than this in his life. He has the strength to beat King Jarasandh. He has even subdued great archer Arjuna's Arrow's in front of my eyes. Do you think that this puny test is even worthy of his effort?

Yet you insult him in front of so many, by not calling him king.

He is more of a King than anyone else in this room,

Even Jarasandh,

Even you,

Even that Mayadhaari Krishna." Duryodhan said with a high voice while looking at every one in the hall, especially at Lord Hari.

No one retaliated. Not Jarasandh, not Drupad, not even Keshav himself.

I, yet again was more indebted to Duryodhan than anyone. I knew he always considered me his friend but that day the height of his friendship reached my heart. My respect and my view of him as my true friend deepened even more.

Everyone else was silent, only the echo of Duryodhan's voice can be heard.

Then the King stood up and bowed with his hands joined.

"Forgive me prince Duryodhan,

And Forgive me Angraja.

I didn't mean to offend you or your friend in any way.

Yet this is a swayamvar and being that my daughter has the full right to choose whoever she wishes to marry. Besides the brahmin has fullfilled and cleared the test within the criteria of rules.

After all that, if your are still angry then I humbly ask your forgiveness." The King said

"You still insult me king.” Duryodhan said, disgusted.

“And not only me, everyone who is present here is insulted by your reasoning.

Why is that Brahmin still holding her hand?

Why isn't the engagement broken of yet?" Duryodhan said building up his anger.

"But my Daughter has already made her decision and I have already gave them my blessing." King said while calming Duryodhan.

"Then I guess I have no choice. I can't take this insult to my face." with that said Duryodhan picked his sword from the various weapons that were lying beside the chair he was sitting on, weapons like mace, spear, bow etc.

But as he unsheathed his sword and headed towards the couple. The brother of the bride Drishtadumnya jumped in with his spear in his hand.

He tried to stab Duryodhan with it but Duryodhan backed off easily dodging his every blow.

I couldn't stand now, I picked the bow from the weapons and headed to help and protect him.

"What are you all waiting for cowards?

Help me right this wrong or are you all just going to watch as this insolent fool humiliates us." Duryodhan said to everyone in the audience.

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As I was staving and protecting duryodhan from all the incoming attacks from the Brahmin who was wielding the Divine bow of the swayamvar.

I saw her. I saw her face as one of them other Brahmin grabbed her by same arm i once held in my hand. My mind was numb, The only thought that came to me was, How soft her hands were? How her skin shined in the moon light?

Our eyes met for a single second as she looked at my face. For a moment I thought that she looked sad. Her eyes were teary, her lips tingled as though she wanted to say something to me? As if she felt the same as I.

She had a look on her face that said.... no....that begged me to not hate her.

No, I must be imagining it. I'm not thinking straight. How can a woman like her have any kind of empathy. I'm blinded by my own feelings. I will not deny that for the first time I had lost my sense of fighting that day. I did not pay any attention to my surroundings. I wasn't thinking at all, whatever mantra, whatever chant came to my mind, I unleashed it all on the Brahmin against me.

"KARNA!!!" came a pleading voice

Duryodhan was on the ground, one of the deflected arrows from the Brahmin had pierced his stomach. He was bleeding heavily.

I abandoned the battle that instant and rushed towards my best friend. I broke the arrow head that was protruding from his back and pulled the rest out through the his belly. How could I let this happen? How can I loose by sense of battle at a critical time like this?

The one friend I promised to protect no matter what was lying next to me bleeding......

And it was all my fault.

As I picked my dear friend on my back and started walking towards the corridor, Our eyes met yet again. Draupadi was looking straight at me, with the same look as before, but I knew what price distraction causes now. I averted my gaze and shifted it towards the gate of the Courtly hall.

As we made an exit from the hall, Duryodhan groaned from pain.

I was the one responsible for making my friend feels this much pain.

"Karna, Don't worry about it.

We will take revenge for today.

That princess will pay, I promise you." Duryodhan said while pressing the gaping whole in his stomach.

I felt regret in his words but he was right.

It was she who was responsible for my friends state.

It was because of her that my friend was in this misery.

It was she who toyed with my emotions.

It was because of her that I had to suffer that humiliation in front of everyone.

On that day I decided in my heart that, She will know the feeling of humiliation. One day she will know helplessness. What I had received today I will give back to her tenfolds, when the time comes.

"You know who he was, right?

The Brahmin?" Duryodhan said.

We had nearly reached the medic chambers. Just hold on for a few moments my friend.

"Yeah, I figured it out during the skirmish.

Though his ability hasn't grown much,

Yet I still remember his battle style." I answered Duryodhan.

"I didn't thought that bastard was still alive.

That means the rest of them were........aaah...

If only you had used your Vijaya Bow in the Battle." Duryodhan said. While still enduring the pain.

"Yes I know, You just rest now friend." I said to him while laying him down on the bed in the medic chamber.

The male medic in charge came rushing towards him.

"I am sorry Karna, I held you back." Duryodhan said as the medic was cleaning and stitching his wound.

"Don't worry about me, Duri..." I said holding my true feelings back.

"What you did today, is another debt of you towards me.

Rest for now."

The prince smiled. I sat in the nearest chair and fell into a deep well of emotions.

I can't forgive him for today. I can't forgive him for denying me my every right. I can't forgive him for what he did to my friend. And I can't forgive him for taking the most precious thing from me.

Arjuna……….

You'll pay.

I vow that I will make you regret for everything that you have taken from me till this day.

And as for her, I will make sure that she remembers what she had done today for the rest of her life. I will make her realize what it feels like to be humiliated in front of so many.

From Now on she is nothing to me.

I will erase every memory, every thought, every feeling of her from my mind and heart......................

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.........or so I thought.