Sootputra: The Unsung Hero

Chapter 35: Kalinga

I didn’t even know when the situation escalated so quickly. A few moments ago we were happily atttending the small swayamvar in the palace of kalinga, famous kings like jayadratha, sisupal and even jarasandh were there. But now instead of attending the swayamvar they were all chasing us in their chariots with blood in their eyes.

I don’t know what came over on Duryodhan when he abducted Bhanumati, the princess of Kalinga. He should’ve just gracefully accepted her rejection but instead he forced her to flee with him. I could still see her struggling over on the other chariot.

But there was no time to lose, others were closing in and Sisupal was leading in the chase.

“Shon, a little faster. Just don’t overtake Duryodhan.” I said and he slightly nodded.

I took the spear in my chariot and threw it on one of the horses in Sisupal’s. The abruption worked as he tumbled and struck a tree.

Duryodhan must have seen it as he was now increasing the distance between us. Now came the bow, I imbued an elemental spell and multiplied my arrows to several other, in mid air. AS they flew to the ground, they created a little tremor, it shook a little and then abrupted and rose, it was enough to stop most of the pursuers but there was still one following us.

“Jarasandh!

Shon! Slow down a little. Get me closer to his chariot.”

Jarasandh, The King of Magadh. He had smashed, the mud wall I created with his mace, and was pursuing us with a rage.

“Let’s go Bali.” Shon yelled as he strectched the lasso around the horse.

Jarasandh’s chariot was a heavy one, the sound of four horses hoofing and thumping the ground as they try to pull it to top speed filled the air. Including his heavy muscled body, and on top of the fact that he was clearly a skilled warrior carrying a large amount of blunt weapons. His eyes were full of rage and the sword he held was more like a scythe.

I knew I will only get one shot as he came closer and closer. I launched an arrow in his driver, he died on the spot. The chariot slowed, but that wasn’t going to stop him. Before he could take the reins of the horses, I threw the only mace I had, on the wheels of his chariot. I thought it cracked but was still revolving.

Jarasandh picked up the pace. He threw arrows, in retaliation. One had to be impressed by his resolve, he was controlling the horses and also fighting at the same time.

“I will kill you, meager king.” He shouted.

The arrows were zipping past me but I couldn’t let them through or they hurt Shon or the horses. So, I just cutted them in the air.

But he wasn’t just aiming for me or the horses. I suddenly felt a speed bump. Jarasandh was using elementals too. He had imbued the arrows with earth and was shooting them like heavy rocks. He couldn’t land a hit on me so he was aiming for the speeding vehicle.

“No, you won’t” I said as I laid an arrow in his shoulder. “Turn back, this will be the only warning I’ll give.

Don’t let it go to waste.”

“Coward, face me. Your just intent on running away.” He struck a cord with that sentence.

“I would’ve king. Believe me, I would not let a chance to fight someone as skilled as you, slip by. Had the circumstances been different, I would’ve pinned you down with everything I have. But today I have to protect my friend.” The sound of gushing wind and roaring chariot’s rang in ears. “Challenge me another time and I swear I will answer. My name is Karna, and I am the King of Anga.”

The pursuit stretched on for a little more time, thankfully Duryodhan was already gone. And we had led Jarasandh on a false trail. At last the moment came which I was waiting for as his wheel gave in and he fell in the mud. We were now free of pursuer’s.

But he was a persistent little demon, he let us go but not before throwing a final chakram at our horses, I had let my guard down at that instant. And had to take the blow of it on my legs to stop it. In just a second there was a gashing wound on my leg. The pain was immense, the calf muscle tendons were torn apart but I tried not to scream or Shon would’ve stopped the chariot right there. After about half hour, the wound started to heal.

Shon whipped the lasso and Bali ran like the wind. The blood had stopped and the gash was fully healed now. There was only a scar left by the time we left Kalinga.

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Soon after We caught up with Duryodhan near the Hastinapur’s border’s. It’s was almost dusk when we entered the capital. When we reached the capital's palace, all went silent. The street we had just crossed, was filled with confused eyebrow raised faces. Well, it was obvious to expect, after all despite the princess being with crowned prince, there was no grand escorts, no parade, no flowers, or soldiers marching down the main streets, Just two chariots with grazed men aboard, thumping along the street. One of them didn't even had their charioteer with them.

The sound of horses hoofing, and squeaking filled the air as we stopped right at the gates of the palace. My legs had taken a little toll, so I was taking it slow. While Duryodhan went ahead with the princess.

He roared while ascending the stairs, all the while yelling as if to fill every ears around him.

"We have won the swayamvar. We even beat Jarasandh. Look at the new princess...... No the queen. " he sounded grandiose.

Although due to his praises (and lies) soldiers all around started cheering for us both. But one quick glance at the new supposed queen would tell anyone the truth. Her silence and lifeless movement were louder than any cheers or yells.

I may have boasted about many of my feats on several occasions but that one, was the one of the few I rarely mentioned.

"you okay...." Shon asked. He was helping me through the stairs. I just nodded.

"Look...." Shon pointed towards the grand entrance. King and Queen themselves had come to welcome their new daughter-in-law.

We were only just a few steps behind when..."Come Karna...." Duryodhan's hand pulled at my arm.

There were only four people waiting for us at the entrance to the grand hall.... the limping Mama Shakuni, his blindfolded sister Queen Gandhari, the king Dhritarashtra himself and his helper Sanjay.

I was wondering where were the rest of the brothers and also where was Bhisma?

"Ma, he is the one I was telling you about.....I would not have made it out alive if it was not for him. In fact if not for him,... I wouldn't have even attempted the swayamvar."

With help of his helper Sanjay, the King hugged me. His hands felt warm and drops of wet tears flowed down on my left shoulder.

" I never thought that Duri will ever have someone like you, in his life. He is very lucky. Don't leave his side Karna." the king wept. Almost like he was begging me to stay. His eyes looked the other way though.

I couldn't tell if the king was happy or in disbelief.

" I have vowed oh king, to always stay by him" I firmly said while touch his toe. (though the pain in the leg made it a little difficult)

While the blind king was embracing me, the queen was checking her new daughter. And I mean really checking her. Mama Shakuni was also standing beside here, smiling with his black chared teeth out. The blind queen, Gandhari's hands were all over her, they were on her face as if sculpting a clay figure. The nose, the ears, eyes, the lips.

"what a beautiful bride you have Duri."

Duryodhan was trying to stay stiff, but I could swore that I saw a his ears go red.

"Tell me oh, dear daughter. What is your name?" Gandhari spoke in a gentle voice. Her hand on the forhead of the princess.

She gulped before speaking, not making eye contact for even a single second. Her red lips were like fluttering leaves. "Bha.... Bhan.... Bhanumati, your grace.....

Bhanumati, Daughter of Kalinga"

"What an idiot child you've brought Duryodhan." Duryodhan and everyone was taken aback by Queen's statement, but none dared to speak to break the next silence, except.....

"So.. Sorry, your majesty. "

"that's the exact problem. I not your majesty, I am your mother.

Call me Ma."

Her voice turned from a hailstorm to a gentle pour of rain. The princess who had forgotten to breath let out a deep sigh, as the situation calmed.

Princess hands were squeezing each other so tightly that when she let go I could see the remained marks of her long nails on them. The shivering girl would have fainted if the Queen had said another word to her.

"And you......" and now the finger was at me. (or almost at me, she is blind, Remember.)

"I thank you for all you have done. "

Shakuni came forward, helping her sister to reach me. "Here....."

She reached for her waist and pulled out the golden waistband.

"I only have this with me right now, but don't worry. Ask how much you want and I shall give it to you."

"heh!..... I don't need it majesty."

"Sister! " Shakuni came forward, with his eyes wide open.

"Ma....." The crowned prince yelled.

"he is not just someone. He is my friend. He is the one who saved me today. He is the king if Anga." Duryodhan exclaimed

"oh, no!...." the queen put both her hands to hee mouth. "what did I do....

I am sorry young king. I didn't knew, I thought that you were his charioter."

There were no words left fir me to say. I just placed the band back on her hand and turned back.

"No Karna, if anyone it should be mother.....

I think my new wife should spend some time with her new mother."

"Yes we will postpone the celebrations for tomorrow after the marriage ceremony. I think you both should talk." Shakuni was fluttering with every word.

"yes mama, that will be right....." they all left and we both headed for the biggest room in the palace, Duryodhan's one.

"I am so sorry for what Ma did Karna."

"it's alright" I released the clenched fist to a normal palm hand.

"I am used to it by now."

"That's the problem, you shouldn't be. Let me make it up to you. He whistled and a guard came rushing in. Then after hearing something in his ear, ran off not before giving me a side look."

Almost half hour later Shakuni came, and behind him came Dusashan with half a dozen of female servants, dressed in revealing clothes, holding plates full of delicacies, and booze.

The empty room buzzed with footsteps and whispers. Duryodhan clapped and all them started serving.

"choose any o' them and she will be yours for today. You can even do multiple if you want. As many as you want."

"Consider it an apology from us"

Dusashan said. Though I rarely think he meant any word he said. While Shakuni just stood and stuffed his face with the chakli and hands with pakodas.

"Not today girls, from today onwards I belong to someone else..." Duryodhan stopped one of the approaching girl in her tracks "but this guy, whoever pleases this guy. I will give a pouch, no.... two pouches filled of gold coins. "

Well, what do you think should have happened. All of them except for one that Dusashan grabbed and a few that still served drinks, leapt on me like a hungry bands of lionesses. I tried to push them back but they didn't listened. But one among them caught my eye. The one that was serving, she was the prick in my eyes from the beginning.

She had not met my gaze from the moment she came in.

The other girls kept calling her Padmavati but I knew her with a different name,....

"Vrushali......!?"

"so it is her you fancy, my, my I've got to say, you got taste." Shakuni said.

" l'll take her,..... only her" the rest stopped in their tracks. Vrushali saw me with a raised confused eyebrow, as if she was nit expecting it. But fir me she was the only safe bet.

Duryodhan laughed at the downed faces of the rest of daasis. I sympathize with them, but Dusashan's eyes sparkled.

"I believe she is one of the new ones."

I can't believe the strange look on their faces. AS If they all are seeing her for the first time. They don't know her, none of them realized that they have already met her.

"what's your name?"

"padma...." her voice was shrivelled up. Her muscles tense and her hands shaking. She coughed, probably due to a little tension.

"padma, take him to the guest room with the biggest bed, and do not disappoint.

And also he may be brave enough to defeat Jarasandh but when comes to this kind of matter he is still a newbie. Treat him gently."

"yes, your highness." she said, Now a little more confident than before.

I was anxious to leave the room, so I grabbed her hand. I realized that the stern hands from a second ago trembled in my palms.