Sootputra: The Unsung Hero

Chapter 37: Jarsandh

I softly signaled Vrushali to go, She turned away but then spurned back, startled by my fist bumping in the door.

“Sorry….” I said.

“When is the marriage?” I asked.

“In a week” She said. But there was something else, something more she wanted to say. I could tell by the uncertainty on her face, like a child scared to tell his parents the mistake he made.

“Karna? Uhhm” She grabbed her both hands, her eyes avoided my gaze. “Karna, there was something else I wanted to ……….” She looked at me. “……..It’s probably better for later.”

“No wait.” I stopped her. “Speak, please…”

“It’s just….it’s just, Sister-in-law came yesterday, asking for Satyasen. She said if he had visted us? He hasn’t been home for quite some time. Eversince…..” I knew what she was going to say. “Eversince, you came back from Kalinga.” I heard her speak every last word, biting my lips. All the while trying not to move, or let any emotion come leak out.

“Karna. What happened to Satyasen? Why didn’t he came back with you. ” I stayed silent motionless. “Karna please tell me, ……Karna!”

“I….Vrushali, I don’t know…..” I said

“No, no…no… not that. Please no not that. Not today. Don’t lie today. Please don’t try to be a big man today, don’t try to save me. You don’t have to cushion the blow.

Whatever it is please lay it on me, clearly.”

“Vrushali I don’t know how to say this……..”

“Please, Karna I beg you……. No matter what he has done, not matter how badly he had act. He is still my brother. I still love him. I deserve to know.” She started tearing.

I took a slight breath. “Shon…..” She looked at me.”Shon saw him last……He was among the crowd when Duryodhan grabbed the princess. A crowd that had Kalingan soldiers……….” I walked outside. “That was the last time we saw him. And if he hasn’t returned till now, then……..”.

“He can’t be.” She said gasping.

“There is so little chance Vrushali, He was wearing our banners. I wish I could say it some other way, but…….

I’m sorry.” I heard the sound of her footsteps running away. All the way crying.

“Great, ……..Two families in one day. That must be a record.” Murmured my lips….

Next Day…..

It was only in the morning , Father came home today. He was awayon a trip with Bhisma, when I came to Hastinapur. Ma was so overjoyed that she cooked Breakfast, Lunch and dinner all at the same time.

And the worst thing was that father ate more than half of it, and with a smile on his face. Like he had won a battle or some such.

“Your appetite, looks good.” I said to him, when his belly was in the shape of half a ball.

“I would be, I have got a leave for today.” He laid on the bed.

“A leave! Bhisma is a persistent and a punctual man. He doesn’t hands leave easily. Did you saved his life in a battle or something?”

“Nope, No battle. Just that the old man was generous, towards my services.” He chuckled.

“I heard he was away on a meeting, with some kings to ensure dominance. What happened?”

“Well! Nothing, it’s just he was in a good mood.”

“Father, you know you are a very good liar, right?” I said, sarcastically.

“You know we were visiting a few kingdoms Kashyap, Panchal, Qinha and some others……..”

There was a thud on the door’s.

“Shon!?” He was catching his breath as if he came running.

“You have to come now!” his eyes were wide open.

…………………………

I took the scroll from the Anga messenger. It said for the king’s eyes only. Untying the knot I spread it and scanned from upside down.

*Rajan,*

*I’ll get right to the point, The matter is very urgent. The army of Magadh empire has declared a war on your kingdom. They would’ve attacked and sacked the capital already, had it not been for your absence.*

*For some reason unknown, The King Jarasandh, has given us the time of a week to surrender, after which he will attack. Unless we do something right now, the whole kingdom, your subjects and its treasure will be burned or killed.*

*People are looking for their king, their protector. There’s already a conflict between the members of the court. If you don’t get here right now, I fear the kingdom will tears itself apart on itself.*

*Whatever your doing, abandon it cause the Anga needs it’s Angraj.*

*Your servant,*

*Yuyutsu*

*“*Shit….”

“We have to go now.” Shon said panicked.

“yes….” I said.

“I’ll go prepare the chariot….” He tried to ran.

“Leave it, just prepare two horses and the necessary ration for us and them. We leave tonight.”

Shon nodded, then ran away. I turned to the messenger.

“It was good that you brought it to my home. ”

“General Yuyutsu’s orders, your grace, He said to take it here instead of the palace.” He said. He was just a mere boy, even younger than Shon. Maybe the same age of the youngest pandav prince.

“You did good. Go back to Yuyutsu. Tell him to do his best, I’m coming. ”

“Yes, your grace.”

“And,…. Take your family, and get them out of Anga. You may not get another chance.” His eyes widened at my words.

“Your grace, If I maybe a little blunt please.” The messenger said kneeling his head down.

I nodded.

“Me and my elder brother, we both are Sootputra too. That’s why we came too Anga. To Serve and support a King that understands us. Who is one of us.

That’s why we are not running, my lord. We will fight with you to the end. For our kingdom, for us.

I want to protect my home, a home that I like.”

“Me too.”

We both smiled at each other. His words rang in my ears. The difference I had hoped to make, maybe it wasn’t all fruitless.

…………………………………….

“What did he say?…….” Yuyutsu said. We were back in the capital, after two days of the horse ride. While entering the kingdom, I saw the Army of Jarsandh, He had already acquired the outskirts of the kingdom borders. Our capital was very close to the said borders, If the attck was to be successful then, it will be among the first ones to fall.

“There’s a marriage in the capital. The prince is busy with it. It will take time to prepare a short army, or even a battalion and then to march them to Anga. Time that we don’t have. And also that will leave Hastinapur vulnerable in a crucial time.”

“So, no help is coming from the capital….!?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“That selfish prickly bastard. That fucker only cares about him.” Yuyutsu banged his fist down on the table.

“Leave it, we have to fend for ourselves…..”

“How?” He said in a loud voice.

“We don’t have any allies. The ones that we had, ignored us. And we are outnumbered eleven to one. And that’s not even counting the elephants our enemy has. How are we going to win or even survive this war.”

“We have two skilled Archer’s though.” Ashwathama came in the room with his echoing steps.

“That should give us some fighting chance.” He said with his smug face. He can be way too annoying at times But I had to say, this time it felt good to have a friend at my back.

“Have you brought some back up?”

“Heh…I am the back up. I can handle 100-160 on my own.” The man displayed his muscles.

“But that’s still not enough. At this rate, We will lose this war.”

“Hey, you don’t want my help.”

“I am not saying that.” Yuyutsu said.

“Then shut up and accept it.”

There was a moment of silence in the room. As I pinned the map on the table.

“Yuyutsu!” his head turned to me.

“Tell me the status…..”

“Yes your grace, Currently the total strength of our army is 1537 including the soldiers, archers, cavalry and the charioteers. We don’t have elephants or even above average soldiers in skill, except you two.

While Magadh has almost 18,000 on our borders already and more are coming.”

“What about you, what are your skills?”

“I am an above average fighter sir, but not on the level of you or Ashwathama. Perhaps if we can give the charge of one battalion to Shon……”

“It won’t matter, these numbers are outrageous. We can’t win with brute force.” It was hard to swallow for us all, but it was clear as day that this war was impossible to win. With these numbers Jarasandh can easily wash down Anga like a flood. So the only question was.

“Why hasn’t he attacked us yet then?” Shon said.

He has joined in now too.

“He was going too, The day his messenger came. He told us that there was no point of surrendering, because he was going to attack regardless.

But when some courtiers in panic, mistakenly told him that the Angraj was not here currently.

We thought that we were done for. But then after a day, jarasandh send another announcement, he gave us one week to prepare or surrender. Based on that he will attack. We were all shocked.”

“It looks like he wants you.” Ashwathama said looking at me. “There was no point in extending the doomsday from now to one week later, unless he wants you. He knows that this war is completely one sided, his victory is almost certain. The question is why?”

“Humiliation!?” I said. “That’s what he wants. He wants to humiliate me in front of as many as he can, like he was in the Swayamvar of Kalinga.” They all looked at me.

“Fuck! ” Ashwathama scratched the back of his head. “Can’t you make at least, some decent friends for once?”

“He wants revenge for that” Shon was rubbing of his sweat.

“What do you think?”

“Innocent people will die just because of me. Soldiers are going to die, some are father’s, some brother’s and other someone’s husband. And I am sending them to their death. I can’t do this knowing that a defeat is what’s in store for us, no matter what we do, no matter how hard we fight.”

“Bhai?”

A remorse, a guilt. That was truly the first time I felt the weight and burden of being a King. Knowing full well that the promise I made will be broken.

“We could try to ask for help from the neighboring kingdoms, for a deal.” Ashwath said.

“I already did, No one is willing to help a country ………….ruled by a Sootputra. And besides they will not take arms against Jarsandh.”

“So, it’s down to my caste again, heh…….should’ve guessed it.” I swear I was going to shed some tears. The broken, defeat that lay before me. If it was a battle with only my life, I would’ve jumped in without a thought but knowing full well the outcome, and with being a protector how could I bet on defeat.

Some time must have gone by, as I was jolted back to reality buy the General.

“Are you ready for it, Your Grace? ”

“I don’t think so, Yuyutsu. ”

“It’s up to you to decide, if you want it or not.”

“What do you mean? How do I decide?”

Everything was going to be destroyed in a few days. Everything was already lost. My legs took a rest as I sat down on the couch. The howling wind from the verandah, as was kicking in the ears. AS if the prophesizing the grim and dark future ahead.

I wasn’t afraid to, cause I had already accepted the fate the day I was cursed. The regret in my heart was that I could do so much more. My fire was still burning hot, but tomorrow it will be quenched and none other than by myself.

What other options, do I had. The only path I could see to save as many as I can was to surrender myself. This way at least the people of Anga will be alive to witness their failed lost king.

As for my fate, I know Jarasandh isn’t one to forgive and let live kind of guy. If it was one on one, I would pierce him with arrows but it was Anga vs Magadh and I can’t take the chance with that odds.

“Answer me this, Karna?” Yuyutsu said.

“What difference does one life make?”

I was perplexed by the question. I knew that I was strong. But I had never killed any Human. Protected people. Killed Demons. Scared the gods but being responsible for lives. It was a new territory.

“I don’t ….. .”

Couldn’t find a just answer. So, I just stuttered a bit.

“A great amount if that life is of a King.

Each decision he make affects hundreds, thousands.

How can he care for so much?

The answer is he can’t. Such guilt would break him.He can’t pity or sympathize with every soldier.

But he should always value their sacrifices.

That is the burden of kings. They follow the path of victory.

And that path is bloody.

Now tell me Karna, Are you a King?

Are you Angraaj?

Did you take the Oath?” He tapped at the map, on the kingdom of Anga.

The thought had just awoken something in me. I knew what I had to do. The path was clear, even if it didn’t worked I can’t get demoralized, cause I’m a king.

“Yuyutsu, Send a messenger to Jarasandh. Tell him Karna is ready to surrender. ”

…………………………..

Magadh chose a very, opportune place for his announcement of victory. A hill nearby the battlefield. On the banks of which, both nations, armies were ready for a war. Compared to the men I command, His army looked like a Tsunami.

Ashwathama was leading my forces with Shon as his charioteer. While Yuyutsu and Me with a little force went to meet The would be King. We saw him from miles away. His entourage was a s big as a battalion. With The hulking giant himself sitting on the big armchair strong his beard.

“Finally, t’s good to meet the Soot.” Yuyutsu advanced but I stopped him. “I never thought that a country will be ruled by you guys. That nation must be cursed.” He drank from the nearby glass. “Good thing I’m here to end it.”

“Like you did at Kalinga. Or should I say, I did.” I stepped forth. “I know why, you’re here. It’s not about conquering my nation. It’s about me. It’s about you. You want to redeem yourself from that humiliation.”

“Tread carefully Angaraj. The next words could be your last.” His voice was gruntled.

“The magadh King, whose name is all so famous in Bharat for many things, especially for defeating Krishna himself. Why would he want to conquer a small nation as Anga.”

“I thought you were here to surrender.” He said.

“Unless, that name is no longer respectable. Unless, it is washed out by a mere Sootputra. ” He grabbed my neck, I jammed my hand in his elbow to release his grip.

“I’m not here to start a war Jarasandh. Because, if this talk goes awry, that will happen on it’s own. For now I have a proposal. A battle instead of a war. I don’t want the soldiers on either side to die.

No matter what the outcome of the war is, you will not get the satisfaction you are seeking. You want to beat me with your own hands, So let’s stake Anga on it. A one on one battle between you and me. The end will be decided by the one who dies. After that Anga, will be left to the person who is still up and breathing.”

Everyone was stunned by the announce, My voice was louder than the afternoon breeze. It had an intimation hotter than the sun above our heads. Even Jarasaandh was silent.

“Unless you want to win, the cowardly way like that Krishna.” I knew the name of Krishna would boil him up. The man had lost 17 times from him already, He despises him to the core.

“Sorry, I was misinformed. I thought you were going to surrender, but this…..” He had a murderous intent.

“this is even better” His voice went from grim to over confident.

“You have decided the start Karna, I will decide the rest. The battle will be a wrestling match, and there will be a time limit. And that will be the time for which you army can sustain mine. If in that time frame you win, My armies will back away even if I am dead. But if you die, Mine won’t. They will burn that capital down to ash. Rape then kill every women they could find. Slave all the children and kill all the men.

Those are my rules and proposal. Unless, you surrender now and everything will be spared, except your head.”

After a while, “I accept” I said.

“We will begin in a moment.

This will be fun.”