Sootputra: The Unsung Hero

Chapter 16 Leaving again.

My hands weren’t reaching for anything. Although I am able to breath it still feels like I am drowning. But drowning in what? The stuff around me was heavier and thicker than water. Almost like honey. It grasped me and was pulling me down. The only way out was the light that was shining on the top.

I gave my all and pressed for the top. Every stroke felt like it bound my hands with something heavier. Someone was pulling me down. As I came closer to the surface the temperature rose. The more I struggled to keep going up the more it rose to the point where it was unbearable, But I finally reached through and poked my head out of the mud that was surrounding me.

The River bed was huge and all of it was filled with clay or wet mud. No one can be seen on its either banks. My body was feeling tired so I gave a final push to pull it out of the mud.

Then I saw her. Crying. She was holding a basket in her hand. An empty basket. It was hard to make her face from this distance. I tried to go closer but in that instant my leg froze. The whole of the river bed had just suddenly dried out to a crisp. While half of my body was still under. I tried and gave my all but couldn’t move an inch. The air filled with salty scent. The Grumbling sound was growing larger. I had heard such familiar grumbling and it was not a good sign. I pushed myself to the limit and managed to pull one of my hands out. I yelled to the lady on the bank, even threw a stone. But it didn’t affected her. She deformed like a dust then formed again. She was saying something to the empty basket but I couldn’t make the words out. The grumbling sound grew even larger.

I could see the river, The flood that was heading my way. And I was lying at the bottom of its empty bed. The nerves on my arms started to show with the amount of strength I was putting but before I could free my legs the current swept me away. It hit me like a wall filled with spikes and everything became fuzzy again.

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The horse was not calming down. Even with all the care that I put to make sure he was feeling fed and cool. It must be the heat that was getting to him. It was afternoon now and outside the stable the sun was shining brightly. This year It’s heat was exceeding the limit. As if it wanted everyone to look at it but no one could due to its radiating shine. Even I who was never bothered by its brightness felt it’s stares gazing upon me.

“Bhai, I’ve brought water” Shon was finally here with the two buckets of water.

“Great, here give me one. ”

I threw one of the brushes to him.

“You take the front I take the back.”

“Okk.” He said.

We both dipped our brushes in water and started washing the horse.

“Who would’ve thought that a king will brush a horse.” Shon said grinning.

“heh…”

“I am the same as before. I am still Vasusena. I am still your brother.”

“yeah. Yeah but now you are a king. The King of Anga Pradesh.

Angraaj. My brother a king.”

His voice took a pause.

“So what happened ?”

“What do you mean?” I said

“Maa, said you woke up suddenly at night, sweating to the bone and scared. ”

She cried so much. I told you, now that you’re here. You would steal all the spotlight for yourself.”

“It---it was nothing. Just a nightmare……..

I am still here for you aren’t I.” I said to him.

“But for How long. Aren’t you a king. Aren’t you supposed to go to your kingdom.

That’s what the talk with the prince was about, right?”

I dipped my brush in the cool water again. Shon didn’t know about the talk that I had with Duryodhan last night. And I didn’t told him anything even with all of his pestering. The things were serious. How could I break his pipe dream, the admiring look with which he always viewed the palace. He deserverd better. So I only divulged the details about the decoration of castle and its mesmerizing looks. That was enough to keep his dreams alive.

“Tomorrow. I’m going tomorrow. It’ll take a day to reach anga. After that there will be a crowning yagna and a ceremony. And after that I will officially be the king.”

“So, cool” His eyes were glistening like a pair of diamonds.

“You should continue brushing or the mare will get antsy again.”

“Yeah, yeah, the big brother is back.

I like the king not the brother, just so you know.”

“Anything changed while I was gone?”

“Many things. For example the friends you knew have all grown up and distanced themselves.”

I knew which friend he was talking about. I still haven’t seen a glimpse of Ashwathama till now. It was nearly impossible for him to not know that I have returned after all the things that have happened since yesterday. So the only conclusion was that he was ignoring me on purpose. The question was why?

“Well I’ll be here till tomorrow. Can you-”

“So is she.” He said with a fading voice.

Shon’s eyes widened. He was looking right behind me towards the stable gates. I turned back. A girl was standing at the gates. Her hair like an ink, tied in a long braided tail. Her eyes were hazel colored and she wore a cholie with the color of sky and half armed top. It was clear that the size was a little short as it reveal some of her crème skin, some cleavage and a stem thin belly. She had a bag in her hand that she had just dropped to the ground. Her neck and arms were drenched in little pearls of water droplets. She wiped some of it from her face with her cholie. She fell, tumbling like a weak tree.

“Vrushali!!!” Shon said.

She was Vrushali? Why didn’t I noticed it earlier. I dropped the brush in the bucket and went to help her. I picked her hand in mine. Her breath was heavy. She was practically panting, gasping for each stroke of air. Her hand was hot, and was trembling in mine.

“Do you have a fever?”

After a few moments she slightly shook her head in no to answer my question.

“But your hand is hot and is trembling.”

“pfftf…” Shon had just grinned now a little.

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing.” He answered while his hand on his mouth.

“Go bring some water.” I instructed him.

He hurriedly went out with a jug in his hand. Meanwhile I picked the dropped bag and shouldered her to the nearby charpai. Her trembling had increased more now. Clearly she was lying. I took her temperature. Surprisingly her forehead was cold but the rest of her body was trembling. She was averting her gaze. Barely squeaking anything let alone a word.

She had barely any features of the Vrushali I remembered. She was almost the height of Shon now. Although she is elder to him in years. She had more feminine looks to her now. She was sporting a little bit of a makeup too. Her soft but chapped lips sported a color of rose on them. She wore kajal around her eyes. Compared to the other girls she was more fit. Her hair was short from the front probably to avoid hurting her eyes. Her stomach was toned and her arms had a little muscle buildup on them. Her palms were caloused and her nails were polished with the same color as her dress. But the main area that signified that she had grown as a women was her …………. chest. I tried to avert my gaze ………but couldn’t. The cleavage that showed through her revealing clothing was a proof that they were quite big. I was feeling a little guilty right about now for the skill of observation that was instilled in me by my guru. They were quite a boon in different circumstances but in this case they were sort of like a punishment for me and my morals. Still I could not take my eyes of her for a moment. She must be one of the top desired woman in the village judging by how she was looking. A beautiful bird. A pretty flower. She was particularly overdressed for a daily casual walk. The makeup she put on and the clothing that she was wearing. Today must be something special for her. She must have noticed me observing her for some time. She nervously moved a little back but still smiled when meeting my eyes.

Then I realized that we were no longer kids anymore. And I was alone with a matured girl in a stable. Of course she would feel uneasy. I backed off that instant. How didn’t I not noticed this earlier. I was entranced and mesmerized by her beaut------

I was doing it again. I have to snap out of it. Where was Shon it had been quite some time.

“Were you running just before now?”

“Ye--Yess” She said. Her voice had the same resemblance like before but with a little more softer tone now. Like a wind breeze before your ear. It was soothing. Oh man I can’t believe I played with a woman like her in my child hood. Thinking about that I consider myself lucky that I had these friends to support me at that time. It was because of her that I came to know about my Guru. I sort of owe her all my teachings.

“Do you remember me Vrushali?”

She was silent. Her lips were whispering something but their sound was not hearable.

“Vrushali?”

“Yess, barely.” She said.

“Me too.

I was hardly able to recognize you.

I have to say you have …… grown into a beauty. Remarkable. I don’t even have words to describe.

Many of the neighbor’s boys must have a crush on you, maybe even my brother. ” I said to her

“Really?

What about you?”

I was silent to that question. What can I answer her? I had just met her. I had jokingly passed my statement. I didn’t know if I should state the truth. She may take it in a wrong way and I didn’t wanted to ruin an old friendship just because of some misunderstanding.

“Forget that.” She said nervously. Controlling her words and voice.

“I – I first saw you at the tournament. I was barely able to recognize you. But when your armor came on, The light it shone. I was close to fainting. I had thought that you have left for good.

Not Shon, Not Uncle and not Even Aunty had told me that you were coming. ”

“Because they didn’t knew that I was.” I interrupted her.

“I never told anyone, didn’t send a messenger. No letter, nothing. I was ---”

I stood lost in my thoughts of the time I was afraid to enter the city. The fear of rejection that I was carrying with me.

“Sorry, continue.” I told her.

“I – I – Sure,

Then I saw your feats against prince Arjuna. Who was the crowd favorite at that moment and then everyone started talking about you. ‘The Mysterious warrior’ the one that clashed with prince Arjuna in archery.”

My face must have blushed a little in that moment as I heard her chuckle a little while looking at me.

“If you already knew that I had come back. Then Why didn’t you came to visit me yesterday.”

“I-” Her face was down. She was fidgeting with her fingers. I had poked a nerve. I was feeling guilty for that. I wanted to take my words back. But before I could, she spoke.

“Well I wanted to. I had every intention to but prince Duryodhan had just crowned you, the king of Anga. I – I thought that you would not meet with us now. Now that you were a king you would want better company. Rich and beautiful girls will surround you. And so what could a village girl like me do to attract your attention.”

Her answer was shocking and at same time humble. I was impressed she thought so much about me.

//That She even dressed the most expensive clothes she could find and wore so much makeup.//

I went to the bucket of water and picked the soaked brush that was lying at the bottom of it. The horse was calm now and the brushing must be feeling him good.

“Vrushali, I am still the same boy I was before.

Except for the name nothing has changed. Not even between you and me. We are still the same friends that we were before.

I’ll always want to be your friend if you’d let me.”

Her face had acquired the familiar smile that I remembered. She was now helping me with brushing the horse.

“Of course. ” she said.

“By the way what’s in the bag?”

She told me that how she contacted my mother about my whereabouts and then went to prepare the lunch herself. She ran here from her home to reach as soon as possible. I also asked her about Uncle and Aunty to which I only got a cold response. Fortunately her older brother was still a charioteer. Uncle was still a farmer. Whereas Aunty passed away 5 years ago. I was feeling sorry for asking about that. But she was happy. She told me that Maa and she had become closer in these five years. She had nearly filled the whole left by the sudden death of her mother. I was glad that Maa took her like a daughter and cared for her as one.

“You know it’s a little early for Lunch.”

“Yeaaaah!!!” She said. Her face was turning red so she hid it behind the mane of the mare.

It was my time to chuckle and I took full advantage of it.

“Hey, don’t’….” Vrushali had just thrown a mug of water at my chest. My scarf that was covering my top was all wet now. I took it off and hanged it on the horse.

“What would your Prince Krishna say? He would not take an unruly wife you know.”

“Let him go to hell. He has a dozen wives already. It won’t matter if he doesn’t get one more.” She said with a pout face. As if her dreams had just been shattered like glass.

“You know he is a king now right. Dwarka’s king. ”

“Yeah, turns out he is not so high and mighty. He ran from Jarsasandh and shifted his kingdom to the island of Dwarka. What a chivalrous king.” She said.

“Looks like someone’s angry.”

“Of course I’m angry. You are trying to pair me up with that ranchor(One who desserts, Like Krishna did with the battle with jarsandh.). Besides I already have someone else in my mind.”

That statement raised my eyebrow.

“Someone who is much more handsome than him. Someone who is still unmarried.”

She stepped forward from the horse.

“Someone who has a better body build. Someone who was recently crowned king.”

With each statement she was getting closer and closer to me.

“ Someone who radiates like sun even in night and Has 1-2-3-” She was looking at my stomach while counting.

“and Has eight abs. with a buffed chest.”

Her face was closer than ever now. Her breath was hot on my neck. Her cold hands were tracing the outline of my chest as if finding a spot that will force me to fell down to my knees. She was suddenly bolder than ever before. Her top had become wet from water and sweat because of the way she was sticking it close to my abs.

“These dark nipples on your chest.” Her nails were poking my left bare chest.

“Vrushali stop!!!” I said to her. But my hand didn’t lifted. My mind resisted but my body reacted like and unruly horse.

“What’s wrong with me? Am I not beautiful? Am I not like a princess? Am I not comparable to them?”

Her hands, her face was so close that you could feel her heart beating. With every beat it got faster and faster.

“Tell me Oh, great king . What’s not in me that is in those royal girls? I can give you the same pleasure that they can. I am the most beautiful in all this village. I have even seen princess that fail in my comparison. So tell, why don’t you want me. ”

“Vrushali!!” I pushed her back.

“I don’t know what’s going on in your mind but we have to stop.

Before something bad happens. Before I couldn’---” I stopped from saying another word and again covered myself with the same scarf even though it was damped.

“Hmmm-Hmmm. Sorry I was late.” Shon was finally here. I felt both a little glad and a little sad that his presence broke the mood and scene that was set just a few moments ago. He had clearly analyzed the situation in front of him.

“Looks like Krishna failed for the first time to acquire a bride. My Bhai had already left him in dust in this one. ”

“Shon, It’s not what you think.

She was helping me wash the horse when she got wet.

Nothing happened.”

“Ok-Ok , I get it. Don’t have to stress it.”

“Shon …” I pressed on him

“I should go.” Vrushali expressed. She wanted to leave as soon as possible. Possibly finally realizing what she had done. Her face showed a state of worry. She must be thinking about how our friendship must be ruined now. But before she could move a step. I grabbed her arm and stopped her.

“No, stay.

At least till lunch. Have some with us.” Her face lit up like a candle. Shon also made a remark about how I held her hand in my grasp. Both of them were getting it wrong. But I didn’t made the effort to burst their bubble. The state in which Vrushali was in would’ve raised many questions if she just went up and left at that moment. I thought that until her clothes self-dried themselves she should stay here. And that she did although with a fake belief.

After lunch it was time to go home. But before I could retire for the day, Shon took me somewhere else. Vrushali had already left. And Shon took me to the part of stable where female horses and their child were kept.

“It’s mother died after giving birth to him.

Since then father and I have took care of him.

Father said that I would get him when he reached his prime.”

Shon brought me closer to a horse. It was still a child. His skin was white and it had ashen colored mane. His eyes were black. Legs strong and full of spirit. I could tell through the way he was spinning his tail.

“We named him Bali.” The horse hinned at hearing his name. Shon was clearly closer to him. The way they both responded to each other. As if he was Shon’s little brother. Shon fed him some of the peas that he brought from the other stable.

“Bali, here you go”

“He is still 8 years old.

So, not quite ready to ride but he will turn into a fine horse.

I will make sure of it. He will be one of the fastest there is.” Shon said while caring for his mane.

“I want you to have him.”

“Yeah, he is a damn fine mare.

Wait- what---”

I just realized what Shon had just said.

“But why---, I don’t understand.

You took care of him for so many years then why give him to me.”

“I took care of him for you.

I knew that one day you will return and for that day I agreed to take care of him.

He was always meant for you, Bhai.

Besides, I didn’t gave you any gift to congratulate you for becoming this strong, to be recognized as a king.”

“But Shon,---” I still cannot accept him. Clearly shon liked him.

“Bhai, don’t. Not today, just accept him.

No more ideals today.”

I could see his determination in his eyes.

“Fine, I’ll accept Bali.

But only when he is grown------

Till then he will be under your care as my ride.”

“Acceptable.” Shon said.