Sootputra; The Unsung Hero

Chapter 24: New path.

Suffocation gripped me as I tried to find a bubble of air in this thick dense liquid surrounding me. My armour came on glowing and boiled the water around it. The hot river evaporated in a burst of steam in front of me and I was stuck in the mud like always. My waist and legs were still trapped and I saw her. On the banks they were behind the woman in my dreams. All 5 brothers and their Mother. In front of them was the lady who now had the empty basket in her hand. But before she could place it in water like she usually does, it caught fire. The woman unaffected by the flames was holding it gently like cotton. The rest of the brother and their mother started burning. The horror was enough to send a man to his death.

Sweating all around, I was now looking at a familiar ceiling. It was my room in anga, the moon lit it like a paint on a canvas. The cool breeze shuddered the curtains. But it wasn’t enough to cool off my body. Half off my bed was a mess now. I wasn’t going to get some sleep today.

It was maybe, one of the selfish reason that I wanted Maa to be at anga with me. Her lap and lullaby maybe wasn’t enough to bring me to sleep but it sure had enough strength to calm me down. I missed her terribly now.

I had returned to Capital yesterday. From a distant it still looked like the old city I was all too familiar by now. But as I got closer The view changed. The palace that I called home , had a complete makeover in my absence. Specially the gardens which now had more flowers and fresh green grass. Shon was kind and excited enough to take me to a tour of all the places that they have renovated in my month of leave. He told me that Vrushali herself had worked hard on the gardens that were now full of fragnace from flowers like lotus, rose, lily, jasmine and her favorite sunflowers. The palace now had a new bath area that it previously lacked, the walls and termite infested doors that were crumbling before were refurbished with new marbles and wood. Specially the doors of my room were made from sandalwood and filled the air with their fragrance. The throne area has also seen a little new addition in the form of a new throne filled with rubies and emeralds. Though small in size the palace was now looking like it belonged to a king.

“I knew that you would not approve of the gold spending on yourself therefore we asked prince Duryodhan to call you away for some time.

And the money required for all of this was provided by him too. Not a single coin was spend from anga treasury was spend. In fact some of that gold is still left.” Shon said.

“Do..Do…you like it?” Vrushali was here too.

After all this time the tension between us had suspended a little but it was still there. Though I was glad she was taking the initiative in closing the gap. But this time she was in for a shock.

“General!! Did you approve it?” I asked him

“It was…It was prince Duryodhans orders, sire.

I couldn’t refuse.” He said.

“His orders?

But what about the people in here. They need it more than us.

While we are busy spending it in a lavish way there are people in my kingdom starving to death.

How is this justified? Doesn’t he know the state of Anga? ”

“Bahi?”

“Karna?”

“You both. I expected better from you. You know where we came from.

How we lived. Still you act like this.”

“But Bhai, it was crumbling. You needed a good room.

A new bath. A bed.”

“It was enough for us Shon.” I shouted at him

“We have lived in a hut. Slept on a mat.

This palace whatever it is. It was more than enough for me…”

“But not for a king” the General interrupted.

“What do you mean, speak!”

“Forgive me if I hurt your feelings, sire.

you may have been a soots sun in past but now you are a king.

And you have responsibilities to live up to. A king cannot look weak in front of its audience.

That’s the foremost rule of a ruler. Living in a broken, crumbling palace maybe a humility for you but for your patrons this palace is a symbol of hope. A place where they could come up to and wish for their worries to go away.

If it looks like a rundown place then how can they be confident in approaching their own king? How can they believe that they have a strong ruler?

Forgive me if I have said anything out of line.”

The silence after his statement was maybe a sign of his victory in words, the only remaining thing was to just confirm it.

“No, no. Every word you said was right.

Perhaps my friend saw this beforehand and I took his goodwill as a malicious intent.

I’m sorry, Shon, Vrushali. For yelling at you.

I was wrong to assume that you did it for luxury only.”

“Well, you ….you would not be that far off.”

He was back to his quirky nature.

“I wasn’t thinking about the things that the General said when I redecorated the palace.”

“I was” Vrushali said, with an expressionless face.

“Good, to know that I could count on at least one of you.”

We all chuckled for a while.

“I shall take my leave now sire.” General said

“ahh.. Before that, What is your name general?”

“It’s Yuyutsu” he said

“Let’s enjoy the new palace.” Shon said.

“Ok, where do you wanna go first? ”

“Let’s go to the bathhouse, Vrushali can join us too.” Shon said

“huh.. Well later, I have some work to do.” She went off averting her gaze from everyone present.

“Idiot” General said. Taking his leave.

“Well he is.” I said to him.

…………………………………….

‘Spending time with people you know, it makes one hearts light’. My father used to say that when we went to help him in his stables. But truly now that I understand the meaning behind those words. The realization that I have already crossed the age of maturity was known to me but it had recently dawned of the responsibilities and complex role an adult has to play to live in this society. Guess I still have a long way to go to if I want to be like him.

Standing at the balcony of my room, bathing in the moonlight, I wondered how many kings were their of my age. If they were also facing the same or more difficulty ruling their kingdoms. The thought grabbed me by the ropes of guilt and pulled me to the most secluded corner of my mind. The constant memory of the only talk I had with the crowned prince came as a memory. I was standing in the middle looking at the brothers and myself arguing as we did that day. I was telling myself to stop abusing them and apologize but my stubborn self didn’t even flick a look. He just said all the things I remembered myself saying.

As my back turned to the prince I saw Rajamata, extending her hands towards her eldest son, The crowned prince who was standing in front of her facing my back with a look of hate in them. For the first time I didn’t retaliated to that look, instead I wanted to be tortured by them, but before I could his visage blurred and he disappeared along with his family.

I wandered the halls, looking for a place of peace. But It had none. Half the soldiers were also asleep, on their post. The wandering king must look like a fool seeking solace from the voices inside his mind.

I stopped at a door. By now my feets reached the first floor. I was standing in front, hesitant in my approach. Knocking, mostly assuming rejection on the first glance. But as soon as she opened them I became puzzled. She just stood there, Studying my face in awe. Like she had seen a ghost. We waited for the other to say the first words but she was as lost as me. Her gaze fixed on my face, her black ink like hair loose to her waist. She was wearing her new pink-violet dress. Her eyes red because of her broken sleep. Despite of this she was still looking like a lotus burning in the light of silver moon. She never lost her beauty, though but now without her little makeup, her freckles on her forehead were quite imminent to show.

“Can I come in?” But no response came.

“Vrushali!!!” She shuddered like lighting had gone through her body.

“Yess! Yesss!.

I mean NO! NO! No.

Why did you come here? If you wanted to ta… talk, you should have called me.

Why …. Did you have to come here by yourself? “She stuttered

“I wasn’t feeling comfortable in that room.” I said walking in her room.

“What…are you …… I mean do you wanna talk about something.”

“No. I just…I just want to talk to you.”

“What about?”

“Anything. Anything at all.” I said.

“What … happened? Tell me. Is it something really bad?” She said.

She must have figured out by my gestures and the fact that I was sweating. But I can’t let her worry about me anymore. I should be the one resolving their problems not becoming one. I have to hide it.

“Nah…The sleep just eluded me today. The moon is shining so brightly after all.

So I just thought maybe we should talk, you know.

By the way you look good in that pink-violet dress.”

“It’s called magenta.” She corrected me.

“Yeah that.

And also Shon told me that you worked so hard on the garden. I just wanted to say that I’m proud and happy to see that.

And I’ll be counting on you from now on for that gardens condition.”

“So, you couldn’t wait for tomorrow to say that.”

“I…I just….I guess not.

Vrushali is it bad that I came here? I mean I don’t want to trouble you, I can go if you want me to.”

“No! No, It’s just…it’s just that you are not telling me what’s going on.

In fact now a days you don’t tell me about most of the things.

And I just see you sometimes, staring … staring at an empty space. Like you are in a place or you’re just lost.

Like you are fighting a battle. A burden that you don’t want to carry.

Those eyes carrying a sadness so old that only the gods can know the reason for them. Those eyes will devour anyone who comes close.

And then I just want to run away from you, as far away as possible.

But at the same time I don’t want to leave you alone. Because I feel that if I do, … you’ll die. My eyes just become full of tears at that moment.”

Vrushali’s eyes widened, she looked like someone had been busted during for a theft. A redness imbued her cheeks and her flabbergasted face.

“I…I am sorry Karna. I didn’t even realize what I was saying till I finished. I just blabbed, on an on without the constrict of manners.” She was covering her face with her pallu.

“It’ Ok Vrushali, before king and head-maid, we are friends.

And infact, I found a kind of solace to hear your honest opinion. I was happy.”

“But why?” She said softly, carefully.

“Because you called me Karna. It is rare for you to call me by my name, these days.”

“But I wanted to leave you. I wanted to run away. But that’s not the truth. That’s not what I want, it’s just my thoughts were all jumbled up.”

“But you didn’t. Even if your mind told you to run, you stayed. Because you want to.

I… Thank you for that. And I hope that in future you will continue to do so. ”

“Of course.”

“You and Shon are my pillars here, Vrushali. This Karna will crumble, decay without you two---- ” her face had a twinkling smile.

She wiped her tears ”Oh, that reminds me. Come, I have something to show you.”

She grabbed my hand and pulled it across the castle straight to the gardens. There stopping near the small pool of water she indicated towards the new hill near the surrounding wall.

“When digging for the pool and the bathe area in the castle, we were faced with the problem of excess soil.

So I suggested to Shon, that we should make a small hill like area in the garden.

It would serve as a great spot for enjoying the cool breezing air.

I also planted a small peepal tree here. When it grows this area will become a hanging spot.”

“Like we had one in the village.” I said.

“So, you remembered.”

“Of course how could I not. You fell from there.”

“yeaahh!” She said blushing.

She ran off to the hill. Stopping at the small plant. The whole garden was shimmering in the burning silvery light of the moon. In it she was the calm and sooth. Smiling, she cared for the plant. I have to protect that smile. Her, Shon’s and everyone in this kingdom. I can’t falter, can’t doubt, can’t grow weak for them. They are counting on me. I have to show a strong confident face, no matter what I’m feeling inside. The recognition that I’m fighting for can’t come if my own people don’t see me as one they can depend on. As the best person they can rely on.

This is now my first priority, to live for my kingdom, for friends, for……. family.