Sootputra: The Unsung Hero

Chapter 26: Invitation

The lonely silent castle became abuzz with the entire guest around. Once a peaceful place was now bustling with people, maids, servants and soldiers going in and out all the time. It was as if we were preparing for war. You have to be careful at every corner or you will bump into a person carrying a plate of salad (at least I did.) and he or she will splay it all on you.

There wasn’t even a day when I would not collide with a kaurav or worse, their sister. I could handle the remarks and insult of the brothers but, Dusala just loved me too much to let go of me (or more precisely my earrings.). It would pain the whole day after I bump into her. It was hard for Vrushali to handle her. She would prowl the castle looking for me (that’s what she tells me every time I see her.). Thanks to her I was sneaking in my own home just to take a bath. The castle bath became a crowded place for two days now as, the guest used them on their leisurely hour. So, I took to the river to take my bath. The river Ganga cut the kingdom in ¾ and went away, bending after some distance from it.

I picked a place outside the city where, I found a peaceful bank, with birds chirping and sunlight pouring through the trees. The water felt cold, it numbed my feet every time in a matter of seconds. The transparent flowing river was slow and supple, with an occasional flip flop of the water as it collided with the stones and rocky banks. Thanks to that, sometimes it felt like that it was talking to me. It felt so good, that I spent hours on end here. I could feel this water, I have felt it’s presence before. I have felt the same sensation in my dreams. This is the same river as in that nightmare. May not be the same place, may not be the same bank but I am certain that the water was of Ganga.

I just wonder why. If only she could answer………..

Leaving the banks I headed for my duties.

…………………………..

The doors of the grand hall slowly creaked open as the soldiers pushed it out. I saw duryodhan sitting in one of the chairs in the court. He didn’t approached me or said anything, just waived his hands towards the throne and with a downward expressionless face. As I reached for my seat at the end of the hall, every courtier sitting stood up, including him. They bowed and then we started the session of the day.

All the while during the court session duryodhan neither said anything nor interrupted in any of the proceedings of the affairs, whether it be the simple matter of dispute between two men or the repair of the dam in the city. I kept a close eye on him throughout the day, (I know because yuyutsu poked his elbow to bring my attention back to the documents he was presenting.). After the said deed had been done, that day came to a close and the ministers left, except for him. He sat there watching each one of them taking their leave. In the end yuyutsu got his chance and bowed to take his leave. Duryodhan like others intently watched him. I don’t know if Yuyutsu replied with the same stare or not.

The hall was now a total silence. It was lit with torches on the pillars which burned the wood soaked in gasoline and filled the air with its aroma. But as the evening drew close, even their light was not enough to keep all the parts of the hall illuminated. We were the only two people sitting in this barely lit room, almost silent room. It was weird that today no servants or maids came to call me or offer refreshments. Is this also his doing. I didn’t get much time to contemplate on things as he suddenly got up and started his walk towards me. The echoing sound of his boots filled the air with each of his steps.

After climbing a few stairs he placed his hands on his waists and with a smirk on his face said “Now, for the final task of the day.”

“I was waiting for you to say something.” I said placing my chin on my left hand.

“Of course, but I have to say though. You run it pretty tight.

I never thought that Anga had this much potential. You keep on surprising me.”

“Thank you “I said.

“For what?” He exclaimed.

“For the praise, and for bringing Satyasen with you.”

He narrowed his brows “Who?”

“Your charioteer, he is Vrushlai’s brother. She seems happy to see him.”

“Yeah, of course. Now, Can we get to the point?”

“Sure!” I stood up so that we can talk while walking outside.

“No, sit.” He said. His voice fainting with every moment. “I like this room. It’s familiar. Silent, dark and ….empty.” He said closing his eyes and widening his arms as if feeling the hall.

I clenched my fists around the arms of the chair “Duryodhan, enough . Just get to the point.”

He opened his eyes and lowered his hands. “I know I have your trust karna, your respect. I know you think only good for me. But the thing that I don’t have is your obedience.

The low born love you. They give you their full support. They cheer for you, even in Hastinapur.”

“Is that why you keep me close. So that you can gather supporters.” I said taunting him.

“Yeah, and also because I like you.

What you will tell me. What you will say, I’ll not get to hear it from everyone, not even my brother’s. Because they are too afraid to even ask anything of me, less go against me. But not you. ”

“You are my friend after all. My best. What kind of a friend I’ll be if I don’t tell you what you need to hear. Besides I have a lot to live up to. A lot of expectations.”

“You don’t have anything to live up for from me. I once only asked for your loyalty and that’s the only thing I’ll need. In fact I need it the most today. ”

“Today?”

“Tell me have you been to a sawyamvar( Groom choosing ceremony) before.” He grinned.

Duryodhan finally walked with me to the outside. I took him to the hill newly built on the grounds. The air blew in the misty cold night. While the moon was nowhere to be found today, only the stars twinkled. The season of cold had barely started but we were already exhaling mist from our mouths. It was thanks to the clothes, Vrushali provided that we were able to stand here.

“Can’t you go by yourself. I don’t like these royal celebrations.” I said disapprovingly.

“You’ve got to be kidding! ” He said exclaiming. “It’s not a village chief, He is the Panchala king. A powerful adversary. And it’s his daughter’s swayamvar. Every king or prince will attend it. Jarasandh, Shalya, even that Krishna. Invitations have already been sent out to everyone.”

“Not to me.”

“I know.” He said gazing at the city over the wall. “Why do you think I sat in the court for a whole day. I thought that at some point you will discuss about it. But---”

“I didn’t. ” I said cutting his statement. “Clearly I’m not invited. So why insist on taking me with you.”

He sat on the moist grass crossing his legs. Caring for the nearby peepal plant “Don’t you want to get married. Don’t you think that it’s time for us to get a wife? ”

He had a rare softness in his voice today. In all my time knowing him, he didn’t even cared a bit about all the proposal that came to the kingdom asking for a marriage of the crowned prince to their daughter. He rejected every single one of them. Even Pitama Bhisma and The king grew tired of his behavior. After all they needed a boy to inherit the vast kingdom. But He didn’t budged even a bit.

So there can only be one thing that can make him change his decision now off all the time.

“I take it you have seen the princess of Panchala.” I said in an inquisitive tone with my hands crossing behind my back.

He made a smirking sound “A messenger came with an illustration. A portrait of sort with the invitation.

And I have to tell you friend, I haven’t seen a more gorgeous girl in my life. The invitation said that she is the most beautiful mortal woman in the world. And believe me when I say this that every word of that is true.

Even if she looks as half the beauty as in that portrait, man, that would still be more than the rest that I have seen. That voluptuous body and that coal black hair. How can you not fall for her?” He said swooning over the moon.

“I see. Still I can’t see why you need me there.” I said

“Come on man, I told you, right. Don’t you have any interest to take part? I promise you’ll regret it if you don’t.

It’s time for you to get married too you know. And she is worth every effort.”

At that moment I thought I heard someone. But looking around I saw nothing. But before I could think it over Duryodhan pressed on.

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t have the invitation. You are coming whether you like it or not.” He said with a red face. It was hard to tell whether that was because of anger or the cold wind.

“I can’t. I can’t marry duryodhan.” I said looking down kicking the grass at my feet. “Don’t ask me why. Out of respect for someone I can’t tell you. Not yet.”

“Do you have someone you fancy. ” He stood up and placed his hands on my shoulders.

“No ” I shrugged it off. “I can’t marry, ever. ”

He sighed ”Okay, I won’t pry. I let you tell it on your own pace. But you are still coming with me.”

looking at him with confusion “Why?”

“Because I need you as a support, as an advisor, as a friend. Choose whatever suits you.

The final thing is you have to come.”

I Knew why I hadn’t received any invite to that swaymvar. So It was a little hesitant to approve in the beginning. But he just kept pestering on and on, in the end I nodded to show my neglecting approval to accompany him to the event. The he told me to arrange a meeting with Aswathama and the rest of the brothers tomorrow regarding the swaymvar.

“Ok then, If that’s all your highness” I bowed and took my leave.

“Oh one more thing, ” He said hurriedly, taking out a parchment from his pocket. But I had already started walking. He shouted from behind. “Don’t you want to see her?”

“I don’t need too.”

Going in I saw Vrushali talking with Satyasen. She was smiling.

At the time I didn’t knew that it would be the last smile I will see on her face a long while.