Sootputra: The Unsung Hero

Chapter 29 Arrival:

We reached the kingdom of the princess where the swayamvar was going to take place, 3 days prior of the scheduled date.

We were not the first ones though. Duryodhan had enquired from some servants that King Jarasandh and a few other princes are already here.

We were lavishly welcomed in the palace. It was much bigger and more beautiful than the ones I have seen at Hastinapur. The flags of the kingdom were hanging all around like curtains. We entered through a large emerald colored gate. The polished white marbled wall covered all around us as we walked through the central grand corridor. The 20 feet high celling had an intricate pattern design on it of Vishnu and Sheshnaag. The soldiers were bowing their head down at every corner. The maids greeted us first, with flowers and sweets. Few decades ago King Drupad had lost half of his kingdom in a conflict. But still for only a half of a Kingdom, the decorations were beyond any I have ever seen.

All the participating Kings and princes were assigned their own quarters and their very own few maids. But for some reason it seemed like the ones assigned to Duryodhan, especially the female ones kept a little too close to me than to him. Fortunately, he was not noticing it that much or just simply ignored it.

As for me! Since I was not one of the suitors I wasn't allotted any personal ones. Though I was allotted my own chamber since being a King meant I had to have one even if I didn't had any intention of participating.

Duryodhan was very happy during this time, after all he was nagging all the way, about the Giant Elephants the King Drupad had. He had seen them with his own eyes during the war. Their white tusk, their enormous size and muscular build. He exclaimed the wish to see them the next day, during the sightseeing of the Kingdom and asked me to join. Since I had no plans in my schedule, I agreed.

Next day after the long tour of the kingdom………..

I was walking down the corridors of the hall that had my room, thinking about the day I had and looking out towards the sky. It was already dusk time. I was feeling a little tired from all the places we visited today during the exploration of the city. In the end, Duryodhan was a little dissapointed with what he saw. I mean what did he expect? Elephants are just Elephants what can be so special about them. They weren't even that big.

I was straightening my shoulder while muttering in my head, when someone bumped into me.

"Sorry, Oh King .

I didn't see where I was going." The Woman said.

She was fairly taller than the most women I have seen in my years. She almost reached my Nose when even my brother can't. She was wearing a normal plain saree. Had a nose ring around her left part of the face and long black braided hair. She wasn't wearing any jewelry except for that nose ring and the bangles on her arms. Her skin wasn't the fairest one I had seen but still it was smooth and without any impurities. For a Daasi(servant) to have such a smooth skin was a little … intriguing.

"Oh don't, I was the one at fault.

I wasn't paying attention and was lost in my thoughts."

I extended my hands to help her stand up. She grabbed it and I slowly pulled her up.

She looked at my face and stood still there in that posture with her hands close to her chest. On a closer look I can see that she had Black eyes and wore next-to-no makeup. Not even Kajal was on her eyes but she still looked pretty. She had a very small mole under her lower left side of the lip which only enhanced her beauty more towards sexy. She was still looking in my eyes with the same intent look and......and I didn't wanted it to stop. Her eyes were searching for something before, but now their thirst was quenched. She had a satisfaction on her face, like a quest that has finally ended.

She had two keen black eyes, which wanted to say something. Eyes, like of a prisoner bound by the will of others. Eyes, that looked like they longed for freedom. Eyes, that were asking for help, searching for someone to depend on.

For that single second, I wanted to be the reason she stands. I wanted to help her, I wanted to be the reason, she smiles.

I snapped from that moment on hearing the echoing footsteps getting louder. She covered her face with her pallu and went cross me. I raised my hand to grab her but she was already out of reach.

I couldn't even ask her name............

"Oh there you are, Karna.

I was looking all over for you.

Why did you leave? The drinks were just about to be served. You should have tried one of King Drupad's delicacies."

It was Duryodhan. It was the echoes of his shoes that took that beautiful moment away from me.

For the first time in my life, I felt like punching him in the face.

"Nothing, I just wasn't feeling up to it.

Besides I'm tired, I was just heading towards my chamber to get some shut eye." I tried to put a smile.

"Ohhhh Okay,

But don't forget we have to go see the lake tomorrow morning and the day after that is the swayamvar itself. I know all these celebration's and luxury don't meet your interest but still you have to join me in all the occasion's Karna. After all you are my best friend." Duryodhan said extending his arm.

I clasped it and with a sigh said

"Of course, that's what I am here for."

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Just one day to go……..

The grand hall was bustling with royals. The kings, the princes, their advisors and the maids or servants attending them. In all of this I was the one person who was standing in the corner leaning on a pillar. I hate these royal gatherings. They are just a way to show off their luxury and power. To remind the people of kingdom of who were the boss and of the difference between them. Criticizing the gatherers, I saw kauravs in front of me. I saw Duryodhan and Dusashan talking to Shalya. It looked like a heated argument, but the storm soon enough subsided as it had started. Good thing too, as now I had spotted a my main reason to be here, my grand prize.

A dark brown man, with a sleek build. The crown on his head had a peacock feather. That was one of his signature looks. A normal bamboo flute was gently twirling in his fingers. He had an aura totally opposite to me. While my aura always seemed to stir things up like a cyclone, whereas his was like moon, like the calm cold wind of the night that sooths you. Fooling your heart to think that everything will be alright.

My feet picked a direction on their own…..

“Keshav?” He said with a smile mixed with a raised eyebrow. “No one has called me that in years.” His voice was almost like what I had imagined. A calm, supporting sound, like the voice of a friend.

“Yeah,

A gopi from Vrindavan married into our city. She told that name. She used to call you that.” I said scratching the back of my neck.

“It’s not offensive is it?”

“No. No. ” he shook his head. “It’s just ……. nostalgic.” He chuckled.

“Call me that from now on, please. By the way who are you?”

“Karna, The king of Anga.”

His eyes widened. “Ohh … The Angraaj.” He said giving a little laugh. “Your name precedes you.”

“Thank you.” A little embarrassment showed on my face. I didn’t expect a man like him to know about me.

“And I didn’t expect you to be here. I thought that no invitation was sent to Anga.”

“How do you know that?” I asked him inquisitively.

“I contributed in organizing this swayamvar. So I know who, is present here as a candidate and who not.” He said looking around.

“And you will be right. I’m not here to participate. I’m just a tourist. Came with the prince of Hastinapur, for sightseeing. ” My brow was raised now. “Still it’s amusing to see that under the guidance of you, and under your care, no invite came to Anga. While all rest of the kings of Bharat are here.”

“Don’t take it the wrong way Karna. ” He said raising his hands. “You saw what happened when you stood on the same stage as the other kings and princes.” He looked. I raised my brow not knowing what he meant. “I had just thought of that already. I knew this scenario would occur, if that invitation was sent your way. I knew from the info on you that, you held your dignity dearer to you than some small swaymvar. That’s why I didn’t send any.” He finished.

“But I haven’t heard any remarks or statement on me.” I said to counter him.

“But you felt it, You still are feeling it, aren’t you. When you’re here talking to me. ”

“Gazes!!” I said, looking around as nearly everyone one of them was looking at us either directly or from their corner eye. He nodded in understanding.

“Yess,” A smile erupted on his face. “The moment I said, ‘Angraaj’. Everyone here looked at you. For the first time, I’m feeling a little insecure for not being the center of the stage.”

“Why is it important though?” I asked him.

“How do you think it feels to them when a charioteer stands beside them, on the same level as them?”

“I can’t control their way thinking keshav, …only mine.” I said.

Keshav was still smiling. I think he may be enjoying this. “And what about you? What do you feel?” I asked him.

He chuckled “Karna, I am just a cow herder. Always am, always will be. I came from a small family in a small village. Raised by an ordinary father, mother. Played with small village kids. It’s just a fate of luck that I found myself here. That same luck told me that my real parents were royals and that I have a royal kingdom as an inheritance. Other than that I am the same kid that left his village all those years ago.” He said tapping his flute on his hand.

I sighed “Well, not everybody has your luck.” I scratched the back of my neck. Smiling nervously.

“You never know, friend. This world can’t have just one lucky fella.” He responded way too quickly.

After a while I smirked. “I understand.” After that we both talked for a while and then parted ways.

Vrushali would be so jealous when she hears of this. The thought of her vanished some of the grinn I had a moment ago.

The night before the day of the swayamvar.

Today was also a wasteful day after all. What's so lavish and exciting about a lake? It didn't even have much fishes. The Fisherman who was in charge of our boat told us that the King had ordered all of their tribe to find as many fish as possible. At first I thought that it was because they will be used as a food source for all the guests that were to come but I didn't saw many dishes made of fish on the table. Then he told us that King is looking for a special one as almost all the caught fishes were rejected and distributed among the citizens. What is the fool king thinking?

I pondered standing in hall way, setting my elbows on the railing of the second floor of the palace looking outwards towards the sky. Tomorrow will be a full moon, but still the light that it shown today was bright enough to light the whole city. It was a calm and beautiful night, but I was lost in some other beauty and I didn't cared about anything else..

I was still thinking about yesterday, Wish I had a little more time to ask who she was and whether I can see her again?

What is this that I was feeling ? It was all new to me. I couldn't explain it in words but one thing that I was sure for was that I wanted to see her just once more.

As though heavens have finally forgiven me or overlooked me for that particular night. The wish that I had just uttered was coming true.

I saw a person coming out of the palace in the night when everyone else was sleeping and no light was there except the moon. But still in the cover of night i instantly recognized her. How couldn't I? She was still wearing the same saree, had the same braided long black hair and the same style of walking. She was still covering her face but it can't be anyone else.

I, not being able to hold my body jumped out of the railing and landed on the balcony below. I could still see her looking around as though making sure no one saw her. I ran towards the edge of the balcony, pushing the vase that was in the way. As it shattered on impact with the ground I grabbed one of the branches of the Neem tree that was practically kissing the balcony and then with the help of its branches descended towards the ground and finally landed.

She still hadn't heard me or my landing. But as soon as I started making a run for it, she discovered my presence and started running herself. I, not to lose her again increased my speed and caught up to her in no time. I grabbed her arm.

"Wooh ....at...at last........

At least tell me your...... your …. name, before you start running......... again" I said panting, catching my breadth.

"Forgive me, Oh King.

Have I done something wrong?" she said looking away while her arm was still behind her in mine. Her Black hair reflected the shine of the moon onto my eyes.

"No, Not yet.

I just saw you sneaking away from the palace in the middle of night while everyone is sleeping.

I was just intrigued.

What is a Daasi like you doing here?

Who are you?" I said with my breathing now under my control. I pulled her hands and she turned towards me. She looked the same as yesterday except she wasn't wearing her nose ring now. Her beauty was already enough but now it was amplified by the light of the moon as it touched her face and eyes. It was like she was bathing in it. Glistening like a new born. Her hands were cold and soothing to touch. Her face only a few inches from me.

"Why are you interested in the affairs of a mere Daasi like me?

Aren't you a King? Surely you have come seeking the hand of the princess." she said while backing off and turning away.

Princess, I haven't even thought about her once. Even my friend Duryodhan who is the one participating haven't had the pleasure to see her, yet. It is said that she is the most beautiful mortal currently present on earth.

"Princess? Do you know her?

Are you one of her Daasi's?" I questioned

"Yes, I am … but her servant.

We are very close to each other. " She answered in a soft voice.

"You still haven't answered my question, King.

Are you here for her?

For the princess?" she questioned with confident.

I was a little intrigued, what does it matter even if I was or wasn't here for her?

Why did she care to know? Does she also..........?

I smiled and chuckled.

"heh......

No, I am not one of your princess's suitors. I am just here to support my friend Duryodhan. He is the actual one taking part in the swayamvar." I said while walking a few steps beside her.

"I haven't even seen her once, not even in the illustrations of painters. " I said looking towards the distance and then turning my head towards her.

"So you won't be taking part in the upcoming ceremony?

hmm, What a shame?"

A sense of dissatisfaction was emanating from her voice. Why was she sad? Isn't that what she wanted? Are we feeling two different things?

"Still I think it may be for the best that you don't take part." she said tilting her gaze downwards and closing her eyes.

"What do you mean?" I enquired.

"Nothing " she said flipping towards me a little flustered. It looked like she was hiding something but I couldn't point to it.

"I just mean, that maybe you'll find someone better and more beautiful than her." she said closing her eyes and smiling towards me.

I thought to myself, So My intuition was on the mark.

"Maybe I already have."

Suddenly a few torches in the palace started to light up. Everyone must have heard the breaking of the vase. People were waking up now.

The beautiful young maiden pulled her pallu to cover her face and started pace walking towards the palace. I grabbed her by the hand again.

"I still don't know your name. " I asked loosening my grip.

"Don't worry you will, tomorrow." with that said her walking turned in running and she was gone before my eyes.

I didn't know what to make of it. Tomorrow? What did she mean by that? Was she telling me to meet her tomorrow? But where and when?

I didn't wanted to be stuck in that state any longer, so I forsake all the thoughts and decided that after tomorrow's swayamvar I will seek her.

No matter what I will find and tell her what I feel when I see her again.