Sootputra: The Unsung Hero.

Chapter 30: Swayamvar.

The bow was indeed an eye catching site but my sites were set on the blob of water above the smoothened mirrored platform. It was like any normal pool of water but except it had no banks or sandy bed to support it. The transparent water was hanging in the air as if supported by invisible ropes and an invisible container. It was in the shape of a Sphere with around 5-6 feet of diameter. I could also discern something moving in it. After a few moments I realized that fishes were swimming in it.

The kings and princes who a moment ago had a pride on their moustaches and confidence in their eyes were now dumb founded, dividing their attention between the heavy bow and the fishes flapping in the clear transparent water.

The bustling, murmuring and noise filled hall, turned silent. Every prince or king was either looking at the test or at the prize.

The stairs leading to the King divided the hall in two. On his right was sitting the guest of honor Lord Krishna and on his left was his son standing with his left hand on the spear and a sword on his hilt. Further left was a girl, sitting on a royal chair with a thick red sari, embroiled with gold design. Her nose, ears, forearms, forehead were all loaded with jewelry. It was like she was wearing half her weight on top of her. Her face was lite with makeup kajal, redness on cheek, rose lips, and a lotus perfume whose smell filled every nose present.

A maid was standing by her side with two thick garland on a plate like the coils of a white serpent. They were even thicker than my arms. Wide enough to cover the whole neck.

But in all this entirety, she was sitting elegantly reflecting a princessely attitude. I wouldn’t have believed that she can act like that if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. Keeping her eyes down but face up. She was checking out every attendee present while trying very hard to not give any hint. But she had already slipped up. She had made a mistake by giving me the biggest hint there was. A hint that made me sweat the moment I saw her, today.

She had finally given me her name………..

I felt a shock, like my heart has fallen down in an endless well. She came down the hall, voluptuously walking towards her chair. But when she lifted the veil from her face, that’s when I stumbled.

I never had a chance from the beginning. A foolish play on my part. Maybe that’s why she didn’t tell me her name. That’s why she ran off.

I clenched my fist cursing my fate. The little ember of hope that I lit, had burned my own house down. I can’t hope to get a single thing that I want, I guess that’s the lesson life and the gods were teaching me. For the first time I hated my friend. I wanted to sit on the chair he was in. But once again, I had to drink this bitter reality and look as the lovely girl gets taken away by someone else.

I tried, oh heaven knows I tried to not look at her. But whenever those eyes went down I couldn’t help but glance at that beautiful face. Cause this might be the last chance I ever see them.

I didn’t know what I was feeling at that time. But I can certainly say that it wasn’t love …… not yet.

I crossed my arms and took a step back to bring a pillar between me and her. I could still see her legs though, covered in red gloss and silver payal.

But before I could fully immerse myself a sound rang through my ears.

The contest had started when the Panchal prince, Dhristadumnya blowed the conch shell.

One by one the contested stood, most of them weren’t even able to lift the bow. Those few that could, they missed. Jarasandh, expected to be the biggest competitor missed (Though not by much.). Same with Sisupal, Shalya and half a dozen more after therm. Finally It came time for the Kaurav princes.

Duryodhan sent the youngest ones first. Sadly their excited faces soon turned to a defeated and shamed ones. Vikarna, Durmukh, Abhay and the five more weren’t even able to lift the bow. The nerves on their head was going to pop out with the amount of strength they were putting in, but still it wasn’t enough to even budge it. Then Duryodhan patted on the back of Dusashan. The young prince had a confident look and not without reason. He lifted the bow in a pull. Aimed at the pool of water but he also missed. Leaving the only one eligible in the court left to try for it the last time.

Duryodhan stood, I saw him clench his trembling hand into a fist. The crowned prince, with the hope of Hastinapur riding on his shoulder lifted the seated weapon like his younger brother. He aimed with his eyes looking at the reflection and when he left the arrow, It seemed like he succeeded. But the arrow grazed one of the fishes in the pool and came empty from the other side. The nervous and excited crowd died down.

My friend saddened by his defeat, came back and sat down with a thud. I clearly remember, I should’ve felt sorry for him. Should’ve felt sympathy but the only feeling I had was, …relieved. I don’t know why but it felt good seeing their face down. All of their faces down. Her neck still empty. The fishes still swimming like they were. My happiness must have leaked through as I saw Keshav, giving me a tense look. A boiling face, anger oozing out, like a volcano had started rumbling. Something has gone wrong. Something that he didn’t expected to.

The king babbled on and on while I tried to read the faces around me. He was saying something about the incompetency of the warriors, and what not but I didn’t gave any heed. Until……

“Isn’t anyone there in you all who is worthy of my daughter?

Who can bear the weight of her hand?” Frustrated King spoke.

My eyes rose, my ears opened. Hair on my neck stood. I came down to the pedestal on which the Pinakin sat.

“I am Karna, The King of Anga” I said to the king. I bowed to the princes. It took her a little while to answer but at last she wished me good luck and told me lift my head. Her voice was as soft and serene as I had remembered. It was the first time she had spoken since this contest began. I smiled at her. Her face turned a nervous pink like the petals of a lotus.

Then came the trial.

The bow had an aura of its own. Like it was pushing me back. My eyes closing to remember the teacher that gave the power to wield these kind of bow in the first place. His poker face made me smile. I grabbed the bow from the center and thanked my Acharya. With just one pull I lifted it from it’s hold. I always knew I could do it. I knew that he gave me the strength. I knew because he could lift it too.

Fortunately for the next step I didn’t had to string it. But just to make sure, I tested the tension in it. And then I knew what the problem was. The string was a little loose. So I roped it around at one end once more, the crowd gasped seeing at this point. The bow now had a string to make a sonic boom (I know because I pulled it to make one).

Even before I had picked the arrows from the pedestal, I felt like several other were piercing me from all the sides. Their gazes were set on me. Standing On the mirror, My reflection looked back at me. I could see the tension and fear in my own eyes. I set My knee down and lifted the bow over my shoulder. The bamboo weighted bow felt good when gripping. Now the final challenge remained.

Looking closely at the reflection of the fishes in the pool of water, my eyes caught a catla fish. Swimming in a zigzag way. It caught my eye cause it was big and slow. But it was a little misaligned from where I was. I calmed my breathing, slightly shifted my angle.

For a moment nothing mattered. The world had stopped, That fish had stopped. The water was so clear that one could see the ceiling through it. I took a deep breath focusing on the target.

With the maximum force that I could muster I let my arrow loose. The arrow pierced the veil of water making a hole for just a second. My arrow was now stuck to the ceiling of the castle.

But the tail of it wasn’t flailing like it always does at my training. Well, how could it with such a heavy load tugging at it’s end. The fish was dead in an instant. It stuck from the end of the bow.

I stood knowing what I had done. Something that no one else had. Something that only I could do.

Now the only thing that remained was to hold the gentle hand of my reward.

And my heart was too excited to do that………………