Sootputra: The Unsung Hero

Chapter 25: Friends Visit

“He seems a little sluggish. What happened? Is he sick?”

“Nah. It’s just that Bali, doesn’t get much to run with a rider on him.

I don’t let anyone else ride him except you. And me myself am too busy with all the new responsibilities of stables, palace and training with you in the evening.”

“Wasn’t Yuyutsu helping you?”

“He is, but it still takes time to learn the ropes you know. And that’s why I haven’t been able to pay much attention to his exercises recently.”

“Guess we should try setting him with the chariot. He is of that age now, after all.”

“Nah, I think we should wait for a few more months, till his legs get a few more muscle and his stamina increases.” Shon said.

“Sure as you say.”

“By the way, did you visit Maa?

You should thank her when we visit next time.”

“Do we really have to. Can’t we just bring them here?” he said in a tiring voice.

“Shon, we have to. No slacking off.”

“But it’s so good here, why can’t they just come here.”

“Shon!!!” I said in a firm voice.

“Ok, ok. I understand, father has to stay. Sheesh.

Talk about a downer.”

He left mumbling. Probably cussing me for scolding him. But I felt relief that at least he agreed. The lavish and luxurious lifestyle was getting to me, so I can’t complain that it wasn’t affecting him as well. But still maa, wants to see him. And a smile found it’s place on my face, knowing that he still cares about them. Vrushali must be missing her parents too, I will take her next time I go to hastinapur.

“Bali, looks like next time you will be my chariot horse. I’m looking forward to it.”

The white horse hoofed as I caressed his mane.

“See you tomorrow, buddy.”

As soon as I made my exit from the stables a servant came running. He told me that my friend has arrived at the palace. He was requesting to meet me as soon as possible. Duryodhan’s sudden arrival without any notice can’t bode any good news. If he is here, it means that something is up in Hastinapur. And I’ll have to leave, in a moment’s notice.

As I strode in the front entrance of the palace, I saw him. It was Ashwathama. He had an retinue of people, soldiers and servants at his back. He had his arms crossed and eye’s glowering. In all these months here. He had been one of the few people who often visited me. Although this time it looked like it was something official seeing how much of a crowd he was carrying.

“You sure kept me waiting for a while” He said, before my eyes could even realize he was there. “Is this how you treat your friend?”

I’m sure it looked like I froze for a second cause I just stood there, still surprised to see him here. Focusing on his sentence I set my jaw. “Of course. Why not?”

“Why not?!!” Ashwathama was taken aback. But maintaining his rage he said. ”Be-Because I have elderly with me. She had to go in to rest cause she was tired of waiting for you.”

“Who?” I asked with a straight face.

Vrushlai was the one to answer. She had just entered the fray with a few servants each carrying a plate and jug, of what I assume were full of either alcohol or juice. Descending the stairs with crossed arms behind her back I saw her face.

It was all teary. But with a smile like a crescent moon still visible in the golden rays of sun. The joy and happiness radiated from her like a fragrance of a flower. With her soft pink, ribbon like lips she said the words that instantly warmed my heart.

“Oh King, Aunt Radha is here.”

My throat felt parched. I looked at Ashwathama, he was giving me a smirk like he had done something that I couldn’t. He had a right to be that ignorant today. That soft low pitched statement had shook me from inside. It was like the warm rays on the glaciers of the mountain. The dam holding the river of happiness was broken.

“Go,….. Go. I know you won’t stop unless you meet with her.”

I’m sure my teeth were showing as I smiled so wide, just like a child, running past him into the palace.

“Where is she?”

“Shon took her to your room.” Vrushali said wiping her tears.

Running as fast as my legs allowed, fumbling on the stairs I reached the floor in just a few moments. I stormed my room and there she was lying on the bed. A maid was clearing the leftover lunch and plates from the side table.

“Much better than the food at home.” She said with her trembling lips.

“I could get used to this.”

She looked up and asked. “Where is Vrushali?”

“She is taking care of the guests.”

“Hmm” She turned her gaze towards the windows. The breezing air filled the room.

“It smells good here. The view is great too.” She said with a simple look on her face.

I sat down at her feet. Holding her hands. “You are shaking, Maa.”

“I’m just afraid, the fear of luxury, I guess.” Her hands flexed my hair and then touched the earring dangling from my right ear.

“If your old man was here, he would’ve been proud.”

“Aren’t you?” I asked softly.

“Of course I am. However, I was proud of you either way. Even if you had or didn’t have the burden of a crown on your head.”

“Maa---”

“I always knew that you were born to be a great man. A king, a warrior. It’s just----”

She started crying. The drops of her tears fell down on my face. She was scared. Choking on her own words. She had a look that said she was afraid. Afraid to loose something. Or already has lost.

“Maa, you don’t have to be scared. I’ll always be your, Vasu. Your son will be there for you. Whenever you ask.”

She gently stroked my hair again.

“Forgive me, Son. Forgive this old woman. It’s just, … you have been the greatest treasure of my life. Ever since, I held you in my arms, Ever since you spoke your first words. You have told me that you don’t think of any of this. That you don’t deserve this. ” She was gesturing all of my room.

“But there are times in the morning when I wake up and fear that I would lose you. That this luxury will steal both my sons from me.

You are so brave Karna. A strong man.

Sorry for being a coward mother. I don’t deserve you. I think I never did.”

Closing my eyes, thanking the gods, I offered my gratitude for making her my mother. Such unconditional love cannot come from a selfish heart. I opened my eyes and wiped her tears with my hands.

“It’s not like I don’t deserve it. It’s just that I don’t need all these……things.”

“Then why don’t you give it away.” She said chuckling a little.

“Maybe I will.” Her eyes suddenly lit up hearing those words.

“Really?”

“Maa, I was joking.” She sighed after a moment.

“Why didn’t father came with you?”

“He ….he still has business in…in the capital.” Shon just walked in with a plate of fruit salad in his hands.

“Shon, were you crying?” Maa asked

His back suddenly straightened up. His eyes were all sore like he had been tearing for a while. “No, It’s ….it’s just dust in my ey..eyes.”

Me and Maa were barely holding our laughter at his clumsy behavior. It was like he wasn’t even putting an effort to cover it up.

“What are you looking at?”

Then I finally broke.

“Were you listening to us all this while?” I said laughing. Mother, hit me on the head and tried to sush me but she was having a hard time controlling herself too.

“I swear, someday I’ll kill you. You better watch your back.” He frowned then strode off, pounding his feet on the floor. While me and mother were still laughing.

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“Hah,…. So you’re here. I was wondering where you had gone.” Spotting Ashwatha at the training area with Shon was an imminent sight. Like a bad omen. They seemed to have a relation of oil and water placed in a jar. Not mixing with each other but still not separating cause circumstances not allow them.

My little brother was trying hard to overpower Ashwatha with his short sword, but he was too good for him.

“You have improved from the last time we fought.”

“You too. ” Shon said in frustration.

“My goal is surpassing your brother so I have to.”

“Glad we agree on something.” They both were looking at me now. Like they were going to ambush me.

“Well, you both can kill me later. For now come let’s have Dinner.

Vrushali said it’s ready.” Both of them sheathed their swords and placed them in the stands.

“So, what has your girlfriend prepared for us.” Ashwatha said grinning.

“You should, stop hanging out with him. Don’t know what else he tells you.

There is nothing like that between me and her.”

“So, you mean she is free.” A hope shimmered in his eyes.

“Go, ahead give your try.

Just don’t cross the line.” A sigh came with my breath.

We entered the hall where small tables were set up for each of us. Vrushali and other maids were ready to serve the food. She particularly looked happier than usual today. I was glad she got to meet Maa. She was looking forward to it the most. The whole day she was in her servitude. She left the care of the rest of the guest to other maids while she personally took care of her. Seeing her near mother’s side, a smile stretched on this cracked face.

“By the way, The prince is coming too. ”

“You— you mean prince Duryodhan? Here?” Shon said gasping for air.

“But he usually calls Bhai there if anything is up. Why is he coming now?”

“He’ll tell when he comes. He’ll be here by tomorrow.”

Duryodhan was going to come. My mind feels a little tense. It was a little out of the ordinary for him to come here. He only visitied the palace on occasion like birth celebration and festivals. But tomorrow was neither, so what could be the reason for his visit?

“Shon, Vrushali can you make sure that everything is ready for tomorrow.”

“You can count on me, Angraaj.”

“Me too.” Shon said reaching for attention.

We all sat down to eat as Vrushali personally served the food. She was donning a blue saree today. Blue seems to be her favorite color. The rest of the maids were handing her the basket and bowls containing the dishes.

“Has Maa eaten, already?”

“Yess! Now she is just sleeping.

I made sure to give her the largest room, saying it was the smallest we had, as per your orders.”

“Good. Thank you.” I whispered in her ear.

“Don’t have to say it. She is my mother too.” A smile crowned her face.

“Can’t believe. It’s already has been a year since he was announced as the new crowned prince.” Ashwathama laughed as he said that. But his smile already had a hint of guilt in them. We both knew what we paid to achieve that reap as a reward. It was part of our soul, that we had sacrificed that day.

“Oh the cheese is so good. Who made it?” Ashwathama said.

“Well the cook of course.” Shon said, filling his mouth.

Ashwathama frowned on him. Shon eyes widened and he looked at Vrushali.

“Ohhh…………” He said.

“Vrushali the food is too good today.”

“Thank you, I will relay your gratitude to the cook.”

“Won’t you eat with us? You must be hungry too.”

“I will eat later.” She said with a confident voice. A pleasant smile donned her face.

“ It will get cold if left for later.”

“Still, I would prefer to eat after you guys.” She said shrugging his suggestion.

“Okk. As you wish.

By the way, you are looking stunning today in that blue saree. Just like the sky.”

“Thank you for the praise.” She said. Her eyebrow raised, and confusion on her face.

“You guys are acting weird today.” She said.

“Ohh are we?”

I just sighed and concentrated on the food, As I watched him fail in his every attempt.

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“Above.”

“Shit.”

He slammed in the soft dirt as the hard end of the stick hit his shoulder.

“It could’ve been your head.”

“DAMMIT!

Fuck.” Ashwathama said spitting his anger in the dirt as he stood up. He rolled his left shoulder where my stick had landed. Looks like this won’t be enough to lay him down this time. He really has improved. He increased the gap between us by roiling backwards.

“I hate that look on your face.”

“What look?” I asked.

“The one that confidently says that you’re going to win.”

“Well then beat me.” My feet's had already closed the huge gap; his eyes widened seeing me only a few inches away from his face in just a second. From the right hand grabbing his sweaty face I slammed it in the ground again.

“So what now?”

“Fuck!” Ashwatha sighed looking at me from the corner of his red eye.

“Come on the fights over.”

“No, No. I’ll get up on my own.

But man,” setting his jaw he said “Don’t you know, the term ‘holding back’. Can’t even feel my lip.”

“That’s because you’re bleeding.”

“What?” He said confused.

“Your lip. The lower one……It’s bleeding.” Pointing it out, I threw a towel at him.

“You know I have to tell you one thing.”

“What?”

“I hate you” He said. Bursting a nerve on his forehead. Whereas I just chuckled.

“What?! you said you wanted to fight me at my full. Besides I enjoyed it this time.”

“But you still weren’t using your full power.” My poker face must have given it away.

“I knew it.” He said.

“You still have a long way to go, but you have come a long way too.”

“Here, apply this.”

“What is it?”

“Limestone powder mixed with turmeric. Apply it, it will seal the wound and the swelling will also go down. Unless you want a duck face for a week.”

“Shut up and give me that.” He furiously snatched it from my hands.

A voice rang in my ears. My gaze turned to the gates of the arena. Someone was running towards us. Shon had two swords in his hands and he was leaping like a frog in this direction.

“Go, your other disciple awaits.” Ashwatha was checking the towel whih now had a blob of red blood soaked in it.

“Again with the swords, Stubborn as always .” Sighingly I said.

“He is your brother afterall……”

“That he is….”.

“Bahi…Bhai…..” He was panting for air. “Want to lea….learn parrying.”

“You’ve gained weight, you moron.”

“Shut up. You have lost weight and yet you lost.” Shon said in retaliation.

“At least, I’ve improved.” Shockingly Ashwathama was keeping his calm.

“yeah, I must say that swollen lips is a big improvement.”

Ashwathama furiously charged. Guess that calm was just an illusion.

“Ohhh..yeah I forgot. Hey stop for a second!” Shon said “The prince is here.”

“You really are a moron.” Ashwathama said punching him.

“When you two are done come to the court. Just don’t kill the other.”

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After a while I got to the main hall and there he was sitting with an entourage. Even though he had sent some before, there were still a few soldiers, guards and servants with him. His brothers Dusashan, Vikarna, Abhay, Durmukha and a few others whose name I still didn’t know yet were sitting around on the couches. If only he knew that I still don’t know all of his brothers, he will get furious. There was another girl among them. Must be only 13 or 14. She was sitting between him and Vikarna. She seemed to be the center of attraction for all. The most gentle one. Laughing and cheering them up like a stigma between the petals of a flower. Her smile was genuine not like a few brothers who had a face like they would throw up any second. But they also, seemed to have a soft spot for her as her one gaze was enough to make them smile. Unlike them she had a look of complete awe on her face as she looked around at the ceiling.

“Ah, he is here. So how is Lord Angraaj doing?” Dusashan said.

“You’ve gained quite a name for yourself.

People here have started to talk favorably about you.” Duryodhan said pleasantly.

“Just be careful not to give everything away. I didn’t make you a king just so that you can live in a hut again.”

“I don’t mind living in a hut.”

Duryodhan was taken aback. Every stare in the hall directed at me now. He stepped closer, his arms wide open. “I know that. I knew that you were insane and that’s why I keep you close.” He said hugging me.

“Come I have someone who wants to meet you.”

He grabbed me by my back and took me to the little girl, who was leisurely drinking from a glass.

“Karna, She is my only sister. The dearest of all us brother, Dusala. She bit my ear off saying that she wants to meet the gold one.”

“The Gold-One?” I said puzzeled at his statement.

“Ask her yourself.” He said with a demonic smile.

I bent down on my knees to match the height of the girl sitting on the couch. She was giving a cute smile.

“So did you enjoy the juice?”

“Hmm… it was quite good.” Her eyes sparkled as she looked at me. She was rather adorned by my earring, I could tell because she was pulling on them.

“Ow, O w ow. My ears would come off.” I said in a bit of pain.

“Hey hands off of him. He is not a bell of a temple.

Stop! You trouble maker. Mother has pampered you way beyond the line.”

Vikarna came to my rescue as he grabbed both of his sister’s hands before they could rip one of my senses.

“Why aren’t they coming off?” She said saddened by the fact that her hands were empty. She was rather infuriated.

“Because they aren’t earrings stupid. They are his ears.”

“Well that’s so unfair. With that fair face and now he has those earrings too. I want him to be my husband.”

And at that moment I heard a few plates drop. The maids present and A few male servants too. The moment soon turned to worse.

“Princess, I heard you wanted to meet me.” I said to the little girl this time though standing with a little distance between us.

“I saw you, I was present that time there. I want to see it. Show it to me.”

I knew what she meant and Now I understood the meaning of gold one too. I manifested my armor on me, This time though a little slowly for the chief of guest to appreciate it fully. The armour slowly like honey, covered and solidified around my upper body. It shone like it had its own sun rays.

“Can I?” The princess asked gently staring like someone had just told her she was alive. I picked her up in my arms and she just delighted while poking around my shoulders. “Amazing, ” was all she could think off to say. For a girl her age she was quite light, she had a lemony fragrance. I was happy that she was joyous.

“OK! Shows over get down now. ”

Her arms pulled at my neck as two of her brothers forced her away. She screamed and squabbled as the two restrained her. She is quite ….. something.

“No, I want it too………” She screamed.

“I’m sorry you had to see that.

She can be quite troublesome sometime.” Duryodhan said sighing.

“nah it’s alright” I said, calming my expressions.

“Geez,…whenever I see her I remember my time.

Come let’s go to a quiet place before she becomes Goddess kali.”

“Yeah, sure!” I too wanted to leave this awkward environment as soon as possible.

“Make sure she doesn’t bring down the castle.” I whispered to nearby standing Vrushali before we passed on to the next room. She shrugged at that notion.

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“I’ve heard that people have started calling you Danveer(Brave charity giver/ Brave donator.). It’s a good title. Suit’s you.

Just make sure not to donate the entire kingdom away.”

“If they ask, I will. It belongs to them anyway.”

For a moment he just stared at me, as if I had told him that mountains are upside down. And then he spoke.

“True, It does. But a king is there to protect them. Even it means from themselves.

Protect them from their own greed Karna, It’s one of your duties. ”

“I will try.” I said looking him in the eye.

“Karna, I’ll not dilly dally with useless talks anymore.

I’ll get straight to the point. ” He had a firm command on his voice today.

“I need an advisor. Since, now I am crown prince I need people whom I can trust.

People who aren’t afraid to speak in front of me. Stubborn ones specially.

And my first choice is you.” Duryodhan said with a grin.

“Why? Why me?”

“Wh-Why?” he spluttered. He was a little taken aback by this I think.

“Because I trust you. Among the people I have, the only ones with whom I can speak about anything are my Mama and you. And because I know that you won’t betray me.”

“But-but what about Anga, what about my family?” I said bowing.

“Don’t worry, You’ll see them several times a week. In your absence you can leave anyone you trust to handle the affairs coordinating with Yuyutsu.” He said

“Tha … Thank you, Your highness.” I said unsure of what to say next.

“Huh? ….. I thought that you would question or retaliate a bit more but you agreed so easily?!”

“yes, I made a vow to you, remember?”

“I’m impressed Karna. You really kept your word. ”

“Of course, I always do.” I said grasping his hand tightly.

“One more thing, Call me Duri. You maybe my advisor but foremost you are my best friend. I’d like you to call me as my brother’s do. ”

I remembered the brave words of the man who once spoke on my behalf on the day I needed them the most. When all of them were firing their glare on me he alone stood against them, taking on the heat of his teacher, brother’s and father. Inside he is a good man. A good man indeed. A man who lost his ways a little. But now that the root of that jealousy is over he has become an Ideal person. An ideal prince. The citizens of hastinapur speak favorably about him. He has even made friends with the prince of Vidharbha and King of Bhojkata, Rukmi, The king of Chedi, Shisupala, after Krishna abducted the princess Rukmini from her swayamvar. I owe him a debt, for it is Duryodhan who protected my honor. It was Duryodhan who protected my parents while I was residing here in Anga. Even when he didn’t had any obligation to do so. Even when it would have been safer for a prince to not get involved with a commoner like me. It would have been safer for him to not risk his reputation for a mere Sootputra, whom he had never met before in his life.

I looked in his eyes.. “Thank you, Duryodhan.”

He just smiled “You are an honest soul and a good friend. Such is a rarity these days in any king’s court.

I want that kind of man beside me as soon as possible” He turned his back and strode off.

“Yes, Friend.”

Looking at his back I just wondered how alone he must be. The darkness in which he had spent his childhood. This man had high ambitions but could only expect so much from life when it comes to a few honest friends.

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I summoned a meeting that day. Shon, Vrushali, Yuyutsu, Ashwathama all of them were there.

“First of all I’d like you to know why you all are here?”

“You’re going again aren’t you?” Vrushali said.

“No, not yet.

It’s not that simple this time. I have been officially chosen as the advisor to Duryodhan.

I…So from now on, half of my time will be spend there. Though I will be freely allowed to come and go should the need arise.

Before that happens though …

Yuyutsu I’ll leave the state of affairs in your hand.

And Vrushali.” She shook like she just have been woken up. “You will monitor and manage In my absence. I’ll leave you in charge. ”

“Me..Me. How….Can..I?” She spoke every word slowly as if picking them carefully.

“I trust you Vrushali. I trust your judgment. Don’t worry, consult with Yuyutsu if you have any trouble. And you can always call me, should my presence is required.”

“And Ashwathama”

But before I could even say a word Ashwatham spoke “Don’t worry. I’ll safely bring her back with me.”

I smiled “Thank you.”

“Now all that’s left is,

Shon?” I pointed my narrow gaze towards him.

“Is everything ready?”

“Yes! Me and Bali are rather excited.”

“Now then, I have the blind trust that you all will not let me down.

My Anga will be in your hands.”

“Yes, your highness” All of them said bowing deeply except for Ashwathama.

After bowing everyone left, except for Aswathama. It was a little odd, the gazes of the others turned as they saw his feet not matching their direction and speed. I signaled with my hand for them to go. But I can say from certainty that some of them were observing him through the corner of their eye.

“Isn’t it bothering you?” he said with a heavy tone.

“I’m thinking about it for some time now.” I said folding my hands with a tense grip “Duryodhan’ll not come himself, just to appoint me as his advisor. That’s just some trivial of a task for him.

There’s something more. Something he hasn’t told me yet. ”

“Then what will you do?” He said looking at me.

“I’m waiting.”

“Just make sure it isn’t too late.” Finally heading for the door.

“I hope so.” I said to me.