Sootputra: The Unsung hero

Chapter 27: Pinakin

Finding alone time for myself in this overcrowded place was proving harder than I thought. First there was the duties of the court, then the training with Shon and Bali, and even after that the care taking of the guest that were pressing over for the week. In this entire scuttling atmosphere the peaceful time was of the bath. When no one was there to disturb me and I could take my own time to focus and relax. So, I didn’t wasted any second of it, in fact if possible I stole more time to stay here. The rocks on the bank of the river felt soothing cold as I laid my back down on them. Every day after praying to the Surya(Sun) I took my time to enjoy this beautiful scenery. When birds chirped. The golden rays of the sun reflected off of the water and the gushing sound of the river just synced in with the air to make a beautiful song. As the bath of the castle was always occupied by the newly arrived guests, I rarely had any chance to relax like this. But today someone else had accompanied me here.

I noticed her not too long ago, standing on the sides waiting for me and also watching. She must have arrived shortly after me. Today I got out a little early than usual as I saw her clasping her hands and rubbing them to get warm. She was shivering even with all the extra clothing she had donned. The misty vapors exhaled from her mouth as she tried to keep her hands warm. Her nose had gone all red. I left the river and walked on the side of the bank where she was standing, with my wet down pants dripping on the soft sand. She just stood there watching me , as if the cold torturing her a minute ago had no effect at all now.

“I shiver every time seeing your naked top. What has that brutal teacher done to you? ” She said gasping on the scars on my chest and arms.

“Really, I can’t tell?” I jabbed at her seeing how she was literally shivering right now. ”What are you doing here? Haven’t seen you here before.” I said.

“Um..” She said clearing her voice. “I have something to ask of you.” She threw me a towel.

“Doesn’t everyone?” I said wiping my face and body.

She sighed as the white vapors leave her mouth. I noticed that her lips were starting to tear up.

“Your grace!?” She was looking a little down.

By now I have lived with Vrushali for so long that I understood the expression on her face. The expression that she had on the day we fought. She had the same face just before that fight.

“I just …” She hesitated. “I just want to know that, are you going to the swayamvar.”

On that quote I raised my brow. How come she knows about it when I haven’t told anyone. I can’t think that the kauravs or Aswathama would do that too, without Duryodhan’s consent.

“So it was you.” I said simply. “Last night, eavesdropping on us.” Giving her the towel back. She didn’t said anything. Just stood there leaning on the tree nearby.

“Vrushali?” I asked. But she stood frozen. In the end I sighed. The rays of the sun shimmered as it came out of the clouds and bounced on the river. I took my pace to the castle dripping water on the way.

“Wait….” She yelled from behind.

She came hurriedly and stood in front of me. She had dropped the towel near the tree. I went back to get it. “You didn’t answer……….. Are you?” She was stuttering, even refused to meet my gaze.

Picking up the towel I said “Yes!” but when I turned, I saw her running away.

………………………….

Everyone had gathered, The ten brothers, Ashwathama, me and Duryodhan. We were all sitting in the guest hall, few maids served the food and drinks. Somewhere as tense as a stretched wire. Some so loose that they couldn’t focus on anything except for the chicken on the table. Dusashan hadn’t changed his ways and was pulling the arms of one of the maids when my eyes met his gaze, He loosened his grip.. I didn’t saw Vrushali among them, in fact I haven’t seen her since morning. I wondered what had happened to her.

“So why are we here?” Dusashan was the first one to speak. He grabbed one of the chicken bones on his plate mixing the gravy with the rice.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Vikarna intervened. “It’s about the sawyamvar isn’t it?” At least one among the brother’s was a little sensible. He was among the few kauravs brother that never talked down to me. In fact if I can say, I was like an idol to him. Whenever I practiced my archery in the training area he would just come up with his brightly lit eyes and ask me about the tricks and tips to improve his own. Some of his good nature has rubbed off on Durmukh too (Another of the kauravs). They were few of the brothers in kauravs with Duryodhan, whom I respected.

“Finally someone sensible.” Duryodhan said in his calm composed voice. All this while he was standing near the balcony, looking out on the city. “Brother’s, While you all were indulging yourselves in luxurious food, drinks and pussy. I was doing some investigation. Gathering info. About the trial present in the swayamvar.” He said sitting down.

“trial?” Ashwathama asked tracing Duryodhan with his eyes as he sat down.

“This is not just a simple swaymavar. There’s a test. And whoever’s wins it, wins her hand.” He said clenching his fist. His moustache up as his eyes lit with fire.

“Still, It doesn’t mean that there will be one candidate, there can be many whoclear the trial.” I said biting on the slice of apple I was holding.

“No, the rumor has it that this is going to be a very difficult one. There are chances that no one passes.”

“How can you say that?” Vikarna asked.

“Because the instrument used in that trial is” Duryodhan leaned forward “A Legendary one.” He said.

“A bow that was transferred from, Dwarka by none other than it’s King and owner Krishna.” My eyes widened on hearing his name. From my childhood I have learned and heard a lot about him. Even my Guru spoke favoravely of him. He told me that Keshav (As everyone in my family likes to call him.) is supposedly one of the avatars of the celestial god of creation and maintenance, The Vishnu himself. Though I am doubtful of that fact, cause many of similar rumors are said about Acharya Parshuram too. And he himself told me that all of them are false or greatly exaggerated. Still it doesn’t dim the light of my enthusiasm and excitement on having a chance to meet the man who has accomplished so much in so little time. His accomplishment are non-ending, and nearly every year, I hear that he has done another impossible task (or married another girl). He has slain more demons and monsters in his life then his age. Even when he was just a newborn he slew a witch. I don’t know how he did that but the gopi residing in our village endlessly told about his feats with enamored eyes. I haven’t told anyone but he is my secret idol. He also started from being just a cowherd and now he was a king. Just like me. I couldn’t wait to meet the man, I thought as I tapped my food trying to contain my over flowing excitement.

“Will he be participating too?” I asked Duryodhan barely maintaining a simple face.

“No, he is not. He will be the chief guest, from what my spies told me. For lending a hand and the bow, the king has seen fit to appoint him a special seat beside him in the swayamvar.

So, it’s highly unlikely that he will take part.” Duryodhan’s face went from constipated to relax.

“Besides the dude already has like 2 dozen wives ”

“30!!!!” Durmukh who was silent all this time, shouted. His eyes were lit like sun and he was smiling like he would start to jump around any second. Dusashan paused looking at his little brother with a look of amusement and confusion and then he resumed “Yeah, 30. He is like a stud, can’t just stop falling for the ladies.”

“Or maybe the ladies can’t stop falling for him.” Durmukh said sipping his tea. He was giving a corner eye look to his elder as Dusashan looked at him with disgust. The surroundings fell silent for a moment.

“Anyway, moving on…..” Duryodhan sighed. “We were talking about the trial here.” He looked at everyone, making sure that everyone was paying attention.

“Now, I can’t say for sure what the trial will be, But one thing is certain…. it will be related to that bow.”

“Maybe we will have to string it.” Ashwathama suggested, scratching his chin. “Like Emperor Ram did for Sita’s Swaymvar.

What is the name of the bow?”

“Ahh..yess! ” The crown prince searched his pockets, and pulled out few parchments. Scrambling through them he picked one and put the rest back. “Ahh” He unfolded the paper. It’s called “Pynakeen…..Pi..Pinaa..

Pinakin, yes. Yes.

It’s Pinakin.”

Ashwath and I met our gaze. Our eyes widened, I think Ashwathama broke a sweat. I too took a heavy gulp as I verified that the name. My senses spiked on hearing it again.

Duryodhan noticed us. “What wrong?”.

Ashwath exhaled a breath “it’s…it’s not just a Legendary bow. It’s the Legendary Bow. The bow thought lost for centuries. The bow that no one can lift. Even if they can lift, they can’t string it. All except for one. The same one that broke the bow in a similar swayamvar.

The Emperor Ram.”

The sentence sent a chill down my spine, even though I wasn’t the one taking part. So, I can’t even think how the rest of them were feeling. The chorus gossip voice ran through the room. Every one of them was talking to the one beside him. I got a poke on my elbow as I looked to the one sitting beside me. Vikarna was ready to ask me some more questions with his eyes wide open when,“ But..but..but how can it be possible. It was broken by him, and no mention of it is given anywhere for centuries. So how can it be here all of a sudden.” Said one of them.

“I …don’t … Know” was all Ashwathama could say slowly. He was true though. Even I hadn’t heard about the repairment of the bow and Keshav having possession of it, anywhere. Not even from the Guru, who was present when the bow was broken by Rama. He told me in his own words that when the bow broke it sent a shockwave down the nearby area. Everyone had to brace, as they endured the deafening sound . No one could hear for some times after it. The last time he saw the bow it was broken in two. That sent a furious rage down Acharya’s body. He was ready to cut Ram in pieces. But the young prince calmed him down. Good thing he did, or otherwise everyone present would have been drowning in their own blood, cause it was he who brought the bow from Lord Shiva himself. I still don’t know how he managed to calm him down. It was hard for anyone to be standing on their own legs in front of him when he was angry. I had witnessed that myself.

“It must be him. That douchebag Krishna. His illusion, or contacts maybe.” He was looking at the small table in front of him, as if ready to smash it in one blow.

“Still it doesn’t explain how he found it.” Vikarna said in his hurry. Duryodhan whispered something but no one heard it clearly. An open air discussion started where everyone was asking questions and voicing their own opinions or theories.

“When no one else can….”

“Still it does explains why Krishna himself had to go to Panchala. No one else would have been able to wield it to transport it there.”

“I SAID IT DOESN”T MATTER.” Duryodhan threw the silver glass on the floor smashing it against the marble. The alcohol spilled all over. A maid nervously stepped forward. Slowly and fearfully she picked the glass and cleaned the floor.

“What matter’s right now is how we clear the trial?” He said.

“What more do you know about this bow.” He pointed at me. “I know you to know about it. What else can you tell me?”

A drunk and angry Duryodhan was a dangerous situation. I had to be careful of how I speak. I knew what the ultimate and the end question will be. So I answered it first.

“It is equal to mine. In fact you can say that they are both one and the same.” Most of them narrowed their brows and eyes at me. It was as if I skipped a stone on water and didn’t taught them the technique.

“Let me clear it a bit.” Ashwathama took over. “The bow held by Karna is called Vijaya and the one used in the swayamvar is Pinakin. Both of these divine celestial bows, at one point of time were used by Lord Mahadeva as his weapons. And then they were passed on to Parshuram, his disciple along with several other arsenals. Which he then distributed and keeps on giving them to the worthy, till this day.

So in a way Vijyaya and Pinakin are the same. Cause they both have, nearly the same.

Does that make any sense?” Ashwathama looked around, his eyebrows raised.

I tried to stay firm and solid as several impressed gaze, pierced me.

“So you think you can lift and string it?”

“Yes” I said.

“Do you think I can do it?”

I knew he would ask it, the minute I heard the name of the bow.

“Maybe not.” I took a little breather to brace myself for his response.

Duryodhan was taken aback by this. The young prince clearly not accustomed to hearing harsh criticism about his ability was shocked. ’How can he say no to me?’ was what his expression said. Everyone was looking at us with intent.

“I see…….

So who else can lift it? What are the conditions? Is there a proper technique?” He bombarded me with several other questions.

“It just depends, if you are worthy or not?” I said in a firm voice.

“You can lift it if you have strength but when it comes to stringing it. You have to rely on technique and worth.”

“I understand the part about technique but what’s worth got to do with it.” Dusashan said.

“Any idiot with immense strength can lift it, but if you don’t understand it’s power. If you don’t know the responsibility of wielding it, You will not be able to hold it for more than few seconds much less string it.” I looked at everyone. The atmosphere suddenly turned that of a quiz with many of them having questions rattling in their brain.

“I can show you the technique of lifting and stringing, provided we have that large of a bow to practice with.”

“Don’t worry about it” Duryodhan said. He snapped his fingers and one of the maids called his guards standing outside. He whispered something in his ear and gave some gold, then sends him off.

“As I was saying…..

The rest will have to be you guys. Though I think that some of you might be able to string it. After all you all have been trained in the celestial art of weaponry. You all know how dangerous it is to possess them. It should be fine then.” I looked around as everyone pondered on in their thoughts. Probably weighing their chances of success.

“we’ll also need practice. Both of you can train us till we leave for Swayamvar.” Duryodhan pointed at both me and Ashwatha. We reluctantly said yes.

“Perfect ” Duryodhan smiled. “I knew it was a good after thought to come here. When it comes to Bow, who better to consult than the best archer in the world.”

“But you said you came to offer me advisory position and for your sister.” I said

“Ohh,…yeah … that too.” He said scratching the back of his neck.

After that we all ate our lunch. After finishing t and as the maids were clearing the table, Duryodhan called in a painter and told his brothers to stand for a picture. It was going to be send to Panchala, for the princess eyes. Me and Ashwathama stood behind the painter looking at the canvas as he started his sketch of the crowned prince. When Duryodhan saw this, he called us in too. Both of us hesitated.

“You are family too. Besides we never had a portrait together.” I joined in while Ashwath still refused. The illustrator/painter told us the positions in which to stand. Surprisingly I was standing right beside Duryodhan, between him and Vikarna. It was evening by the time the sketch ended.

Tired from talking, thinking and standing for several hours, we all immediately headed out. Some went to train, some to sleep. Me on the other hand, I was the last one to leave the room, along with Ashwathama.

“What’s the worried look on your face?” He held the door for me.

Looking at his eyes I told him my concerns “Lifting and stringing it is fine and all but, it’s what we have to do afterwards that I am worried about.” Ashwathama raised his eyes, as if suddenly realizing that the actual trial still eluded us.

We all left the hall with our minds occupied by this cursed swayamvar.

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Like any regular day I went to visit Maa, But as reaching closer to the door I heard sobbing. Someone clearing their stuffy nose and crying. I stood leaning on the wall.

“I can’t take it maa.” A soft low pitched voice spoke.

“It’s too much for me to handle. I can’t see him with another.

My heart can’t take it.

I know about his prowess. The way the maids talk about him.

Every time I met his gaze, no matter what I am wearing. No matter how I look. He pays next to no attention.

The only solace was that like me he treated every other girl in this palace.

But now he is going to marry that princess. With his looks, I know the princess will choose him. No one can deny that. He is now a king, he belongs with royals now. With the princesses, with the queens. I know that. ” She cleared her stuffy nose.

“But still I can’t seem to get my heart to accept it. Even after all these years, no matter how much I try.

…..I can’t be with him.”

I purposely made a little sound with my shoes, and then entered. Vrushali was crying in Maa’s lap and Shon was standing on the side. Seeing me she immediately wiped her face, She had sore red eyes and all the mascara was dripping beneath her eyelids. Our gaze only met for a second when she immediately ran past me. Her face was angrier like a wild boar in a stampede.

Shon was glaring at me, he would ram me down like a flat bread. His eyes looking upwards to my face as I approached Maa. Only she had a pleasant smile on her face like that of a crescent moon.

“You knew about her feelings, right?” She said calmly.

“Yeah.” Slowly placing my head on her wet lap. But Shon picked me up. His face like that burned red in sun. He blew up at me. Picking me up, he punched me. I saw his fist coming from a mile away. But seeing that he really needed to land this one, I suppressed my urge to dodge. His punch landed right next to my jaw.

“You knew!!!

You knew, and still!!!” Shon was massaging his knuckles with his left hand.

“You know what she had done!? You know the sacrifices she had made for you!? ” Shon said picking a parchment lying on bed. He unscrolled it and in it was a sketch of…..me.

“She made it!!!!” He said fiercly.

Shon told that Vrushali had fought her father to come to Anga and when he still refused, she just left either way. She discussed to him about the night when I went to her shivering and scared. How she never eats before me if I am in the castle. She recently, persistently asked Shon about tactics of war and to Yuyutsu about the affairs of politics, just so that she can excel at her new job. And also so that she has some common topics on which she can talk with me. So that she can help me. When he finished he was catching his breath.

Radha Maa, took over from here.

“Karna, she just wants you to appreciate her. Just so that she can stay close to you. Even if it means just for a second longer.

In all these years both you and Shon had visited your home. But Vrushali hasn’t. She hasn’t seen her father even once after leaving and her brother only a couple of times. Think about her feelings. Think how broken she was when she heard that her only and last emotional support…………broke.”

She puts a hand on my shoulder. “Karna, she loves you. That love comes rare. Why can’t you just accept her?” Maa’s voice is always sweet to hear.

I lifted her hand. “I can’t. “By that time I had realized that an innocence in me has died long ago. ”I just can’t

You both know the reason. I can’t give her the happiness she deserves.

She’ll only suffer with me. Anyone I marry will.

I don’t want that on my conscience.”

“Do you love her?” Shon stepped forward. His eyes were like that of an angry gorilla, his brows frowned making lines on his forehead..

“Tell me do you?” he pressed.

“No.” I said simply. They both took it with a shock, both of their eyes widened. But it was the truth. It was also one of the reasons. Despite being close for all these years, I haven’t developed any feelings for her.

“No matter how much I try. I can’t seem to develop those affectionate eyes through which Vrushali sees me. “ I said depressingly. I stood up and walked to the window. The sun was nearly about to drown.

“This heart has turned into a stone. Maybe it just can’t love …….

The only thing that I can be to her is a … friend.” I said, not meeting their face.

“tch” Shon was disgusted. He leaves slamming the door. I couldn’t turn to show Maa my face.

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On that night Shon called me at the balcony of the second floor. The air here smelled that of Lavender and Lilly or was it coming from Vrushali who was also present here.

“Bhai, she is leaving. She is just here to ask permission.

Say something. Only you can-”

I raised my hand and he stopped. A look of confusion on his face.

I looked at the city below as my hands grabbed the railings. “Have you made your decision?”

“Ye..Yes.” Her voice was as usual soft but this time stuttering.

“Shon, Prepare a chariot and a Wagon for tomorrow.”

“But-”

“She has already decided Shon, We should respect it.” He left keeping his head down. We both were alone now, like stranded on an island lit by moon. The air howled in our ears, and the trees shed their leaves landing them on the white marble floor around us.

“Your grace, Shon told me about the talk he had with you this evening. I just…. I just want to know that if the Angraaj is planning to participate or not. Because if you are, then no matter if you are chosen or not. I will not be able to stay here.

Because you want a princess. Which I can never be.”

I turned to face her. But she backed a step or two seeing this. “Vrushali, don’t take me for so low. I’m not like this society. I don’t judge, I don’t discriminate based on standing or status.” she looked at me with her deep eyes, burning in the moonlight.

“It is true that I am going to the swayamvar but I will not be a participant there. I am just a company for the crowned prince.” She smiled with an ember of hope (which was soon going to die again).

“However, I still can’t marry you; in fact I can’t marry anyone. I have my reasons which I can’t tell you out of respect for someone. But know this, there is only suffering with me. “

I turned to lean on the railings again.

“Go out there; find a good man who will keep you happy. Build yourself a home.

Live your life the way you want.”

A hand pulled my arm. The one covered with scars. As I saw Vrushali standing in front of me. Her steamy breath covered my chest. For the first time in a long time, I really looked at her. Her willowy frame. Her lack of makeup. Her medium breasts. Her puffy nose. But in her, I saw a soothing beauty. Her teary black eyes looked into my soul. Her now loosened hair was like waterfall that tumbled down her back in thick locks. Her grip strong at the same time gentle. And her mouth…..oh, that teary but tender pink lipped mouth.

She stood on her toes to rise up and grabbed the back of my head. She …. She kissed me. It wasn’t like a covered lip to lip kiss only. It was a full open mouth to mouth, sexual kiss that tasted like salty tears and saliva. And I loved it. I loved how hear small body leaned on me as if melting into mine. The way our lips fit like two puzzle pieces. The way she relented a bit when I held her hair tighter and tighter and pulled her more closer by her waist. After we broke up which seemed like ages, she looked at me………

“But I don’t love you Vrushali” I said astonished.

“I know……….. but my heart doesn’t” She said, then pushed me away. Next thing I heard was sobbing.

She left, wiping her tears and locking her hairs back. While I stood there alone, showering in the moonlight …………..Stunned.