Sootputra: The Unsung Hero

Chapter 28: Deflection

A scream came like that of a toddler. He or she was crying so hard that the air around me shook. She was holding the basket in her hands as usual but this time I can hear the sound of a crying baby from it, thought I can’t see no arms or leg flailing above it. The basket was still empty just a red cloth was dropping from it. I could see her saying something to the basket but her face was not visible. It was still covered with the shimmering silvery saree that she wore. I screamed at her, who she was? Why I keep seeing her? But she gave no heed. The roaring sound became louder.

This time though she put the basket early in the empty bed of the river and then wandered off into the oblivion. I pulled myself out with great strength from the sticky river bed and picked the basket up. It only had a red silky cloth and on it two shining earring similar to mine laid bare. It was my first time seeing them off my ears, but why were they here? Before I could even think the waves came and I saw the goldenly illuminated ceiling of my room.

“……graaj ……..Angraaj!!!!

Your…your sweating.”

I felt a tight hold on my arms as I saw his pale blurry visage. Then the old man came into view. He was scared and worried as if he has seen a person dying.

This time there was a male servant that greeted me in the morning. This was unusual, but then I racked my brains about last night, and I knew what had happened. She was already gone. It was a little embarrassing that he had to see this, It was something of a secret between me and Vrushali. The nightmares came rarely but whenever they did, it was Vrushali who woke me from it. It was her face that I saw first thing in the morning with my tea. After giving me the tea she would change the bed sheet every time, whether it was soaked in my sweat that day or not. The old man was doing it too, but he did not looked as happy about it. I came to know from Yuyutsu, that it was Shon who took her to Hastinapur. So both of them were currently not present here. It was good of Yuyutsu to send some guards along for the ride to her home. I knew what will happen; I knew the blowback will be hard; I had prepared myself for it but for some reason it never came. I thought that the turmoil of emotions from her absence would be enough to shatter me, to break me, but something was wrong. I could see her visage on the places she usually worked. I could feel her absence, her voice not vibrating against my ears. Me not able to call her when I need her the most. But I couldn’t feel her. It was like a dam in me that was holding the emotional river at bay or maybe the river itself had dried out.

“All of you know about basics of archery. My father drilled that in you all.

So the only thing that we can teach you in this short amount of time is to make as precise shots as possible.

Taking your breathing into account, balance, time and the most of all aiming. ” Ashwathama stopped. He was taking rounds up and down, his hands behind his waist. A sense of pride on his nose. For a second it looked like the ruby on his forehead had started to shine more brightly. He looked at all the brothers that were clumsily lined up. Some were closer, some a little back. One leaned on the pillar and two sat on the floor. Duryodhan was not in the line. He was examining the arena and the targets that were lined a few hundred meters away from our position. After Ashwathama’s long speech ended, each one of them was handed a quiver full of arrows and a strong, sturdy bow. Duryodhan also came to receive one. He clapped his hand to tell them to break formation and take their places. In all of this commotion I just stood silent, observing each one of them (not for long though).

Before they broke the formation Vikarna who was the most uptight one among them turned his eyes on me “You should say something too, sire?”

I ..I turned my face from right to left as each one them glued their eyes on me. I sighed.

“The most important thing in wielding any form of weaponry is to not be arrogant about it.” I reached Duryodhan and asked for his bow. Then I turned left, towards the rest of them.

“Understand your weakness. Accept it, that’s the first step in improving. As a man and as a warrior.”

//In my head I was sounding like a hypocrite.

“Handle your bow like it is your arm. Like you take it for granted.

You don’t look at you fist when punching someone.

That’s the same for bow. The more time you take focusing on it. That’s the time you are not looking at your target.”

I picked an arrow from the quiver of Vikarna, who stood with a face of awe. I met his gaze with a smile.

“When you are able to do that, then and only then will you be able to handle any bow.”

I quickly turned around in just a split second raising the bow while nocking the arrow on the string,

….. and fired it.

The staff of the arrow flailed like a serpent for a few second.

“Bird’s eye, as Guru Drona would like to call it.” Duryodhan said looking at the small red circle painted inside a bigger white one, which was now pierced by a long wooden arrow. I heard a long whistle behind me. Dusashan grunted. Everyone else? Well they certainly tried to keep a simple face but their wide eyes gave it away.

“Awesome.” Said Abhaya (Or that was his name I think), slowly.

“That too, without aiming for even a second.” Vikarna was excited.

“ Can ... can we also-”

“No Kid, It takes an insane idiot to do that.

Maybe be in your next life though.” Ashwathama shut poor Durmukh down before he could even finish. He snatched the bow from me……

“Stop demotivating them.” He glared at me.

“I’m … demotivating …them?” I said confused, pointing at a Durmukh who was now looking down and Vikarna was slapping his back to cheer him up.

For the next few days I told them about archery, breathing, balance and aiming. We trained for hours on row in the training arena. I even had to avoid my daily affairs just to be there for them (Yuyutsu was not happy about it though). Some of them improved drastically in just a short amount of time. Others were…meh.

On one day some of the kauravs lead by Vikarna came close. Their eyes sparkling. They all asked me to demonstrate my skills even more (Well, mostly Vikarna did). And I did.

The chance doesn’t come often and that too with a crowd to witness. And I too wanted to show off a little, after all Archery was the one thing that I was best at.

I asked one of them to fire their arrow at my target. Durmukh volunteered. I was constantly looking at his fingers as they loosened their grip. I had already guessed the trajectory and speed by the tension on his string. The moment he let go, I fired my arrow. There was a sound of two reed wood striking for a split-second. A zapping sound cutting air came as both the arrows hit their respective targets, their ends wobbling after that for some time. On the closer inspection of the color coded fletching. It was revealed that Durmukh hit his target despite aiming for mine.

I saw a few jaw dropping. Nearby, Ashwathama sighed and shaking his head whispered “Show off” as he corrected the posture of a prince.

“You are the best archer in the world” Vikarna said, hugging both the arrows from the target.

“Now that Arjuna is dead.” A voice said from the back. It was Dusashan with a disgruntled noise as he left the training area.

After a few days. The guard that Duryodhan send out came back. He had brought a large Bow. It was black in color with a purple colored engraving on it. It was even bigger than the estimated size of Pinakin. Some of the shorter kaurvas couldn’t even match its height. And it was certainly heavy (Though I have lifted more heavy bows then this).

The bow was already stringed when it came. So we first tested it to see if they can wield and shoot with it. Some of them struggled but most were able to grasp a handle on it after a while. They were also able to make good shots and some even landed Bird’s eye (As we had started calling it.).

For the next couple of days, I taught the about how to string it without breaking. Putting it in a vertical position. Don’t try to lean on it, or lean it on you as it will misbalance you immediately. Putting your tow near the end of the bow end to support it from slipping away while pulling the other end to put tie the string. All the while thinking how powerful this bow is and how powerful its original would’ve been. Thinking about the responsibilities, on your shoulders if you ever carry this bow. Feeling the vibrations in it. The arrows fired will already be par on the levels of elemental. Try feel it’s resonation. And sync with it.

Many of them slipped up. But some improved overtime. At least a hope lit among some of them and others just kept their depressed head down.

At last, the two weeks were over and the day for us to leave came.

I saw Shon, prepped and ready on the garden area along with many other charioteers. Bali was tied to it as well. It was the first time the horse will run for real. I patted the excited horse. Every chariot was decorated with flowers, the wheels cleaned, the frame polished. The kauravs had the orange flag of Hastinapur riding on them. While mine had the one of Anga. The red flag had a rising Sun from a valley (The origin of my story.). The Sun encircled a small Om (The Sanskrit word) in it, depicting the mountain at which I trained. The chariot seemed to welcome me with open arms, the charioteer not so much. Shon was still giving me a cold shoulder ever since returning from the capital. I even apologized to him but he just shrugged it off. I was a little lonely without him and Vrushali. There was no one in this castle to whom I can talk my heart out anymore. Even Maa had gone back a week ago.

So in a way I thought it was best that I was going away for a while, but still

…………………… I hate royal gatherings. I sighed on the thought, as Shon jerkily started to move .