

CAPTAIN KHADOOS

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TreeShade Books

I AM HUMAN TOO

“This is not right,” mumbled Suraj to himself.

“What’s the matter?” asked his friend, Aditi.

“Look at this,” said Suraj and showed her the article in the newspaper, “they are making a joke out of him. So what if he decided to take a break to deal with his mental health issues! People take breaks all the time to deal with their physical health issues! We are in 2027, for God’s sake. Why are people still so immature?”

“Everybody has not gone through what you have.”

“Should I tell you the statistics of the number of people who suffer from depression in India? I can quote those numbers even in my sleep.”

“I know the numbers, Suraj,” she replied, “I am a psychologist; I have to know these numbers.”

“Somebody has to do something about it,” grumbled Suraj, as they sat in a coffee shop at Girgaum Chowpatty, a locality in Mumbai.

“Why don’t you do something?”

“Like what?”

“Why don’t you give an interview?”

“Hmm, I’m not good at giving interviews.”

“I think people will really appreciate it coming from you.”

“You think?”

“Why not? You are the captain of the Indian Cricket Team! Coming from you, people will listen to what you have to say.”

“Really? Coming out in the open talking about my depression doesn’t seem like a good idea,” said Suraj, a frown on his face. “I’d rather tell the world that I am gay than depressed. They will at least accept that. If I tell them that I had depression, they will say *so what? He’s feeling a little sad, tell him to get over it!*”

“Oh come on, people are not so stupid now.”

“Trust me Aditi, they are.”

“Okay, will you do something for me?”

“Yeah, sure, anything,” said Suraj eagerly.

“Tell your agent to call up any news channel and tell them that you have an announcement to make,” she said. “But don’t tell them what the announcement is. Let them speculate and lose their mind for a few days.”

“Okay, if you say so,” he said, “but to let you know, I’m not convinced. People in our country are still not ready to accept that it’s okay to go to a psychologist or take psychiatric medication. And I don’t know if my giving such an interview will convince anybody.”

“Should I quote that verse from the Gita again?” asked Aditi.

“No, it’s okay. I know it,” replied Suraj. “*You have control over your actions, but not on the fruit of your actions.*”

“*And if you don’t succeed, don’t succumb to inactivity,*” she said.



THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Suraj's first televised interview sent shockwaves through the length and breadth of the country.

"I have suffered from depression and have taken medication for it. No, I am not ashamed. In fact, I am still on medication for it." News channels kept playing these lines again and again.

"Why don't you snap out of it?" was one of the questions that the interviewer asked Suraj.

"Do you tell a person who suffers from heart disease or diabetes to snap out of it?" shot back Suraj.

"But those are diseases of the body," said the interviewer.

"The brain is also part of the body isn't it?" replied Suraj. "Why do we look at people differently just because they have some problem *up here*? Just like the body, the mind also gets sick from time to time, and some people have a greater tendency to get depressed when compared to others."



A couple of days after the interview, Suraj parked his car in the basement of his father's apartment in Girgaum. The apartment was a couple of kilometres away from the seashore in Mumbai. Suraj had purchased a flat from the earnings of his first IPL contract and had moved out from his childhood home.

He rang the bell and waited. A couple of moments later, a tall middle-aged man who still looked fairly young opened the door.

"Come in Suraj," said Suraj's father, Sanjeev.

“Hi Papa,” said Suraj.

“So, how are you doing?” asked his father as they sat down in the living room.

“Fine,” replied Suraj.

“I saw your interview,” said Sanjeev, getting right to the point.

“Hmm,” replied Suraj, “what did you think of it?”

“Well, it was good,” he replied.

“Okay,” replied Suraj.

“You know that you have painted a huge target on your back right? The Australians must have watched it. Don’t you think they will use it to their advantage?” said Sanjeev.

“I don’t care what they think,” said Suraj. “I had to take a stand.”

“But couldn’t you take the stand some other time?” asked Sanjeev.

“Like when?” asked Suraj.

“I don’t know,” replied Sanjeev, “like maybe the day you retired?”

“Oh come on Papa,” said Suraj, feeling dejected, “can’t you agree with what I have done just this one time? You saw the way the media made a joke of that CEO didn’t you?”

“I did,” replied Sanjeev, “but there are other ways of showing your support. By saying that you suffer from mental illness, you have not only damaged your own reputation, but have also jeopardised the performance and well-being of your team.”

“Okay, but everybody is saying that it is a step in the right direction,” explained Suraj.

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“I don’t care what everybody else says,” said back his father. “Seriously, I can’t for the life of me understand why you fall for this flattery every damn time.”

“What flattery? There is a difference between flattery and praise,” said Suraj, his voice rising.

“Mind your tone, young man,” snapped Sanjeev.

Suraj became quiet, as he felt humiliated and leaned back in the chair.

This was one of the reasons why he had moved out of the apartment in which he had spent his childhood. Suraj’s mother had passed away when he was an infant and his father was the person who had brought him up. But he was a hard man, tough to impress and he rarely praised Suraj.

After an uneasy silence, Suraj got up and walked towards the door.

“Bye Papa,” said Suraj.

“When will I see you again?” asked Sanjeev.

“I don’t know,” replied Suraj, “maybe after coming back from Australia.”

“Okay, then all the best,” said Sanjeev.

“Oh come on Papa, we both know that you don’t mean that,” snorted Suraj and walked out of the door.

When Suraj sat in his car, he put his head back, leaning into the headrest and closed his eyes. *What would it take for him to get his father’s approval?* He thought to himself.



CONFUSION, CONFUSION, CONFUSION

Suraj checked his bag one last time to see whether he had packed everything he needed for the three month long Tour of Australia.

“Shall we leave?” asked Aditi, who was standing by the door, impatiently looking at her wristwatch.

“Yeah, let’s go,” replied Suraj and closed the bags.

The two of them placed the bags in the trunk of Aditi’s car. It was a tradition that Aditi would have dinner with Suraj and drop him off at the airport on the night of his departure for a Tour. They went to Aditi’s favourite restaurant and post dinner, made their way towards the airport.

Aditi had estimated that it would take them at least an hour to reach the airport from the restaurant, but to their pleasant surprise the drive took much less time than expected. When they reached the airport, there were still three hours left for Suraj’s flight to take off. They parked the car in the airport parking terminal and decided to have a cup of coffee. The next two hours were spent chatting – with Suraj feeling the most relaxed he had felt in a long time.

Aditi on the other hand had a lump in her throat. She would not see Suraj for the next three months, and that made her sad.

“Why can’t I come with you on the tour?”

“Because wives and girlfriends are not allowed on tour.”

“But I am neither your wife nor your girlfriend.”

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“It’s not that easy.”

“How about if you say that I am your personal psychologist?”

“We already have a team Psychologist.”

“Okay,” she replied.

“Come on,” said Suraj after a few moments and got up, “I think I had better make a move.”

“Okay,” replied Aditi, trying to mask the sadness she was feeling.

When they reached the Departure Lounge, Aditi felt her emotions reach a crescendo.

“Wait, Suraj,” she said and held his hand.

“What?” he asked and turned around.

“I want to tell you something,” said Aditi.

“Okay, what is it?” asked Suraj. “Tell me quickly because I have to leave.”

“It’s just that,” said Aditi, feeling tears run down her cheeks, “I’ll miss you a lot Suraj.”

“I’ll miss you too,” replied Suraj and gave her a tight hug.

Aditi hugged him back and hoped that the moment would never pass. When they let go, Aditi took Suraj’s face into her hands and touched her lips to his.

“What are you doing?” asked a shocked Suraj.

“I think I love you Suraj,” blurted out Aditi.

“What?” said Suraj, at a loss for words.

“I wanted to tell you a few days ago,” said Aditi, between sobs, “but I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Okay,” replied Suraj, not knowing what to say.

“So, do you also have feelings for me?” asked Aditi.

Suraj stood transfixed at the spot. He felt a chill down his spine, and thought how he could extricate himself from that uncomfortable moment. He definitely liked Aditi as a friend, but he wasn't sure he had romantic feelings for her.

“Suraj!” said Aditi, with urgency in her voice. “Do you have feelings for me?”

“Listen Aditi,” said a surprised Suraj who put his hands on her shoulders in an attempt to calm her. “I think you are awesome, but-“

“Oh, here comes the *but*,” said Aditi, feeling dejected. “Is it a yes or a no?”

“What do you want me to say Aditi?” said Suraj.

“It's so simple dammit, do you like me or not?” she asked him again.

“Uh, I don't know if I like you or not,” replied Suraj.

“Screw this, I'm going home,” replied Aditi and walked away in a huff.

“Aditi, wait!” exclaimed Suraj loudly, but to no avail.

Aditi left the place as quickly as she could. Suraj cursed himself for behaving in such an indecisive way.



As Suraj boarded the airplane, he had a sick feeling in his stomach. *Did he like Aditi?* He wasn't sure of the answer himself. “*We do spend a lot of time together even though we are not romantically involved with each other. But why did she have to bring that up now, just before this tour? She knows how hard I have worked for this tournament,*” Suraj thought as he sat on his designated seat in the First Class Cabin of the Airbus A380. He closed his eyes and hoped that he would be rested and that his mind would be clearer when he woke up.