

“Something made me stop him. ‘Mishra-ji,’ I said, ‘please wait. Where must we go?’

“‘Sahib,’ he replied, ‘it is not my place to speak of this. If sire were able to trust in life, he might find what he has been seeking.’

“‘And I will have to... prove my heart?’ Mishra-ji smiled and nodded.”

Ulgar interrupts me, “But Master were you not...”

I glare at him and continue my tale. “I do not know what made me trust him, and the very next day, we were on our way. It rained during the entire two-day journey through the dense jungle. Long vines cascaded from tall, thick, ancient trees, and the dense undergrowth made it difficult for us to walk. In places, it was marshy and slippery. Not to mention the blood-sucking leeches that stuck to my flesh. We carried no food or water, and from time to time, Mishra-ji plucked small berries that kept me surprisingly satiated. Even a few drops of rainwater collected on the leaves were enough to quench my thirst.

“I was unsettled, not knowing what sort of test I would face. When I asked Mishra-ji, his response was always the same: ‘Your patience will be rewarded.’”

Ulgar asks, “But Master, were you not nervous?”

“The unexpected trumpeting of elephants resounding through the jungle, or the mighty bison darting from the bushes was enough to make anyone’s hair stand. But Mishra-ji remained unperturbed. He bowed to any animal that came close, as if he knew them personally. I was very wary. At one point, a peahen suddenly flew across my face, squealing. I screamed and gripped Mishra-ji, who only laughed and shook his head. He told me not to worry, for the jungle knew where we were going, and no harm could befall us.

“At one time, I even thought I might be sacrificed in a tribal ritual!” I laugh, but Ulgar doesn’t flinch. “When we stopped for the night, I realised that for the first time in years, my knee did not pain me at all. And I could not help but think... the raindrops, the berries, my knee. Were these divine signs?

“After two days of travelling through the jungle, we reached an extremely dense area. We had to walk through thick bamboo whose leaves scratched our faces. The creaking of the stalks was so loud, it almost felt as if we were inside one giant bamboo plant. Soon, we reached a place from where

we could go no further. Mishra-ji recited something in a tongue foreign to me, and after a few moments... pin drop silence.

“Then a deep voice thundered, as though it came from the heavens. ‘Welcome, Ned-Har of the Blue Mountains. Thus far, you have shown extraordinary courage and faith, but before you continue your journey, you must answer three questions:

“‘Which is greater, love for oneself or love for another?’

“I paused to think, then answered, ‘The deepest form of love cannot distinguish between oneself and another.’

“The deep voice asked the second question: ‘Who is the most knowledgeable of all?’

“‘He who knows Nothing,’ I replied.

“Then the final question: ‘Who is the wealthiest of all?’

“This one was tough, but after briefly considering, I replied, ‘He who has enough.’”

“And then, Master?” Ulgar’s eyes reflect an innocent wonder.

“Pin drop silence once again. It was as if everything had momentarily ceased to exist. Then I heard a voice behind me. ‘Well, hello, Ned-Har.’ I turned to find a young-looking sage sitting cross-legged under a giant tree with a brown cat in his lap. He was bald, and his face was glowing. His eyes were soft and seemed all-knowing, as though he had seen everything that could be seen, as though he was beyond the illusions of this world. He wore two powder dots on his forehead, a red one between his brows, and a yellow a little above. I remember admiring how handsome he looked in his saffron robe.

“Mishra-ji bowed before him, and I did the same. The youthful appearance of the sage contradicted his presence, which felt many centuries old. He spoke gently. ‘Born in a warrior community and having been not only an orphan but also an outcast, you went beyond your pain to find your inner voice. Under the care of a kind master, you worked harder than those blessed with an able body and earned immense respect and wealth. But that is not your biggest strength. Instead, your greatest fortune is your ability to connect with your heart, which is the first thing one loses when difficulties

arise.’ He looked at me with eyes full of love while petting the cat, who appeared to enjoy his divine company.

“The sage continued to recall intimate details of my life, from my thoughts as a child to the secrets of the trade Master Yaromi taught me. How could he have known? I was astonished, while at the same time, unsurprised.

“‘No journey is meaningless,’ he said, ‘for if you had not experienced each phase of your life, you would not be able to connect all the little dots and find the beauty that was waiting to be discovered. And like the rest of us, your brother is on his own journey.’ He paused, closed his eyes, and whispered something while holding his palm towards the sky. As he opened his eyes, a stunning jewelled box appeared in his hand.

“He beckoned me to come closer, and as I did, I was mesmerised by the heavenly scent that emanated from him. He handed me the box and said prophetically, ‘Go to the city of Corcusia and send your brother on the next phase of his journey. He must take this box to the Mountains of Templetron.’ With tears streaming down my cheeks, I bowed before him in gratitude, and he nodded with an ever gentle, humble smile.

“Then his smile became playful, and he leaned forward saying, ‘Don’t mind the three questions you were asked. You do not need to pass a test to receive help, Mishra-ji and I were just having some fun.’ The sage winked at Mishra-ji, and they burst into soft laughter.”

Ulgar asks, “What was in the box, Master?”

There is a knock at my door, and he goes to investigate.

“A boy has come to see you,” he reports. “He says he was sent by Master Andahar.”

By Andahar? “Bring him in.”

A scrawny boy appears. He is neither short nor tall. His ears are so pointy, they might have done better on a kitten. A dirty cloth bag hangs loosely across his chest, partially covering a grey tunic which appears older than he does and a few sizes bigger than he needs. His head is bruised, teeth stained with blood, but his eyes have an innocent spark, hard to find in a boy his age. Looking down at his feet, he fidgets with his nails.

“I am Elar of Corcusia, servant to... sent by the kind Master Andahar to serve Master Ned-Har,” he stammers.

Andahar

I walk through the meandering streets to reach an archway that opens onto a large, crowded square. At its centre, sits an imposing bell tower that overlooks the ongoing fair. There are stalls everywhere, filled with a variety of merchandise. Multiple performers roam the square. There are dancers and actors. Musicians accompanied by dancing bears. Clowns blow through rings of fire while acrobats show off their skills. Jugglers perform outside some stalls, attracting quite a crowd. A few artists showcase their work, while some others draw portraits, mostly of children whose parents urge them to sit still. A few men loudly narrate stories of God to the hopeless group gathered before them. Most of the people at the fair fill themselves with food, drink and useless conversation. To add to the cacophony, there are hordes of peasants who lead their horses, goats, and sheep towards the livestock market, while others push carts filled with sacks of grain. Watchmen survey the square for troublemakers.

I take a deep breath and make my way towards a craftsman's stall. His apprentice whispers something in his ear, and he gives me a quick but careful glance. "We are not serving customers today," he says. It is absurd, for I have observed him welcoming every visitor before me, showing them poorly designed bows and wasteful pots. I ask no questions and move on to the next stall, a bread maker.

"I am looking for the Mountains of Templetron." What looked like half a smile a moment earlier turns into an expression of disgust.

"The busiest day of the year, and you come along playing jokes? Off you go before I call the watchmen!" he barks like a rabid dog.

I clench my fist a little and move on to the blacksmith, who is proudly showcasing axes, armour, and horseshoes. "I can get you the most brutal knife you have ever seen," he says, welcoming me in.

"I need to know the way to the Mountains of Templetron."

"Be gone before I demonstrate my devices of torture on you, you crazy wayfarer!"

"See a physician first," says the fruit seller, heaving a deep sigh.