

RING OF REMEMBRANCE

by Shenaaz Nanji • illustrated by Parwinder Singh



MYTH LITERATURE

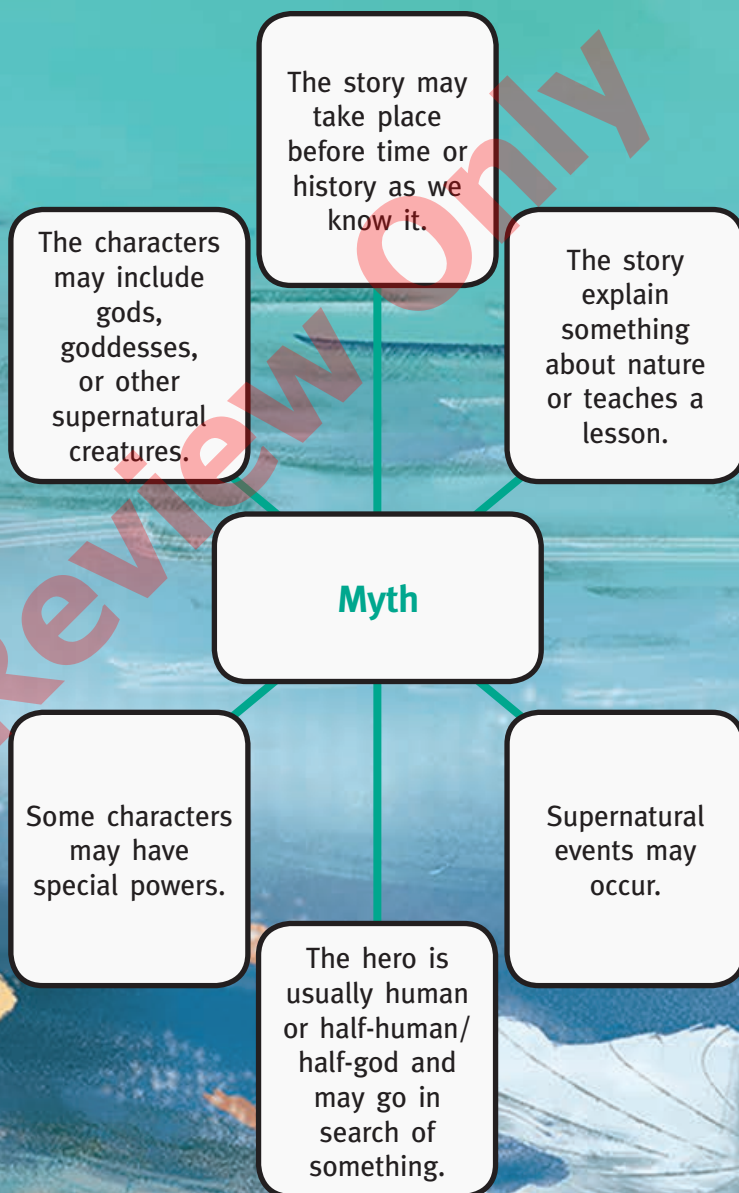
Level **T/50**

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The myth retold in this book
is from India.

Myth

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The Boy

“I will beat you today,” Bharat bragged to Masti, his pet lion cub.

They set off like racing chariots in the forest that stretched for miles from the lush grassland in the east to the rolling green hills in the west.

Every afternoon after forest school, Bharat found Masti waiting for him under the neem tree. The cub greeted him with “the happy dance,” prancing into the air, lifting all four feet off the ground at once, purring joyfully, and swinging its long paintbrush tail. They would race all the way to Bharat’s hut while his friends watched, some in awe, some in fear.

But today, as luck would have it, Bharat tripped over the tangled roots of the baobab tree and fell. Masti pounced on him, and they wrestled playfully on the grass. Bharat pried open Masti’s mouth. “Let’s see if you have new teeth,” he said, emulating the way his Ma checked for new teeth in *his* mouth.



Bharat had first met Masti a year before. One afternoon on his way home from school, he had heard a loud moan. He followed the noise to find a lion cub thrashing under a tree. It was caught in a hunter's snare. He crept closer and saw a rope around the cub's neck. As the cub struggled, twisting and straining to get free, the rope around its neck tightened. It would strangle the cub.

He had to free the cub, but what if it bit him? Or what if Mother Lioness, keeping watch on her baby, pounced on him?

But if he didn't do anything, the cub would surely die.

Quickly, Bharat broke a twig off the neem tree nearby and pressed it in the cub's mouth to prevent it from biting him. Then he untied the rope. The cub's leg had a gash and it was bleeding.

"Oh dear, you are hurt," said Bharat. He stroked the cub very gently. Its fur was thick and soft with tawny black spots. "Hello, little one," he whispered. "I will help you, okay?" The cub gazed at Bharat with piercing amber eyes, as if in fear.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Bharat assured the cub. "I'm going to pick you up and take you to a comfortable place so I can check your wound."

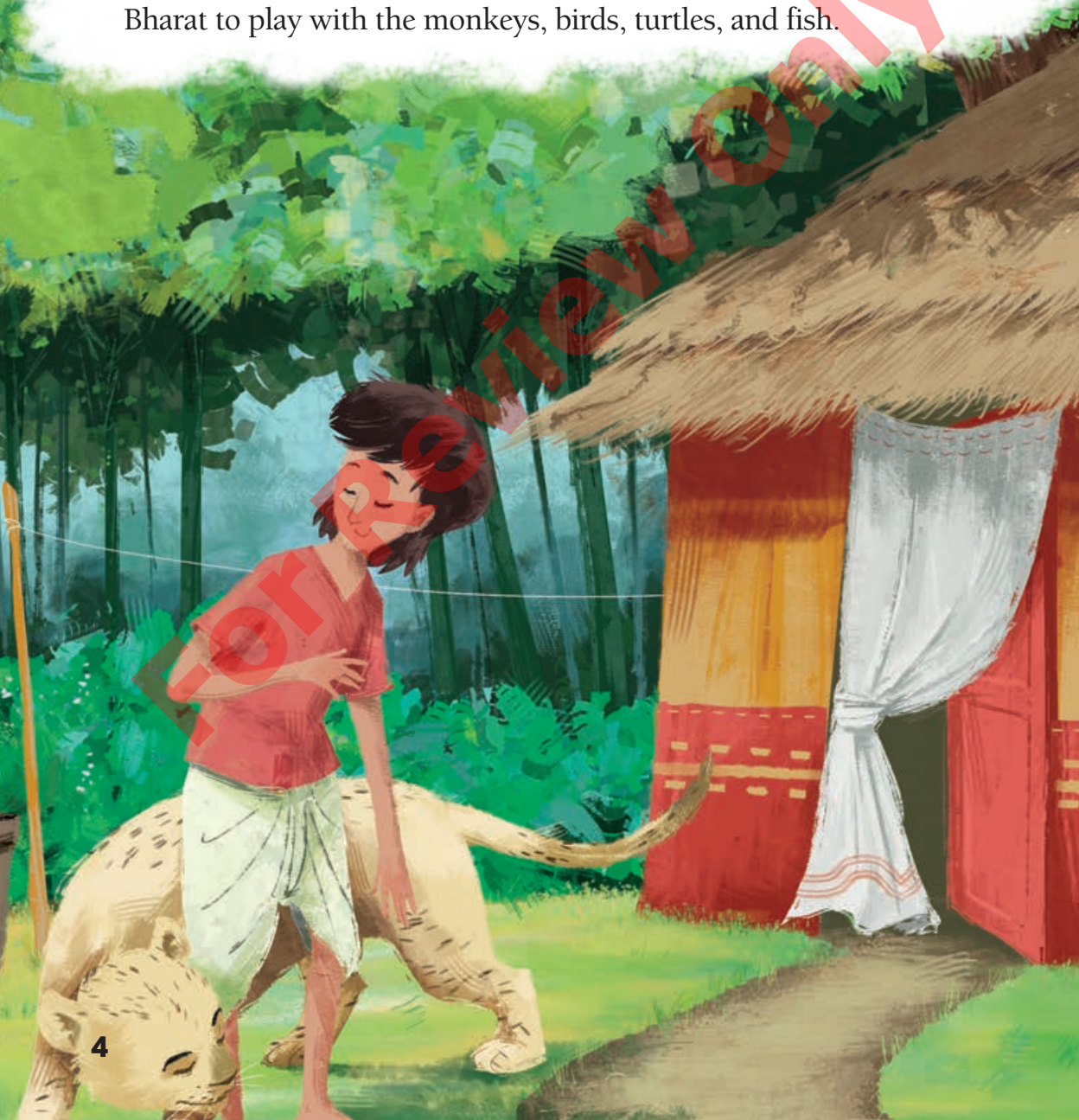
He cradled the cub in his arms, the twig still in its mouth, and laid it on a bed of leaves. Then he plucked a leaf off the neem tree and rubbed it on the wound. He knew of the neem's healing powers from his teacher at the forest school. She called the neem "the miracle tree" since its leaves, seeds, and roots cured many diseases.

After some time, Bharat removed the twig from the cub's mouth and watched it limp away into the forest.

The next day after school, Bharat found the cub waiting for him under the neem tree. It followed him all the way home. Soon it became a ritual. Every day after school, they would chase each other, racing all the way home.

“I will call you Masti, for mischief,” said Bharat.

After Masti dropped Bharat at his hut, the cub would peck at his leg as if to say goodbye and then dart off deep into the forest, leaving Bharat to play with the monkeys, birds, turtles, and fish.



As the days went by, Bharat learned the language of lions. A wagging tail meant that his new friend was happy. Soft purring meant it wanted to play. Loud roars meant it was angry.

One day, when Masti was nowhere to be found, Bharat was romping in the forest with a band of monkeys, climbing trees and hanging onto their branches. The monkeys were curling their tails around the branches, using them as extra hands as they swung from tree to tree, when suddenly one of them emitted a warning cry.

Below the treetop, several yards away, Bharat saw a pride of lions lazing under the hot sun on a rocky ridge by the big baobab tree. Masti and his siblings tumbled like furry balls on Mother Lioness as she lay on her side while Father Lion, with his long, gold, shaggy mane, stood guard nearby, his amber eyes alert and watchful. Masti ran to Father Lion and they rubbed heads, nuzzling each other with affection.

What a loving family, thought Bharat. If only my father lived with me.

That night, when the stars lit the dark sky in the forest, Bharat sat on the swing in his yard rocking gently while his mother braided her hair and laced it with jasmines. She always told him a story before he went to bed. His favorite story was about Hanuman, the brave monkey commander. But tonight, having seen Masti's loving family, he wanted to hear his own story. "Ma, why doesn't my father live with us?"

His mother shook her head sadly and wrung her hands as if squeezing out dirty water when washing clothes.

"Ma, tell me about my father," he insisted.

After some hesitation, his mother began. “Eleven years ago, when your Grandpa Kanya was away on a pilgrimage, a tall, strong, gallant man came on a hunting trip to the forest. You should have seen how radiant he looked in his jeweled crimson robe. On his feet he wore red *morjari* slippers embroidered in gold thread. He had aimed an arrow at a buffalo, but it hit and wounded my pet deer.”

“You mean Hiran?” Bharat asked.

She nodded. “The gallant man begged for my forgiveness and stayed to tend to Hiran. We spent many wonderful days together. I showed him the trees and flowers, the river, and the forest animals. We fell in love and married, but then he had to leave, promising to return soon with his family and friends on an elephant procession to take me to his home for a big celebration in the city.”

“And then?” Bharat asked his mother.

“Then you were born,” she said, gazing lovingly into his eyes.



“But what happened to my father?”

His mother bit her lip. “He never returned,” she said. She took a long breath and sighed. “The day after your father left, a frail elderly traveler passing through the forest knocked at our door, asking me for water. My mind was so preoccupied with thoughts of your father that I didn’t hear his request. He felt insulted. He became angry and cursed me. He said, ‘May the person who occupies your thoughts forget you!’”

She held his arm. “Beta, dear, guests are very important in our culture. We must welcome them, take care of their needs, and treat them like family.”

Bharat nodded, but he was thinking only of his missing father. *Why had he not returned?* “I wish Father lived with us.”

His mother smiled sadly, looking down wistfully at a bare finger. Bharat knew that it had once borne her wedding ring.

“One day, I will find Father,” he promised.



In the days that followed, Bharat grew restless, especially at bedtime. No longer did story time interest him. Every night he dreamed about his father.

One hot afternoon, he went to the river to cool off. The water shone like smooth green glass reflecting the greenery of the forest. He jumped into the water and swam, soaking in the sensation of the cold water as it flowed over his clothes and skin. A few yards away, a school of fish flashed and flickered like spots of colored lights as they rose and dove back down into the water.

He knew each fish and called out: “Rani, Rohu, Catla.”

Rani was a pink perch, Rohu, a brown rainbow trout, and Catla, a carp with a silver underbelly. When the fish swam near Bharat, he started a water fight, splashing water at them as they flicked their tails, splashing back at him.



“Rani, give me an underwater ride!” asked Bharat.

He held onto Rani’s tail as they dove into the water, swirling past other fish, seaweed of many colors, and a family of turtles. A shiny object gleamed on a moss-covered rock.

What was that? Bharat thought. He let Rani go and came up for air, took a deep breath, and dove back down into the water to pick it up.

It was a ring. He rose out of the river and sat on the shore, looking at the ring, water droplets dripping from his wet hair. Someone must have dropped it. Bharat waved farewell to the fish, tied his *dhoti* around his waist, and ran to show the ring to his mother.

