

## THE DISCOVERY OF COURAGE

Sikandar was beginning to hate senior school. He couldn't believe he had to be the junior-most batch for a second year in a row. Ever since the new principal – imported from some day school in Delhi – had decreed grade six would remain in middle school, the seventh graders were once again the juniors, and Sikandar was once again the favourite water-boy of the seniors.

So here he was, at midnight, filling water from a tap, only because this gave out 'cold' water. The senior-in-question, Iqbal Rahman, was a giant of a fellow, so Sikandar wouldn't try to spit in the water. There were rumours about what happened to the last fellow who did that, and Sikandar didn't want to join those ranks. Plus, there was the race tomorrow. *The* race, for which he had been preparing nearly a month now: the annual 2 km run, the only event to come close to the 100-metre dash in ultimate stardom. The medal would be given out on Sports Day, and his parents would be there, and maybe some girls from the school across the road, but he didn't care too much for either. What mattered was that seniors would leave him alone – at least for some time – if he won the race for his house. He came close last year, but the last stretch made him falter. He finally settled for fifth place, but he knew he could do it this year. And who knows, he could even get a colour.

Sikandar wondered if all boarding schools were like his: being good at studies was great, but it was in sport that excellence was appreciated. It was as if there was an unspoken rule. The school gave out sports colours – medals for sporting excellence – for every discipline, but academia only had one: Best Student of the Year. And since Sikandar wasn't half as good in studies as he was in running, he needed to win. He wouldn't have to get up at night to wash his seniors' dirty socks, or bring him chips from the canteen, or even pass on a message to a senior from a hostel halfway across the school. He hated this idea of seniority. Why was a senior allowed to bully their juniors? And who said seniors deserved respect – why did 'respect' have to be demanded? And worst of all, nothing, nothing indeed, could excuse a junior from being asked to do a 'favour' by a senior, not even a fast like the one he was keeping.

He was proud of his fast. He'd promised his mother he would keep one this year, even if he didn't pray five times a day like she did. His mother had carefully explained the rules to him. 'Do not eat after sunrise and before sunset and break each fast with three dates. Remember that Ramzaan is the month when God revealed his teachings to our Prophet,' his mother had said. 'If you fast during this time, God will give you whatever you wish for.' And so Sikandar had begun fasting and praying before he slept. Every night he prayed for the same thing and repeated the same sentence: 'Please God, make me win this race.'

He had been doing well so far. He knew he had to run, so he was careful about what he ate and how much he ate. The school had given him biscuits, noodles, milk powder and energy bars, and there was fruit, too. He looked forward to giving Iqbal his bottle of water, so that he could eat something before he slept, contrary to his coach's advice.

Sikandar wasn't particularly religious, or at least, school didn't give him the time to be. His mother was the devout one in the family, who took him to the famous saint's tomb in Nizamuddin every time he came back home for vacations. He would be asked to kneel and pray for the saint's blessings, but all he could think about were the delicious kebabs they would eat after the prayers.

At school, however, it was different. There were classes every day of the week except on Sundays, and in the afternoons, sports took over. First there was the cricket season, then hockey, followed by football and finally athletics: this was the sports calendar for the year. No one thought of visiting a temple or a mosque in the midst of all the sports and studying.

He'd slowly gotten used to life in the hostel. It was difficult at first, especially in junior school. Sikandar would try to hold his tears back whenever he left home. There was no place for 'cry-babies' in boarding schools. So he would silently weep in the toilets, making sure there was no one around. He couldn't do that in senior school, because there were common toilets, and

also because seniors found cry-babies disgusting and usually made their lives even more miserable. There was a new boy who'd joined last term, and he used to wail for his mother at night. Sikandar was extremely thankful that he wasn't that boy, as he was singled out by the seniors the very next morning.

Whenever he missed his parents, Sikandar would begin thinking about something else: history prep-work, library books, his running shoes, a new cricket bat. He'd made some good friends too, like Jagjit, who everyone called the Mad Sardar. Whenever someone cracked a sardar joke, Jagjit would laugh the loudest. Sikandar liked that about him. Jagjit also didn't call him names, like the rest would, even if it was in jest. Sikandar had learnt that in a boarding school, no quarters were given. He was expected to be a man, and learn to take everything in its stride.

He could see Iqbal waiting for him on the balcony. 'Hurry up, you stinking filth,' the burly senior shouted. Sikandar began to walk faster. The quicker he got done with this favour, the earlier he could sleep. It was already 10 p.m. and he had to wake up at 4 a.m. to eat the *suhoor*, the meal before dawn, then get ready for the race at 5:30 a.m.

As he entered the senior's room, he saw Iqbal and his two roommates chomping away on something. They were eating *his* tuck. *His* noodles, biscuits and cookies. They continued to eat while he stood at the door, his mouth unable to speak the words: 'Can I come in, sir?'

'What are you looking at? Yes, this is your tuck, the tuck you'd hidden from us. You think we wouldn't have found it in your trunk, you idiot,' Iqbal glared at him.

'I have to eat that in the morning. I have to eat that and run,' Sikandar said, fighting the urge to shout and cry.

'You think we give a damn?' Iqbal shouted, 'Run on an empty stomach. Isn't that what the coach says? Leave the bottle on the bed and get the hell out of here.'

Sikandar threw the bottle and ran. He did not want these seniors to see him in tears. He went to his room and jumped into his bed. Everyone was already asleep and finally Sikandar could let his tears run. He covered his face with the blanket and started sobbing.

'Sikandar, what happened?' Jagjit asked from the other bed. He quickly wiped his tears off and mumbled, 'Nothing'. But Jagjit already knew, because he was there when the seniors had come to the room and asked everyone if they had something to eat, before they grabbed hold of Sikandar's trunk saying, 'This guy must have the Roza tuck.' He went over to Sikandar's bed and said, 'You should tell the house captain about this.'

'If I do that they'll thrash me.'

'But how will you run if you don't eat anything?'

'I will run. I will win this race. Then I'll show that fat mule.'

*Nearly 4,000 years before Sikandar was born, the baby Ishmael was desperately thirsty in a valley in the Arabian Desert. Ishmael's mother, Hagar, ran back and forth seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwah, begging God to help her son.*

*The angel Jibreel, bathed in the heavenly fire that arose as soon as creation began, saw them both, and swooped down to earth to help them. He plunged his flaming sword deep into the ground next to Ishmael. As soon as Jibreel withdrew the sword, water – the sweetest water Ishmael had ever tasted – sprang forth.*

Sikandar loved the stories his mother told him, especially Ishmael's. He loved how God sent someone to help his followers. Jibreel, Ibrahim, Ishmael and Mohammed: they were all God's chosen ones, his mother said. That night, as Sikandar lay on his bed, his pillow wet with

his tears, he realized God hadn't chosen him. If He had, Iqbal wouldn't have found the tuck. If He had, Iqbal would be burning in a fiery pit of hell by now. But no, Iqbal was munching away on his food, not worrying about the wrath of God, or Sikandar, or anybody else.

He held on to the locket his mother had asked him to wear. It was supposed to protect him from evil, but it seemed like it had failed. Sikandar silently sent one last prayer to the heavens: 'God, make me win this race tomorrow. I won't ask you for anything else ever again.'

That night, Sikandar dreamt. He dreamt of a golden meadow, where the blades of grass and the flowers shone yellow. Sikandar was running through the meadow, trampling on the poppies and daisies and lilies. He didn't know why he was running; all he knew was that he had to run. And he ran like his very life depended on it. But the golden meadow didn't end; it just went on and on. Finally, after what seemed like a hundred years, Sikandar saw the finishing line. There it was, all his classmates cheering him on alongside the white ribbon.

But all of a sudden, he couldn't run anymore. His legs had frozen. He looked down and saw the field had turned to ice, and his legs were also made of ice and stuck to the icy golden-hued ground.

He looked helplessly at the finishing line, knowing that the race was doomed. And then, all of a sudden, he saw a mighty being emanating light. He shimmered in gold just like the frozen golden meadow that glittered in the sun. The being motioned to him. Sikandar couldn't make out who he was, but somehow he knew that he was being asked to run.

So Sikandar ran; he ran as if a mighty flood followed at his heels. The cheers went up again and the icy expanse began to melt, golden blades began to sprout through the ice. Sikandar thought he could hear someone shout out his name. Then, he could actually feel someone's hand on his shoulders. How was that possible? He had left every one far behind. The hand continued to shake him and finally jerked him upright...in his bed.

It was Jagjit. 'Dude, your race will start in ten minutes.'

Sikandar quickly put on his tracksuit and running shoes. He ran out to the ground, the memory of his dream fading into the cold mist of the morning. Everyone, including his classmates and seniors from the eighth grade, was busy with the stretching exercises. He waved, and some of them waved back.

They had to go around the track five times. At the end of every lap, their timing would be recorded. Most gave up after two laps, but there was a technique to the running. Like always, most started sprinting as soon as the shot was fired. But those used to running long distances knew the key was to preserve energy and give it their best in the last two laps. Sikandar had a different plan. He knew he would have to pace his laps. His stomach had begun to growl, but he couldn't think about food or its lack right now. He would have to take the first two laps easy, push harder on the next two and give his all in the final lap.

The first two laps went as Sikandar had predicted. Nearly half the runners pulled out, panting and collapsing on the ground. There would be others too, but Sikandar slowly started increasing his pace in the third lap. He could hear Jagjit and his other classmates cheering him on from the sidelines. He started inching towards the group of runners who were leading, all of them his seniors. He tried to match his pace with them step by step, and into the fourth lap, he began to run faster, inching away from the group. He was leading the race, and he knew he could continue to maintain the pace till the last lap.

As Sikandar neared the halfway point in the fourth lap, a familiar feeling began creeping up. His mind began telling him that he just could not run any more. Exhaustion was seeping through his bones and it was a miracle that he was still on his feet. This was the same feeling he'd experienced the previous year too, and as a result he'd slowed down, only to find others overtaking him. It was as if he'd come up against a wall, a wall that he could not run around.

His body seemed to believe what his mind was telling him. He could feel his calves straining under the pressure, his lungs collapsing and a terrible hunger gnawing away in his stomach. No, he thought to himself, not this time. But it didn't work. His body was refusing to obey his will, and there was nothing he could do. He slowed down... in a flash a senior overtook him... then another...and finally one more.

Out of nowhere, a fleeting glimpse of a golden meadow crept up in his line of sight. Sikandar remembered his interrupted dream and the stories that his mother told him suddenly made sense. No one was going to come from the heavens and swoop him to the victory line, he realized, it was he alone who had to do it. He began to run harder, forcing his already exhausted body to draw on whatever reserve of energy he had left.

Suddenly, Sikandar didn't care about the favours or the bully Iqbal. Surprisingly, he didn't care whether he won the race. He just had to finish the race – that was his test. He could not fail at this and it had nothing to do with his fear of the seniors. In fact, he didn't care what the seniors did to him any longer. He had to finish the race in order to prove to himself that he was not a quitter.

With that thought in mind, Sikandar continued running. He was on the final lap now – the last 400 metres. He was coming in fifth, but he realized he could cover the gap between him and the fourth person. He began taking longer strides and although each stride was a Herculean effort, he didn't give up. He remembered Hagar in the desert, running back and forth in the hot midday sun looking for water for her son. She hadn't cared about exhaustion, and neither should he. He ran until he overtook the runner in front him. After this the last 200 metres seemed much easier.

Cheers erupted around him. He realized that someone had already crossed the line; it was the same senior who had won the previous year. But Sikandar didn't care. He continued running, because it wasn't about the race any more. All of this – the race, the favours, boarding

school – would end one day. After that, none of it would matter. At that moment, the race was nothing but a sideshow; winning it wouldn't prove anything.

Jagjit suddenly appeared near the track and began to urge him on. 'Dude, you can come third. Come on, push.' Sikandar's lips curled into a half-smile; he pushed himself towards the finish line. This, *this* is what would remain: his friends, his will, his courage. Iqbal would now be a speck of dust in his life. It would irritate him for a while, but he knew he could sweep it out whenever he wanted to. There was always another year for the medal, and he could try out for the other races too, since he enjoyed running anyway.

As he crossed the finish line, he felt a tremendous sense of relief, as if a great vault of knowledge had opened for him. He broke into a smile. His mother would come to school next week for Eid with his presents. Yet, it felt like he had already received his greatest gift.