

*Note: The following scene takes place in a rocky formation called the stone palace. Set atop a mountain with caves at varying heights, it is home to a wise, old tiger called Bhola. Two characters X and Y have come to meet him about Z (real names withheld and some minor parts modified to prevent spoilers).*

After helping themselves to some water and a refreshing dip in the pool, X and Y return to find Bhola sitting in his large verandah overlooking the grassy slope and the thickets beyond.

“How was the pool?” asks Bhola.

“Awesome,” replies X.

“Refreshing,” replies Y.

“Now tell me, what brings you here?” says Bhola. “But first, tell me your names.”

X and Y introduce themselves and proceed to tell in brief the reason they had to flee their homes, the tragic losses they had to bear, their time in the mountains, and how they found out about him.

Bhola hears them patiently and says, “I am sorry to hear about your loss. It is indeed unfortunate that you had to leave your homes like that.” Then, with great contempt, he adds, “That scum of the earth, that sinister beast who calls himself ‘Z’ leaves a trail of destruction wherever he goes. He most certainly deserves to die, but even death is afraid of him.”

“Viha told us you too had a terrible fight with him,” says X.

“Oh, yes, I did,” replies Bhola.

“What was it like?” asks Y.

“It was like nothing I had encountered before. In my prime, I ruled over the largest territory and was feared and respected by all. I fought and defeated countless tigers, many of them mighty in their own right, but not even the fiercest of fights could have prepared me for Z.”

“Were you still in your large territory when Z arrived?” asks X.

“No,” replies Bhola. “I was already past my prime by then and had reduced my territory to a manageable size. It was in the upper regions of the southeast mountains, close to the northeast range. Z had just taken over a territory adjacent to mine and was looking to expand further.”

“So what happened then?” Y asks eagerly. “How did the fight start?”

“I had already heard about him by then, so I was prepared. I wasn’t too worried either, for I was certain, based on my years of experience, that the

stories of his size were grossly exaggerated. That was a terrible mistake, though, as I later found out. Unknown to me, his evil lieutenants had been keeping an eye on me, studying my every routine, and perhaps even observing my strengths and weaknesses. When they first began appearing on the scene, usually one at a time, I thought they were normal scavengers looking to scavenge. Later, as their frequency increased, I started suspecting their intentions, but never could I have imagined they were spying for Z, for such alliances were unheard of. Besides, all I could do was keep an eye on them and be alert.

“One early morning, as per my routine, I had just come up the long incline to visit the highest point in my territory. It’s a small, flat, open area with the woods on one side and the edge on the other. They must have determined that I was the most vulnerable here, for Z appeared out of nowhere when I was just a hundred meters from the edge. Never had I frozen with such shock, for he was every bit as massive as I had heard, perhaps even more. The shock lasted only a few seconds, but I can never forget that feeling. I was trapped—behind me, past the edge, lay a steep slope and a valley two thousand feet below. The lieutenants arrived next, sporting an evil grin, and I finally realized that they were working for him.

“As I turned my focus back on this freak of nature, I began shifting into fight mode. I remember him telling me, ‘Prepare to die, grandpa Feeble’ and I had shot back with, ‘You wish, you inflated infant.’ His plan was to push me past the edge, but I kept dodging his swings. The one advantage I had going in my favor was his immense bulk, which made him slightly sluggish, and I milked it to the hilt. When his powerful swipes did connect, they took the wind out of me—more so when accompanied by his giant-clawed jabs—but I managed to recover quickly and move away from the edge. I gave him back a few, but I soon realized that despite all my strength and experience, I could not fight him endlessly, for I was slowly but surely running out of steam. Age was not on my side, and I had to quickly find a way out, or else I would be dead soon.

“An hour into our fight, the wind began picking up, blowing a continuous cloud of dirt and dust, much to my annoyance and discomfort. The only consolation was that Z was troubled even more and was fast losing patience, thanks to my skillful dodging of his swipes. Then, catching me unawares, he suddenly launched himself into the air and would have crushed me had I not

lost balance and fallen backwards. The wind and dirt were making it almost impossible for either of us to see clearly. As he prepared to launch himself again, I kept moving backwards, unaware that I was moving closer and closer to the edge. All along, I kept wondering why this dust storm had appeared out of nowhere, and that too of this magnitude, for there never had been one like this before. He would have gotten me this time had the dust not gone into his eyes, causing him to fall blindly and miss me by inches. I was about to move back even further, when, all of a sudden, the earth beneath him gave way. The fast-moving river of dirt took him all the way to the long incline and continued flowing downhill from there. For a moment, I wondered if this monster was so powerful to have caused the earth to split, for it certainly seemed so, but then I remembered that elephants, much stronger than him, have stomped here for eons, so a couple of body smashes are nothing in comparison. No, it was Mother Nature conducting one of her crazy experiments, and we had gotten caught in the middle.

“When the earth tore apart, I remember seeing the fear in his eyes as he slid uncontrollably farther and farther down the incline. To add to his fear, the trees along the route teetered precariously, threatening to uproot any moment. I don’t know if the dust storm was a prelude to this landslide-causing tremor or just a mere coincidence, but it was heaven sent. I couldn’t help but laugh at the events unfolding in front of me, what with the two lieutenants following their master frantically down the slope—but alas, I had laughed too soon.”

“Why, what happened next?” asks Y.

Bhola replies, “The earth beneath me gave way too, and I began sliding uncontrollably past the edge, towards the valley. The entire top surface was reshaping itself, and I was being carried away with its discarded materials. Visuals of me smashing into a rock hundreds of feet below kept flashing through my mind, but a tree, tilted at a 70-degree angle, found me first and stopped my fall to death. After recovering from the impact, I quickly moved up the trunk to escape from the barrage of dirt and stones coming my way. It gave me a few moments to catch my breath, but then my heart sank, for I could hear the tearing of the roots accompanied by the jerks in the tree, and before I knew it, the tree had uprooted. As it began hurtling down the mountain, its momentum forced me further up the trunk, where I latched onto a branch, but

in my heart of hearts, I knew that the imminent freefall would bring about my end. Instead, it came to a sudden, violent stop, and I was thrown further up the tree (though technically, up was down and down was up).

“I was now in one of the leafy branches, and from there, I could see that the topmost branches had wedged themselves between two jagged boulders. I couldn’t decide whether today was my lucky day or unlucky day. I had hoped for the former, but again, I had hoped too soon, for the weight of the tree was tremendous, causing the branches to crack and chip as they pressed against the boulders. As the tree inched further and further down, I moved back up toward the root-end, but it wasn’t safe there either, for the rapidly accumulating debris underneath was raising it to dangerous levels. I was a sitting missile in a catapult that would launch the moment the branch-end pivoted. I knew I had to get off and thus began scanning the area for a relatively safer spot. Soon, I noticed a boulder fifty feet away, seemingly unmoved by all the craziness around it. Slipping and sliding over the moving debris, I somehow made it there. Then, heaving a sigh of relief, I quickly wedged myself between the boulder and the slope, and hoped for the best.

“The continuous flow of the debris had me covered in no time, camouflaging me as a mound of soil, twigs, leaves, stones, and all kinds of insects. Some of the creepy crawlies even found me and bit me, but I wasn’t budging, for a bit of pain was acceptable given the precarious situation I was in. When the madness stopped sometime later, I heaved a sigh of relief, for I was still alive. I now looked around to find a way back up, but before I could, two ugly faces appeared, flapping their wings and arguing mid-air. Those vile lieutenants had come looking for me, and I could feel their piercing gaze burn through my eyes; luckily, they couldn’t make me out under all that camouflage. ‘Even my whiskers must have blended with the surroundings!’ I thought.

“‘He’s not here, I tell you,’ contended one, while the other insisted I was. It was comical to see them hovering and, at times, flying up and down as they argued and even engaged in half-hearted physical fights. So embroiled were they in their back and forth that they did not even notice the dramatic transformation taking place with the wedged tree. The root-end had been lifted high enough, and lo-and-behold, the tree pivoted and smashed against the mountain before disappearing from view. The most beautiful thing, however, was that it almost took the brothers out. So scared were they after

that that one of them said hastily, 'I think Bhola's already dead and is lying somewhere in the unforgiving wilderness of this valley.' 'I think you are right,' said the other with equal haste. 'Let's not hang around.' I did not correct them.

"After their departure, I waited for a few minutes to shake the debris off and noticed that the slope had rearranged itself, mainly with fresh, loose earth. I knew it was risky going back up there, as my enemies could still be around, but I had no other choice. All I could do was ensure that I stayed hidden until it was safe. For every four steps I took, I slid back three. Such was the nature of the surface, but I was making progress. A few more such iterations had taken me about twenty feet from the boulder when I lost control and began sinking into the debris. I desperately tried turning and climbing back out, but got pulled in that much faster. Moments later, I broke free and traveled in empty space before hitting the floor with a loud thud. 'Where am I?' I wondered, as my head swelled in pain. Looking up, I found a partial opening in the roof with the sunlight filtering through and realized I had fallen into the belly of the mountain—well, at least one of its bellies. The landslide must have created this opening before covering it up with bushes and tender tree branches, along with plenty of loose earth. Getting up, I looked for a way back through the opening, but there was nothing to climb onto. It was so high that even my highest jump fell pathetically short of the mark.

"I then decided to look around and found the cave to be quite expansive. 'What if falling into this cave was a blessing in disguise?' I wondered. 'Z will definitely kill me if he sees me, so why am I so desperate to get back out there? Besides, I have already lost my home and have to make a new one elsewhere. What if that home is at the other end of this massive cave?' Encouraged by these thoughts, I began moving deeper into the cave."

"What a fascinating chain of events it has been so far!" says X, interrupting. "I can't wait to hear what happened next!"