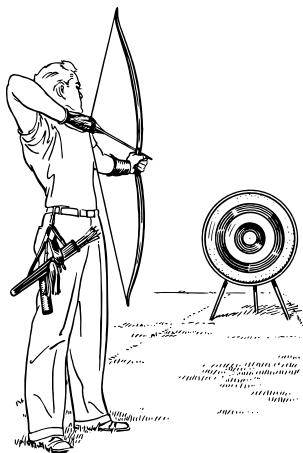


The Archer's Revenge



Destination Infinity

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I

ARYAN'S mission was to kill the minister who was visiting the mountainous Temple town of Tirupati. Today was the minister's birthday, and he had come to seek the blessings of the powerful god of the Seven Hills. Aryan was waiting for this moment for the past six months.

Tirupati, or Tirumala, is a famous Temple town located in the hills of South India. It has two separate one-way roads—one for driving up the hill and the other for coming down. Aryan was waiting for the minister's car to approach, on the way down.

The downhill road contains about fifty steep U-turns (hairpin bends) to slow down speeding vehicles. Between the U-turns lie remnants of the mountain itself. He was able to climb over this mountainous patch, four meters above the road and twenty meters before the U-turn, using a rope. From this elevated position, he could see all the vehicles approaching the U-turn. He could also see all the vehicles moving away from the U-turn if he moved to the other end, a few meters behind his current location. Since Aryan was over the mountain, almost in the middle of the U-turn, and the road curved around him, both sides of the U-turn were accessible to him.

Aryan had placed a cluster of nails to puncture the car tyres, below him, along the corner of the road. He had a long stick with which he would push one side of the cluster of nails to the middle of the road. When the minister's car rode over it, the tyres will—most probably—get punctured. A car with punctured tyres would be difficult to control, especially while negotiating a U-turn, and there is a good chance that it may topple over the one-and-a-half feet high perimeter wall along the boundary of the mountain. There was no way anyone inside the car could survive such a huge fall.

But, there was a good chance that the driver might be able to control the vehicle, and manage to turn it successfully around the U-turn. If that should happen, the car would still have to stop immediately after crossing the U-turn to replace the punctured tyre. Aryan would use his bow and poison-soaked arrows to kill the minister, right there. Aryan was a trained archer—he rarely missed his target.

Aryan was ready for action—he would strike at the heart of the heartless minister, today. The minister had killed his father and hence, he will have to pay for it with his life.

He was suddenly distracted by the rotating lights of an Ambassador car. Why do some politicians still use Ambassador cars? The question was beyond him. Why they flashed the rotating lights and blared the siren on their car, was also beyond him. These things were not going to be of much use on Indian roads and traffic. It would only help potential

killers, like him, to easily identify the car.

Fortunately, the car was coming alone—without any escort vehicles. There was another car about fifteen meters in front of the minister's car, but that was a tourist car. Once it passed, he quickly pushed one end of the cluster of nails to the middle of the road, while the other end still remained in the corner. He was sure that at least one of the car tyres would roll over it.

Not one, but both of the tyres on the right side of the car—the driver's side—ran over his nails and were punctured instantly. While the tyres were deflating, the car briefly lost control, wobbling on both sides. Somehow, the driver managed to steer the car through the U-turn and stopped it 15 meters away.

Aryan quickly ran to the other side of the mountainous patch in between the U-turn—through plants, mud, and trees—and noticed the car stop a few meters ahead of him. The car didn't topple over the mountain, as he had hoped.

Time for Plan B—he removed his bow from his shoulder and took out an arrow from the pouch tied to his back. The car was clearly visible to him below and his location gave him the perfect opportunity to strike from close range. He ducked behind the mud and grass to escape their notice. Aryan wasted no time getting into striking position with his bow and arrow.

But the minister had to step out of the car, for him to

strike.

The driver got out first. He discovered that two wheels were punctured and informed someone inside. The security guards got down, opened the car's dicky and brought out spare wheels. They had two spare wheels! Heck, they were well-prepared for eventualities.

He waited with bated breath for the minister to get out while the tyre was being changed. All his planning and efforts over the last six months came down to this very moment. But it seemed he was out of luck today—the minister did not come out.

After the tyres had been replaced, the guard knocked on the window of the car's back door. The window glass came down, and he said something to the minister, seated inside. Finally, the car door opened and the minister—in his white shirt and white dhoti—stepped out to inspect the tyres. Aryan stretched his bow and tightened his grip on the arrow. He was waiting for the minister to turn towards him. Aryan would have only one chance and the arrow had to pierce the minister's heart on the very first attempt.

After inspecting the wheels, the minister turned to face the guards. This was the moment Aryan had been waiting for. The minister's heart was in his line of sight. He tightened his grip.

But before Aryan could release his arrow, the minister was hit on the shoulder by another arrow. Aryan's eyes

widened, and he froze for a moment.

He looked down to check if he had accidentally released his arrow. No, his arrow was firmly in his hands. Then whose arrow was that? Everyone near the car panicked. Before Aryan could recover from his shock, the minister quickly sneaked into his car, removed the arrow, and threw it out of the car's window. The security guards took their guns out and positioned themselves behind the car. They started shooting in the direction from where the arrow was launched, which was about 15 to 20 meters ahead of Aryan's position, on the mountainous patch above the road.

Aryan heard a loud cry. Probably, someone was hit by a bullet. Who could it be? Whoever it was, he had to save them. He now fired his arrow at one of the security guards, hitting the guard's hands. The guard dropped his gun, removed the arrow from his hands with great effort and winced in pain. Having realized that there were more archers, possibly all around them, the guards and the driver got into the car and sped away.

Aryan raced toward the place from where the other arrow was shot and found someone—dressed in a black shirt and black jeans—lying on the ground. Was the person all right? Was he already dead? Aryan turned him around to see. It was not a guy but a girl.

2

IN INDIA, people usually become successful politicians because they are the kin of successful ministers or MLAs, related to or friends of industrialists, or famous film stars or social activists.

Guru was none of them.

He was the eldest among six siblings. When he was nineteen years old, his father, a construction labourer, died in an accident. Guru was obliged to quit his Government College education and join his mother in the construction work to support his family.

Initially, he was content with the daily wages that were provided. Since his brothers and sisters were still studying in a government school in Chennai, they had access to free meals provided by the State. Money earned by Guru and his mother was sufficient to feed the family in the mornings and at night. But, the income of the family was not enough to arrange her sisters' marriages.

In India, parents need to provide dowry, usually in the form of gold jewellery or cash, to get their daughters married. The value of the dowry determines the status of the groom. This practice was not prevalent in all communities, but in Guru's case, dowry was very much a reality. Guru knew that he had to earn considerably more, and that too in a short

period, if he wanted to get his sisters married into relatively well-to-do families.

Guru was a keen observer of people and noticed that some workers occasionally died or suffered major health ailments due to the poor safety standards maintained by construction companies at their sites. The contractor he worked for was no different—he did not consider spending on the well-being of labourers to be a good investment.

Guru also noticed that there was no labour union to fight for the rights of labourers. He formed an informal labour union and started negotiating with his employer on behalf of the affected families. He tried his best to secure monetary compensation for the families of labourers who died or suffered serious ailments due to their strenuous working conditions.

Initially, he faced a lot of opposition from his employer for his attempts to bring justice to the labourers. He was attacked by thugs hired by his employer, but he managed to survive the assault. The incident only increased his determination to fight. His efforts were noticed by other labourers, and he formed a network of able-bodied labourers to fight any such attacks in the future.

Unable to take him down by force, his employer relented and offered monetary compensation to the affected families. This turned Guru into a hero among the labourers, and he became their saviour. Labourers now consulted him about

their problems concerning company management, and he became their unelected representative.

Guru enjoyed this responsibility and the respect it earned him, but he soon realized that he was unable to make any money from these endeavours. What he did amounted to social service, not business.

Since he had secured the trust of labourers, Guru decided that it was time to capitalize on that trust. He now negotiated with both parties to strike the best deal possible—for the employer. He was paid a handsome commission for these cost-reduction efforts. Guru found that he was not only able to make a decent amount of money, but was also much sought after and thanked by both the labourers and their employer. Even though he didn't realize it, he was already learning the art of politics.

“Why should I ask my workers to vote for you? What have you done for our company over the last few years as a ward councillor?” Guru heard his boss fuming over the phone as he entered the general manager's cabin. The boss said, “Look at this Guru—this useless ward councillor won the previous election because I recommended his name to all our labourers. But, he conveniently forgot us after that. Now he wants me to canvass for him again. What makes him think that I will agree to it? I really don't understand. Anyway, what brings you here?”

Guru said, “You called me this morning to discuss the

compensation to be given to—”

His boss interrupted. “Oh, that. You do the best you can. I know you’ll have the company’s interest as your topmost priority. Am I right?”

Guru said, “Sir, I have never forgotten it. You know that.”

His boss nodded his head and got into thoughtful contemplation for a few seconds. He then looked at Guru and said, “Guru, I have an idea—what stops you from contesting the ward councillor election yourself? I am sure all our workers will support you. You live in this area, and know almost everybody in the colony. You should be able to convince people to vote for you. You have a good name among them. What do you think?”

“But I have never contested an election before, Sir. Besides, I don’t have the money required for campaigning”, Guru replied.

“Don’t worry about funds. I’ll sponsor your campaign. It’s time you stop slogging as a labourer and start handling bigger responsibilities. A journey of a thousand kilometres begins with a single step. Go ahead and file your nomination papers—you have my blessings”. Guru could not refuse these words of his boss, but didn’t anticipate how big that responsibility might become, one day.

Guru visited the Tirupati Temple for the first time, a day before the election results were announced. He became

nervous and someone suggested he visit the powerful God of the Seven Hills in Tirupati. Guru boarded the earliest bus to Tirupati, even though he did not have the habit of visiting temples. Guru needed some way to overcome his anxiety.

As soon as he reached Tirupati, he walked to Alipiri and then made his way up by foot instead of taking another bus to reach the Tirumala temple on the hilltop. He reached the temple at midnight, and he had to wait for twelve hours for the darshan of the God. Even though the journey was physically exhausting, it soothed his nerves and helped him shed the mental tension of the previous day.

After coming out of the temple, Guru was much more relaxed. He knew that the result would have been announced by then. He was tempted to call home, but instead, he bought food, distributed it among the hungry poor, ate some and boarded a direct bus to Chennai.

He reached Chennai in the evening and went home directly. When he knocked on the door, his wife rushed to open it, beamed, and informed him that he had won the election. He embraced her, looked into her eyes, and said calmly, "I know." Thereafter, he made it a point to visit the Tirupati temple at least once a year.

Thirty-five years have passed since then and Guru has visited the Tirumala temple much more than 35 times now. Over the visits, he also advanced in his political career. From being a ward councillor, Guru became a member of the Leg-

islative Assembly and a state minister, and later, a member of parliament and a central minister.

During his second term as a central minister he managed to wrest the 'plum' Ministry of Power portfolio from a rival. The rival minister, however, convinced the prime minister to split it into two and became in charge of the Renewable Energy portfolio.

This was a major setback for Guru as new power projects were about to be sanctioned to produce power using renewable energy technologies, and additional funds were released to subsidize the rooftop and commercial solar installations. The renewable energy projects were completed much faster compared to the fossil fuel and nuclear-based power plants he was setting up. There were plenty of business opportunities in the Ministry of Renewable Energy, and all of them were snatched away from him.

Guru did not take this defeat lightly. Not only was he addicted to money and power, but he also wanted to be invincible. For the first time, he chose not to circumvent the roadblocks in his path—he wanted to uproot them, reduce them to rubble, and trample triumphantly over them, turning them to dust. That, he thought, would be a fitting reply to his rival.

3

ARYAN was two when his mother passed away. His father had been bringing him up single-handedly since then. His father refused to remarry, as he was not sure how a step-mother might treat Aryan. His extended family was also of no help, as they were all based in Kanpur, not New Delhi, where Aryan was growing up.

Some of Aryan's earliest memories were of his school and home. His father woke him up early in the morning, cooked and packed lunch, dropped him at school, picked him up and left him at home after school, went back to the office, came home late in the evening, and helped Aryan with his studies. Most of the days, he went to bed early with Aryan.

Aryan's father was doing the work of his mother too and yet, Aryan couldn't recollect anything that suggested his father was tired of bringing him up. He was insistent on providing the best possible life to his son and Aryan reciprocated by being committed to his tasks—a trait he picked up from his father. Aryan pursued even the most difficult goals with ardent determination.

While most of Aryan's friends opted for tuition classes after school, Aryan did not. His father decided Aryan would get the best possible tutoring from him. He thought tuition classes added very little value. Perhaps his working as an

Engineer in the government department made things easy for him, but Aryan was sure his father gave his full efforts at work too.

There was one important activity Aryan was involved in from a very young age—archery.

Aryan's father wanted Aryan to bring home an Olympic medal. And archery was the sport he chose for Aryan. From an early age, Aryan started his training under a professional coach at the local archery club. Initially, archery was not special to Aryan—he considered it another subject to score, another game to win. But since Aryan was dedicated to learning the skill, he practised longer than anyone else. As a result, his accuracy improved greatly. Good coaching and Aryan's dedication were important, but all those hours spent by his father in dropping and bringing him back home, especially when Aryan was younger, were important in making him a world-class archer.

Aryan gradually developed a liking for archery—all his victories and awards helped. Aryan was better than the average archer of his age and his performance in archery competitions was reasonably good. But he was not sure if he could win an Olympic medal. His father, however, never let Aryan lose hope—he insisted that Aryan focus on learning the skill and not bother about results. Aryan's father was an idealist who knew how to transform intentions into reality through concrete actions and motivation. Aryan may or may not win

an Olympic medal, but it was important to his father that Aryan gave his best shot at it.

When Aryan's father learned about an Environmental Engineering course in the UK, which also had a world-class archery academy, he immediately decided to admit Aryan there. He thought it would give Aryan a much-needed international exposure to the sport and also provide a firm academic footing.

Besides, the newly formed Ministry of Renewable Energy was on the look for people at executive positions, and Aryan's father, was selected as a top-level executive there. He was finally able to dedicate his time to the field he believed could make a huge difference to India's energy security, and enable electricity to reach the masses.

Aryan knew his father's new job at the ministry was no accident. His father had always been passionate about the environment and clean energy. Aryan could recollect the passion with which his father used to discuss decentralization of the energy markets, enabling people to generate their own power, taking electricity to the remotest corner of India, reducing pollution, thwarting global warming, and how renewable energy played a significant role in enabling all that. These discussions, in part, inspired Aryan to study environmental engineering and his father was very happy.

4

ARYAN, 21, was in the final year of his undergraduate course in Environmental Engineering in the UK, when he was informed of his father's death.

Aryan initially believed that his father died due to cardiovascular arrest. That's what the hospital report said. The moment he landed in New Delhi, he sought more information about his father's death. People informed him that his father had fainted in the office and passed away en-route to the hospital. No one said much and Aryan did not suspect the authenticity of the report.

A few days after his father's final rites, Aryan got a phone call from a stranger.

"Is this Aryan?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"I have something important to tell you. Are you alone now?"

"Yes, but who are you?"

"My name does not matter. I work in your father's office. Your father did not die due to a heart-attack. He was murdered—his tea was poisoned."

"But the hospital report says..."

“That report is false. It was made up at the behest of some key doctors working there. Actually, they were forced to write the false report.”

“Please tell me who you are—how can I trust you otherwise?”

“I don’t have to call you and tell you this, but your father was more than just a colleague. He... he has helped me a lot in my career.”

“Why don’t you inform the police about this?”

“If I do that, I will probably lose my job. Or worse, get myself killed.”

“Really? This sounds more like a speculation. Do you have any proof of your claims? Do you at least know who the killer is?”

“Yes, I know who the killer is. Your father was killed by the Petroleum and Conventional Energy Minister—Guru.”

“Why would he kill my father?”

“Inter-ministerial rivalry. Your father was the right-hand man of the Minister of Renewable Energy. There had been a tussle between the Ministry of Renewable Energy and the Ministry of Petroleum and Conventional Energy for funds. The Prime Minister intervened to close the case in favour of the former. This upset Guru, the rival minister. He planned to eliminate the key people in the ministry, place his own accomplices inside and indirectly control the ministry through them.”

“Were more people killed too, or only my father?”

“Yes. Two more people were killed on the same day—the Renewable Energy Minister and another key executive from our department. All three of them were killed in the same way—by poisoning their tea.”

“Hmm... If three people belonging to high positions in the government died on the same day, the police or the press should have become suspicious. As far as I know, there were no police inquiries or press mentions of this case.”

“You should know that it is possible to buy people in India, especially if one is a minister. That’s the reason I am afraid no action will be taken against the minister, even if I file a case.”

“What made you suspect murder?”

“Imagine—even though these three people died in different localities, they were taken to the same government hospital that was more than 20 km away from their respective localities. Why did they take all three of them to the same hospital when there are other good hospitals on the way?”

“But it was the department people who had carried them, right?”

“Yes, the ones who brought the bodies to the hospital were the department people, but they had been paid to do this job.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“These things don’t remain hidden for long. People simply come to know about it. Besides, my relative is a doctor in the government hospital and she... Don’t you think I am giving you too much information? If you want to know more, talk to people who worked with your father. Talk to his close friends and colleagues; they might know more.”

OVER THE next few days, Aryan spoke to all of his father's close friends and colleagues. He told them about the anonymous phone call. While they agreed that there were problems between the Renewable Energy Ministry and the Petroleum and Conventional Energy Ministry, they couldn't confirm the murder. But they informed him that there was something abnormal about his father's death. A couple of them even admitted that they had come across rumours similar to what was mentioned on the phone to Aryan.

Aryan went to the local police station and told the police inspector about the anonymous call he had received and about his suspicion that his father may have been murdered.

"So, you want me to take action against a minister based on an anonymous call?" the inspector asked Aryan.

"No, I just want you to register a case and investigate further", Aryan replied.

The inspector looked firmly and said, "See... your name is Aryan right? OK. Think about this—why should that person, whoever called you anonymously, want to do that? If he was telling you the truth, he could have revealed his identity. Why didn't he do that? Think about it."

"He was afraid that he might get into trouble", Aryan said. "Besides, I discussed with some of my father's friends

and colleagues, and they too admitted hearing rumours that my father was murdered”, Aryan added.

“Ah, very good. Now you want me to take action based on rumours?” the inspector asked.

“But...”

“You need to understand how the system works, Aryan”, the inspector interrupted. “Without any credible witnesses, I will not be able to reopen this case. The report from the hospital is sufficient to prove that your father died due to heart attack. I can’t do anything based on anonymous phone calls or rumours. If you want me to take legal action, I need a witness. I need evidence. Credible ones.”

“Fair enough” thought Aryan. While he was leaving the police station, the inspector asked, “So, what are you doing? Are you studying?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you just continue with your studies? Whatever happened has happened. If I were you, I would not get into unnecessary trouble”, the inspector said.

Aryan nodded his head and walked out of the police station.

Aryan was still unable to decide if his father had been murdered. There was nothing he could do until he knew that for sure. He hoped the police might help him find out the truth, gather evidence, and take action against the minister if

he was involved, but the meeting with the inspector turned out to be in vain.

Aryan walked into his apartment when four thugs pulled him towards the compound wall and surrounded him.

“Who are you people? Why are you dragging me like this?” he shouted.

“Ah, our young detective is very angry. Look at his cheeks—they are so red. Guys, be careful—our superhero might take us all down with his little finger, like they show in the movies”, one of them said. Others laughed. “Why do you want to waste your energy? You think you are Sherlock Holmes? It seems you even went to the police station to register a complaint today? People die when they have to—you can’t do anything about it now. Do you want to meet the same fate?”

Aryan tried to free his hands from the strong grip of the two thugs who were standing on either side of him. “It’s none of your business”, he said.

A man standing in front of him took a knife out of his pocket and pressed the blunt side against Aryan’s throat until he winced in pain.

The thug said, “Yes, it’s none of our business. We were paid only to kill you, not to talk. I guess we should just finish our business without wasting any more time. Do you know what will happen if I turn this knife around?”

Aryan looked down at the sharp edge of the knife which

was sparkling in the reflection of sunlight and trembled with tears.

Sensing that their mission of threatening him was accomplished, one of the thugs said, “If you continue your detective work, this knife will pierce your throat with such speed that until you wake up in heaven, you’ll not know what happened. Is that clear?”

They meant what they said—Aryan could see it in their eyes. But this incident confirmed what Aryan feared: his father had been indeed murdered by the minister.

6

ARYAN had two options: to go back to the UK and finish his studies, or bring justice to his father's death, risking his own life.

Aryan couldn't imagine a life without his father—his father was everything to him. Even though India had an active family-oriented culture, he was not familiar with anyone in the extended family—either from his father's side or his mother's side. His parents were shunned by both families because theirs was a love marriage. Although he was in touch with other family members later on, he was never close to anyone.

Aryan could feel the void created in his life due to his father's death. Despite being in the UK, Aryan would talk to his father daily. His father was his best friend—a guide whom he trusted deeply. Without his father, life did not mean anything to him—he felt lifeless. He couldn't accept the fact that someone could take away the only source of his life's support and strength.

Aryan was not the kind of person who bowed down before unjust authority. The minister had the temerity to think that his power and money would silence everybody. Blinded by his might, he probably thought he was invincible

and could induce fear in the mind of anyone who dared to oppose him.

But the minister did not know that the fear of death grips only those people who value life over death. Aryan's biggest disadvantage was now his biggest advantage—he didn't have to fear anything or anyone, any more. Aryan was ready to sacrifice his life, but he couldn't let the minister get away with a crime as heinous as this. Revenge seemed to be the only option for Aryan—what was the point of living a lifeless existence anyway? The minister had not only destroyed his father's life but also his. Aryan would not allow the minister to get away with his murder.

Over the next few days, Aryan considered his options. Since he couldn't trust the police any longer, he decided to take matters into his own hands. The minister seemed to have everything—power, wealth, influence, and both the police and thugs at his disposal. Aryan was merely an unarmed individual. Or was he?

Aryan believed that any problem could be solved if approached with dedication, willpower, and sincerity. He did not allow himself to be deterred by the enormity of the problem. His father taught him that any goal could be attained if it is broken down into smaller, achievable tasks. He told him that no challenge was insurmountable—he just had to make an honest analysis of his strengths, weaknesses, and circumstances. If he pushed through with ardent determina-

tion, thorough planning, and daring execution, there could be only one result—victory.

Aryan's weaknesses in this situation were evident to him. But did he have any strengths?

Yes.

Archery.

Aryan was a trained archer.

Archery may have lost its sheen because of the invention of gunpowder and automatic firearms, but bows and arrows formed an important component of any war until even a couple of centuries ago.

Aryan knew he was against power, might, and guns, but archery had its advantages, too. The most important advantage was the surprise factor—no one would expect him to attack with bows and arrows, and they wouldn't be prepared to defend against this form of attack.

Archers have been an important element of many battles fought in Ancient and Medieval India. Both Rama and Lakshmana, the heroes of the epic Ramayana, were archers. The Mahabharata War, another famous epic, was won due to Arjuna, the archer, and Krishna, the mentor. The commander of the enemy forces, Karna, was an archer too. The valiance of Arjuna's son, Abhimanyu—a proficient archer—and the sacrifice of Ekalavya—who could hit targets based solely on sound—were epic. Archers determined the outcome of wars. Archers defended forts successfully. Archers were central to

the planning of any war.

And Aryan was an archer too.

ARYAN monitored the activities of the minister—the press releases and feature stories about him in various newspapers, magazines, TV channels, and websites. A simple Google Alerts setup in the minister's name sourced all articles about him, right into Aryan's email inbox. After monitoring his movements and a few visits to the minister's home and office areas, Aryan decided that attacking the minister in Delhi amidst all the security would be difficult.

There was another obstacle—in Delhi, Aryan's actions would be closely watched, and it would be easy to trace him. He needed a place where he could live anonymously, a place that would be difficult to reach for both the thugs and the police. He wanted a secure base to which he could withdraw, months together if need be, in order to plan and carry out his attacks. He was sure, more than one attack would be required to kill the minister.

Aryan wanted to move out of Delhi both for his security, and ease of planning and executing his attacks—but where could he go? One day, while reading the newspaper, he came across an article that mentioned the two annual visits made by the minister to Tirupati—one on his birthday and the other on his wedding anniversary. Aryan realized he had hit the jackpot!

Tirupati is the famous temple town of South India located in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The cover of the hills would offer an excellent opportunity to hide and attack the minister. It would also enable him to build a secure base. The minister was scheduled to visit Tirupati after a couple of months, on his birthday. Since it was a personal visit, that too far away from the capital, the security cover would be minimal. It offered Aryan enough time to establish his base and plan the attack. It didn't take long for Aryan to zero-in on Tirupati.

But Aryan's first stop would be the UK. He informed people in Delhi that he was shifting to the UK. He hoped this would convince the minister that he was no longer an active threat.

When he landed in the UK, he went to his college and applied for a long leave. He picked up the best assault archery gear and returned immediately to India—not to Delhi, but to Chennai. From there, he took a train to Tirupati and checked into a hotel in Tirupati town right below the hills.

8

TIRUPATI is a historic town where the temple of Lord Venkateswara, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, is located. Though the temple is on the hills, the town itself is split into two parts: Tirupati town, located below the hills and Tirumala town, located over the hills.

Since the town is an important pilgrimage centre, millions of Hindu devotees visit the temple every year. The queue for darshan (having a glimpse of the statue of the God) is generally long, and on average, a devotee spends many hours waiting for it. The town is swarmed by pilgrims throughout the year, and is well-connected through air, train, and bus services.

Tirumala is situated at the top of the hills, which is reachable by road using both cars and buses. There is another way to reach the top of the hills from the town, which thousands of people use regularly—by walking through the hills. Before the roads were constructed, this route was the only way to reach Tirumala. For an average person, it takes four to six hours to climb up the hills on foot.

The walking route is covered with steps, cemented pathways, and a roof, from the bottom of the hill to the top. Since people walk up and down during the nights too, the route has been electrified. There are various shops located on the sides

of the stairs. If something is unavailable, shopkeepers shuttle between Tirupati town and their hill-top shops to bring it on request. On his first visit, Aryan noticed all these things and was convinced that his supplies, groceries, and vegetables could easily be procured from the vendors on this route. He didn't have to go to either Tirupati town or Tirumala town for that. This was important for him to evade the police.

Not many people know that there were other walking routes that were used to traverse the hill, in ancient times, but mostly abandoned now. One such route intersected with the present walking route. Aryan had identified it using Google Maps, but he couldn't locate it initially. With the help of his smartphone and GPS tracker, he pinpointed the ancient route that was few hundred meters away from the current route, winding through the trees.

Aryan immediately set off to explore the ancient route, which led him deeper into the jungle. Initially he was intimidated by the vast expanse of nature, but as he moved deeper into her lap, he was overwhelmed with joy. He felt as if he had finally come home.

As he was exploring, he was looking for two things—a place to live and a fresh water source. Local people had informed him about a stream that flowed from the top of the mountain and cascaded into a waterfall below. With the help of Google Earth, he identified that this stream intersected with the old unused route, he was currently walking on. His

goal was to reach that exact point.

After walking downhill for many hundred meters on the old unused route, Aryan found the stream. This was the fresh water source he was searching for. The stream crossed his path and the wooden bridge that once spanned it, now lay broken. He couldn't cross the bridge, but he didn't want to cross it anyway.

He had to find a place to live just before the stream. He was looking for a cave or shelter and luckily, he found an old traveller's rest house. This one-storey stone structure, possibly built to enable weary travellers on foot to rest for sometime during ancient times, offered a perfect place for him to stay safely in this remote location, amidst the hills' forests.

The rest house was built over a raised platform with a roof resting on pillars. A thick stone wall made of large grey stones enclosed almost all four sides except for the entrance which remained open, without a door. There were two steps leading into the house. There were open windows in the middle of all the three side walls for light and ventilation. Since the building was old and unused for a long time, it was partially covered with vegetation, and he found a few bats hanging from the roof.

He started cleaning the house and soon it looked more liveable. This was more than what he had hoped to find in this remote location. It was the perfect home he was searching

for!

As darkness was approaching fast, Aryan retraced his steps along the old unused route and reached the new one. He quickly blended in with the people walking there. After walking down the stairs for a couple of hours, he reached his hotel room and took a long nap. He had a lot of planning and shopping to do over the next couple of days.

9

AFTER two weeks of walking up and down, Aryan finally set up his new home on the hills. He ensured that he bought only those items that were necessary.

He bought a foldable table and a plastic chair to work on his laptop and to have meals. He also bought basic cutlery, crockery, and utensils to store grains, vegetables, and to cook food.

He made a solar cooker to boil rice and vegetables. He set up a wood-fired stove with a few stones and collected firewood from nearby trees to light a fire. He covered the main door and windows with curtains for privacy. He bought mattresses and pillows for sleeping.

He attached two solar panels on the roof to generate electricity during the day. He bought batteries to store the generated power, so that he could use a couple of LED lamps during the night. He could also charge his laptop and cell phone when needed. He dug a pit and installed a compostable toilet. He bathed and washed clothes in the nearby stream. The stream also provided him with abundant fresh water—he boiled some for drinking.

He visited shops on the new walking route to buy rice, vegetables, and other essential supplies. He started to grow vegetables around his new home and picked many fruits from

the surrounding trees. He stocked up on as many supplies as possible and tried his best to reduce his reliance on the outside world—he didn't want to attract unnecessary attention walking in and out of the forest regularly.

He now focused his attention on practising archery and making plans for his attack. With a weak cellular signal, he was able to connect to 2G internet. He bought newspapers and magazines whenever he went out. He kept track of all the movements of the minister, both online and offline. He downloaded books on archery to learn more about the attack strategies employed by archers in ancient times.

After a few weeks, the anticipated moment finally arrived—the minister was coming to Tirupati on his birthday, and newspapers and websites featured the news prominently. He calculated that the minister's security cover would be minimal, and hence formed a plan to kill the minister while he was on his way down.

However, he did not expect the turn of events that actually unfolded.

IO

DIVYA, 20, was born and brought up in Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu. Despite being the eldest child in a family of three, her parents pampered her more than her younger brothers. Her brothers, on the other hand, were forced to study under very strict schedules. There was immense pressure on them to excel academically and maintain a top rank.

Divya was always a free-spirited person. She just couldn't get herself to do anything against her liking. She was not academically weak, but she never tried to excel. She forced herself to memorize the notes just before exams so that she could just pass. Otherwise, she did what she wanted, and her parents did not discourage her activities. If she wanted to participate in some activity, her parents never refused. If she didn't want to join any activity, her parents did not force her. In contrast, her brothers' schedules were meticulously planned, down to the last minute.

She didn't consider this behaviour of her parents as gender discrimination. She was actually scared that her parents might start controlling her too, but, fortunately, they didn't. Perhaps they tried, but were unsuccessful; nonetheless, she was thankful that she was not forced to do anything against

her wish. That freedom was sufficient for her to love her parents dearly.

From a very young age, Divya showed a keen interest in archery. Her parents enrolled her in music classes—which lasted only fifteen days. During the course, she noticed children practising archery in the neighbouring compound. The more she watched the game, the more she liked it. It was almost love at first sight, and the intensity of her admiration solidified further during the time she was supposed to be singing. She was fascinated by bows and arrows.

In the next few days, she made her own bow and a set of arrows, using broken sticks from a tree, and created havoc at home by breaking glasses and cutlery with her practice sessions.

Unable to take any more damage, her parents made her join an archery academy. Even though she hated the strict routine and structure of the archery coaching class, for once she did what she was told. That was because she didn't want to be thrown out of this one!

Every time she hit the target accurately, her joy knew no bounds. Very quickly, she became a dear student of the instructors and was granted several privileges like extra practice time.

Archery was not just a sport for Divya, but was also her best companion. She learned what the instructors taught her, but also learned many new things about archery from

various books published on the subject. The proximity of her home to the Connemara Library—one of the four national depository libraries that received a copy of all books published in India—helped.

She participated and won a few local competitions, but she never participated in the district, state, or national level, in spite of her instructors insisting on it. She did not like participating in archery contests. Archery was her passion, and she did not want anyone's approval or rewards or rankings to prove anything. She viewed positions and rankings as superficial. Her passion for the art of archery was pure, and she didn't want to adulterate it by running after prizes and medals.

II

ARYAN heard a loud cry. Probably, someone was hit . . . by a bullet. Who could it be? Whoever it was, he had to save them. He now fired his arrow on one of the security guards, which hit the guard in the hand. The guard dropped his gun, removed the arrow from his hands with great effort and winced in pain. Having realized that there were more archers, possibly all around them, the guards and the driver got into the car and sped away.

Aryan raced towards the place from where the other arrow was shot and found someone—dressed in a black shirt and black jeans—lying on the ground. Was the person all right? Was he already dead? Aryan turned him around to see. It was not a guy but a girl...

The next instant, she was on her knees. She took a knife from her pocket and tried to pierce it through Aryan's neck. He caught her hand just in time.

"Relax. I was the one who saved you. The minister and his guards have left. I saw you attacking the minister. Actually, I planned to attack him too", Aryan said.

She pushed him to the ground, held her knife firmly against his neck, and asked, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

“I am a trained archer. That minister, Guru, killed my father. I was about to launch my arrow to kill him when I noticed your arrow. It hit his shoulder before mine”, he said, trying to free her grip on his neck.

She lifted her knife and loosened her grip.

She asked, “He killed your father too?”

He nodded and asked her, “Who was your father?”

She replied, “My father was the Renewable Energy Minister. He was in Delhi when this rival minister killed him by poisoning his tea. I was aiming for his neck but missed. I generally don’t miss targets from such a close range. You said he killed your father too?”

He remembered the conversation he had with the anonymous caller—two more people were killed, and the Renewable Energy Minister was one of them. She was telling the truth. He said, “My father was a senior executive in the Renewable Energy Ministry. I think both our fathers were killed on the same day by the same minister. Weren’t you hit by a bullet? I heard a loud scream.”

She said, “No, the bullets missed me. I was only acting as if I had been hit by a bullet—I thought that would convince them to go away, thinking they had killed me. There was no way my arrows could have fought their guns. Fortunately, I heard the car moving away.”

Realizing it was too dangerous to continue the discussion at that spot, he told her, “It’s risky for us to stay here for

long. Let's go to my hideout in the forest. It's just a couple of kilometres from here."

"I can go back to my hotel room", she protested.

"It's too dangerous to stay in town. The police will be coming after us", he replied.

"But they don't know who we are", she said.

"It will not take long for them to discover who was behind this attempted murder, especially in the wake of the recent murders. Who else could have the motivation to kill the minister? If they find that both of us were missing from the locations we were supposed to be at, it will be easy for them to associate us with this incident. Let's go to my hideout, which is beyond the reach of the police", he said.

She appeared thoughtful for a while and hesitated to give him a reply.

"At least for now. Once you are there, you can decide whatever you want to do", he said.

After looking at him for a couple of seconds, she said, "OK. Let's first get out of here. You have built a hideout in the forest?"

"Yes. It's a safe place where the police cannot get to us", he said.

She nodded and followed him into the woods.

ON REACHING Tirupati, Guru rushed to the hospital he was familiar with. Since the injuries were not serious, they treated him as an outpatient. He immediately contacted his sources to gather information about Samara Simha Reddy, or SS Reddy, as he was more commonly known—the police inspector in charge of Tirupati town. He called the inspector on his cell phone. After the customary introductions, the minister came straight to the point—

“I was attacked on the hills—someone tried to kill me”, the minister spoke in a loud voice.

“Please relax. I am sure you are safe now. Can you give me some details on what happened?” the inspector asked.

“They punctured the car tyres. Once I got down from the car to check if my people had fixed the tyres, I was attacked.”

“Attacked with what? Guns? Knives?”

“No. Bows and arrows. They were archers.”

“Archers?”

“Yes, archers. They were attacking from the mountainous patch, just above the road.”

“How many of them were there? Did you see any of them?”

“I don’t know—I think there were at least two archers. It was difficult for us to see them from our position on the road.”

“Any injuries?”

“Yes. One of my security guards and I were struck with arrows, but the injury is not serious. I am at the hospital now. The doctors said we can leave within a few hours.”

“When and where did this happen?”

“We were attacked an hour ago while coming down from the Tirumala hills. I think they stopped us around the third or fourth U-turn from the top. I will ask one of my security guards to stay back and help you identify the exact location and other details you may need.”

“That would be helpful. Any casualties on their side?”

“We started firing in the direction from which the first arrow was launched. I think we shot one person—we heard a loud cry. But another arrow hit us from behind, and that’s when we decided to leave the place.”

“Do you suspect anyone?”

“At this moment—no. But it could be related to certain events that happened a couple of months ago. I’ll investigate from my side and will try to give you some information on the potential suspects. I will be able to do that only after I reach New Delhi.”

“Can you come to the police station and file a formal complaint?”

“I prefer that you deal with this case privately. There should be no records whatsoever. I don’t want this news to leak out—especially to the media.”

“Why should I do this for you?”

“If you help me with this case, I’ll make sure you’ll get the promotion that you’ve been wanting for the last five years. I’ll also make sure you get a good incentive for this help.”

That promise was sufficient for the inspector to give his full attention to this case.

Inspector Samara Simha Reddy, loved the authority his job gave him. But until he became the inspector, he had been made to go through hell—at least in his opinion.

Brash and independent, he hated obeying orders from seniors. He wouldn’t obey an order that he didn’t want to, and he even shouted back at his superiors. His superiors couldn’t fire him—that was a privilege that government employees enjoyed in India. So, he was transferred to remote corners of the state. During those days, he hated his job.

However, after becoming the inspector and having a small region directly under his control, he began enjoying his job—perhaps because of the independence it offered him. People had to obey his orders and there was minimal interference from his superiors. Since his attitude was well known, none of his superiors communicated with him unless they had to. His bitterness towards life and job decreased considerably. But his attitude ensured he was never recommended

for any pay rise or promotions. He had to be content with what he had. He occasionally requested his higher authorities for promotions, but as he had anticipated, they routinely rejected his requests.

Promotion was not his aim. By requesting for a promotion, he hoped they would at least give him the pay hike he was entitled to—but there wasn't much luck. Now, with the minister's phone call, he sensed a good opportunity. With the kind of connections important ministers had with the top officers of the police department, he should be able to get the pay hike. He might even get the promotion the minister promised. Not to forget—the incentive. All this for just doing his job—life was getting better!

13

DIVYA found Aryan's makeshift home in the forest interesting. She thought it was insightful of him to have created a remote base where he could stay safe and away from the police, politicians, and everyone else. It would indeed be difficult to trace him up here. Aryan had accounted for the possibility of failure and was in a position to retreat, prepare, and launch further attacks whenever he was ready. He was quite resourceful and planned things meticulously. She liked his methodical and disciplined approach to what was essentially a crime committed on impulse.

She was also surprised to see how he was able to live in a remote forest for days together without depending much on outside civilization. Aryan occasionally required rice, grains and some vegetables from outside, but otherwise, he had almost everything else required to live. He got water from the nearby stream, some vegetables from his home garden, and abundant fruits from the forest. He used firewood to heat water and fry items while cooking, had solar cooker to boil rice, pulses and vegetables, and even had solar panels to power his cell phone, laptop and LED lights. With sufficient stocks, one might be able to live in this place for months together...

"So, do you find this place comfortable?" Aryan asked.

They had been too tired to talk the previous night when they reached Aryan's home in the woods, and had fallen asleep immediately upon arrival.

She looked at him. "It's not as comfortable as a hotel room, but it's definitely more comfortable than a prison", she replied.

The very thought of prison, where he might eventually end up for the crime he was about to commit, irked Aryan. But he had already factored in all the consequences and had taken the best possible decision after thoroughly considering the eventualities. He was ready for whatever the future might bring—it was too late to change his mind now.

"Do you live in Chennai?" Aryan tried to continue the conversation.

"Yes, my house is in Chennai—I live there with my brothers and my mother", she replied. "How about you?"

"I was studying in the UK when the news of my father's death reached me. I was born and brought up in New Delhi—I lived there until about a month ago. But I realized it was too dangerous to live there, considering what I am doing now. So, I created this hideout", he said.

"It's very thoughtful of you to set up this house—I didn't think about... a failed mission, you know", she said.

"Do you still want to kill the minister?" Aryan asked.

"Of course", she replied. "That's the only goal of my life."

“If you like this place and we both have the same goal, why don’t you stay here? You’ll be caught if you go back to Chennai. It will be easy for them to associate us with the attempted murder—they’ll come after us”, he said.

“Yes, you told me that yesterday. I think you’re right—staying in the city from now on will be dangerous”, she said.

“It’s not just about that—we can plan and attack him together. Our combined forces will be more effective than if we work independently”, he said.

She thought about it for a moment and said, “I prefer to work alone. I don’t like things being thrust upon me.”

He said, “Why do you think I’ll thrust anything upon you? We can brainstorm ideas, discuss strategies, and execute only those that both of us are convinced of.”

She looked away from him and considered the offer for some time. She still appeared doubtful and was unable to come to a firm decision. He wondered if she had some other concerns.

He said, “Are you afraid to live alone with a young, unmarried guy?”

She was surprised to hear that question. She smiled, looked at him, and said, “Are you afraid to live alone with a young, unmarried girl?”

He was equally surprised. “I’m not.”

She said, “Why should I be?”

He was reminded of the brief assassination attempt on his life. She had almost pierced the knife into his neck. No wonder she was not afraid!

“So, would you want to stay?” he asked.

She thought for a while and then said, “Considering the fact that I may be caught if I go back, I think I’d rather stay here until our business is finished. But I don’t like being compelled to do anything and should be able to leave anytime I want. Is that fine with you?”

He offered his hand to her and said, “Welcome to Revengeville. As a special offer, I’ve decided not to charge any rent—you can stay here for free as long as you want.”

She shook his hand and mocked—“You can’t charge any rent even if you want to. You’re not the owner of this place anyway.”

Aryan was glad that she agreed to stay on. To complete the formidable task that lay ahead of them, they better help each other. Two people can execute attacks more effectively than one. Besides, loneliness was getting on his nerves, and he needed some company to stay sane.

EVEN though Guru, the minister, had initiated investigations through the police, he rightly guessed that, his personal investigations might be more useful in identifying the suspects. Only he knew his enemies—and, more importantly, his crimes.

Initially, it was difficult for him to guess who might have been behind the assassination attempt. Not that he had no enemies—in his profession, everyone was a friend one day and an enemy the next. People frequently oscillated between friendship and enmity, based on their commercial interests and Guru's position. Hence, any of his “associates” or “well-wishers” could have been behind the assassination attempt. Except in rare cases, even in his profession of politics, people didn't kill others due to commercial losses or power struggles. Besides, it was difficult to get away with murder. Hence, he ruled out professional and commercial motivations.

He thought about all the recent crimes he had committed. All of them were related to money, except one from a few months ago, when he killed three people to take control over the Ministry of Renewable Energy. A personal loss, of a loved one, could be a powerful motivation for revenge.

He asked his people to conduct some preliminary investigations on the immediate family members of the people he

had killed. At least in one case—Aryan's—there was sufficient cause for suspicion. Aryan had tried to register a police complaint and the minister had sent his men to silence him. One of his men contacted the University where Aryan was studying and was informed that Aryan had applied for a long leave on health grounds. His apartment at New Delhi had been locked for the last couple of months and the neighbours hadn't seen him around during that time. No one knew where he was.

The minister wondered if he should have had Aryan killed, instead of just having him threatened by his men. But there were no signs of any violence from that kid back then—he had made sure Aryan was sufficiently shaken up. And yet here he was—trying to kill him with a bow and arrow. The minister had discovered Aryan's background in archery training and was able to make the connection with the way he had been attacked.

Inspector Samara Simha Reddy had already arranged a thorough check of the spot where the murder was attempted. Apart from the nail cluster which was used to puncture the tyres of the car and a couple of arrows, they could not recover anything else. There were no fingerprints on either of the objects—whoever attacked was probably wearing gloves. There was no body, blood, or any other clue that could lead to the suspects.

Just as the inspector was pondering over how to pro-

ceed with the case, he received a call from the minister who informed him about the probable suspect. But the minister didn't tell him about the context of the crime or why Aryan was trying to kill him.

Anyway, it didn't take long for the inspector to figure it out. In India, it may be possible to escape conviction for a crime, if one had enough money and influence or at least delay the judicial process. But it is impossible to stop the truth from circulating. The inspector only had to talk to a couple of his friends and their contacts in Delhi and do a little research to establish the circumstances and motivations behind the crime. What happened now was an attempt to take revenge on the minister for the murders committed by him a few months back.

Now that the inspector knew the truth, he could use it to demand more payment from the minister, eventually.

IT HAD been a few days since Divya moved into Aryan's forest house. Initially, she found it difficult to adjust to the natural surroundings with minimal amenities, but eventually, she got used to living alone in the forest. She had to do much more physical work than in the city, but all those efforts helped her remain fit and agile. She felt more active and energetic in her new house than in any air-conditioned room she had lived in. She wondered if humans were ever designed to live in comfortable houses and follow a sedentary lifestyle.

One day, while having lunch that she had prepared, Aryan said, "I think we need to plan our next attack."

"Do you have a plan?" Divya asked. "The minister is not going to visit Tirupati again for a while."

"Yes, but he will be in Chennai next month. Elections are around the corner, and he has a busy campaign schedule in the city"

"Chennai is quite close—just 160 km from here"

"Yes. He will be starting his election campaign by throwing a party for a few influential people at his guest house located on the outskirts of the city. I have located the place on Google Maps, but I don't know how or from where we

are going to attack. The security cover will be tight, especially in the wake of our recent attacks”, Aryan wondered.

“It seems like a good opportunity, though. Let’s attack him during this party”, Divya replied firmly.

“How? We can’t stop his car while he’s coming in or going out—I am sure security will escort him from the front and rear. We cannot get into the house with weapons. In fact, we cannot get anywhere close to his vicinity—they will check everyone moving in and around. How can we attack him?” Aryan asked doubtfully.

“As I see it, we cannot get within close range or have a direct line of sight. Is that the problem?”

“Yes, how can we use our bows and arrows to attack him in such a situation?”

Divya began to explain, “According to the archery training manual, it’s not possible. But archery doesn’t always require a line of sight, and archers have attacked their enemies from far away, even if there was a huge obstacle—like a wall—in between. That’s why it pays to know your history and think a little bit outside the box. In your case, out of the practice manual.”

Aryan said, “That’s impossible. How can you attack somebody from far away, when there is a large obstacle between you and them? Doesn’t that mean you can’t see them and there is no way to take aim? How will you launch the arrows then? Towards the sky?” he smiled.

Divya replied in a serious tone, “Yes, towards the sky. Think about this—once you launch an arrow towards the sky, it will travel up for some distance, lose velocity, and come back towards the earth after a short while—right? Unlike bullets, which are released with a great force, arrows travel much slower. Hence, it is possible to estimate where they will fall.”

“So?” Aryan asked, unconvinced.

“If we estimate the angle and force of release of an arrow from a bow, we can easily determine where it will fall on the earth. And it will fall with the sharp edge facing towards the earth. That means, even if there is a huge wall in front of us, we can still strike an enemy standing on the other side of the wall by adjusting the force and angle of release, provided we know where he is standing”, Divya said.

Aryan began to recollect the Physics lessons he had in school and the Newton’s laws he had studied.

“What do you propose we do in our case?” Aryan asked.

Divya said, “Simple! We know he is going to be on the terrace along with his guests. We can position ourselves around 60–80 meters away from the spot and launch our arrows at a sloping angle, towards the sky. They will go up initially, gain some distance, and come down to hit our target area after a short time. But we need to fix the angle of elevation, force of release, and practice until our delivery is consistent.”

Aryan said, “That is absurd. Madam, please remember that even if we have a clear line of sight, hitting the target requires a lot of accuracy, force, and practice. It’s easy to miss the target even in such a simple scenario. I think we should focus on how to get into the line of sight and get a clear view of the minister so that we can strike right at his heart.”

Divya said, “You just said that the minister, especially in the wake of the recent attacks, will have many armed security guards around him. Their guns are faster and far more accurate than our arrows, I guess?”

Aryan nodded in affirmation.

Divya continued, “So, if we get anywhere within their line of sight, the chances are very good that they will shoot us before we’ve even launched a single arrow. Am I wrong?”

Aryan said, “No, you’re right. We can’t afford to do that.”

Divya said, “In such a situation, getting into their line of sight would only make it easier for them to kill us. It’s almost a suicidal move for us. But think about this—what advantage do we have that they don’t?”

Aryan was silent.

Divya said, “Our arrows may be slower than their bullets, but in this situation, we are going to convert that disadvantage into an advantage. We are going to attack from a safe distance and escape from there before they even realize what happened. We should engage our enemy on our terms and

strengths—not theirs.”

Aryan said, “Even if I agree with your suggestion in principle, how can you ensure accuracy? There is no way you can aim and hit a particular person using this method.”

Divya said, “Our aim is not to kill the minister right away. The Greeks used this technique to hurt and intimidate their opposition just before a battle. In other words, they used archery to mentally weaken their opposition so that their cavalry and artillery could finish the job. The opposition back then defended themselves using large shields, but our opposition doesn’t have any of that. Our aim through this campaign should be to create fear in his mind and embarrass him in front of his guests. We need to shake the ground beneath him so that he doesn’t feel secure anywhere, anytime. People who are afraid will make mistakes. We will wait and take advantage of it.”

Aryan said, “But there will be other people in the crowd. Our arrows may fall anywhere on the terrace or even away from it. What if others get killed?”

Divya said, “We will use blunt arrows. People may get hurt, but there will be no serious wounds.”

Aryan said, “Not bad. We spoil his party, embarrass him before his guests, and if we’re lucky, one of the arrows might even hit and hurt him. We will convey a clear message to him that his killers are closely watching him and will keep striking at him wherever he is. That will make him live in

constant fear for his life and will make him think twice before going anywhere outside. He needs to realize that life is not a commodity to be taken at will. Let's do this."

Aryan opened Google Maps on his laptop. Since the minister's guest house was close to the beach, They began to look for an ideal spot, from where they could launch their arrows. Soon they narrowed down the exact spot.

There were two more houses in front of the minister's house, and then there was a short lane, followed by the beach. Their chosen location was on the beach, around 60 m away from the minister's guest house—a distance that was perfect for their mode of attack.

Over the next few days, they set up a spot on the hills where they could practise for the attack. They marked an area that covered the same length and breadth as the terrace of the minister's guest house. They setup their bows and arrows at a distance equal to the distance between the actual target area and their planned position of attack. They practised the precise angle to hold their bows and the force with which they had to launch their arrows in order to hit their target area.

Accuracy depended on the angle of elevation of their bow and the distance over which their bowstring was stretched, which determined the force of release. They practised repeatedly to achieve a fairly consistent result and ensure their arrows fell somewhere within the marked area.

A DAY before their scheduled attack, Aryan and Divya travelled from Tirupati to Chennai in the unreserved compartment of the train. They started early in the morning and reached Chennai before noon. They had already booked a hotel near the railway station so that they could check into the hotel immediately after they reached Chennai. Aryan picked up a second-hand motorcycle that he had found on an online classifieds site, after paying the requisite amount that was already agreed upon with its owner via email. They wanted to use the bike to reach the guest house and quickly get away from there without anyone's knowledge. Since the bike was not registered in their name, they figured it would be difficult to trace its ownership even if someone managed to note down the number while they were trying to escape.

The East Coast Road, affectionately called the ECR by the locals, is the entertainment highway of the southern metropolitan city of India—Chennai. The road, stretching all the way from Chennai to Pondicherry, a former French colony, is two hundred kilometres long. It is dotted with various entertainment avenues like theme parks, resorts, beaches, and guest houses. The road has been built along the beaches of the Bay of Bengal in the eastern coast of India and hence its name. Flanked by the beach on one side and the IT highway

with high-rise office complexes, on the other, the area around ECR has residential villas and VIP guest houses. Guru, the minister, owned a large guest house on one of the smaller roads connecting the beach and the ECR highway.

Aryan and Divya reached the actual scene of attack and surveyed both the minister's guest house and the area on the beach from where they would launch their arrows. Google Maps had reproduced the area fairly accurately, so they were not in for much of a surprise. They parked their bike on the lane adjacent to the beach and played in the beach water for some time while simultaneously surveying the area. As they had expected, there was no one near the beach. That reassured them that the place would be equally secluded late in the evening on the following day, when they planned to carry out their attack.

There were two more parallel roads connecting the ECR highway to the beach lane, about a hundred meters to the left and right of the minister's guest house. They decided to use one of them—the left one, to park their vehicle and exit out of the beach after their attack.

The next day, as planned, they came to the same spot at around 6:30 in the evening. The sun had almost set, but there was enough light for them to position themselves at the right location on the beach from where they planned to launch their arrows. They carried two re-curve bows in a large black bag, both remaining dismantled inside, to be

assembled on the spot. The bag concealed the bows from public view. They also brought some heavy aluminium arrows with edges deliberately blunted to avoid causing much harm to the people partying on the terrace of the minister's guest house.

As they had expected, the road leading to the minister's guest house from the ECR was heavily guarded, and the police were checking people and vehicles arbitrarily. They went past that road and took the next left turn to reach the beach. There were no police or security personnel on this road. Aryan parked the bike close to the beach, and they walked back a hundred meters along the beach lane to reach their predetermined spot. They sat down on the spot and pretended to talk about silly things to appear like lovers to anyone who may pass by. They would wait until 6:55 PM to assemble their bows—by then, it should be sufficiently dark, making it difficult for anyone to notice their activity.

At 6:40 PM, while they were chatting about some inconsequential things, they saw a guard approaching them.

"Someone is approaching us. What do we do now?" Divya asked.

"I don't think there is any reason for anyone to suspect us yet. Just keep talking silly things and pretend we are lovers casually passing time on the beach", Aryan said.

In spite of this decision, they were silent, and their hearts were beating fast. What if the guard finds the bows and ar-

rows? Would they be arrested?

As the guard came closer, they noticed that he was not a police. He was probably a private security guard working for one of the many villas around the area.

“What are you two doing here?” the guard asked.

Aryan replied, “We are friends. We just came to pass our time on the beach.”

“Are you two college students?” he asked.

“Yes, same college and same class”, Divya replied.

“Show me your college ID cards”, the guard demanded.

“We didn’t come directly from college. We went home and then came here. Our ID cards are at home”, Divya said.

By this time, the guard had noticed the unnaturally long black bag lying next to them.

“What’s in that bag?” he asked.

“That’s my cricket bat and stumps kit. I need to hand it over to a friend on my way back—that’s why I brought it”, Aryan said.

“Open the bag, let me see what’s inside”, the guard said.

Aryan paused and took a deep breath. There was no way he could show the contents of that bag to the guard. Not only were they carrying bows and arrows, but they had also lied to him.

“Why should I show that to you? Do you have a search warrant? Are you a police officer?” Aryan asked.

The security guard was taken aback for a moment. He then said, “See, this is an empty beach, and it is not safe for youngsters like you to be roaming around at this time. It would be better if you two go back home now”, the guard said.

“But, we came just now”, Divya protested.

“It’s OK. We’ll go back. Thanks for your concern”, Aryan said, hung the bag over his shoulders, pulled Divya’s hand, and started walking towards their bike.

“What do we do now?” Divya whispered once they reached their bike.

“We couldn’t stay there—it would have only increased his suspicion. We’ll wait here for ten minutes and then go back. By that time, I think he will have left”, Aryan replied.

AS THEY had hoped, the security guard left in less than five minutes. Aryan and Divya waited for another five minutes near their bike, and then walked back swiftly to the spot. It was almost dark, but not completely dark. Even though they couldn't see the terrace of the minister's guest house, they knew the party had already begun—they could hear the music and see the glow from the reflection of lights.

Divya switched on the torchlight in her cell phone while Aryan quickly assembled both the recurve bows in less than five minutes. They took ten arrows each and placed them on the ground, next to each other. They took an arrow each, placed it in its position on their bows and lifted their left hand, which was holding the bow, to an angle of about sixty degrees. Both of them pulled the string of the bow, along with the arrow, to the requisite length, as practised earlier. They were finally in position and ready to launch the arrows.

They looked at each other. "Let's start on the count of three", Aryan said, "Don't stop until all the arrows are launched. Once all the arrows have been fired, run."

Divya nodded.

"1... 2... 3."

They launched the first arrow into the air. It went up in the air quickly, continued its upward journey for some

time, then levelled off parallel to the ground, and began its downward descent towards the terrace of the minister's guest house. Even though their arrows were not sharp, they were not entirely blunt either. Since the party was on an open terrace, there was practically no obstruction to stop the arrows. Even though they couldn't see the arrows landing on the roof of the guest house, they were sure they would hit someone or something and cause enough commotion.

They repeated the same procedure and launched all ten arrows in quick succession. Once all the arrows were launched, they started running towards the bike. On reaching the bike, they quickly disassembled the recurve bows and placed them inside their bag. Aryan sat at the front of the bike and started it while Divya sat behind. In less than five minutes after the attack, they were already on the East Coast Road and were heading towards Mahabalipuram. They wouldn't know the impact of their attack until the next morning when it would, hopefully, be reported in the newspapers.

They sped on the East Coast Road until they reached Kovalam Junction. Aryan turned right in order to head towards the Chennai Bypass Road that would enable them to go to the neighbouring state, Andhra Pradesh, where Tirupati town is located. But once he turned he was stopped by the police—the traffic police.

“Show me your licence and documents”, the traffic constable demanded.

Aryan took out his licence, a copy of the vehicle registration book, and insurance papers.

“The name on the licence and the name on the registration copy don’t match. Why is this vehicle not registered in your name? Whose vehicle is this?” the traffic constable questioned.

“It’s mine. I just bought it yesterday. I am yet to transfer the documents to my name”, Aryan answered.

“How do I know if this bike has not been stolen from somewhere?” the traffic constable asked.

“It’s not a stolen vehicle. If you want, I’ll call the person from whom I bought the bike. You can check with him”, Aryan said.

The cell phone of the traffic constable started ringing.

“Yes... What?... The minister’s house has been attacked?... The suspect is on the run?... But how does that concern our department?... OK. If you know the type of vehicle and the vehicle registration number, I can stop them... It’s impossible to check each and every vehicle moving through this road... No, without authorization from the higher-ups in my department, I can’t do that...”

“I am already working overtime here, and they want me to do the job of another department as well!” the traffic constable mumbled to no one in particular after he cut the call.

Just then, he noticed the large black bag in Divya’s hand.

Aryan saw him noticing it and wanted to divert his attention somehow.

“Sir, I have only five hundred rupees”, Aryan offered.

The mention of money, that too so quickly, brought out a smile from the traffic constable. He turned to Aryan and forgot about the bag.

“OK. That will be enough for now. But make sure you transfer the ownership of the bike to your name immediately. Is that clear?” the traffic constable said.

“Yes, Sir.” Aryan said and offered a five hundred rupee note to the constable. The traffic constable went over to the next “customer”, Aryan started the bike, and they proceeded towards Tirupati.

“Are we going to ride all the way to Tirupati on this bike?” Divya asked.

“Yes. Bus stands and railway stations might be monitored. Going by bike is safer”, Aryan replied.

“But they may not know who attacked them yet”, Divya said.

“No. I think they would have figured that by now”, Aryan said. A drop of sweat rolled down from Divya’s forehead. Did the police already know who they were, she wondered.

THE MINISTER, Guru, was near the gate of his guest house, welcoming his guests when he heard some commotion on the terrace. People were shouting and asking others to move into the house. At least two arrows landed near the gate where he was standing. He rushed inside the house to see many of his guests running down from the terrace.

“What happened, why are you all running down?” he asked.

“Some people on the terrace have been hit by arrows. Someone is shooting arrows at all of us from outside. We ran down so that we don’t get hurt”, one of his guests mentioned to him while simultaneously running out of breath. Others pointed towards the terrace and said, “Go save them. Some of them are still stuck on the terrace and battling for their lives!”

He ran to the terrace and found a few arrows scattered all around the place. By then, the terrace was almost empty except for a couple who were still standing there with glasses in their hands. “We just came back to fill up our glasses with one last shot. The arrows have stopped now”, they said. It was difficult for him to admire their dedication to the cause of drinking alcohol even when their lives were in danger!

Guru came back into the house. Fortunately, only one person on the terrace was hurt, and the injury was minor—the arrowhead had struck his shoulder and had penetrated less than half an inch. “Please, can someone call the ambulance? Guru, look at what happened to me—please save me”, he was wailing frantically. Guru assured him that there was no threat to his life, but to pacify him, he called the ambulance.

He cancelled the party and sent his people to search for the attackers around the area.

Guru wondered if this was another attempt to kill him. He picked up an arrow that had landed near the gate and analysed it. The arrowhead was blunt. The attackers did not intend to kill him or hurt anyone this time. He realized that the intention of the attackers was probably to create panic and spoil his party.

By that time, all his guests left the party “safely” in their cars “protected” by a solid roof. The cars with sunroofs had closed them. Their lives were in danger, and they were not willing to take any further chances! Guru knew the rumour mills would have already started working overtime. By now, everyone connected to his VIP guests would have come to know about the “shocking attack” and how they had “daringly escaped from the place alive”. He wondered if Facebook and Twitter servers were equipped to handle this sudden surge in traffic.

In a short time, as he expected, there was a flurry of re-

porters, cameramen, and other members of the media. They were all lined up in front of his house wanting to know what had happened and who was responsible for the attack. After all, some VIPs in the city had “narrowly” managed to escape “sure” death.

In spite of his assurances that nothing serious had happened, and it was just an attempt by the “opposition parties” to sabotage his party and create commotion, the media was persistent in wanting to know the exact number of “deaths”. Their “breaking news” wouldn’t be all that “breaking” without that crucial piece of news. Guru shut the gate tightly and asked his guards not to allow anyone inside until they received further instructions from him. The reporters left after an hour or two, but a few of them stayed overnight, determined to find out more about this “shocking crime”. Guru had a tough time convincing the top bosses of publications and TV channels not to give this issue much coverage. He had to use his influence and money to stop the media from creating a ruckus out of a non-issue.

The last thing he wanted during election time was negative publicity. His security guards told him that the attackers had already left, and they couldn’t locate them anywhere in the area despite a thorough search. But they had already alerted the police and requested that they check every vehicle going out of the ECR.

Guru immediately called the deputy commissioners of

the crime and traffic departments and convinced them that the “attack” was actually a prank and was coordinated by opposition members to sabotage his party. He was aware of what was going on, and they need not waste their time on a trivial issue like this. It was difficult to convince them, but he somehow “managed” to prevent the issue from getting escalated. Now that the media and the police were taken care of, he called the police inspector of Tirupati town—Samara Simha Reddy. The inspector was about to leave for his home when he got the call.

“Hello.”

“Guru here. I gave you some leads and asked you to work on my case. Have you done anything about it yet?” the minister asked.

“Yes, we are working on it. I’ll inform you when we get hold of him”, the inspector replied.

“When will you inform me? After I am dead?” the minister screamed, unable to control his anger.

“Mr. Guru, please be patient. I am not your servant—you can’t shout at me like this. Be calm and tell me what happened”, the inspector said.

“I was attacked once again, this time in my guest house in Chennai. I organized a party for some VIPs in the city, but I was forced to cancel the party as a flurry of arrows fell from the sky. Fortunately, only one person was hurt, and it was a mild injury”, the minister replied.

“They used bows and arrows to attack you once again?” the inspector asked.

“Yes. This time, I don’t think they wanted to hurt or kill me—they used blunt arrows. I think their intention was to spoil my party”, the minister said.

“Why didn’t you catch them? Didn’t you have your people there?”

“They attacked from a distance, maybe from the beach. By the time our people went in search of them, they had fled. I am sure this is going to be hot news in the entire VIP circle of this city. I want you to do something quickly before they manage to do more damage. Weren’t you able to proceed further with this case in some way?” the minister asked.

“I feel that guy Aryan, whom you mentioned to me earlier, is behind it”, the inspector said.

“I know that already. Who else is with him and why have you not caught him yet?” the minister asked.

“The problem is—he doesn’t stay in the town. If he were staying in a hotel or even a rented accommodation, we would have traced him by now”, the inspector replied.

“Where else does he stay?” the minister asked.

“He stays in the forest, in the hills. We are trying to locate him by tracking his cellphone, but the signal is very weak, and most of the time his phone is switched off. We need input from at least three cellular towers to locate him accurately. But from the data we have, he can be anywhere

within a fifteen-kilometre radius. That's too large an area in the forest for us to track", the inspector replied.

"What do we do?" the minister asked.

"He has to come out—our team and our associates have his photo. We have already circled the area. Just give us time—we'll get him", the inspector said.

"Please do something quickly. If you need any help, let me know. I want that guy behind bars soon", the minister said and cut the call.

Even though Guru was not satisfied with the conversation, he was confident that this inspector could be trusted with the job.

ARYAN and Divya rode from Chennai to Tirupati, a distance of around 160 km, on their bike. They couldn't avoid taking a few breaks on the way, as the journey was long and tiresome. They reached Tirupati, parked the bike at the Tirupati railway station and walked up. It took them a couple of hours to reach their makeshift house amidst the jungle in the hills. They reached at 4:00 in the morning, collapsed on their respective beds, and immediately fell asleep.

They were so exhausted by the long travel, that by the time they woke up, it was late afternoon. It took a few more hours for them to regain their full energy, and soon it was evening. Divya walked down to the neighbouring stream for her bath, while Aryan gathered some firewood and vegetables for cooking. Then, he walked downhill to buy newspapers. By the time he was back, Divya had cooked a meal—rice, boiled vegetables, and curry.

After finishing their meals, Divya started browsing the internet while Aryan scoured through the newspapers, both eager to read the news about their activity on the previous day.

Aryan said, "Except for a small mention in a couple of newspapers, no one else has reported our attack."

“There is no mention of the attack on the news websites either. Probably the minister used his influence to stop the news from being reported”, Divya said. She seemed thoughtful but was not surprised.

“We are committing a crime against him. Why should he be afraid of that being reported?” Aryan asked.

“He will not want any negative publicity, at least until the elections are over. Even though he is on the receiving end, there will be rumours about the motive behind the attack”, Divya said.

“But he could have used it to his advantage. He could have claimed that the attack was a planned assault by the opposition parties. Since they didn’t have any hopes of winning the elections against him, they decided to eliminate him this way. He could have said that he was committed to serving the people regardless of the threat to his life—he valued the welfare of the people more than his life. That would have fetched him additional votes, wouldn’t it?” Aryan asked.

“That’s what every politician does—blame the opposition for anything that goes wrong. People won’t believe that lie. Did the newspapers report any injuries?” Divya asked.

“No. For the kind of blunt arrowheads we used, I don’t think even a crow, if it had come accidentally in the way, would have been hurt. Forget people getting injured. This feels like cowardice to me. Next time, we should not attack like this. We should get into his range, look straight into his

eyes, and pierce an arrow right through his heart”, Aryan said.

“What are the chances we’ll be able to get into his range, attack him, and escape from the scene?” Divya asked.

“If we monitor his activities and plan properly, I think we can do that. We almost got him in the hills earlier”, Aryan said.

“That was because it was a personal visit and there was less security. After all the ruckus we have created, I am sure security arrangements will be very tight from now on. We may not be able to get anywhere close to him without getting caught”, Divya said.

“What do we do? We keep launching arrows towards the sky and hope that one of them will accidentally hit him? We might as well launch one from right here and hope for a miracle”, Aryan mocked.

Divya said, “Relax. If your enemy is more powerful than you, there is no point in fighting them directly. You should first weaken them, make them vulnerable, and then strike. We have just created fear in the minister’s mind. He will feel vulnerable every moment from now on. Our next move will weaken his position considerably.”

Aryan said, “You got an idea for the next attack already?”

Divya said, “Yes. By taking so much effort to prevent the attack from being covered by the media, the minister has unintentionally exposed his weakness. We’ll now use it to

the fullest.”

Aryan said, “I hope our next attack will be slightly more purposeful and effective than the last one. Please remember that we are risking our lives and could get caught anytime.”

Divya said, “Yes. We are going to attack the very source of his power this time. It will make him weak and vulnerable. Only then, we can kill him. Can you make a list of all his major election campaigns during the next one month?”

TWO WEEKS later, Aryan and Divya were back in Chennai. They rode their bike from Tirupati to Chennai. They checked into the same hotel near the railway station where they had stayed earlier. By evening, they were ready to go to Mount Road, where Guru, the minister, was scheduled to address a large election rally.

Mount Road, or Anna Salai, is an important road that runs through the heart of Chennai. Many businesses have their offices on this road. Mount Road connects important areas of the city and, hence, is generally busy with a lot of vehicles plying on it throughout the day. Since it was difficult to get permission to hold a political rally on the main road, Guru managed to arrange his meeting on a small by-lane off the main road. Traffic on that lane was blocked to accommodate the rally.

A large temporary stage with huge banners of the minister on both sides was constructed a few meters before the far end of the lane, and chairs were laid in straight rows, one behind the other, in front of the stage. Political cadres, well-wishers, the public and media who came to listen to the minister talk had already occupied most of the chairs. Many people were standing on the sides and behind the chairs—the crowd almost reached the main road. Since this meeting was at the

heart of his constituency, and it was his last rally before the elections, it was very important for the minister to create a positive impression. Guru made sure the arrangements were grand and the crowd was huge.

Since Guru was a Cabinet minister, this event was covered by both the local and national media. TV journalists, newspaper and magazine reporters, bloggers, social-media writers and other members of the media were present in full strength to cover the event. Guru personally oversaw all the invitations to ensure maximum publicity.

When Aryan and Divya reached Mount Road, the meeting had already started. Introductory speeches were ongoing, and the minister was scheduled to speak shortly. Right opposite, across Mount Road, overlooking the stage, was an old government building with three floors. Aryan chose this particular building because its terrace offered a direct line of sight to the meeting stage, and the building was empty. The government department which occupied the building earlier had been relocated, and the building was about to be sold off through an auction. An empty building was a good choice for attacking the minister without attracting any unwanted attention.

Aryan and Divya parked their vehicle in the neighbouring mall, two buildings away. They were wearing black jerseys and black jeans. They carried their archery gear in a black travel bag. They walked along the main road towards the

empty Government building. Aryan noticed a police constable sitting inside the Government building complex. The gate of the building was closed but not locked.

There was an ATM in the neighbouring building with a private security guard. The wall between the two buildings was almost five feet tall. Since some bikes were parked along the wall near the ATM, Aryan was confident that he could climb on a bike and jump over to the next building easily. Aryan quickly thought of a plan and whispered it to Divya.

Divya opened the gate of the empty government building and walked towards the police constable.

“Who are you? What do you want?” the police constable asked.

“Sir, I am looking for this address”, Divya said, handing a paper to him.

He looked at the paper and read its contents—‘Express Avenue Mall, Royapettah’. He then looked at her. She maintained an innocent, smiling face.

He started explaining the way to reach the mall, while Divya kept asking further questions, pretending to be new to the city. In the meantime, Aryan went and stood in front of the ATM in the neighbouring building. The security guard was busy elsewhere. Aryan quietly slipped into the side lane of the building and jumped over the wall, crashing into the neighbouring government building compound. He jumped high and landed on the ground once again to ensure the noise

was loud enough to be audible.

The police constable heard the thud, asked Divya to wait for a minute, and went to the side of the building. Divya paused for a few seconds and then followed him. On seeing Aryan, the police constable walked towards him.

“Who are you? Why did you jump over the compound wall?” the constable asked.

“I am a hobbyist jumper. Jumping walls is my passion”, Aryan replied.

“What?!” the police constable said and tried to grab Aryan’s shirt collar.

Aryan shoved the police constable’s hand and pushed him behind. The constable’s back hit the wall of the building, but he recovered quickly and moved forward with both his hands stretched out in an attempt to grab Aryan. Aryan moved out of his way and pushed the constable from behind. This time, the constable fell down on the ground. Aryan took a chloroform-soaked napkin and tried to cover the face of the constable with it. But the constable caught Aryan’s neck and pushed him down. The constable rolled over Aryan, held Aryan’s hand tightly, and was about to punch him, when Divya sprayed pepper spray on the constable’s face. The constable felt the burning all over, loosened his grip on Aryan, and moved his hands quickly to cover his face. Aryan got up. Both Aryan and Divya joined forces to push him down. They removed his hands, pressed the chloroform soaked towel on

his mouth and nose until he fainted.

Aryan and Divya tied the constable's hands and legs with a rope and stuffed a handkerchief into his mouth. They looked around to see if anyone had noticed, but to their relief no one was in sight. They carried him and left him behind the building. It would be a few hours before the constable regained consciousness, but by that time they would have left the building. Aryan and Divya reached the stairs and climbed until they reached the terrace of the building. The terrace was locked. It had an old wooden door with holes all over it—probably the department didn't think it was necessary to protect the terrace. Aryan removed an iron hammer from his bag. It took him just two swings at the lock to break it.

From the terrace, they could see the Mount Road below them. The lane, which was to be their meeting venue after the attack, was opposite to them. There were people sitting and standing on the lane, facing the stage. The stage was 50–60 meters away from their location, and they could also see people sitting on the dais, waiting for their turn to speak. Though they couldn't clearly identify the faces of people on the stage, they would be able to identify the minister when he rose to speak because the loudspeakers blared the speeches around the area. Aryan knew the voice of the minister by heart. They quickly assembled their bows and placed their arrows on the floor next to them. Now, they were waiting for Guru to stand up and give his speech on the microphone.

They didn't have to wait for long. Within fifteen minutes, the minister was invited to speak. All the cameras focused on him. A few news channels were broadcasting the meeting live. The opportunity that Aryan and Divya were waiting for had finally arrived. They took one arrow each, placed it on the bowstring, pulled the bow string to the requisite length, adjusted their aim, and got into striking position.

"At the count of three", Aryan said.

Divya nodded in agreement.

"1... 2... 3."

Aryan and Divya released their arrows at the same time. The arrows moved quickly through the air, and within just a couple of seconds, one arrow hit the minister's chest while the other hit him in the stomach. The minister fell to the stage, his back hitting the floor, unable to bear the force of the impact.

"Bingo", they said in unison, and quickly ducked behind the parapet wall to hide from anyone looking in their direction. They then moved five meters behind, hoping to be less visible to the people and the video cameras. They took ten arrows each, loaded them on their bows and released all of them in quick succession. Those twenty arrows were not aimed at anyone in particular but were released in the direction of the crowd.

After launching all the arrows, they dropped their bows in the same location, removed their black Jerseys and jeans

and came out in the normal clothing they had worn underneath. They quickly raced downwards, took the rear exit, jumped into the adjacent compound and ran towards the gate.

As expected, there was commotion all around. People were running out from the meeting venue in all directions. Aryan and Divya walked to the adjacent mall where they had parked the vehicle, started their bike, and drove away in the opposite direction on Mount Road before the police could cordon off the area. That was one big escape!

But they were not aware that surveillance cameras at multiple locations had recorded all their movements—both in the mall and the neighbouring compound.

THE CAMERAMAN of the 365×24×7 TV channel, a popular news channel in India, was broadcasting the minister's speech live, when the two arrows hit the minister. The minister fell back with a thud. He and other cameramen caught that moment on their cameras. After a couple of seconds, he realized what had happened and turned to see where the arrows were being fired from. He was in for a shock—more arrows were being released from the terrace of the old building opposite the lane. He immediately turned his camera towards the source of the attack and started recording, but he couldn't capture the people launching them. They were out of focus and had already climbed down before he could get the focus right.

Arrows had been fired randomly all over the place by someone or maybe more than one person. As the arrows had stopped, he turned his camera to focus on the crowd, who were, by then, up on their feet and had almost created a stampede trying to run away. He rushed forward with his camera to cover injuries. Chairs were scattered and people were scrambling to run away. Despite panning his camera in all directions, he couldn't notice any blood or injured people anywhere.

He remembered that the minister was the first to be hit

by two arrows directly and ran towards the stage. By the time he went near the stage, the minister, with the help of people around him, was already standing on his feet. He zoomed in the camera to get a clearer view and all he saw was a white shirt and a white *veshti*. There was no trace of any blood or injuries anywhere on his body or clothes. The minister walked out of the venue escorted by the police.

The cameraman once again focused his camera towards the audience—the area was almost empty. He took a couple of steps forward when he accidentally stepped on an arrow lying on the ground. He bent down, grabbed the arrow and held it in front of the camera so that people across the nation could see it. The arrowhead—the sharp front portion of the arrow—was covered with a small rubber cap.

He wondered why the attackers took so much effort to launch a sensational attack in front of the national media if they did not want to cause any injuries. He got his answer when he looked carefully at the arrow once again. There was a note wrapped around the stem of the arrow.

He loosened the thread and placed the note in front of the camera so that the entire nation could read its contents:

We seek justice for our father's murder by this
minister, six months ago.

ABOUT five minutes after Aryan and Divya left, Divya got a phone call on her cell phone.

“Hello... What?... Yes... But... OK...” was all she said. She disconnected the call.

“Aryan, I need you to drop me at Tirumangalam junction. I’ll have to go home”, Divya told Aryan in a loud voice so that it was audible amidst the sound of the bike and the traffic.

“Are you out of your mind? We have to go back to our hideout in the hills by tonight at any cost. Staying back in Chennai is very risky. Both our lives are at stake”, Aryan shouted back.

“I... My mother needs to be admitted to the hospital immediately, and I need to be there”, Divya said.

“It’s dangerous to stay back in this city, Divya. We may get caught anytime”, Aryan said.

“I need to go, there is no other option.”

“OK. I’ll drop you there, and I’ll go back to the hotel. Both of us will leave for Tirupati tomorrow morning.”

“Right now, I don’t know how long I need to stay. You go back to the hills. I’ll join you as soon as possible.”

Aryan couldn’t make her change her mind about going home. Divya was as adamant as ever. He raced to the location

she wanted him to drop her at and stopped the bike. She got down and looked at him.

Aryan said, “Come back as soon as possible. Don’t use public transport to travel to Tirupati. Do you have a bike?”

Divya said, “Yes, I have a Scooty.”

Aryan said, “OK. Even if takes a whole day, come back on your Scooty. Also, don’t venture out for a long time in public places. Try to stay inside your house or at the hospital, as far as possible.”

“OK. See you soon”, she said and turned to cross the road.

Aryan continued to look at her as she walked away for a few more seconds. He suddenly felt alone and vulnerable. Divya was more than just a partner in crime—she was a companion he could rely on. She made him feel confident and stronger. For the first time, he wished all this was over soon.

He then started his long journey towards Tirupati.

DIVYA hired an auto and was at home within the next ten minutes. She was glad to be back in a familiar surrounding. She realized how much she missed her home only after she reached it. She opened the main gate, went inside, and rang the bell on the second gate that led to the living room. Her mother opened the door.

“Why did you call me now, mom? You know I cannot be roaming around here”, she said.

“There is an important event happening this evening, and you’ll have to be present”, her mother said.

What could be so important, Divya wondered.

“We have fixed a match for you. People from the boy’s house are coming to see you this evening”, her mother said.

“You are planning my marriage... without even asking me?” Divya asked.

“That’s how it has always been in our family. Elders know what’s good for you and youngsters are expected to obey”, her mother said.

“What do you mean I’ll have to do whatever you say? There is no way I am getting married right now. There are so many things I need to do before that”, Divya protested.

“You can do whatever you want—but after the marriage”, her mother said.

Divya couldn't take this any more. "You very well know what I am doing now. In spite of that—"

"Yes. I know what you are doing now", interrupted her mother. "You are staying alone with some guy on the hills."

"What? Is that what's bothering you? Don't you trust me?" Divya screamed.

Her mother was silent and looked away, indicating she was in no mood to change her decision. At that moment, Divya's grandmother walked in from the next room. On seeing her grandmother, Divya was much relieved. She went and hugged her. "See what mother is trying to do, grandma. She is trying to get me married without my—"

"We'll talk about that later", her grandmother patted Divya's back and asked her to sit down on the sofa. "First, let's drink some tea. Do you want to have tea?" Her grandmother motioned her mother to get some tea from the kitchen.

"No, I don't want tea", Divya said.

"Why don't you want tea?" her grandmother asked.

"I... I don't feel like drinking tea now", Divya said.

"Are you not used to drinking tea?" her grandmother asked.

"Of course I am used to drinking tea. You know that very well", Divya said.

"Then why are you refusing?" her grandmother asked.

"I told you... I don't feel like having it now", Divya said.

“What do you mean? Unless you don’t like it, or you are not used to it, there is no reason for you to refuse tea”, her grandmother said.

“What the... Wait. I don’t want tea because my body is heated up, and I have some mouth blisters. Having tea now will only make it worse”, Divya said.

“You know what? Tea is good for people with body heat and mouth blisters”, her grandmother assured her.

“What??? This is totally unscientific and—”, Divya was cut short in her protest.

“You were born two generations after me. I know what is good and what is not. Don’t use science as an excuse”, her grandmother said.

“Can’t I decide whether I want to drink tea or not? Don’t I even have that freedom?” Divya was almost in tears.

“Yes, only you will decide. Now tell me—do you want tea?” her grandmother asked.

Divya realized that there was no point in arguing with her grandmother who had already decided what her choice has to be today. She agreed to have tea.

Once the tea was served, Divya was about to sip the tea when her grandmother asked, “Now tell me—do you want to get married?”

The reason behind the silly tea argument was now evident to Divya. She threw the teacup on the floor, went to her

room and locked herself in. She decided to sleep for some time to remain protected from the marriage coercers outside.

Divya slept for a couple of hours when she heard her mother knock on the door. She didn't bother about it for a few seconds, but her mother was in no mood to relent. Divya woke up from the bed, walked slowly towards the door and opened it reluctantly.

"What took you so long to open the door?" her mother asked after she came inside the room.

"I was sleeping mom. I am tired—please let me sleep for some more time", Divya said.

"Nonsense. The boy's family has already arrived, and you are not even dressed. Here, wear this Kanchipuram silk sari and get ready in another ten minutes. In the meantime, we'll keep talking to them to keep them engaged. Make it fast", her mother said and left in haste.

Divya decided to put an end to this marriage business. She knew her family wouldn't listen to her. But if the guy refused to marry her, surely his family would listen to him? She dressed up quickly and was ready for the girl-seeing ritual.

Ten minutes later, her mother came in, handed a tray full of cups of tea, and asked her to give it to the boy's family. Divya served tea to everyone.

"Divya made this tea herself. She also cooks well", her mother announced. Suddenly, the boy's mother started wailing in pain. Everyone looked at her. Divya, who was serving

tea to her, said, “Oh no—I am so sorry Auntie. I stepped on your feet accidentally.” The boy’s mother was definitely not amused, but she gave a fake smile to mean she had not taken the incident “sportively”.

Since the boy felt that they had to “thoroughly understand” each other before marriage, both of them were ushered into Divya’s room so that they could talk to each other in private. Divya’s mother whispered into her ears just before she entered the room, “Keep looking down and let him talk. Don’t talk unless you need to—is that clear?” Divya nodded and went inside. Divya sat on her bed while the boy sat on a chair opposite her.

He looked at her and smiled. She grinned from ear to ear for a couple of seconds and immediately shifted to her serious look.

“Your smile is sweet”, he said, blushing.

He found that smile sweet? This guy was going to be difficult to break.

“My mother told me that you have completed your B.Sc. I hope you are fine with being a home maker after marriage. Do you want to take up a job?” he asked.

“Why? Don’t you prefer girls who are independent? Would you not allow me to work after marriage?” she asked.

“I am modern, and I don’t mind you taking up a job. But my mother is traditional—she doesn’t prefer her daughter-in-law working”, he said.

“So, you’ll listen to whatever your mother says even after marriage. You won’t take your own decisions”, she said.

“Not like that, but we can’t totally disregard what elders say, no?” he said.

“First of all, why should they interfere with our lives? I prefer a nuclear family—we’ll rent a house and live separately”, she said.

“But your mother said you’re fine with a joint family”, he said.

“How can my mother decide for me? My opinions are mine, her opinions are hers”, she said.

He didn’t like the way the conversation was heading. He thought maybe he should try a different topic. “What are your hobbies?” he asked.

“Shopping. I love shopping for gold jewellery and silk saris. I buy one of these two items every alternate week”, she said, looking straight into his eyes. “But they are so expensive, aren’t they?” he said.

“Yes. Actually, my father has run out of money. That’s why he wants to get me married—so that my husband can take up the burden. Er—I mean, pleasure”, she said and smiled mockingly once again.

He didn’t know why his questions were met with such stern answers. Maybe he had to learn the art of conversing with women. Time to change the topic once again.

“You know what, I love adventure sports. I once trekked to the top of a hill, camped and returned the next day”, he said and beamed.

“What’s the big deal with that? I’ve been living on the top of a hill, amidst the forest, over the last two months”, she said.

His eyes widened. “How... how did you manage that by yourself?”

“Did I say I was alone? I lived there with a guy. My boyfriend, actually”, she said.

By now, his mouth was wide open. “I... I think my mother is calling me. We’ll meet sometime later”, he said and went out hastily.

She knew her goal was accomplished.

THE NEXT day, Divya left for Tirupati from the Chennai Central Railway Station by train. She used to love train journeys—it brought her back memories of her yearly childhood trips. Like then, she sat at her favourite window seat and indulged in her favourite activity—getting a glimpse of nature, civilization, and people. As her journey progressed, she could no longer concentrate on the outside. She was totally preoccupied with her inner thoughts and reflections. What was she doing? Was she going in the right path? Playing with others' lives—is that the correct thing to do? How long will she have to continue with this double game? What would she gain by playing this dangerous game? Will all this trouble be worth it in the end?

There were so many questions that were ringing in her mind, but the answers were not as forthcoming. She now realized how simple those questions in her college exams were—at least they had clear answers. The exam of life, however, seemed to be much more complex. In the path she had chosen, lives were at stake. She didn't know if she was strong enough to deal with the consequences of her actions. But she realized she didn't have options before her now—she had already chosen her path and would have to complete the task at hand. The rest, she would decide later. Everything needed

a thorough reconsideration.

She was so immersed in her thoughts that before she knew, the train had already reached the Tirupati railway station. Three hours of journey felt like three minutes. Divya got down at the station and was crossing the main gate when she saw two ladies in churidars getting down from a jeep. They looked in her direction for a couple of seconds and then walked towards her. Only when they were a couple of feet away, did it hit her that they could be policewomen in plain clothes. It was too late to escape. Before Divya could react, they held her by her arms from either side and dragged her towards the jeep.

“Who are you? Why are you dragging me?” Divya protested and tried to free her arms. But they were stronger, and the grip was firm.

“You need to come with us to the police station”, the woman replied.

“Why should I? Do you have an arrest warrant?” she asked.

“We don’t need a warrant to question people. Just keep quiet and come with us; otherwise you’ll invite more trouble”, the other woman replied and handcuffed her from behind.

“Why are you handcuffing me? Just remove them now or—” Divya shouted.

They were in no mood to listen to her, and continued dragging her towards the jeep. They threw her in and closed

the door. There were two male constables in uniform waiting inside the jeep. They drove her to the police station. Divya remembered Aryan's suggestion not to use public transport or roam around in public places—she cursed herself for forgetting that crucial bit of advice. Upon reaching the police station, they took her to one of the cells, tied both her hands behind a chair, switched off the lights, and locked the door from outside. She tried calling them, but there was no reply. Unlike other cells that had bars and one could look outside, this one had an opaque door. After a short time, Divya became tired of shouting and fell asleep on the chair in the interrogation room.

Divya woke up as water splashed on her face. She had no idea how long she had slept. The lights had been switched on, and she could see the two lady constables in front of her. Both of them held a bucket of water. One bucket was empty—probably that was the one just emptied on her, she thought, feeling the water dripping from her face. The second constable stepped forward and splashed another bucket of water on Divya's face with great force. Divya jerked back and could not see anything for a couple of seconds until the water dripped away. The inspector walked in and asked the women to leave.

“Who are you, and why are you trying to kill the minister?” the inspector asked.

Divya turned her head sideways in defiance, not wanting

to answer.

The inspector slapped her. Since she had never been beaten by anyone, not even her parents, Divya felt a shock-wave pass through her body. The pain of an experienced police inspector slapping her was too much. She turned towards him and opened her mouth to say something.

He slapped her again. This time, his fingers hit her lips causing them to collide with her teeth. The force of the impact cut her lips and blood started flowing from them. She broke down and her eyes were filled with tears.

The inspector allowed a few seconds to pass before saying, “If you remain silent or if you lie while answering my questions, I’ll slap you twice as hard as this—is that clear?” He raised his voice while uttering those last three words.

She nodded her head.

The inspector asked, “Who are you, and why did you attack the minister?”

Divya replied, “I didn’t want to attack the minister. My boyfriend attacked him because the minister killed his father. He wants to avenge his father’s death—I was just helping him.”

“By just helping him, you have attempted murder. Do you have any idea how many years you two will be locked up in prison?” the inspector asked.

Divya was silent.

“What are your names? Where is he now?” the inspector asked.

“My name is Divya. His name is Aryan. He lives in a small house in the forest, in the Tirupati hills. Please leave me—I am innocent. It was Aryan who planned and executed everything. I was just doing what he asked me to. Please let me go”, she pleaded with tearful eyes.

“OK. We’ll let you go”, the inspector said after a brief pause.

* * *

Aryan was surfing the net when Divya entered the makeshift home. He saw Divya standing next to the door. He beamed and said, “Welcome home. Good to see you once again. Did you notice the newspapers, TV channels, and news sites? All of them are talking about our attack the other day. I am sure it was a huge blow to the minister especially on the eve of the elections. I think we have succeeded in our efforts to connect the minister with the murders. Reporters are already investigating that line. I hope the police will also start investigating soon and arrest him.”

Divya stood quietly and did not reply.

How did you come?” Aryan asked, and looked at the computer.

“I came by train”, she said and sat down on the floor.

“You came by train? I told you not to travel by bus or train—it’s risky. The police may be monitoring those places

by now”, he said.

She didn't reply. Her silence made him feel jittery. He turned around and saw her sitting down. She had covered her face with her hands. He got up from the chair, went to her and removed her hands from her face. Her eyes were filled with tears, and she did not look up.

“What happened, Divya?” he asked. She remained silent.

Aryan noticed some movement and turned to look outside the door. There were at least six policemen standing with their rifles pointed towards him. A chill went down his spine. He realized the gravity of the situation.

TWO weeks after they were arrested, the general elections got over. The minister found time to visit Aryan and Divya in prison. They were brought to the interrogation room from their respective cells. Three chairs had been placed at equal distances around a circular table. Aryan and Divya were seated on two of them. The other chair was empty. They saw each other but didn't speak.

After a couple of minutes, the door opened, and the minister walked in. He sat on his chair and looked at both of them.

"I am sure the jail food is better than the forest food you were eating over the last couple of months", the minister said, laughing to himself. No one thought it was a good joke, except for the minister.

After laughing for a few seconds, the minister suddenly became serious and said, "What did you two think? You could kill me with a couple of bows and arrows? You thought you could use this outdated archery to fight against me? You two were not only technologically challenged but also heavily outnumbered. I have the entire police department under my control."

He paused and continued, "However, I give you credit for evading arrest all this while. We should have caught you a

long time ago, but you two managed to stay out of our reach. It was a good idea—living in the forest on the hills.”

Aryan and Divya had their gazes fixed on the table.

“You both are almost as old as my own children. I can’t even imagine youngsters like you spoiling your lives with impractical ideas and outdated methods. You could have at least tried getting guns—you’d have had a better chance of killing me. But I guess you don’t know where to buy them”, the minister said.

There was no reaction from either of them.

The minister turned towards Aryan and said, “I was open to doing business with your father, but he did not co-operate. For him, his cause—this renewable energy—was more important than business. If he had been practical and realistic, he would have been very rich and more importantly living with you today. He proved to be a major obstruction to my plans, and I had no other option but to kill him, along with the other two people. I see the same diffidence in your eyes that I saw in your father’s. You should understand that people live to do business and make money, not to further some imaginary causes.”

Aryan looked straight into the minister’s eyes and said, “We should not have used those rubber tips on our arrow-heads while attacking you during the meeting. You would have most certainly become history by now.”

“So, why did you?” the minister asked.

“We believe in the legal system. We wanted to give justice a chance”, Aryan replied.

The minister laughed and said, “You have no idea how the law and order, legal and political systems work in India. I don’t want to bore you with the details, but it’s sufficient for you to know that powerful people like me control everything. You think, by doing what you did, you could strip me of my power? You think all that drama you created will make people vote against me? You think the police will arrest me and the court will hang me? Those things happen only in the movies. Reality is different. I am sure you’ll spend many months in jail—that will give you enough time to ponder over what I said and realize the futility of messing with powerful people.”

Aryan said, “I don’t know when we’ll come out, but you can be sure that your death is in our hands, whenever that may be.”

The minister laughed once again and stormed out of the room. Aryan and Divya were alone in the room once again. They looked at each other, but still couldn’t speak. Words simply failed them.

While Guru, the minister, was walking out of the prison, he heard someone calling his name. Someone had the temerity to call him by name instead of addressing him as ‘Sir’? He turned around to see who it was.

“Ah, Mr. Reddy. Thank you so much for your help. These kids had been a nuisance, but now, because of your

help, they are safely locked up in the prison—that's where lawbreakers belong. I appreciate your swift and proactive actions", the minister said.

"Mr. Guru, not all lawbreakers are inside prison. There are people who have committed larger crimes and are still roaming outside freely", the police inspector said.

This inspector not only called him by name but also had the guts to mock him! Guru maintained a smiling face and replied, "That shows the inefficiency of the police department."

The inspector, realizing he couldn't intimidate the minister, lowered his voice and came straight to the point—"Mr. Guru, I hope you will remember the incentive you promised me earlier on the phone."

"Mr. Reddy, you did your job. The government pays you a handsome salary for that. I pay incentives only to people who do special favours for me, apart from their regular duties", the minister said. Flashing a fake smile at the inspector, he got into his car and left. The inspector was left fuming inside.

A WEEK after Guru's meeting with Aryan and Divya in the prison, the results of the general elections were announced. Even though the ruling party won the elections and formed the government once again, Guru lost in his constituency. He was no longer a minister. A few crimes don't sit well with people and murder was the chief among them—people didn't vote for someone else; they voted against him. The old cabinet was largely retained as such, but without Guru. The Conventional Energy and Renewable Energy portfolios were consolidated together under a single ministry and was given to another minister, Nadeem. What Guru wanted to achieve all these days was finally accomplished, but he was not there to enjoy its fruits.

Nadeem got a huge bounty—almost on a platter. Even though Nadeem was excited initially, his enthusiasm waned soon after. His contacts and well-wishers indicated to him that even though the old minister, Guru, was no longer in charge, his hold over important executives of the department, was still very strong. Nadeem hoped things would get better with time, but found evidence to the contrary—the old minister was working very hard to strengthen his grip over the department. Guru was determined to milk the cow for as

long as possible. Nadeem had to stop him now, or this may continue forever.

Nadeem was no stranger to power politics and its games. He had worked in two different ministries earlier. But Guru, the old minister, was clinging on like a leech. He had a powerful grip over the key executives in the department. The executives were scared to take a stand against the interests of Guru. Even though Nadeem knew he would win in the long run, Guru's actions would only cause unnecessary delays and conflicts, and prove expensive.

Someone mentioned to Nadeem about Aryan and Divya and the case against them, instituted by Guru. Nadeem's curiosity was piqued, and he wanted to know more. He ventured deeper and used his influence to gather all the critical information related to the case. The more information he gathered, the more convinced he was that it could be used against Guru. Though Nadeem didn't believe in using violence to eliminate people, he had no issue if someone else wanted to use it. Violence or non-violence, Guru had to be eliminated from the scene. Nadeem was determined to use every possible resource to muster support against him.

Two weeks later, Aryan and Divya were informed that Guru had lost the elections. The new minister appointed in his place, Nadeem, wanted to meet them. Aryan couldn't guess what the new minister wanted from them. He was ushered into the interrogation room. Divya was already sitting

in one of the chairs, and she was in a cheerful mood.

“I guess we achieved something—the minister has lost the elections”, Aryan said after the constable who accompanied them left, and smiled at her.

“We achieved more than that”, Divya said and smiled back as the door opened and the new minister, Nadeem, walked in.

“I guess you are Aryan and Divya. I am glad to meet you two”, Nadeem said after the door closed behind him. Both of them looked at him blankly.

Nadeem didn’t expect them to trust him immediately. He said, “Oh, don’t suspect me of having any connections with Guru—he is my rival, and he is causing a lot of trouble. I am here to help you get out of the prison. An industrialist friend will arrange your release. By tomorrow, your bail applications will be processed, and you’ll be free.”

“But why do you want to take us out on bail?” Divya asked.

“Well, both of you are young, and it hurts me to see youth spending precious years of their lives behind bars. I know the case history, and I also know you both have a genuine cause”, Nadeem replied.

Aryan said, “This is not an election rally, and we are not people to be won over by your sweet talk. Give us the real reason—what do you expect from us?”

“Let’s just say”, Nadeem said, “my enemy’s enemy is

my friend. I understand that you two have some unfinished business with the minister, don't you?" He winked at them.

Aryan got the message, smiled within, but kept quiet. Aryan's reaction indicated to Nadeem that he was eager to utilize this opportunity.

Nadeem continued, "Guru is a powerful man—with or without his Ministry. If he comes to know that you two are out on bail, he will pursue you. I think you should go back to your forest house or... whatever you have created in the hills. That seems like a safe place for now."

"But the police knows the location of our hide—out in the hills. They arrested us from there", Aryan said.

"The police will not interfere with whatever you do this time. While I have already taken care of their interests in advance, Guru never fulfilled any of his promises", Nadeem said.

Aryan and Divya looked at each other.

"I am not lying—I don't have to. As you can see, I've been frank with you—you can trust me. I hope you'll utilize this opportunity to the fullest. All the best", Nadeem said.

"Once you are out, call me on this number in case you need any help", the minister said, handing over a card, before leaving.

AS PROMISED by Nadeem, Aryan and Divya were released the next day, and they went straight to their makeshift house in the hills. Though the police had searched the premises, they didn't take anything away from there—not even their bows and arrows. Almost everything was intact, and that would be sufficient to continue living there for the time being.

“So, what are we going to do?” Divya asked and looked at Aryan.

“What more could we ask for? Yesterday morning, we didn't know how many months or years we'd be behind bars, and today we are already back at our base. We should utilize this golden opportunity. We will strike one last time—this time, we should kill Guru. That's also what the new minister, Nadeem, wants us to do”, Aryan replied.

Something about Divya's look told Aryan that she was not comfortable with the plan. “Do you trust him—the new minister, Nadeem?” she asked.

“Of course, I don't. How can we ever trust a politician? But we should also take our current situation into consideration. Nadeem wants the old minister to be eliminated, and so do we. He has already helped us by getting us out on bail, and we will have to help him in return”, Aryan said. He

wondered why he had to defend his intentions to her. Didn't she also want the same thing?

"Don't you realize what's happening here? We have now become pawns in their game. The new minister is using us to eliminate his rival. Even if we complete the job—kill Guru—and eventually get caught by the police, it's us who will be prosecuted. Nadeem will not even be questioned. There is no evidence to connect him with this case", Divya said.

"Yes, but since when did we start worrying about the consequences of our crime? If we had killed him the first time, when your arrow missed his heart and wounded his arm instead, I guess the consequences would have been pretty much the same. We didn't bother about it then—why bother now?" Aryan asked.

"The situation then was different, Aryan. But now, we have exposed Guru in front of the national media, and we have made him lose the elections—people have voted against him unanimously. He lost all his power—his dearest ministerial berth is no longer his. We have already inflicted sufficient punishment on him. Don't you think that's enough?" Divya asked.

"How can that be sufficient? He killed our fathers, and he will have to pay for it with his life—nothing less. By killing him, we'll convey a powerful message. Let everyone understand what will happen if they start taking lives just because

they think they are powerful”, Aryan said.

“Did you ever consider what will happen to us after we kill him? What kind of future do you anticipate for either of us? We will be behind bars for many, many years. We may even be hanged. Nadeem or anyone else won’t come to bail us out then”, Divya said.

“I don’t know why you are suddenly concerned about the consequences of our crime. You seem to have changed your mind. For some reason, you don’t want to kill him now”, Aryan said and paused to think for a couple of seconds. “Or maybe, you never wanted to kill him. Guru is alive today because of you. During the first attack, if your arrow had not hit his shoulders, mine would have pierced his heart. When we attacked him during the election rally, if we had not used the rubber pieces on the edge of our arrowheads, Guru would have been dead by now.”

Divya replied, “The first time, if he had not turned suddenly, my arrow would have hit his neck instead of his shoulders. It was sheer bad luck. In our recent attack, although we managed to land both the arrows right on him, we were not sure about the accuracy from that distance. If he had had faster reflexes, or someone had pushed him away, or if we had miscalculated our aim, Guru could have easily escaped. We had discussed this at length before our attack—we concluded that our chances of killing him from that distance were very low. Going for his life and missing would have achieved noth-

ing. It's because we didn't kill him, that we were able to turn the public opinion against him, and he lost the elections. We had analysed all these things before. You never had a problem then."

Aryan was silent.

Divya continued, "We have lost nothing yet, Aryan. If we disappear from the scene, the police will start investigating Guru's murders. That will be Nadeem's next move—he doesn't have any other option. I think we should stay away from Chennai, Tirupati, Delhi and live anonymously for some time. I am sure we'll be forgotten after a few months."

Aryan said, "You are telling me that police will act against him, and we'll get justice? You know how long it takes to prosecute a person through the legal system in India. The legal route, however enticing it may seem to you, is totally ruled out as far as I am concerned. You still trust the legal system in spite of what happened to us?" Aryan paused for a couple of seconds. "I also remember you telling me then that we will strike and kill him once he is stripped of his power and that should be our logical next step. We made him powerless so that we could kill him. Now he has been stripped off his power, but you seem to have conveniently forgotten what you said."

Divya lowered her eyelids and looked down.

Aryan continued, "Guru is no longer a minister and doesn't have police protection any more. Can't you see this is

our best chance? If we don't do anything now, most probably he will find this place and kill us both. It won't take long before someone in the police gives away our location. Either we strike or wait for him to strike. Which option do you think is better?"

Divya said, "Let's go away from here. Let's go to a place where no one can find us. Let's give justice a chance, Aryan. We need to be more patient—we can't expect everything to happen overnight."

Aryan asked, "Why are you suddenly inclined to solve this legally? I don't understand how you still believe in the police and law. We can never be sure if the police will take any action against Guru, or not. But we can always be sure with our bows and arrows."

Divya asked, "If your father were alive today, do you think he would have approved of your actions? Do you think he would be proud of what you are doing?"

Aryan was silent.

"Can you live knowing that you have killed a person? Won't your conscience trouble you until the day you die?" she continued. "What's the difference between you and him? Guru chose to murder fellow human beings. In the name of revenge, you too are doing the same thing now. What's the difference between you two, Aryan? Is violence the answer to violence?" she asked.

Aryan looked away, silently admitting that he couldn't

find words to craft a reply to the difficult questions posed by Divya. She asked the questions that Aryan did not have the courage to ask himself.

After a short time, he turned back to look at her and said, “Let me make this clear. I am going to kill the minister, whether you help me or not. You will have to decide if you want to work with me. The choice is yours—if you don’t want to be a part of this, you are free to go anywhere, right now”, Aryan said.

Divya looked away. After a brief pause, she turned to face Aryan and asked him, “Have you made any plans for our next attack?”

Aryan was relieved. He smiled at her and said, “The minister will be coming to Tirupati Temple again in two weeks for his wedding anniversary. This time, unlike our first attempt, luck will not favour him.”

“We are going to attack him on the same spot?” Divya asked.

“Yes. That’s where he will not expect us to strike, once again”, Aryan said and winked at her.

DURING the next two weeks, Aryan and Divya planned their attack down to the last detail and rehearsed it many times. This was going to be their last chance, and they were determined to give it their best.

The appointed day arrived. Aryan and Divya positioned themselves on the same elevated mountain patch between the U-turns, from where they had attacked Guru a few months earlier—albeit independently. The memories of the failed attack on that day still haunted Aryan. He wanted to conquer his fear of failure by successfully executing his attack this time. This was another reason why he chose the same spot.

Though both Aryan and Divya were on the same elevated mountain patch, they were on opposite sides. Divya positioned herself on the side where she could see the vehicles approach the U-turn. Aryan positioned himself on the other side, from where he could see the vehicles leave the U-turn. Both of them could see vehicles passing below as the mountain patch was just four meters above the road. Since there were some trees, rocks, and vegetation, they couldn't see each other, but they held on to two ends of a single long rope as they waited.

Divya's job was to pull the rope towards herself immediately after she saw Guru's car, a white Ambassador with

flashing lights on the top. This action would indicate the arrival of Guru at the U-turn. Aryan needed the signalling for a reason. He was holding an arrow in one hand and a matchbox in the other. The arrowhead on this arrow was wrapped in a cloth dipped in kerosene. The match box was to light the cloth wrapped on the arrowhead so that it caught fire. He had kept his bow on the ground next to him and had a few poison-soaked arrows in a large pouch tied to his back. From his position, he could see the road, and the vehicles approaching him once they crossed the U-turn.

Opposite Aryan, just before the short protective boundary wall, there was a heap of sand. This was no ordinary heap of sand—it had been placed there for a reason. The heap was about four feet high at the narrow top and had a circular base about three feet in diameter. Such heaps of sand are normally found near construction sites, but at this location it served another purpose altogether.

Inside the heap of sand, Aryan and Divya had placed an earthen pot filled with petrol on the previous night. The opening of the pot was placed facing Aryan and was covered with a thin felt paper. A loose layer of sand covered the felt paper to hide the mouth of the pot from onlookers. The setup looked just like a heap of sand, but Aryan knew exactly where he had to launch an arrow with a burning arrowhead in order to create an explosion.

Yes, they were going to create an explosion!

They had replicated the setup a few times in the forest and were satisfied with the explosion that ensued. There was a small lag of about 1.5 seconds from the time the burning arrow went into the pot to the time the explosion actually occurred. This necessitated early spotting of the car and that in turn required Divya to alert Aryan once she spotted the car. They had marked a line on the road, and Aryan was supposed to release the arrow when the front tyres of the car crossed the line. This would ensure the car was close to the heap when the explosion occurred.

Aryan felt the rope tighten in his hands. The next instant, Divya pulled away the rope in one swift movement. That was the signal indicating the approach of Guru's car towards the U-turn. Aryan took a matchstick, created a fire and lit the kerosene-soaked cloth on his arrowhead. He then placed the arrow with the burning arrowhead on his bow. He pulled the bowstring, got into the attack position, and waited as he looked towards his left. The white Ambassador car turned around the U-turn and was now moving towards him. He was ready to release the arrow, but suddenly, the car slowed down and stopped just short of the line.

The glass windows were open, and he could see a lady in the back seat. Probably, it was Guru's wife. Aryan remembered that Guru had come to the temple to celebrate his wedding anniversary. A hand was pointing towards a location that was about six to eight meters in front of where he

was standing and everyone in the car was looking out. Aryan quickly lowered his flaming arrow to hide it from their sight but realized they were not looking at him. Perhaps Guru was narrating the event of his attack a few months back. They did not seem to notice Aryan, as he was hiding behind a tree. By now only his face had popped out to monitor them.

The car had stopped for two minutes and by this time Divya had come over from the other side.

“What happened? Why didn’t you shoot the arrow yet?” she asked.

“They’ve stopped the car. But they’ll have to move it soon—other vehicles behind won’t wait forever. You go to your position”, he said.

Divya went and stood ten metres ahead of Aryan where they had tied a rope. The rope was tied around a tree and the open end reached up to the road below. They had parked their bike on one corner of the road ahead of their location. She was ready to get down and bring the bike immediately after the explosion. This was crucial for them to escape from that location.

After another long and agonizing minute, the car at last started moving forward. Aryan got back into the striking position, along with his burning arrowhead. As the car crossed the line, Aryan fired his arrow. Within the next one second, it flew towards the heap of sand and pierced into the felt paper on the pot. The arrow delivered the flame straight into the

pot containing petrol. That set off a huge explosion, and the flames spread to almost half the road. Even though the driver saw the explosion before him, it happened so quickly that he couldn't apply brakes.

The car moved through the flames and smoke. Some petrol was splashed on the left side of the car during the explosion, and flames soon engulfed the car. The fire spread inside the car too. The car crossed the explosion site, but the driver lost control and hit the boundary wall and the car stopped. The two right-side doors of the car opened and both the driver and the lady got off the car puffing due to the fire and smoke. They pulled Guru and his security guard out of the car. Some parts of their clothes were still burning. Aryan was able to see Guru moving—he was still alive.

Aryan anticipated this possibility—that's why he had brought poison-soaked arrows with him. He quickly dropped one side of a rope on the road. The other side was already tied to a tree. He used it to climb down to the road and walked towards Guru, who was on his wife's lap. Aryan moved forward until he was just five feet away from Guru. He took an arrow, placed it on the bow string, stretched it back, and aimed at Guru's heart. He took one deep breath.

Aryan turned his head impulsively and looked back. Divya was standing ten metres behind him on the bike. She was looking at him silently. He looked at the minister once again; his eyes were filled with tears.

Aryan raised his bow upwards, looked at the sky above him, and released the arrow towards the sky. He couldn't do it. He couldn't bring himself to kill Guru.

He turned back and walked towards Divya. They got on the bike and rode downhill as fast as they could.

ONCE they descended the mountain and reached Tirupati, Aryan rode the bike to the airport and parked the vehicle. Divya finally asked him the question that had been lingering on her mind all this while.

“Why didn’t you kill him?”

Aryan got down, looked into her eyes, and looked away. He said, “I couldn’t. I wanted to kill him right until the last moment, but when I looked at you, I realized I was... maybe... wrong.”

After a brief pause, he continued, “I want to live. I want a future. A future that involves both of us. Let’s go to the UK. My student visa hasn’t expired yet—you can take a visitor visa for now. I am sure we’ll be safe there.”

Divya asked, “Why do you want me to come with you?”

Aryan said, “Don’t you realize what we just did? Or, for that matter, what we have been doing all this while? If we stay in India, we’ll be caught sooner or later and we’ll be put inside prison for God-knows-how-many-years. We attempted a murder, Divya”.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be safe. You go back to the UK and stay away from India for a while”, Divya said.

Aryan said, “It’s not just about our safety, Divya. It is... I am in lo-”

Divya said, “Don’t say that, Aryan. It’s... not possible.”

His eyes widened in disbelief. He wanted to confirm her decision once again, “Are you sure?” he asked.

Divya looked away. “Yes. I am very sure”, she said.

Aryan’s shoulders dropped. He looked down and breathed deeply.

After a few seconds of silence between them, Aryan turned back and mustered the courage to ask, “Why, Divya? You... you... don’t like me?”

Divya looked back at him and said, “It’s not that, Aryan. It’s just that I... I have promised my dad that I’ll keep my personal and professional lives separate.”

“What professional life are you talking about? I thought you said your father was killed along with my father.” Aryan said.

“No... he wasn’t. He’s still alive”, Divya said and looked down. Aryan’s face moved forward, and his eyes focused on hers.

She continued, “I am not the daughter of the Energy Minister. He has no daughters. He only has two sons, and both of them are settled abroad”, she said.

“What are you saying, Divya? Who are you then? And what were you trying to—were you set up by someone to kill me?” Aryan asked.

“No. Actually, I was set up to save you. My father works for the CBI—Central Bureau of Investigation. I finished

my graduation sometime back and plan to appear for the Civil Services examination. I want to take up a career in the IPS—Indian Police Service. In the meantime, I am... sort of... interning with the CBI. I am helping them with this case”, she replied.

It took a while for Aryan to even consider the possibility of her working for the CBI. He recollected the events that had happened over the last few months involving both of them. He still couldn't believe that she could've been set up by the CBI to track him. If the CBI knew where he was and what he was up to, they should have arrested him by now. Not send a person to help attack a minister!

“I don't get it”, Aryan said, “Initially, I found you on the mountainous patch between the U-turn when you were trying to kill the minister, just like I was. How come you claim to work for the CBI then?”

Divya replied, “Don't you think my releasing the arrow on the minister, just before yours, at the same time and location, was too much of a coincidence?”

Aryan said, “Yes, but no one knew I was going to attack the minister on that day from that place. How come... how come you claim it was not a coincidence? I mean, how did you come to know about it?”

Divya said, “Aryan, one minister and two senior executives of the Renewable Energy Ministry were killed, and you thought the Government would not do anything about

it? The CBI was instructed to investigate this case by the Prime Minister. We were able to gather all the info on who was responsible for the killing and why they did it, but we did not have any evidence to prove that the minister, Guru, was behind these killings. Our only evidence, the two employees who arranged the tea to be poisoned, were also killed shortly afterwards. Since the minister had a considerable clout and influence, we couldn't take any legal action against him without solid evidence."

Aryan said, "OK. But what does that have to do with tracking me?"

Divya continued, "Our contact in the police station in Delhi informed us about you and your complaint that was never filed on the day you went to the police station. That's when we started tracking your mobile calls and online activities, mainly to protect you, but also to track you and try to get some evidence against the minister. Your browsing activity on the Internet gave us sufficient cause for concern. We figured soon enough that you were planning to kill the minister."

"OK. But how did you find out that I was going to attack him on the Tirupati hills?" Aryan asked.

Divya said, "Your mobile GPS. We were tracking your location using the mobile GPS, which you didn't bother to switch off for most of the time. We knew when you shifted to Tirupati and in which hotel you stayed. But we couldn't

locate exactly where you stayed in the hills. We kept monitoring your activity. When you came out to survey the U-turn on the road—that too, three days before the minister was scheduled to visit the Tirupati Temple, we had a good reason to suspect that you might attack him.”

Aryan said, “But still—how did you find out the exact position from where I would launch my arrows? I think you were very close—just a few metres ahead of my location.”

“We installed a few wireless day and night IP surveillance cameras on the trees around the U-turn. When you rehearsed your attack on the two nights before the actual date, we knew exactly how you planned to attack him and from where. On the day of the attack, I deliberately positioned myself ahead of your position, without your knowledge, of course, and released the arrow on the minister’s shoulder before yours could hit his heart. My attack was a ploy to distract you from killing. We didn’t want an innocent person like you spending his entire life in jail. Besides, that gave me an opportunity to join you and monitor all your activities closely”, Divya said.

“Why did you bother doing all that? If you knew I was going to attack the minister, you could have arrested me. Why didn’t the CBI do that?” Aryan asked.

“Arresting you was not our priority. We just wanted to make sure that you didn’t murder him. Besides, we wanted to gather some evidence against the minister and thought that working with you might be useful”, Divya said.

“What about those two attacks that we launched together later on? We attacked in him in his guest house and then in the election rally. Why did you coordinate with me for those two?” Aryan asked.

“Did we even attack him in his guest house? We just launched some arrows, that too with blunt arrowheads, all around him. The first attack was supposed to keep you engaged and prevent you from suspecting me. But his panic and reactions made us realize that we could use the media against him. That allowed us to plan a more detailed and purposeful second attack, which we carried out during his election rally. That was successful—it weakened him and made him lose the source of all his power—his position as the minister. Fortunately, we were able to create a negative opinion about him, and people voted against him. That considerably strengthened our stand against him.”

Aryan asked, “But you still don’t have any evidence against him, do you?”

Divya replied, “Do you remember the conversation that Guru had with us in the prison, just before the election results were announced? If you recollect that conversation, you’ll realize that he admitted to his crime of killing your father.

“So?” Aryan asked.

“I recorded the entire conversation on my mobile phone”, Divya replied.

Aryan said, “How did you get your cellphone inside the

prison?”

Divya said, “Come on, Aryan. I work for the CBI. Smuggling a cell phone inside the prison is not very difficult, even for a petty thief. Actually, I was advised to stay inside the prison anticipating something like this might happen. I was regularly in touch with my superiors—my father, actually—using the cell phone. We decided not to involve the police department in this case. If Nadeem had not taken us out on bail, the CBI would have taken me out via the court—legally.”

Aryan said, “What about today’s attack? I almost killed Guru. I probably would have done that if I had not turned back to look at you in the last moment.”

Divya said, “That was the only chance I took personally. I tried convincing you not to kill, but you wouldn’t listen. I was asked to tie your hands and legs while you were asleep and detain you within your house in the hills so that you couldn’t have done anything today. But I refused to do that. Since I had a fair idea about you, I took a chance. But I’ll have to admit that, until the last minute, I had no idea what you would do. Fortunately, you decided against killing him.”

Aryan said, “You took a big risk. Until the last moment, when I actually changed my mind, I very much wanted to kill him.”

Divya said, “There is another reason why I took that risk. The minister should have been arrested as soon as he walked

out of the Tirupati Temple—we already had the evidence required to prosecute him. But the arrest warrant was delayed. By the time we got the warrant, he had already begun travelling downhill. I was counting on him getting arrested so that this attack wouldn't be necessary. But that delay almost cost Guru his life; and for you, your future. By the way, Guru has been arrested from the very spot where we left him."

Aryan said, "So, am I also going to be arrested before leaving the country?"

Divya said, "No. In spite of your misadventures, it was primarily because of you that we were able to gather evidence and arrest the minister now. Had you killed him there, there would have been no other option but to arrest you. But since you chose not to do that, you'll be safe as long as you are outside India. We'll make people believe that you escaped from here before we were able to get to you. Go, Aryan. Go back to the UK. Live your life just as your father wanted you to. Make your father proud."

Aryan looked into her eyes for a couple of seconds. He lowered his eyes, turned away and walked towards the ticket counter. Not once did he turn back to look at Divya after that. But Divya couldn't stop looking at him until he left her view. She kept looking in his direction even after he was out of sight.

How much she wished she could have accepted his proposal and moved to UK along with him. But she knew she

couldn't do it—there was a career, her chosen career, ahead of her, and she didn't want to spoil it. And, of course, she had a promise to keep—she would keep her personal life separate from her professional life.

About the Author

Destination Infinity aka Rajesh Kollu, is basically a 'Professional' Blogger living in Chennai, India. He has an opinion on everything and is an expert on nothing!

He was forced to become an author because people kept pestering him with the lethal question, "What do you do?"

When he answered, "I am a professional blogger" people usually persisted with questions like, "What is a professional blogger? I have never heard of this? Do you know anyone who is *also* a professional blogger? Would anyone in their right senses become a professional blogger? You quit your *plum* sales career for this? Do you earn anything from your work? How do you eat?" etc.

Now, since (at least) one of his books has been (self) published, as an e-book and in a hand made print edition, he can safely say, "I am an author, I write book(s)" With that one sentence, he aims to eliminate any further questions, especially the "Do you earn anything out of your work?" ones.

Because, it's quite normal to be an author and not be earning anything at all!! 😊

You can follow his misadventures at

<https://www.destinationinfinity.org>

The Archer's Revenge is an action-masala novel, giving you the experience of eating a home-cooked meal. As you savour the nostalgia, and chew on the familiar places in and around Chennai, you'll be met with a few surprises that will make you both laugh and cry.

In this debut novel, Destination Infinity inspires each of us that we, too, can write—all it takes is a healthy dose of foolhardiness.

Enjoy it with your kids and the kid in you!



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