

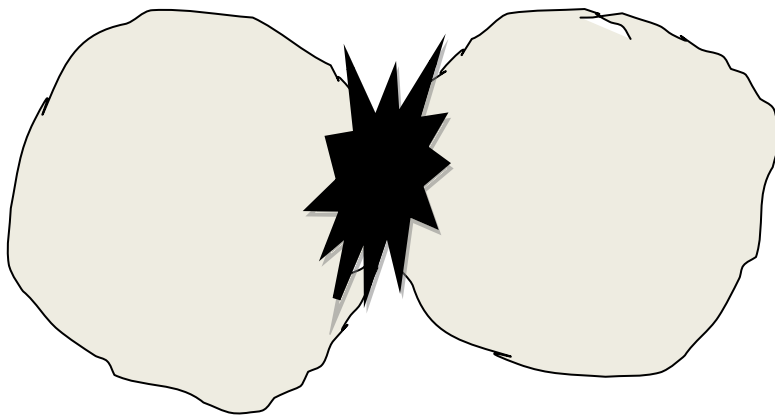
# THE SHADOWED APOGEE

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*A STORY BOUND MUSING ON  
FACETS OF LIFE.*

# PART 1

*‘Imperfection is the  
cause of all actions.’*



# PROLOGUE

I jerked shrilly. I didn't know where I was. I tried to open my eyes but I realized they were forcefully shut with a blindfold. I tried to move my hands but they were bound tightly behind my back through the chair. I moved my fingers. They were numb because of the lack of circulation. Very soon, I realized I had been severely gagged, depriving me of almost all of my senses to perceive. Perception is relative; I understood its meaning that day.

My ears caught no sound making me suspect that I was shut in a solitary spot, where nobody could come to my rescue and I could rot to death. Fresh wind constantly swept across my face making me shiver. I was definitely out in the open.

In such cases of complete helplessness one shifts into a state of paranoia almost immediately, which is followed by panic, fatigue, maybe a nervous breakdown and then death. So, it was important for me not to lose hope. I knew it could have been worse. At least I knew who was behind my abduction and why. How it must have been for people without any idea!

I tried to speak but no words came out. I could only mumble. I mumbled louder.

"Aha! You are up," came a crisp voice very close to my ears. I nodded. I knew it would be best if I would cooperate. They wouldn't dare touch me. Only I had to be mentally concrete.

"You are our special guest here. We will do whatever we can to make your stay most comfortable." I could plainly sense sarcasm in his voice. With that I heard the noise of his footsteps fading and I knew. Now I was alone.

Time lost its characteristic of passing quickly. I didn't know anything about the outside world. The cold wind continued to blow, the ropes I was gagged by continued to hold me tight, my mind continued to wander uncontrollably and my heart continued to pound anxiously against my chest.

I knew if I wanted to survive I had to channel my thoughts in a specific direction. I couldn't let my abductor get what he wanted: my hope. Memories came to my rescue. They could hold me for some time. I remembered how it all had begun. I had to employ the technique of dual persona. It suggests one to take up two personalities and imagine a monologue with one character telling the story to the other. This way even when one of the characters is haunted by paranoia of the reality, the other one comes to his rescue and takes him back to the fortress of his memory. I shook off all the gloom and graveness of the situation and began storytelling.

The reverie absorbed me.....

# I

The Shatabdi express staggered onto the Dehradun platform with a loud hissing sound, with the clear voice of the announcements in the background. A thousand impatient heads leaned against the compartment gates, waiting for the superfast express to finally halt. The train was bang on time. This was the best thing about the express. It would start in time without waiting for anyone or anything (This is rather not a novelty but nevertheless, a quality) and would roar through many of the spots, indicating them that they were not big enough yet to deserve the Shatabdi. The distance wasn't too much, and still it gave the best it could, to the passengers, without ever compromising either in service or in the expenses (more importantly). Who cares for the many expresses which are stopped midway just for the sake of getting the Shatabdi in time.

After moving for some more meters, it stopped and a hustle of people moving in and out began, although moving in were mainly the coolies, Dehradun being the last station of this frontier. I was one of those getting out.

"I'll take your bag, sir," said a coolie as he grabbed my suitcase from the handle. I had the mood to snatch it back but who doesn't like a bit of fun.

"For free? That is most sweet of you." I said with animated gestures and kept my entire luggage in front of him. He disappeared as soon as he had come without even touching my luggage, muttering words on his way. I made up a fake frown as a response. I wondered if I looked old to him to not be able to pick up some luggage. I was an experienced traveler. The coolies attacked those who looked frail.

I walked through the platform number two. Right across me was the platform number one in the background of which was the entrance, or the exit, whatever you call it. It was when I had walked about ten steps that I realized how cold it was. The night sky through the clouds was inviting nothing other than more cold. I pulled the hood over my head, the ears were freezing. But I was prepared

to face this cold. I had been warned and I had appropriate measures to fight what is almost extinct in the south and UP-- winter.

The station was small but clean and busy. The bustle of the Shatabdi was not yet over. Many lazy souls were still coming out from the train, looking left and right for the trace of the people who were supposed to pick them up. Some found them while some had to wait. It was funny for me to see so many hugs and kisses and smiles and welcomes and welcome backs.

The parting seen is also particularly dramatic. One can see and learn so many things within those one or two minutes when the train is about to go from a station. One can see a friend's true loyalty, a mother's true love, a father's true self, in simpler words the true human spirit as is inherent in all of us though we seldom show it or even see it within us. The station itself seems to me a totally dramatic place, a place where much of philosophy can be showered. Like see, doesn't this place represent our lives? You will say our life can be fitted in a bitter gourd too and I won't refuse to that because life is diverse and if you take to permutation, you will find so many dimensions yet to wander upon. But here, on the station, trains come and go, lasting here for a short time, making their impact for a short time and then going away. But tell me, does the going away of the train bring any difference to the working of the station? No, it doesn't. Our life too, is just the event of people coming and going, but in the end it is us who have to live our life and in that no train can play our part, the most they can do is put us on the right path.

Philosophy is weird, I smiled to myself, for I had just compared a non living platform with something as grotesque as life. I had reached platform number one by now. I halted in front of the weight measuring machine. I had always wanted to have myself weighed by this strange machine with colors rolling up and down. So I stood upon it and rolled a two rupee coin into the slot. A small card came out giving my weight to be sixty seven. Not bad, I said to myself. On the lower end of the card was my horoscope. Don't bother, I told myself and tossed the card on the railway track.

Within five minutes, I was out of the platform. Here, a large swarm of taxi drivers surrounded me, "Where to, sir?" they asked in muffled voices through

their high mufflers, their eyes hungry for getting a passenger. But I dashed through them without paying them heed, straight to the office of the prepaid autos. On the way, I noticed far less beggars or nomads, as compared to many of the platforms of the north east. This place, no doubt, was going to be great.

At the office, I got an auto for fifty rupees and it would drop me straight to my new house on D.L. Road. I placed myself comfortably in the auto. The night air in the open was cold enough to penetrate my hooded jacket and sweatshirt. I further wrapped a muffler around my ears. It was nine thirty in the night of a late December's day. Although, I was coming in the city for the first time, I had been informed very well about all the things here. The good man was the owner of the house in which I was going to live, shared with the owner along with two other mates. An independent house was never what I wanted. I just wanted a roof to live under, I being accustomed to nothing lavish.

Whatever one might say, some things are common in all the cities. Like here too, one can see people, entering from the exit and exiting from the entrance. My auto too didn't hesitate in exiting from the entrance.

I lifted the flap to see the new city in faint glimmer, at the cost of facing the sub zero wafts. The city was silent, perhaps asleep, defeated by the extreme cold preventing them from coming outdoors. The traffic lights had already taken the off mode. Everything was cold, closed and silent. We took a sharp left turn. The road now was wider and emptier. At high ends were big advertisement boards with the imprinted faces never getting tired of smiling and publicizing their product. These boards had fascinated me since I had come to know of the enormous money behind them. I would love to see my face in that big a poster but that would require many lakhs or may be more. We took another left turn and now came the view of the clock tower. It was gigantic and glittery. I noticed the out of ordinary six edges of the clock towers unlike the clock towers of many other cities. A novelty, it was. To our left was the Head Post office in front of which, were fountains, with colored water spattering from them, under the effect of the lights. It was fascinating to see all the street lights glimmering (It is rather a rare phenomenon for us, hailing from the north east). As we proceeded on the longest and perhaps the best road of the city, the Rajpur Road, very soon came the view of the queen of mountains, right in front of me, high up on the gigantic

mountains, for now, twinkling and glittering like a large swarm of fireflies to my myopic eye. Meanwhile, silence dominated the way.

We passed some more closed shops and I noticed many of the popular brands all having gigantic showrooms in the city. No doubt, the dwellers of this place were all millionaires but believe me; people like us can never be extinct. We are necessary for the balance, the neutrality.

All the while, the auto driver was absolutely silent; his eyes fixed in front, his body covered with shawls. I, on the other hand, was in no mood to be serious or silent.

"From how many years are you here?" I asked him.

After a pause, he replied, "Six years."

"You like this place?"

"Sir, we don't see the place. We see a passenger, that's all."

He seemed a bore. I tried to get some life in him. "When you were a child, did you play any sport or anything that you particularly liked?"

"Why do you ask me that sir?"

"Come on, tell me."

"I liked to play cricket sir, just like so many others of my age." He replied as we took a sharp right turn to enter a narrower alley. Both sides of this alley had congested houses bordering its dirty canal outlined edges.

"Do you sing?"

He blushed and shook his head.

"You don't? I don't either but you know it is quite a medicine to what is called monotony. You are a patient of that. I have seen many taxi drivers. They talk a lot and that is all just for extra money. They are ill mannered and they will surely fall prey to the smallest temptation laid in their way. They have killed their conscience." I stopped. Why was I saying all that to a taxi driver? Why would he give a damn? So, I changed the topic. "Well let us sing a song." I said and started



singing a nineteen eighties tune. He smiled and then laughed as I reached a part of the song which had a higher pitch and my untrained voice quavered to give something like a yell. The auto stopped.

“We are there sir. It was good to have you.” He said, smiling.

“Folk never waver from your principles. I don’t know how much you understand me. Hope to see you soon.” I withdrew my luggage. Then, I paid him and stood in front of the house, bubbling in excitement and anticipation.

## II

Now, my dear friend, I will reveal to you all about myself. I was born in Varanasi, being the youngest in the family. My name is Apoorv, Apoorv Sharma. About Varanasi, friend what should I say! Once I have described to you Dehradun, you wouldn't like it but perhaps you still would if you are an irrevocable theist, believing in the supreme importance of the historical city of Kashi. No doubt, the city was home to many of the greatest temples of the Hindu religion but the city could have done much more with them. The city wasn't kept well. There was pollution, beggary breeding in the open, illiteracy, dirt and many more things detestable to a person who has come in the search of the Mightiest, to find peace and contentment in His hands. The Ganges was opaque with floating polythene, soap and dirt. These were some of the things that were bad about the city. There, of course is its historical significance that still makes it a great city, but only to live for a day or two and that too in a good hotel or in the winters(the summers are torturous).

Coming to my family, my father was a senior officer in Revenue Department, so we never had any economical problems. He was a cool and calm man, never hurrying through things, never worrying about my future and all that. He used to say, "Appu, see, I will give you all I have but I don't want you to take a job that kills your entire life. You sacrifice yourself to it and it never pays back. It will destroy your incentive to innovate. Do something that goes easy. You use your mind and get returns. Even an illiterate can learn my job if he continues to do it for ten years. Repetition makes these jobs boring. But your job, the job involving sheer logic, clear sense of thinking, of innovating, can never be done by anyone else but you, by the person who has discovered that path, that conceptual space, the key to which, holds he and he alone."

My mother was a house wife and she was the main terror at home. Although, she had never thumped me, her voice had a supreme sense of command which, all of us at home had to follow. She too was B.A. and must have had many courses of how to dominate your family or how to make your children be terrorized by you

and many more. Still, in the core of her heart, she loved us and showed many of her feelings on the railway station minutes before my train was about to go.

I had an older brother, who hated me for I loved complaining against him and also because we had eight years of age difference, making us people world apart. He was a studious character and had got admission in one of the best engineering colleges in India when I was only nine.

Now, about me. To start with, I want to make it clear that I was not extraordinary. I liked to study, no doubt, but I found no sense in solving meaninglessly impractical problems. As the years advanced I started hating all the subjects except Mathematics and Physics which too, I knew only to a limit. I avoided the detestable subjects and could only secure seventy percent in my class twelve exams (negligible as compared to my brother's ninety three percent). My father never said a word but my mother was sufficiently outraged. I worked hard for B.H.U. to show my mother what I could do and got through the entrance. I did B.Sc. and continued to M.Sc. from B.H.U in Physics.

Once done, I was free. I sent my resume to many places and had got a return from Aakash Institute, a coaching institute for entrance in engineering colleges, in Dehradun. I contacted them immediately. They asked me to come to Dehradun to give demo class so that the matters could be settled. The confidence was given to me by many of my friends saying that I was good in making people understand things. I wouldn't mind teaching, I knew and so, I came to Dehradun via Delhi, believing that the students would surely accept me as a teacher.

### III

I rang the doorbell. No noise came from indoors. I rang again and listened. Nothing. I knocked on the gate. The dogs in the street started barking madly. Then, I heard footsteps, they were nearing. Suddenly the lock churned and door was opened. Then came in view, a fairly young man, perhaps just as old as I was, dressed in simple *kurta* with home knitted sweater. A high muffler covered his neck and ears.

"You must be Apoorv." He said, with an intention of beginning things.

"And you must be Prakhar." I retorted with a sense of surety. I had talked to him several times on phone.

"Just so. Welcome, welcome! I was expecting you sooner. Was the train late?"

"No. The train was great. I was just wandering across the station. It's tiny." I replied as he assisted me in carrying my luggage to my room.

"I had sorted everything out for your arrival. The bed is just ready. You must be tired."

"Not quite. Journey ended sooner than I thought it would." I replied. We had entered a corner of the house, passing through the central common room and the dining room next to kitchen. All lights were closed and everything was pleasingly warm and silent.

He asked if I wanted dinner.

"No, they gave us so much to eat. I am full, thank you." I replied.

He opened a door to the right and backed a way for me to enter first. I entered my room. It was just what I wanted. Very near to the door, was a study table on which, was kept a beautiful lamp. Right next to it was an almirah, so gigantic that I could have fitted myself in it. On the other side of the almirah was my bed, seemingly soft and comfortable with a bed sheet full of bright colors. The walls

were pale white, clean and unmarked. Towards the other end was the attached bathroom. What more does a person need?

“Hope you liked it. If there is anything you need, please don’t hesitate in coming to my room. It’s right across the hall.” With that, he turned to go.

“Thank you. And yes, Prakhar, can you please tell me the way to the terrace?”

“Left to the dining hall. Do you plan to go up there?”

“I feel like. It’s a lovely new city.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Well, good night.”

“Good night.” I said courteously.

Once he was gone, I was left to myself, in my new room but who feels like sleeping that soon and that too in a new town, full of curious things and moving sights. So, I went straight to the terrace to have a view of this sleeping city.

The terrace was a small unkempt place with a street light reaching very near to it, illuminating the terrace with yellow light.

I stood under the street lamp, against the low boundary wall. My face must have looked something very strange, a contrast of black and yellow; with black taking all the shadowy portions and the rest, by yellow. I started walking up and down the terrace with slow short steps. The breeze was cold and the sky was roofed with black clouds.

When one is alone, and its night, believe me these are ideal conditions for stray and meaningless (sometimes) reveries. So, I was starting to think about things that occupy a tired and about-to-sleep mind. Well, the first thing that struck my mind now was the discussion I had found to be taking way in my compartment in Shatabdi.

“I wonder sometimes, all these people say, India is a strong economy, India will become a world power in just some years and all this stuff, is there any sense in such gossip?” began one of the passengers, closing the Economic Times he was busy reading, right from the beginning of the journey. He had spoken loud

enough for a good part of the compartment to hear. Now he looked up and straightened.

In such situations, either the most courageous and knowledgeable speak, or the ones who find it a better alternative than staring blankly at people around them.

“Nonsense. What’s the use of such development? What’s the use of erecting skyscrapers when you can’t feed the broke?” spoke a man, his face expressing genuine dejection. Many nods and ‘yeah’s followed. Meanwhile, I moved my head from left to right as people from different corners of the compartment answered.

“But don’t you think we are mistaken too?” this came from a young lady. All eyes turned towards her. Who likes to take the blame on themselves?

“How so?” came the immediate question.

“Like see, I broadly divide Indians into two classes- the moneyed and the broke.” She said and straightened. Like a public orator she moved her head through the compartment as she spoke. Her voice had a tinge of wisdom and playful youth. “The part that strikes me the most is that in India both these classes live together but in a state of total disdain towards each other. While the moneyed class enjoys lavish lifestyle and gigantic malls, for the broke, everyday is a struggle, a hard fought battle to afford the most basic needs, which the moneyed insouciantly waste. It’s not that the moneyed are unaware of this state, the fact is that they have been seeing it long enough to develop a state of total ignorance.”

Nobody could deny that. She was so correct. “Like see, do we ever care to think how really difficult it must be for the broke to spend the monsoons without having a concrete roof over them? Even when we have some business from them like in the case of labors, do we bother to even think how difficult their life really must be? It’s all just because of the difference in exposure. While the moneyed are heavily exposed to latest technologies and knowledge, the broke spend their entire lifetimes battling for survival. No wonder, they are so mentally incompetent.”

“Even the moneyed,” said somebody else, “they are so heavily materialistic that the central and the only thing for them is money, by hook or by crook. They are not happy people either now a days, for greed is boundless.”

“Things were not like this some years back, you know,” said an old man, his voice despondent and pensive. “We were not rich. Nobody was very rich but we were simple. We helped each other so much. It was a battle, no doubt, but it was fought together. Nobody was more than the other. Everybody helped everybody.” He stopped and smiled. “You know, apple was two rupees a kg back then and still we found it expensive. We could not afford it every day but we used to get it for our kids on weekends and you cannot imagine the pleasure it brought to them. You cannot imagine how proud we felt that we could give our children apples. There was simplicity and joy in simple things. People are complicated now.” Everybody was listening intently now, smiling, regressing their way to the happy past and back again to the melancholic present. By this time, our destination was minutes away and everybody scattered, back in their own lives’ priorities. I remember I took it as the first time when I had seen the moneyed bonding so well (Be it for pass time).

The clouds had floated away to reveal the half moon. The sky seemed brighter now. Change! This was that one word that I hated and with which I was most unaccustomed. I know this is the biggest sign of mental immaturity but this was the one thing that I just couldn’t help. I hated to see the shade of my father’s moustache changing from jet black to hazy grey and then to streaks of white. I hated to see my mother’s spotless young skin loosening with time giving way to wrinkles and spots. I hated to be forced to throw away my favorite T-shirt just because it fitted me no more. The T-shirt was a constant, I was a growing variable. Wish the T-shirt could grow with me! In my days of learning differentiation too, I loved the constants, it was so easy to deal with them rather than those complicated variables, although my Mathematics teacher always said, “You should be like positive variables. See how constants are thrown out of differentiation. You should be in action, always with something, for constants are only the dead.”

My legs were painful now. I was done with walking. Without delaying, I descended the steps and went straight to my room. It was time to sleep. The bed

felt just as comfy as it looked. I was asleep before I could have the consciousness to close the light.



# IV

Someone was singing. It was rather a familiar tune, an English song it was. I awoke and rubbed my eyes. I looked on the walls for a watch. There was none and I remembered. I was yet to unpack. The light I had left switched on still glowed, but its brightness was dwarfed by the overwhelming sunlight that had lit up my room. I closed the light and left my bed (most heartbreaking moment it was) and after freshening up, came out in the dining room cum common room. There, in the kitchen was Prakhar with another boy. They were preparing breakfast.

Prakhar noticed me and said with a smile. "Good Morning. How was the night?" The other boy turned to look at me.

"Passed like a blink of the eye." I replied to Prakhar.

"Ah, yes. I must introduce you to Akarsh. Akarsh this is Apoorv, our new mate."

I went forward to shake hands. He gave his.

"Nice to meet you, Champ." He said. His voice was girlish and in a low pitch, it sounded nothing different.

"So you must be singing In the End, Linkin Park, isn't it?"

"That's true. I love that album. By the way, how old are you?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Out of curiosity."

His sudden curiosity to know my age was surely out of ordinary. Nonetheless, I answered, "Twenty three."

"Bravo!!" Prakhar shouted from the kitchen. The look on Akarsh's face was that of disappointment.

“Why? What is there to rejoice?”

“Akarsh still remains the youngest. So you are still the little man, Akarsh. He is in college, second year engineering. We call him Elfin.” Prakhar said, clearing away the doubts.

“Oh, I see. By the way, what’s going on?”

“Making breakfast. I have to leave for office at sharp nine and he has to go to college. He is good at making chappatis. Look how round and tiny they are. I am good at making the vegetable. So, I make that. Ajay is good at making eggs and juice. Oh, you haven’t met Ajay. He is out right now. He would return by nine. He goes for his tennis coaching. Ajay is a coach and himself is a great player.”

I nodded to all that he had to say. “I will make whatever you will ask me to. I am sorry I didn’t turn up today.”

“It’s okay. Elfin didn’t realize this for over a month and we finally had to shout at him. Isn’t it Elfin?”

Akarsh smiled. “I knew it from the first day and I pretended I didn’t. It was so funny to see both of them preparing food for me just out of courtesy. Ha!”

We all laughed at that. I tell you, if I would have been in Prakhar’s place, I don’t think I would have taken it as lightly as he did.

“By the way, where do you work, Prakhar?” I asked.

“In the bank. The job is very busy. I return by seven in the evening. When is your demo class?”

“It’s today at eleven o’ clock. This place,” I tried to remember the name. “Meedo Plaza. Is that walking distance?”

“Yes. It will be less than a kilometer. You come out of this alley and then go left. Keep a watch to your left. It will come after the traffic signal.”

So, after having a pretty gossipy breakfast, I started getting ready for the class. At about nine, I heard a knock on my door. It was Prakhar.

“Hey, just wanted to introduce you to Ajay.” He said. A tall, hefty young man walked up to me, his eyes gleaming, “Hello!” he said.

“Nice to meet you. I am –“

“Appu. We can call you that, can’t we?” he smiled.

I nodded my approval. There are some things that you just can’t avoid, can you? With that Prakhar and I bid farewell to the other two and set out to face the day.

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It had been a fortnight, a fortnight since my arrival in Dehradun and the conformation of my job in the coaching institute thereafter.

I looked at my watch. Seven pm. Still fifteen minutes to go. I wrote the next heading and turned to speak again to my inattentive audience; that being a score of teenagers, half asleep, forcefully jotting down what I wrote. From the last one hour I was speaking continuously and by now, my initially active audience had lost it. They just wrote; their eyes blank and preoccupied.

It had been hard work, hard work to prepare the topics to that degree of perfection, so that any questions from their side could be duly answered. I had decided the content and order in such a way that if they would have paid attention in the class and would have asked questions which I expected them to ask, they wouldn’t ever need to worry about the topic at all. But, while against children, you don’t get what you want to get. The response was heavily disappointing. Even though I cracked jokes pretty often (that being a part of my character) so that the students don’t succumb to the intricacies of Physics and instead, take fun out of it, their interest riveted to me as long as the joke continued (they would take as much pleasure out of it as they possibly could, neither would they miss any opportunity to make fun of any mistake that I made) but as soon as I returned to the topic, they returned to the jotting robots that I didn’t want them to be.

I tried to find the eyes with some attention and interest. I began from the right. Yeah, right there in the last row, a girl showed some of that. So, staring at her, I began.

“So torque, children, what do you understand by that?”

I answered my own question, “It’s the turning effect of a force.” My eyes and my voice heavily relying on that girl’s attention, I continued, “Let us take an example of a disc. Now, actually, when two forces act in such a way that they don’t produce any translational acceleration,” Her attention flickered, she yawned. She was my only hope. “but form a couple to give an angular acceleration to the body, thereby rotating it,” I waited for her to look up again but now, even she chose to stare gloomily at her notebook, “they are said to produce a torque and that is it!!” My volume rose. All heads rose too. I had lost my temper.

“From the last one hour, I have been shouting and you, you think you are doing a favor to me by sitting here and sleeping. How can you not understand your parents are spending a fortune so that you can study well and you, you ravage the time away. You think it’s cool to come out of the classroom and say we understood nothing. Let me tell you something. IT’S FOOLISH!!” I glared. All heads were down again, but now for a different reason. I had been a child. I knew how little all I had said meant to them. I knew that the moment I would leave the room, their faces will be bright again, the reason being that children hate it when things are thrown at them raw.

Still, I continued, “If you have to waste your time and sleep, from tomorrow,” The bell rang loud. My voice drowned in it. Smiles appeared on all faces, controlled well enough for a teacher who is old enough to forget himself in their place to miss, but not to me. I would have smiled too if I would have been in their place. Anyway, I had to complete my statement (since the hustle and bustle had begun, under the table, children had packed their bags.)

“Don’t bother to come to the class unless you want to study. I would turn you out if I catch you not paying attention.” I spoke, propelling my voice with as much severity as I could dig in and find.

With that, I stormed out of the classroom, clouding my face with unctuous but heavily carved furious expressions.

Within fifteen minutes, I was out on the street, my eyes blinking quickly to adapt to the darkness outside. The traffic had slowed down and the street looked deserted. I waited, for what, I didn't know. I stared at the sky. The moon shone brightly. It was one of those moments when one stops seeing sense in the hustle bustle of daily life, when all one seeks for is a life unhindered by worldly troubles, just peace in the lap of nature.

The disappointment from the children's response to my teaching wasn't something I had expected. It was not that I had not been told about this, but it was that I always thought that teachers were mistaken, in one way or the other. But now that I found myself a victim of it, I didn't know who to put the blame on. All I knew was that I had given the very best I possibly could give. I respected curiosity, a desire to know, an afflatus to learn, an open mind to gasp in wonder at the majesty of nature and these were exactly the things that I only scarcely saw in this place and according to my colleagues no other place was any better.

I started walking with my mind and my body in two different worlds. In my mind was the thought of the next day, with the same jotting robots, uninterested teenagers, with the same four classes a day schedule with little solace even in the break. My body on the other hand, reflected physical exhaustion, my watering eyes, my dry throat and my painful head.

It was a half an hour walk and I found myself in my lane. But by the side of the gate, in front of our house, leaning against their bikes were Ajay and Prakhar. I looked more closely. It was definitely them.

"What's happened? Why are you standing here?" my voice came out weak, like from a dilapidated drum (I was not feeling any different either).

"Actually, Elfin is in there with his girlfriend, yeah he has one." Ajay smiled to my stunned look, "He likes to have the home to himself while she is around."

"So we just wait until she leaves?" I asked bitterly. I was in no mood to stand (more importantly) outside in the cold.

Prakhar stared at me, like piercing me with his eyes. "Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yeah. Just had a rough day." I replied.

"Come on let's go then and have a coffee." suggested Ajay, with his hand on my shoulder. A coffee was not something that I would mind and so we three set out. It was a five minute walk to Café Coffee Day.

This one week in Dehradun had told me a lot about the city and also about the people I lived with. Well, about Dehradun, it was indeed a very good place. To start with, it was particularly a heavy-eyed city. It slept at around eight after which everything went silent. Even in the morning the city began because of the school kids in their speeding two wheelers, causing the bitter policemen to start up the duty early. Schools! They were everywhere in Dehradun. It all began with The Doon School, the very prestigious school from which leaders and rich businessmen passed out. From then onwards, Dehradun became a hub of schools, from the Doon International School, Doon Global School, Doon Public School and many more, all inching closer to the name-- Doon school, in the hope that people would expect the same standard as that of the great school from them just because they shared a word in common with it.

Also Dehradun boasted of fascinating sceneries, from the awe inspiring Mussoorie, glimmering among the mountains to tiny brooks and heavy greenery. But the sad part was that here too, the bigger seasonal rivers namely Rispana and Bindal were heavily polluted, initially because of discharge of effluents from the nearby industries and afterwards due to them being declared as the alleged dumping ground of all non- biodegradable wastes.

Well, about the people here. Frugal, insular (To the healthy degree sometimes and sometimes not) and uncomplicated, these are the words which explain them, almost entirely. And now about my mates, Ajay, Prakhar and Akarsh. Although they seemed to be just like any group of three youngsters living together, laughing, partying and sleeping heavily, they so much were different. Ajay and Prakhar went to bed at around nine, due to the heavy exhaustion from the day. They got up at around four thirty and Elfin slept at that time. After Prakhar and Akarsh had gone to their works in the morning, Ajay went to public libraries and read heavily. All three of them were very silent people. They rarely gossiped.

Neither did they interfere in each other's business. On weekends, they all remained in their rooms and emerged only in the evening for a walk, which I mostly preferred to skip because of the awkward silence we all shared as we walked for kilometers. Prakhar and Ajay smiled at themselves looking at the skies, trees everywhere except at us. Elfin busily message chatted with his girlfriend or with his friends. Many a times he hiked with his friends on weekends only to return on Monday morning.

This attitude though pleasant to a certain degree had a tinge of heavy monotony and lack of enthusiasm, making me increasingly willing to speak to anyone out of the job, because I hardly spoke, I hardly smiled, as the days rolled by.

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"So what happened?" asked Prakhar as we comfortably settled in the Café, sipping cappuccino.

"Just the usual stuff. High expectations, low results from their side. Even good children, they are spoiling themselves." I heaved. To have Prakhar and Ajay talking to you isn't something you get every day. So my motive was to cherish each word they spoke and if possible, to make them speak some more.

"I harangued them today. Told them how they were wasting away their parents' money. Even personally talked to some of the good students who seemed to wander off. But teenagers, to get them to accept something that you are saying is like," I ventured for a simile, "Anything very difficult." Similes are tricky.

"They have settled a thing in their mind that whatever a teacher has to say is necessarily and by default, wrong and there is nothing that he can possibly say which is actually of benefit to them. Such is their mindset." I spoke sullenly.

I looked up to see Prakhar and Ajay smiling at me. "What are you smiling at?" I asked.

"So you don't know it yet?" Prakhar spoke.

"Know what?"

"This is the first thing you must understand in today's world. For having a healthy heart and a sound body, this is a hard fact that a doctor and a teacher have to understand. Tell me what your job is?"

"I am a teacher. You know that."

"No, listen to your words. Speak them to yourself. You are a what?"

"A teacher. So, what?"

"Apoorv, your job is to teach and that is it and there is no stone that you should leave unturned to do this job to perfection. But if you try to reach beyond your job, which in your case is to see that children are morally good or to see if their hairstyles are right, to see if the good children don't cross over to the dark side, by doing all this you will only be wasting your breath. You will be worrying about others, while wasting away the best in you. Yes, a reasonable concern is of course, healthy and so is your interest to maintain discipline in your class but if that thought is on your mind the whole time, it can destroy you. Remember, you have a life too. Remember your goals, your aspirations."

I listened quietly. Deep in my mind, I knew he was right. Reality dawned upon me. A teacher, who sacrifices his life to the children so that they become a marvel, sounds great but is rationally foolish. Although, it was exactly the realization that I never wanted to have, it was a welcome change from my state of apparently perpetual gloom.

"Carefree and yet honestly dedicated. That should be you if you want to survive in this profession and in turn in this world. People have switched to the deviated definition of this lifestyle- Carefree, dishonest and blatantly treacherous. That of course is not very good to adopt." Ajay smiled.

"I understand," I said. "By the way, neither of you is a teacher of this kind. How do you know about this stuff then?"

"It isn't a very big thing, you know. You got to know these things if you want to survive. Every profession has some rules, some precautions."

Now my mind was bursting with anxiety to ask the question that I wanted to ask them right from day one.



“Can I ask a question, guys, to you both?” I had gathered the courage.

“Is it personal?”

“No, not exactly.”

“Go on then.”

“How do you manage speaking so less, hardly enjoying what is said to be the best part of one’s life?”

They chuckled. That was expected. “We enjoy, Apoorv, we surely enjoy, just in a different way.” With that Prakhar stopped and returned to his cappuccino.

“You mind sharing that different way with me?” I spoke, when I had waited enough for him to continue and he hadn’t.

“You will know, with time. Get up at around five thirty tomorrow morning and come on the roof and I will give you a demo. Try our fun.” Prakhar smiled.

“Considering the cold, isn’t it a herculean task to get up as early as that?”

“Your call.”

“I am in. I will be up.” I spoke, only half believing in myself.

I knew our conversation had run its time. The rest of my cappuccino disappeared in total silence, with the three of us totally indulged in ourselves.

As we walked back home, on one hand I was clear in my mind about my plan of action tomorrow with children, easing away my gloom, and on the other hand, my desire to know what exactly their source of enjoyment was, had touched its peak. Its human tendency, what he doesn’t know is exactly the thing that obsesses him until he comes to know it and then he realizes the sheer pointlessness of knowing it. I didn’t know if it would be true in my case.

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I awoke with a start. My room was arranged now, my way. Right in front of me was the wall clock. But my drowsy eyes added with the slight myopia saw only blurred white background dissected with black lines. I left my quilt and went closer. It was quarter past five. Perfect, I said to myself.

Within fifteen minutes, I was on the terrace, panting. Although it was completely dark (more importantly, icy) the street light had illuminated the terrace. I saw Prakhar, leaning against the boundary wall, admiring the radiant Mussoorie.

"Well, I am here." I spoke.

He turned and smiled. "Good. I didn't expect you."

"I am not so predictable." I grinned.

"Nice to know. I guess it's time to begin our session," I listened. He continued, "Tell me who you consider to be the most powerful in this world?"

"Well, Barack Obama perhaps."

He laughed. "Not in that sense. I am talking of someone or something that transcends human abilities, someone who is the master of creation, immortal, omnipresent, omnipotent."

"Spiderman. Although I still think Dr. Octopus could have defeated him if only he wouldn't have fallen for his rhetoric." I joked. Prakhar wasn't smiling. "I am sorry. I was just kidding."

"You don't need to tell me your character at all. Just create a good image of Him in your mind."

"Something like a caricature?"

"Not exactly. More like a 3D high definition icon. Try and include close up details."

"Okay." I knew what my character would be. It always was Reverend Laxman. Yes, Laxman from the Ramayana and not Lord Rama. I had a reason.

In my childhood when my mother had told me the story of Ramayana, I had gasped at the power and gallantry of Lord Rama. When I grew older and became

acquainted to the realities of the world, it was then that my admiration and fascination for Reverend Laxman began. This was because although, Lord Rama was of course great and powerful, it is the perspective of Reverend Laxman that we have to think from. He was not divine. How it must have been for him to always live in the shadow of his brother, to see everybody worshipping Him, while he remained earthly. In the present times, a situation like this can catapult a person into inferiority complex and envy, so overwhelming that it can suck away the good in him and can toss him into eternal gloom of subjection. And yet we see him steadfast in the path of truth and honest dedication to the Lord. He is the closest one can get to the perfection that we characterize only with the divine. So began my veneration to Reverend Laxman and it has never fallen ever since.

I tried to remember the painting I had drawn from in my sketch book back in primary school of Him (It's in block letters for me, always). The idol of Him next to Lord Rama and Sita in our Pooja room back at home, aided to my memory.

"So, I will speak now. Just try to visualize all I speak. Try and feel it. I know that you are a physics teacher but for a moment forget your physics and accept things as they happen. Don't let your imagination be crippled by laws." Prakhar spoke as he sat beside me. I nodded.

"Don't interrupt in between and concentrate."

"Do I need to close my eyes?"

"Not compulsorily. But the imagination gets better with closed eyes."

"Okay then. I am ready." I closed my eyes.

He drew a deep breath and began, "I escaped. The speed gifted to me was fascinating. I rose as high as I could imagine and then began for my destination-the ultimate, the transcendent. Through darkness, I passed through sleeping cities, in pity of their unawareness, or rather, their ignorance. But I couldn't be dimmed for I myself was a source of light. The shade of the rising Sun changed as I travelled through India, cruising over Africa, then over America and finally escaped the atmosphere into space through the portal of the Earth. I felt light. I didn't need any atmosphere, I smiled to myself. I was immortal."

"I sped once again. Past Mercury I hustled with its overwhelming heat which increased as I neared the Sun. I passed the Sun and fled through the portal of our Milky Way. I passed many silent galaxies, in partial light from their sources but all dead, lifeless. It had been quite a travel before I reached the divine's portals. I heaved. There, right in front of me was the undying source of light. 'Holy Father!' I muttered. He was right across the Elysian lawn. I walked through the lawn, never missing any of the shades of the spring which never left this divine palace. 'Chase your ambitions but never miss the ecstasy you come across in the way.' He had said. I was obeying him."

"I noticed the rose, with its unique tinge of divinity, its crimson shade, soothing to the eye. I noticed the cactus, with a shade of festive yellow and a skin of fur. I smiled to myself. There could be no thorns here."

"I neared the dome. A downpour of peace was setting upon me. Flawless, I said to myself. I entered. It was gigantic, sparkling in His light, lowering in His ovation. He looked at me with his radiant eyes. I knelt down near his feet. He lifted me and took me in His arms. There was nothing that I wanted. I was complete."

Rapture shivered me. I had immersed in my imagination. It was a feeling that the worldly words cannot hope to explain. Every word that he spoke appeared as a picture in front of my eyes as clear as reality.

"I talked to Him, told Him everything about the past week, about how things were happening adversely and how I had held on somehow to adapt myself to the torrents that rose so often. He smiled at me. 'Everything changes and yet, nothing actually does. Sow child, I am always by your side.' It was everything that I ever wanted. I didn't want to leave but I knew I had to. I wasn't a coward. I had to fight the world and become a conqueror. After casting a last look at Him, I exited the palace. After crossing the many galaxies and silent planets, I reached my galaxy Milky Way. I entered Earth and after passing through all the continents, reached India. I headed north and reached where I was sitting—Dehradun."

He stopped. I didn't feel like opening my eyes. It was a heavy sensation of peace. Prakhar had made it a point to speak the lines at a slow pace and with a jab of

emotions related to the scene, so that I could feel it exactly the way it was supposed to be felt.

I opened my eyes. Sun was gradually coming up now. The street light was dwarfed by the scattering plumes of the rising Sun.

"I must say you are a very good orator."

He smiled. "So how was it?" he asked and got up.

"I can't find the words." I admitted.

He smiled. "I hope it's in the positive sense."

I nodded. "I thought this is done using the soul concept, where you consider your God to be a source of light too."

"Yeah, that's right but that makes it difficult to imagine. It's when you imagine the things that you see each day that you get interested. If you were good with your hands, you could have drawn your heaven as it is in your imagination."

There was a brief pause and then he continued, "I wonder how youngsters of today can afford to miss out something as profound as this."

I considered a reply. "You know, I don't blame them. This is something incredulous, something they have never seen, something they don't know if exists. On the other hand, their kind of fun is right in front of them. I don't know for how long this peace will blanket me."

"As long as you want it to last." He spoke, much like a know-it-all philosopher.

"Sounds good. It isn't practical and you know it."

"You don't trust your mind?"

"Let me rephrase myself," I wasn't meek when it came to a clash between philosophy and practicality. "The thing that we just did is fun, no doubt. But if you ask a teenager to do it, it's like asking him to shoot in the dark. He will end up either severely distracted or he will be irritated in a minute."

"Okay, I agree. You have a point with a teenager. But what about you?"

"What is its benefit? Yes, I feel peaceful and yes, I will behave properly with people. But will this make poor people rich? Will it put their sufferings to an end? These were still the bigger problems. Let me choose a lighter one. Will it make the corrupt less corrupt?"

"If only they practice it daily-"

"And you know they won't. Why would they? They have a choice between what they can touch and see, money, the thing that gives them, be it ephemeral, pleasure, and something they have never seen, they have never touched."

Prakhar sighed. "It seems you have given it quite a thought."

I nodded.

"Why is it that physical touch is stronger than the experience of a soul?" Prakhar shook his head, disgustedly.

"Because the fact is that we spend sixteen to seventeen hours of our day with our eyes open to the physical world, the world outside. The sensation is stronger."

"This makes me wonder if we were even supposed to do all this or not."

"Do what?"

"Considering the physicality and materialism, if we were supposed to wander of to Him or not?"

"He inspires, no doubt. But a girl may do just as good." I grinned. For the first time Prakhar laughed care freely. I knew I had made a point to him today. It must have been an unwelcome realization. So, I patted him lightly. He smiled. With that we descended the staircase, back to the world we had to be in.

# V

Things had changed since the time I had talked philosophy with Prakhar. It was as if I had cracked the code to an encrypted android. Both Prakhar and Ajay had opened up to me and liked to talk over breakfast, lunch, and dinner and even over our walks. Many of our walks ended up in heated sessions of oblivious quibbling with either Prakhar or Ajay losing the track of what I was speaking or the other way around.

My classes went smoothly once I had accepted the fact. There was something that Ajay had told me one day that could have changed the fact but I will tell you that later.

The deal was simple. If children gossiped, I turned them out and if they were ready to learn, there was nothing that I was not prepared to do in order to improve them. Although I saw some good children losing it, I bothered only with mild rebukes in the class or with satires on their eccentric hairstyles. What scolding can't do, sarcasm can. In the teenage, children develop the sheath of vanity which if messed with, has the tendency to strike back venomously, only in this case this tendency made them prove to me that they weren't good for nothing, which in turn, made them study. My job was done.

It was one of the week days and I was knocking on our main door, after returning from my work. Generally, Prakhar opened. But today, there was no reply. I knocked again. It again went unanswered. The scene reminded me of an eerie poem that I had read back in high school, where a lonely traveler knocks on the door of a deserted house where the dwellers were only the dead and most preposterously, he knew the inhabitants. They listen to his calls, but are separated by a world to answer.

I wondered if something like that was happening. But before I could knock again (the traveler in that poem knocks plenty of times before leaving), the lock churned. I heard the metallic clang and the door opened. Only I wasn't greeted by the familiar smile of Prakhar. It was a girl. I stared at her. I had seen her somewhere.

“Who are you?” she inquired.

It was then that I remembered. I had shared the train with her. She was the one who had spoken up in my compartment. For a second, I decided to speak the same. Some sanity struck me the next second. Around thousand people had shared the train with me that day. It was nothing serendipitous. But what was she doing at my place?

“Is it Apoorv?” I saw Prakhar coming from behind the door, “Oh, yes. Let him in, for God’s sake, Shraddha. He lives here.” Prakhar laughed. “Sorry for that man, she is quite,” Prakhar stopped to venture for an inoffensive word under the gimlet eye of Shraddha. “Blatant.” Shraddha glared at him. He smiled blushing. All that time, I stood in the doorway. She now went out of the way and I entered.

“Formally, Shraddha this is Apoorv, he is a physics teacher here in Aakash Institute and Apoorv this is Shraddha, my colleague.”

I lowered gently to greet her. She did the same, hardly smiling.

“So she works with you in the bank?” I questioned. Stupid question; that’s what colleague means, I said to myself and without waiting for an answer, left for my room. For the next hour, I crossed the hallway twice for the kitchen and both the times, I saw them talking deeply. Office work sometimes gets tedious, that was what I satisfied myself with, for I could find no other reason for her to be at our place at that hour.

When I had prepared my share of the meal and was waiting for the girl to leave so that we could have our meal, I heard a knock on my door. I quickly opened. It was Prakhar.

“Apoorv, I got to go for a very important job in the bank which I must finish now. Don’t wait for us, okay? Have your dinner.”

I nodded. It had happened many a times before. Prakhar left for work many a times after work. “Is Ajay around?” I asked.

“No, I presume he is in the library. You have your dinner. You must be dead tired.”



That was true. I was sitting in my super comfortable quilt and so, I fixed a time when I would leave it to go in the dining hall. (for that was the only way I could find to amass the required will of doing anything against the overwhelming desire of retiring into bed in my quilt) But just as Prakhar left, another tap on my door aroused me. Ajay wasn't around, Prakhar wasn't around. It could only be Elfin. I opened the door and so it was. Elfin stood in his night suit, his face was pale, his eyes red.

"Saw a ghost or what?" I asked him.

"I want to talk to you. Can you come to my room?" From the time I had seen him, for the first time he seemed so grim.

"Why, what's up?"

"Follow me." He spoke shortly and I obediently did. He opened his door and I entered. It was exactly the way I had imagined it to be. Piles of book lying here and there in a haphazard heap, dirty mattresses, dirty bed sheets and perpetually open laptop made the room an ideal haunt for a college going youngster, yet to discover the wonders of self discipline.

He commanded me to sit. I did. "Your room is a very rare piece of art. I wonder how hard you must have worked to create an antique such as this one." I taunted. He didn't smile.

"Okay, seriously what's going on?"

"I have something to talk about."

"Concerning what?"

"Prakhar and Ajay."

"What about them?"

"They are not good people."

"And what makes you say that?"

"I know more things about them than you do. Did you wonder where Ajay is?"

“Prakhar told me he is in the library.”

“And which library is open at this hour?”

Elfin was right. No library is open now. But that was not the point. The point was that Prakhar had lied to me. “What do you think is going on with them?”

“I don’t know. I asked them once when I observed all this for the first time. They said it was none of my business. I said okay and never asked again for I didn’t want to lose this place. But I am sure whatever it is, it’s clandestine.”

“May be it is just some girlfriend stuff.” I doubted myself. Prakhar wasn’t the kind of person who would have a girlfriend.

“I thought that. But then one day I found them tiptoeing away at around one thirty at night and returning at around three, both Prakhar and Ajay. Now tell me what does that mean?” I had nothing to say. He continued, “I am just asking you to maintain a distance from them. They might be anything, anything bad.” He spoke with a sense of maturity that I had never seen in him before. But that is the beauty of life. Situations bloom a person.

“But then if that is the case, aren’t we supposed to find out what exactly is going on?”

“See, you might be a person with revolutionary and sacrificial streak but I am not. I just want an ordinary worry free life with lots of money, nothing else. My engineering gets over and I am out of here.”

“That certainly is your choice but I am going to find out, with you or without you.” Sounded great, I knew but deep inside I was afraid. Afraid of the worst; what if they were terrorists? In the state in which India was, it wasn’t difficult to imagine something such as this. They wouldn’t think twice before killing anybody. The idea definitely was in contrast with their discovered demeanor, but who knows? May be they had just used me as a prop.

“And now let me show you my last piece of evidence against them.” Elfin went over to the window and peered down. I followed him. Our house stood deep in D.L Road and from it, through labyrinthine lanes, one could go to Canal Road and through it, into a small settlement called Jakhan which in turn, led to the

higher part of the city through the Rajpur Road and also, downwards into the main city.

"You know Prakhar's bank lies near the Clock Tower?" I nodded. Below us in the street, we saw Prakhar and the girl going the other way on his bike. So, he wasn't going to the bank. Then where was he going? The character of Shraddha added to the mystery.

"There you go. Now you trust me?"

"I don't know, man. This sucks. I am dead tired. Let us have dinner and sleep and let the morning take care of the trouble." With that, I sauntered out of his room.

Both of us had a silent dinner and then I knew I had to make it light.

"So man you have a girlfriend. You never told me?" I smirked.

He smiled blushing. "Yeah, you never asked. Her name is Christy. She is Christian."

"Score! Is she in your college?"

"Nope. I met her on facebook. It turned out she is coming to Dehradun for some research. We met then and liked each other instantly."

"Awesome!" I commented. Smart kids of the day, I said to myself.

"Actually we had to meet tonight at a restaurant."

"Then why didn't you go?"

"We broke up." He said in almost a whisper, his eyes distant.

"Really? Why?"

"The same old thing. I did something. She did something and we both misunderstood each other to the extent that it destroyed us." He smiled, broodingly.

"So how did you know your misunderstanding was actually a misunderstanding?"

"I just slipped it out while speaking. She caught it and then the rest, is just history."

There was a short pause and then I changed the topic, "So, I saw your bike, it is awesome. Which one is it?"

"It's Pulsar 220. I bought it three months back."

"So what are the racing feats you have accomplished with it?" I questioned. I had started knowing young kids just too well. He was just an older version, with very much the same thinking procedure.

He grinned. "Top speed I have achieved with it is around one sixty. Felt like I am riding the air. You can't imagine the feeling."

I don't want to, I said to myself.

"I better sleep now, Akarsh." I called him by his name only for the second time. "Got an early class tomorrow. I will keep in my mind what you told me and I will find out what really is up. Good night."

"Good night and thank you."

"What for?"

"For talking to me the way you did. Break ups are never easy." He looked miserable.

I didn't know what to say. I had never been in his place. I just smiled to him in consolation. Words can be mistaken, but smile can never be.

I learnt two things that day. Never judge a person by his outlook and never consider teenagers to be foolish. The second one came from one of my classes where one of the boys had come to me after the class and had cried (literally), for he wasn't getting good marks. I had consoled him somehow. Teenagers were like rich deposits of emotions with a young brook of persistent sentiments falling

from their brink and they didn't know how to control it. It was in understanding them that one needed some time. After that, they are easy.

So, with the weight of the new found truth about all three of my roommates, I slept with a new energy to face tomorrow. The monotony had finally broken.

# PART II

*“Situations are specific orientations.”*

# VI

My eyes were red with rage as I saw the Enemy right in front of me. The terror in his eyes was most soothing. My lips loosened to a wicked smirk.

“Behold! Your end has come.” I spoke, in almost a whisper. The Enemy broke into profuse apologies and pleas of mercy. Mercy! Mercy is for the ones who can redeem. As I took a step closer, his terror reached its acme. He started looking for escape routes, miraculous rescues but nothing was going to save him today.

“You know,” I began as I took another step towards him, “When you throw a boomerang, it comes back to you. Your actions were your boomerang; I am here to get the boomerang back to you.” I raised my hand towards him; my eyes were focused on him. As I did, his feet left the touch of the ground and he rose. Like a shackled bird, he kicked and punched in the air but he moved nowhere. A crushing force pinned him to the wall, his arms and legs fell loose. His eyes rolled. Fighting his pain, he reached for the gun. I saw him pull it out and target at me. I smiled calmly. He pulled the trigger and the gun roared. For a moment the Enemy thought it was over but the very next moment, what he saw made him gasp in utter disbelief. The bullet had stopped midway through its trajectory and was now floating in mid air.

“Bad move, man. Bad move.” I smirked. The streamlined end of the bullet swung in mid air and now faced the Enemy.

“Hell awaits you.” I prepared myself for the final move.

“Apoorv!” Somebody yelled. I turned backwards but saw nobody. Nobody can stop me tonight, I said to myself. I raised my hands. One last push and the same bullet will be embedded in his heart, I planned.

“Apoorv!” somebody yelled again and this time, wild knocks followed. My dream broke and I sat up straight in my bed. I took a moment in getting back at reality. Somebody was yelling my name and knocking my door wildly in the middle of the night.

I remember the dream because actually it had been the harbinger of the storm that was going to come any moment and change everything the way I knew it into something that I hadn't ever imagined.

"Who is it?" I asked, without leaving my bed.

"Apoorv, this is Prakhar. Open up. There is an emergency."

I quickly left my bed and opened the door. "What in heaven's name?"

"Apoorv, we need you. Dress up quickly. We have to go somewhere."

Prakhar's eyes were horror struck, just like the Enemy of my dreams. "Where are we going? What's happened?"

"Long story. I will tell you in the way. Let's go. Quick!"

But I didn't move. "Listen Prakhar. What I have learnt about you guys yesterday gives me reason enough not to trust you. So, unless you tell me exactly where we are going and why, I am not going anywhere."

Prakhar slowed down. He turned back and looked into my eyes. He looked wide awake, like he hadn't slept at all. His eyes were moist and anyone could tell that there was something very wrong, because Prakhar never frowned, he never looked distressed. "There is a serious situation out there and every single moment that we are wasting here is taking a person closer to death. All I can ask you to do right now is trust me. I will tell you everything. Just trust me." His voice was earnest with true emotion. Death has an eerie quality of infusing seriousness in situations. I continued to stare at him for a moment and then hurried away to get ready. In the way, I caught a glance at my wall clock. It was twelve thirty a.m. of a freezing January night.

Within five minutes, I left my room, having no idea of what lay ahead of me through the night.

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"Okay, now tell me what is happening?" I spoke, as we started for our journey on Prakhar's bike.



"We will have a lot of time for that." He spoke shortly, and sped his bike in full throttle. The night reminded me of the night I had come here. Only today, the streets were even more deserted. I was wearing four sheaths of woolen clothing and yet the winter air penetrated easily, making me shiver. After passing through many confusing lanes and thin alleys, we finally emerged on the Rajpur Road, around Jakhan. Prakhar quickly took a right turn and my knowledge of roadmap told me that we were going towards either Mussoorie or Rajpur.

"Mussoorie or Rajpur?" I asked.

"Rajpur." Prakhar replied.

Rajpur is a very small settlement situated at the very north of the city chiefly inhabited by Tibetans, at the foot of the lofty mountains. Also, Rajpur boasts of lush greenery and minimal human interference which was once the feature of the entire city.

We passed through the Sai Baba temple, where nomads rested by the roadside, entirely enveloped in their torn blankets, shivering, waiting for the sunshine to reoccupy the heavenly realm as the rhythmic noise of the trees swaying gently on both sides of the road in the cool winter breeze dominated the scene.

Just when we neared the main market of the Rajpur settlement, Prakhar unexpectedly took a left turn. I couldn't recognize the road. I immediately panicked.

"Where are we going?" I yelled at the top of my voice.

"This is old Mussoorie road. It was abandoned after a shorter alternative was found. It concurs with the new Mussoorie road at Kothalgate."

I had heard Kothalgate before. It was the last stop of city buses. I hadn't heard of the old Mussoorie road though. I hadn't had time to wander across the city at all because of my busy schedule.

"Why not take the new Mussoorie road instead?"

"Because we have to stop midway." Prakhar replied shortly.

The old Mussoorie road is a wonderful track. Lined on both sides with dense forests going slantingly down the slope into the abyss below, the track is truly awe inspiring. It also offers solace for those who seek refuge from the humdrum of daily life.

But the eerie effect of the night played its part and all I could perceive about the road that day was its correspondence to the silence of death, the darkness of gloom and the ghostly shades of omnipotent nature.

We passed a gigantic ashram of the Swami Ramteerth mission and many homes enveloped in darkness. I had bent my neck inwards exactly behind Prakhar's back with my hands on my ears, so that I could save myself from the sub zero wafts.

Finally we halted. I looked up to see where we were. Our stop was just like any other spot we had passed until now. It was dark and lonely. No special lights or evidence of any emergency; just ubiquitous silence.

Prakhar parked his bike in front of one of the houses and rang the bell of the same house. I waited. I wanted to get indoors, into warmth.

"As much as I admire the eerie hype you are creating around this, I expect you to enlighten me on what is going on here?" I said, as I stood by him.

"Like I said, there is an emergency and although I would have preferred not telling you this, but now that Elfin has told you something about us, I will have to tell you the truth in order to clear out any misconception."

"Yes, you will have to."

I smile today. How lightly was I taking it all!

Before Prakhar could continue, someone emerged from behind the door. As we reached closer, I saw the brown eyes of Shraddha staring back at me.

"What is she doing here?" I questioned in almost a reflex. Shraddha continued to glare at me coldly and then looked away to talk to Prakhar.

"Do you really think this nutcase can really help us here?" She spoke as she unlocked the gate.

"If he can't, nobody else can." Prakhar replied shortly and walked in. I followed.

"Yes, but look at him. He hardly seems to have any idea at all." Shraddha spoke, once again frostily.

"Excuse me," I cut her short. "You do realize that I can hear you, don't you?"

"Yes, I do and that's exactly the reason why I am speaking it out loud!"

Damn! I said to myself. Another girl had just outwitted me (That list has so many names I can't even count them out).

"Stop it, Shraddha. We need to tell him everything. He can help us." Prakhar's voice rose, for the first time.

We entered the house. With the sense of ownership with which Shraddha walked around the room, I understood it was Shraddha's home. It was surprisingly huge, way too spacious for a single person to live in. The interiors were opulent, reflecting no shortage of funds for the girl. I wondered when my place would be something like that. A voice inside of me echoed, not for a long time to come.

Although odd was the moment, but that was the first time I noticed Shraddha physically. She was tall (shorter than me, thankfully, but taller than most of them) and had long jet black hair that reached up to her shoulder. Noticeably, her locks were shiny, like polished graphite. She was very feminine and flaunted raw beauty apparently without the use of unnecessary makeup. I don't remember to have noticed what she was wearing (I consider that to be one of my best qualities, spiritually) but it must have been something ordinary. I would have noticed otherwise.

But I hated her. She was a bossy, overconfident creature devouring my patience with every fleeting second.

Prakhar and I settled in the drawing room. Prakhar faced me. He looked grim and as I noticed for the first time, seriously disturbed. His emotion was contagious. I understood now, finally, that something was really wrong. Shraddha emerged from one of the rooms with a DVD. She silently handed it

over to Prakhar. Prakhar rose and inserted it in the DVD player adjacent to the television. After tuning in the settings, he sat by me.

“Watch carefully.” He spoke in almost a whisper and punched the play button.

A video began. It was a dark room. Only the yellowish light of the video camera brought a person in view. He was blindfolded with a tape across his mouth. His hands were tied behind his back and his legs were pinned to the chair. He tried to move initially gently and then wildly. The chair vibrated shrilly and fell down by its side. The man howled but nobody came to his rescue. The camera reached closer to his face and then I recognized. The last scene showed the panicked face of the man, desperately trying to move, but in vain. The yellowish glimmer ceased and the screen went black. The man was nobody else but Ajay. I was horrorstruck.

“When did that happen?”

“Yesterday, he didn’t return from the coaching academy. I thought he had gone to the library but he didn’t turn up even in the evening. I tried to call but the phone was switched off. Then Shraddha came in the evening with the DVD. ‘Ajay’ was written across its cover. We hadn’t opened the DVD when we left yesterday. Of course, when we saw it, we came to know what really had happened.”

“Where did you get this DVD from?” I asked, facing Shraddha.

“I found it here, on my doorstep.”

“Oh God! Who would do that?”

“We have no idea.” Prakhar rose and looked into my eyes. “I read in the newspaper that there have been many such cases in the recent past in Dehradun.”

“Abductions and video footages?” I asked.

Prakhar nodded. “Last week a businessman was abducted. A similar video was delivered to his family. They called the police but nothing came up. Two days later the businessman returned home on foot, unscathed. No ransom calls,

nothing. When asked if he remembered anything about where he was kept or who had done it, he couldn't speak a thing. The next day he committed suicide. Suicide note said: I deserved it. I robbed poor people. I cheated. I don't deserve to live."

"What do they want?" I spoke slowly as I observed my voice was trembling.

"You tell me." Prakhar rose and brought me the DVD cover. "There are these wild scratches across the cover, you see? Does that mean anything to you?" "There depth is too much to be there by chance." I spoke, as I ran my hands over the cover's surface. The scratches were wild but not random. I understood. They were not there by chance. They were definitely *drawn* there.

"Can you understand the purpose?" Prakhar asked, with a faint glimmer of hope in his voice.

The scratches were black and shiny, not white and rough. Black and shiny. It immediately hit me.

"Bingo! It's a scratch hologram. Can we have a good source of light?" I immediately got up. It was my Eureka moment.

"It's a what?" Shraddha asked. I stared at her. It was my turn of outwitting her.

"Never mind. Just get me near a good bulb or something."

In moments of distress, even the shortest moments of rejoice serve as an elixir for hope, for the spirit which has a habit to fight relentlessly, until the war is won.

"Holography, actually is a method of producing a three dimensional image of an object by recording the pattern of interference formed by a split laser beam and then illuminating it with another beam of light." I spoke with a sense of command. Prakhar and Shraddha were baffled. This was my field. "In a nutshell, it offers a way of seeing things the way we see them in real life that is from different angles and perspectives."

"I don't see any laser beams or stuff like that here." Shraddha spoke.

"Yeah, that's where things get interesting. Last month I read an article online which provided an alternative to laser holography. It's called scratch

holography. It's actually an optical illusion caused by diffraction but it does the trick. That is exactly what we have here."

I waited for what I had said to sink in and then continued. "Whoever sent this purposely made those scratches in a predefined sequence in order to convey some three dimensional figure which we will be able to see against a source of light."

I lifted the DVD cover against a 100W bulb but before I could start seeing the hologram, my eyes fell on a figure that was drawn at the upper edge of the cover with a marker.

Shraddha and Prakhar noticed it almost immediately after me. "What is that?" they spoke, simultaneously. There were two vertical ellipses mapped from one to the other with arrows. I recognized the diagram immediately. Sometimes it's useful to be an academic.

"It is a Venn Diagram. It is used to represent relations and functions." I was wondering what it was doing over the cover of an abduction DVD.

"Look, there are words across that thing." Prakhar pointed out. I looked closely. Prakhar was right. Previously camouflaging with the background through the transparent DVD cover, the letters immediately came into light against Prakhar's palm.

"The first one says body, the other says soul." Prakhar read. My mind immediately began on a wild search for a relation between the two. Very soon, I realized, it wasn't just a relation. It was a function.

Basically in this kind of mapping, relation means any connection of the first set with the other. Function is different from a relation in the fact that while on one hand in a relation, a value from the first set can have any number of images in the other set but in a function, a value from first set can have one and only one image in the other set. Also a function cannot have any values in the first set which have no image in the other set while a relation can have that.

The mapping of body to soul provided a perfect example of a function. One body has only one soul. It cannot have multiple souls. Also, there can be no body which has no soul. Both the laws are fulfilled.

Here is a fun fact in this mapping. A function allows values to be left in the second set which have no pre image in the first set. We call those types of functions as into functions. This, in our case, means that there can be souls which have no body. This allows the scope of existence of ghosts! Eerie!

I phrased everything that had just processed in my brain to Prakhar and Shraddha in the simplest possible words. They both nodded.

“Let’s see the hologram.” I raised the DVD cover against the bulb. “The scratch hologram is a bit difficult to view. The holographic image appears only from a specific angle.”

I moved left and right and at a particular angle, saw it. It was a mini constellation. There were circles with a prominent dot in their center all over the hologram. “There are so many of these.” I spoke as I pointed to one of them. The three of us stared at the tiny hologram with our heads pinned against each other. Shraddha was to my right, staring earnestly at the crazy symbols. I took a moment off and glanced at her. She was truly beautiful. Her locks touched my face and a funny emotion of prurience combined with the delight of my debut outreach to a girl’s face made me smile. I was hopelessly cowardly when it came to girls. I looked away, back to the thing that mattered at the moment.

There was a long silence. I finally broke it. “See, all the structures are not the same. This big dot stands alone. No circle surrounds it and look at all these circles,” I pointed to a large group of circles surrounding the gigantic dot, “They don’t have a dot in their center.”

“I think the circle means the body and the dot means the soul.” Shraddha spoke.

Extraordinary, I said to myself as I looked at her again, admiringly. She was absolutely right. The whole purpose of the Venn diagram became clear. We were supposed to see the hologram from that perspective. But the very next moment, I was doubtful.

“No, something is wrong. If we see it like that, for this weird group that we just noticed, there is just one soul and so many bodies?” I scratched my head. “No, this breaks the law. It no more remains a function.”

Most unexpectedly, Prakhar withdrew and so did Shraddha. They both backed off. I looked at them. Their faces were aghast.

“What’s happened? We haven’t cracked it yet.” I spoke.

Nobody replied. They were dumbstruck, with what, I couldn’t tell. Although I knew that the technique used here were truly flabbergasting, I found no reason for them to be horrorstruck the way they were. I left the hologram and walked towards them. Prakhar was now sitting on the couch with his head in his hands while Shraddha wandered around the room, staring at the floor. I gazed at Shraddha but she didn’t once look at me.

I thought rationally for a moment. There had to be something that I hadn’t seen and they had. I went back to analyzing the hologram but nothing new came up. Nothing that I had not seen. There was one possibility now. I calmly faced Prakhar and Shraddha and spoke.

“There is something that you know and I don’t. You need to tell me what I am missing.”



## VII

Shraddha pulled herself together and looked at me. Her eyes were moist. "There is something that you don't know about all of us. I think we will have to tell you." Not once did her voice tremble.

I knew whatever it was, it was serious. It had moved the great Prakhar into a state of distress. "This was the condition on which I had come here. You already have postponed it."

"Okay. Listen carefully." Shraddha held my hand and made me sit. Her eyes locked with mine. "Prakhar, Ajay, I and two others had formed a group. We called ourselves The Apogee. Our functioning was based on the way our brain works."

"What did you do together?" I asked. The stories of secret groups preserving ancient knowledge were not new to me. I felt excited.

"We helped in redemption." She spoke and waited to see what effect it had made on me. I must have looked quizzical, for, she continued, "It was like this. People came to us with cases related to their family, of the people who had gone down the wrong way. We took their cases and promised redemption."

"How?"

"We used to conduct a detailed research into the person's life, his friends, and his habits. Once we knew everything about him, we decided upon a plan of action. We had an artificially controlled environment so chosen that it helped in the procedure. It is right next to this place. It offers a spectacular view of the mountains. It also gets windy in the evenings. You understand?"

I nodded, she continued, "By artificially controlled environment, I mean that we had twenty three speakers and woofers fixed out of plain sight around the spot creating a surround system. We had cameras, artificial wind blowers, safety systems in case the subject has a suicidal streak et cetera. Our control room was, of course, here and we closely monitored the subject. He was stabilized by

Prakhar's redemption speech. You should hear it someday. It is truly touching." She smiled. I nodded. I had heard Prakhar speak. His voice was magical. "Mostly, the subject was touched and he opened up. He would start talking, sharing his problems and we would provide solutions on the basis of the plan of action. The plan of action was nothing but the enlisting of all the possible responses of the subject to the treatment and our response to every single one of it. It is created in a combined meeting. It's quite a tedious job."

"I don't think it can be done. There can be so many possibilities." I spoke.

"That is the reason why we researched on them. This way we narrowed down the possibilities on the basis of the extents of their demeanor."

"But why this preplanned plan of action? You could have just spoken spontaneously."

"That would destroy the whole concept of the Apogee. The Apogee operates like a brain. In our brain, there are millions of neurons. When we think of something, the neurons fire at each other. All the information that we hold in our brain has a predefined sequence and permutation of the neuron firing. This is what we call remembering things. When we all perform the action of neurons of a single brain, we become one single person called The Apogee. The Apogee is stronger than the rest of the people because each coordinating unit of its brain, each neuron is itself a conscious being. The encapsulation is not a formality; it's the necessary condition on which we can call ourselves the Apogee. Otherwise we are just people."

"Did your subjects redeem then?"

"Mostly, yes. They accepted that some mysterious power was speaking to them and they could talk as much as they wanted. It was a comfort that most of them did not enjoy too often. We dealt with many teenagers. But we have failed too. One of the men tried to find where the voice was coming from. He lay flat on the floor and tried to listen. He found the camera and some of the speakers. He started destroying them. We quickly went out and tried to explain to him that we wanted to help him. He cursed us and zoomed off."

Both of us laughed. I glanced at Prakhar. He was standing in the cold balcony with his back to us.

"So how did you get your subjects up here?"

"That was the difficult part. We mostly took family's or friends' help. They somehow got the subject here and then we planned something to get him alone. Of course their cooperation was primary."

"But how did people come to know of this Apogee?"

"Initially we had begun with our colleagues. Ajay was the person who had first come up with this idea." Shraddha's expression went grim. "Five brains collectively working as one are way smarter than just one brain, he had said. People told other people and now many people know about us. Still our working and action plans are strictly clandestine."

I was about to ask another question when she gestured me to spare it. "I know what you are going to ask. Didn't the subjects also know about us? Well, yes, some of them did and with those subjects we took a different approach. We no more remained that one person named The Apogee. Instead, we talked to them face to face. The only problem which came in the way was ego. Ajay knew effective means of getting rid of it, add to it the charismatic oratory of Prakhar, accurate psychological analysis by Suraj, the computer genius of Aakash and the softer side and scientific perspective by me and you get a perfect group worthy of making necessary changes in the society."

"Where do you work, by the way?" I asked.

"That is not the point." She replied, flatly. I knew she was right. I got up and started thinking.

"Does it have anything to do with the way you guys reacted suddenly?"

"Actually," began Shraddha, as she brought the hologram and raised it against the light, "it does."

She pointed to the weird group floating in mid air and then to another such group, looking exactly the same, only in this one, there were fewer circles

without a dot and there was a big dot in the middle of the circles. I hadn't noticed it because it was just too small.

"Many bodies, one soul." Shraddha spoke and looked at me.

It immediately hit me. "The Apogee, it's referring to the Apogee, your group." Shraddha mildly nodded. She moved her finger to the other such group and I understood. Shraddha wasn't telling everything to me just because she had to fulfill my condition but also because it mattered. It mattered to the bigger story.

"How do you know you are the smaller one?" I asked, sweating in January.

"Count the circles." She replied. I did. They were exactly five.

The implications were truly fearsome. The Apogee was up against another group operating the same way they did, only far bigger than them.

# VIII

“What do we do now?” I asked, once I had recovered from my state of trauma.

Prakhar turned towards us and comfortably settled in the couch. Shraddha was sitting opposite to him.

“You don’t have to worry about it. You have done your job and we have fulfilled your condition. I will drop you back home now.” Prakhar replied, his eyes distant.

“What? Am I not a part of this?”

“No, you are not. The message is clear. The Apogee is against a similar group. That’s all.” Prakhar was steadfast. I looked at Shraddha but she seemed just as rigid. I knew I had no grounds to protest on. I wasn’t a part of the Apogee. I collected my jacket and followed Prakhar out of the house. Shraddha looked at me and said, in a plain voice, “Thank you for your help.” With that she turned back and disappeared indoors. Shraddha was feminine but definitely not weak.

I looked at my watch, it was three thirty a.m. I hardly had any time left to sleep. Moreover, the force of the recent events was enough to keep me from concentrating the entire day. The mere thought of going back to my monotonous work distressed me. Prakhar kicked. The bike roared to life. I prayed for a miracle, a miracle that could keep me there.

But nothing happened. I sat behind Prakhar and the bike sped, piercing the night silence and into the dark road.

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We stopped right in front of our home. I got down and looked hopefully at Prakhar. He quickly turned the bike around and disappeared down the street. I looked down and sighed. Ajay was in trouble.

In the course of the past few days I had come to know Ajay pretty well. Prakhar had told me that he and Ajay had been friends since high school and that there

was nobody he had met in his entire life who was as passionate about work as was Ajay. By profession he was a tennis coach but up close, he was so much more. He was an ardent chef. In the evenings, he used to make us cookies. He even tried out western desserts which he served us after dinner. He was lively and loud.

There was this one time when I had found myself sitting beside him alone, on a Saturday evening. Prakhar had been in the bank at that time.

“So, Prakhar told me you are not very fond of religion and stuff.” He suddenly spoke.

I returned from my reverie in which I was out on a date with a girl who was talking to me so well that I was smiling to myself. I was a regular practitioner of the technique of dual persona. “I am not an atheist as such. I just don’t have that inclination.”

“Inclination of praying?” He asked. I nodded.

“Well you don’t need to, as long as you work hard enough. You remember, that day, we suggested you not to be attached to your work? We said that is how you could survive. Well as it turns out, we were both right and wrong.”

I straightened. It was clear that Ajay meant to say something important to me that day. “How so?” I asked.

“First of all let me ask you a question. Who do you think is better: A labor who works as hard as you can imagine but curses his job in the evening or the one who works just as hard and in the evenings, looks forward brightly to the work the next day?”

“I don’t think any such idealistic labor exists.” I replied smiling.

“Let us suppose. I expect you to reply morally.”

“Well morally, I think the one who looks forward brightly to his work the next day is better.”

Ajay nodded and locked his eyes with mine. "Something here is uncanny, don't you think? The output is same from both the labors, then why is the second one better than the first?"

Good question, I wanted to say. No reply came to me that I could phrase in a way that it would make sense.

"I will tell you." Ajay began, sensing my trouble, "From generations, we have been seeing the world we live in. Our ancestors noticed that there was something dualistic about this world."

"Dualistic?"

Ajay nodded. "There is something that differentiates us from the machines, isn't there? Let us suppose the scientists make a humanoid that can do all we can do. But there will still be something missing in him, don't you think?"

I understood what Ajay was getting at. "Emotions, it won't have emotions."

Ajay smiled. "Bingo! Emotions make us human. Emotions differentiate us from androids. From here emerges the concept of a dual world. The first one is physical, carrying objects, in short the materialistic world and the other, my friend, is the emotional world: the world where materialism has no place, where humans are not differentiated from one another on the basis of what job they do or which caste they belong to, but on the basis of how uplifted they are, what is their emotional maturity and how aware they are about themselves. The world we see is the superimposition of these two worlds."

I was confused. "So what does it have to do with the labor problem?"

Ajay smiled. "Everything. The first labor was doing his job perfectly but deep within he hated his job. He detested every moment he spent doing that job. In short, he was, in the physical world, a perfect labor but in the emotional realm, a frustrated, hollow layman. The second labor on the other hand was emotionally fit."

"How does that matter? The output was the same."

“Aha! You realize you are asking me the very question you answered to.” I nodded. “The reason is that dedication is a very strong force. It belongs to the emotional domain. When a labor is dedicated, he will do everything he can to improve. He will think beyond petty problems of tiredness and monotony but one single force will guide him. That force is called hope. This is the difference between work and dedicated work.”

“What you are saying is that dedication will help him in seeing things in a new light. He will optimistic and stuff like that.” Ajay nodded. “I don’t know Ajay. What I think is that these things look good in a movie where the hero has to spend just some hours in distress when suddenly out of the blues, an angel comes and saves him.”

“Who is saying some angel will come and save you? I am saying that you will redefine your boundaries. Every day, you will work hard to improve your performance. Yours will be a battle to improve, unceasingly, insatiably. When you reach past your predefined boundaries that is when you will smell success. In your case, if your job is just to teach, reach past it. Do everything you can to improve. This is dedication. This will be your prayer.”

I nodded. Don’t mind me but I am a skeptic. I found those things unrealistic because I had seen my father convert from honest, dedicated government servant into a person who reluctantly left for work every day, cursing the Government and the system as he passed. My practical experience said that all the dedicated work gave was disappointment and stress.

“What if the dedicated worker fails?” I asked.

“Good question. Failure is our illusion. It is just an important part of the bigger puzzle. It is in the unpredictability of life that we understand its true essence. It is when we have experienced the lows of despondency that we can relish the highs of pleasure. It is in the adventure of risks that we can taste life, not in the safety of our comfort zone.”

I didn’t say anything. I considered myself quite an amateur when it came to things as high handed as that. The only reference I could make to what he had



just said was to the story from the Holy Bible, The Prodigal Son which almost had the same moral.

“We didn’t realize it but we just discussed the essence of the Bhagavad Gita. Karma yoga, you must have heard of it.”

“So what you are saying is that your advice to me that day was right in the physical realm but incorrect if we see it in the light of Bhagavad Gita.”

Ajay nodded. “Here, we have a choice between being successful machines and being successful humans.”

I had chosen being a successful machine that day. It was too difficult to be a successful human.

A serious concern for Ajay’s condition broke my reverie. I tried to push the door but it was locked from the inside. Elfin must have locked it after we left, I thought. But before I could knock, I saw something shiny lying near the doorstep. I knelt down and picked it up in my hand. As I recognized what I was holding, I looked skywards and thanked God. The miracle had happened. I was holding a DVD with Ajay II written across its cover.

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For a moment I stood on the threshold, unable to think, unable to decide what to do next. I had to think of a place where the DVD could be played.

The first place that came to my mind was Elfin’s laptop. But I couldn’t have included him in this. It was better for him not to know. I withdrew from the threshold and took to the road leading to the main Rajpur Road. I had to buy some time to think.

My first impulse was to take the DVD to Shraddha and Prakhar but there were two problems standing in the way. First of all, I had no vehicle to travel that distance and secondly, even if I would have reached, they would have just taken the DVD and dropped me right back home. I wanted to be included in this. Ajay was my friend too. I thought of other options but it wasn’t time before I realized there weren’t any. My only hope was Prakhar. I had to convince him somehow.

I reached the main road and looked for autos. There weren't any. I wished the same auto driver could come now who had brought me here the first day but deep within, I knew. Such perfection is not a characteristic of life. One has to make his way through whatever comes. Miracles are rare, I spoke to myself. Miracles are rare.

I jogged with the DVD clutched in one hand and the other pumping rhythmically. Everywhere, there was dead silence. Nobody could be seen, absolutely nobody. I waited to see if any vehicle was coming but the silence prevailed. Nothing broke it.

I now understood that this was hopeless. I turned back and sprinted, back to the road I had come from. My only hope now was, yes, Elfin's Pulsar 220.

Dogs barked madly to my sprint and I innocently slowed down. I am afraid of dogs but no, I am not a coward.

Within five minutes I was standing again in front of our house. I knocked wildly and yelled Elfin's real name. Very soon, Elfin emerged from behind the door, rubbing his eyes. "What the hell?"

"I need a test run of your bike. Can I have it?" I asked.

"In the morning, yes. What are you doing outside this late?" Elfin spoke. I had surely not awakened him. He had been studying.

"Just strolling. I wasn't feeling sleepy. Can I have a test run now?" I looked hopefully at Elfin to see if he was buying it.

"My God, you are insane. You are chasing Prakhar and Ajay, aren't you? I noticed. They are out too. I thought you were just kidding when you said you are going to find out about them."

Perfect, I smiled to myself. Elfin had just found out an excuse for me. Luckily, he hadn't seen me leaving with Prakhar earlier that night. "I told you. I was dead serious. Can I go now? I might lose them. I know which way they have gone."

"Which way?" he asked.

“Old Mussoorie Road.” I replied. It was safe to give him that much information. As a matter of fact, he deserved to know that much.

Elfin smiled. “Alright. But you know how to drive it, don’t you? It is quite a heavy bike.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I have driven a Ninja. One of my colleagues has it. I can drive this one comfortably.” I lied.

“Okay, I will just get the keys.” With that Elfin went indoors. I punched the air. It had been easier than I had thought it would be. Although, I had only driven my father’s Hero Honda Splendor, a rat in front of this beast, I trusted myself. In moments of emergency, people do things they never thought they would be able to do. Elfin emerged from indoors. He threw me the keys. I caught them and quickly turned.

“Just one thing, Apoorv. Will you get me a ride of the Ninja?” Elfin asked hopefully.

“Sure. Thank you for this man. I will get it back soon.” I replied and climbed the beast. Although I had no idea how I would get a Ninja, it was the least of my problems today, the biggest being the DVD which I had tucked in my pant behind my back.

I pressed the electric start button and the beast roared. I hit the first gear and rode out in the night.

Once I was out of Elfin’s sight, I settled more comfortably and started thinking of ways of convincing Prakhar. The bike was truly amazing. Even a non speed addict like me couldn’t resist driving it over a speed of eighty kilometers an hour. By the time I reached Old Mussoorie road, I had decided upon an entire plan of action to convince Prakhar. I heaved satisfactorily and enjoyed the rest of the ride wholeheartedly.

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I parked the bike beside two others which were standing in front of Shraddha's house and pressed the doorbell. I understood that all the rest of the members of the Apogee were now there.

Footsteps approached me and I prepared myself. Somebody opened the door. Without looking at who had done so, I stormed within and dashed towards the room with the DVD player. Three guys stared at me as I marched straight to that room. I raised the DVD I had found and spoke, "I found this out on our doorstep. It says Ajay II. There are no holograms on the cover." I hurriedly took out the DVD and inserted it in the player. I could sense four people standing behind me, watching me operate, in stupefaction.

I grabbed the remote and settled on one of the sofas. Four people did the same, staring at the television. I now looked at all of them. Prakhar, Shraddha and two unknown guys were waiting for me to press the play button. It is good to have control.

I punched the button. Another video began. Before any scene could start, these letters emerged on the screen.

SEEMAPURI, NEAR DELHI.

PRESENT TIME.

The video now showed a gigantic slum area, shot supposedly by an unprofessional cameraman. The camera jerked irregularly as it proceeded within the slum. Now a male voice came from the speakers, almost a whisper.

*"Amid chaos of negligence and cries of the innocent,*

*Unfolds here, a pall of silence,*

*Silence of ignorance, silence of a future,*

*Lost in the turbulence of the unknown."*

The cameraman had proceeded deep within the slum now. The video now showed one of the slums. An elderly male was resting on the floor, his face was pale and his expressions reflected pain, deep and overwhelming. He howled

loudly and tears rolled down his eyes. The little kid sitting still atop a makeshift bed looked helplessly at his grandfather, his eyes giving away the melancholy his young heart held. The old man turned back and forth but the pain didn't subside. It was then that his eyes fell on the camera. As his eyes met mine, a shiver ran across my body. We wished the cameraman could help but the video continued. The old man looked away. The little kid jumped down and consoled the old man. "The Ambulance is on its way, Appa." The old man managed to give a forced smile.

"How will we pay, son?" The old man forced the words.

The little kid spoke in a reflex, "It will be alright Appa. Don't worry. It will be alright."

*"The old had been the young,  
Their eyes sparkled with dreams,  
Until the blinding light of cruel reality,  
Tossed them into the abyss of despair."*

The camera passed through many slums. We couldn't help notice the lack of sewage disposal. Houseflies swarmed all over the place. The video went from bad to worse. Shraddha left the room, choking.

*"There the city men take pride,  
Of statues and monuments that mark their cities bright,  
Hollow hearts, weak souls are they,  
For they can't ever live our lives."*

The screen went black. All of us sat in dead silence. Every eye was still fixed on the screen, now dark, just as dark as the video it had shown.

I was shaken to the very core. The video was disturbing. Very disturbing. Even the truly distressed state I was in, my mind found the ability of thinking clearly. Ajay wasn't even mentioned in the video. In fact, there was nothing even remotely related to Ajay in the video.

I pulled myself together. I had to convince Prakhar to include me in this. I glanced at him. He was sitting on the couch, deep in thought. I walked over to him and settled near him. I opened my mouth and realized my voice was trembling. "Listen, Prakhar. Ajay was my friend too. I care for him as much as you do and that is the reason I want to help. The Apogee needs to have five members. Let me be the fifth interim member in our battle against this group. We have to get Ajay back, together." My voice was silent and earnest. Prakhar looked up at me. His eyes locked with mine. I expressed my true intention with my eyes. Prakhar understood. He nodded and smiled slightly. I smiled back. You won't regret this; I wanted to say to him.

"Now listen to me." I spoke louder. The two others sitting in the room looked up at me. "This is not getting anywhere. I don't know what this meant but what I think is that we don't have to do what he expects us to do. Why don't we try and trace the person who gets this DVD here? We will stand on vigil. He must know something."

"But how will we know in which house the next message will come? Or if any next message will come at all or not?" Prakhar said. He was right.

"We can only be optimistic." I replied.

Prakhar considered the plan for a moment and then nodded. "Suraj and Aakash, you go to our place. If you see anyone, catch him and keep him there itself. Call us immediately. We will come there. Elfin will be asleep, so don't worry about him. Here is my set of keys." Prakhar hurriedly ordered. "And yeah, wait only until daybreak. Once the sun has risen, come right back here." Suraj and Aakash nodded and hurried away.

Once the two of them had left, Prakhar spoke to me. "So how did you get here?"

"Elfin's Pulsar 220." I replied. Prakhar eyed me suspiciously. "Don't worry, he has no idea."

"By the way," I began. "Correct me if I am wrong. We are not calling the police because they will only complicate the matters, right?"

Prakhar nodded. "Imagine you will have to give that hologram explanation again to I don't know how many policemen. Moreover the police will have just as little idea as we have."

"Yes, but the job of catching a person. Police could have done it better."

"Don't worry we will do it alright. I will be out in the lawn. You be on the terrace. Take the front stairs as soon as you see anything." Prakhar patted me lightly.

Shraddha had left the room midway through the video and had not returned yet. I left the room and started looking for her. After searching the entire place, I found her standing on the terrace, broodingly staring below. I silently approached her and stood beside her. I had to think of something cheering to say. She slightly glanced at me and looked away. My presence had been registered.

"Where did Suraj and Aakash go?" Her voice was composed, but her face was pale.

"We are trying to trace the person who gets this DVD here. They have gone to our place." I replied. She had solved my problem.

That place offered a complete view of the road below. I was doing my duty too.

"So what do you think that video meant?" Shraddha asked, facing me now.

I thought for a moment. The video really made no sense to the problem.

"Did this kind of DVD come too in the other abduction cases of this sort?" I asked.

Shraddha shrugged her shoulders. "We had read only about a first DVD. Never about a second one."

I kept thinking but no plausible reason came to my mind. The second DVD was really a mystery. When my reverie broke, I realized there had been a pretty long silence. I looked at Shraddha, she had returned to staring at the dark woods again.

"I am a teacher by the way. I teach chemistry to class eleven and twelve." She suddenly spoke.

I was genuinely surprised. "Chemistry to class eleven and twelve?" I repeated.

"Yes, why does that surprise you?"

"Because it is surprising. You must be a professional 'mugger' then."

Shraddha laughed for the first time. "Yeah, if that is what you call us." She looked way better when she laughed.

There was a short pause. Her smile disappeared suddenly and she spoke, "There is something I didn't tell you about The Apogee, a thing that we are not very proud of."

"What?"

She sighed. "We charge a fee from all our subjects."

I wanted to ask how much but that was immaterial. I had to say something that could make her feel better. "That is not a thing to be ashamed of. It is just a reality of today. One cannot run away from reality." She nodded.

"By the way when was the last time you took a case?" I asked.

"Day before yesterday. It was of a teenage girl. We had another case to see to today. The plan of action was ready."

"All your meetings are held during the night, aren't they?"

"Yes. We all have our jobs during the day and nights offer a silent environment. That is why."

"So don't you ever feel sleepy?" I asked.

Shraddha smiled. "Initially I did. But now I am used to four hours of sleep."

"You know, you were in the same train as mine almost a month back. Where were you coming from?"

"My parents live in Delhi. I had gone to meet them."



Shraddha, much like Prakhar, wasn't a fan of gossip. Her replies were strictly limited to my questions.

I looked at my watch. It was four fifteen a.m. There still were almost two hours before daybreak. I suggested Shraddha to go indoors and rest but she protested. I took a better position for the vigil and settled there. Shraddha sat next to me and threw a blanket over my legs, as both of us stared nervously at the dark road, waiting for our enemy to take his next move.

As for the moment, he was in complete control of things. The Apogee was unable to understand even the reason of the recent events and was struggling to keep up with the speed with which things were happening around it.

Somewhere, I imagined some wicked man smirking at our helplessness and saying, to gagged Ajay, "Look how feeble your team has become."

# IX

“Apoorv!” Somebody whispered very close to my ears. I woke up. Shraddha’s brown eyes, right in front of me were terrified. She pointed downwards. I peered in the direction. A car was standing right in front our house, its headlight illuminating the road ahead. I looked at my watch. It was quarter past six. I had slept for quite long. The darkness had subsided but the Sun was yet to rise. I quietly descended the staircase and slithered behind the pole in the center of the staircase. The circular staircase up front reached almost up to the front gate, but at an elevation. I reached on the stair in level with the gate and waited. A man emerged from the car and looked left and right. He held something in his hand. I looked closely at it. It was definitely not a gun and neither was it a knife.

I knew the moment had come. The fact that Shraddha was looking at me from above gave me further courage. I leapt away from my hiding place and dived from the staircase, dropping exactly on the man. Before the man could respond, I was on to him. He fell on the floor with a thud, with me on top of him. Prakhar came sprinting from the other side and pinned him down. He tied his hands behind his back with a jute rope and dragged him indoors.

That was heroic; I said to myself and smiled. Prakhar made him sit on a sofa and himself sat opposite to him. I took a good look at the man’s face. He was young, nothing over twenty five and was well built. He had been easy to overpower, though. Despite the fact that two people were glaring at him while he had been gagged; his expressions were serene with no trace of panic.

“Before you even start questioning me, let me tell you something.” He began coolly. He readjusted in his chair and continued, “I cannot tell you anything because I don’t know anything. The group you are up against operates like a linked list. I am the last one in the chain. So, neither do I know the one who comes before me and nor is there anyone who comes after me. I am just a device to perform all actions.”

Prakhar seemed to understand what he had just said. I didn’t know what linked list meant. We left the man to himself in the drawing room and came into the

dining hall. Shraddha joined us. "They operate like a linked list. It is a data structure concept. In this kind of data structure, each unit knows the address of only the unit next to it and the address of first unit is known by a special member called Start. We get Start, we get everybody but he, he really is useless."

"But all that comes only when we suppose he is telling the truth." Shraddha said.

Prakhar reentered the drawing room after a moment's thought and questioned, "What do they want from us?"

"Again, I am not in the decision making unit. I am just a device to perform physical actions. I don't know what they want from you."

I knew a question I was sure he knew the answer to. "Tell me, do you deliver the second DVD to all the homes you have abducted someone from?"

"Nope, I was given special orders in your case. I only deliver one DVD in the other cases. Here," He extended his hand to give us a piece of paper. "This is the thing I was supposed to give you now."

Prakhar took it from him and looked. "It is some parable." We were all puzzled.

"Who gave you this?" Prakhar asked.

"I received an email. I received even the contents of the DVD through an email. I was ordered to make a DVD and deliver to you." Before Prakhar could suggest tracing it, he spoke, "Don't even think about it. These guys are professionals. They are not foolish enough to use a traceable id."

Prakhar looked closely at the guy and asked him, in a silent voice. "Why do you do this job, when you know they abduct innocent people?"

"It is none of my business what they do. I am paid more than adequately for my job. I am glad with that."

None of us could blame him. Prakhar called Suraj and Aakash and briefed out to them the entire situation. I was convinced that this guy was a dead end but also, he had told us something we hadn't known before.

He had been given special orders. This abduction was not like any other abduction. All the clues they were giving us, everything they were doing was to achieve one single goal. This group wanted something from us, and there was nothing they were not prepared to do in order to get that.

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“Don’t mind,” I said to the other me. “But the pain is overwhelming me.” I shifted in my chair and moved my hands in my cuffs. I knew the only injury I would walk out with from here would be this: the marks of the rope I was gagged by and yet he could get so much more from me. They had taken so much from people without inflicting them with any injury that I was afraid. What if he convinces me somehow? I didn’t want to think that.

“So,” I said to him, “I will tell you something about me. That will help you understand me better.”

“I am all ears.” He smiled and replied. This is what I liked the most about him. He was always there for me, no matter how busy he was, no matter what I wanted to talk about.

“I was not emotionally developed. In my teenage, I had been busy with issues related to my studies and my future. I ran day and night for tuitions. I was called a nerd in school. So, I never got the time to sit back and ask myself, who am I? What am I? Moreover I was born in a family which worshipped practicality. My father was not at all into philosophy or spirituality. He believed in the things he saw, nothing else. My mother was too busy to have time for spirituality. Only recently had I started seeing her praying for hours. (Earlier it used to be just the Gayatri mantra in the morning) Although I had a decent friend circle, I wasn’t said to be a very good friend. I used to laugh to see my friend crying because he had broken up with his girlfriend. I used to laugh it off when my friends told me they were depressed. Depression to me was just a sympathy weapon for the weak. Friendship to me was just two people talking to each other because they need each other, in something or the other. I had not discovered the areas of friendship which portray qualities like trust, sacrifice and genuine caring.”

So did you not care for anyone, he asked and I replied that I did. “I cared for my family and I cared for my ambitions but friends, no. I never felt attached to my friends. Parting had been most easy for me. While everyone cried in the farewell

party and said they would miss each other, I staunchly proclaimed, 'Oh come on! Who are we kidding? As soon as I get a good college and meet new people, I will forget you in a minute.' I laughed but as I saw, nobody else was laughing."

So did you not change yourself, he asked and I told him that I tried to but I failed. "My emotions had hidden themselves in a safe deep within my heart that I myself couldn't open."

"Now it must be clear to you why I had been the quickest in recovering from all the shocks we were receiving that day. I was not emotional."

He nodded, although, as I noticed from his expressions, he didn't look very enthusiastic.

"Oh not you too! You cannot hate me. You have to understand me."

"Can we go back to the story now?" he asked, in a rigid voice.

"Okay." I replied to him and once again began storytelling.

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"So we have to do what this group expects us to do?" Suraj spoke, as the Apogee in crisis settled for a meeting.

"We are left with no choice. This guy is a dead end." Prakhar replied.

I was thinking of something else. "So all the abduction cases you have read about ended in suicide?"

"Most of them. The victims become so disturbed that they start hating the world. They are unable to speak, think or do anything. They nearly reach a state of insanity." Shraddha replied.

"Has anyone you know recovered entirely?" I asked.

Shraddha shook her head. "Nope, moreover I didn't know we were going to be stuck against this group. I might have missed the news."

"Listen!" came the voice of the man from the drawing room, where he was still kept. We all went to the room. "You keep me here and you will lose the little

chance you have of getting whoever you have lost, back. It will be best if you let me go."

"On one condition. Tell us where do you live?" Prakhar asked.

"House number 46, Chanderlok colony." He immediately replied. There was no terror, no panic and no fear in his eyes.

"Phone number?"

He readily gave it. Prakhar untied him and he immediately left. We returned to our meeting venue, the dining hall.

"There is something I need to ask you, Aakash." I spoke to him only for the first time. For the moment I thought it was important for us to figure out why we were being played with rather than knowing what was the next message they were using to play with us.

"Were you working on shortening some of the procedures of the Apogee using programming or something?" I asked. It was a well thought out question.

Aakash was surprised. "Yes, how did you know?"

"It was obvious. So what exactly were you working on?"

"I was working on shortening the procedure of developing the plan of action." Aakash replied.

"Any success?"

"I was expecting success within some days. I had cracked most of it."

"Who all knew about it?"

"Only the members of the Apogee, nobody else."

Prakhar understood what I was getting at. "You think that is what this group wants from us?"

I nodded. It perfectly made sense. Shraddha suddenly spoke, "But this makes sense only if we suppose this group does the same thing we do. It doesn't seem

so, though." Shraddha was right. They had destroyed people. What for? We didn't know. The purpose of their existence was actually the key question, the answer to which could open up all secrets.

"We are left with no option but to play the game then." Prakhar spoke.

I was left with no more ideas either. The only way we could remain in the game was by playing it.

"So you said it is some parable?" Shraddha asked.

Prakhar opened the piece of paper. "Yeah, it begins with once upon a time. I will read it to you."

"Once upon a time, there was a king. He had a gigantic state. He was kind, generous and very pious. Even though he was the king, he used to go to buy his own stuff from the daily market and eat with common people. He believed that simplicity was the weapon to be truly uplifted. His state was prosperous and his fame was wide and far."

"Very soon, the king was blessed with a son. But the king was very sad. The queen asked, 'What makes the king of the kings despondent?' The king replied, 'Our son is so beautiful. He is blessed with the providence of being the king of such a gigantic state. But, I am afraid. I am afraid that he will destroy himself in vanity and pride. I am afraid that he will lose his path.'"

"The queen replied, 'Oh the king worries too much! This is the time to celebrate the birth of the prince of this state. This is the time to put all the troubles aside and thank the divine for his gift in the form of our son.' But the king couldn't bring himself to do that. The same thought continued to torment him until he decided to do something about it."

"He confirmed his decision with his closest counselor and then broke the news to the queen. 'I have decided to hand over our son to one of the most morally rich families of our state. We will not tell him that he is the royal prince and that we are his parents. He will spend an ordinary life and take ordinary education and when the time is right, he will be told everything about his true identity. Until then, he must go among the masses and live an ordinary life.' The queen was

flabbergasted. 'You are taking away from me my son! Oh mighty king, I must ask you to reconsider.' But the king was steadfast. He knew this was the only way of putting his son on the path of righteousness and enlightenment through simplicity."

"The queen begged and begged but the king didn't budge from his decision and so the royal prince was handed over to a middle class family to lead an ordinary, common life."

"Years rolled by. The prince grew into a kind, generous and gallant young man. He had lots of friends and everybody liked him. The young boy now had in him all the qualities his father, the king, wanted him to have. There, the king had become old. He had realized that his life was nearing its end. One day, he fell ill. But instead of consulting the doctors, he immediately ordered to bring the young boy. The young boy was surprised to know that he had been personally called by the king. When he reached the castle, the king was lying in bed, counting his last breaths. The young boy sat by the bed and the king told him everything about his true identity and the responsibility he was born to take. The king told him that he had not been told only for his best. The young boy understood. He said, 'Holy Father! Your sacrifice was divine! I understand that all you did was for my best. I will do all I can to rule this state just as well as you did.' The king smiled contently and closed his eyes for the final time."

"The prince took over as the new king. He based his rules on the very same ideals his father had used. The state flourished. Everything continued to go smoothly until one day the soldiers brought the king's best friend to court saying that they had caught him stealing. The young king looked at his friend and all the moments of enjoyment he had spent with him came to his mind. He couldn't bring himself to punish the person who had been his partner even when he had been nothing special. 'You are given a warning. This should not happen in future.' The king gave his judgment. The court men were surprised. The crime deserved punishment."

"In the course of the next few days, many people whom he had loved and spent most of the time with were brought to the court with allegations of crimes. The king was stuck in a moral dilemma. He couldn't punish those who had been his



friends. He couldn't see pain in their eyes. The news spread. The king was defamed to be weak."

"With so many rumors circling around, the king was very disturbed. His courtiers told him how his friends were benefitting from his weakness and that he must get stronger. The king understood what they were trying to say and decided to change his attitude. He understood that it was time for him to sacrifice his friendship for the greater good, for making honesty and justice survive the tests of time. He knew that friendlessness was the price he must pay to become a good king. Once he had accepted the fact, he became a stronger king. He punished those who deserved punishment and rewarded those who deserved reward. The harmony was restored and the state flourished. End of story."

"Good story, a bit idealistic towards the end though." I said. Everybody glared at me. It was not a moral story meant to entertain us. It was a clue meant to be deciphered (or so we thought). Once again a clue related to Ajay's abduction hadn't even mentioned Ajay.

"Now what is this supposed to mean?" Shraddha spoke, wearily. The alleged 'clues' we had received since Ajay had been abducted were frankly an insult to the word clue. They were just random pieces of irrelevant data, meant to do what we didn't know.

I looked at my watch. It was seven am. Elfin is about to get up, I thought. I had to return his bike before eight. He left for college at eight. It was important for me to return his bike before he panicked because he knew where I was. He could have done something crazy. I told this to Prakhar. The last thing we wanted then was Elfin coming there and confronting us. He agreed to come with me on his bike so that we could come back to Shraddha's place together.

On the way back home on Elfin's Pulsar 220, my mind drifted to the latest message. The story was just a story. I had seen it very carefully. It wasn't a code. There was this one time when I had come across a dialogue which when interpreted to see the pattern of progress, depicted a DNA strand. So, I was particular to even notice if any figure was emerging from the emotional or physical interpretation of the story. This was a latest weapon I had come across

in literature. We live in an age where any algebraic code can be broken by brute force technology within seconds. The computers are not only intelligent but are also outrageously fast. If they can't find the algorithm, they will keep guessing until they find it. Considering this, it becomes impossible for common people to keep secrets. It becomes impossible to attain the privacy they deserve.

The solution lies in realization. Realization of the fact that we are humans. There is something that differentiates us from these superfast machines. Like Ajay had said, it is our emotions. Whenever we read any story or any book, our emotional status varies which if plotted according to intensity, can depict a figure. Negative and positive emotions can be classified morally (Anger, jealousy et cetera are negative emotions). This method does wonders for carrying short messages, as short as an alphabet or a figure and of course, can gain complexity. The best thing about it is that it can be deciphered only by a human being and that too the one who was intended to read it. Only the encoder has to know the reader because only then can he program it in a way that it can be deciphered correctly.

But our story was written with a singular purpose: of writing a story, nothing else. I was getting weary of the game now. We were terribly lost. The hope of getting Ajay back soon was fading. It seemed we could get him only when his captor wanted us to.

We reached home. I will tell you something about me now that it strikes me. I always wanted to be a good painter but I wasn't one. As I stood on our threshold, I once again recalled the painting that I wanted to draw from years, only I wasn't good enough to do that. I call it Past and Present. The way I imagined it in this case, emerged in front of my eyes. There had been so many instances in which I had gasped at the power of time and had wanted to draw this painting.

The painting would have three time frames with the same background: our threshold. I wanted to portray in the first time frame the first time I had left with Prakhar tonight, having no idea of what lay ahead of me, the second time frame was when I had been dropped there and I had found the DVD with Ajay II written across it and the third was the present. All the three sequences had the same location, they were separated by time. The frames of the past were drawn

in hazy shades while the present was sharp with colors of fervor. How beautiful would it really be, I marveled to myself.

Prakhar unlocked the door. We entered. I kept the bike's keys on the dining table and hurried into my room.

"I will take a bath. I will be out in five minutes." I spoke to Prakhar as he saw me leave for my room. I took a hot bath, an experience one can never have in Varanasi (the heat will never permit you). I was going to skip work that day. My syllabus was already lagging behind in almost all the batches. This is going to cost me many off days, I thought to myself. If the syllabus was not completed with time, the teacher had to take extra class, classes during the break or whatever it took to clear the lag. The thought was depressing. I cleared my thoughts. I needed to think afresh.

Within five minutes, I was in the living room. Prakhar was talking on the phone. I noticed that he had taken a bath too.

"We will be right there." He mumbled into the phone and looked up at me. I recognized his expression immediately. The last time I had seen it was when we had figured out that their group was against another such group. Something was wrong.

"Is everything alright, Prakhar?" I neared him.

"That was Shraddha. She said the place was invaded shortly after we left. Suraj and Aakash are gone."

# PART III

*‘Silence is a divine  
quality.’*

# X

“What do you mean by gone?” I asked with my hope and courage breathing its last.

“Abducted.” Prakhar’s eyes were focused on the dining chair’s leg. It was clear he was thinking about something very deeply. This was news I wasn’t prepared to take. It had come as a gigantic wave tossing me ashore.

“We should hurry up, Prakhar. Shraddha is alone there.” I spoke; genuinely concerned of Shraddha who had already taken a lot more than most of them can take, without losing patience. But Prakhar wasn’t listening. His eyes were focused, not lost. I was about to repeat when Prakhar suddenly turned and sprinted to his room. He emerged a second later with a candle and a match box. He grabbed me by my arm and marched me into my room. I stood flabbergasted having no idea of what Prakhar was up to. He hurriedly closed all curtains and locked the door from within. The room became pitch dark. I couldn’t even see him. A second later, a light in the center of my room caught my eye. I could see Prakhar lighting a candle near the yellowish glimmer. His face looked much like my brother’s face when he used to scare me at nights using a torch right under his chin with his eyes wide open. The candle lit up the room with an eerie flickering light. All this time I stood dumbstruck, watching Prakhar work. Prakhar stood up and calmly faced me.

“Listen to me carefully. We need to meditate.” He simply spoke. I cannot describe in words how genuinely indignant he had got me by saying something like that at such an inappropriate time. This is the problem with spiritual people. When a situation gets out of their hands, they run to their imaginary hero, seeking mercy and refuge. What they don’t realize is nobody can help them more than themselves. Oh, you are again frowning at me. You don’t think so? Come on! One has to learn to be independent.

“Prakhar, are you out of your mind? There three of your friends are gone. You almost lost Shraddha. You are up against a group which mentally kills people and all you can think of is meditation?” I bellowed. “Listen to me,” I continued,

"We are going to Shraddha's place. She needs us. We are calling the police and telling them everything."

Prakhar hissed, "Shraddha has already called the cops. They have secured the place. They are currently listening to Shraddha's story. I know what I am doing. We have to do this."

I was about to shout again when I heard a tap on my door. I immediately understood. It was Elfin. He must have seen the keys on the dining table, I thought. I moved to open it. Prakhar held me by my arm. "Listen, don't tell him I am here. Tell him something unsuspecting about your night trip." With that he blew the candle. The room returned to complete darkness. I struggled to reach the door and turned the doorknob. Elfin stood in front of the door, smiling anxiously. He peered inside my room, probably puzzled by the darkness.

"It is dark in there, man." Elfin said, peering more than ever.

"I was sleeping. Hadn't slept the entire night." I said, rubbing my eyes and pushing a fake yawn.

"So what did you find out?" He asked. I had to think properly.

"Oh that! That is a sad story, man." I spoke, buying myself some time.

"What happened?" He smiled.

"I searched the entire Old Mussoorie Road but there was no sign of their bikes. I kept searching for a long time but found nothing."

"You should have proceeded beyond Kothalgate."

"Why would they take the Old Mussoorie Road then?" The old Mussoorie Road and the new Mussoorie road concurred at Kothalgate.

"You got a point. By the way, I heard some bellowing right now. Who is in there?"

My heart skipped a beat. Think, think! I said to myself. "Oh it is my girlfriend. We were playing dummy fight. It is a fun game. You should try it." I spoke. I was left with no other option.

Elfin smiled. "Girlfriend? Amazing man! I didn't know you are a player too." He punched me. "I want to meet her."

I was lost more than ever. Elfin was trying his level best to make it hard for me. "Not now, man. We are in the middle of our moments, please. I will introduce you soon." I replied.

Elfin was visibly disappointed. "Okay. But when I come back you will have to tell me everything. Where you first met? How you met? What is she like? Everything. Okay?"

I nodded with a smile. "See you in the evening." Elfin finally left. I closed the door and heaved. Prakhar lit up the candle once again. My anger on him was lost in this meaningless conversation with Elfin.

He looked up at me with a depth in his eyes. "Listen, Apoorv. I understand what you are saying. You are saying that we need to accept the facts and do something about them rather than running to an imaginary superhero seeking refuge." That was exactly what I was saying. He continued, "But running on the battlefield without adequate preparation is just as stupid as that. Apoorv, since you are an academic, your logical sense has not yet left your side. This gives you an edge over all of us. You are useful to us and that is why I want you to put all your talents to use today."

"And how is meditation going to help in that?"

"It will. You have to trust me."

I was left with no option but to obey. I reluctantly nodded. Prakhar smiled at me and mumbled, "Thank you."

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I don't know Shraddha's side of story since I was stuck with Prakhar. I asked her later on what had happened but she is too short tempered to narrate to me. So, here she is, filling you in with what happened with her once we had left. I had not told this part to the other me that day since I didn't know it then.

*I stood in the doorway thinking of nothing. A dozen policemen paraded around my home, looking for any clue the intruders might have been careless enough to leave.*

*You want to know how I felt? Well I felt the same way one will feel when one's comfortable and supposedly secure home is invaded at dawn by a score of men, armed and masked, when one's best friends are driven into capture without even the slightest of clue of the reason, when one's loyal friends whom one needed the most do not turn up in time to support one.*

*My phone beeped. I saw that it was Prakhar's message:*

*Hey, we will be a bit late. Apoorv met a minor accident. He is alright. Don't tell all to police. Think and speak. See u.☺*

*I was aware of Prakhar's style. He had managed to use a smiley in such situation.*

*Another police car parked itself besides six others in front of my place. My home was very special to me. My parents had lived there right from the beginning. Even I was brought up in the same place. I remembered to have spent many evenings with my family on our terrace which offered a brilliant view of the mountains and my beautiful little city. My parents had moved to Delhi because of my father's post retirement job which he was adamant to take up since it was his passion. After my education which was very much based on my ardor for teaching, I longed to come back to Dehradun. I had taught in many other cities but the children here are the best. They are simple and innocent. Of course I am not talking about children of class eleven and twelve but even they are much better than the teenagers of the metropolitan cities. So, I settled in our own place in Dehradun. I awoke from my reverie on seeing a senior police officer walking up to me. I had to choose my words. I had to be careful while imparting information.*

*"Hello ma'am. I am Prakash Rawat." He spoke warmly. I smiled a bit. "Would you kindly walk me through all that happened this morning?" He spoke as he drew from his pocket a pen and a writing pad.*

*I nodded. "The three of us were sitting in the living room, talking when suddenly the door burst open and around twenty men entered with guns. They blindfolded us and asked us to kneel down. Somebody whispered to me, 'Reach Naveen Restaurant at twelve noon. That will be your last clue.' Then the noises faded. When I removed my blindfold, Suraj and Aakash were gone."*

*"What was your relationship with Suraj and Aakash?"*

*"They were my friends. We were just hanging out."*



*"In the early hours of morning and that too, on a working day? That's surely out of ordinary." The detective pierced me with his eyes.*

*I knew I was not getting away with lies having loopholes. I had to fill them up somehow. "We exercised together every morning. We had just completed our routine."*

*The detective continued to glare at me for some time and then made a note on his pad. "Can you think of anyone who might want to do this? Any enemies, anybody?"*

*I shook my head. On this question I was just as lost as he was. He questioned me again, "What can you think of from their invitation to you to Naveen Restaurant?"*

*"I can't think of anything. Only I was asked to come with two of my friends Apoorv and Prakhar. They left this place minutes before the invasion."*

*The detective smiled mischievously. "Were they also exercising with you, miss?"*

*I had to nod. I knew I was posing myself as a complete playgirl or whatever but I couldn't help it. I was lucky and proud to be a member of the Apogee. There, I got an opportunity to use my knowledge for practical and philanthropic purposes.*

*"Where are they now?"*

*"They had gone to their place. I have called them. They will be here shortly." I replied.*

*I knew the detective had not believed me. His face said it plainly. "We will wait for the ransom call. Thank you, miss." He said and joined the other cops. I sighed disgustedly. They were waiting for a ransom call that wasn't going to come.*

.....

Prakhar stood in front of me typing a message on his phone. I heard the beep. The message was sent. I heard the Nokia tune and I understood that he had turned off his phone.

"Give me your phone." He said. I obeyed. He switched it off and threw it on my bed.

"Listen, Apoorv. Today our session will be a bit different. I will talk to you. You have to speak whatever comes to your mind. You have to speak everything. Even if you start thinking of football, you have to speak out. You understand?"

I nodded. "Do I have to close my eyes?"

"Yes, compulsorily and I want you to concentrate. Just go with my words." He spoke as he settled on the floor. I settled next to him but he snapped, "You will not sit here. Go lie on your bed."

"What?" I exclaimed. Prakhar was really going crazy.

"Apoorv, we really don't have time to repeat stuff. I know what I am doing. Just obey!" He yelled in his whisper.

"What if I fall asleep?"

"You won't. I will see to that."

I lay on my bed. It was obsessively comfortable. "Okay, I am ready." I sighed and closed my eyes.

Prakhar began, "Today, I have come to you to talk, son. You need revival."

I immediately remembered. I was supposed to speak whatever came to my mind. "God, what I can see is that I have a battle to fight and I must go and fight."

"Fight you must but you will need a weapon in the battlefield, son. As for now, you don't have it."

"What weapon?"

I imagined him smiling at me. "You will need a heart, son."

I was left with nothing to say. He had touched a nerve here. He continued with his voice lowering to a barely audible whisper, "I know you are a skeptic. I know you see me as a refuge for the weak. I know you are a man who isn't blinded by greed or wealth but is programmed to be just a run of the mill machine."

"At least I am doing better than those with a heart, God. I am stronger than those who have had their hearts broken, who have been betrayed and left to rot in their emotion of grief. I am immune to the injustice this world necessarily metes out to the people with a heart." I yelled, losing control over myself.

He sighed and there was a short pause. He spoke softly, "Speak out son. Where is this coming from? What made you like this?"

I regained composure and spoke slowly, "It began with witnessing injustice that I could do nothing about. As I grew older, I saw people being used and destroyed only because they let somebody into their inner circle. I saw that the people who had reached beyond caring for emotions were the ones who were most blissful. I felt powerful once I had reached beyond emotions. I was invulnerable."

"And yet you cannot survive without having emotions."

"Yes, I can. I have until now. I will in future."

"Let me ask you a question, son. Do you even believe in me?"

Nothing came to my mind. "I don't know." I simply said.

"Let me make it easier for you. Darwin proposed the theory of evolution which provides a perfect explanation to life on earth. I am not needed in creating the life. Life created itself, through the process of natural selection, slowly but surely developing, gaining complexity until the Homo sapiens evolved. The Homo sapiens boasted of consciousness and intelligence that set them apart from the rest of the beings. When the superior Homo sapiens became aware of their consciousness, and their intelligence, they started dominating the planet. They made cities, skyscrapers, airplanes, supercomputers which did the tasks they could not do inherently. They organized themselves. Very soon they started asking questions. Who created their planet? Who made life? They made a caricature of a superhero who had done everything without showing himself. They started calling him by different names, started praying to him in different languages. As knowledge increased, the selected few started questioning the credibility of this superhero. Whoever did so was executed. These were the people who prayed to the one who had allegedly created life by destroying life. Soon, knowledge defeated faith and a new generation heralded its commencement. Science opened eyes. It made people worship nature. They kept opening nature's secrets while all the way, under the glimmer of this new era of practicality with the philosophy of live life king size, was hidden in plain view the human's untapped potential, lost in the turbulence of machine dominance."

"You don't come in the picture at all?" I asked.

"Until now, I don't. But when the 'human' started noticing that he wasn't just a conscious machine but a human, a human who holds in him transcendent powers, he panicked. There had been people in every generation who had understood the power of their mind, their emotions but they had reached beyond, beyond the scope of yelling at people to join them. Many of them did and they were called God's incarnation. I can't believe there is a word such as that."

I understood what he was saying. "Because everyone has that power."

"Exactly. Now the question is what exactly is this power I am talking about? I will tell you. Understand heart to be the metaphorical word for emotions. When you look at the world with a heart, it will be bright with ardent colors. I will simplify myself." He heaved. "Emotions too are of two natures- the positive emotions of optimism, hope et cetera and the negative emotions of anger, jealousy and hatred. Remember despondency and happiness are not emotions, they are conditions, created from emotions."

"I thought negative emotions are those which make you sad and vice versa." I replied.

"Actually, the classification is based much more on energy. We don't need to go into that. What I mean to say is that you cannot resist being emotional, the question is which type of emotions do you embrace?"

"I was not emotional. I didn't choose any of the emotions."

"You had chosen, son. Ask yourself. Every human who is living in this chaotic world will have emotions. You had embraced despondency. You had embraced monotony. You had embraced solitude and you liked to hide it behind a fake veil of heartlessness."

I sighed. "I did it so that I could rise above the petty problems related to emotions like depression, heartbreak and stuff like that."

"And you think it was working? The fact is that the most profound joys of human life are achieved when you can look at things with a heart. The monotony can be broken not with negligence but with passion. People nowadays always

remain on the verge of losing their temper. Tiny things can push them over the edge. But if you see everything with a heart it won't seem so irritating after all. Human life is not a curse for not behaving properly in heaven. It is a blessing, a blessing you must realize."

"You didn't tell me where you come in the picture."

"About that? Well, for you I am nature. For some, I am the creator of human soul. For others, I am creator of the world. I will leave it to science to figure it out."

I realized it was Prakhar I was talking to. He had already surprised me a lot. I was wondering how he had come to know so much about me.

"You think there is something such as the human soul?"

"Yes, I do. I believe in the power of human thought. I believe in dualistic nature of the world. I believe in the power of emotions. Also, it is just as necessary to control our emotions. All weapons come with this precaution. If you start caring too much for your emotional situation or of others', you will be used. This is what you had witnessed."

"But what about injustice? How am I supposed to deal with that?"

"That will need some more explanation. There are two types of things in this world. Things that we can do something about and the things we can do nothing about. The things that we can do nothing about do not depend on any one person but on orientation of a number of people. The things we can do nothing about should be left alone. There is no use of wasting your breath over it but if there is something you can do about it, you should do it."

I had started talking to a person now. I knew my lesson was done. There was a short pause.

"All I will ask you to do," He spoke softly, "is to understand emotions now. When you open your eyes this time, you should be a totally different person, a person who doesn't run away from love, a person who doesn't ignore the joys that the world is waiting to offer him, a person who can not only use but also control the weapon gifted to him."

I smiled and nodded. I was convinced. Prakhar had touched the nerve. Nobody had reached as close to me as he had. Nobody had talked to me the way he had. I opened my eyes. The first light was that of the flickering candle. Then suddenly my room lit up with crimson glory. Prakhar had opened the curtains. The sun had risen. I slowly awoke and looked at Prakhar. He was busy in switching on his phone.

"I cannot imagine how you knew all that." I spoke, in a spirit of true speculation.

"I am a professional. We have been keeping an eye on you." He smiled.

"Well, I will change. I have to, I want to be happy." I felt like never before.

"Apoorv, now we are ready to go out there and fight. We have to get them back alright."

I nodded fervently. Prakhar spoke again, "Will you do me a favor? Will you apply this band aid on your head and leg? It is actually to cover up a lie I spoke to Shraddha." He offered me two band aids.

I laughed. "Of course I will." I had been changed. It was hardly a price with which I could repay what Prakhar had done for me.

# XI

We saw many police cars as we neared Shraddha's home. The whole colony seemed to have mobbed the place. Prakhar parked his bike next to one of them while I rang the doorbell. An old woman answered the door. I had never seen her before.

"Who are you?" She fired at me. I hate this question. It leaves one with nothing to answer.

"Namaste Aunty." Prakhar clasped his hands together and smiled. This was a thing I had seen only here. My colleagues had told me that this was done each time one saw an elder. The woman recognized Prakhar and replied his greeting. "Namaste beta. Thank god you are here. Shraddha is waiting for you. So terrible what happened!"

Prakhar nodded melancholically. "Aunty, this is my roommate Apoorv."

I managed a smile and did the thing. "Namaste Aunty."

She didn't reply the way she had done for Prakhar. We entered the house. Shraddha was sitting in the drawing room, staring blankly at the police running around the place. As soon as her eyes fell on Prakhar, she leapt from the couch jumped into his arms. She broke down and cried like I had never seen before.

"Everything will be alright." Prakhar mumbled. "Everything will be alright."

I watched them in awe. Their attachment was really touching. She let go of him and dabbed her eyes. Then she eyed me. "What happened to you?" She asked. I noticed she was looking at my forehead band aid.

"Oh nothing actually. Just found out that Pulsar 220 is too much for me." I smiled. She smiled back a bit and looked away.

On regaining calm, she told us about their next message.

"So they are asking us to go to Naveen Restaurant. What could be the reason?" Prakhar asked.

"The cops think they might want some confidential information about something since they have made no ransom call." Shraddha replied.

"We don't know any confidential information that might be of interest to them." I said.

"We can't even say that." Prakhar spoke slowly. The situation was helpless. It was as if they weren't even afraid of the police. Not once had they said anything about not going to the police. The only option we were left with was to wait for the last message in Naveen Restaurant.

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After the police officer was convinced that no ransom call was coming, his only hope was the invitation. He had decided to let us go there but with backup, microphones and pen cameras. He had asked us twice if we were held on duress and were hiding some information from him and that our best chance of getting Suraj and Aakash was by telling them everything we knew. We had staunchly refused saying that we had told them everything we knew.

In a city like Dehradun big crimes are rare. So, the local newspapers don't miss an opportunity of getting any crime report whenever there is any. They had now come to make matters worse. The three of us sat in the bedroom, nervously waiting for twelve noon.

My mental state was much like one will have when one is taken to heaven and then thrown on Earth. But this time I was not going to give up. The state where you accept that you have a heart gives you immense peace of mind. It takes away from you the need of acting as if you don't care and gives you permission to be your true self. I could feel myself revived; only I had to put this to proper use now.

At around eleven thirty, the police gave us microphones and pen cameras. We got ready and set out in the police control car, disguised as a pickup truck.

Naveen Restaurant is one of the most decent restaurants of the city. Situated at the far north of the city, its distance from our present location was around twenty kilometers. As we came into the main city we realized the city wasn't as gloomy as we were. The sun was bright and warm, a comfort from the freezing cold that the nights and the mornings offered. People sat in corridors and verandahs,



enjoying the gift of warmth the day offered. I lowered the car window and sunshine fell on my face. The warmth was most encouraging. Hope was in the air.

We passed through the Clock tower and turned right. A busy road slowed down our journey. The Chakrata road is notoriously called the bottleneck of Dehradun considering its width. All the traffic that had to cross to the other side only had the Chakrata Road as a convenient option. The stretch of around five hundred meters took at least half an hour to cross (People of metropolitan cities won't find it surprising. People here are outraged; they credit it to the destructive growth their city is undesirably making).

Our car stopped some meters away from the restaurant. The senior police officer faced us and calmly spoke, "We can hear and see all your actions. Anything wrong happens, police will be everywhere. So, just keep your cool and do as we say. Okay?"

We nodded. With that the door opened and we were let out. From then onwards, we couldn't speak anything that we didn't want the police to know. They could hear everything. I had chosen my favorite Transformers T shirt and loose jeans for the occasion. Don't mind my only occasional reference to clothes. It is just the way I am.

The three of us entered the restaurant. The place wasn't crowded since it was a working day.

"Settle on one of the tables," came the command from the police. We chose a table for four and settled there. Shraddha sat next to Prakhar while I sat opposite to them. A waiter immediately attended to us and provided us with the menu.

"Show us who all is there." A voice blared from my microphone. I scanned the restaurant. A family was sitting next to us and two tables away from us were sitting a group of young boys, laughing and talking. My pen camera gave the footage to the police.

The manager came to take the order. We asked him to come later. I now looked at the menu. There were all types of cuisines available in the restaurant. In normal circumstances, I would have enjoyed this place a lot but that day, we had

to order something that could take us long to finish, providing us with sufficient time to wait.

I thought of lemonade but its price on the menu surprised me. The cheapest dish on the menu was a *papad*. I couldn't have ordered that alone. I looked at Prakhar and Shraddha. They were also going through the menu.

The manager came again. We had to order now. "I will have corn soup." I said. Prakhar and Shraddha ordered the same. I spoke into my microphone as a tiny joke, "You are going to pay for that, aren't you?"

Nobody replied from the other end. No, they won't, I replied to myself.

"Apoorv, go to the wash room. Check there." I got up and so did Prakhar. He had received the same command. Together we entered the washroom. It was absolutely empty. I moved throughout the place to see if there was any clue but the place had nothing out of ordinary. It was just a washroom. I washed my hands and splashed water on my face. Prakhar did the same. Together we came out. As soon as we sat back, Shraddha left to check the ladies washroom. A minute later she came back with a blank expression. "Nothing." She mumbled to us.

This was not going right. Although, we didn't know what to expect, this wasn't one of our guesses. There was some purpose of getting us here. The soothing music didn't soothe me anymore. See with a heart, I had been told. I closed my eyes and heaved. I had to use the weapon now. This was our last message, our last chance. I opened my eyes and peered over to the family sitting next to us. The parents had come with their infant. The woman seemed to be around thirty, very fair and was surely not a house wife. The man, unlike the woman seemed more relaxed and happy. The couple talked happily to each other, laughing and cuddling their child regularly. I smiled. The infant was very beautiful. I looked into his eyes. They were deeper than depth of oceans reflecting perfectly his innocence.

Nothing left to notice now in them, I said to myself. I moved my sight to the group of young boys but I couldn't have stared at them for too long. Their table faced ours. They could have seen me staring at them like that. Our soups arrived

but I was too busy to notice. My eyes wandered on the entrance for a while and then fell on the Sherpa, who was opening the door for every customer.

He was my only hope. My microphone erupted again with a sound. "Apoorv, have your soup. Don't stare that way. It's awkward." I looked away and returned to my companions. They gave me a questioning glance. I quickly started eating. I noticed I was sweating profusely. I wiped my forehead and sighed. It was important for me to think clearly. I had to think the way I would have thought in normal circumstances. Don't let the worries take over you, I said to myself.

I started thinking of the Sherpa. Every time anyone neared the door, he would salute them and hold the door wide open to them. He would then sit on his chair beside the gate and wait, wait for another customer, wait for anything to happen. Sometimes his eyes would linger on the food he could see people devouring and he would look away, remembering the most he could get was the leftover of their plates. His job doesn't change a bit while the weather changes, the customers change and yet when I turn to look at him, he is smiling brightly at everyone. Even on a closer look, you find out he is not faking it. He is genuinely content. Hierarchy is a characteristic of life, without which there will be no management of beings. Somebody has to salute and open the door to every customer, somebody has to be a labor and somebody has to stand guard at inhabitable borders of gigantic countries. That's just the way a society is organized. In animals, there is a natural hierarchy triggering the food chain, helping every being to survive by devouring the one below it. Only in humans, the hierarchy is more complex. It can be switched, changed by one's own efforts.

Like a flash, it hit me. My mind chronicled everything, every clue and processed it. Everything started making sense. I gasped in utter disbelief. How blind we were being! The whole thing was right in front of us. The only thing I needed to do to confirm my belief was make a phone call.

I looked up at Prakhar, my eyes giving away my jubilation. He looked closely at me and understood. He looked at Shraddha and she understood. We had to wait now, wait for us to get out of there, wait for the police to remove this

microphone. We finished our soup. I could see Prakhar and Shraddha waiting anxiously for further instructions.

“There is nothing here. What do we do?” Prakhar finally spoke.

There the police officer was sweating. This was his first case of abduction without ransom demands. “Come back.” He spoke one by one to all the three subjects.

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On our way back, I had figured out why everything had happened but I couldn’t think of the place where our three friends were kept. The answer, I was sure had to be in the knowledge we had been imparted. I wanted to ask something to Prakhar but a police officer was sitting right next to us. I had to contain my excitement somehow.

The city passed in total ignorance since my mind was bent over something I had almost figured out. The greens of Rajpur swept my face with fresh wind and I closed my eyes for a moment and felt the air. Freshness is exhilarating.

As soon as we reached Shraddha’s place, the three of us shot indoors into the bedroom. For the first time my speech was so important.

“So you said you stabilized the subject first in your redemption task. What exactly does that mean?” I asked.

“It means breaking that layer which makes a person pose artificially. It can usually be done by some touching story or moving sight.” Prakhar replied.

“Exactly. The second video of that slum was intended to do exactly that thing.”

“Makes sense but that is when we suppose they also do the same thing we do: redemption.”

“Aha! The next clue tells exactly what they do. It is actually the most significant clue. You remember the parable?”

Prakhar and Shraddha nodded. “It talks of punishment to those who deserve punishment and reward to those who deserve reward. Right?”

“Yes.” Shraddha and Prakhar chorused.

"This is what they do. You told me about a businessman who was abducted and when released, committed suicide. His suicide note said he deserved it; he cheated poor people and stuff like that. They do what you do only their motto is a bit different. They believe in destructing the ones who deserve it."

"But how?" Shraddha asked.

"That is not the point." Prakhar cut her short. He faced me and said, "So they are doing this to us because they want us on their side. They want to convert us."

"Precisely so. The last message in the restaurant was about human hierarchy. We were supposed to notice the Sherpa. The message was that everyone chooses their level in the hierarchy. They have clearly chosen the topmost level. They want the Apogee by their side to further strengthen them."

"What if we would have missed the message, like we have been missing from such a long time?"

"The whole purpose of this game was to buy some time and at the same time convince us. We know they are not after killing us. This was the time they wanted in convincing Ajay and they got almost six hours for convincing Suraj and Aakash. Even if we wouldn't have figured it out, I am sure Ajay, Aakash and Suraj would have walked their way back home after some time. But now, since we have figured it out, we have a chance of finding them out. The only question is-how?" I spoke.

"He told us they operate like a linked list." Prakhar mumbled, deep in thought.

Utilizing the time, I made the phone call to the messenger of their group, whom we had caught in our place earlier that day.

"Hullo?" came his voice, just as pacific as it was.

"Don't let him know we have figured it out." Shraddha whispered to me.

I nodded. "Hullo, tell me, were you supposed to tell us that you operate like a linked list?" The question was well thought out.

There was a short pause then he spoke, "Yes."

“Okay, thank you.” I ended the call.

“He was supposed to tell us that they operate like a linked list anyway. Even if we wouldn’t have caught him, he would have come and told us this.” I told Prakhar.

“This means it is the part of the clue. We are supposed to use it. Linked list really is of no help, actually. We have to find Start. Only he can lead us to the first member who can lead us to his next and like that.” Prakhar was deep in thought. “Linked list clue is useless, unless...” He stopped. Suddenly his expressions changed. He looked up at me.

“Unless what?” I asked.

“Unless it is a circular linked list.” Prakhar got up. “Yes, that is the only way it makes sense. That way one member will play two roles. Bingo!” Prakhar had figured it out. Shraddha understood too. Only I was clueless. I gave a questioning glance.

“See, when the linked list will be circular, the last member can also be said to be the first member from the other side. This way our innocent messenger also becomes the Start, the member who holds the address to the first member of the operating unit.” Shraddha explained.

“So the messenger played a dual role. He lied to us.” I finally understood.

“Actually if I am guessing it right, he didn’t. He told us an address. I think that is the address of the first member of the linked list. He completed the duty of being the Start, only we didn’t realize it. That is where our friends are kept.” Shraddha spoke.

“So, if we hadn’t figured it out, they would have given away the fact that their linked list is circular. That way they could have returned our friends without ever showing themselves.” Prakhar said.

I knew what it implied. “The same thing will happen if we don’t move fast now.”

“We can’t go anywhere without letting the police know. They have appointed security guards for the place for at least two more days.” Prakhar spoke.

"No, I can't go without letting the police know. You guys can. You should go. If anybody asks you where you are going, just tell them, you are going home. Okay?"

We nodded. She smiled. "Go and when you come back, I want you to have Ajay, Suraj and Aakash beside you."

We promised with our eyes and left. Five minutes later, Prakhar's bike was roaring through the Rajpur Road. Chanderlok colony is situated near The Ajanta Continental, a medium sized hotel. On the other side of it is hotel Great Value, another prestigious hotel of the town. Considering our speed, it mustn't have taken us more than ten minutes to locate 46, Chanderlok Colony.

Prakhar parked the bike in front of the gate and sighed. "How are we going to do it?" He asked.

"Graciously. I will ring the doorbell and we will do it like gentlemen." I rang the doorbell. We waited anxiously. The door opened and a middle aged man beckoned us in. The room we entered into was small and empty. The man smiled comfortably at us and spoke, "Nice work. I didn't expect you." His face didn't show any surprise.

"Where are our friends?" Prakhar asked.

"They are right here. You are intelligent. You didn't get the police here. Although we had means to take care of that, it is always nice to let things remain simple."

"We didn't call the police here because we understand you now. Entirely. Just return us our friends and get this over with."

"Of course." He got up and disappeared indoors. A minute later three men brought three chairs in the room. I saw Ajay, Suraj and Aakash gagged in their chairs. The chairs were left in the middle of the room.

"Open them up!" Prakhar yelled. The man emerged again and gestured Prakhar to relax. We stood on one side, the man stood on the other.

"Nobody is dishonest or bad here, Prakhar. You don't need to worry. Whatever we did, we did for a purpose, a noble purpose. We wanted a group of as much

potential as yours to utilize its resources to the maximum extent. We wanted Apoorv to be included. We had been noticing you carefully, Apoorv and that is why you found the second DVD on your doorstep.” He looked closely at me and smiled.

“We wanted you to understand the situation our country is facing today. Steps as little as yours are not going to help on the bigger frame. Our group, on the other hand is global. It is doing the job someone must do in today’s society. As to the way we work, we don’t touch the criminals physically. We just provide them with some time to think and a topic to think on. The force of conscience breaks them down. Prakhar knows what I am talking about.” He stopped. Prakhar didn’t reply.

“In simplest words, I am providing the members of The Apogee with an opportunity to perform on a bigger stage, to help in a bigger project, to do a nobler task and set itself atop the human hierarchy.”

“Why do you kill them?” I asked.

“We don’t kill them. They kill themselves. The criminals one faces on the bigger stage are past the scope of redemption.” He replied flatly.

“I just want my friends back. I don’t want to be a part of anything. Apoorv, don’t be convinced by his rhetoric. It is wrong.” Prakhar spoke. I was not falling for anyone’s rhetoric. Prakhar was my mentor. There was no way I was leaving his side. I nodded.

The man spoke again. “Anyway, I will leave your friends now and they will choose their side. I am not holding them on duress. This will be their decision.”

“Yes and they will choose this side.” Prakhar said confidently.

“We will see.” The man said. Three strong men entered the room and untied Ajay, Suraj and Aakash. Their eyes adjusted to the light outside and they saw us standing on two ends.

“Come on guys. Let’s go. The Apogee is good in itself.” Prakhar said and smiled. I looked closely at the three of them. They were not smiling at Prakhar. They didn’t move. I feared the worst.



“Sorry, Prakhar. I am theirs’.” Ajay spoke. These are the words that still ring in my ears like a thunderclap.

Prakhar was stunned. He looked at Ajay but he had already turned towards the man. Suraj and Aakash turned too and walked away to the other side. I watched them in awe. “Ajay you can’t do this.” This was all I could speak.

He smiled at me. “Apoorv it is not like in some dark movie. We are on the same side. This is the one opportunity I have been waiting for throughout my life. I am finally doing something that matters. I am helping my nation grow.”

“They kill people!” I spoke, losing control over myself.

“They don’t. Destruction of the bad is necessary for improvement of the society. If at all you want to help your society, you should join us.”

“I am not going anywhere.”

“You are not prepared then. You are not prepared to sacrifice petty desires to achieve something greater. You are not prepared to set yourself apart from the crowd.”

“But what about our Apogee, Ajay?” Prakhar asked.

“Apogee is not dead, Prakhar. It is stronger now. It is bigger. The fact is that you are too afraid to accept reality. You are too afraid of death.”

I saw Prakhar’s eyes light up with rage. I thought he would reply but he didn’t. The rage in his eyes disappeared to give way to unabashed sorrow.

“Shraddha is waiting for your arrival. There is a police report of your abduction. At least come with us and show yourself.” I spoke. Most surprisingly, I was not indignant. The fact was that I was finding them convincing.

It was a fact. Sometimes elimination is the only way to liberate the society of malice. Moreover, they didn’t use weapons for destruction. They left it to the conscience. But I had to stick to Prakhar. He had done far too much for me to leave his side now.

"Alright. I will be moving out, Prakhar. I am going to Delhi." Ajay said. His voice was rigid. Prakhar didn't reply.

"Apoorv, I give you an opportunity. You can join us." The man said.

I turned back without replying and followed Prakhar out of the house. In the way I heard his voice, "That's okay. I will give you more time to think."

Ajay, Suraj and Aakash came out. They entered a car and zoomed of. Prakhar and I sat on the bike and left after them. Prakhar mumbled in the way, "That was not expected." That was really not expected.

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I sat on the terrace with Prakhar by my side. Both of us were blankly staring at the woods. Downstairs, Ajay, Suraj and Aakash were talking to Shraddha, breaking the news of their change of side.

Then that I had got some time, I pondered over the whole situation. It wasn't really a big deal. The three guys were doing something constructive. I didn't know why Prakhar was so uptight about it. I glanced at him. He looked back at me.

"You can take Ajay's room if you like now." He said.

"Is it better?" I asked. I wanted to humor him.

"It is bigger and there is a bathtub in the bathroom. Ajay especially got it for himself."

"I am good actually. So how long have you been living together?"

"Five years. When Ajay had first come here, he had shoulder length hair." Prakhar smiled.

I couldn't imagine Ajay in shoulder length hair. I had always known him to be that smart athletic young man.

"I know you want to ask me why I am making such a big deal out of it." Prakhar spoke.

“Actually yes, but you can answer it whenever you are alright. I am sticking by you, no matter what.”

There was a short pause. The warmth had relaxed me. Moreover, I was relieved from the game we had been playing from the last night, only its ending was not as I had imagined.

“You know,” Prakhar began. “There is a big difference between being good and being right.”

“You are right when you are factually or logically correct. Like if you say, Delhi is the capital of India, this and only this is right. There can be no other true answer to this question.”

“Yes but what are you implying?” I asked.

“If you see in our situation, this group is doing the right thing. Eliminate the evil, perfectly correct logically. But the word, good. Good is a more difficult word to understand.”

I now understood. Prakhar was explaining to me the reason of his reaction.

He continued. “Good is a relative word. It belongs to the emotional domain. Something like relative velocity. If somebody is travelling at a velocity of fifteen kilometers an hour and I am travelling at ten kilometers an hour in his direction, to him I am travelling at a velocity of five kilometers an hour. If somebody is travelling at the same velocity as mine, to him I am at rest. Am I right?”

“Absolutely.” I replied. He knew Physics too. Prakhar never ceases to fascinate me.

“Similarly good is a relative word. To one I might be doing a good thing, to the other, I might be doing nothing at all and to another, I might be bad.”

“Are you implying that we all have a velocity?”

“Are longitudes and latitudes drawn across the Earth? No, we make them for our convenience. We make them to find out the exact location of any place. Similarly, velocity is just an analogue we are using to understand a more complex principle of human opinions.”

“The word good, nothing and bad are analogous to positive velocity, zero velocity and negative velocity of one relative to the other?”

“Exactly, only there are much more things at play here. We don’t need to go into that. Human opinions are varied, so how is one supposed to know if one is doing the right thing in the emotional domain?”

I was puzzled. He continued, “We usually do it by asking an inner voice we call our conscience. Today, Ajay chose their side because he thought in the physical domain. He didn’t think of the word good. A man kills all members of a family and then walks off. He is good or bad?”

“Bad, of course. But this is not the case here. What they are doing is for the good.”

“Can you tell me how you answered this question, in terms of the concept of relative velocity? What exactly did you do?”

I thought for a moment. How did I know he was bad? “To me he had a negative velocity.” I replied.

“What if I tell you he had killed the family which had killed his family?”

“I might say what he did was right.”

“Exactly. You can’t say if he was good or bad. You will say what he did was right, fair. But some enlightened man will say he was bad. Some bad man will say he was good.”

“Okay, so to me he is at rest, to the enlightened man he is travelling with negative velocity and to the bad person, he is travelling in same direction with a higher velocity.”

Prakhar nodded. “As a matter of fact, in this model, our velocity reflects our instability. The enlightened man will have the least velocity and the bad man will have the maximum velocity. Actually the thing we are comparing is the sum of kinetic energy and potential energy.”

“Does that mean that people are also at different elevations?”

"Yes, that is what reflects our potential energy. What we call God is the zero potential energy level and has zero velocity. This is the acme of stability."

"So that means we have a velocity and some elevation."

Prakhar nodded. "So, now how will you judge what Ajay, Suraj and Aakash did was right or wrong, good or bad?"

"I will see from the perspective of zero kinetic energy and zero potential energy level. That will be the true judgment." I spoke.

"Precisely so. So how are we supposed to know what it is like to be there?"

"Our conscience tells us. It is our part which is at zero potential energy and has zero kinetic energy."

"So ask that part of you. Close your eyes and ask your inner self. The answer will come to you. The answer I received was that redemption is the symbol of hope; hope to do the impossible, hope to achieve goodness not through destruction but through realization and reconstruction. No matter on which stage one does it, no matter how one does it, killing is killing."

I consider Prakhar to be too idealistic. Ajay was partly right. Prakhar somewhat seems to be running away from reality. I don't know if what I think is true. The lesson is yet to come in future. I am looking forward to it.

Shraddha emerged from the staircase. I saw that her expressions were not despondent but that she had cried recently.

"Are you alright?" I asked her as she approached me.

She smiled serenely and nodded. She passed by me and embraced Prakhar. Prakhar clutched her tightly and closed his eyes. It was as if Shraddha was the stronger one now.

"You are not leaving too, are you?"

She laughed on my frightened expression and shook her head. "Acceptance. Prakhar is not strong at that. I am. Are you?"

"I am actually but I won't mind a hug." I joked.

She pinched me on my shoulder. "I am thankful to you. You have been very helpful. We couldn't have done it without you."

"And I am thankful to all of you. You taught me lessons of life. I didn't know the meaning of trust, sacrifice and dedication before I met you guys." I retorted. I locked my eyes with hers'. I noticed they were distracted and looked away.

"They told me you are sad about the Apogee." Shraddha spoke to Prakhar.

"Yes, I am. We were helping the society. It is sad that it is all gone." Prakhar replied. He had regained his composure and was now standing against the boundary wall, facing away from the afternoon sun.

About the police, guys, well we told them that we had found Ajay, Suraj and Aakash by our house. The three of them were being questioned at the moment. It goes unsaid that they were glibly lying about the whole thing.

"Will you do me a favor, Shraddha? Will you come to our place as my girlfriend? It is actually to cover up a lie I spoke to Elfin." I didn't know if it was too much to ask from her. I had to arrange someone. Elfin could have killed me otherwise. Moreover, Shraddha wasn't the kind of person who would let anyone talk too much. She was ideal.

She looked into my eyes and blushed slightly. A slight smile appeared across her face. I wanted to play some good track in the background. It could have gone so well with the scene.

# EPILOGUE

My reverie broke. End of story, I told the other me. “You didn’t tell me how you ended up here.” He said. Well that, I replied, that was just the fulfillment of the promise that man had made to me. He had promised to give me some more time to think. He had done just that. The very next day he had abducted me. The other me was satisfied and I was drowsy. I leaned my neck against the chair and fell asleep.

I was gagged and harangued with rhetoric for two days but I was steadfast. Prakhar’s was the side I had chosen and nothing was going to change that. I was released after the detainer was convinced I was past the scope of transformation. I walked back home gaily.

Today, Prakhar and I live together. Elfin has completed his engineering and has left the place. He is now recruited in Bangalore. I am now a well known Physics teacher of the town. My parents want me to come back and I know I have to leave but Dehradun is the place I have learnt so much from. Its simplicity has inspired me; its beauty has opened my heart.

Ajay calls us sometimes to tell about his success in the new group but our talks are strictly formal. Shraddha too has left Dehradun now. She lives in Delhi with her parents but we still go to the spot next to her place, the spot where the Apogee used to carry out all its operations.

Once again I feel like drawing the painting: Past and Present; the Past when I had come to this place that night, the past where Apogee is carrying out the redemption task and the present. The painting will be an amazing reminder of our past and our present. It will depict the power that time holds. It will depict the ephemeral nature of things around us. It will, in a nutshell, portray the essence of life.

I have made many friends now and sometimes I insist Prakhar to reform the Apogee with new members but he simply refuses. He is still attached to the Apogee that was.

With that reader, I will bid you goodbye and promise you my update whenever new lessons of life dawn upon me so that we may all share them and not make the insane mistakes that we make which hold the potential of turning around our lives forever.

*THE END.*

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*THANK YOU.*