

MACHIAVELLIAN



ARCHIESMAN BASU

BASED ON A TRUE CIA CONSPIRACY THEORY

THE ORIGINS

The term 'Machiavellian' originated from the famous **Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli** (3 May 1469 – 21 June 1527) who was Italian diplomat, politician, historian, philosopher, humanist, and writer of the Renaissance period. He has often been called the father of modern political science

He wrote his most renowned work *The Prince* (*Il Principe*) in 1513.

"Machiavellianism" is a widely used negative term to characterize unscrupulous politicians of the sort Machiavelli described most famously in *The Prince*. Machiavelli described immoral behavior, such as dishonesty and killing innocents, as being normal and effective in politics. He even seemed to endorse it in some situations. The book itself gained notoriety when some readers claimed that the author was teaching evil, and providing "evil recommendations to tyrants to help them maintain their power.

The term "Machiavellian" is often associated with political deceit, deviousness, and *realpolitik*. On the other hand, many commentators, such as Baruch Spinoza, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot, have argued that Machiavelli was actually a republican, even when writing *The Prince*, and his writings were an inspiration to Enlightenment proponents of modern democratic political philosophy

In psychology Machiavellianism is stated under 'The Dark Triad'

It is characterized by manipulation and exploitation of others, a cynical disregard for morality, and a focus on self-interest and deception

“It is better to be feared than to be loved, if you cannot be both”

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They're my Da Vinci irrespective of me being their Mona Lisa or not.

Very sorry if I missed someone.

But thanks to all for being in my life.

And dear reader 'you'. Thank you for picking up this book of a first-timer .

Enjoy!

This is completely a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, places, events and incidents are either a product of author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

To Nana and Nani,
Both of whom I lost while I was writing this book

PROI

‘It’s said that Goddess Durga visits earth because this’s her *maayke* (mother’s home), but her husband’s so doubtful of her that every time she visits earth, he furtively has a watch over her...’ *and so there’s always a picture or an idol of Lord Shiva behind Goddess Durga’s statue.* That was what the 17 year old boy wanted to say, but the timelines of his eyes had paused with the words as his vision glided over the girl in yellow *sari* walking alongside him. Her pink tongue darting towards the vanilla cone she held in her hand as her endless nods continued when she suddenly realised the boy had cut his interest in Indian mythologies down to a cold silence.

‘You don’t panic *darling*, you can ‘officially’ come to my *maayke* after we get married. My mom won’t mind...’ said her cream-clad

tongue, a wink ran down her over-darkened Nagpuri eye. The red *bindi* islanded by the pale forehead skin, shining its intensity with the lingering overhead beams somehow managed to wrap her naïve self within a coat of an astonishingly mature lady.

‘Marriage? We’re still in the 11th grade... technically not even mature enough to be called adults!’

‘Not again!’

‘Hey, I’m talking about practicality!’

‘Again, again, again, I’m saying this- Do not fall for these rules this society wrote for us. People make rules only because things never worked out the way they wanted!’ she said pausing at her place ‘Now look, the moment I hold your hand ‘here’... hundred eyes of fifty narrow-minded people would look onto us- judging me as ‘manner-less’, concluding you as some ‘flirt-type ridicule’ and if worse one of the 50 actually knows one of us’

‘How do you even think so much?’ the boy asked blankly looking at her face, trying to make out whether it was the same girl whom he had accidentally stumbled across in the ever-boring school bus.

That day, in the pre-school bus when no one other than them belonged nearly to the same-age-group, scenarios compelled them to sit together. Barely knowing by face, the boy came across to the newly admitted Nagpur girl in the bus who cornered herself in a two seater, away from the childish talks of the childish voices of childish faced children. And with a blank ‘Hi!’ there he popped who moreover wanted a companion who’d rather help him ignore the irksome voices of 60 chattering pre-schoolers around them, at least for the next one hour.

And at the Salt Lake stop when they parted, their discussions reached heights as such that even the pre-schoolers for a while presumed themselves as mature talk-makers.

‘Humanities student, *darling*’ she said brushing her shoulders ‘We’re born to sit idle!’

‘...and roam late nights with boyfriends?’ the boy said proudly looking at his reddish black watch ‘It’s 12:23, too late for a girl to be out in a city like Kolkata’

‘I shouldn’t have gifted you that watch’ she said tossing the piece of left over ice-cream into a ‘*Use me*’ named Kangaroo

‘Technically you brought it for the useless brother of yours who never appeared for *Rakshabandhan*. So out of disappointment you passed it to me...’

‘Well isn’t it nice, the one who selected the watch is himself wearing that?’ she said intently rubbing her vanilla palm over the boy’s white kurta. That undeniable smile of hers.

Trying hard to ignore the over-possessive balloon selling kids who kept walking with them till the heavy British gates outside the pooja, they both exited the *mandab*. It was dark, it was late and it was Kolkata. The boy had quite a thing to worry about

As on moving to get his *Duro*, the boy asked her to wait for him till he came back with the vehicle. Although after three consecutive pleas from her to accompany him to the parking the boy remained stern over his ‘No’ as after a decade-long stay in Kolkata he was quite acquainted to the fact that the shadowy parking gets a lot worse by the presence of the drunken devils on earth

As on entering the parking the boy felt a feebly quivering metal in his left pocket, soon he realised that an hour ago *she* handed him her phone before entering the *mandab*. As on taking the phone out, her screen flashed ‘*Mammi2*’, behind which it said *18 missed calls, 7 messages* making the boy ashamed as it was because of him, one whole family was having a sleepless night.

Silly girl! She should have at least called her home, the boy thought as suddenly even his phone began to ring, a call from an unknown number *At this time of the night?* With a light hesitation, he picked up the call

‘Boy, I know she’s with you...’ said a female voice, intensity pouring through her voice as the boy kept wondering to whom he was speaking to ‘... please give her the phone’

‘But who am I speaking to?’ he asked back

‘I’m *her* sister... now will you give her the phone?’

‘Actually, she’s not with me right now’

‘What do you mean by she IS-NOT with you, she told me she’s going to meet you!’ barked the trembling voice of the girl opposite

‘I mean I was going to get my vehicle from the parking, she’s standing near the gate’

‘Then why the hell is she not picking up her phone?’ her sister’s

voice literally broke

‘Her phone’s actually with me and it was in silent, so I didn’t realise someone was calling. I’m Sorry for that’ the boy apologized as he pulled his *Duro* off the stand and roared it back to life ‘Didi she’s absolutely fine, I’ll bring her back in 10 minutes’

‘You do bring her safely back, but bring her as soon as possible and directly to CMC (Calcutta Medical College). I beg you dear... its urgent!’

CMC at this time?

‘Is everything alright *didi*?’ he questioned with a controlled curiosity.

And ten seconds post the reply- the boy stood motionless, electrocuted be the better word. His phone soullessly thumped against his ears as the thing he had just heard of had left him in a sheer scepticism to question the moments he was living, as dream or a reality!

Because

If, Adversities when asleep is called a nightmare

Than Adversities when awake is called ‘Life’



The boy raced out through the streets of Kolkata without uttering a single word to the girl. She sat behind him, weirdly silent and lost in her thoughts as after near ten consecutive efforts of ‘What’s the matter?’ when she didn’t receive any reply, she thought it would be better just to let silence fill up the void between them..

She realised he wasn’t taking her back to her home. They’d been moving totally opposite to her house and at this hour of the night, she began feeling insecure.

‘And where are we going?’ she finally asked

‘Medical College’

‘But why? Is everything all right?’ she asked back ‘Who’s there at Medical College?’

‘We need to reach there’

‘But I have a family waiting for me at my home’ the girl fired back ‘And it’s near 10 clock! Why don’t you just tell me what’s the matter?’

As on hearing her talk abruptly, the boy pulled the brake and rubbed his tires to a halt. He turned back to her and ‘Your family is at the

Medical College. Your father just had a cardiac arrest and his condition is critical! I'm taking you to him. You just need to control yourself'

But she cried.

And she cried.

Silently and sadly.

But she cried.



B-209 was the cabin her father had been admitted into. The narrow stairs didn't matter to her, the thundering clouds didn't matter to her, the crowded lane didn't matter to her, the lighter tinge of drug-like smell hanging around didn't matter to her. All it mattered to her was her father and the **B-209**. And it all happened too fast to even give it a glimpse. Some moments ago she was the cutest girl, licking a little ice cream and chattering stuffs which her voice made a lot more cuter. And now she was this complete stranger- running into the Calcutta Medical College's corridor area searching madly for the B-209.

She didn't talk to the boy since the disclosure. Neither did he emphasize. They both huddled up to the second floor when suddenly the wing number B-213 came to view and so continued the sequence. The second floor welcomed them with a heavy rainfall outside as the boy saw through outside the huge window like projections made over the wall. The projections were too big than usual it could have been an under-maintenance section or may be the design was as such.

The smell of wet sand got mixed up with the medicated tinge of the hospital and the entire surrounding settled to the sounds of the heavy rainfall and draining waters from the pipes. The boy noticed everything, but *she*, none. She just kept budging forward, and by now they both were 10 feet apart. It seemed as though she totally forgot that the boy was still behind her

And suddenly the B-209 came to her sight.

She quickly pointed it towards him and madly ran across the passage towards the room. She didn't wait for him. It was her father.

She ran. She ran. And she kept running.

The floor was wet. And wet floors are slippery. And slippery floors are dangerous. He warned her, but his voice never seemed to have reached her.

The B-209 kept getting bigger and bigger as her eyes didn't watch anything else than the signboard

And just 5 feet to go, a nurse blocked her way. She took an abrupt sharp left. She stepped on the wet patch. Imbalance hit her hard as her left foot slipped having her spin anti clockwise with a slight tilt as she tried holding on to the nearby wall. Luckily she held the reeling, but the reeling was wet and her greased palms swiftly slipped over it. And just too short of her right leg to stop her from fall, she collided with the base of the open projection and with a forward flip she got flung into the air outside.

And from the second floor projection she landed over the concrete floored ground floor, straight on her head.

The boy kept standing, watching his world shatter in the matter of few seconds. He tried to believe his eyes, but couldn't.

He gulped hard.

And then he ran. He ran for her!

**PARALLEL UNIVERSES ARE THE UNIVERSES THAT
EXIST ALONGSIDE OUR PRESENT UNIVERSE, BUT WE CAN
NEVER EXPERIENCE THEM BECAUSE WE CAN
EXPERIENCE ONLY ONE UNIVERSE AT A TIME.
IT'S USUALLY TERMED AS AN ALTERNATE REALITY.
SOME OF THE MOST COMMON PARALLEL UNIVERSES
THAT WE ALL KNOW ABOUT ARE HEAVEN, HELL,
OLYMPUS.**

**USUALLY PARALLEL UNIVERSES DIFFER BY JUST ONE
EVENT (i.e AN EVENT WHICH HAS OCCURRED IN ONE
UNIVERSE AND DID NOT OCCUR IN THE OTHER. ELSE**

**EVERYTHING BETWEEN THE TWO UNIVERSES
REMAIN SAME)**

**THE FOLLOWING TEXT IS BASED IN THE YEAR 2017,
BUT IN A PARALLEL UNIVERSE WHERE THERE HAD BEEN
NO ATOMIC BOMBING OVER HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI.
A UNIVERSE THAT HAD NEVER EXPERIENCED THE
TRAVAIL OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR.**

FACT:

**IN THE LAST 15 YEARS 684 PERSONNELS OF ISRO HAVE
DIED UNNATURAL DEATHS OR JUST DISAPPEARED,
WHICH IS NEARLY 46 SCIENTISTS DYING EVERY YEAR
DUE TO UNKNOWN CAUSES**

MOST CASES REMAIN UNSOLVED TILL DATE

*Not all lives are lost in the borders between countries.
Some are lost in the borders between the knowledge and the
unknown.*

THE IDOL STONE

There's something about the physical science laboratories that make them look like the duller place on earth. You turn around and see sophistication all around with pictures of great scientists hanging all over the wall- some looking at you, some ignoring you like the girl next door. And there's always this small window where no cuckoo ever coos, where the window panes never need curtains because the thick layer of dust serves the purpose. And when you gaze outside the lonely window you see an open trunk with some dying leaves and young twigs where the sparrows would come, chirp have some intimate moments and once a while they'd peep into the window and shoot a pitiful glance at those humans trapped inside.

But that's not something that should be emphasized upon, especially when the entire story begins inside the physical science laboratories of one of the most eminent space research organisations of this planet-ISRO (Indian Space Research Organization). Yes, you're right. The only organisation in the world that had successfully planted a satellite around Mars in its very first go- Mangalyan.

This is a place dedicated to the people who know what infinity really looks like

"Looks fascinating, doesn't it?" said Shyamalan from the corner of the shabbily lighted research lab at ISRO Ahmedabad "The top glows like some crystal!" he said looking towards the can-like device placed over the desk, not very large, nor too small 'and this body, it looks like, like some old sand watch'

The air inside the lab was heavy and badly needed a freshening up. It had been only the two of them and a bunch of metals locked in the room since the last 5 hours. But that never bothered the two because the lab was a world in its own.

"Where did you take the inspiration from?" said Shyamalan curiously tampering the device with light fingers

"Of what?" came a disinterested young female voice from the other end of the lab.

“Of the design of this device! Hey, why don’t you just name it something? Something cool and complex, like something heavy... ‘The molecular teleporter’ or... or the ‘Dimension traveller” Shyamalan said waving his fingers wide in the air like Mozart “Adds weight when you publish your paper- ‘Dr Kritika Soni and Shyamalan Iyer creates the spectacular Dimension Traveller’. Cool, na?”

His suggestion remained unanswered, but he didn’t mind that. He had now gotten used to Dr. Kritika Soni. The typical ISRO gene- Too damn serious when it comes to work! Although Shyamalan himself was no less either because then he wouldn’t be sitting inside this estranged laboratory within the highly secured facility of India’s Space Research Organisation. So, this was the not-so-important, sometimes ignored Shyamalan Iyer, a blooming young mind with some ‘potential’ as they might call in ISRO. He looked like the South-Indian version of Alan, the guy from the Hangover Trilogy- unkept beard, unkept hair, properly pressed loose t-shirt, a pot belly which he claims to have decreased since he joined his gym and tighter pants to look even slimmer. Luckily he didn’t wear any glasses else his tiny face would start looking more like a hairy panda.

Apart from his trying-to-look-good looks which never manages to impress anyone, he was a recent pass out from Indian Institute of Science holding a degree in Relativistic Mechanics. And being not much use to ISRO during the current time, was sent as a research associate to Dr. Kritika Soni thinking he might learn something about the life of an ISRO scientist.

But so far he has been substituting the job of a television inside the lab because Dr. Kritika’s working style was way too different from even a *normal* human being. She could confine herself within that lab for days, she could stay focused for long hours even with the presence of a constant headache as Shyamalan, she sometimes went on a silent spree making her look more like a deaf woman and yet when you talk to her she’d behave like nothing ever was wrong with her. On the contrary she often welcomed short conversations, but would start coughing and talking disinterestedly whenever the conversation goes on for longer than she expected it to be. And this was exactly what was happening right now.

“Pass me that xynim crystal, will you?” Dr. Kritika Soni said

looking towards Shyamalan through her eye gear.

Initially she used to wonder how can one even speak such an awful lot of words without stopping for a breath? And because it was just the two of them in there hence since dawn till the dusk there was only one voice that Kritika would hear. Sometimes for the sake of shutting his hyperactive mouth she would plug-in her earphones without actually playing anything. But she also missed it when he wouldn't frolic around talking about himself, his car, his mother, his college life, his drunk day stories, his ambition for life, his ambition for world, his ambition for humanity, and many more things after which she would hand him her phone and ask him to go and speak to his girlfriend or his mother or any damn person who very ironically would be missing his voice (Yeah! This guy had a girlfriend too!)

But Dr Kritika Soni on the other hand wasn't even as half as her name and behaviour sounds like. Going by her expressions till now one might probably imagine her to be some boring dull faced scientist, with glasses and an oiled hair stuck in a room filled with astrophysics formulas and only answers when being asked something, something that she really finds important to answer to. A scientist who presses her clothes daily and goes to bed early thinking about the next day's work objective, that was the kind of her. Someone who would have a boring South Indian pot-bellied husband, working in some boring MNC, and earning money just to increase the digits over his pay cheque.

But no, no. Absolutely NOT!

Dr. Kritika Soni, was the young and agog 28 years old creation of ISRO with beautiful dark curls that lingers over her pale long neck, like creepers hanging down the roof of a light toned wooden house, and her exceedingly whitish complexioned face was so perfectly elliptical that had she been born during Renaissance someone or the other would have definitely made a painting of her by now.

"How did this crystal even manage to remain hidden from the world?" Shyamalan said looking at the crystals within the enclosed container totally disrupting my hearty sketch of Kritika "That too for an awful lot of time, hah!"

"Xynim, no! It wasn't exactly hidden" she said. "People just kept thinking of it as a miracle..."

"A miracle?" Shyamalan insisted

“Did you hear about ‘Vishvakarma’ temple in the South? The one over the Western Ghats?”

Silence followed from Shyamalan’s side as Kritika continued.

“Well people there claim that the idol of the deity has magical powers within it, and the idol is directly blessed by the Gods. Because whenever you place a coin over the rock on which the idol stands, the coin will magically stick to it” she began explaining with great interest “Believers still believe it’s the God’s miracle that makes this happen. Although scientists were never ready to call this ‘miracle’. They claimed there was just a magnet inside the rock that made the coins stick to it” she said playfully, working with her equipment “the temple men won’t allow for any tests to be carried out over their idol. They were afraid that indeed there was a magnet! But the believers of science never agreed to settle over the superstitious belief”.

“Well there definitely *should* be a magnet!” Shyamalan suggested

“No” Kritika smiled “nothing even close to magnet. Nor there was any ore that could have induced the magnetic property in those rocks. The archaeologists tried figuring out the rock from which the platform was built, but it was from a really long time ago- something near to 300 AD. But they also searched for the rock from which the idol had been carved out as they noticed that the two rocks were different. Later, they found it was the ‘idol’s rock’ that had granules of these...” she said picking up one of the crystals with the sleek tongs and bringing it close to her gigantic face, “These xynim granules embedded within the rock magnetised the foot rock! That’s the miracle. These crystals are just like magnifying lens. They do not have magnetic properties within themselves but they intensify the fields with repetitive internal reflection of fields. And not just the south, but the presence of xynim crystals is a possible explanation of the infamous magnetic hills of Ladakh”.

“But if the ‘idol rock’ had the crystals then shouldn’t the coins stick to the idol rock?”

“Well, had you not been such an atheist you’ll know that usually in temples people are forbidden from touching the God’s idol because they’re considered to be holy. Hence no one ever tried sticking a coin to the idol”.

“So you mean I’m holding something whose existence is undisclosed to *most of the world*?”

“The *entire* world” Kritika corrected

“Sorry? Did you say THE ENTIRE WORLD?”

“Government secrets...” she shrugged.

“But that’s wrong!” Shyamalan said handing Kritika the preservation box “Don’t you think the world has the right to know about them? It has the potential to instigate many more researches!”.

She looked at him and his innocence thinking that once even she herself used to be like this.

“Yes, they do. But it will be revealed only when the time is right”.

“But this is the right time! Do you realise how it’d boost the economic sectors of India? It will open an entire new area of research!”

Kritika paused her work and had her eyes deeply shut for a while thinking what could be the better way to put this reality in front of Shyamalan.

“Well Shyamalan” she finally said “did you know that in biochemistry whenever someone discovers a poison they never disclose it to others...”

“Why?”

“Because you never know when your *own* poison is being held up against you” she said taking out the tiny bluish xynim crystal. “A disease is released only after its antidote has been found. Likewise, we hold information regarding things until we are sure that it cannot affect us adversely in any possible way. When of national importance things not being productive enough would work, but things backfiring upon us is always a no-no situation. So we do need to hold secrets.”

“I thought only RAW, the Research Analytical Wing, and armies held secrets.”

“This explains that you’re new to ISRO” Kritika said putting her eye gear on. She bent down and pulled her face very close to the pipe shaped device for which Shyamalan had been suggesting names lately. Slowly, she started embedding the crystal into its desired setting.

These things were new to Shyamalan. And Kritika knew it would take time for him to get accustomed to these things. She knew it’s the transition that carves out a professional out of a student.

We are often told that research organizations like NASA, ISRO, CERN work for enhancement of human knowledge. But on a closer detail we get to know that these organizations work with a primary

objective of booming economic and social power of the nation they represent. And enhancement of knowledge was totally a secondary thing.

“Indians always had a better hold over knowledge” Kritika explained on watching Shyamalan run unusually silent “Things which the world considered unimaginable, we managed to create wonders using those very unimaginable things.”

“Who all are we talking about?”

“Lal Bahadur Shastri” she suggested, the former Indian Prime Minister who was very famous for the quote ‘Jay Jawan, Jay Kisan’ (Hail the soldier, Hail the farmer) which implied it is because of the farmers that you get your meals, and it is because of the soldiers on the borders because of whom you could have your meals peacefully.

“Homi Bhabha” she mentioned.

“Father of the Indian Nuclear Programme... Brilliant guy ha! University of Cambridge and all.”

“And had also been presented with Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan” she said arching her brows trying to search for another name that had just struck her mind, but now she forgot. She thought. She thought “And Vikram Sarabhai?” she said clapping her hands in excitement “Yes how can we forget him!”

“Oh yes! He’s one of the founding members of... IIM Ahmedabad” Shyamalan said happy to add information to Kritika’s over-informative chat.

She suddenly turned away from her work, eying towards Shyamalan with a cold gaze. She didn’t seem happy with Shyamalan.

Have I said something wrong? he thought.

“Yes! He ‘is’ one of the founding members of IIMA!” Shyamalan said emphasizing more on his ‘is’, “the guide in my IIM visit told me about this!”

“And nothing related to ISRO?” she asked with an intended sarcasm

“What about him?” he asked with a loose grin “I guess he was he a scientist at ISRO, right?”

“He was the *founder* of ISRO.”

DORAEMON!

Educational and research block

ISRO-SAC, Ahmedabad

Chief Akram, after having spent a complete half of his lifetime working for ISRO under some of the most eminent scientists India could ever have in the field of space research programmes, was now one of the most erudite person this organisation had ever given birth to. Having come across ISRO 25 years back, from an unheard district of Andhra Pradesh where education was considered secondary to getting married... there entered this 17 year old boy having fled from his house, a couple of days before his marriage not knowing that his so considered 'drastic mistake' would turn out to be a life-changing boon for him.

From working with Dr Abdul Kalam towards developing the Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile technology to working under Dr Soni (Kritika Soni's father) for designing of aerospace components for TEJAS, he had been through all. And having these many ample experiences in this rare field, he was often being called upon to take guest lectures for various National Level competitions held by ISRO, after all he was the one who was good with speeches.

And every single time he spoke, his speeches were greeted with a wave of silence and unbelievable admiration from the awed audience he addressed.

This too was one such abnormally normal day for Chief

"So how many of you watched Doraemon in your childhood days?" Chief said, adjusting his collar mike while he flew his eyes over the semi-circular classroom. In front of him sat 250 students from all over India, winners of Indian Space Champs Competition sponsored by ISRO. And after a week between galaxies and space engineering, this was their last day in this ISRO campus and hence the last day lecture was scheduled to be delivered by the man behind this entire idea of igniting the curiosity of space within the young minds, Chief Akram.

The students kept analysing their unfamiliar surroundings, with various degrees of silence until Chief raised the first question towards them. Their eyes motioning along with Chief's legs, as they eagerly waited to prove their knowledge regarding space and time and black holes and dark matters, yet they weren't getting the right moment. Quite contrary to their expectations Chief was excited more about knowing about Doraemon than discussing Einstein's theories.

“Yes, you heard me right. How many of you used to watch Doraemon? Come on, most of you must have watched it, right? In your young days... even my 11 year old son watches it and he drags me to the sofa making me watch that weird robot doing some crazy stuffs.”

A giggle ran through the first benchers- It's always great to have people with low humour expectations.

“Now everyone knows that Doraemon keeps an aaaaawwfuuull lot of gadgets in his tiny pocket, right? And yesterday while I was watching the show, he came up with a gadget that looked like a pen. Just a simple pen. But that wasn't just *any* pen. All you need to do is draw a circle with that pen over anywhere on the wall and the encircled part turns hollow. You then go to another place quite distant from the first circle, let's consider it 20 kilometres apart and draw another circle over the wall and these two circles weirdly get connected and form a passage as such that the moment you enter the first circle, you directly pop out of the second circle, which means that pen made you travel 20 kilometres in just 2 seconds! Hours of travels reduced to fractions of seconds! And my son just couldn't stop fantasizing his life with that gadget. And for the next whole hour I had to listen to him talking about what all places he would like to go once he had that device. Trust me, do think more than twice before you make a child” Chief winked as the whole class broke into a genuine laughter and it was good to see the smiling faces of those young kids rather than silent and dejected faces scribbling notes.

“And I explained to him that ‘Why use such a beautiful device to travel distances which one can more likely travel in 30 minutes? Why not use it to cover distances which the mankind might never be able to cover even if he spends his entire lifetime on the spaceship?’”

The class felt silent again as all their eyes had been transfixed to the 5'4" Chief Akram who kept speaking with a constant smile over his chocolate brown face. He had a way with the young hearts and it took him less than a minute to grip the entire class under his words of wisdom.

“Now 3×10^8 m/s, we all know it is the speed of the light” Chief said stepping into the aisle “But can anyone tell me how fast is it?”

Confused faces kept looking at one another. *What sort of a question is that?*

‘Very fast!’ someone cracked from one of the last rows as a giggle

of heavy voice came from the surrounding region. Even Chief smiled to the unusual comment.

“Hey, hey, hey, do not “grammatify” the data” the class laughed yet again “Treat physics as you treat your crush. I’ve seen men describing women with such enthusiasm that on listening you’ll feel like he’s describing some Greek Goddess or something! Her lips so beautiful as if they had been carved by Da Vinci and her eyes so glittery it seems that she had been handpicked by the fairies from the gardens of the heavens... Exaggeration indeed has no limits I guess.”

And that was followed by the usual college acts of internal mocking and silent looks being passed on through the class as the students were amazed to know that people from ISRO can be pretty cool at times.

“But you see whenever you explain the looks of any human being we often use frame of references to make things imaginable. Helps us give a better picture. Similarly, I wanted a frame of reference for the speed of light. Something with which I can know how fast light really is!” Chief said looking for answers “No one?”

“All right, 3×10^8 is the speed that can make you reach moon in just 1.3 seconds!” Chief said. A low turbulent amazement rose up within the class as the student murmurs filled the auditorium “Yes! That’s how fast the speed of light is! And the distance covered by light in one year is called a light-year. And let me tell you it is a ‘gargantuan’ distance- very very huge! In fact, the star nearest to our sun- Proxima Centauri is just 4.7 lightyears away from us. And even if I set you in Helios 2- the fastest man-made space ship right now- for your entire lifetime, still you can never reach Proxima Centauri. And how many more lives do you think you’ll need to reach that star?”

“10, 20, 5, 18...” kept coming as answers and some crazier ones claimed 100 and 110. And then when the real answer came from Chief Akram their faces turned cold

“200 lives... still you cannot reach the nearest star. Well, precisely as calculated it’ll take 19,000 years to reach the star nearest to the sun! And if we think over studying the universe, then I must say we badly need an alternate technology because the earth’s existent for a maximum of 4 billion years, only’

“Sir?” claimed a female voice from the third last row “Why can’t we travel by the speed of light? Because if we’re able to do so, we can reach

Proxima in maybe..." she said looking into her notes "4 years!"

"This was exactly I wanted to hear" Chief said excitedly moving towards the blackboard "Because this question was answered by Einstein himself!" he said scribbling the most famous formula that Einstein had quoted " $E = mc^2$ " where 'm' is the mass of the body, 'E' is the energy and 'c' denotes the speed of light... But here's where the main problem comes- For accelerating to the speed of light a body needs infinite energy which mean $E = \infty$ and because 'c' the speed of light is constant (3×10^8). It directly indicates that 'm'-the mass of the body needs to be infinite which means you need to weigh some million times heavier than earth just to travel by the speed of light, which 'actually' is never possible. And forget about accelerating *your* body, the combined energy of the entire universe too cannot propel a single electron to reach the speed of light. So you need to scrap off that idea. Unfortunately, nature has its own set of laws..." and the auditorium felt dead silent with every eye deeply dug into every word Chief spoke.

With a cheerful smile Chief revived the life back to the students saying "But that's what challenges are all about! To find a solution which can prove Einstein's theories wrong is one gusty act but what if we find alternates?" he said "One never wins a Nobel for proving someone wrong. And from Nobel prize I just remembered a story on a doctor named Barry Marshal. Actually the doctor was quite convinced that H. Pylori bacteria causes stomach ulcers but at that time he couldn't prove it because it was not allowed to test any unknown drugs on humans. But he was very sure *his* drug would work. And so he himself drank the bacteria, developed stomach ulcers in days, treated himself with antibiotics and went on to win a Nobel prize! And that's to an extent which people go to prove the point of their existence- We win Nobel only for creating something absolutely 'Fantastic', something 'Unimaginable', something before you proved its existence would rather be categorized as work of fiction! And although not exactly practically proved 'we' at ISRO do have a concept which might be our answer to covering huge distances in very short time... and not to mention how it might affect the space study and the way we look at our universe".

"Sir but how's it even possible to think of something which even our technology cannot afford to build?"

"Well son, you see... you must always be open to take inspiration

from any damn thing- Eminent personalities, stones, dogs, ants... and sometimes 'even' Doraemon".

"NO!"

"I wonder how you got placed in ISRO" Kritika said slowly sliding her eye-gear and putting it against her temple. She looked at the device from the three different positions finally coming in agreement with herself that the work done was pretty clean.

She nodded to herself in satisfaction.

"Hey, Kritika? Remember we were talking about the three men... Bhabha, Shastri and Vikram Sarabhai" Shyamalan asked sceptically "You were saying something about them?"

"You know in second grade you must have had a subject named General Knowledge. How did you manage to pass that subject?"

"Alright, enough jokes on me!" Shyamalan said trying not to be flown away by Kritika's derogate humour "Now what's the deal with the three men?"

"Give me a hundred rupee note" she said looking into her device from the top.

Shyamalan was puzzled with the unusual demand but throughout his these many days of stay with Kritika inside the lab, he realised one thing that whatever doubts one might have, one should never question Kritika "Why?", because her animosity shoots instantly upwards, the moment when someone starts having tabs over her work.

So before trying to infer a reason Shyamalan did as was being asked and handed Kritika with a crisp 100 from his pocket which she carelessly snatched away from him, inked it with a random design of a Micky Mouse, adored her mouse for a while, then crumpled the note and threw it into the centre of the device like some garbage.

She could have done this on a ten rupee note too, Shyamalan thought grieving the loss of his 100 rupee note.

"Was that a fine for not answering correctly?" he asked

Kritika looked at him with a confused expression. It took her a moment. She was in the middle of something very important and she hated it when someone would interrupt her whole thinking just to clarify their one simple doubt "What?"

"Nothing, leave" he said coming closer to the device, *100 bucks*

gone for one silly mistake, he thought “Why did you make two of these devices?” he asked watching two identical device of different sizes. Because as per the progress reports Kritika had submitted she never mentioned anything about constructing a second device.

“Just for a backup” Kritika shrugged, “You need to have backups when you’re working under such programs which have more chances of failure than success”.

“But haven’t you constructed the second one officially?”

“No! Not at all. The second one is made so that ‘I’ can have further tests as I want. I don’t want to be answerable to the organization for every test that I perform!”

“Are they both same?”, Shyamalan began asking carefully, not wanting to lose more of his 100 rupee notes.

“Yes they are, Shyamalan” she said taking definite pauses after each word trying to make Shyamalan realise how badly he was boring her

“Then why are the sizes different?” Shyamalan asked, totally confused by what Kritika was speaking “I mean what’s the point of creating ‘two models’ of the ‘same device’ with just a difference in their sizes?”

“Coffee?” Kritika asked jumping aside, peeling off her lab coat and exposing her smoother length of fair skin. She placed the tong like instrument carefully aside, and hung her eye gears over a half penetrated nail over the wooden shelf ‘There’s a *lot* I need to tell you about, before you really stop eating my head’

“But what about the device? You said it’ll be complete by today”

“Oh!” she said turning hastily towards the device “We’re done with that. Congrats. The device is now complete” Kritika said as artlessly, as if that wasn’t really a big deal for her at all! “Now, coffee? Yes or no?”

“Haven’t you been working on this for a decade?”

“Yees”.

“Then how could you be so cold? Right now you should be jumping all around celebrating your success!”

“Stop worrying about the project Shyamalan” Kritika said picking her tiny velvet purse and turning slowly towards her reflection on the glass panel of the door “Both these devices need to be charged before we can start testing them. So just relax”. She twisted her head in four different ways, applied a strong deodorant, checked herself out on the

smoothly finished surface of the glass covered generator, moistened her lips, slid a strand of hair upward by an inch “And do shut the lights off when you come” she said quickly storming towards the door and walking out of the laboratory. The strong scent of her deodorant still continued to make her presence felt.

Her voice partly echoed in the underground hallway; “And make it quick! I want to be back as soon as it gets charged so that we can start running test trials on it” the door slammed behind her.

She waited for a moment and let out a deep breath. She was really trying hard to contain her excitement for the fact that she had created a device that could bring upon a new era of space research! Yes! That device in the room. That device in the room was way more than anyone could imagine! And even though she wanted to exclaim her joy of success hooting and madly running through the corridors, but that won't really comprehend with the decorum of ISRO.

For once she did really want to thank the only person who had never given up on her, as well as her dreams- Shyamalan Iyer. But he had his own mess to be concerned about. And the thing they both had created was the first of its type, not just in India, but the entire world. That's how grand the device was! Shyamalan indeed deserved some appreciation

But then.

“Umm, Kritika?” called Shyamalan from the lab “Can I take my hundred rupee back? You forgot it inside the device...”

WHY ‘WORM’ HOLES?

“In order to cover the vast distances we somewhat use the concept Doraemon used in his pen gadget... a device that can dissolve light-years into miles and can shorten the journey to the various corners of this unending space! And that's not exactly ‘our’ or ‘Doraemon's’ idea, rather it's a concept actually brought to existence by Albert Einstein, although if in scientific terms I spell it out to you, it's near impossible to understand. So we'll keep it absolutely simple... no terrifying equations, no quantum theories, no mathematical dilemmas. I want you to leave ISRO with an idea that we scientists are not different from the normal people; we just deal with the things differently. So according to Einstein- Just like every street on this earth and every game in your computers

even our space has shortcuts which allows you to travel from one point in the space to another point, by diminishing the vast distances between the two points into just a few feet apart. Which means billions of light-years compressed into a few centimeters! And so you see, places which we couldn't reach even when the '200th generation of ours' passes by, could be reached within a minute or two." The Chief paused looking at the astonished faces in front of him.

So he continued, "And these magical pathways created by nature using laws of physics are called 'Wormholes or Einstein Rosen Bridge'. But this concept is totally hypothetical. A lots of 'ifs', 'buts' and 'assumptions' comprise it, but let me tell you that although this is just a theory yet we should not try questioning its existence. Because considering the potential this theory has, it can revolutionize the entire space study and feed us with information that we might never receive if we try to float through space. So Wormholes you see, are actually a ground breaking theory and before I keep bragging about 'why' and 'where' might a wormhole exist, you first need to know 'HOW' a Wormhole exists.

Now getting back to basics we all know that we are living in a space of three dimensions (3D)- length, width and height. And if we consider a page or a piece of paper, you see it although has length and width but we never consider the thickness of a page, right? And so when we talk about piece of paper we call it two dimensioned (2D)- length and width. Now according to our concepts we can convert anything from 3D to 2D by assuming we crush the object and reduce its height to negligible amount. For instance, assume anything- a pen, a fridge, a duster. Keep it in front of you and assume it has no height... so the top view of the respective thing is actually the 2D view of your object because in top view you never consider the height. Now if there's a spherical ball in front of you and you need to convert it into 2D, what shape would the sphere look if drawn on a paper?" Chief asked as he optimistically kept looking forward to a positive reply.

After a few seconds of non-responsiveness "A circle?" replied an unsure voice from the mid row

"Absolutely! It's quite simple to understand... the top view of a spherical ball would look like a circle and so a sphere would look like a circle in 2D. And this is what happens in space! If we consider this space

to be a 2D just like this piece of paper” Chief said taking a piece of paper “Now fold the page from its centre and bring the two edges together” he said, perpetually implementing his verbal notations “Now take a pen and pierce the surface of the page and so you see with one strike there are two holes created over the same page, right? And this same hole when found in space is what we call a ‘Wormhole’. So wormholes are actually tunnel-like shortcuts which connects two different points in the **space-time**! And here comes the twist... Do you know how do these, entrance and exit points of wormholes look like?” Chief asked quickly pacing himself back to the board as the projector projected a picture of the space. “You see, when space is assumed to be 2D these wormholes look like ‘flat circles’ but because space is 3D hence wormholes actually look like a ‘sphere’ when in space. And the moment you enter into these spheres you never know where you’ll end up- it might be a different universe, a different, galaxy or even a **different time**!”

The peaceful auditorium air suddenly got filled in by a humming uncertainty as the students were further into confusion over “Travelling to a different time using a wormhole?”

“Yes! You heard me right. Travelling through time is possible in wormholes because if you remember specifically I said wormholes connect two points in ‘Space-time’ and not just ‘Space’. And the only difference between these two is that space is 3 dimensioned and space-time has 4 dimensions- where time is the fourth dimension.”

“But here comes the main question- IS TRAVELLING IN SPACE AND TIME, REALLY POSSIBLE?”

WHAT’S THE ‘J’ IN J KENNEDY?

“It’s John Kennedy” Kritika said waving her hand forward trying to impose her statement as the two of them tried killing time at the bus stop by debating over things that hardly affected their lives. Behind them was the long, high and fenced periphery of the Indian Space Research Organization campus with dimly lit street lights highlighting the wall arts made on the compound.

“I tell you, it’s Joseph Kennedy!” Shyamalan argued as a greyish noisy bus suddenly emanated in front of them, and the glass doors slid open with a ‘Swush’. An old lady stepped out of the bus as Kritika and

Shyamalan boarded in, still continuing with their versions of the American president's name

"Hey, I've been to NASA's Kennedy Space Centre... My fiancé works there. There's a huge picture of Kennedy over there and it's inscribed in bold John F Kennedy."

The doors of the bus closed and the cooling inside the bus was way more than usual making the two shiver feebly. With a grumbling roar the bus moved forward as the overhead handles continued to dance as the bus kept switching its direction.

"But I remember having read that it is Joseph Kennedy."

"Shyamalan stop being ridiculous! Joseph Kennedy Jr. is the name of John Kennedy's brother... and his father's name was Joseph Kennedy Sr." Kritika said in a sharp voice "John Kennedy is the name of the American president."

"Okay fine!" Shyamalan said refusing to irritate his senior any further. "But for what reason were we talking about Kennedy in the first place?"

"Oh yes! You know he had been killed. Don't you?"

"Yeah, assassination of Joseph..." Kritika gave a sharp glare "John, John Kennedy... it's highly controversial, isn't it? Shot down by an ex-US marine."

"But there's no proof of that, because before the person could be interrogated, he too was shot down by someone else. And that's why no one really knows who was behind the assassination of Kennedy. But don't you think that's fishy?"

"What's fishy?"

"America's world renowned organization CIA who gave birth to famous operations like- Operation Mockingbird and Acoustic Kitty, couldn't solve the murder of their own president?"

"Well, someone seems to know a lot about CIA operations, eh?" Shyamalan said, quite astounded by Kritika's hold over history

"Answer me."

"I know what you mean to say, because if CIA could extract Americans from riot situations at Iran by pretending to be a movie crew then this is a very petty job for them."

"Do you know what the conspiracy theorists claim?"

"Well, they claim a lot of junk, I know."

“They claimed that the CIA was behind the assassination of John Kennedy.”

“WHAT?!! That’s ridiculous!”

“Yes, because US during that time was in a state of cold war with the Soviet Union. And Kennedy was determined to negotiate with the Soviet rather than breaking up a war, which was not supported by the CIA. And CIA also wasn’t much happy with John Kennedy as he was way more disappointed with the organization due to the failure at Bay of Pigs invasion!”

Now Bay of Pigs Operation was something of which Shyamalan had no idea of. But for Kritika it was just brushing up her memory because it was the Bay of Pigs invasion that introduced the world to the famous Cuban politician Fidel Castro. Something she got to know about when her father used to turn on the TV after he came back home. And she knew how irritated she would feel when he’d swipe her cartoon channel with some boring newsreader reading news over the television screen.

The CIA had trained a counter-revolutionary military that could overthrow the government of Fidel Castro, in Cuba. But the operation was unsuccessful. Although CIA managed to arrest Fidel Castro.

“So you’re telling me that just because CIA wasn’t happy with their president, they killed him?”

“Well if getting into foreign lands, understanding their security systems and assassinating people like Osama bin Laden is so swiftly done by the CIA, then I don’t think it was much of a difficulty for them to kill their own president in their own land!”

“Yeah, but Kritika! Who kills their own president? Why would they even do something like that? There has to be more than just dislike to make them do what they did. They are the CIA after all.”

“Shyamalan, do you even know what all things were the CIA involved in?” Kritika asked looking back at Shyamalan

He held his silence

“Project MK-Ultra” she continued “where they used the war captives to test their drugs which they had manufactured for mind control and hypnosis. It is even said that AIDS was created under a joint collaboration between CIA and WHO (World Health Organization) in order to eliminate the homosexuals and the African-Americans! And the prisoners were the ones on whom these biochemical weapons were being

tested promising them a freedom if they manage to come out alive.”

“But there’s no proof to these happenings!”

“These are classified projects Shyamalan. You do not have proofs of these happenings anywhere on this planet. But just because some things aren’t recorded doesn’t mean they didn’t happen! What everyone knew about the Bin Laden assassination was that it was a successful military operation, but how many really knew that it took 10 years to execute this operation? The world gets to know things long after it has taken place: Kritika said stopping for a breath, “The CIA is something the whole world hates. Yet not everything you hate can be replaced” she said taking a short sniff.

Shyamalan could spot a hint of sentiment in her voice. A pain within her that came out in the voice of revulsion. Yet for some reason Kritika pretended to remain strong. She took out her properly folded pink handkerchief from her purse and with its sharper edge softly managed to wipe her about-to-fall-tears off.

Is she really going to cry over some conspiracy theory? Shyamalan thought on watching her eyes moisten. Too much nationalistic sentiment I suppose.

“Why is it that you really hate the CIA?” he finally asked trying to ease her down with a smile “They never harmed *us*.”

Kritika paused suddenly, to which Shyamalan instantly knew he had said something wrong.

“Or at least I have never come across such a happening” he corrected himself instantly.

“You never came across knowing the founder of your own organization either’ she said with a sudden arrogance, “Our whole nuclear and space technology is lagging right now because of the CIA! You know why I asked you about ‘The three men’- Lal Bahadur Shastri, Bhabha, Vikram Sarabhai? Who do you think killed them?”

“And what makes you think CIA did that?”

“Because they wanted to derail India’s nuclear and space programs. As simple as that!” Kritika said trying to sound obvious, “Economy, space and nuclear power are the things that can make a country a super-power! And the speed with which India was progressing because of these three men, India could have easily surpassed America within the next few decades. And so it became necessary for the CIA to stop the

expansion of the Indian horizon.”

“Oh come on! Don’t tell me you do believe over the things written on the internet. There’s no guarantee that these conspiracy theories are actually true!”

“Both Bhabha and Vikram Sarabhai had officially mentioned being followed by American and Russian spies. Their works were being tracked down. And their deaths are nearly unexplainable! Bhabha died in a plane crash where the plane didn’t experience even the slightest of technical error, and Vikram Sarabhai was poisoned in his room. And no scientific enquiries were ordered! And when they were ordered the post-mortem reports came out to be either classified, or reason of death not found” Kritika said, as the bus with a series of bumpy jumps stopped at the station “Still think that these are *just* conspiracy theories?”

“I didn’t know these all *really* happened.”

“It’s not just them” she said getting off the bus. This station named Shivranjani was relatively more crowded with people running to and fro to catch their buses “It could be us too.”

“What?”

“The project we’re right now on to is something very very rare. And since the time of Einstein, people have tried creating this device. Now just imagine what happens when the Americans get to know that such a device has been finally invented...”

Shyamalan kept looking nervously towards Kritika. It had hardly been 3 months since he had joined and now he’s being told about the harsher realities of the life he had been dreaming about for so long.

“Well, that’s Science” she said with a smile “It’s a boon for the ones who use it. And sometimes curse for the ones who create it.”

TIME TRAVEL

“This concept of travelling in time has always been one of the biggest mysteries of all times. Centuries of researches have been based over this by various nations, many observations had been taken, scientific experiments had been put out just to try this one thing out- To make the clocks walk in reverse, to directly hop into a time which we’ve already lived once. That’s how weird this thing called time is- It never waits for anyone! And not to forget that time travels are also the central theme of some of the best novels like ‘The Time machine’ by HG Wells,

the Harry Potter series and also lately we saw the movie named 'Interstellar' where time had been displayed as a physical quantity! And let me tell you these themes are based over 'probable theories' connected directly or indirectly to Einstein... Works of fiction! But even in the real world there had been many astounding cases which you still won't believe did really happen." The Chief paused to look at the astounded faces before him.

"For instance, Seattle attorney Andrew Basiago says that when he was a child, he and William Stillings were "chrononauts" in a secret United States government time travel program called Project Pegasus. The purpose of the project was basically—to protect Earth from threats from space, to establish territorial sovereignty over Mars, and to familiarize the Martian organisms to our presence. And you won't believe this, the best part of Basiago's and Stillings' claim, however, is that one of their fellow time travellers was none other than a 19-year-old Barack Obama, who went by the name 'Barry Soetero.'"

A low humming of uncertain voices soon turned out into a roar of complete confusion as the class was still unable to believe what they just heard

"Come on everyone, I didn't say this is true" Chief said with a wicked smile, "But I didn't claim it false either! It's just that it's quite interesting, and you know the next most interesting instance of a time travel was when a Benedictine monk claimed to have observed crucifixion of Christ and also 'The Last Supper' in a television like device through which he could tune into past! The device was named 'The Chronovisor' but he dismantled it considering the devastation it might cause when under wrong hands. The monk even presented a picture of Jesus on cross when asked for an evidence."

A second roar went across the auditorium as students kept looking at each other in mere disbelief. I mean picture of Jesus Christ being crucified, come on!

"Unfortunately the picture was fake and the monk himself admitted it. Though he insisted that 'The Chronovisor' was real. So getting back to the topic, first tell me why do we think time travels are so essential to us? I mean why everyone wants to travel either to past or drift forward to future? And what all possibilities can a time travel unveil? Maybe if someday we travel back in time we might be able to save a million lives,

prevent ourselves from doing things which we knew were the biggest mistakes of our lives, get answers to some unanswered questions, historians might peep into the past to look in for a detailed study of their subject, we might be able to figure out the origin of various religions, cultures and even the origin of various blind faiths and rituals! A study of the geological changes which the earth underwent, evolution of various species and an opportunity to relive the Renaissance- the dream of every architect and art enthusiast on this planet. So you see travelling back in time diversifies and intensifies the research of most of our existing subjects, warns us from the probable mistakes and also if we were able to convey messages to that era we might have been able to solve petty misconceptions like earth is flat, eclipses occur because the sun and the moon are gulped by a huge dragon and thunders are caused when Gods get infuriated. Also may be find answers to all those questions we have been asking about our past histories. But because Science is a two way road- everything which exists if has a positive face, human brains do not take long to figure out the negative side of it either. If fire made life easier, the same fire was used in to burn humans alive in practices of sati. If circular wheels made travelling easier, than during the reign of terror in Europe- prisoners were tied over the same wooden wheel and thrown down the mountains rolling and scratching and twisting and tearing, till the time every bit of their body died of tremendous pain. If mobiles made communication easier...' Chief said picking his phone up and pressing a button, "See, message sent! But the same mobiles have been used to activate wireless time bombs! And how can we expect that after all these, when a technology which allows us to escape time once taken to the outside world won't be used as a threat against humanity?" he gave everyone time to grasp all that he said.

"Give it a thought and you'll realise that travelling in time won't seem to be such a nice idea to you. But because we're here to discuss the scientific aspects of a time travel, the first thing- We all are travelling towards future, but at the speed of 1 hour per hour. You get it? Now because everything needs a point of reference, we consider that the speed of time which we encounter is the reference frame. That is- we travel one hour into the future for every passing 60 minutes. And if we really need to travel into the future this speed needs to be tampered with- we need to travel at some 5 hours per 60 minutes speed, so although 60

minutes have passed but for you 5 hours would have passed by that time! And let me tell you the concept which I just told you ‘actually’ happens due to dependence of time on gravity! And here comes to the picture **Einstein’s theory of general relativity** and don’t be frightened by the name please, it’s working is what would astonish you.”

He continued, “According to this theory time slows down when we’re present in gravitational fields! Consider earth’s gravity as ‘g’ and when you land on a planet where gravity is twice the earths, that is ‘2g’ time will slow down even more. It’s like gravity has its effect over time too. More the gravity, slower the time will pass. And you know what will be the consequences? By the time 5 years passes in that planet, on earth 50 years must have passed because time runs slower in stronger gravitational fields! By the time you reach earth, your friends might have become all old and your parents must have died and you’ll be just 5 years old from the time you left earth. Now I just made up the values, the values aren’t real although the concept is! So you see how time travel occurred? It took you just 5 years on that planet to travel 50 years on earth... So that’s how you can step into earth’s future by a 100 years just by getting spending some 6-7 years in a planet with gravity higher than earth’s gravity. Although we’re finding ways to make this thing work but still the theory needs more practical experiments to be firm over its considerations.

So, this was travelling into the future... Now what if we knew how to travel backwards in time? To the history, to see ourselves and our earlier generations, step into a time when you never existed or to a time when legends like Newton or Galileo ‘actually’ existed!

Sounds cool doesn’t it?

THE INTERVIEW

The music was light. The overhead lights were light. The tables around were of light teak colour. And the surrounding voices too were light. Just the sound of the blind beggar sitting outside the café, singing a folk song with his unbeaten voice along with the voices of traffic kept the contrast. He kept singing loudly, in tune, making the passer-by turn towards him, give him a look, appreciate his voice, and pass him by without filling his plate that lay in front of him which had just a few one rupee coins in them, and the more gracious two rupee. The same plate

which he uses to eat the café leftovers because for them every penny they earn turns into food.

Life doesn't give them the pleasure of choices.

"The coffee here is nice" Shyamalan said with a compelling nod, sipping loudly from his paper cup as the upper froth made a foam moustache over his lips and although in advertisements that really looks cute over the coffee girl, but when this happens to a fat guy with unshaved facial hair, it makes him look more like a she-male. "Although I expected more of an enclosed space."

"Your senior is paying for your coffee, isn't that good enough for you?" Kritika said totally inverting her glass of coffee over her mouth till the last few drops cinematically fell into her mouth. The song in the background seemed to have loudened up, more of an intentional act than a coincidence as the guy at the cashier kept looking at Kritika from the corner.

Her rimless glasses were lying on the table, extremely undetectable, and her hairs open covering her face from the sides. She bent backwards at an ease and stretched her arms downwards and blinked her eyes sheepishly

"Do you know that the counter guy has a crush on you?" Shyamalan said tilting his head towards the cashier guy

"Why else do you think I brought you here" she said with a one-sided smile. "It's awesome when your face earns you discounts", she winked

"I'll do the same with you, once I get married."

"Gay marriages are yet not legal Shyamalan, stop being optimistic."

"Stop making me feel bad Kritika. On one hand, I'm just too excited that my first job at ISRO has come to its end. That too after six years..."

"Six and half" she corrected, "And yes, it's done, finally."

"Yeah, six and half. Whatever. But on the other hand, I don't why but I'm not feeling it."

"Well that's probably because of all the fat that you've junked up in all these years."

"Ha, ha, that's not funny" Shyamalan said disagreeing with a straight face. "My whole school life was based on such fat boy jokes. Now I'm used to them."

Shyamalan was seeing this part of Kritika for the first time, and he was glad that he was able to bring that part of hers out because never before in the labs or outside ISRO did he see her as this beautiful, happy woman, smiling at life and laughing at him for being fat, as she was right now.

“Nah, it’s all right” Kritika said waving off “Relax! No one would bully you here. But if you have known some South Indian jokes, it’ll pay you well because this place is filled with *rasam sambar* people.”

“Hah” Shyamalan smiled “I never knew you could be this sarcastic.”

“Well, sometimes you need to be funny because it’s awful when you get bored with yourself.”

“Sounds reasonable. Um, hm” Shyamalan agreed slowly “But hey, there’s this one question you still didn’t answer me?”

“Which... one...?” she said thumping her head on the table

“What will you call this device?”

6 and a half years back

“But what will you call this device?” asked the interviewer with that big ID card of ISRO hanging off his shirt pocket. He kept looking blankly towards Kritika who had recently dropped out of her assigned space programme on Mangalyan saying she wanted to get into research. And the research idea she had proposed made people wonder on who hired her in ISRO? And rumours remained as such that because she was the daughter of one of the greatest scientists ISRO had ever had- Dr Soni (as called by people at ISRO)- so the higher officials were accepting her proposals irrespective of how unrealistic it sounded.

“Sir, Artificial Wormhole?” Kritika suggested in an unsure voice. She knew that was a very lame answer and she cursed herself for not having named her project, but she never saw this question coming. Like, she was very sure about the questions which she’d be asked- technicalities, functioning, advantages, prospects, and everything other than the name of the device. Everything, but this!

Who asks the name of a project as an interview question, Kritika thought.

“Everyone!” cried the back of her brain

“Artificial wormhole?” repeated the interviewer sounding not very

convinced “Don’t you think that’s too mainstream? Name it something unique. Something that only the people involved in the project will be able to connect to.”

“Sir, I haven’t exactly worked upon the name” Kritika said managing a forced smile trying to bring back the conversation into her periphery of intelligence “Because I wasn’t sure whether this project will even be accepted.”

“Well yes, you’re right! Your idea hasn’t been accepted yet” said the interviewer knocking his pen’s point twice over the evaluation sheet. Two black dots got soaked into the dry paper. He then put the pen aside, closed the file, slowly kept the pen over the file. And during these three steps of the silent action, the only things Kritika could sense was the sense of discomfort, the nervousness slowly eating up her soul, her dried up lips, the over-loud clock that kept clicking slower than ever and the 19th century air-conditioner that went as loud as it can suppress even the fart sounds “But tell me, how did you get the idea of creating an artificial wormhole?”

“From the Philadelphia experiment, sir” Kritika answered as quickly as if she had been all the way waiting for this question to be asked.

The interviewer gave an ‘Explain further’ expression to it.

“The Philadelphia Experiment was aimed by the Americans towards attaining invisibility, so that warships can enter enemy territory without being detected. And it was during the World war. So, the aim behind the experiment was very obvious- to bombard the Japanese harbours. The experiment deals with Einstein’s Unified Field Theory... not exactly the whole theory, just a part of it where electromagnetic field and gravity can be merged to form a single field. And this theory had been practically tested twice during ‘The Philadelphia Expedient’ wherein the second test the ship named USS Eldridge, on being applied with the fields instantly disappeared from Philadelphia in a flash of blue light and teleported to Virginia which is 300 Kilometres away. And then after a while the ship reappeared in Philadelphia, back to where it got disappeared from. And they say that USS Eldridge went 10 minutes back in time which totally fulfils the criteria of the wormholes because even wormholes can make you travel in space and time!”

“So, you’re proposing to re-perform the Philadelphia experiment?”

“Sir I am trying to re-correct the Philadelphia experiment.”

“How?”

“I want to test the exact frequency of the fields needed to attain a stable wormhole, not like the one that collapses in 10 minutes. And it’s also said that men who were on board, suffered from severe brain disorders and some were found physically fused to the bulkheads, after the experiment was performed.”

“You know that this can be just a conspiracy theory, don’t you?”

“Yes sir, it can be. And it can be possible that whatever I said might not be true. But when these many people are very sure that something like ‘The Philadelphia experiment’ has taken place, and when they all conclude the same thing. I think it’s a shot worth giving try to”

“But if even such a device is created, do you think it will be much of an importance to us?”

“This experiment was tested by ‘the’ US during time of a ‘World War’, sir. I think it says for itself...”

THE MANY WORLD THEORY

“Class, you know sometimes I really wish I could have been even better than what I am today IF and only IF I hadn’t done those silly little stuffs which happened to me when I was young! Too many wrong decisions, regretful past, life-long lessons... every person in this world have had their share of experience which displays these three things. Some used those to improve themselves, some used them to pull someone down, some just made these the very reason to become an alcoholic but ‘what’ is the only thing that we often say when we remember these harsh memories? ‘I wish, I hadn’t done that’.” The chief knew how to keep his audience stick their ears to him.

“Well, this happens to be one of the most important reason for the creation of time machine! You always want to change certain things in the past or maybe prevent them for occurring because you’re aware of the consequences. But according to the scientists, ‘You cannot change the past even if you somehow get into the past, which too is near to impossible’ but just for now let us assume that we get into the past maybe just minutes before the famous ‘Battle of Waterloo’ where the legendary French General Napoleon Bonaparte lost and was captivated for some 6 years. And just minutes before the battle we kill Napoleon,

then what happens when we get back to our present? There are millions of books printed currently with the fact that Napoleon died 6 years AFTER the Battle of Waterloo, but YOU just killed him before the battle and you're very sure about it. Then what? Maybe because Napoleon died, the French army never went to the war which might have saved thousands of lives and if thousands of lives had been saved then guess by how many times will the population of earth increase. If population of earth increased then natural resources might have been depleted by even a greater extent that it is now and so it comes to the point that just because we killed ONE man, getting into the past the whole set of events gets drastically changed! And this is why our scientists claimed that we cannot change things in the past! Because PRESENT is just the outcome of millions of events that occurred in the PAST. And because the PRESENT is always definite, the past also needs to be DEFINITE and unchangeable." He paused for his curious audience to grasp everything he just said.

"But let's leave that apart. For understanding what happens when we get back in time we must understand a simple theory named '**Many World theory**'. It's a theory according to which infinite number of universes exist, and YOU are just living just one of them- So if there's a hypothetical man named X standing here in this stage with a bouquet of flowers all set to propose a young lady whom he wants to marry, there's exactly another universe in the space where the same man is standing at the same place with the same bouquet waiting for the same girl. The girl arrives in both the universes, the man kneels in front of her in both the universes, says the same words 'Will you marry me?' but here in this universe she says 'YES' while in the other universe she says 'NO' and after this very moment the life of Mr X changes in both these universes. In the 'yes' universe X gets married and lives happily ever after, while in 'No' universe the man becomes an arrogant drunkard. So, you're getting me, right?" He nodded helping the students understand.

"The theory of 'Many Worlds' depends on probability where each case of that probable outcome becomes a universe! Similarly, just like a toss before a cricket match between team A and B has two possibilities Heads or Tails. We assume that Team A chose heads, now after the toss if it's heads then Team A wins and if tails Team B wins, hence there are actually two universes created one in which team A wins the toss, and

the other in which Team B wins it (or can be said Team A loses).” He begins walking towards the board.

“Now whoever wins has an option to choose either to bat or field first, hence under each possibility the further parallel universe starts existing, namely 4-

- Team A wins the toss and chooses to bat first
- Team A wins the toss and chooses to field first
- Team B wins the toss and chooses to bat first
- Team B wins the toss and chooses to field first

And this happens all the time around us according to the theory, but WE ARE ABLE TO EXPERIENCE ONLY ONE OF THE MANY POSSIBILITIES. We might end up seeing that TEAM A won the toss and chose to bat first, that’s it! But there are other ‘Parallel universes’ in which every possibility which didn’t happen in ours is ACTUALLY happening, just that we can never see them happening because of laws of nature and Physics.”

Toss between Team A and B

- Team A wins the toss :
 - A chooses to field
 - A chooses to bat
- Team B wins the toss
 - B chooses to field
 - B chooses to bat

He turned to look at the students after he drew the flow chart on the board. “So, the next time you fail in some paper or some girl rejects your friend request just be happy that there’s a parallel universe in which the same YOU have passed and even the same girl accepted your friend request. And that’s the most appealing thing of this theory- Although every passing second, you’re making some choice you’re creating parallel universes and so there might be infinite numbers of parallel universes, but unfortunately, we all are able to live just ONE of the infinite possibilities. And so, this leaves us a clue to over what happens

when we ‘actually’ change something in the past!” He paused to drink water from the freshly kept bottle of Bisleri on his table.

“We continue with the example of the cricket match- Let’s assume that TEAM A loses the world cup after winning the toss and choosing to bat first and the captain of TEAM A was not happy at all. He thinks that his team would have rather won the match if he had chosen to field first and hence he gets back into time when he must decide whether to Bat or field first. This time he decides to field first and when he returns to the present he sees that he was right! His team had actually won. But this is self-contradictory, right? He had already experienced the present in which his team had lost, how can the present be altered instantly? Give it a thought. And the answer is that the present never changed, he just entered the possible parallel universe in which he chose to field first. And this is the very reason why we call PARALLEL universes as ALTERNATE realities! You get to see and experience things which might have happened if you had not chosen or done certain things in the past.” He waited for a dramatic pause.

“So, you see every possibility between a ‘Yes’ and a ‘No’, ‘True’ or a ‘False’ does exist with their proper outcomes in the parallel universes. All you need to do- Is the Herculean job of getting back in time and choose the other option. And you clearly get to see what would have happened in case you chose the other option! It’s funny indeed, people in my office still joke about this that ‘Let’s get into the past and say ‘NO’ instead of ‘YES’ when my wife asked me to marry her... I wish to see whom I’d have landed up with after that.”

A mild laughter broke amongst the students

“But the thing is, there are many theories regarding this which always keep contradicting each other and hence although we can imagine what might happen next, we cannot undermine the huge wall of ‘absence of technology’ standing between us and the world of fantasy! Without a time machine, these all things would remain as mere theories! Only if there existed some kind of an artificial wormhole, we’d be soon be answering the endless questions to which we do not have any answers to respond with.”

THE FAILED EXPERIMENT

“What’s the damage?” Shyamalan said with a bleak smile leaning

towards the cashier who still stole glances of Kritika. Not something that was an exclusively rare thing for a girl with a pretty face; females have an inborn talent of being able to ignore *things* whenever, wherever and whichever way they intend to. And by *things* we mean 'us'.

"*Dhaaiso, 250 Rupees, hua bhaiya*" said the man at the cash counter trying to look very busy by uselessly looking at his dysfunctional desktop.

It wasn't until the mention of the money did they realise that they didn't really have any. Both shared a concerned look and Shyamalan dived his hands into his pockets

"How much do you have?" Kritika asked looking at Shyamalan

"Three hundred" Shyamalan said, "Minus hundred" looking intentionally towards Kritika

Kritika swiftly managed to ignore the latter. She quickly held Shyamalan by his arm and pulled him two steps to his right "Yes, it should be right here by now!" she whispered with spontaneity in her voice. She glimpsed her phone. She looked at her watch. Back at her phone again. Then towards the confused Shyamalan.

"Will you tell me what's happening?" Shyamalan said slightly irritated by her weird actions "We're running out of money! Don't you have some?"

"I forgot to keep money in my purse!" she whispered. Low enough to be not overheard by the surrounding customers, loud enough to be overheard by the man at the cash counter

"It's time" she said intently searching all around for something. Then her eyes fell on Shyamalan's closed fist "Got something in there?"

"No! Two hundred is all I have Kritika."

"Check it again."

"I know it Kritika, there's nothing in here!" he said opening his fist and facing his round palms towards her "What were you expecting? That a hundred-rupee note would suddenly appear in my palm?"

Kritika looked at him with displeasure. "Y-E-S!" she said sounding obvious. "I had put your hundred rupee note in the 'Artificial Wormhole'. I had set up the location coordinates exactly here, and exactly this time. The money was supposed to appear somewhere near here" she said looking around over the floors and tables, "I thought this was a great way to test our invention" she resisted.

“That’s all right but didn’t you bring any safe money with you? For in case it didn’t work...”

“I was very sure it’d work!”

“Oh, that’s ridiculous!”

“Don’t make it sound more complicated than it already is, Shyamalan. It should definitely be somewhere over here” she said scanning the floors and tables by her almond eyes. But the money was nowhere

With a blank expression on her face Kritika looked towards the man at the counter hoping he’d be able to magically comprehend the situation and do something about it.

The idea of two ISRO scientists being detained by a coffee stall owner for not being able to pay their bills didn’t sound nice at all!

Her clueless face held on towards the perspiring man at the counter. And there’s nothing more compelling than the clueless look of a beautiful girl. It’s the way a dog looks at his master while he’s eating meat slices. It’s the way Somalian drought stricken children look towards the social workers from UN during faminess It’s the way a blind person looks at you when he’s unable to cross the road by himself.

And as compelling did that sound, further compelling was it in the real life.

And the next thing Shyamalan and Kritika did was- they walked out of the café with a smile over their faces and Kritika saying something about benefits of someone having a crush on you.

Kritika’s mood was an emulsion of happiness of the weird *jugaad* escape that they made and dejection towards the fact that the thing for which she had invested six and half years of her life hadn’t really been successful. Yet there was a lot of things to be done. And this was never an easy job, so setbacks were really obvious, she thought as she searched a five rupee coin in her pocket for the melodious beggar outside

Just that this time, along with the five rupees coin the plate had a hundred rupee note in it with a Mickey Mouse sketched over it.

THE SAME EVENING

6E-114

9 November 2016

21:30

Netaji Subhash International Airport, Kolkata

“Indigor flight udaan shankyhya 6E-144 Kolkata theke Ahmedabad jonne Gate number 24 e prosthaan korun. Boarding shesh hote esche, anuwaad kore jaara ekhono check-in korenni taara tarataari security check er deeke prosthaan kore”

—Those passengers who haven’t yet checked in we sincerely request you to please approach the security check, the boarding has already begun at Gate number 24 - Announced one of the most underestimated objects of the vast Netaji Shubhash International Terminal, the speakers.

It was one hell of a usual day at the airport- Baffled crowd, hyperactive children running all around, unnoticed announcements and huge queues against the blue fairies of Indigo who strongly held their beloved patience and kept responding to weird queries with a beatific smile over their over-fair faces. The “busy” baggage crew near the dimly lit X-Ray machine were as usual being on their top notch at this hour of the day, swiftly passing numerous baggage into the wide mouthed

machine, with their polar opposites shopkeepers sitting idly at the *Lavie* store waiting for that “one” customer who might choose to buy a 2000 rupee bag, in a city where people work for 2000 rupees a month.

And with variant tones of over-varying versions of the same Bengali language, there stepped-in the man- Duryoy Kundu. The suspended Bengal-humidity outside, creating deep red contours over his brown shirt as with a truffle hanging to his left shoulder and a doctor’s coat patched over his right hand he entered the main airport building, all sweaty and exhausted. The glass door behind him shut, instantly cutting down the car horns and the endless howls of taxi drivers just outside the building periphery..

“What? Is she a new intern or a new recruit?” Duryoy asked over the phone, totally struggling over his phone’s poor network and also the time, as just 25 minutes were left for his flight to depart and he’s least aware of his flight procedures.

‘than ask her to meet me once, I reach Delhi” he said as the voice opposite kept uttering words he barely heard

“Listen I’m boarding the plane so I’ll call you once I land Ahmedabad...” he said taking his ticket out, of which he had somehow managed a printout while the shopkeeper of the same shop was busy searching for him a second hand Kalam for this 2 hour flight, at the College street

“Just ask her to bring her documents and the day I reach would be the first day of her job... now I seriously got to go. Okay. I’ll get back to you . Bye” a deep exhalation added up as he switched his *Galaxy* off.

With eyes tossing at every possible direction searching for departure boards over the Check-in section, but to his disappointment he could find none. Or maybe he was just too off the track to even settle himself for a while and give a close look to his buoyant surroundings, as the bright departure board standing next to him pointlessly waited for his eyes to stick on.

He blankly kept staring into his *FastTrack* which kept pushing forward with every passing second, trying to mirror how the slowest hours of the afternoon escalated to this hour of fiasco that now he had to doubt his own chances of getting on-board.

5 hours ago

Calcutta Medical College, Kolkata

“Darling, life hurts a lot more than death” Duryoy uttered to Dvijata the famous quote by Jim Morrison as he entered the congested psychiatric ward of the Calcutta Medical College tossing his cup of 4 o clock between his hands and lips. His ID card stamped by the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi; “Neuro-Psychologist” printed in bold beneath his peculiar name, had been quite acquainted to this forever changing lifestyle of the man it was representing. Last week being in some Siberian pigeon-hole at some Chennai hospital and tomorrow stationed at his hometown with the 10-o clock wake-up tea, wrapped in his cosy bedsheet was all that kept the constant thrust of liveliness within Duryoy alive.

“What do you think?” he said stopping by Dvijata with a gleeful face waiting for her to reply to the wickedly true quote of life.

“You didn’t bring one for me. Did you?” Dvijata said beholding over the tea mug he held. The patient-report file with highly illegible handwriting of Dvijata lay motionless in her arms

“We’ve had enough teas together darling. Why don’t we move on?” Duryoy winked

“Hah, that’s why you don’t get a girl...”

“One unmarried giving marital suggestions to another, doesn’t make much sense to me” Duryoy shrugged looking all around the dimly lit ward with medical smells suspended all around golden rays cutting into the room thorough the windows.

“Why is this ward looking more refreshing to me?” Duryoy asked somehow spotting that the forever sadistic psychiatric ward had somehow lit up because 4 o clock marked the beginning of the patient-family meeting time as emotions would begin to overflow through this room in a while

“Yes, it should look to you that way” Dvijata said putting down her file and taking off her stethoscope “Because now you’re going to attend my patients until I return”

“Wait. What?” Duryoy said not expecting to here anything like that

“You’re my replacement Duryoy, haven’t you read the clause?” Dvijata said cheerfully “In case I’m not available then you’ll be attending my patients.”

“But you ‘are’ available!”

“Not anymore” Dvijata said turning sharply towards Duryoy and inching her head rightwards trying to sarcastically sympathize with him “Tea time... Darling”

So, Dr Dvijata Shah, the ‘Miss Cute Kid’ of her batch mostly because even in her third year of the college she looked no older than a school kid. Not exactly a heartthrob of her department but provided her looks had managed to make space even in the political science department page of Delhi University where a guy mentioned her in his confession post- Quite an achievement for a girl who’s studying medical!

AND Since then she’d been looked upon as ‘the’ Dvijata Shah of her batch.

*Apart from the daily doses of tragic proposals she also had one more tragic truth attached to her fate- she was Duryoy’s college days **senior** from AIIMS Delhi, with whom he shared a special memory of those second year ragging days when he had been asked to ask a random girl sitting in the cafeteria for a date, by his third year seniors. And that was the day when Miss Dvijata had to add one more idiot into her contact list when Duryoy with all his machismo, considering her a fresher because of her extremely youthful face, straightaway went to her saying “First year right?” Duryoy diving deep into his impromptu “Darling, I knew you’d come. Anyways, because you’ve come here and you’re all alone so why not I just join you for a decent cup of coffee in this highly indecent canteen! Because I being your senior at least owe you this much” he said pulling his chair hard “Anyways, I’m Duryoy... Neuropsychology.”*

That day she did have coffee with him and although trying hard to derail herself from the highly offending man who from the very first instant, kept mentioning her as ‘darling’, but true remained the fact that the live hearted absconder of the Department of Neuro-psychology did have an indulging aura of speech, and after the sweetest reality being drunk within the next 15 minutes Dvijata felt as though she knew the person since ages!

Little did she know that life had destined her to know him for a few further decades!

AND VICE VERSA

“You’re dealing with that guy on bed 15” Dvijata said uttering her words more rapidly as she summarized the patient condition to Duryoy “Attempted parasuicide twice- once by poison ingestion and the second time trying to hang himself. Fortunately, the rope was weak enough to withstand his weight. He’s highly insolent and is suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. His condition is also a special case because he cannot distinguish between real life and dreams.”

Duryoy kept recalling his past knowledge over paranoid schizophrenia while Dvijata kept describing him about the Bed 15 patient. Schizophrenic patients often end up confused between what has really happened and what is a mere imagination. So if they imagine a cow, then after some time they’ll say that they indeed saw a cow in the real life. And they’ll create explanations and stories to an extent that you’ll indeed start believing that he really saw a cow! Human wonder or medical failure, either way it’s an amazing thing.

“He keeps making weird sketches all the time, trying to make a dog or something” Dvijata said.

“Uh, huh”

“And this man doesn’t even remember his wife!”

“I don’t blame schizophrenia for that” said Duryoy with a wink.

“I knew this was coming” Kritika said with hopelessness.

“Hey! What’s this” Duryoy said pointing at her pad, “Can you at least put some date over your reports? It’s always me who fills these dates for you!”

“Oh so someone forgot who filled up their attendance sheet in college when he was too screwed up to even move from his bed” Dvijata said snatching Duryoy’s pen and scribbling the date over her report.

What’s college life without a little booze? Duryoy thought.

“What’s the reason behind his... pathetic condition?” Duryoy asked looking at the patient whose back was facing towards them, and the face couldn’t be imagined “Rejection by some over-fantasized female, drugs, gambling...”

“When he was 17 he had a flight accident after which he somewhat lost his memory.” Dvijata said in a flat voice, deigning at the suffering of the young man “Be kind to him. He’s way more qualified than you

think he is.”

Duryoy’s eyes were still rolling over the patient records- “Says that he’s from a parallel dimension” and “Mentions himself as the one who dropped the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima.”

Crazy man! Duryoy thought looking at his bed number- 15.

“He still believes that the dimension he came from had only one World War” Dvijata said watching Duryoy read the “Parallel dimension” statement “Too much obsessed with World History I suppose” Dvijata added, slowly taking off her Doctor’s coat, revealing the beautiful cerulean kurti that she had been wearing. Her face and features evolved as fast as a Pokémon as she no longer resembled a doctor stuck between mad people. She tilted her head backwards, took out a pin from her hair and held it between her lips releasing her long, unbearably beautiful hair and waving her hands through them trying to re-shape them

“And the guilt of killing so many people by dropping the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima left him in absolute depression” Dvijata said.

“Well that’s something he doesn’t need to worry about” Duryoy said flipping through his file “because even mosquitos have killed more people than all the wars that had occurred throughout the history.”

“But what he doesn’t realise is that, it was all a dream that he’s talking about!”

“Well, he’s just my type then.”

“I never fail to understand why people with mental disabilities find you interesting.”

“Please leave before I change my mind again” Duryoy said gazing at her like some disappointed cat.

“Don’t you have a flight to catch today?”

“At 21:50” Duryoy said continuing to interest himself into the Bed 15 patient “5 more hours to go.”

“Hey I suggest you should leave early. Underestimating Calcutta’s traffic is not a mistake you’d like to repeat” her hands giving shape to her hair like a potter’s palm “It does get worse. And I am quite aware of your punctuality tales from your college days. Plus your useless deeds used to be dad’s most highlighted dinner-table topics...”

“Oh, don’t live by the rules that your father created. He’s too cold to love any human being.... And vice versa” Duryoy said, the last two

words with a slower pause as he remembered that Dvijata 's stubborn father was once his professor. And just like every other uncool things on this planet, he too was pathetic.

In short- He hated Duryoy... and vice versa

"My father was chosen to be the friendliest person in the department by his fellow employees!"

"I've heard homosexuals are very friendly people too."

"So now you know why we two couldn't be more than friends" she winked.

21:37 screamed Duryoy's watch, with more sweat beneath it than tissues. And it was really high time!

Now, getting back to Ahmedabad did hold a special place in Duryoy's heart as since the last one and a half years his mother (his parents lived separately, but weren't divorced) had been witnessing his face over the decade-old-computer in their guest-room during those short video calls.

Just as of now, the conditions could barely be of any support as it was just 10 minutes for the flight to depart. With sheer hopelessness of being lost in the galaxy of his own thoughts, he turned on his *Galaxy* and dialled Dvijata ...

And the moment she picked up the call "You missed your flight, didn't you?" came the age-old familiar voice across the phone "Or let me guess, even better- You couldn't even make it to the airport."

"Tonight, dinner from my side. Just manage a room for me at some nearby hotel and I'll be there in 15. And text me the address please"

"Excuse me! I'm in no condition to even get anywhere. Download some app, search for some cheap hotel, get yourself checked-in. I've already left the Medical college quarters and precisely I've left Kolkata too..." she said stretching more over the last words

"Dvijata, please?"

"I'm serious! Am not in Kolkata anymore. Will you just tell me what happened to you?"

"Just imagine, I even reached the airport but there's no flight display!"

"Did you call your mother?" she asked, weathered by her upbringing flashing her maternal instincts. Something Duryoy had often

fancied her for.... And she had applied the same to her profession too. Whenever it came to young patients she's the first one to talk them. And the next time Duryoy invites her for a coffee or a random walk from hospitals to the quarters... the child's biography is the only topic she'd recurrently talk over.

"Once this call ends, I will."

"Wait! You said you're in the airport? Why haven't you boarded then?"

"No flight displays of 'Kolkata-Ahmedabad', I told you!"

"Duryoy, hold on for a second please..." Dvijata said instantly placing Duryoy's call on hold.

What a great time to put the phone on hold Duryoy thought as he kept standing in the airport all by himself watching all unknown faces pass by him.

Soon he recalled that it might be some Dvijata 's matrimonial-site-match-guy who had called her as the fog of jealousy filled over Duryoy's heart. The feeling was weird, yet he hated it. Not very long ago, Dvijata's father had created Dvijata's profile in some matrimonial site (as useless as he could be) and now endless calls and requests kept stacking into Dvijata 's phone- sometimes during therapy sessions, sometimes while she slept after a 12 hour constant supervision and sometimes while speaking to one of her friends who's standing hopelessly at the airport of an unknown city.



Suddenly through the loner air of the airport, cracked the speaker-
"Kind attention please. This is the last call for Mr Duryoy Kundu for flight number 6E-144 travelling from Kolkata to..."

"That's me!" Duryoy said vigorously stepping out from the queue, towards the young man in his late 20s wearing a sleeveless fluorescent jacket over his white Indigo shirt, his walkie-talkie held against his mosaic lips, as on the sudden reference he turned.

"How can I help you sir?"

"Duryoy Kundu, it's me" Duryoy said trying hard to maintain his calm 'they just mentioned me in the announcement... Kolkata Ahmedabad"

"Just a minute sir" said the man. Instantly picking his walkie-talkie

up “I’ve got him - Duryoy Kundu - 6E-114...” said the Indigo official as some language more weird than Tamil wished from the opposite end and with a second’s pause with disrupting signals all it came out was- three perfectly comprehensible words

“Get-Him-Fast!”

NIGHT AND DAY

9 November 2016

ISRO-SAC Ahmedabad

10:08 AM

In the blissfully resting white Luima of Dr Kritika Soni placed over her desk at the ISRO research centre Ahmedabad, there suddenly cracked in a call from a place 13,721kilometers away from India-Florida

“Milan calling...” showed the screen in bold. But there was no answer to the call.

It wasn’t something urgent, but not calling Kritika would mean a lot of things. It was just like one sweet tale where both had nothing to say yet even the silence felt so fulfilling!

And with a mild displeasure over his face, NASA’s flight trajectory specialist Milan Kundera, he kept waiting for his call to be answered. Standing all alone in the parking plot of the research centre it was just him and the forever glowing board of the Kennedy Space centre (NASA), Florida, that kept pitching bright indigo over his face.

But after sixty wasted seconds, the call remained unanswered. With a fading hope Milan got into his car as the smiling Ganesha hanging against his rare-view mirror greeted him, and locking the door with a light ‘thud’ he turned his beast on fire and within minutes disappeared in the endless roads of Florida.

Dr Kritika Soni kept a vacuum smile over her tapering face as with that feet long pony of hers comprehending with the rimless glasses she wore and with concern hidden behind the serious face, she now perfectly resembled an authentic ISRO scientist. Her fainted eau de cologne proved her 15 hour continuous shift she’d been constantly in, as still the

glimpse of little kids wandering about the ISRO's visitor's centre with curiosity over their noses and eyes bulking out of their tiny brains.

"Stay in the line" commanded their teacher as the little kids aligned themselves into somewhat straight queue like little lambs in a flock, and herded deeper into the premise 'do not touch anything!", she shouted again.

Kritika felt pointless standing there answering to weird questions like "Why there are nine planets in this universe? Why is the earth blue? Why is sun at the centre" and if even worse than "Which way is the washroom?"

Not that she had never been in this sort of situation but she demanded the reason behind making a scientist holding a position worthy enough to be delivering lectures at international curriculums, to be made as a sign post to guide tiny toddlers towards potties!

As the population within the central space kept depleting, she keenly waited for Chief Akram to verify her work and freed her from the worldly responsibilities of being an ISRO tour guide. Shortly stretching her fingers and twisting her fair skull lightly, she peeked outside the window. She could see the sun lit up brightly over the sky, her instincts claiming that hour to be roughly near 'ten" as she revived moments from last night when she had arrived, she peeked out of the same window and all she could hear was the evening *aarti* from the nearby temples dwarfed by the honking cars outside the campus periphery.

And just after 15 hours of research, a cup of coffee that she couldn't pay for, her failed experiment and debating about conspiracy theories with her junior, she barely reflected herself as being any near to the movie stars she had adored so much- late night at the bars, hanging out with friends, road trips to Goa... She lived each of these moment virtually, thinking one fine day she'd turn them to reality but the life for her had taken such drastic turns that since then she never got this so-called chance of "being-so- jobless" that she could even consider getting back to attend even her college reunion for once.

But now it's all worth she said to herself, as no longer was her brain accountable to be called "just-any-brain". Now it had things which were enough to feed an entire generation of space research and the potent of this revolutionary idea as such that it could magnify the ISRO's spectrum to an international recognition.

Kritika looked at the enclosed envelope she was holding, a red CONFIDENTIAL stamped over it and just beneath it was the prestigious logo of Indian Space Research Organization, somehow managing to confine the greatest discovery of the world of space within itself. Kritika's fascination with the logo had been a long untold story. The time when kids of her age kept confining their days with dreams of becoming an engineer to a cricketer, she kept indulging herself into stars. Yes, just the stars which'd keep shining in the darkness of the night and let her thoughts wander into the lands of the fairies who wore garlands made of stars...

Kritika Soni (Childhood diaries)

"Kritu, do you know that these stars when aligned in a specific pattern will give you beautiful shapes" Kritika's father said as he loosened his tie. Kritika's loosened hairs swinging lightly with the light November breeze kept brushing against her father's face as her father kept looking onto the most precious star he had ever earned- the seven year old star whose tiny head was placed cosily over his warm lap. Kritika's gaze remained fixed towards the endless stars above them.

"But they're scattered everywhere dad!" his daughter said, scratching her round cheeks

"Try connecting 'some' stars, not 'all' of them..."

"But dad, all stars are beautiful. How can I leave some?"

"Kritu, not every beautiful thing is meant to be with you forever. You need to leave some..." his father added

She nodded absently, thinking which one to leave "But dad, I won't leave the brightest one, over there" she said pointing towards the moon.

"Kritu, that's not a star! You know it's the moon. And constellations are made of only 'stars', no moons"

"But it shines the brightest, dad! It's the best"

"Kritu, not always the things which appear small mean aren't bright enough. You're too far from them to realise their worth. These stars, they're trillions of kilometres away from earth but are still spilling light on you, but the moon is just few thousand kilometres away! It's nothing when compared to stars, yet you'll find the moon more beautiful only because it 'appears' big. Appearances are deceptive Kritu..." he said running his hands through his daughter's oiled skull "So much to

learn from the space, isn't it?"

"Then dad which star are you?"

"Kritu dead people become stars, daddy is still alive!" he said poking her cute tummy as a wild giggle ran across the beautiful face of hers

"NO daddy, you need to choose a star from up there... when I miss you, I'll look towards that star only!" she said holding her father's hand.

"The smallest one Kritu, daddy is always the smallest star" he said holding her tight "Because no matter how far I am, daddy will always brighten your life..."

Kritika peeked outside the window, up towards the endless expanse of the night as she searched for the tiniest star overhead and soon to the left of the splendid Orion belt she could see her father smiling, the smile of pride as his daughter had ameliorated the subject his entire life's research was based over. She could feel her eyes getting moist as she felt as though her father had stretched his arms just to run his venerable palms over her open hair just like her childhood days.

Unable to resist that strong gust of emotions, she lifted her heavy hands and arched them towards the sky trying to hold her father's lone hands, but the distance which a moment earlier seemed inseparable now seemed to be separated by lightyears! And as she flung her hands into the air trying to touch the unknown, a voice suddenly cracked through.

"Kritika ma'am?"

For a moment Kritika thought as if she heard her father's voice, but as she realised that it was a feminine voice addressing her, the entire image she had been practically hallucinating of, dissolved into the eeriness of the night sky.

"Kritika ma'am?" she called again

"Yes!" Kritika turned, recoiling her arms in a thunderous speed as she could still feel her hands trembling.

"Chief Akram is waiting for you..."

"Well isn't ten in the night too late for Chief to be here?" Kritika said clutching the envelope tighter.

"Umm... ma'am it's actually ten in the morning."

CARE TO LOOK?

“Did the flight get delayed or what? It’s already 5 minutes past the departure time” Duryoy asked trying hard to make out a conversation with the man assisting him towards gate 24 as the altering blows of air conditioner kept melting the sweats of panic beneath them.

“No sir, actually the flight’s been waiting for you. Boarding had been completed before time today and the captain too chose to leave but someone inside the cabin requested that we wait for you” he continued as he smiled to the hostess standing against the aerobridge entry to collect tickets “But sir we request you, from next time please report at least two hours ago. If not then try one hour but not 20 minutes prior to departure please” he genuinely pleaded as Duryoy kept wondering who suggested to wait for him

Smiling to the last *Thankyou* bid by the man assisting him to his flight 6E-114 this evening, Duryoy departed. His feet thumping into the aerobridge as the hollowness of the mini-tunnel kept reverberating his every step he made towards the groaning plane, trying hard to imagine how he’d face the plane-load of people waiting for him past the 15 minutes. *Should I call Dvijata right now?* He thought, but as on entering the cabin the sight of 120 thwarted passengers staring hard over him totally flushed off any further thoughts.

Later seems better

“27C” said his seat number as he swarmed through the central aisle wildly making an unfortunate cut across the two beautiful airhostesses who undoubtedly won a second look, as with a carefree smile over his orange-cabin-light-lit face he quickly settled himself over the piece of cushion.

The airhostess continued “We kindly request you to switch off all electronic devices and turn the phone to flight-mode if there’s an option available...”

Oh shit! The call from the airport is still on! Duryoy thought, as on turning his phone on, greeted the perky contact photo of Dvijata with a baby smile over her evening face as she hung a huge teddy bear around her neck which she won after making Duryoy uselessly wander across the snaky lanes of the Chandni Chowk. Besides the photo it continued...

13:10...13:11...13:12

“Hello?” he said, arching his neck behind the seat ahead preventing the airhostess’s watchful glance “Dvijata? You still there?” he whispered as a strong glare from the man sitting to his right interrupted his words for a moment, but he continued “Listen, I’ve got on the plane. You listening to me?” But it was just silence that answered Duryoy back
Connection error maybe

Ending the call with a short sniff, Duryoy adjusted his seat belt thinking over how lucky he was this evening. And then just as he was to switch his phone off there popped in a message, which more often he never cared to even open. But this being from Dvijata, his soulless fingers had precipitously gained thunderous strength and a millisecond later he read

That’s so rude of you!

at least care to look at the woman sitting next to you!!!!

CREATION OF THE CENTURY

An inquisitive silence held-on the air inside Chief Akram’s cabin. The tight smell of fresh books lingered around the room with the smell of the moist air from the ever-noisy air-conditioner that gave the entire room an uninviting aura. The room was nothing less of a dump yard-piled up files, stacked books of huge volume, a bouquet of dead roses lying in the vase, an ever beeping CPU and some charts related to constellations hanging at random places moreover trying to cover the cracks on the walls. But still Kritika had a weird attachment to this very room because some of her best days in ISRO had been in this very room-her first day at work *this* was the cabin she had been called to, the intense over-night project meetings where coffee merrily substituted water and sweating the skulls with eyes fixed over the screens during rocket launch programs, the hugs, the wishes, the chatters, the celebrations... every time this room had unknowingly included itself within those special moments.

And apart from that, this room had a part of Kritika’s childhood stored in it. This cabin once belonged to her father. And when she was ten, her father used to bring her in this cabin and she used to sit at the corner sofa with a big- *Space encyclopaedia* over her tiny arms and some *Britania* cakes by her side. Hours went by as she used to flip

through those pages and later in the evenings her dad used to take her out for a walk where he'd buy her a 5 Rupee popcorn packet and she'd tell him what happened in her school the entire week, her grades, how badly she wanted a puppy at home, how she hates Saarika and everything all her stories of 'daily adventure'.

A vivid smile ran down Kritika's slender cheeks, as she kept looking at the pictures over the wall and an unsound track from past silently kept playing in her mind. And after moments of watching closely the photo frames over the wall and the cobwebs on the ceiling, Kritika's naïve look was now fixed over Chief Akram whose rigid gaze was fixed over the device placed on his table. The device although had managed to gain attention had not yet managed to win hearts as it looked too ordinary as compared to the purpose it was built for! Like you see hear something as grand as Artificial Wormhole and then you see that it looks like a piece of tin can, you won't really buy it. After all looks do really matter...

Kritika kept looking onto Chief waiting for some sort of reaction, undyingly hoping for a positive one, this was the only project she had been working over since she had joined ISRO. Year by year her rank varied, the number of candles over her cake varied, her co-workers varied, yet she held on to the project until its very accomplishment. Every word mattered for her a lot because at that moment there had been a million things running through her mind- Because the device kept on her table was no less than 7 years of her life

"What do you call this device?" Chief asked as he scrolled through the project description with his natural expressionless face

"We haven't named it yet" Kritika thought of saying that, but she was tired of saying that and people were tired of listening to that so this time, she said in a confident tone "Artificial Wormhole, sir"

"That's a nice name" Chief nodded still continuing to surf through the report "And you claim this Artificial Wormhole to be functioning exactly like the real wormholes?"

"*Almost* like the real one" corrected Kritika.

She pointed at the topmost part of the device- the upper hole "For instance right now we're currently in India and we urgently need to send some parcel to London. So we set the location coordinates of the point on earth "we" are currently in and then to the location coordinate of the place where we want to send our parcel to- that is London. And when we

throw our parcel into this device automatically there opens a portal in London through which our parcel pushes out. And this whole transition occurs in a matter of seconds, which means India to London in just 2 seconds! And this is the very characteristic of wormholes- It can connect any 2 points in the space reducing millions of kilometres into a matter of inches!” Kritika said, as she could feel the power of hope rising in Chief’s eyes.

“No no dear, you didn’t get me” Chief said peering more intently towards the tinier details “I mean why is it *almost* like a real wormhole? How’s it different from the real ones?”

“Oh! Sorry” Kritika said having realised that her urge to speak about the device was so high that she was skipping to listen to the questions. She shook her head and said “Unfortunately Chief, the range within which this device functions is hardly a few kilometres above the earth surface. So we can send objects from one point in earth to another point in earth but we cannot connect points of earth to some random point in the space through this device. So, that’s the drawback” her voice declining with the words “But once this primary phase of object transfer works out, we can try implementing new changes! Peripheral increase, density variations and other aspects...”

“NO, no, that’s all right. Being able to transfer objects from one corner of earth to another within seconds is no less than a miracle” Chief said looking at the Artificial Wormhole with eyes of appreciation. For a while he wanted to believe her, but then practicality overtook his thoughts imposing a sharp “IMPOSSIBLE!” statement over it because however good reasoning one might give, it’s not at all possible to create a teleportation device. These are just sci-fi concepts made for entertaining audiences in the silver screens. But believing that they do exist in the real world almost seems like a madness!

“But Kritika” Chief’s words slowing down doubtfully “Do you REALLY... like no hard feelings... but do you really think that ‘this’ device would be able to carry objects from one place on earth to another in just seconds?”

“Yes, definitely Chief!” Kritika said emphasizing confidently on her words “In fact, this device not only connects two points in the space but also two points in time!”

Chief suddenly landed back to senses as the thing he just overheard

couldn't be missed 'two points in time!'"

"Indeed it does, Chief. I've installed such settings within the device that we can able to send objects from one time to another. All we need to do is mention the time along with the coordinates of the place where the object needs to be dropped."

"Wait wait wait" Chief interrupted "You mean you can send objects to the past or future using this device?"

"Partially true" Kritika said coming closer to the device "We cannot send objects to future, because future has never occurred. Past has occurred, past is definite and hence we can send objects back into the past"

And there followed an eerie silence.

Chief didn't move his lips an inch further, more as an expression of astonishment, bewilderment and disbelief, striking all at once. He tried hard to revive every book that he read, every theory that he had heard regarding the existence of wormholes, and all they ended up was with a "HYPOTETICAL" mark stamped over them.

But what this young scientist was claiming was no less than a miracle!

With a half-hearted emotion and a full hearted wisdom Chief said "Kritika I don't know whether this device will work or not, but if it does... I guarantee you; this will undoubtedly be the Greatest Creation of This Century."

THE JOB

And somewhere within the same city of Ahmedabad an absolutely different planning was taking place.

"Exactly 20 bouncers would be allotted in the overall campus, 5 at the main gate and 10 within the central ground. And the rest 5 at the alternate entry points" said Khalif over the phone, peacefully managing his weathered tempests as the roadside beams from the opposite end crafted a huge shadow of his 6'2" frame over the wall behind. His face seemed to be hard as steel and his cheeks had cuts of that of the traditional *Pathani* warriors from the Mughal dynasty. His face had the raw manliness depicted through the unshaved grey beard that curled outwards from a tougher root, giving him a savage look. And even at this age his body remained as tight as rubber, very appropriately curved at

the desired sections of the muscular limb just like some biological specimen of the perfect male body. His neatly cropped hair, his disciplined life, the tone of bravery within his voluble voice, all concluded to the same point of him once being a military man.

This was Khalif.

The room lights dimmed and the red carpet beneath shining by the petal shaped lamp torching his conditioned cabin “And I need some of your students to accompany my men, at least for the first 2 hours because this team is absolutely new... And in case any brawl takes place we’ll deal it our way, we do not want any interference from your side. Is that clear?”

The teenage voice opposite to him had quite coldly accepted the terms and without much questioning over the facility issues he ended the call

“Bloody teenagers!” Khalif murmured “Can’t deal a single problem by themselves”, he said, his fingers punching the phone screen. And with a heavy sniff he tossed his phone directly over his sofa, just above which his company’s red logo kept shining over the black background behind- A shield with a black charging bull engraved over it and below it in bold ‘SAW Securities’, an organisation that provided endless numbers of beefy men to the event organisers irrespective of the event type- concerts, celebrity protection or garba, whatever be it!

Khalif’s 56-year-old weary face continued adoring the city lights gleaming like a live portrait over his gigantic glass window. The city was celebrating *Navratri* - the festival of nine nights. Ecstatic faces of every passer-by with a lively gleam radiating optimism from every corner and the brightly lit Ahmedabad skyline smiling at its festive aura, that’s how it felt. But Khalif mirrored back to himself and his job which never let him or any of his men enjoy any of these occasions, but these occasions were the ones that gave him and many others a living. Had he been in some other job, by now he’d be sitting with his retirement and grandson in some city park. Had he been in some other job he wouldn’t have been so much deplorable for not being able to talk to his son anymore. Had he been in some other job he wouldn’t have to stop himself from calling his son, every time he looked towards his phone. There was a photo of his family that once existed, of which he was once a part. But now all that was left was he, himself and his set of nostalgic

memories.

But even though at such an age he remained the hunk, the impenetrable man whose benefits come above any virtues a person might inherit. He was a man of conclusion. For him conclusions mattered, precisely the profitable conclusions. People called him self-centred, ugly old chap, yet he never denied. He was cold as a jackal and sharp as a visionary. His days at the Indian Army had built this part of him. He was a man of responsibility and job rather than money and lavishness. And his guarantees were as reliable as the words of the bible. You could rely upon him for your life once Khalif promises to keep you safe. But no one does that, because such a commitment would cost them a fortune

And being the head of SAW Security was just a way to hide his true identity from surfacing into the eyes of CBI and covertly serve his purpose towards completing *THE JOB* he was appointed for. Only when *The Job* would be done he'd no longer be caged up in the 4 cross 4 cabin of his, and because of this, a part of his consciousness was still stuck over his white table phone which could ring out any time now

Once THE JOB is done, I'll be free.

I'll make sure I apologize to my son for not being able to give him the childhood that he desired for.

I wouldn't have to live like this any longer.

No longer will I be held responsible for the plane that crashed, killing 7 ISRO scientists.

I should even go and talk to my wife, once this is done. She has had enough because of me...

Will she accept me, again?

Khalif's chain of thoughts abruptly faded out as a sharp knock over his door interrupted.

"Get in" he ordered, not turning to look who it was.

And with a narrow squeak over the door there stood a rather unusually lean man and with a short height and his head had to tilt 30 degrees upward in order to look at Khalif's eyes "Sir, Joshi here" he said, his voice very weak and unconfident. His approach making it clear that he wasn't one of the bouncers in the agency. His eyes were rather round and bulging and his body was stout, not overly fat, just the right

amount of fat needed to look a little more than healthy. He was wearing a cap of SAW Securities and his comfortable dressing style adding up to his decency and his flat fingertips and slightly bent body posture was something that clearly said that he spent way more time in front of the computer screens than a usual man does.

“You wanted to see me, sir” he said.

“Joshi, you know what we need to do tomorrow... right?” Khalif asked, his eyes still stuck to the city’s beautiful horizon.

“Sir I’ve appointed 20 men for CEPT Garba night, they’ll handle it all. And I too will be there to make sure everything goes perfectly fine. Everything’s as decided, sir.”

“Yeah, that’s all right, CEPT thing your men will be able to handle it... not much of a problem. My concern is something different” Khalif continued “You remember once I told you about a task which you might need to do in the ‘near future’? And you’ll question me back ‘nothing’ regarding it... nor open your mouth. And once the job is done, we never meet.”

“Yes sir, I do remember” Joshi said with a pinch of dejection over his face, but *promises are promises*. It was because of *this* promise that Khalif let him enter the SAW and gave him a respectable position. Now it was his turn to prove Khalif’s decision worthy.

“Joshi, that ‘Near future’ is tomorrow!”

RE-CREATION

Turning the lights off Kritika quickly reached for her file. Chief silently kept a close watch over the device.

“Chief do you have eye gears? We might need two of those” Kritika said looking around the cabin “High intensity radiation will be triggered from the inner portion and we cannot risk our vision”

“Yup, I’ll bring them. You prepare the device...” Chief said disorderedly searching his drawers.

Kritika quickly set up the location coordinates.

“Chief, where’d you like to send the object to?” Kritika asked

“Can I give *any* location?”

“Within the earth’s periphery, of course” she said, “Whose location coordinates you’re aware of” she added.

“What say... um, Calcutta Medical College?” Chief asked taking

out two eye gears from his back drawer

“Any special reasons?” Kritika asked with a notorious smile. She knew Chief never minds whenever his employs threw one or two personal question towards him. Something that made him even more desirable amidst his colleagues

“Not really” Chief smiled handing her one of the eye gear “One of my relatives had once been admitted there and I and my wife went to Calcutta to meet him. But the bustled streets were so confusing that I could hardly figure out which way to go. Finally I Googled it and found the way and you know, Google always welcomes you with information more than necessary- and that’s where it gave the location coordinate of Calcutta Medical College, just a glimpse. And that glimpse was something I remembered for rest of my life”

“And then you say you have a poor memory” Kritika mocked, joyously putting on her eye gear “Coordinates please”

DATE: 9 November 2005

TIME: 1:10 AM

COORDINATES: 22.57°N, 88.36°E (Calcutta Medical College, West Bengal)

“I’ve set the date to 11 years back. So whatever we drop inside this device will drop out at Calcutta Medical College, 11 years back” she said checking everything for one last time.

“Wait” Chief interrupted “Why are we sending this in the past? We can never know for sure whether it reached the destination! Why don’t we send this into the future?”

“I do understand what you’re trying to say sir but I’ve already tried that, and I’ve reached a surprising conclusion that might strengthen the theory of parallel universes” she said looking up from the device “Last evening we tried sending an object into the future, but it never reached its desired location. And there’s a reason to it. At this moment there are possibilities of infinite futures depending on what I do, but the past is fixed and there is only one past. It’s like if we assume our timeline to be like a zip of a chain- our present is the slider that moves forward, past is the closed part and the futures are the two open halves. We do not know which half our object might land if we send it into future. That’s why this time I’m trying to send it into past”

“Interesting” Chief said itching his cheek “But how will we verify that it reached the past?”

“We can hope for a verification Chief, we cannot state that confidently. There’s a less than 1% chance that we come across the object we send in the past. But that’s better than sending into future where probability of getting it back is one to a million”

“Game of numbers ah?” Chief said with a smile “Alright, no problem. Your invention, your rules. Let’s test it”

Out of pressure, she started emasculating to a greater extent. Her fingers trembling, mouth drying, breaths getting heavier and time seeming her palms feeling warm and sweaty.

Kritika quickly rubbed her palms on her lab coat and gave Chief one final look.

Chief nodded.

And with a tiny “Click” in the silent cabin, the device boomed into power. A large mechanical sound constantly kept escalating with time as the device flashed an extremely bright whitish-blue light all over the room and the light too kept magnifying its intensity blurring the visibility around with absolute whiteness, making it difficult enough for even the two people within the room to see each other’s face.

The brightness kept increasing in magnitude, and even with those dark eye gears protecting their eyes... nothing other than the over-brightened white light was visible to anyone!

Suddenly a thought cracked in Kritika’s mind- *What should I drop into this device? Barely anything beyond 5 cm is visible!*

Her hands searched for objects near to the table but it was a failed attempt. Nothing could be found. Plus she had the risk of inserting her hands inside the device which would definitely make her lose her hand. Hence, without giving much of a thought Kritika quickly took off her black beaded necklace, that didn’t hold much of an emotional equivalence to her. Not that it had zero significance. The significance of the necklace was huge, but on the negative side. It made her remember the horrific untimed death of her father that ruined her life. It made her remember the incident that had affected her brain so severely that she had been prone to mental illness. It was the living memoir of the unfortunate event, that continued to weigh more and more over her sleek neckline as time passed by. It was handed to her by the man who had

been accused of killing her father in the plane crash- Khalif.

This necklace originally belonged to Khalif, sort of *his* family heirloom, but maybe it was the guilt of doing this wrong or the innocence of his barren heart that made him feel guilty over himself for having orphaned this young kid, and so he handed it to Kritika wishing her a better life.

And now, Kritika with the least of the guilt scratched a big “**D**” over the centre-piece of the necklace with a pen. Her untidy effort slipped two or three beads out but somehow managing to hold the remaining portion of the necklace, she threw it into the device. And as soon as she dropped it into the device, the device began groaning to levels that it felt as though the entire device would explode! The lighting of the entire ISRO facility began to flicker as the device had begun emanating huge magnitudes of magnetic fields. It was also a cause of worry because just beside the ISRO facility was the Torrent power generation plant, and in case the magnetic fields pierced into that facility the predictability of the devastation would be more than just a number. Precautions had to be taken, and had to be taken soon. The xynim crystals were relentlessly doing their jobs, but its reflection phenomenon was like a chained reaction. It would continue to increase the magnetic fields more and more till the source is powering the device. Hence the device was needed to be shut down before the fields reached uncontrollable extents.

Chief was very sure that the device would explode and without taking any second further for granted he hassled towards the other side of the table and pushed Kritika away from the device.

“NO!” she said resisting the push by pushing her foot against the back wall. She was too soaked into understanding the behaviour of her device that she had totally forgotten to keep the track on time. Chief yelled something that sounded somewhat like “Get out... We... leave... now... explodes... off”

But Kritika had decided to be with the device and get a note of its every behaviour. Chief had urged her to leave, but seeing Kritika not leave the room even after three rounds of tremendous persuasion Chief decided to stay back with her *Because if she being such a young soul can show this extent of dedication! Why can't I? She is my responsibility! I cannot leave her behind!*

The sounds were about to reach their optimum of eardrum piercing

levels when suddenly a lowered pitch of decreasing magnitude coldly subdued the rising tone.

It continued for ten more seconds and in no time darkness and silence took over the entire cabin- no smoke, no burns, no harm, nothing. Just a hurting silence. For a moment they were partially blinded and their ears severely deafened by the loud noise. The impairment of their senses was being harder on them than they had imagined it to be, and it felt as though they were looking into vast expanse of nothingness in front of them.

A thought struck Kritika that it might have been possible that the magnetic fields had magnified to extents that even the people surrounding the device might have been teleported.

But to her comfort, as the senses eased themselves back to the normal, the cabin lights reappeared and there was a blank look over Kritika's awestruck face. She didn't try checking whether the object really reached 11 years back, at the desired location or not. She badly wanted to, but the shock of a deeply pounding heart and high doses of adrenaline flowing through her system needed some time to ease down. She kept her excitement low and didn't even get near to the device to figure out if her device had 'really' teleported the necklace she threw into it or not.

But Chief did.

He stepped near to the device and leaned forward. He kept hovering around the device for some time trying to figure out any effect of these high magnetic fields over the device surface, his eyes sometimes narrowing and sometimes exceedingly bulging out of amazement. And his face changed colour faster than a chameleon. He peeped in for the second time just to be sure. But the reality remained unchanged.

He paused. He turned. He sighed.

"UNBELIEVABLE" was the only word he could come up with.

THE VISITOR

Khalif had been in a melancholic mood that evening with just a lonely silence prevailing around him. He was at his desk with some contract files of the SAW Securities which he didn't care much of, anyway. The flickering sleep mode screensaver of the ever moving Windows logo kept disappearing and reappearing at different corners of

the desktop as he blankly gazed towards the screen. Well he was actually looking towards his low light reflection on the darker portions of the screen and trying to reflect all those moments that had passed which made him where he was now.

Initially, an army-men. Then promoted to CISF. Got his job at ISRO. And life was accentuating at its best. His family was happy. His son got into Delhi College of Engineering. But then one unfortunate accident killing 7 ISRO scientists including one of India's most prominent- Dr Soni, in which he was involved and then he landed up in a blacklist, got terminated from the CISF and now he's an international criminal. And separated, yet not divorced.

The Unpredictability of life.

He had to leave his family and forget everyone he was close to, and altogether begin a new life. His current position was no hide-out. Here, sitting in the Headquarters of SAW Securities, Khalif was constantly keeping a 24 hour watch over his client's target, devising new plans to kidnap his client's targets. He didn't have much idea who his client was because these are certain projects where secrecy of self is more important than secrecy of the project. But he had a fair idea that it was the CIA as they demanded kidnapping of an ISRO scientist for a vague reason. Just the way it had always been happening. Or it could have been the Russians too or the Chinese, anyone! All these countries were international superpowers and to remain at the top you don't always need to rise up, you sometimes need to push others down.

The ISRO scientist who was to be kidnapped, her name wasn't mentioned to Khalif. It was just a simple way to ensure that Khalif himself made no contact with that woman or that man. Just a commonly used technique of maintaining privacy when it comes to such covert operations. His client just handed him a photograph of *the woman* and informed him that she, along with the man who'd be accompanying her "tomorrow night" are the ones to be kidnapped. They'd both be coming together to attend the CEPT Garba night and hence Khalif took in the security contract of CEPT's night under SAW Securities and made his men (as bouncers) deploy to all corners of the event ground, making it further easier to spot the two.

Everything was smooth.

Everything was just as it used to be.

Crime was never a word detached from Khalif after he had been detained by the CISF. But today there was an alteration in his feelings. An unusual knock that kept pushing him backwards.

Khalif continued to carelessly run his eyes through the final plan and the set-up location of his men, camera positions, crowd estimate and the usual things. And amidst the vast silence within his room, his left leg continued to wobble in a fixed rhythm making tiny squeak sounds, trying to drain out his anxiety. Something very unusual of him.

He had been through all this, and much more indeed. And there was no possible reason to be nervous about! Yet he could feel his heart fasten and breaths getting warmer and heavier. He could feel his age pounding upon him. With a harsh ignorance he pushed himself away from the realisation that he was getting too old for this. The tenacity of the situation, the excitement, the planning, the consequences were all overboarding his anxiety level. But there was one thing that added up the most making him think of retreating from this project, every single moment. Something that made him regret on himself more and more as he went closer to tomorrow's night. Because more than kidnapping this time he was about to destroy a family.

Khalif's client maintained his target's secrecy by not mentioning her name, but as a matter of fact Khalif knew the woman. He had killed her father. And this time, probably he has to kill her too.

Khalif was told by his client that this woman had created something of grave importance, something that would bring upon India overwhelming power which might be misused very easily. According to his client he was doing it for the betterment of the world. But Khalif knew it was all a bluff. Had they really been concerned about the betterment of the world they'd have contacted the United Nations Task Force. So two things were very clear, first, these men weren't ordinary men, and second, the device that Kritika had created was more than *just* a device.

GETTING INVOLVED

The world these days works over two things- information, and the price tags attached to it. Information in the 21st century has become synonymous to the Right to hold authoritative dominance over others, because as goes the saying "I might not know the dessert that my friend

likes, but I sure as hell know the flavour of custard my enemies love”. And so for the international super-powers, being aware of every step that their counterparts put up is just the inevitable clause attached to them. Not all information in this planet is within reach, but one must know that not *any* information in this planet is beyond reach. And just so going by the rules of Economics- where there is a demand, there is a supplier.

And in case of India, who else would have the perfect access to the locations and timings of scheduled working better than Divisional Head of their very own security organization?

Khalif had always been in touch with the CIA field agents deployed in India. The information that they needed regarding the internal systems of CISF forces and the ISRO organization were all available from Khalif single-handedly. And they made him rich. Because when you know something that others don't- you're first payed to reveal the information, and then you're payed not to reveal it to anyone else! Which means- back to square one with a 7 digit number added to your bank balance. Who wouldn't?

It all began with a policy change by the government that took place in the early 2000s. The Indian government was aware of information drains occurring all around their research organizations, and prices being put up against the brains of their scientists. But they couldn't be more clueless about how or where or when or what was all happening. They just knew “Why” it was all happening. Because in order to beat a murderer you need to think like one. The kidnappings and murders of the Indian space and nuclear scientists were occurring at a horrifying rate and the government wasn't able to provide the desired security to the brightest brains of India.

India was at a major loss.

And once there was a survey done at Harvard between Indian students and foreign students which led to a clear conclusion that Indians don't like taking risks. They'd rather believe in a safer low-paid job that yields 10 percent increment than to take a risk and be a millionaire (or a homeless). And unfortunately these events that were occurring were indeed not good for the safe playing people. If something had not been done soon enough, Indians would permanently debar themselves from entering into jobs that might cost their lives and soon enough India would hit a major setback. It was all a “Lose-Lose” situation and

something had to be done, soon enough.

So instead of trying to hunt down the predators, the government began strengthening its own bastions. Tried analysing every loophole that could possibly exist at the minutest level and brought out a solution to deal with each of it. Various measures had been tested, implemented, rejected, and finally came a series of measures that everybody agreed on. Because when the men who created “Zeros” and trigonometric functions centuries before Europeans did, got back to their brain storming- They reached a conclusion that was enough to halt the brain drain for a substantial period of time.

The top 6 scientists of ISRO (Dr Soni being one of them) from the satellite and rocket divisions had been given Y class security and the Chairman of the ISRO was given Z class security. A foreign eye keeping a track over the works of these scientists had become absolutely impossible. And a new software named Zenetrix had been developed by the team of professional hackers in which they implemented every possible method of hacking a computer and then themselves designed a firewall to defend against their own hacking methodologies making Zenetrix literally impenetrable!

Well of course, there's no such thing called “impenetrable” and this firewall would be broken some or the other day. But that would demand time, something on which the world runs over. Something that no one can spare!

But one of the very few people who could crack the Zenetrix was none other than Khalif's counterpart- Joshi

And hence leaving no option with the CIA, they came in contact with ex-CISF officer Khalif who still continued to keep a hold of the current security details about ISRO. His hands ran deep into the heart of the organization. And because Khalif had been terminated and publicly demeaned by this very organization, he now had a stronger reason to cooperate with the CIA. And because security was a mandatory thing for the ISRO scientists, every movement of every scientist was accompanied and tracked by CISF men. And that's no less than sticking a GPS tracker over the scientists!

Every time a scientist disappears or is found dead lying beside a river or over a railway track, people blame the CISF for their inefficiency towards being able to maintain the secrecy of the scientists.

But what they do not realise is that one dark spot within the system is all it takes to ruin the intensive effort put up by the organization through years. Even the Spartans had a battle formation in which the army men would stick so closely to one another that every man would defend the person to his left, using his shield. And it was intensely necessary that the formation should have no weak spot. One person down and the entire battle formation goes in vain.

India's resistance towards this loss of brains had a perfect battle formation.

Unfortunately, Khalif was the weak spot.

The plane crash in which Dr Soni died, was devised by him.

THE UNHEARD ILLNESS

Chief and Kritika were too flabbergasted to believe their own eyes. The silence within the room kept communicating their speechlessness as their dry mouths demanded water so that they could express out the eruption of amazement occurring within their hearts. Their thoughts couldn't be contained and the excitement was way past being overboard.

The light through device was so bright that it took a minute to get back to the normal light conditions of the room. But even after the lights got adjusted the silence persisted. The years of efforts that had been put up behind this device radiated through the astounded eyes of Kritika.

"Do you realise that you just made an object pass through time and space?" Chief asked with the "Unbelievable factor" still within his voice "This is the Greatest Creation of this century!"

"But sir" Kritika resisted "we do not know whether the thing that we dropped has reached the destination or not" said Kritika with a lowered confidence.

"What? No... but.. this! By the way what did you even put into the device?" Chief asked not finding a better thing to ask about.

"The necklace..." Kritika shrugged without making a fuss of her loss "Didn't matter much."

Even Chief knew, that the necklace reminded Kritika that her father's murderer was still roaming out free. And every time she looked at it, she'd feel like ripping the necklace off her neck, crumpling it into pieces under her heels and throwing the bits deep down to places one can

never retrieve it from. But she had saved it for the right moment.

This was the right moment.

“And it’s no more in here” Chief said pointing towards the hollower section of the device.

“So?” she asked, unsure.

“So it needs to be somewhere in this planet! It has undoubtedly been transferred to some other place. Although we do not know where it is but at least you have created one of the most spectacular thing humans could have ever created!”

“But it might be possible that it just simply got destroyed”

“Do you see any evidence of any destruction here?”

“Not that I can see of” Kritika said analysing the corners and the insides of the device closely “But it does not guarantee us that the necklace was teleported 11 years back in time!”

“You did it Kritika” Chief said overhearing what Kritika said, his voice trembling excitedly. His smile, his words, his expressions, nothing seemed to be under his senses “YOU did it!” he cheered once again, pointing his over-powered finger towards Kritika “YOU!”

“WE have created it Chief, not just ‘Me’.” Kritika said dragging herself back to being modest.

A bleak smile on her face saying it all.

“No, dear” Chief Akram said strongly disagreeing to the statement. He quickly got back to his seat and threw his hands out searching for something. He didn’t know what he was searching for! His hands just wanted something to be excited about “I will never-ever take the credits of someone else’s work. You have been working over this project like some psychopathic drug addict, 15 hour research almost daily for 6 years...”

“6 and a half years...”

“Yes, six and half years, yelling over the technicians, late night conference calls... I believe You’ve dedicated enough of your life to this project. You owe this success... In fact I’ll request the Headquarters to issue a month’s leave for you. Although you know what their reply would rather be, but still.”

“But Chief, it’s not just me who made this possible” Kritika humbly resisted “Many people have been working on it... days, years, maybe centuries passed by while this research was taking place. I’m just the

lucky one to get to see this century-long research getting a proper conclusion...” Kritika said, shades of reliefs painted over her face too.

“You know? *This* is where I find that somewhere deep beneath you, your dad still exists” Chief said, his soft gaze fixed hard over Kritika’s face, “Such simplicity. Such modesty. Such respect for co-workers, never have I seen in any person other than your dad. And now I see it in you too, my girl...” Chief said nodding towards her.

Words of appreciation kept pouring off Chief’s mouth, but what he didn’t realise was that- Kritika had started getting deprived of her senses. Voices started fading out from her ears as an absolute detachedness from the surroundings kept shadowing her vision. Her mental illness had already begun affecting her senses, again.

Not many people were aware of this, but any mention of her father instantly triggered an emotional outburst within her mind- hallucinations starts showing up, as she sees things that aren’t really existing in the real world, just like some time ago when she thought that her father was standing just outside the window with open arms, when she even forgot the distinction between night and day.

And this disorder has become a part of the reality which Kritika lives every single day! Although most people claimed this to be an effect of over-emotional bonding with her father. But ‘this’ was taking deep turns indeed. It had been over a decade since this accident happened.

Inability to forget past trauma .

As mentioned in her psychiatric reports.

It also mentioned a particular case of some disease but Kritika somehow ignored the fact and did not continue with any further tests.

Looking at the sullen face of Kritika, Chief realised that he shouldn’t have spoken much about her father. But this *everlasting crave of telling a daughter how great her father was*, had to be fulfilled one day. And no better day than this did it ever seem to be existing- when the daughter of an eminent scientist created something of which not just her father but the entire nation would be proud of!

With a deep breath of grief, Chief continued “Every single day I feel the absence of your father, every single day...” a silently trembling lower jaw of Chief could now be seen as his reverend eyes turned

towards the picture hanging over the cream yellow wall to his right, dated more than 25 years as the young Chief could be seen with his hands tightly held around a bearded man with sterile features and a carefree smile.

Kritika turned towards the picture as Chief continued “This picture was taken... a day after you were born. Your dad gave a huge party... Staffs, co-workers, even the cleaning staffs! Crazy man he was, seriously... And you won’t believe how happy he was to hear that he became a father... that too blessed with twins!”

“And there’s no shame in saying that, it’s because of your father that I’m sitting here, enjoying this post in ISRO. Had he been not with me... I’d be rather supervising some minor technical part of a space craft or rather being frowned upon by some South Indian guy for not doing my job properly. But that day, apart from this happiness I realised one thing which made him ‘so great’- it was the dedication and passion he had for his job. Because if you remember your birthday was on the same date when RS-1 was launched from Satish Dhawan Space Centre, 18th July.”

Kritika nodded.

“And even though your mother’s condition was highly critical he chose to remain with us in the control room and monitor the status of the satellite till it reached the orbit. And after that successful launch, the smile that broke out of his face was just unexplainable! What a day that was, whole ISRO celebrating a festival within itself, everyone greeting and hugging one another... and you might not know this but RS-1 was the ‘First’ successful satellite launched by an INDIGENOUS launch vehicle, and your dad was a part of it. That time we told him how lucky his children were, to be gifted with a father like this. But today I take my words back... I failed to realise that it was an Einstein born in the house of Schrodinger!”

Kritika stood expressionless, barely managing a smile. Her face feeling drowsy as delusions started taking over her mind- uncontrolled sentiments of loss kept spinning all around her, as that same echelon of respect which she once felt for her father was all she could feel over Chief’s aged face- rugged by experience, refined by knowledge, polished by respect.

“And Kritika I am glad you’re *just* the exact reflection of your father. Had he been here he’d be very proud of you...” Chief added.

“You’re right Chief! He’s very proud of me... and... and *I can see that over his face*” Kritika said, pointing towards an empty corner of the room. An eerie monotonicity taking over her voice as she continued smiling. But there was something different about her voice. “In fact Chief, dad is still standing there, right, beside you... See he’s even looking at you... he’s now smiling” she whispered.

“Kritika? Are you all right dear?” Chief asked as he realised it was getting out of control. Chief reflexively stood up from his chair, attempting to lend Kritika some support as he could feel her imbalance.

But it was too late!

With a thunderous blow within her cerebellum, Kritika Soni collapsed.

SWEET COINCIDENCE

“Oh – my - God! How did you land up in *this* plane?” Duryoy asked, steeply amazed by the coincidence that Dvijata too was in the plane, sitting right beside him and looking more beautiful than ever.

“Before that I need a ‘THANK YOU DVIJATA’ from you because I had to request the flight attendants to halt the flight for you, you moron! You know how unpleasant they get when you ask them to do something for free! And can you ever be on time?”

“I guess I’m in the flight before it left, so technically I’m on time!”

“No, technically- You don’t care about time. That is the point.”

“No the point is- you’re stressing too much on technicality. Let me tell you where your genes comes from and it’s ‘daddy daddy and daddy written all over your DNA! Because even he used to shout at me for being late for his class and then he’d start barking about the importance of punctuality and discipline...Every-damn-time” Duryoy said, locking his seat belt, trying hard to shadow that mischievous smile beneath.

“What if you’d have missed your flight?”

“I’d have taken the next flight! What’s the big deal?”

“Damn, your careless attitude” Dvijata said turning her face away from Duryoy.

“Are you angry?” Duryoy asked slyly.

Dvijata didn’t react.

“Dvijuu, this is Duryoyyyy” Duryoy started calling her name melodiously. She hated it when he did that. “...You cannot be angry

with me. I'm your old friend from AIIMS. You remember me? We were in the same department! You even dated me, though I was your junior but let's keep that aside and how I jumped into your house just to meet you after the 2 month semester break? And how the specimen sample slipped from my hand on seeing you pass the anatomy lab, remember?"

The man at the window seat steered an uneasy look at Duryoy. And then Dvijata too gave him a look stern enough to put an end to his pathetic piece of melody.

For ten complete seconds there was this heavenly silence and then "Look the patient at Bed 15 took a lot of time that's why, it wasn't my fault! He really had issues he wasn't able to deal with! And he's no mental patient, because even though he said that he was the one who dropped a nuclear bomb over Hiroshima, yet he was making perfect sense!"

"And since when did you start listening to your patient's life stories?"

"I had to attend him, alright? I couldn't have left him in that condition soullessly prescribing some unsure medications *just* because I had a flight to catch. He needed someone to hear him out" Duryoy paused thinking that his dedication would finally yield him a hug from Dvijata, but instead she kept looking away from him 'they call this service before self' Duryoy said "And by the way, this too was taught by your dad..."

"Oh shut up Duryoy!" Dvijata said finally easing down "You almost missed the flight!"

"But still, when I was in 'such' hurry you put my call on hold just to speak to some 'matrimonial site prick', right?"

"What?" Dvijata's eyes widened "I put your call on hold because I was requesting the air hostess to halt the flight for! NOT because of some unknown matrimonial site guy's call" her voice pounding words with annoyance.

"You could have done that without putting it on hold..."

"Oh Duryoy! Let me tell you, you're too much obsessed with certain things, first 'my dad'."

"That's quite obvious."

"Second, my matrimonial site account"

"Which your dad created..."

“Third, your job”

“Which your dad taught me...”

“Oh come on, it’s useless speaking to you!” Dvijata said folding her hands tight

“Fine! That was a joke” Duryoy said pushing back to his seat “But why are you travelling to Ahmedabad?” Duryoy asked, this time with a serious tone.

“This isn’t one of your pathetic jokes right?”

“Hey, I’m serious! I mean real ‘serious’, you unknowingly pop into this plane in a seat beside me... without me knowing a single thing about it! How do you expect me to react?”

“Okay fine, so today evening actually...”

“And yes” Duryoy cut her pleadingly “Are my jokes really pathetic?”

Calcutta Medical College ***5 hours ago***

Duryoy and his cup of over-sweet tea went towards the bed 15 patient as Dvijata departed for the roadside tea-stall, her limbs automatically adrenalizing themselves as she approached the free end of the building. It was an absolute pleasure for her to end up in the open air, away from the running ambulances and the chaos within. Even the whiffs of the neuro drugs had coldly settled in her nose.

Dvijata walked by the giant British columns of the Calcutta Medical College that kept engulfing hundreds of people within it. These people weren’t happy, they weren’t rich either! The two worse things ‘TO BE’ when you’re alive. And well there’s a part of India that lives through these nightmares! The real India might be panoramically viewed in the monuments and the proud history of the country set within the beautiful variegated culture of this country, but there stands a part of this country which you’ll find only in the government hospitals. The part of India in which people aren’t able to even afford a tetanus shot, the part of the India in which you’ll see high fever patients approaching near-death to be lying down opposite the ward doors waiting for just one bed to get empty so that they can be admitted, the place where the huge red oxygen cylinders carry “Life” rather than “Oxygen” within them and the quarter circular tunnel-like pathway connecting the ward building to the

campus roads, well it's a "PATHWAY without a path". Families of almost all patients, mostly villagers have settled themselves within the pathway just because they don't have any more money to fund a low-priced accommodation and the tunnel had a shed overhead so they might save themselves from the tripping rainfall. And when any doctor passes-by they look upon them just like- Not like human to human, that never happens! not even close to a poor man to a rich man, it's even more than how a person looks towards Gods. Just like the Gods in the temples or churches or masjids or let that be any religion.

Because if Religion divides us, calamities unite us.

And this was one of the reasons Dvijata never loved working in government medical colleges. The bare scene of occurring in front of her seemed quite unbearable for her. But at least she was happy that her department saw less of human pain, rather it dealt with brain problems, behavioural changes, neuron functioning, all too enough to restrain herself from these heart-aching stuffs.

As on exiting the campus gates the scenic Calcutta view came into the picture- tram lines, setting sun, huge emergency vans standing beside, the British style lamp-posts, the gossiping taxi drivers with their taxis parked next to them, the same tiny stalls selling whatever one earth you want and the road ahead so straight that it seemed as if seemed as if the concept of perspective drawing had been hand knitted to construct every building out there. And all these heavenly things placed just outside the house of sufferings. Ironical indeed!

Dvijata's eyes jumped back to life as she figured out a tea stall on the other side of the road with young doctors enjoying their evening cup of tea in the traditional clay cups with some cookie-like biscuits. Some smoking cigarettes, some smoking their daily dose of happenings with others and some smoking gossips with the tea-stall owner

"Dada, ektaa chaa din naa" Dvijata said, managing to speak to the tea stall guy in partially broken Bengali which her disorganized stays in Kolkata had made her learn. Her weird accent turned some heads and her face was enough to turn the remaining unturned. Holding that warm clay mug of tea, she lightly blew the tea, took a small sip and let the time pause itself for a while. Everyone has that moment of detachedness, the moment when you just want to be with yourself and enjoy the tiny happenings around- a mother and her child walking back home from the

bus stop and the mother carrying her child's bag as she constantly keeps chatting with the child or maybe a worker after daylong work is roaming out in the streets with his three year old son. His son wants to buy a balloon of 20 Rupees totally unaware that his father earns just 100 Rupees a day! But still the father buys him one and the gleam of happiness in both their eyes of the strengthening bond, is just so loveable that it's better termed "inexpressible".

These tiny displays of affections happening all around just needs a calm eye to enjoy, and Dvijata had one.

Suddenly amidst the serenity, Dvijata 's phone rang out - An unknown number.

"Hello?" Dvijata said keeping her cup of tea aside.

"Dr Dvijata Shah?" asked the voice opposite, a heavy male voice

"Yes, and who am I speaking to?" Dvijata asked

"I'm **Chief** Akram, from ISRO... we need you help"

"Sorry, but I guess am not the Dvijata you're searching for! I work at AIIMS not ISRO..."

"You're a neuro-psychologist, right?"

"Yes, I am! But..."

"One of your patients 'Kritika Soni' has just got critical and fell unconscious, and she's currently admitted to a hospital in Ahmedabad. Doctors claim her condition to be not very fine and so I thought of calling you..."

"Oh, yeah Kritika!" Dvijata said trying to recall.

"Yes Doctor, and I found your card in her drawer so I gave you a call. Can you please come here and have a look at her?"

"But am not in Ahmedabad right now, and the doctors there must be fine too! What's the problem?"

"Doctor actually there's a conference for which Kritika needs to go to Bangalore next week and that cannot be postponed. I request your presence ma'am"

"Sir I do get your situation but am in Kolkata right now, I cannot arrive Ahmedabad immediately..." Dvijata paused for a second "But there's a friend of mine who has a flight to Ahmedabad tonight. He too is a neuro-psychologist and my work partner too... he's quite experienced person."

"But Doctor, we need 'you'. We cannot risk altering Kritika's

doctor, at least not at such a critical moment. No one understands her mental condition better than you. You just reach Ahmedabad Doctor; all expenses will be covered by us!"

"And so I couldn't refuse them" Dvijata said shrugging her shoulders "And luckily I got a seat in your flight. I even called you but you didn't pick it up!"

Duryoy nodded

"No but seriously, I was busy with Mr Bed 15. This is a very special case of schizophrenia. He can be helpful in our research. And the way and the clarity with which he explained stuffs, damn!"

"That's the miracle of people suffering from this disease" Dvijata said sipping water from the plastic glass. "Even if they fake it, they'll make it sound so real that it's hard not to believe. They even make up details of sounds and smells... Like, wonders that human brain can do. Unbelievable."

Both of them continued to look towards the seat ahead of them as the plane danced for a while as it swam through the clouds. They both sank within the thoughts of their own words which they didn't realise, but soon the thoughts ended and a dire need to start a conversation came afloat.

"Isn't this a nice coincidence?" Dvijata said, not turning to look at Duryoy "Both of us landing in the same plane?"

Duryoy spotted a chance to surface his demands, and he eagerly turned towards her.

"Actually yes!" he said "Indeed it is. But because such coincidences are rare and barely do you visit Ahmedabad, why not make the best of it?"

"What did *that* mean?" Dvijata said her eyes narrowed.

"I mean barely you visit Ahmedabad... and this time... we're visiting together... and we both are officially on leave... and because it's Navratri, why not join me for garba tomorrow night?"

"Dr. Duryoy Kundu" Dvijata said with a slight accession of cheerfulness "Are you asking me out for a date?"

MAMMA CALLING

"She's alright... yeah, she's absolutely fine ma'am. Though

unconscious, but that's more out of weakness... the doctor said so... there's nothing to worry ma'am" Chief said over the phone, as he scudded out of the room so that he might not disturb the girl beside him.

For Chief, she always remained a girl rather than a woman.

Kritika remained unconscious in the adorable single-bed room scented with the flowers lying beside the "Get well soon" notes penned down by her co-workers more out of love than sympathy, had an IV plugged into her forearm and the seventh or eighth floor city-view from her room framed in the huge square window over the left wall. But she was in the least of her senses to enjoy the beauty of this room

"Ma'am please do not cry, you need to stand strong" Chief continued over the phone "And even I'm here throughout so you do not worry, she'd be absolutely fine..."

"But my daughter..." the voice opposite broke into stream of tears and memories, rolling down her face as she struggled to compose herself. But she couldn't. She just couldn't. Which mother can? When she hears that her daughter had such an incident.

"Ma'am you do not worry about anything. She 'has been' and 'is' one of the priceless possession ISRO has ever had. ISRO even agreed to bear the expense of this entire treatment, so there's nothing to worry about. I shouldn't be telling this to you due to security reasons but now I think I should because the thing your daughter has created is just priceless... absolutely priceless... So priceless that once the new gets released she'd be known as one of the best scientists ISRO ever had! So be a proud mother and stop crying please. I know how hard it is to keep calm, but you're her only family! If not you, then who?" Chief said as he quickly checked the time in his golden wrist watch, it said **1:10**.

"Thank you Chief, thank you so much... I wonder how I'd repay the debt for everything that you did for her... it's even more than a father does for his daughter..."

"Ma'am, I *am* her father. And as a father- Love outdoes rationality. Any day."

SEPERATION

Chief softly ended the call, as he looked into the long hallway of the hospital busy with nurses, patients and their dejected family members.

Chief slowly peeped into Kritika's room once again only to find out

that she had gained consciousness and her eyes were keenly analysing her sterile surroundings. She seemed delighted to see the greetings and the flowers from her co-workers

With an uncontrollable eagerness Chief entered the room “Kritika, my girl... what happened to you dear? Why do you do this to yourself?”

“Chief, it’s alright” Kritika said with an unusual sloppiness in her faintly-opened eyes “I am quite used to this thing” she said, her weak hands reaching for the bottle of water.

“But Kritika life is more important dear, if something happens to you it’s only the flowers that greet you back. Don’t take your job ‘this’ seriously that it ruins your life, we work to live not live to work. Why don’t you get this?”

“Chief, my work is my life. I don’t do it for anyone else! I do it because it makes ‘me’ happy...”

“That’s enough! I’m signing you for a leave after you’re discharged and that’s final” Chief said keeping his phone in his pocket “God! You know how much tensed your family members are?”

“I don’t have a family, Chief”

“You have a twin brother!”

“We aren’t in touch. It’s been seven years since we spoke...”

“And you *have* a mother.”

“I *had* a mother”

“That’s no way to speak about your mother! Do you have any idea how much she cares about you?”

“If she really cared about me” Kritika paused “She would have never divorced dad”

THE NEXT EVENING

SHAKESPEAREAN LIVES

It was awkward, yeah... it really was!

When Duryoy Kundu, the man in his late 20s decorated himself up with a bright red *kurta* with golden embroidery designed over it and a deep blue jeans hugging his legs even more tightly than Dvijata hugs him, he came across himself in the mirror and all he could end up with was “Am I not too old enough to be doing all this?”

Duryoy! Men of your age are moving in Mercedes with a wife at their home waiting for them and a cute little baby crying next to her. And just behind the little baby there lies the wedding pictures hanging happily over the wall. And look at you! Cheekily looking at the guy in front of the mirror waiting for the clock to strike 10 PM so that you can go and dance with some teenagers and also the girl whom you always wanted to marry! But instead you let her father create a matrimonial page account of her. And even knowing this fact that she probably won't marry you, you called her for a dance? I mean, do you really want to die alone or what?

Thoughts kept threading up in his mind backing up with memories. And as for Duryoy his memories drifted him back to those days when he met Dvijata for the first time and then back again to his present, sitting in the rickshaw waiting at the ‘traffic signal’ of the road, and also his

life.

Just that one green was all he needed!

And in the perplexed state Duryoy realised that it had been 10 complete seconds since the rickshaw driver had been staring at him blankly. He looked around to realise that he had reached his destination. The honking cars, flying selfie sticks, immobile traffic, over-loud bikes and overcrowded street of the CEPT had already managed to create the aura of festivity. Plus, the dresses that everyone wore around seemed like every knot of those had been made in sync with the festival, just too perfect to match the enthusiasm and youthfulness- backless cholis, designer collared kurtas, stylish traditional handbags and the hair-styles all too enough to fall in love with person next to you because it's only 'this' festival where your heart topples 'every' second.

Handing a crisp 50 Rupee note Duryoy got off, his smile arching with the liveliness. And with the infinitude of beautiful clothes hanging all around him, his brain began permuting the various combinations which Dvijata might land up with. (Yeah! This man was quite jobless indeed).

Just against the huge board with 'CEPT University' (CENTRE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING AND TECHNOLOGY) sharply typed and the brickwork background campus, stood a huge crowd of youngsters waiting for the entries to begin. The campus building from that distance seemed like a living edifice of the **architectural excellence** in India, although the design and layout was quite similar to the IIM-Ahmedabad, Gujarat campus, but anyways... just a random thought. With the predominant introspection which Duryoy ran over himself, he figured out that the reason behind these exaggerated feelings towards the campus was moreover because of the 'lady' in open hairs walking towards him in mustard *lehenga choli* and *mojari* style ballerina shoes, swiftly managing to turn the unhesitant faces in the crowd. And her deeply highlighted eyes madly voiding the fluid called 'Hope' from every eye, there she was- the neuropsychologist from AIIMS- Dvijata Shah.

*Not to mention 'her' **architectural excellence**, either.*

She looked so beautiful that she had exceeded the levels of being called *just* a woman. She was now an art.

Her large circular fancy earrings gleaming brightly above her pale skin, made Duryoy's heart internally wreck with an uncontrollable fear- that he might not be able to hold his feelings for her, any longer...

When audibly close, Duryoy puffed his lungs saying, "You know Shakespeare once said- She's beautiful, therefore to be wooed; She's woman, and therefore to be won" he said "Totally applies over you..." and he laughed at his own joke

Nervousness makes you do weird stuffs, doesn't it? And the way female presence affects the male humour is just irrefutable!

"That wasn't funny, was it?" Duryoy asked

"I pray you, do not fall in love with me" Dvijata said folding her hands "For I am falser than the vows made in wine..."

Silence

"Nice English!" Duryoy appreciated, having got nothing much to say

"You aren't the only one who reads Shakespeare", she winked.

THE SCENT OF CEPT

The heavy crowd was all set to break into the CEPT campus as the SAW bouncers arranged themselves into their designated positions- Five at the main entrance, ten around the garba area and the other five at the other probable exit points. Each one pinned through wireless connection, walkie-talkies and the surveillance cameras set throughout the campus projecting their respective view zones over the grey Lenovo placed on Khalif's lap. The hot coffee mug beside him still left untouched and would continue remain untouched, till his targets had been spotted. Kritika's picture was still minimized beneath the surveillance camera updates and Khalif constantly kept referring the picture because he still knew how hard it becomes to find someone in a crowd of hundreds. During the Navratri nights when women manage to exceed their natural beauty by a factor of ten, making it impossible to figure them out by their normal pictures.

And this was exactly why Khalif demanded for the man's picture, but the unavailability had just compelled him for a closer inspection.

Now the CEPT garba was not exactly different but it was unique because to reach the campus one had to make their way through the

campus and hence diversions more likely existed and so there were more than one way a person could reach the garba lawn. And so, it was made very clear that the target should be positively spotted before they enter the garba lawn because once they enter into it, it would be near impossible to figure them out. And even the shape of the lawn was as such that once lost it would mean lost forever- a single *aarti* arrangement made at the centre of the garba ground around which people would dance in concentric circles till the point the outermost circle gets as big as the ground itself! And the view is truly magnificent. Everyone in the same circle matching their steps altogether with everyone else and livening the folk beat, with slow, tuned and the perfectly matched dance movements happening all around.

Like that is all garba is all about!

People dancing in beautiful clothes for 9 nights, that's it?

Well, that's what it looks from outside, but once you get in here you'll realise the true beauty of the festival- The aura, the festivity, the late night hangouts, instagram flooding with pictures and snapchat stories filling up your screens, all of *this* is what makes Navratri the Christmas of Gujarat.

The overhead lightings at CEPT had been crafted to look like a giant gold garland with coloured gems inscribed over its body, lighting up the place with a shimmering golden hue. And a stage had been built at one corner of the ground for the group of traditional singers and musicians to set apart their lively glitches and reveal the best they had been hired for.

With the speaker testing sound popping from the insides of the campus, the roar of the crowd suddenly attained a directional momentum as the gates had been opened. Huge crowds began to funnel into the campus through the narrow security gates.

And with this, Khalif knew that the last chapter of his life had just begun.



Taking a mint gum out of her handbag Kritika began unwrapping it as she checked for her belongings which she might have left in the hospital room. With no familiar objects lingering around the cream coloured room she gave the room one last look.

She had been cleared by the hospital authorities on being suggested

by her psychologist Dr Dvijata Shah. Well although it might seem like a very childish step to risk a patient discharge this early, but Dvijata was confident over her act. And she knew that more than PTSD, it was the intense work pressure of Kritika that had made this happen. Of course, bed rest was suggested to Kritika by the hospital authorities but the best Dvijata could say was “Kritika needs to freshen up and feel free and light-headed for a faster recovery. But I don’t know how are all those things possible if she continues to stay locked inside a room with medications and dead flowers around her!”. All Kritika needed was a free-mind and a good quiet stroll through the streets in the windy night, just to relax herself from every sort of pressure she had concerned herself with.

Chief had arranged a man who’d take care of all the paper-works and payments, so through the eyes of Kritika it was a complete bliss. A cab too was waiting outside for her as Chief’s man handed Kritika the required identity proofs, receipts and her prescription file which was moreover of no use to her as with Dvijata besides barely did she need a reason to worry.

With a happier face, she exited the hospital entrance as the dryness of the city began to crawl over her skin. She looked around for a rickshaw, and she even saw one and called it, and it was even approaching her when suddenly a grey Verna abruptly screeched to a halt just between her and the rickshaw. Her eyebrows arched downwards and it took her a while to make out who was inside the car. The dark shades of the glass were making it difficult for her to guess out, and then the window slowly came down revealing the man inside.

Her eyes widened

“Oh my God! You?” she said with absolute disbelief.

THE BOY AT THE PARKING

It was all negative for the moment. Twenty minutes down and none of the bouncers had any idea where their targets might be. Khalif was losing both time and patience, and even the after-thoughts kept concerning him further. It’s never easy to kidnap an ISRO scientist. They’re some of the most valuable assets of the Indian government. And in case something as such happens the entire security team gets fiercely into action. The Central Industrial Security Forces (CISF), the

specialised set of paramilitary force of India which serves for the security purpose of various industrial sectors like the atomic, missile technology and space research are the ones under whom the ISRO security falls. And these forces are different from the police forces. These are two independent bodies and have their respective ways of dealing with a situation. And along with that there was a secondary concern that Kritika Soni after having created the device was temporarily on the national watch list because of her incredible creation. And if something happens to her the Home Ministry might issue SSG (Special Security Group) forces to provide security or have the situation in control. And this would further worsen Khalif's situation because SSG forces are specially formed by candidates recommended by the Intelligence Bureau. Once they get into action, it's nearly impossible to outrun them.

Endless thoughts kept running in Khalif's mind and all he could do was stare into the laptop screen waiting for that one face to appear. Joshi too was in the car and was running the 'Face Recognition software' over the incoming video clips. He had held his patience for a while because he knew that Khalif was in a bad mood and he in no way wanted to be the one on whom Khalif drains out his entire vexation. The silence was maintained within the car when suddenly there was a knock on the window and everyone's heart skipped a beat together as they all looked towards the source. If this was some police official then they all were in for some trouble. The man standing beside Khalif's window had a sturdy built, rough beard, but it was a sigh of relief to see him wear a kurta. It was a student.

Khalif silently pulled down his window and looked straight into the boy's eyes.

"Sir, this is a no parking zone. Will you please pull up your car to the parking area or else I've to ask the bouncers to do so."

"We will" Joshi said from the back seat. "We aren't parking here, we're just waiting for someone."

"You might wait anywhere, but here sir. There's very less vehicle space anyway. I want you to drive somewhere else please."

"Just a couple of minutes" Joshi pleaded

"Sir will you please shift your car to somewhere else, or else I will have to call the authorities!" the boy said raising his voice. May be for

once he didn't know on whose men he was yelling at

"Hey" Khalif said in his gravest voice "We will. Alright? I'm the incharge of securities and I don't need to explain myself to you over where to park my car, alright?" he said. And beside Khalif was a big golden badge of SAW Securities and a tiny black metal that looked like a gun, that made the anger and the words from the boy's mouth disappear. Without uttering a single word, he ran away, apologizing for the fifth time.

And amidst all this there had been a significant activity occurring near the gates of CEPT. Joshi was unable to believe, but there was something his face recognition software had detected.

"Sir" Joshi said, his eyes unmoved from the monitor "I think we've found *the two*."

THE WORST WALK EVER

"The security check seems quite tight over here" Duryoy muttered.

It had been 20 minutes since the gates opened but the crowd still proceeded very slowly. There had been separate lines for boys and girls, and 5 bouncers boldly standing and specifically checking every person out as the lines now seemed unending.

"Can we join the line please?" Dvijata said unable to sustain the pointlessness of buying a ticket for a garba night and then standing outside the campus gates watching the crowd pass by.

"Do you notice how much crowded those lines are?" Duryoy said pointing towards the crowd "There's no hurry as such and none of us knows how to dance, anyways. Have some patience! We'll enter after this crowd cuts off..."

"And till then what are supposed to do?"

"Coffee?"

"Roadside tea?" Dvijata asked, cheekily shrugging her shoulders, "Makes me remember Calcutta."

"I'll have anything... as long as I get to have that with you!"

Dvijata narrowed her eyes.

"What?" Duryoy asked with a blush over his slender face

"You really know how to project simple things as undeniable stuffs..." Dvijata said with a smile.

"Well, that's what my friends say when I talk about you."



Back in Khalif's van the heatedness of the scenario rose up.

"Sir, I think they're moving away!" Joshi said as he hastily turned towards Khailf who was busy commanding some rear entrance guards to change their positions.

"What?" Khalif said looking wildly towards the screen, "Joshi, are you sure these are *the two*?"

"Sir, not 'absolutely' sure but the software finds resemblance to the woman in our photo. Plus as said, she's with a man and they've been standing in front of the gate for 20 minutes but they didn't join the line, the man looked towards the CCTV and then suddenly they decide to move away from the CEPT entrance. And he even pointed twice towards the guards..."

"Zoom in" Khalif commanded, "To the woman." Joshi began rewinding the footage back to 2 minutes and zoomed it towards the woman's face. And although the hair seemed different but the tapering face and the skin colour made Khalif feel confident that these were *the two*.

Instantly picking up his walkie-talkie Khalif connected himself to one of the main-entrance guards "A man and a woman have just departed towards right. They're walking away from the campus. The woman's in mustard coloured *lehenga* and the man is wearing a red kurta. Follow them but do not take any action, first confirm me that the woman is *the one* in the picture. Try not to lose track of them and do not loosen the security, they're just our suspects... we're not sure about them. Send me a confirmation, quick'

And suddenly a message popped in the Khalif's Blackberry, the one he used only to contact his clients.

It read:

Found them?

'WORDS' CAN SHATTER 'WORLDS'

"Duryoy? Have you ever felt that there are times when patients trust 'us' more than Gods?" Dvijata said gazing downwards "Their expectations cling over us as though 'we' are the only thing standing between life and death" she said. Her voice didn't sound usual. There was something that had been concerning her and Duryoy did sense it, but

after being nine years with Dvijata he was well-aware of the fact that she's most vulnerable when she tries abbreviating the miseries of her life into tiny phrases of feelings. And even the greatest counsellor on earth cannot bring those words out of her mouth until she herself decides to speak it out. Now that she was saying it voluntarily, Duryoy restricted himself to replying only when necessary.

"Yes" Duryoy said "That's because we're doctors. People expect us to do so!"

"No, I mean I hate it when I can't stand up to their expectations... I mean, why is it that the people who mend souls are the ones who need to break most hearts? These patients, they cry in front of me, they're made to stay with *us* as long as they start believing in themselves, and the fact that it's only us who can get them back to where they should be! They think of us as Gods. Their families, their friends, their close ones they all remain on one side, and we 'the saviours' remain on the other. They believe us! And what do we do? Categorize them under name of a chronic disease, prescribe them some drugs and try keeping them alive with a false hope! We're not treating humans, Duryoy! It feels like we're treating machines!"

"Did something happen today?" Duryoy asked narrowing his eyes, "Or is it Kritika?"

'No, not Kritika!' she said waving off 'She's fine! It's just that one of my patient, very young kid. Dyslexic. I knew him since he was seven and he just used to hate me, like literally hate me. Used to throw away his dinner plates, spit into the morning milk, refused to speak to the nurses, because he believed that we'd make fun of him just like his friends used to do at school. He hated humans so much that he'd find pleasure in cartoons. He used to believe that whatever might happen, cartoons would always speak to him with respect, with dignity. They'd never make fun of him. And it took me, 14 months to make him believe in me. And no medication proved to be as effective as one thing" Dvijata said looking at Duryoy "Guesses?"

He could only whisper, "No."

"The teddy bear."

Duryoy stopped for he knew what she meant, "The one, which I bought you?"

"Yeah" Dvijata smiled apologetically, "But that teddy bear had

made wonders. Just 6 months with the teddy bear and he'd talk to everyone, and give the nurses a smile and wish me when I used to go to him for a regular check-up. Well, then I realised that all he needed was a friend! A year ago, he got shifted to another hospital. And today I hear that..."

Dvijata's eyes had moistened and her face got more rigid.

"He made a GOODBYE card for me before he left me..." she wept silently.

Duryoy offered to hold the pink water bottle she was carrying as she quickly produced her kerchief and slowly wiped off the wet corners of her dark eyes.

"His father called me last night after we landed, inviting me to the final ceremony. But I don't think I can bear it" she said, her voice on the tip of the edge "Why is it... why is it always... us?"

"Dvijata, you know, there's something that differentiates us from the Gods. We can neither create lives, nor destroy them. All we can do is heal them when they are wounded. You did all you could..."

"Yes. And that's why I'm quitting my job."

"You wish to quit your job?" Duryoy asked trying to reassure what he had heard "WHAT?"

"This isn't working out for me, Duryoy. Although as doctors we're expected to be tough but I cannot. I cannot watch people strangling to death by my side, as I stand helplessly trying to do something that would only make him live a day more. And even you know what kind of patients we deal everyday- patients who're either too depressed to kill themselves or too vulnerable that they might kill anyone who comes in their way. And along with them, we too are battling with life. Let me tell you one thing Duryoy, when you live among dead people, sooner or later you become one" she paused, "We although are trying to brighten other's lives but are finally ending up dooming our own. This profession is like a stretched rope Duryoy. The longer you try holding on to it, the more you'll hurt yourself."

"But why all of a sudden you're acting so weirdly?" Duryoy asked as he tried keeping his voice under control "You're one of the best doctors this country could have. If you quit, you never know how many lives might just go wasted just because they couldn't get a proper treatment as of yours!"

“Duryoy, I want to live like a normal human being! Take a break from my work and live like a happy person for once!”

“I always thought work makes you happy!”

“It does, and you do know that. But not everything that makes you happy should be retained. And after 50 years I do not want to lie at my deathbed saying, ‘just in the tussle to save some hundred lives, I forgot to live mine’” Dvijata said as she shifted her gaze low.

“But it has always been this way!” Duryoy said, his voice rather loud than usual “Back in AIIMS you always told me you’re the luckiest person because you’re getting to do what you’ve always wanted to... Than why is this sudden change concerning you so much? We all undergo pressures, even I’ve treated patients who had death threats, patients who would cut their wrist if they get one loose moment, teenagers who would rather kill themselves because they did things which their parents would never accept... and they all depended over ‘me’. You realise the substantiality of the profession we’re currently in?”

“But I cannot do this any longer, Duryoy!” Dvijata shouted, her concerned voice unusually shooting to the heights of shrillness.

She paused knowing what she had done was not correct.

In a softer tone, she said **“Duryoy, I’m getting married!”**

SECOND THOUGHTS

Duryoy remained beneath the orange street lights all shattered
Dvijata is getting married? was all that reverberated within his ears

Duryoy knew a day would rather come when he’d be facing this desolate moment of truth as he knew he ‘WAS NOT’ making *a* move, or precisely *any* move. But every single time he thought about it, he preferred not to. And now it was all too damaged.

Dvijata didn’t look at him after those words fell from her, but still she chose to stand beside him. The bitter silence constantly filling them and although she knew that this thing would shatter Duryoy from the inside, she wanted him to be happy about it.

“Aren’t you happy about this?” she asked feeling a hollowness building inside her.

Duryoy remained silent.

It had been nearly a decade long since they both knew each other,

and Duryoy had fallen for her exactly a decade ago. It wasn't just some *just* friend turning him down- This was Dvijata Shah. The woman with whom his very days of college and a third of his lifetime had been directed upon!

"Duryoy, please don't feel sad about it... Dad suddenly asked me if I was seeing anyone or not and one thing led to other and then all I know is now I am getting married and I *just* couldn't refuse him then."

"Couldn't refuse him?" For Duryoy only numbness felt around him.

"I mean, yes I could have but this was more of a sentimental thing. Dad's friend had passed away some years ago and since that day he constantly stayed in touch with *his* wife- Miss Raval, as she was too broken down after her husband's death. And living in America she had no one to speak to. She badly needed a moral support, and so dad didn't hesitate a bit. And soon, the bond between my family and Miss Raval strengthened, and strengthened to an extent that when she asked for *my* hand, without giving a second thought dad agreed."

"But that second thought was damn necessary!" Duryoy yelled out of impatience "And how could he even say 'Yes' without consulting you? Dvijata YOU are getting married not your dad. YOU need to be sure about this first. YOU need time for this!"

"They told me that the ceremony would be only when I'll be okay with it!"

"Oh, come on, does that even make sense? It's like telling a man that he'd be hanged offering that he gets to choose the time he wants to be hanged" Duryoy said. His voice losing a hold over itself.

"Duryoy, why on earth is this thing concerning you so much? You better be busy with that research of yours that you never told me about. You have problems which you never share. You like me but every time I ask you about what you think about me- You end up with 'Don't let some weird word define a relationship of ours'. Duryoy I fail to understand- WHAT IS IT THAT YOU ACTUALLY WANT?" Dvijata's voice unable to sustain her anxiety

She knows about my research? Duryoy thought.

"What is it that you know about my research?" Duryoy asked, entirely back to his senses.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I've no interest in knowing things which you don't find me eligible enough to know" Dvijata's voice slightly

breaking “Unlike you... I don’t voice my opinion over things I don’t completely know about.”

“It’s not an opinion, it’s a general perspective Dvijata ! The woman who has always been independent is now leaving the biggest decision of her life over someone else!”

“At least am not choosing a man who had been a decade long friend of mine and I don’t even know him completely!”

“Dvijata, I don’t tell you about my problems because most of the time you’re in some hospital in India and rest of the time you remain stressed out by the suffering patients. One more extra thing I burden you with and I’ll rather find myself treating *you* for a mental breakdown! I don’t want to concern you with my useless issues!”

“And by choosing to do so, do you even realise that you’ve created a wall of void between the two of us?”

“And *just* to fill this void you agreed to marry some Indian-American? That too because your dad thinks that man is the perfect for you... Wow!”

“Duryoy why do I sense that you are not reacting to ‘this’ the way you should be! What is it that is concerning you so much that you’re constantly scavenging for the flaws within me and my family?”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore” Duryoy said unable to deal with the tension ebbing his body “Can we please attend this garba night... together? We’ll figure something out after that.”

“No, Duryoy tell me what is it that you want to tell me? Am not getting anywhere until you break this ice...”

“Let’s just not talk about it or maybe talk about it someday else?”

“Duryoy why do you keep ignoring things that concern you?”

“At least I don’t try escaping them.”

“What?” Dvijata fired back, feeling herself dragged back into the argument “You think marriage is an ‘Escape route’ for me? And what makes you say that?”

“I’ve known you since college Dvijata . I get it when you do things just because you cannot take something any longer.”

“And just knowing me for a decade makes you think that you know everything about me?”

“Dvijata, I know things about you that you yourself don’t know”

“Duryoy” Dvijata said. Her voice soft and low, “Why are you still in love with me?”

PEOPLE FROM THE PAST

“Negative” said the bouncer who had been following Duryoy and Dvijata for a while. He rechecked twice with the photograph he had in his phone but ‘No’ she wasn’t the one in the photograph. This girl had a fairer skin and her hairs were shorter and cut across like some Egyptian princess.

Dvijata’s body composure was very very similar to Kritika’s, so similar that they looked alike when viewed from a distance in the real world, let apart the in the camera-clippings. But Kritika was more of a calm and composed, low voice, not much reaction, none of which were found in the girl the bouncer had been following till now.

“Are you sure?” Joshi’s sound came off the walkie-talkie

“Yes, they look-alike but faces are very different. Not very hard to differentiate. And this one’s shorter as compared to the one in the picture.”

Joshi slid a hand over his walkie-talkie putting it aside, “Sir, she’s not the one” he said “Judgemental error.”

Khalif let out a loud breath and looked outside the window in dejection “Continue, continue searching for her.”

“Sir, so should I send the bouncer back to his position?” Joshi asked to which Khalif didn’t reply initially and then he nodded absently. Khalif was deep into his thoughts and had something coming up in his mind which he had not been revealing for quite some time.

“Yes... report back to your...”

“Joshi!” Khalif said suddenly jumping in his seat and turning backwards, straining his muscular neck, “Show me the video clipping.”

Joshi quickly turned the laptop screen towards Khalif and zoomed into the live video feed in which they could see Duryoy and Dvijata conversing about something serious.

A thought crossed across Khalif’s mind as he bent further ahead and had been staring at the video feed more closely

Joshi sensed the discomfort within Khalif’s mind but didn’t utter a word. It’s never a good idea to disturb Khalif while he’s at his mental attic.

But time was ticking by and something had to be done. Because in operations as such, uncertainty is the biggest constant one might come across

“Sir?” Joshi said in a meek tone “Is everything alright?”

“Yes” Khalif nodded, a severe and a heavy nod, “Yes, we might have mistaken *this* girl. But I definitely know the man she’s standing with” Khalif said with a nasty little smile over his face “So after 12 years, we meet again” he said to himself, “Duryoy Kundu.”

MILAN SAINI

“And what makes you think that I still love you?” Duryoy asked maintaining his part of the decorum.

“I... I... I just know this Duryoy! I don’t need a reason to make me think. The way you hold my hand a second longer every time we meet, the way you look down and smile at me not listening to a word that I’m speaking, the way you bring me tea when I’m stressed out, the way you attend my patients just because I’m not feeling well... There’s always more than one way to display love!”

“And so even though you knew ‘everything’, you still chose to marry that ‘Stranger’?”

For a moment, it appeared as though Dvijata had nothing but silence to answer with.

“Excuse me?” suddenly poured in a voice, breaking the intensity of the situation. A sturdy man with a clean face and rough hair, with a skin tone unlikely that of an Indian stood against them, his eyes stuck over to Dvijata. His tall frame creating an extended shadow over Duryoy’s face

“Dr. Dvijata Shah?” asked the man, his mouth smelling of nicotine.

“Sorry, do I know you?” Dvijata asked, narrowing her dark eyes

“No ma’am you don’t, but you’re Dr Dvijata Shah, right? Neuropsychologist?” asked the man, his voice clearly not that of a man who stayed in India. The English accent had an edged fluency in it.

Dvijata couldn’t figure out how to respond as for a while although she felt a trust in the man’s voice.

“Yes, she’s Dvijata and she’s a neuropsychologist” Duryoy said completely irritated by the weird telepathic silence with no telepathy “So?”

“Can you please come aside or rather follow me because there’s

something I want to tell you”, he said looking at Dvijata.

“Excuse me? Who the hell are you and what do you exactly want?”
Dvijata said furiously

“Doctor trust me, this is no time to overreact!”

“This isn’t over-reacting!” Duryoy said exacerbating his tone further and further as time passed by “What did you expect her to do, jump into your arms?”

“Can you please leave us alone? We’re right now in the middle of something”, Dvijata said to the stranger as politely as possible “It’s not really a good time... for anything.”

“Doctor please don’t misunderstand me... I’m Milan Saini and my fiancé Kritika Soni is your patient.”

“Oh? She’s here?”

“That’s what I wanted to tell you”, and Milan continued.

10 minutes ago

CEPT main gate

“Dvijata asked me to take a leave from my project... although it just completed day before yesterday. But what do you think?” Kritika said in a low voice walking against the same board of CEPT which moments earlier had seen Duryoy and Dvijata standing. Her gaze lowering towards the ground where she could see her slender shadow touching her feet and beside her shadow walked another shadow- tall, lissome and having uncombed hair. It was indeed after a long while that she was enjoying her moments. His presence itself was so fulfilling... and it’s because of her sudden collapse last night that made this man rush to her straightaway from Kennedy Space Center (Florida) to India

“Won’t you ask me what the project is all about?” Kritika asked, on getting no reply from the man besides.

“No Kritika, I am not concerned over your project or any project in that case. All I am concerned about is you. Why do you keep indulging into your work this much? Do you even know that the thing you’re doing to yourself is getting you closer to your death? What happens if something happens to you?” said Milan Saini, the flight trajectory specialist from NASA “Do you realise that I live in Kennedy, it takes me half a day to travel from there to here! Doesn’t matter how badly I want to help you but in case things get worse I won’t be able to make it in

time, Kritika. You need to start taking care of yourself.”

“I do Milan, it’s just that when sometimes... I really miss my dad.”

“Kritika that’s ridiculous! Did you even see your medical file?”

“No, it’s all and the same every time. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, some drugs prescribed and bed rest suggested, that’s all I’ve been getting in response since the past 3 times.”

“Not this time Kritika! Not this time.”

“Oh yes, I know Kritika but I’ve never met you before Milan... I believe” Dvijata said lighting up a bit with a blithe smile, “Or maybe I’ve heard about you...”

Duryoy stood gazing their faces as the two continued analysing each other.

“Yes ma’am... you must have heard of me from Kritika, I work at NASA and Kritika too talks a lot about you”, Milan said with a slight accession of cheerfulness, but something else was still concerning him that moment “But ma’am and sir”, he said looking towards Duryoy, “I think you guys are being followed!”

9 minutes ago

CEPT main gate

“WHAT?” bellowed the high-pitched voice of Kritika amidst the cheerful crowd, “Alzheimer?” unable to believe her very own voice, “I’ve been detected with Alzheimer?”

Milan’s face remained unaltered as though he had been expecting a similar reaction from her.

Well, Alzheimer is a chronic [neurodegenerative](#) disease that usually starts slowly and gets worse over time. The most common early symptom is difficulty in remembering recent events and as the disease advances, symptoms can include [problems with language](#), [disorientation](#) (that’s getting easily lost), [mood swings](#), loss of [motivation](#), not managing [self-care](#), and [behavioural issues](#).

“But Dvijata said that it’s usually genetically transmitted!”

“Up to 70%, Kritika. But it’s also caused by hypertension and depression, and that’s exactly your case”, Milan said with a greater disappointment and concern. He could see the fear of death in her eyes and all he could do was try not to believe in the words that he had heard

about this disease.

At first, the patient's condition declines, they often withdraw from family and society getting all lonely. And gradually the bodily functions are lost, ultimately leading to death. Kritika had already portrayed the two of the three symptoms.

Milan could now see darkened rails of tears running across Kritika's cheeks. The same cheeks which moments ago which were blushing with openness of her beauty.

"Why did you do this to yourself Kritika?" Milan murmured as he tried keeping his emotions hard within himself!

"Did you speak to the doctors?" Kritika's voice cracked

"No but I spoke to the man from of your office who went to complete the formalities in the hospital"

"How much time do I have with me?"

"Doctors didn't mention anything about it", Milan said hesitating to open up.

But deep down Kritika knew that he was lying. Alzheimer patients don't usually live long lives, she knew that.

The whole world of Kritika had shut down for a moment. The voices unheard, the glitters unseen, the excitement inexistent. For that time, it was just herself standing in a dark alley with no one around. And a huge clock in front of her with no markings on it and the dials kept ticking in reverse. The world, the job, the invention, the marriage, no longer held any significance to her!

And then out of a sudden she sees Dvijata. She knew this too could be one of her hallucinations, so she shook herself out of it, but Dvijata remained unvarnished. She rubbed her eyes again, but Dvijata remained! For once she thought that Dvijata was there for real.

And damn! That indeed was Dvijata

"Kritika saw you and she was madly following you from the gate just wanting to talk to you, but then she noticed that the bouncer in black, who's currently standing beside the MAGGI stall has been following you both since you left the gate. And this's for sure because when I stopped you both, the man too took a halt", Milan said, making sure no one else was hearing what he said, "I think you both should leave right away!"

“But why would someone follow ‘us’?” Dvijata asked as she looked towards Duryoy “I mean we haven’t done anything wrong, we have the passes and we’re *just* some doctors! We aren’t even into some *super secretive research* sort of thing...” Dvijata’s words slowing down as her eyes drifted doubtlessly towards Duryoy, his face growing pale with every passing second.

“I think we must leave” Duryoy decided, looking sharply at Dvijata

“Are you serious?”

“Should I get my car?” Milan offered

“No, thanks Milan. But following a car is lot more easier and we cannot risk our home’s location. I think the safest thing to do right now is to enter the campus. We can easily camouflage ourselves in the crowd” Duryoy said.

“But the person who’s following us is a bouncer! If we enter through the main gate they’ll easily catch us!” Dvijata argued, and she did have a point.

“There’s an entrance from the back that very few people know about.”

“Great!” Duryoy said giving one last look to the man who had been following them. To his surprise, he was gone.

“Where’s Kritika?” Dvijata asked turning to Milan.

THE COFFEE

“Sir, the woman”, Joshi said hastily pointing towards the screen, “Our target, she’s entering the premises through the Main gate”, Joshi switched the camera recording of the main gate to a full view over the monitor, and there she was- Kritika Soni. She kept looking around searching for someone even when she entered, but with no familiar faces around she chose to enter the premises all by herself.

“Wait a minute!” Khalif interrupted, “Are you sure she’s the one?”

“Yes sir, this time it’s positive.”

“What does the face recognition software say?”

“89%”, Joshi smiled, “I’m very sure. She is *the one*.”

“Good”, Khalif said nodding to himself because finally for once this evening things were beginning to show up the way he wanted, “But where’s the man she’s supposed to be with?”

“He disappeared a while ago. He came with her, the two of them had some conversation and then he went the other way while our target kept standing. He never came back.”

“May be that man just came to drop her off”, Khalif replied with his eyes trying to hunt down possibilities. “May be the man we’re searching for is already in there. We need to wait. We need to wait until someone shows up because my client was very sure that someone would show up inside the campus and then we need to... do our part”, Khalif looked at the monitor trying to figure out his next move. Then he nodded, he nodded affirmatively, now he was confident. “We need to wait. Keep a track on her and inform me about any person she’s communicating with-might that be a 10 years old or a 40. I need to know every detail about where she’s going and who she’s going with.”

Joshi nodded, picking up his walkie-talkie and forwarding the orders to all the bouncers within the campus as the voice of the static emanating from the walkie-talkie kept reverberating within the car.

“Joshi”, Khalif called in a grave voice as everything around paused itself, the static, the words, the voices, the video, the air, the scent of the coffee, everything, “Make sure they do not lose her.”

Khalif sipped his coffee.

THE SILENT COMPROMISE

In no time, the CEPT campus welcomed the three.

A silent five minutes’ walk through the low-lit part of the campus and some rough grounds was the easiest alternate way in. None other than Milan had any idea over where they were being headed towards. All that could be visualized from the surroundings was that- it was the rear of an open amphitheatre. And in no time the three were standing on the topmost row of the amphitheatre facing the huge crowd of thousands dancing to the beats of the soulful Gujarati folk music.

But even amidst the penetrating enthusiasm, silence was what struck them the most!

Milan got busy trying to connect to Kritika over his cell, but she wasn’t picking up his call.

And for the moment again, it was Duryoy and Dvijata together, left all alone with awkwardness by their sides.

“So...” Dvijata said, retaining her cold composure. Her skin gleaming like lighted gold due to the overhead lighting. And the curse of human psychology as such that when you know you’re going to lose something forever, the thing appears to be prettier than ever.

“So?” Duryoy asked trying to retreat his gaze from her.

“I didn’t know you’ve made enemies now.”

“How would *you* know?” Duryoy said, “You must have been planning your marriage, right?”

“Duryoy, enough!” Dvijata was literally close to yelling at her voice’s top, “Had I known that you’d get so much obsessed with my marriage, then I’d have never said this to you! I thought you would support me in this. But if you can’t, then please stay out of this. I can handle things on my own.”

Duryoy sternly held her by her arm and forcibly made her look towards him “Look at me!” he said as she turned to him, but her eyes still seeming to be elsewhere.

“Is this all about me keeping secrets from you?” he said

“Unlike you, I don’t cry over other’s decisions.”

“I can’t believe I did all this for you!” Duryoy said loosening his hand from her shoulder and stepping backwards, “I never said those things to you because I never wanted you to suffer because of me! Those were classified information Dvijata . Telling those to you would directly mean risking *your* life! And I didn’t want to lose you.”

“Don’t try explaining it to me. I never demanded any explanations.”

“Only two people on this planet knew about my research. And one of them died 11 years ago.”

“Died or killed?” Dvijata fired back.

“Well why does this even matter so much to you? You’re probably getting married to some bloody American and you didn’t even care to tell that to me!” Duryoy recoiled, loud enough to shift the in-doubt Milan ten inches away from them, “Did I ever ask you WHY didn’t you care to tell me that you were getting married? Did I?”

This conversation was the most erosive conversation Dvijata had had in years. And every word pouring out of Duryoy made her realise how less he knew about him! How wrong had she been about him! And with every dialogue being exchanged between them, Dvijata kept losing herself to the winds... more and more and more.

Duryoy had been cold, really cold. But still! She wished he would be a little more empathetic towards the person whom he had secretly adored so much. For whom he even risked jumping into her balcony because it was getting irresistible for him to live without getting a glimpse of her. She wanted that Duryoy, who would get out of his dorm to have a walk with her just because she was feeling lonely, even though he had a Micro-Biology paper the next day.

She wanted *that* Duryoy.

Not some stranger who had been carrying out secret researches and hiding inside the crowd since the last ten years.

She was now crying. Loud. Clear. And painful. And all Duryoy could do was hear the consequences of his choices. The last time she cried was when she never knew that a man like Duryoy ever existed, as after meeting him never did she have a reason to shed even a single tear. And what went further tough on her was the fact that, that very man was the one who made her sob today.

No this is not done, Duryoy! begged a voice from within She needs you now, more than any time else. If you lose her now, you lose her forever

But suddenly in no time, out of nowhere Dvijata found herself wrapped within Duryoy's tight warm arms, her tiny head selflessly pushed against his chest and her tears happily creating wet patches over his kurta. An irony of emotions were being played, and the smiling face of Dvijata with wet tear patches over her face was worth looking at. And they continued to remain tucked within one another, with no words, no complains, no regrets, no hesitation. Just the silence.

'I don't know this is right or not... But this 'feels' so right'
Duryoy wished he said that.

And so did Dvijata .

MEETING KRITIKA SONI

It had been fourteen precise minutes since Duryoy broke into the monstrous dancing crowd of CEPT, leaving Dvijata back with Milan. No, he wasn't leaving. He just came up with a sudden idea that out of nowhere he should be the one who goes in and finds Kritika Soni. Barely remembering the fact that he had never met her previously. Duryoy was

no longer within his mind's territorial sanity. Duryoy at the moment was no more than a huge lump of obsession, madness, restlessness and disbelief, hidden under a skin of tissues.

Losing himself within the dancing crowd he suddenly had the odd realisation (which should have occurred to him long ago) that he had never met Kritika! Not that he knew how she looked. Men when single, never leave a chance to know someone from the opposites. But he realised that it would be quite awkward (and lame) to just show up out of nowhere and start acting so friendly. It makes you look more like a Bollywood kidnapper trying to kidnap kids from parties.

Hence snaking through the crowd Duryoy secretly admired the beautiful bollards set up at the corner of every alternate step in the stairway, lighting up the sideways with a golden hue. Soon with a few downward strides ahead, he entered into the darker curves of the low-lit lawn where he made a halt by the exceptionally huge Frangipani design searching for Kritika. But all he could witness was groups of youngsters dominating the lawns clicking selfies, cracking jokes and crafting some of their best memories

Duryoy missed those days, and now even harder because the 'very' person with whom he had spent those golden days was about to get married and he wasn't cared to be told. It's this weird way which brain works that when it is disappointed it tries connecting the feeblest of the things to the best of memories, making it even harder to bear.

For once every while there was a voice that said- 'This is all a dream. You'll wake up, and everything's going to be fine' and Duryoy wished it was true. But you know how screwed up you are when your brain tries to define the reality as just another dream!

And then a sudden whiff of weed diverted Duryoy off his track, as he turned sharp right towards a group of architecture students with long uncombed hairs and rough beard puffing out a cloud of white smoke from their garnet mouths

And unexpectedly just behind that not-so-sober cloud of suspended weed smoke, slowly fading into visibility was a sombre face which wasn't hard enough to guess.

Kritika Soni, finally!

THE LINE BETWEEN GLIMPSE AND A STARE

FACT –

In 1932, German newspaper reporter J. Bernard Hutton and photographer Joachim Brandt reportedly [visited the Hamburg shipyard](#) to do interviews for a story. As they were leaving, they heard the drone of aircraft engines. Looking up, they saw the sky filled with warplanes. Bombs began exploding around them, and within a short time, the area was a raging inferno. Brandt snapped pictures of the devastation and the two drove back into Hamburg, but when the film was developed, there was [no evidence of the attack](#). The pairs' editor accused the men of being drunk and discounted their story. Afterward, Hutton moved to London, where he supposedly saw a newspaper story in 1943 about a Royal Air Force raid on Hamburg. The accompanying photos showed the shipyard just as he and Brandt had seen it 11 years earlier.

The RAF did, in fact, [bomb Hamburg](#) in 1943. In a series of raids known as Operation Gomorrah, approximately 550–600 bombs turned the city into a firestorm which killed 40,000 people. It was World War II's first widespread destruction of a major city

Sometimes there occurs a moment of pause, a moment of sheer idleness, a moment when your brain pauses absolutely for a second because there's a strong feeling that you've been exactly at 'that' place, with exactly 'those' people, doing the same 'exact' thing, somewhere in the past or may be in a dream. It's a very rare thing to happen but once it occurs it leaves you absolutely spellbound.

The French word 'Déjà vu' is mostly referred to as a psychological prank which our mind plays with us in our daily life and there hasn't been any specific explanation regarding its occurrence. The meaning of Déjà vu is 'Already seen', that is a strong feeling of recollection of an event which you feel you've already experienced in the past.

Something quite similar happened to Duryoy when for the first time he laid his eyes over Kritika Soni- the same dress, the same lawn, the same background, the same time, the same posture, just that in the dream the face wasn't clear. He had seen this exact moment in a dream, years ago... but had never been able to define for that passive moment that how could human brain possibly reach out to 'precisely' portray things which are to occur in the future! And he had an immense respect for the

potentiality of the dreams. In fact, dreams do carry meanings because many civilizations like the Egyptians and the Islamic people have even tried to interpret dreams claiming that everything you see in a dream has a meaning! You see a tiger in your dream, it means there's an opportunity heading towards you, you see yourself being chased by a bull means you're either trying to escape a situation or you'll soon be doing that, and even something as silly as 'Running naked on the streets' has a meaning! It just tries to show your feelings of vulnerability towards something.

And believe me you'll actually enjoy reading the various interpretations of the dreams that every culture believed to be true. It's an important factor that tells us about the anthropological development that we underwent.

But nevertheless, dreams have the potential to take you to your past or the future. Something to which no one ever had an explanation.

Silently wrapping his thoughts, Duryoy approached towards the girl of his dreams. Her chestnut skin emanating vibes of raw sensuality as with the overtly slender cut of her face, one could barely dream about her being in an ISRO lab doing researches having the highest order of discretion. And leaving Duryoy and his Déjà vu quite against each other she stood still, weirdly gazing at Duryoy who had surpassed the thin-line between 'a glimpse' and 'a stare', long back.

At first Kritika noticed that and decided to ignore it. After a ten second she looked back at him, and he was still looking at her. Her eyes widened themselves out of discomfort. But even a blind man doesn't keep his eyes stuck to something for so long as much as Duryoy did.

Duryoy kept thinking where he had seen her earlier, but he couldn't!

Well she wouldn't mind if I smiled Duryoy thought, as he gave the best of his smiles. Unfortunately, that smile made him look like the last bit of thing he wasn't looking like- a lustful sinner.

She nodded back, with a hint of recognition.

"Hi, I'm Duryoy Kundu", Duryoy said walking closer to her, totally unaware how awful his expressions had been.

Kritika just nodded. She didn't reply. Of course, no one would!

But Duryoy's keen face looked like as though it wanted a response more than just a blank nod.

This is ridiculous! Kritika thought, "Sorry, but do I know you?" she

asked in the sharpest possible way

“No!” Duryoy shook his head with a bleak smile, “But I’m Dvijata’s friend... And there is something I need to tell you...”

THE ABDUCTION

The momentarily silent walkie-talkie of Khalif suddenly plunged into life as a message from one of the guards turned the on the heat of the scenario, “Sir, I see a man approaching our target. He might be the one our client was talking about.”

“What’s the location?” Khalif enquired as he furiously turned towards the monitor screen

“Main lawn sir, camera 14.”

As Joshi zoomed into camera 14, Khalif stared hard towards Kritika as he saw a man suddenly getting into the view. The man showed up, shook hands with her and there began a bit of an unheard conversation. Kritika’s movements could be seen as something as that of a surprised person- Her head movements had been restricted to nods and her hand movements had significantly depreciated more than usual symbolising an anxiety. Yes! Khalif could read body languages. He had to inherit this skill as a part of his profession.

“Sir, this is the same man you were talking about.”

Khalif waited for some more time so as to make sure that this was ‘THE MAN’ they had been searching for. It was a second’s decision that Khalif had to take, and the entire planning depended on this ne decision. Had they lost this man, it might cost them ‘forever’ to get the two back. Khalif had more than one reasons to believe that Duryoy would be the one her client had been talking about, and those reasons were pretty strong. Those reasons had a past attached to it.

It was indeed a heartthrob moment because the decision had to be taken, and taken quickly. Joshi had his walkie-talkie stuck to his mouth and his senses focussed onto Khalif.

Kidnap the man who’d be accompanying this woman away from the lawn. The woman’s picture has been attached below read the letter, clearly.

“Sir they’re leaving the lawn” Joshi updated, as he monitored their moments on the screen.

Khalif looked at the screen and there was no one else other than the

two of them. This wasn't really a tough choice to make. Although Dvijata had entered with someone completely different, Khalif had ran search on the man, and the man proved out to be a US citizen. Now, going by his experiences he could roughly say that his client was more or less a member of the CIA. And CIA for no reason would kidnap their own national, that too when he's in a foreign land. Had they wanted him, they'd have kidnapped him in US itself.

Khalif had reached his conclusion

He instantly clutched his walkie-talkie 'Follow them! Quick!' he commanded, as he hastily shifted to the front seat of the car. With Joshi turning the tracking device on and getting an overview of the campus map, he began searching for the most perfect place from where the operation could be carried out, all the 20 SAW guards shifted their senses back to being highly alert as the 'FOLLOW' orders marked the beginning of their operation for the evening...

As now began the most awaited part of the plan- **THE ABDUCTION**

AN ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE

Duryoy and Kritika after having introduced themselves, went slicing past the buoyant crowd. Duryoy's conscience was telling him that they were constantly being followed. It was a feeling which doesn't get easily overlooked. Heads turning, fingers pointing, eyes following, whispering over the walkie-talkie, something too inexpressive about the entire situation.

Rights, lefts, forwards, U turns- Duryoy had no track of where they were moving and why they were moving, but he made sure they were moving.

"Will you explain me, why are we running around like this?" Kritika said trying to keep her pace with Duryoy's.

"Listen!" Duryoy said grabbing Kritika's wrist, pulling her towards himself, "I think I'm being followed."

"Like, how? And by whom? And why?"

"By the event bouncers!"

"May be you don't have a pass."

"Really?" Duryoy said pulling out his pass, fairly disappointed by Kritika's suggestion

“Why else would they follow you?”

“I don’t know the reason.”

“You don’t *know* the reason?”

“Alright may be I know, but it makes no sense right now. So, we need to split up, and that too soon’ Duryoy suggested, switching directions and pulling her towards the canteen area. The crowd was considerably more dense there, giving Duryoy more time to explain ‘They’ve seen Dvijata with me, and I don’t want her to face any problem. So, I want you to go back to Dvijata and take her away from this place as far as you can. Meanwhile I’ll try diverting these boys” Duryoy said now panting exhaustively, “And just tell Dvijata that there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, hold on, hold on” Kritika shook her head in disagreement, “What if something happens to you?”

Duryoy paused for a millisecond having remembered how he always wanted to hear the exact same words from Dvijata. How he always wanted to know whether she cared about him or not. But this weird weird world, never goes by your way. None the less he was pleased to hear that at least someone cared for his presence, if not her.

“Nothing happens to me” Duryoy comforted her with his confidence, “There must be some clear misunderstanding!”

“Then why are you running away from them?”

“Because I don’t want to worry myself with unnecessary issues” Duryoy shrugged. “Now leave!”

“But there’s a problem” Kritika said, louder this time just to overcome the notice of the speaker they were passing-by, “I fear that these guys are following *me too*” she said, “It won’t be a good idea if I go back to Milan and Dvijata.”

“But why would they follow *you*?” Duryoy said, “Don’t tell me yours too is a misunderstanding!”

“No, not really a misunderstanding” Kritika said, her breaths heavier now, “But I am aware of my reason.”

And before Duryoy could ask anything further

“It’s confidential. Am sorry...”

“NO, no, that’s all right” Duryoy said, “But why *us*? There’s nothing that we both share in common. It’s hardly been 15 minutes since we met!”

“I don’t know Duryoy, but they know things that we don’t. Things manage to get leaked all the time. In my case I fear that my research info might have slipped off while I was admitted in the hospital.”

“You’re saying these men want to abduct you?”

“I fear that’s what they’re following me for. Maybe they aren’t following you at all.”

“Then why aren’t we calling the police then?”

“That’d be too late!”

“Then at least call someone! Call Milan. Explain to him the situation. In case something happens to us there’ll be someone who can brief it to the search forces!”

“You seem to quite acquainted to dealing with these situations.”

“Well, this is something every scientist in India is acquainted to”, Duryoy said, hesitating to speak further.

Abduction of scientists is no newspaper cover story as nowadays it has become almost a daily occurrence! May be film stars getting pregnant or their two year old’s learning to walk is a more attractive and informative news than the disappearances of the scientists who work under nuclear or space research programmes. And what is more, these disappearances often lead to death.

Kritika being in the field of space research had always been aware of such happenings. In fact, the death of her very own father was the closest of the examples she had witnessed. The plane accident in which Dr Soni died was said to have been funded by the CIA, as per the conspiracy theorists. Many made claims, many resisted, but nothing happened because the problem with the world is that people are so busy trying to win debates that they forget to heal their very wounds.

“Why didn’t ISRO provide you with security?”

“Unfortunately, you need to be in the top 6 of the ISRO to be safe enough.”

“Oh, very well” Duryoy said as suddenly he felt a dragging pull on the hand he held Kritika with, as she halted abruptly. Saving himself from falling on her, “Why did you stop?”+ Duryoy said impatiently turning to her.

But her eyes didn’t turn back to him. They remained as frozen as though they had witnessed a ghost. And going by Kritika’s round and terrified eyes he knew that something horrible was awaiting

He looked behind her. His eyes slowly climbing over the two bouncers in black uniform, sturdy built and gigantic biceps, their arms folded, and legs wide apart, as they stood still looking hard at him. Their dresses had logos of SAW securities attached to their left pockets and both seemed like the un-friendliest person on earth one might ever stumble across- tanned skin, dense moustaches and dark decoloured lips which never smiled. And behind the two beefy-men was an open patch of under-construction building and a narrow roadway, not-at-all enough to escape.

Duryoy could still hear the traditional Gujarati folk music being played behind him and the humdrum voices of people chattering at a distance. Both of them knew that by now they should probably be running towards any damn direction that God ever created. But they both stood there still, at their exact places thinking ‘when the *other* runs. I run’

Kritika gulped hard

“Can I see your passes?” the bouncer said, placing his wide empty palm against Duryoy’s face. The palm now seemed larger than Duryoy’s face, which happened to have shrunk further knowing the fact that there was no way out.

Kritika quickly went through her purse and handed him her pass, and Duryoy realised that he had just added up one more thing to worry about- He gave his pass to Dvijata after they entered.

Life at its very best, he thought.

“Yours?” said the bouncer looking at Duryoy, still not giving Kritika back her pass

“Umm... Mine is with another girl actually” he smiled loosely, feeling useless over himself, not an exclusive feeling though “She’s in there, if you want I can bring it back from her.”

“Call her.”

“Actually, my phone too is with her.” This time even Kritika turned to him with bewilderment. The bouncer looked at Kritika, hoping in case she had a phone. But ‘No’ her phone’s battery was dead.

“I’m afraid, you *both* need to come with us” said the bouncer as he started moving.

“Hey?” Duryoy said “Why does she need to come? She has a pass...”

“Because we need someone to pay for your fine” the bouncer said.

“I do have a wallet!” Duryoy claimed.

“Oh really? I thought that girl must have your wallet too.”

Kritika tried keeping a straight face and ended up with a decent unnatural look.

“Ha-Ha, very funny” Duryoy said going for his wallet, confidently. He ran his palm over his jeans pocket, back pocket, kurta pocket, and every other pocket that the tailor had stitched.

Damn!

“Actually, my wallet too is with her.”

“URGENT”

“Are you alright?” asked the maturely somber voice of Milan as he figured out the discomfort within the lady standing just beside him, her tiny hands strongly clutching the highlighted end of her kurta. It had been a while since Duryoy left, and there was no response from his side.

“What is that you’re worrying so much about?” Milan said looking at Dvijata.

“Nothing”, Dvijata whispered sharply. Her broken voice unable to speak any further.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of Doctor. You see, it could even be a misunderstanding! May be that guy wasn’t really following you two. And, why would he?”

“This isn’t the first time...” Dvijata paused, unable to remember Milan’s name.

“Milan”, said Milan with a reassuring smile

“Milan, this has happened earlier also. And it has always been like this, since the time of college. Duryoy was always frank to me about everything. He never had secrets. He wasn’t the type of person who could keep secrets! But I was wrong. Drastically. There was this one thing that he told no one about. And by no one, I mean not even me. He made abrupt trips to Ahmedabad, and that too sponsored by someone with some reach. He said he went to meet his parents whenever he went to Ahmedabad, but then I came to know that his parents never lived together! Although because his mother lived in Ahmedabad, I thought that it might be something personal and that one fine day he would disclose everything to me. But he didn’t! It had been ten years but he

didn't."

"In these uncertain trips to Ahmedabad, is *this* one included too?"

"I was trying to figure that. But Duryoy didn't break a word. And I don't expect him to do that either... Because he doesn't care!"

"Don't take it personally" Milan said easing down, "but I really think you have some unresolved issues with him probably."

"Yes of course I do!" Dvijata fired back, "Why else would I be sharing all this information with a person whom I had barely known since the past 12 minutes!"

"I just said– Don't take it personally. And I think you're overthinking it. May be that's something very personal and he didn't want to talk about!"

"Oh really?" Dvijata fought back "Then how would you like to explain this message that he received two days after Kritika's father's plane crashed?"



dr soni's no more. I managed to escape bt the media and police now thinks that I was involved in dr sonis murder. This was to inform you that do not try to save me. the police would arrest me soon but you should not risk your identity or your research.

and please halt every work you're upto. carry the important files. burn the rest.

Your diary is still with me, collect it.

"NO. No, no, NOOO, noooo... This is not possible! Not at all. No chance! Duryoy knew Kritika's father?" Milan withdrew himself from the conversation totally astound by the news. His reaction to the statement was more in the extremes of disbelief, "But ha...HOW?"

"That's because Duryoy worked under Kritika's father", Dvijata said with a hollow voice. She could feel her heart ebbing with the untold pain.

"So, you mean Duryoy knew Kritika!"

"I can't be so sure about that. But there's one thing I'm very sure

about...”

Milan’s silence waited for the answer.

“Duryoy was working under something that attracted a lot of international attention.”

AN ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE- 2

“Is there anything you have brought with yourself other than that pink water bottle?” Kritika asked hopelessly looking towards Duryoy, “If you had the pass we could have easily made our way out!”

“And you do believe that after having a two-hour watch over both of us these men would let us walk out, just like that right?”

“How do *you* know?”

“I know! They just wanted to scratch out a way to somehow summon us together. You couldn’t have managed to escape that. It’s an age-old strategy...”

:And who are you, James Bond?” Kritika asked irritated “I hope you’re taking this seriously right, Duryoy?”

“I’m trying to play it cool. We pretend as if we don’t know anything and follow them as they lead”, Duryoy whispered, “But just as we reach *that* spot” he pointed with his eyes, “Near to the speakers, that’s when we’d pass closest to the crowd, and we both can just jump into the crowd.”

“Together or separated?”

“Separated” Duryoy suggested, “That’d buy us time. And they’ll need to separate to catch us. More chance of us, escaping.”

“And *then*?”

“Then what? Run the hell out of this place. And if possible this city” Duryoy said walking slowly and steadily, but his eyes fixed over to his break-out point.

“And what about Dvijata and Milan?” Kritika asked, “We cannot just leave them alone!”

“First at least get yourself out of this mess” Duryoy said, his voice as exhausted as himself. It had been nearly a constant half hour run through the crowds running for their lives.

“Well...” Kritika said doubtfully, “Don’t you think we’re overreacting? I mean we just doubt something and we decide to run out of this city.”

“Not really” Duryoy said looking back at Kritika, “I know you’re very well aware of what the abducted scientists undergo.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“Come on! Your father too had been...” Duryoy paused all of a sudden, realizing he had revealed more than he was supposed to. Self-realization struck upon him but Kritika had heard him loud and clear.

It was well beyond late.

“You knew my father?” she said that in the split of a second past the last dialogue

“Don’t you think we have better things to worry about right now?” Duryoy said managing to divert the topic

“What do you know about my father?”

“Nothing!” Duryoy said emphasizing over his speech, “All I know is he too had been followed by foreign spies and he did not take that seriously, and then he ended up losing his life. And something similar is happening with us right now. And if we do not try to escape we might end up just like your father did. So, are we good now? Can we please focus over our escape?”

Kritika maintained an emotionless composure, trying not to think about her father again because the last time she did that she ended up in a hospital bed and all her information getting leaked leading up to this disastrous evening.

Kritika nodded reluctantly, finding sense in Duryoy’s words because what Duryoy was claiming wasn’t that false either. In the last 15 years ISRO had lost 684 personnel due to lack of security and seriousness. And over that, a high degree of professionalism had been spotted behind those murders because most of these cases remained conclusion-less, and sometimes even supernatural! They’re usually termed unexplainable and the cases are shut down. So, if there was anything that could help them save from all of this, they should.

“So?” Kritika asked, “How do we manage to run *into* the crowd?”

“We need a diversion...”

“How?” Kritika asked “Even if we yell to gain attention, that place is so close to the speaker boxes that we’d hardly be audible.”

“May be, if you fake a harassment” Duryoy suggested not expecting a positive response to *that*. Kritika eyed at Duryoy asking him to better explain what he said “Look you’re a pretty girl and for every pretty girl

there's always some lame stalker who has his eyes on her and might choose to follow her throughout. So, if you make a scene out of yourself saying that the bouncers have been harassing you, someone or the other would come up and help you out. That's how we bring our diversion, and then we escape."

"WE? How come WE?" Kritika said in a bad temper "By doing this *you* will get a chance to escape not *ME!*"

"Haven't you ever been into a club fight?"

"I'm a damn physicist! What do you expect of me?"

"You don't really need to be *in* one just to know one" Duryoy said pretending as though watching a club fight is something as normal as watching a cow walk over the street. "Look, you'll be safe, trust me. And unlike you I am neither a girl nor beautiful, so I really need to worry about my life. So, you can fake a harassment over the bouncer who's walking behind us and..."

And before Duryoy could end, Kritika took a sharp turn and was walking straight towards the bouncer behind.

"That was quick" Duryoy said to himself.

THE PINK BOTTLE

There she walked straight towards the bouncer as his bulky eyes noticed her deviation. He looked towards her expecting a reply and before he could even ask her the reason- *SLAP*- That was loud and clear and awesome.

"How dare you touch me?" Kritika yelled, her voice broken. Her hands straight and her body pretending to be offended. And the fixing gaze with which she stared, made her look like an immediate incarnation of Goddess *Parvati*. What was she even doing at ISRO? She could have made a fortune in the industry!

And as expected, that one move had gained her quite an audience. Most of them were guys looking for an opportunity and the rest were girls, their eyes filled with disgust. Well, the Indian intolerance at least managed to benefit *somebody*.

Kritika continued with her irate yelling and explaining and arguing and acting, as the first bouncer who was leading them went on to help his mate. And making the best of the opportunity, Duryoy tried slipping into the crowd- slowly, placidly, going with the flow, sideways. Now

that the drama had managed to gather further attention, the crowd was facing concentrically towards the whole thing. The music had been held since the loud arguing voices somehow seemed to have surpassed the speaker volume. There was a mild pandemonium within the crowd with faces changing directions and murmurs running across the ears, while Duryoy slipped deeper. Soon he noticed a gang of bulky bouncers approaching the place of quarrel as he hastened his escape. By now some over-caring and over-powering men were speaking on behalf of Kritika as she stood aside sobbing and ashamed, and the accused shamefully stern on his point that he didn't even touch her!

The extra bouncers reached the spot and said something to one another and then they were looking around like petty dogs searching for a bone, but it seemed like they couldn't find what they intended to see and their vicious glimpses got sharper and now they were looking more intensely all around, like hungry, lone wolves. They were now craning their necks, scanning the crowd, speaking rapidly over their walkie-talkies, some jogging away in confusion. Duryoy quickly turned his face away and continued moving, as far as possible from those men.

But all of a sudden, deep from the right commanded a high voice, "Hey you! Stop right there." And Duryoy paused. Froze like a meat. He slowly turned towards the bouncer, his eyes tensed and his heart literally punching from the insides. He pulled his both hands upwards, slowly, giving up, surrendering himself. And just as the look on the bouncer's face eased, he used his lifted hands to give a thundering push to the guy standing ahead of him. And then came a sprint faster than Usain Bolt.

"I said stop!" yelled the bouncer.

But Duryoy didn't wait for another second as he swept through the crowd, madly, pushing and moving away, making way with his hands, leaving toppling men behind him. What he didn't know was that he could now be easily spotted from anywhere, because everyone he passed by was now looking at him and the crowd broke like a jacket's zip from where he passed. The bouncers continued their chases by running parallel to him, over the crowd boundary.

Duryoy was losing his breath when something positive came to his sight, the crowd was shallowing up. He jumped over the long flat stairs and entered the ground floor of the main building. He didn't know what area it was but it had bright yellow lights lit all overhead and moveable

soft boards with a foot-long gap beneath them were arranged all around the area, like some tiny complex maze. And over the soft boards various informative posters on design and architecture were clipped on. Not that it was of any interest to Duryoy, yet it looked extremely beautiful walking through the little maze. But Duryoy made use of the maze and hid himself at the rightmost end, or what he thought was the rightmost end. The bouncers saw him entering the mini-maze and they covered all the exits, and then all together huddled inside.

The bouncers, instead of searching every corner of the maze, knelt down and checked out the legs of the people inside, through the gaps beneath the boards. It wasn't much difficult to figure out the differences between the legs of a man who's strolling around freely, from the one who's trying to hide himself.

And then came into a sight a fitting description- shoes untidy, as though the man had walked through some sandy field, the jeans colour adding up to an agreement and the man had been taking short, hurried steps, walking in a closer circle, as though he was intensely thinking of something. Their target was standing on the other side, not very hard to guess that.

Duryoy stood neat to soft board, within the reach of the hands, quite unsure what was to be done. One of the bouncers knelt, putting his hands through the gap, trying to hold Duryoy by his legs. And when suddenly two hands stormed towards Duryoy's legs, Duryoy instantly grabbed one of the soft boards from its edge, lifted it up and slammed the supporting rollers over the hands. And a terrible beast-like scream came from the other end. Fracture, definitely. The two hands had loosened their hold over his leg, leaving Duryoy on a free spree, but unfortunately two more bouncers appeared ahead of him. And they did not look happy at all.

Of course, the space was so less that they had to come one by one in case they wanted to grab him. Both of them charged towards him, one holding him by his hands and the other holding him by his waists, tight enough to crack a bone or two. And they both pulled him as though two dogs fighting for a bone.

It was terrible. Not to mention how painful that was.

But the next terrible thing was done by Duryoy. Making the best use of his gifted teeth he bit the first man so hard over his biceps that his flesh nearly punctured out. The man took back his hands with a devious

scream. And before he could do any further harm, Duryoy head-butted the bouncer real hard straight on his face. The man's teeth hurt Duryoy, but it was worth a try. The man held his face tight and kept maundering curses as a hair of blood widened between the fingers covering the nose. Meanwhile the second bouncer charged towards him and held him by his waist and gave him a stronger downward pull, enough to topple any damn person.

But when life is at risk, always give try a try.

With his free elbows Duryoy hit the man right on his head, and punched him sideways and did things he didn't really remember. But all he remembered was after some time, the man was in tremendous pain as he left Duryoy's waist free. And Duryoy making best of the situation, fulfilled his childhood dream of doing this once- held the man's head tight and blew his nose with his knee. BAM!

"God that felt good" he said to himself, as he watched the man slipping from 90 degrees to straight 180. He wished he had an audience to appreciate his instantly-developed skills as he jerked his knee like some professional kick-boxer.

But then he noticed that the nose-bleeding-bouncer was looking right at him, still not prepared to attack him, but the aggression in his eyes made Duryoy take two steps backwards. And to his grief there was no way behind. He felt cloth wall behind him but he knew that wasn't something that would tear easily. He could feel his end nearing.

The bouncer charged like an enraged bull, one hand covering his broken nose and the other ready to punch Duryoy on his face and give him back the feeling called pain. And his hand swung straight towards Duryoy and Duryoy's reflexes made him instantly bend rightward saving himself from an excruciating pain. And making use of the man's momentum, he quickly grabbed his hand, pulled it backwards with all his strength and kicked his knee. Now Duryoy was a Bengali, and Bengalis play football, and footballers have strong legs and Duryoy had strong legs and when he used his strong legs to kick the bouncer's leg, it really made some impact. The bouncer lost his balance and went straight through the cloth behind. Ripping it into two, pulling down the entire cloth wall with a violent noise and dropping on the other side like a dead man.

Duryoy then gleamed at his miraculous arms.

The huge cloth wall now had a huge hole over it. Duryoy peeped outside the torn down part trying to figure out where he was, and something to be happy about- He was back at the lawn where he first met Kritika.

Awestruck faces of the beautiful women and negligible men around, kept looking at him. He looked around like some action figure, a little smirk, folded his sleeves neatly, let out a short sniff and walked out with two bodies of heavy bouncers lying behind him.

Yeah, I've taken them down

And as he walked a few more steps, he felt an unusual drag within himself as though the gravity suddenly increased ten folds. Things began darkening up around his eyes and just as the realisation struck him 'Damn! I've been drugged' he lost his senses.

And he collapsed.

The pink bottle still lying beside him.

THE INITIATION

REVISITING NIGHTMARES

It was dark, and windy, and a chillingly moist air had surmounted all around. The voices of thundering sky, heavy rain and tripping drops of water from the walls kissed the ear drums. The sound of the rains kept creating its hymn amidst the dead silence of a grave night. The dampness in the air had managed to create wet patches all over the shirt and neckline, and tiny balls of sweat kept hanging at the edge of the hairs. Very discomforting when it started, but soon the hollow night breeze ran over the wet matches cooling up every nerve over the skin.

Duryoy's softly shut eyelids opened to find himself standing in an isolated corridor of The Calcutta Medical College- the low powered tube lights over the high slabs giving a ghastly feel to the entire visual space. The long hallway to his right seemed practically unending like some Renaissance painting. The walls and the doors converged all together into a single point, that had been blurred down by shades of black into darkness.

This wasn't a very unknown place for Duryoy.

He had left this place a day ago, in the real world. But in the darkest corners of his memories he had revisited this place, and particularly this day a million times. Something about this place keeps bringing him here.

*There were sounds of people talking, but no one around. The entire facility seemed to be entirely evacuated, just the dead souls peeping onto him from some unsound corner of the vast building. And suddenly amidst the piercing raindrops came an angry conversational voice from the door, seven steps ahead- Ward number **B-209** 'Emergency ward' written on top of it. Duryoy slowly took the seven steps and with his ear stuck over to the conversation inside the room, he peeped into the room. The insides of the room were dark as he swung his eyes past the room. And then when he swept his eyes again, there were three people at the far end of the room*

Duryoy's heart skipped a beat. But they seemed harmless.

The lamps slowly illuminated the room up, as Duryoy continued to hide beneath the shadows.

'Don't you dare stop me!' threatened a woman in her late 40s to a man who held her right arm tightly, more out of a request than a demand. The woman held a suitcase on to her left arm and a college boy

stood beside her. Mostly her son.

‘Rini, why aren’t you trying to understand this? It’s their life, let them decide’ said the man as he hesitantly left the woman’s arm. Duryoy knew the man, but he didn’t let a word out.

‘Don’t play this card on me, okay?’ she said ‘I always warned you that this day would come and you promised me you won’t let this happen. What now? Did you ever hear of ‘Voluntary Euthanasia’?’

‘Why are we even getting into this?’

‘Have you, or have you not?’

‘Yes, I have. And I have also read the article which you’re referring to- ‘Research no less than a Voluntary Euthanasia’- but these tiny things should not stop us from taking this nation to where it deserves! These writers need new stuffs to type and fill paragraphs about, but we live the life they can only imagine about. Why believe to the shallowest perspective of some third person?’

There was silence and a stern disagreement to the pitched words

‘All your life’ the woman emphasized, ‘All your life you had been living in the fear of being followed and your work getting tracked. You never felt safe even in your own house. You saw your colleagues die, you saw what happens to their family, but still you’re voluntarily pushing your daughter into this! What is it if not madness?’

‘Rini, I’m helping my daughter pursue her dreams. I agree, I did say that I wouldn’t allow my children to pursue this life of treachery in space research but Rini, our girl has earned it! She got herself capable of getting a call from the Indian Institute of Space Technology! Her dreams are deeper than our **shallow concerns**. If she by herself can afford to pull herself this up, what gives us the right to pull back her dreams?’

‘Does she even know that these shallow concerns might take away her life? Does she know that her father used to get threat calls every month? Does she know that her father’s calls used to be tapped, all the time? Does she know that she was once about to be kidnapped if her father didn’t disclose the research papers? DOES SHE?’ she yelled, looking towards her husband ‘We got ‘one’ chance to live a normal life. This was that chance, but ‘No!’ you gave up your family-life following your passion!’

‘If not us, at least for the nation...’

‘I don’t care what the nation is up to’ her voice shrivelling with

pain, ‘Once you die they’ll honour you with a medal and give us some money. But will that be enough to compensate the loss of your life? Is your entire life, that you dedicated to the nation just worth this much?’

‘Rini it’s not that they don’t care’

‘No one cares about you as much as much as your family does. But you’re now involving your entire family into the thing that almost takes your life every single day? You might be a man and able to bear such torments, but can Kritika?’

‘Would she be able to deal with all this, all by herself?’ she said, her frame swaying vertically by the heavy breaths ‘Since 20 years I’ve been living the life of a coward! Heart wrecking every time a call comes in that phone, spending sleepless nights when you didn’t come home after 1:30 in the night and your phone is out of reach. Calling your colleagues like some mad dog just to make sure that ‘YOU’ are alright and more than that you are alive! And the same horrendous life you’re readily giving it to your children? Do you even realise what would ‘their’ family be like after some years?’

‘Rini what sort of baseless attitude is this?’

‘Baseless? My attitude is baseless? You made my entire life baseless, and my attitude is all you get to talk about? If thinking about my girl’s safety makes me baseless than it better be, I don’t care! Because all I have learnt was that- In order to live some, we’ve got to leave some’

‘Kritika!’ she called out hastily holding her luggage ‘We need to leave!’

And from the shadows appeared Kritika Soni, the 17 years old Kritika Soni.

“IT”

On figuring out the near impossibility occurring around him, Duryoy couldn’t contain his anxiety as he stepped backwards in complete bewilderment. In a flash of a moment he had no idea where he was or what had he been doing an hour ago. This could be a dream, he knew. But the problem with dreams is that one never realises that he’s within a dream until he wakes up.

There was no such idea which day or which time of the year it was. All he knew was that he had undergone some sort of reverse time-travel

as he was witnessing a memory of Kritika Soni, something that happened 12 years ago.

He looked onto himself trying to figure out where he previously was and where he currently is. Luckily, the red kurta he was wearing instantly made him realise that he was in the CEPT garba with... Dvijata ... and two other people. His eyes knocked over the emergency ward and he instantly remembered- 'Kritika too was there!' she was with me... we ran into the crowd and... and then... then it was a total blank!

But he couldn't explain to himself how he's currently in Calcutta Medical College and skipped back 12 years into the past. His heart kept claiming that it was all a dream, so just somehow wake up! But Duryoy was moved by a counter-explanation that this wasn't a dream. Dreams are made up of one's own memories, memories of the events that a person has seen through his eyes or been through. But what he saw just now was a part of Kritika's life that he had no idea of. So, him seeing someone else's past made it clear that this wasn't a dream, this was all real.

'This is not a dream. This is not a dream' he reconciled himself as his hands continued to tremble. His tongue had dried up and the insides of his mouth craved for water 'This cannot be a dream'

He checked his watch to see that the date and time were both of the present day. This wasn't a time travel either! Than what is this? He thought

Duryoy recalled that there could be one thin possibility of these occurrences- Lucid dreaming. Something that was practiced by the Tibetan monks nearly 2000 years back. A dream in which the dreamer is conscious that he's dreaming and has the power to do anything and everything the way he wishes to. But that needed a few minutes of intense focus over just one single thing. Might be anything- a visual object or may be just a sound. But the entire focus should be dedicated to one particular thing.

Duryoy took in a deep breath, closed his eyes and focussed, focussed and focussed incisively over the sounds of the raindrops till the point his mind was convinced that the time and the world around him had frozen. The efficacy could now be felt. It felt as though every surrounding atom could be controlled by his fingertips.

Duryoy kept thinking of an impossibility, trying to convince his brain that the impossibility can exist in the real world. When you can fool your brain to think of something impossible and open your eyes just to see that the impossibility is occurring around you, that's when you know you're inside a dream.

After severely thinking of an impossibility, he slowly opened his eyes just to witness the impossibility that he had been thinking of, implemented in front of his eyes- the building in which he was standing now had no columns! All the columns had disappeared and the building seemed to look like a huge monolithic piece of concrete suspended mid-air. As hauntingly magnificent it could get

'Damn!' Duryoy said to himself 'This is a dream!' trying hard not to panic. But his anxiety had caused the lights all over to flicker, and the column-less buildings started to sway

'I need to get out of this dream' he said to himself searching for a gun, a knife or a brick... something with which he could kill himself. Because the only way to exit a dream is to die within the dream! But as of now nothing could be found even centimetres around Duryoy that could even give him a tiny scratch.

Amidst the hustle he suddenly heard the footsteps of someone approaching towards him hastily. The sound kept growing louder and louder, and before he could turn there was a blind sinewy push from a young 17 years old boy in an off-white kurta who wildly ran past him, tears running down that boy's eyes, madness filling his face and guilt emanating off his expressions as he ran towards the darker end of the building.

The impact broke a beaded-necklace that the boy was carrying in his hands, and the beads bounced all over the floor like ping-pong balls. But Duryoy kept looking towards the boy because for some reason he felt that he knew that kid.

Watching the kid diminish into the darkness an incongruous feeling glided on Duryoy. He had a sudden urge to know where that boy was heading towards, and although the boy was totally out of sight yet Duryoy felt as though he knew where the boy might have headed towards. He let his instincts speak as he made wild turns through the empty corridors. He headed towards a point where the road opened to a roofless sky.

Rushing few steps further into the heavy rain, he paused. His limbs froze.

A naked chill raked through his heart on watching the corpse of a young girl lay ahead of him. Thick blood reflected by the discontinuous thunders occurring overhead as the ineffably beautiful face of the girl lay dead still. Her eyes still open.

She seemed to have attempted suicide, or may have just fallen off the building. And the boy, he stood beside her body, still looking towards her as if she's the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. And even from that distance Duryoy could differentiate the boy's teardrops from the raindrops.

And if you'd notice- The moment when 'he or she' turns into 'it', is when even the language pays its last respect. Duryoy's eyes remained fixed to the face of that girl who no longer existed, when suddenly there blazed in another thunder emanating light all over the earth, lighting up the face of the dead girl too

'It' was that of Dvijata.

UNCONSCIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

With the unnerving sight of death suspended in Duryoy's fickle mind, his heart raced out and his eyes instantly shot open. He drew a startled breath as he entered back into the reality. Relieved by the fact that it was just a dream, he kept maundering the religious chants just to be sure that the visions that he had witnessed stays limited to the dreams only. Because according to various cults a bad dream is usually a presentiment of an upcoming disaster.

But soon Duryoy realised that the reality was of no good either!

His eyes deep red and lungs starving for a breath as a tight rope running over his chest restrained him to a heavy steel chair. His both wrists had turned near pale as the ropes tying his hands were tight enough to undoubtedly halt the blood flowing through his veins, and his near-immovable neck muscles groaned to unexplainable extent.

Slowly a million began to rise in Duryoy's mind – *Where am I? Why am I tied like this? Why did I witness such a vision AGAIN? Why is it that I saw Kritika and her past even though I barely know her? Or was it even her past? Where is Dvijata? And where is Kritika?*

And... And why on earth is my face so wet? He thought, as suddenly

out of nowhere litres of icy cold water splashed over his face. All too enough to bring his dizzy mind back to senses as his eyes went wide open and a thunder of pain ran down his spine. His vision was totally blurred but he was able to make out that some face was invariably looking at him. A torchlight beamed straight into his right eye as the man staring him, tightly clutched his skull and pulled his eyelids up for a few seconds.

“Wh...where am I?” Duryoy asked as he got no response in return. “Where am I? Hey you!” he yelled, “Tell me!” but his calls remained unanswered. There was another man in the room who seemed to be checking Kritika’s pulses.

Soon the two men exited the room with a tiny conversation of ‘them’ being alright. Duryoy’s vision was restricted to a few inches, but there was this inexpressible relief that took over him on watching Kritika on the chair to his right. Her wet hairs sticking to her pale face, and her dress, drastically wet with water tripping down the soaked end ends of her cloth. She was totally unconscious, yet her presence was enough to cheer Duryoy up.

At least I’m not alone, he thought

With an attempt to wake her up, he slid his chair towards her as much as he could but all of a sudden- an unsound gravity pulled his senses down to blackness, and just before he could even realise that he had been drugged.

Again, he lost his consciousness.

IT WASN’T AN ACCIDENT

While the whole India celebrated Navratri, Milan helplessly stood beside Dvijata, her emotion suspended somewhere between anxiety and dudgeon. It had been two hours since Duryoy left them. And a while ago they had received a text from Duryoy that he might get kidnapped, and so would Kritika. He asked them not to panic.

“What is it that Duryoy has done?” Dvijata asked to herself. But her thoughts had involuntarily turned out quite loud. By now it was very clear that Duryoy and Kritika had disappeared. Their phones where no longer reachable and had everything been alright they’d have called back. But none of the two ever did.

There were no clues as to where the two of them were. It was now a

dead end!

“Doctor, are you alright?” Milan said, making sure things weren’t getting worse for Dvijata.

Dvijata disorderedly gazed upward, but didn’t respond.

“Actually, I don’t think this has anything to do with Duryoy...”
Milan said trying to cheer her up

“What do you mean?” she said slowly

“Well, this is nothing new, or maybe new for you but astrophysicists and scientists have always been targeted by foreign agencies for the internal information they possess. Maybe this is the case we’re dealing with right now.”

“Milan, I’m seriously not getting what you’re trying to say!” Dvijata said sounding utterly impatient, “Duryoy is no astrophysicist!”

“But Kritika is!” Milan paused, “She’s heading one of the most important research programs of ISRO.”

“Then why the hell did they kidnap Duryoy?” Dvijata fired back, “Milan why don’t you say it straight? Or is it because Duryoy used to work for ISRO?”

“Hey, we aren’t sure about that!”

“Then what is it?”

“I think they mistook Duryoy as *me*” Milan said unable to look back into Kritika’s eyes.

“Do you really think someone might come all the way from another country just to kidnap two people? And then make a foolish blunder like this!”

“Doctor, they crashed an entire plane just to kill Kritika’s father!”

“But these are trained agents Milan! They do not do such petty mistakes. If they have done something, there should be a reason!” She folded her hands looking away from the crowd Her eyes thoughtfully roaming about everywhere but not retrieving a single thing ‘But why do you think these men wanted to kidnap you?’

“I’m from NASA! And she’s from ISRO!” Milan said trying to sound obvious, “Do you realise the amount of information anyone might gain if they kidnap the two of us?”

“We need to call the police. We need to call the police, right now, Milan” Dvijata said producing her phone from her tiny coruscating bag.

“No, no, Doctor don’t!” Milan said taking away the phone from her,

“Trust me, this’d make things worse.”

“What the?” Dvijata fired back irately, on having the phone snatched away from her, “Give me my phone back, right now!” she demanded trying to suppress the anger within her voice.

“Doctor you need to calm down, please.”

“Just give me phone back!”

“Doctor please calm down, I’ve already called Chief Akram. He’ll bring the necessary military support because ISRO cannot afford to lose Kritika. Duryoy will be safe, I guarantee you.”

“And who’s he? Chief?”

“Chief is Kritika’s Project Director at ISRO. For now, he’s the only person we should be contacting right now. And I assure you- Both of them will be absolutely safe.” Milan said with a bleak smile, trying hard to keep up Dvijata’s spirit, “Any information regarding an ISRO scientist getting kidnapped, if leaked, could endanger many lives. It’s far more complicated than it seems. For now we need to keep it low.”

Dvijata gave a silent nod, enough to deplete the vehemence of the situation.

But the lightened tension fell back as Milan’s phone rang out loud

“Chief Akram calling...” showed the screen

THE RULE OF LIFE

It was 1:08 AM as the dense night of immense liveliness of the city of Ahmedabad continued.

A red Sedan tore past the city as the smooth metal body portrayed an artistic dance of the surrounding lights falling over it. Inside the car, beneath the roof sat two people with their gaze fixed in random directions. A 90s song kept the air within the car lighter as the hearts ticked like a second’s hand and the blood pressure equivalent to the speedometer of the speeding car.

And amidst the melodious vocals of the song, totally coiled up in her thoughts, Dvijata said “I really thought the police could help us.”

Milan didn’t look back but he continued- “I don’t think these things are in our hands ‘any’ more. This has now become a case of national security and intelligence theft. We can just expect that everything goes fine and we get them back, safe and alive. But as of police is concerned I don’t think police will be involved because a national level research is at

stake over here. If ISRO wants police to cooperate with them than they'll have to disclose the project Kritika had been working on... which they won't really."

"So, who's going to rescue them?" she asked with the concern back in her eyes

"CISF, maybe."

"Are these projects really that 'crucial'?"

"Much more than you can imagine" Milan said with a diluted smirk. He himself had his experiences at NASA where privacy issues of scientists are often a concern. "Even the tiniest bit of information is worth millions when it comes to space research. Even we at NASA follow certain protocols- We've been asked to maintain the secrecy of the project we're working on, we aren't supposed to discuss anything related to work in public, we're supposed to use government facilities while travelling, our phone locations are constantly being tracked. It's like pretending to be a fool even with a brain like Newton."

"But you are Kritika's fiancé! Don't you have any idea what she was working on?" Dvijata enquired.

"No" Milan blurted out "It's almost a ground rule that our phones are being tapped, and would always be. We have to be quite careful over what we speak. And rarely do I speak to her because of this god damn time lag! It's like when I'm all fresh and in a work mood, she would be all lazy and romantic and would call me for relationship talks. It really gets awkward" Milan said as they both silently smiled sharing a second of eye contact. That one moment of lightness amidst the moments of panics are the ones when one defines the value of a smile.

"You two are about to get married and you do not even share everything honestly with each other?" Dvijata asked slightly puzzled by the way the weird couple worked out, "You can at least trust on each other over your research works..."

"Doctor, it doesn't work out this way" Milan said swiftly twisting the steering wheel, making the car take a sharp right and enter the Shivranjini road

"You can call me by my name" she said, slightly uncomfortable for constantly being mentioned as doctor in such a non-technical conversation.

"Alright, Dvijata. You see, even you're about to be married to

Duryoy but still he never told you about his research, did he?"

There was a sudden alteration of expression on Dvijata's face.

"... But this doesn't mean you two aren't close!" Milan added

"No", Dvijata whispered

"NO?"

"No, I mean my engagement is fixed to someone else" Dvijata said totally unwilling to speak that out "There's nothing between me and Duryoy."

The last sentence churned the heart out of Dvijata, yet she resisted her tears.

"Come on Dvijata! I don't know you, but this doesn't mean I don't get you! One doesn't really shed tears for someone whom they don't really care about..." Milan said without much of a hesitation. "You cried for nearly half hour after Duryoy disappeared. The next one hour you repeatedly kept asking me whether he'd be alive or not. I'm no psychologist, and I don't need to be one to understand a person's pain."

"I even asked about Kritika! Didn't I? " Dvijata retreated trying to defend her feelings

"Dvijata I don't understand this... Why is it so much necessary for you to prove that you do not care about Duryoy?"

"I care for him" she fired back "But ONLY as a friend! I don't think it's unnatural to cry for someone who has been kidnapped. It's a general concern. And anyways what makes you know so much about me and Duryoy?"

"Well, I know you since the time you began treating Kritika for her mental illness. And I've heard quite a lot about you two" Milan said.

"Well guess what? People change... that's the rule of psychology!"

"And guess what... Feelings don't. That's the rule of life."

SAAERA

Amongst the various fundamental theories of dreams there is one theory that had been highly worked upon- Collective dreaming. The fact that dreams are restricted to the periphery of one's own brain is what makes it compelling because had people been able to witness the same dream together then it would have opened up an entire new range of possibilities that the world had never before thought of. But coincidentally sometimes some coincidences occur without you

realizing that it's a coincidence.

In the dream while Duryoy stood outside the door of the emergency ward, the 28 years old Kritika Soni too was present inside the emergency ward witnessing 'her' own past being played in front of her- The day when her parents decided to separate. Her heart empathetic towards the 17 years old version of herself pleading to her mother not to leave. She could see her father standing beside her with hopelessness. She could hear every word, she could feel every object, yet she couldn't shift an atom. She existed, yet she didn't exist. No one inside the room could feel her presence. It was like a past memory being played in 3D. And all she could do was watch and listen and cry, but she couldn't alter a thing.

And just as her mother held her twin brother's arms and decided to leave, a sharp voice of beads ripping off altogether held her attention. The sound came from the outside, as three brown beads came rolling into the room. Kritika looked outside and caught a rough glimpse of a young boy running away hastily.

And much to her surprise she saw Duryoy outside the door, wearing the same red kurta he was wearing at CEPT. He stood up and quickly followed the boy.

'Duryoy!' she called for him, but he didn't hear her. She followed him, but everything there was happening very quickly!

It was getting difficult for Kritika to follow Duryoy in the traditional attire that she was wearing, it kept wavering and restricting her legs. And the floors being slippery further challenged her balance. After a 50 second chase to the open grounds of the Calcutta Medical College, she could see Duryoy standing amidst the heavy rain, at a distance. Hesitance and fear melting down his sterile face. And just as a heavy thunder bolted down to the grounds lighting up the entire earth with a huge thundering sound...

Duryoy was gone!

Kritika stood there all alone without any idea over what was happening 'to' her and 'around' her. It happens with most of us too, we never realise that we're dreaming while we're 'actually' in a dream- weird things happen, people change, voices alter, yet for a single moment the thought never ponders in our mind that 'This is a dream!'

Kritika was absolutely confused over how could Duryoy just

disappear? And over that, which place is this? She had never been here. And every signboard her eyes could search for had things written in Bengali dialects. She gave up searching about the place as she suddenly realized that the 17 years old boy who she saw running past the door was still standing there, and just in front of him was a girl lying dead.

Kritika's terrified eyes found it hard to accept the thing she was witnessing as suddenly from the door behind her, a girl came running followed by a woman who kept cursing the Lord for what had HE done! HE took away her most priceless possession of hers and it wasn't much difficult to understand that she was the dead girl's mother. The emotional equivalent of such a scenario was unprecedented. The pain, the growling, the howling, the cries which a mother does on watching her beloved piece of existence lying dead in front of her, is just inexpressible.

The vibes from her voice were as such that even amidst this thick sound of rain, Kritika's heart skipped a beat. Out of an emotional imbalance the mother did things she had no idea of! She tried speaking to the dead body, kept calling her by her name as if she's just in a deep sleep and might wake up any time, her head swung past in agony as if her neck muscles never existed she ran her hands over the girl's hair and kept mentioning her by her name again and again.

She had a beautiful name- SAAERA

The boy kept standing beside Saaera but the mother never noticed him. A young girl who seemed a bit older to Saaera stood beside the mother weeping at the sight, her face too stern to exalt any expression. For an instant, she looked upon straight towards the boy with a weary gaze. It was confusing, yet an unsound telepathy could be sensed. And just 4 seconds after the vocal-less communication, the boy turned hard and wildly pulled himself away from the girl who was no more. He kept running away into the darkness of the despondent evening.

Strings of confusion went parallel within Kritika's peaceful mind as she was unable to connect facts with vision!

But the point of all this led to one final question 'Why am I witnessing all these visions?'

THE OFFICE CABIN

Kritika Soni's dead gaze bored across everywhere trying to figure out which place she was in. She knew that she didn't belong to this place and wished that this all ended soon because she was not much used to witnessing raw emotions. And unable to resist the tragic scenes she pushed herself around and ran back the same way from where she came in.

In her way back, the whole path was cushioned by a layer of unstable water, giving every step of hers an audible splash. She made her way into the voluminous passage of the Calcutta Medical College where she seemed to hear a sound coming from the ward B-209 again. Again, a manly voice resonated across the walls this time, and the conversation sounded as though the people within that room weren't able to settle themselves over a dispute. But one of the voices was something that left her absolutely awestruck. All the twitched muscles over her face left their instant hold, and her face froze for that very moment. For a while nothing else but the voice mattered to her because she knew the voice so well that she could have recognized it even in her sleep.

She instantly swung the door wide open, but by now the insides of the ward had changed completely

It was now a cabin that once belonged to Kritika's father nearly 10 years back.

And looking at that cabin took her back to the Liquid Propulsions System Centre, ISRO Bengaluru where her father served as a chief scientist. The place where the young seven years old Kritika Soni first witnessed her father's cabin- Piled up files, super-secretive looking sealed envelopes, pictures of earth from the space, charts depicting the various parts of spacecraft propulsion systems and hydraulic engines, constellations over the major hemispheres... all too fascinating to create a strong desire within her mind to become a scientist one day, just as her father.

*Her father's 46th Birthday celebration was held in that same cabin for which she too had been a part. That day, his fellow scientists and co-workers surprised him with a huge cake and a 4*4 photo frame of his days at ISRO.*

46th Birthday Kritika said to herself, the last birthday she spent with her father.

And back within the B-209, just before she could loop her memories back into the past, the cabin door smacked open and her father stepped into the room in total aggravation. His greasy palm holding a file in one hand and his specs on the other, which he sketchily threw over his desk. A territorial grievance ripping off the expressions from his iconic face. He came in and violently kicked a chair against the wall creating a dent over the off-white wall. He ran his hands over his ruffled hair, dabbing a bead of perspiration from his forehead.

‘How could she divorce me?’ he said to himself ‘HOW COULD SHE?’ he yelled swiping his desk in one go.

The research paper and files swung open and glided all over the room and he picked up his pen-stand to smash it against the wall when someone knocked on the door.

‘Dr Soni?’ said a courteous voice from outside ‘You have a visitor’

‘Who’s it?’

‘I don’t know sir...Some, young boy’

‘Tell him, I’m not free today. Someday else...’ Dr Soni replied instantly

‘Sir but he wants to see you. He said it’s very urgent!’

‘Who the hell gave this guy entry?’

‘Sir, the kid said he contacted you by mail’ Ram bhai said slowly pushing the door ‘and that you’ve asked him to meet today! He has a hardcopy of the mail too’

‘Are you sure he’s a kid?’

‘Yes sir, 16-17-year-old’

‘Ask him to come tomorrow... or maybe next week... or tell him I’ll call back when I’m free... if I’m free. Or tell him to meet Akram on my behalf.’

‘Sir I did suggest him that, but he wants to meet ‘only’ you. He claims only you can help him in this thing’

‘Ram bhai, I-AM-NOT-WILLING-TO-SPEAK-TO-ANYONE! Do you get that? Just leave!’

With a generous ‘Ok sir’ Ram bhai shut the door and went off. And seconds later sounds of a petty turmoil rose from the outside. Dr Soni heard that but chose to ignore it. He wore his glasses back and sat over his desk with a dusky face, shifting his smouldering gaze outside the window which had been opened for the first time since the day of its

creation. But suddenly, out of nowhere the cabin door swung open and there stood a stranger whom he had never before seen in his life.

But for Kritika he was no stranger. It was the 17- year-old boy from the Calcutta Medical College!

THE IRONY

The Danny's Café by Ahmedabad's SG highway had a festivity in its own. It was just the young heart of young India where days went old and memories got renewed over cups of coffee and a plate of puff, divided by bites. The aroma of lingering food, fairly scented by the over-powered female deodorants, carried over by the light September breeze kept the café unendingly lively. And the added decorations over the fenced walls and sounds of happiness hopping around from every corner of the open café, all too enough to make your 20s worth living, as just after an extreme dramatization of life by dancing to music with your friends, your crush and your friend's crush, nothing suits better than a late-night coffee!

The business of the café was at its peak. The demand was high, so a mobility of the crowd was much needed so as to make sure newer ones keep coming and the business continues to bloom. So Aathman, who was a man in his 30s had a sturdily young but tanned face, 5'11" body and bulkier cuts near to his abdomen that nowhere complemented to his looks as a waiter.

For now, he had an added responsibility to politely request the customers, who're done, to empty the table so that they may proceed to clean it as it was time for the café to close. The last customers often were either some engineering college guys, still optimistic to see some eye-catching girls or architecture students for whom nights and sleep don't really coincide. So, it was time that the waiters placed the empty tables at the corners and stack the tiny chairs beside. Not many waiters were present. And the ones who remained were either busy chatting over their day's hardships or may be into some random chores such as arranging the dishes or maybe putting up the edibles back into the refrigerator.

Not much people were now remaining- a group of students and a man at the corner, silently sipping cold coffee from his plastic cup.

Aathman knew the man. And some years ago, even the vice-versa was true. But now he wasn't sure whether that man still remembered

him. It was better if he didn't. He did not take orders from that table, he did not serve order to that table and nor did he even approach the 4 surrounding tables. He just carried on with his job coldly ignoring the man with the cold-coffee.

The manager of the café turned to Aathman and silently pointed him towards the man with the cold-coffee.

Aathman nodded.

Aathman gave a second look at the man. The man didn't change. Not one bit. He still was the conventional old 9 to 7 working class guy with a laptop bag and an ID card strapped around his neck. He wasn't wearing any fancy traditional dress, nor was he looking as though he went to some *garba*. Sitting all alone as he used to in the cafeterias of ISRO.

"Sir, is there anything else you would like to order?" asked Aathman as politely as he could

The man looked up, paused for a second, "No, thanks. That'd be all" he said, smiling back. It wasn't a smile one usually gives to strangers.

"Thank you..." Aathman replied. "...sir" he said with a gap. And he turned around to leave

"But there's one thing you can bring me..." said the man as Aathman turned back with a silently invective face. "And only 'you' can bring that for me. No one else can."

Aathman got puzzled. *Did he mean drugs?*

"Sorry sir, I didn't get you."

The man looked back at him with that same eerie smile. He slid a crisp 500 Rupee note in front of Aathman and said, "An ISRO scientist disappeared tonight, just a few hours ago. No clues, no idea, no lead over this thing. I felt that I should be contacting the CISF, but before that I thought I should ask you first."

"There's an old saying... which I'm unable to remember right now..." Aathman said

"Yeah, a stitch in time does save nine?"

"NO, no not that one. Definitely not that one" Aathman said taking a few steps closer "People *serve* you, only when they *need* you. Right, Chief Akram?" said Aathman leaning forward to Chief, "I've left that job long back. I'm just a *waiter*."

"Yes, you're right. You've *waited* all your life for that one chance

and here I just brought you one.” said Chief

“Well I don’t need a job, I already have two of those” Aathman said pointing at his t-shirt logo saying ‘Danny’s’.

“Waiting and serving counts as one.”

“... And I work as a gym trainer too. And am quite happy with it.”

“That’s a good thing to hear, Aathman... Job satisfaction is a vital aspect of a man’s life. Even if it includes cleaning tables and serving coffee to people.”

“Well, if Olympic medal winners in India end up selling noodles on the roadside stalls, I don’t think I’m in *that* bad condition.”

“How much do they pay you?”

“It’s not about the money!” he said pushing the table towards Chief. “It’s about the respect. Here, they don’t just blindly fire me in front of the entire nation just for my one mistake, which wasn’t even supposedly mine!” Aathman fired back, keeping his voice under control, “Not a single person came to defend me when Dr Soni disappeared and they blamed me for not taking my job seriously! And why? Just because I survived the plane crash, you thought that I was involved in Dr Soni’s murder.”

“We didn’t blame you...”

“You didn’t defend me either!”

“That’s because that time Khalif was a respected man and his words were taken seriously all over ISRO. No one even doubted his involvement. But later when we found out the reality we did take his name to the International Terrorism list! And after that we even called you back with a job offer...”

“Oh yes! First you spit ink on my face in front of the entire media, claiming that I was involved in a murder and then you call me back saying ‘Sorry that was all a misunderstanding. You can re-join us *once again*, so that again when some scientist disappears, we can ruin your entire career *once again*!’. How do you even expect me to join back at the same post when even my own parents consider me a disgrace just because you all concluded things with no proofs!”

“Well, we even fired Khalif after that!” Chief retorted.

“Oh come on, he disappeared with all the evidences, long before you considered firing him!” Aathman said furtively coming closer to Chief. He kept his composure but couldn’t cage his grief, “Khalif had

always been smart enough to manipulate the step ahead. What do you think? I wasn't in touch with all those things?" Aathman asked with a stern face, "*My job left ISRO, I didn't.*"

"Well then work as a private body if you don't want to work under ISRO. You get a chance to prove yourself again. And who knows, you might even be awarded. This time I'll make sure that you and your works come to light."

"Why do you specifically want *me*? There are many others capable of doing this job better than me!"

"That's because I just have a feeling" Chief said "that you're the only person who can crack this case. Aathman, I've seen you work earlier and trust me, I trust you more than the security force out there! There are spies all around and if by any means the internal info gets leaked, the scientist cannot be saved. SO! I need someone whom I can trust, someone whom money cannot buy... because he's *very* content being a waiter at Danny's", Chief winked with a naughty smile trying to lighten the talk, "What do you say young man?"

"Jokes apart Chief" Aathman replied gravely "I'm not sure whether I can do this or not."

"I just want you to give it a try because you're the only person I'm confident about. And I even tried reaching you earlier, but I didn't have anything to face you with because somewhere down the line even I believed that you were involved in Dr Soni's murder. But as evidences kept opening up, I realised I had been wrong! Terribly wrong! So that's why I wanted to give you a fair chance to prove yourself true..." Chief said, slowly patting Aathman "... everyone deserves one!"

"But not everyone gets one!" Aathman said slowly pulling himself away from the table.

"Believe me, this is the best chance you can get to prove your innocence!"

"I don't care" he shrugged carelessly, "The only thing that'd prove me innocent is if I bring up Dr Soni once again... which is not really possible."

"Well, actually it *is* possible" Chief said with a bleak smile, "Because even this time a 'Dr Soni' has been kidnapped."

LIFE'S A LOST BATTLE

Imagining life to be a lost battle and the weapons as broken as the hopes, the forces surrounding as bad as the devil himself and the entire world turns out to be against you. That's when anyone would lose their faith to live any longer. The expectations from life start getting minimal, and all you do is keep scavenging the past for that one point where you had gone wrong and things kept rumbling down thereafter! You keep starving, you keep fighting, but that doesn't help you because you just cannot prove yourself. The world works on proofs, not trust. And just when the last bit of hope is about to sink, there comes up a second chance.

Is that 'just' a second chance? NO, It's the whole world you've ever dreamt of coming at your doorsteps and waiting for you to take that one perfect step so that it could be welcomed. What you need to do? What you've always been doing. Be patient.

Aathman held his silence reflecting on the words above as Chief drove him to the ISRO campus. Aathman had layers of doubts suppressed within him and a double of reluctance trying to stop him from getting into all this, once again. But somehow, the whole point of history repeating itself struck him quite interestingly. And because this time it was Dr Soni's daughter, his inner persuasiveness to help her out from the menace increased further.

"Do you still remember *her*?" Chief asked looking at Aathman, "I think you've met *her* before."

Aathman wasn't a man who preferred words interrupting his thoughts. Not that he was an introvert, but yet he needed his moments.

Aathman nodded silently and heavily itching his stubble left cheek "She was 17 that time, I guess. She came to see off Dr Soni at the airport. She was quite disappointed over him getting away because it was her vacations and he promised her a family trip to some hill-station..." Aathman said, totally verbalizing the memories "Is she still the same?"

"Better than you can imagine. She's the head of one of ISRO's most exclusive projects, right now."

"So, she's just like her father, eh?"

"Dedication, yes just like him. But the knowledge... trust me, she even surpasses her father."

"What was her name?" Aathman asked, trying to picturize Dr Soni's

daughter as he kept looking at his own face over the mild reflection of the car's window glass- how did she look, was she just like her father, does she even remember him?

"Kritika... Kritika Soni" Chief replied with a smile.

"Yes... Yes... Kritika! Dr Soni used to call her Kritu" Aathman said, with a hint of remembrance "back, when she was just 10, I was the only person she'd talk to. Dr Soni used to be busy in his long meetings and he left her with me. We played ping-pong on Dr Soni's table and she used to ask me to take her to the canteen and buy her that small Vanilla cup ice-cream. And after emptying her cup she would politely request me not to tell anything about the ice-cream to her father. Little did she know that her father used to pay me before-hand for the ice-cream. He always knew what she wanted. That father-daughter bond was just...' he said exhaling guilt of the lost moments 'But after that unfortunate incident, even *she* thinks that I was involved in her father's murder. I tried contacting her but she didn't respond, she said she didn't want to see my face ever after. And so I never contacted her, ever'

Aathman paused, tightly pushing his lips inward. His eyes showed dejection.

Back in those days Aathman used to be Dr Soni's personal body guard, and no one knew Dr Soni and his family the way he did. And he loved that family a lot, which made Chief further sure that Aathman would do any damn thing to save Kritika.

"Why do you think will someone kidnap Kritika?" Aathman asked looking back at Chief

"*Maybe*, because of the device she created" Chief replied.

"Maybe?"

"Aathman, currently we aren't in a position to conclude anything. Although events happened as such that Kritika completed creating a device, and within 24 hours of the completion she had been kidnapped. So *maybe* it's them all over again... You know what I mean" Chief concluded.

"It's definitely them!"

"Now Aathman, you should know this that Kritika wasn't kidnapped alone. A doctor had also been kidnapped along with her and that made no sense. I mean why would someone even try kidnapping a doctor?"

"Was he with her or were they at different places, kidnapped at the

same time?”

“Together, at the same time. Now it maybe that just because those men didn’t want to leave any evidence they even kidnapped the doctor along with her...”

“Are you sure, the doctor didn’t have anything to do with Kritika or the project?”

“No. Nothing. They don’t even know each other... They just met at CEPT this evening for the first time. He’s just a friend of Kritika’s psychologist.”

“Kritika needed a psychologist?” Aathman asked, sliding uncomfortably over his seat as the story kept revealing itself. He knew he had a long list of updates waiting for him.

“Oh, you don’t know this?” Chief asked in a surprised tone “Well, after Dr Soni’s death Kritika underwent a psychiatric disorder... for nearly 2 years she even denied to accept her father’s death. She was undergoing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder...mostly happens when people get badly traumatized by some event. Since then she had been permanently assigned a psychologist, to keep her grounded to the reality” Chief added as he kept narrating the tale “Well I have a photograph of Kritika in case you want to see...” Chief said pointing towards his phone placed near the gearbox “It’s in the contacts.”

Aathman quickly ran his fingers through the contact list just to witness the young Kritu turn into a beautiful and mature Dr Kritika Soni.

“But she still hates me” he said to himself.

HOW OLD ARE YOU?

The situation inside the B209 ward was getting complex yet Kritika couldn’t realise that she was actually in a dream. Well it was no ordinary dream either- the functioning, the clarity, the occurrences, the sounds and the detailing around was so real that barely could anyone consider it a dream! And according to a study it is said that most people dream of things that they either long for or think about throughout the time while they’re awake. But the problem with dreams is that we even tend to accept the most unbelievable things, when we’re dreaming and not for once we ask ourselves ‘Why?’

Something very similar was occurring with Kritika who was constantly revisiting parts of her past, yet was unable to make out that

this was all a dream

'How come you enter my cabin without my permission?' was what Dr Soni wanted to say but all he could land up with was a dead glance hanging around the young boy who just swung open the door of his cabin and was now panting heavily. His parched tongue thirstily hanging outside his jaw with his eyes gravely stuck on to Dr Soni with an inexpressible longing. The boy wanted to say something but didn't have the words to put them through.

Dr Soni passed him a bottle that got emptied post some furious gulping sounds. The boy was still panting, but now he seemed somewhat better.

'I'm sorry sir' the boy said, his eyes still facing the floor 'But this was urgent'

'Is it more urgent than my family shattering into pieces?'

'Sorry sir?'

'Is it more urgent than my daughter not getting to do what she wants to?'

'I'm not getting you sir' Duryoy said managing to utter words in a broken manner

'Yes! Exactly! You're not supposed to get me when I'm busy!' yelled Dr Soni 'You're not supposed to get me when I'm in between of a family problem! You're not supposed to get me even if you have created the most amazing thing of this universe. I DON'T CARE!'

'Sir you need to give this a look' he said pointing to his green bag which seemed literally empty

'What?' Dr Soni said irritably 'Didn't you listen to anything that I said?'

'Sir please sir, I assure you this is important. The world can wait, this can't'

'What is it all about that you entered right into my cabin like some lout!'

The boy straightened himself and started speaking in a professional tone- 'Ever since the world has existed, a passionate attempt to skip into time has always been a concept lingering through the minds of...'

'Wait' Dr Soni interrupted with the absolute restlessness his voice could speak out with 'Listen to my question clearly. I just asked you- What is it that you wanted to tell me? That's it. Explain me, or leave'

The boy remained a little shaken, but he gathered himself up clearing his voice 'Okay sir, the Writings as of Asimov or maybe art works like Antonio de Pereda's 'Allegory of Vanity' had always tried telling us that...'

'Hell I'm leaving' Dr Soni said rising up and walking straight to the door

'Sir, please!' the boy said trying to comfort Dr Soni 'Please listen to me', but he was too late.

Dr Soni was out of his cabin. His tight footsteps echoing in the hallway, fading away with the hopes of the young boy

'I can travel in time!' he shouted leaning onto the door. And his words had managed to pause Dr Soni's descending footsteps. There was a momentary pause after which Dr Soni turned back and the boy said a few more words after which Dr Soni walked back into his cabin with a displeased expression haunting over his face

'Time travel?' Dr Soni said getting exceedingly near to the boy's face 'Time machines are something that look very fascinating only in sci-fi novels. It's a dead dream, child. It's like chasing a star just because you think it's behind the mountains. Do you think time travel is 'really' possible?'

'Yes it is possible and I have a theory to make it possible if you let me explain myself!' said the leaving no gap between his words 'What bad will it do to you if you just spend five minutes hearing an idea which took five months to develop'

'Time machine is an idea which cannot be developed even in 5 centuries'

'But sir, Einstein's one of the finest discovery came to him while he was asleep, when he dreamt himself to be flying faster than the speed of light. And this simple, unimportant dream gave modern physics the relation that travelling faster than the speed of light will get you into future. And this isn't something that would have come to anyone even if given 5 millenniums!' said the boy, unhesitant to show his arrogance now 'I know you're a man of science Dr Soni, but you also need to believe in the power of coincidence'

'How old are you?' Dr Soni asked, having a calmer expression over his face

'Does it have anything to do with what I want to create?' he said

rather bluntly.

‘No, but it has everything to do with the extent of understanding!’ Dr Soni fired back ‘All these concepts of time travel just remained within the heavy encyclopedias and Wikipedia as something which Einstein said ‘is possible’ but was never made ‘Possible’! So what if some mathematical functions and Greek alphabets proved him correct?’

‘But I never said that I’d be using Einstein’s theories to escape time. Can’t I create my own theory?’

‘Make it clear first- Did you create a theory or did you create a time machine?’

‘I never said I created a time machine! I said I have a theory! And if you help me, this theory can make time travels indeed possible’ the boy paused ‘And, what’s wrong with time travel anyway? Receiving information from space has always been the hardest part of the job as an astrophysicist. But why do we keep forgetting that if we could travel in time, we could receive decades of space information in just one blow. Time travel opens a whole new horizon of opportunities! ‘The art of prediction’ would turn itself into ‘art of certainty’ when we know how to play with time! The next earthquake on Japan, the next tsunami at the Bahamas, the next volcanic eruptions in Iceland... these all would be answered in one go!’

‘Are you trying to explain an astrophysicist over how can a time travel be beneficial?’ Dr Soni asked mockingly ‘We’ve spent our entire life knowing the prospects of a time travel! And that’s why I am saying that it’s impossible!’

‘Sir you yourself once mentioned in your speech that- The greatest theories on earth aren’t the ones that get accepted, but the ones... which until proved right are categorised under science fiction!’ the 17-year-old replied with a boisterous confidence ‘I’m not trying to direct anything but I want to prove a point that my theory can challenge the pre-existing paradoxes!’

‘Do you even know the greatest paradox which proves us that time travel can never exist?’

‘The future man paradox- If it was possible for us to travel back in time to our past, then people from our future should have visited us by now! But because no person ever came from future, hence even we cannot go back into the past either! Totally proving that time travels are

never possible... But that's everything based on the real world.'

'So now which fairy tale world will your theory work if not in the real world?' Dr Soni pointed out 'Are you out of your mind or what? How do you even expect me to invest in a project which is based on some god damn hypothetical world!'

'No, no! It's not a hypothetical world, it's just the world we witness every night yet we do not consider it...' said the boy 'We've always searched for a time machine yet we never realised that every human being on this planet has already been gifted with the greatest time machine which even years of research could not have created!'

Dr Soni awaited an answer

'THE HUMAN BRAIN!' he paused expecting a hint of aggregable smile over Dr Soni's face. But there was none. He continued 'Our brain can take us to our past and make us relive those moments, sometimes in dreams, sometimes while awake, and it can also make us travel in time...'

'But what you're talking about is called memories! They are just like mirages, they yield nothing... it's like a hologram!' Dr Soni said totally disagreeing to boy 'The thing you're talking about is just like photographs- Whenever you look at them they can get you back in time, but mentally and not physically! You cannot change anything 'in' there.'

'Dr Soni, that was exactly the point' the boy said giving one last look at his green bag, he knew he no longer needed the book that was inside it 'Just 10 percent of our brain functions when we are awake, but still it never fails to create wonders! But when we're asleep our brain is able to perform at its optimum, create wonders and do unimaginable stuffs! So why not use the brain while we're asleep? We dream while we're asleep, and dreams are outcome of the brain when it functions at its best. So why not use dreams to travel back in time?'

'But dreams are meaningless conglomerations of your memories! That's it! Nothing more than that!'

'Dr Soni, you're not quite correct over this' the boy said with a smile 'Most ancient civilizations on earth believed that dreams carry meaning. Like, according to Hindu mythology snakes in dreams mean 'a developing evil or jealousy' and according to the Islamic mythology it means 'an arch enemy. Longer the snake, greater the enmity' Hence just because we cannot explain something doesn't mean they would seize to

exist. There's definitely some connection! Else it cannot be possible that two different civilizations with entirely different perspective coincidentally conclude the same point. Our brain when we're asleep has the power to skip time. Many a time when we're asleep we're being haunted by our past in our 'dreams'! Sometimes, someplace we suddenly realize that we've been exactly at the same place earlier too, in our 'dreams'- Déjà vu! So you see the point keeps on getting clear that the only thing through which leaping forward or backward in time is possible, is in DREAMS!'

Dr Soni retorted with a short sniff 'Look kid, I'm no specialist in dreams but all I know is- When we dream, we do not know that we're 'actually' dreaming! It's only after you wake up you realise that it was all a dream. How do you even expect to possibly put yourself voluntarily into the dream? In your full consciousness...'

'Sir this is where I need your help. A neuro-activating drug-NURAC- needs to be created which would increase our consciousness while dreaming to extents such that even the dreams look no less than the real world!'

'But even if you successfully increase your brain functioning and perform realistic dreaming how'd you possibly travel back or forth in time?' Dr Soni asked massaging his temples.

'Sir, the only difference between dreams and real world is that- It's a dream! Now if I stress back to the Einstein's theory of general relativity (More the gravity on the planet, slower will the time move) which tells us that gravity and time are totally related and dependent over each other! In other words, you can also say that gravity constricts our movement in time because gravity sets the pace with which time must flow.

Dr Soni nodded

'So Dr Soni, will you tell me what's the most unusual thing which you can do in your dreams but not in the real world'

'Speak to people who no longer exist, say things to people which I cannot say to them in the real world...'

'Think harder Dr Soni' moving his hands excitedly 'Something which you can only dream of, but never do it in the real world!'

'It might sound a bit crazy... but yeah, sometimes I dream of flying in the sky... like some bird!'

‘EXACTLY! Everyone for some or the other time dreams about flying in their dreams although they do not have any gadgets or wings behind them. And when can you possibly fly without any gadgets?’ the boy asked ‘...A PLACE WHERE THERE IS NO GRAVITY! And that’s the case with dreams... Dreams do not follow the laws of gravitation because dreams have no gravity! And hence a place where there’s no gravity, there’s no restriction to the flow of time! So indirectly Einstein’s relativity theory proves us that we can travel through time while we are dreaming...’

With a shrewd smile over the boy’s face, he eagerly waited for Dr Soni to react.

And as of Dr Soni, he remained totally clueless over how could anyone relate a theory of Einstein to dreams without tampering with the facts by one bit.

‘Is there still anything which you’re not clear of, sir?’

‘Yes. How old are you?’

ISRO LEFT ME. I NEVER LEFT ISRO.

A heavy black BMW X5 screeched to halt against the massive gates of ISRO-SAC Ahmedabad. There was a mild disturbance within the shadows beneath the huge tree where the armed men sit and talk about life till the dawn breaks in. There was nothing unusual about the car other than the timing. Most guards at ISRO recognized Chief, and so followed his car. But barely had they seen him enter the perimeter this late. Whenever he did, it was either some instant meeting, launch program or undoubtedly an emergency call.

“Is everything alright sir?” asked the main guard peeping through the window. The colder air from the car’s air-conditioner hung lightly over the guard’s face as he inched his neck further to check the man sitting beside Chief.

Another guard, short and square, with a weak patch of facial hair came and stood sharp against the headlights of the car, blocking the car’s way inwards.

“Chief, do you have the papers for this man?” asked the guard pointing towards Aathman. Chief had always been the man who’s favoured by all, and no one ever doubted his intentions, so when it came to minor issues, things could be eased up for him. But not today. The

recent Paris attacks had sent a shudder across the hearts of the critical organizations, and the security measures were shunted in parallel.

Chief was aware that his trustworthy card might not work today very well. Instead he explained “There’s an emergency right now. He’s my security advisor and it’s very urgent.”

“Inside the campus?” the guard asked, horrified by the news.

“NO, no, no... It’s something I cannot disclose to you right now. It has nothing to do with you guys. But it’s really very urgent. You’ve already made the entries of Milan and the girl with him, right?”

“Yes, they brought their permission letters” the guard tried putting it as humbly as possible, “Chief, I’m sorry... it’s my job. Had this been any other time I’d have readily agreed to let this man enter with your reference. But things have straightened up after the Paris situation.”

“He had been in ISRO! You can search your references if you want.”

“We need an ID for that, sir” the guard responded “ISRO ID, not the ordinary ones...”

“Hey this is an emergency and who the hell picks up an ID of an old job that he has left years ago? Call someone from inside, move your asses and get the permission to let this man in. I don’t know! I just want this man in, and I want him in, right now. DO you get me? Every passing second is increasing the risk of some scientists losing their life, and here you do not get the urgency of the situation! Accompany with us if you want to, but we need to enter!” Chief blurted out impatiently. But the guard’s expressions were clear enough to figure out his conclusion.

Chief gave up hanging his head low “Call your boss please.”

“Wait, will this ID work?” asked Aathman producing a glazing rectangle from his shirt pocket. The two faces turning back at him with utter amazement, “It’s of ISRO Bengaluru.”

“Head of security operations?” asked the man, reading out Aathman’s designation “Really?”. Steeply amazed.

“8 years ago” Aathman shrugged, “You can check the records if you want” he said, as the guard gave a reluctant nod and went back to his cabin to check details on his computer.

Aathman shifted back to his seat, comfortably.

Chief fascinatingly turned towards him and asked, “You still carry your ISRO ID with you?”

“Told you... ISRO left me. I never left ISRO.”

HUSBAND

Meanwhile the isolated conference hall of ISRO Ahmedabad echoed Dvijata as she sat over the conference table with her phone held between her shoulder and cheek as she rubbed her deep eyes. The conference hall had a dim light lit on over them and all the other chairs stood still in their places like military squadrons facing one another.

By her tone it wasn't hard to guess that it was her father she was speaking to. And following the universal parental trait, her father was concerned over his daughter not calling him through the evening. And this was the time when parents would make a Martin Luther sort of speech over what the term 'being responsible enough' means. And Dvijata seemed like a lone survivor trying to dodge the storm of words with her nods and fake laughs. Her face evidently emanating the none-eagerness to talk about any of the things that happened tonight because of the thousand questions that would follow her over the disclosure- Are you safe, who's that guy? Duryoy, you mean my student Duryoy? What the hell were you doing with him? And who kidnapped him? Did you inform the police? I should have never allowed you to leave home! You get back to Delhi right now!

But on the verge of fading the topic, the conversation switched over to what Mr Shah (Dvijata's father) thought over Dvijata's to-be in-laws. And that's something old people really like to blabber about- Their family, our family and how ours is better.

Dvijata having no options left kept faking an interested tone into her father's life stories. Her eyes turned to Milan who was sitting nearby browsing through his phone for anything that could make sense to the current scenario. For the moment, he pretended to have closed his ears for the simple reason that what Dvijata was doing was the last thing someone would do at such a moment.

How much heartless can a person get? he thought, as he heard her talk about marriage and useless stuffs that no one usually talks about. He stretched his spine and later arching backwards he gave the conference room another look.

Milan hated her for being so emotionally detached. She behaved as if she had to be in here just for the sake of it. She didn't show any

personal concerns, she didn't show any sympathy towards Duryoy, she hated him for holding secrets, and now she had been chatting to her father about her marriage. Wow!

Disgust was tripping down Milan's ears as he heard her merrily chat to her father about her in-laws, with smiles and laughs.

"Dvijata you don't know how great it feels" her father continued "when Miss Raval thanks me for you agreeing to join hands with her son! You made a great choice dear, by agreeing to that family..."

Although Milan's growing hatred for her was totally understandable but Milan was missing something here. Had Milan looked at her, closely, he'd have known that she wasn't even listening to her father! She was totally lost in some other world and her dried up lips made the sleekest of the sounds of agreement just to make her presence felt.

She felt insecure. She was alone. She felt lost.

"You don't need to thank me for this dad" Dvijata added, still feeling mortified for being so mean to Duryoy. Her real intention for calling her dad this evening was to call off the wedding. But watching her father be so excited about all this, she couldn't say. She just couldn't! The silence was a part of the duty she had to hold on, for all the sacrifices that her father had made for her throughout the length of years.

"I tell you her son is a great guy Dvijata . How often does one get a husband who works at NASA?" Dvijata 's father said pitching his excitement to a whole new level "But it might be that you've to leave your job at AIIMS because he lives in Florida."

"Dad would you hold on for a second?" she said putting the phone on hold, "Milan? Do you know any Raval who works at NASA with you? Arvind Raval?"

Milan let out a clueless expression trying to recall the name

"Actually, there are many bases of NASA" he said.

"No, no, no he's in Florida. Umm, Kennedy Space Centre?"

"I recall no one by that name, sorry" he shrugged quickly flipping back to his work, so shrewd, that it felt he won't admit it even if he knew the man.

Dvijata noticed that switch of tone. And she didn't like the way he pitched the sentence.

"You don't want to say it then admit it, na! I'm not begging to you

or something” she said getting back to her call.

But then that was the burst-out point for Milan.

“Dvijata” he said transfixing his gaze over to her “if you don’t want to help then that’s all right. I don’t mind searching them alone. You don’t seem interested, you don’t seem concerned, you have nothing to mourn for” Milan said, “But till the point you’re here at least let the ones who’re doing their job, do their part.”

Dvijata remained silent.

Her perpetually perplexed face kept staring back at Milan, with guilt, with shame, with the efforts of trying-to-explain herself. But all she landed up with was a 30 seconds long silence, which seemed more like 3 decades!

Her eyes shifted down and she gulped hard as she quickly muttered something to her father trying to end the call. But her overindulgent father kept emphasizing her to check out Arvind’s photo which Miss Raval had sent him lately, and which he would definitely forward to Dvijata irrespective of a tsunami hitting by his town or some earthquake of magnitude 8 shaking his grounds.

And with the call’s disconnection filling the conference room with silence, Dvijata quickly moved her hand through her purse dumping her phone into it and a feeble ‘Sorry’ coming out of her low lips.

“Listen, I don’t know what Duryoy means to you and surely you aren’t marrying him. But this doesn’t mean you stop caring about him, alright? That man has been kidnapped!”

“Why don’t you stop pretending to be caring about me, instead. I said I am sorry! I have my sets of lives and sometimes they overlap. I don’t need you to make me realize Duryoy’s importance!” Dvijata fired back fixing Milan with an intense stare, “Even I had no interest over speaking to dad over my in-laws whom I don’t even know. I just didn’t want him to know what I am currently going through...”

“Is Duryoy just a colleague to you? Or just a friend?” Milan asked.

Dvijata shot a thoughtful glance at him trying to make him realise that he was being more personal than he should be. But in fact she never had an answer to that question. Sure, Duryoy was nice, he was a very close friend, it had been a near decade since she knew him, they had roamed around in cities around India during their hospital tours, they had very much enjoyed the company of each other and may be Duryoy was

just perfect because no one understood her as much as he did. But there was something about him which he kept enclosed within himself. He had a secret. And if even after 10 years of knowing each other Duryoy could keep a secret from her, surely he could keep many other things hidden as if they never existed. And Dvijata never adored the virtue of translucency within people.

Yet she couldn't just leave Duryoy like this!

He had always been for her irrespective of his world shredding apart in itself. Let that be during her third-year college days when she freaked out the night before her semester end paper, or her career as a psychologist when she never cross-checked her conclusions, or the tinier things which he did for her without for once complaining about it- like bringing back a tea for her whenever he himself took a tea break, or may be fill in the dates of the reports beneath her signature because Dvijata was always too lazy to scribble dates beneath her signature. But Duryoy had her back.

She had nothing to say, but she had to because this wasn't the first time her silence had been misunderstood.

"I know this act of mine was the most heartless thing you might have ever come across. But had you known my story..." she paused 'our story' she corrected "you'll know that it's not entirely *my* fault. I'm really really confused at this point of time. And whenever I am confused, I need Duryoy. And the thing that I'm currently dealing with along with this is not some small issue, that can be thrown off for later! It's my marriage! It's like a confusion for the whole life!"

"Well than why don't you just have Duryoy for your whole life?"

"Do you think, it is..." Dvijata's phone beeped with a WhatsApp message, which she knew was her father sending Arvind's photo, but she managed to ignore "...it's that easy? It's been 10 years and yet I don't know him completely!"

"Well why do you even want to know him completely? Let the uncertainty drive certain things... Not that he's some CIA agent or something that you need to worry about!"

"Not a CIA agent" Kritika imitated "but he's doing things at that level or else why would someone just kidnap him?" Dvijata asked, feeling uncharacteristically on edge.

"I keep telling you this, again and again... They must have mistaken

him as 'me'. 'I' was supposed to be with Kritika!"

"And you think those men are, *that* stupid?"

"No I don't!" he said passively, "But at least am trying! What you were doing right now, was that your way of showing concern towards Duryoy? You've lost a friend, a close friend, and that's how you show your regrets towards him? By chatting to your father about your marriage? Agreed that marriage is important, but is it more important than the existing crisis that we are currently undergoing? Can't a call be ignored for the moment? Even if it cannot be, it can at least be cut short! Don't keep blaming your situations for everything! Everyone makes a compromise to be themselves. Believe it, understand it and start living with it."

Dvijata paused for a brief moment.

She felt agitated, moody, depressed, malevolent, all at the same time. She said she cared, yet she couldn't prove it. She wanted to be of help, yet she couldn't be of any. She wanted a motive, but couldn't find the strength to pursue it. And now she was being humiliated by random strangers

In no time, a cogent pull on the door handle making the door squeak like some hungry mice, she exited the room. Milan could see her sleek shadow digging deeper and deeper into the hallway.

His head hung low with dejection...

BOY, WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

'Did you know that you can plan your future towards this dream research?' Dr Soni asked trying to be a bit supportive towards the 17-year-old 'Maybe neuropsychology? It deals with brain and it's functioning, human behaviour and responses. I think this field might interest you'

The 17-year-old nodded as he continued to stuff his bag like some contended vagabond post his day's work. Till now he never bothered himself by thinking about his future or college or his future college because being with Saaera had made his present so much better that barely did he want to lose those moments and drift into the future. Those ice-creams after the school, those stuffed-up metro rides back to home, those ridiculous late-night outings during poojas, and the 10 rupee foorchkaas they had as a celebration after their school exams ended,

were all too engrossing to keep him stuck to the memories of his past.

Dr Soni saw the boy's wide eyes stuck to one place, yet roaming around the untouched corners of his brain. There were whispering voices within his ears that kept conflicting among themselves.

'Which is the best institute for pursuing Medical Sciences in India, sir?' the boy said with a feeble voice

Dr Soni's eyes waited for a reason, for such a question being asked.

'Just felt like knowing' the boy shrugged.

'AIIMS is the best. It's certainly one of the best' Dr Soni said sharing every bit of knowledge he had within himself.

'AIIMS?'

'Yes, All India Institute of Medical Science. It's in Delhi...'

'Is it tough to get in there?'

'It isn't "easy"' Dr Soni smiled 'It's the best in the country. And the things that are best in India aren't any less than being best in the world.'

'Can they help me synthesize my drug?'

'I cannot think of any better place than that'

The boy's eyes jumped across the room trying to hide from Dr Soni's hard stare.

'Then I should try for AIIMS. I definitely should' he said faking cheerfulness.

'Most people have a dream. You have a reason. I think you're already half way through this, son.'

'But it's tough out there, doctor.'

'It was never easy. It has never been' Dr Soni said leaning backwards with a heavy exhale.

'I should probably leave' said the boy watching Dr Soni's drained out face

'Not if you don't want to'

'What I want, doesn't matter any longer Dr Soni' he said turning to leave when all of a sudden the voice from the cabin called him back again

'You cared to explain me Einstein's theory. Wouldn't you care to tell me your name?'

With a bleak smile the boy responded

'Duryoy, sir... Duryoy Kundu'

THERE'S A DRUG IN YOUR SYSTEM!

The entire vision happening against Kritika's eyes melted into a ball of bright light, with colours melting into shades of black and white and diluting itself into a pool of nothingness. The 17-year-old Duryoy, her father- Dr Soni, the cabin and everything else that existed a moment earlier was now a fading lump of white light as the dream continued to collapse. More and more vivid did the scenario become and in no time Kritika could feel herself brought back to her living senses. Out of the dream, into the real world.

The dream was over. Yet the disbelief which startled Kritika was unending!

Soon the diversion of physical pain conquered her thoughts as she felt the reluctance of her groaning neck to move an inch further. Her pale hands tied to the chair handle barely had any senses left within them, and her wet clothes were just in favour of making her condition worse. The wet curls of her smooth hair stuck hard to her panic-stricken face as she kept wondering whether she was still in some dream or back to the reality.

She kept rewinding the instants from the dream again and again, and all she knew was that there were things that only Duryoy had answers to.

Her conscious thoughts suddenly got knocked by the sound of heavy breathing with an intense discomfort that came from the person to her right who too was miserably tied to his chair. His red kurta with dark brown wet patches and his wet hair beetling from his forehead, hiding his eyes behind a bush of shadow. It was the semi-conscious Duryoy getting back to his senses. His confined chest trying to breathe-in as much oxygen as it could to keep his heart beating.

On seeing Duryoy move, a bolt of glaring energy shot into Kritika's nerves. She wanted answers, to anything and everything she had come across in the dream- *Was all that she saw really happened? Does he really know my father? Who was the girl who committed suicide? What happened to the idea of time machine which the 17-year-old Duryoy had claimed to create? Because one of the many things that he had claimed was true- Duryoy had passed out from AIIMS.*

To her surprise the next time she looked at him his eyes were wide open and the heavy exhalations from his mouth made him look highly

unsettled.

 Their eyes met.

 She gave a bleak smile

 And even before she could explain herself- “How did you do that?” barked Duryoy, trying to free his limbs from the tight ropes, going absolutely berserk for the moment. He didn’t seem happy at all. Nor did he seem like the passionate, professional and smart doctor he had always been.

 “How did I do what?” asked Kritika, totally surprised by the way Duryoy was talking to her. He had been quite appreciable when it came to his nature and style of speaking, fascinating enough to continue the conversation beyond the nights of garba. But as of now, this was an entirely different Duryoy.

 “The visions! How the hell did you enter into my brain?”

 “What are you talking about? Can you please start making some sense Duryoy? I am sitting right in front of you, how can I even enter your brain?”

 “Through dreams, damn it!” Duryoy yelled, impatiently staring at Kritika “You entered into my brain through dreams! And that’s not at all possible unless some NURAC is already present in your system! Now, how did you get those NURAC?”

 “Are these the same NURAC which can help you get into the past? Which you were talking about to my dad?” asked Kritika totally ignoring the concern which Duryoy showed towards the drugs present in her system, “Something that you wanted to create once you got into AIIMS!”

 “First answer me, how did you have them?”

 “No, Duryoy... first control yourself. I haven’t taken any drugs at all, trust me. I had been kidnapped ‘with’ you and we just met barely 5 minutes before we had been kidnapped. Give yourself a thought- How could have I even consumed some? And after being kidnapped, this is the first time I came back to my senses.”

 Duryoy went silent still not convinced by her. He was quite shaken to his grounds that he could barely settle over anything.

 “Duryoy” Kritika said, softly looking at him, “Will you please tell me what it is that is concerning you so much?”

 “Oh, I don’t know! I saw you in the dream... and Saaera... and...”

“Duryoy... I seriously am unable to understand thing you’re talking about” Kritika added with a deep considerate voice, “But if you care to tell me... a bit soberly... I might be able to help you with it.”

Duryoy remained silent. He kept clenching his fists trying to push some blood within the numb veins blocked by the unbearably tight rope. He then tried using his legs to push the chair. And it didn’t take long for Kritika to understand that he was trying to ignore her. She kept looking at him waiting for some clue over what was happening with her, and the moment she thought that Duryoy was trying to say something to her- Duryoy glanced back at her.

A long glance it was.

As if he could read her every thought. He looked around trying to choose his words. And after a few seconds he nodded heavily, marking his surrender to himself.

“NURACs” Duryoy said with a deep sincere voice, “I did create those during my college days at AIIMS. Sort of a college research, you can say. These aren’t just any drugs. These drugs affect human brain to an extent that our dreams start looking as real as the real world itself- the detailing, the sounds, the clarity, everything increases, making it so real that one is hardly able to differentiate between the real world and the world of dreams. Like when you had been dreaming did you feel that it was a dream?”

“Not really” Kritika said trying to find the right words, “But how does that make me enter ‘your’ brain?”

“Well you know that dreams are mostly limited to a single person. I cannot see yours, you cannot see mine. So, I tried giving a shot to- what if we all can connect to each other through dreams? That would be one of the most significant researches of the 21st century because it would put an end to the entire telecommunication industry! And I used the concept of LAN gaming to help men connect to men through dreams. Like, our brain is like the computer and the dream is like the LAN game which any number of people can access while asleep. But only the people who have consumed the NURAC can access it. And once you access it, the memories of all the people who have consumed it merges into one... So that’s how you share a common dream platform. But what you see in the dream once you get there is something that is highly unpredictable- which includes the present and the past memories of all

the people who're involved in the group-dreaming. For this reason, you were able to see my past and I was able to see yours."

"You mean, the things that I saw in the dream 'actually' happened to you?" Kritika enquired, her eyes broad, beautiful and horrified "And you even knew my father?"

Kritika was now definite that there were things that Duryoy knew over her father's disappearance which she didn't. That was more of a gut feeling, but whatever the feeling was... it was too damn strong.

"That isn't the main concern for now!" Duryoy said, swiftly drifting the topic "The thing to be concerned about is- How did the NURAC enter your system?"

MULTIPLIED IRONY

Just two doors away from the room where the two young scientists had been tied down to the chairs like some dogged animal and barely made to stay conscious, the situation was no less uncertain.

For that evening Khalif chose to sit with his staffs in the control room, managing things all by himself rather than just sitting in his posh cabin and not showing up until anything substantial comes into play. It was important. It was freedom for him. His last job. And although things were running smoothly, he knew that in no time trouble would expand exponentially when the news of an ISRO scientist being kidnapped would hit the media. But as of now, the media had restrained itself from making any such claims.

Joshi sat at the corner of the room, near to the window, just beneath the split AC which kept conditioning the sweaty suspended sweat odoured air filling up the silence between the rapid sounds of smashing keystrokes over the 6 tiny keyboards attached to the 6 tiny monitors used by 6 tiny men. The projector kept hanging from the slab like some obese spider, and its eyes projecting an empty blue screen over the white display board. And just beside the blue projection stood Khalif, leaning over the wall, watching everyone work... yet, himself totally lost in his thoughts. A beetling cigarette held between his teeth, and once a while being hugged by his lips, continued burning out endless strings of smoke into the room.

Joshi seemed concerned.

Over the project, yes! But he was more concerned over the

deteriorating condition of the kidnapped scientists. The two had been sedated deeply, more than necessary, to an extent that the woman from ISRO had drifted to deep unconsciousness. Joshi had personally been into the room making sure their hostages were safe, and after placing three added seconds of his gaze over Kritika's benumbed face he could tell that the doses of sedatives seemed to be working quite strongly over her. All for a terrible few seconds a dreadful thought crossed his mind- Is she alive? And that seemed to have paused the hearts of all those who were aware about the situation. Luckily the man they kidnapped along- Duryoy- had managed to hold a pink bottle of water from CEPT, all the way till here until his senses gave up. On having seen Kritika not responding to any movement or sounds, Joshi quickly splashed the remaining water into her face hoping for some reaction.

Of course, nothing happened! You heavily sedate one of the most biologically weak persons and expect them to fight the nausea and wake up. That's ridiculous! They knew the drug would be overpowering because the amount of anaesthetics to be injected into a body depends upon the weight of the person to be injected into. The slenderness of Kritika's frame could easily speak for itself that only a few drops of anesthetics would have been enough to get her into lifeless sleep. And over that her weak mental condition was further responsible for her weakened strength. And all these factors had summed up altogether this evening, now making it extremely difficult for even Joshi to decide whether she'd be able to revive or not.

They needed a doctor for that. But they even sedated the damn doctor!

There had been a slight twitch within Joshi's heart on helplessly watching Kritika lie cold and still. Well this wasn't love that was happening, for sure. Rather it's that tinier part of emotion that arouses within you for a person whom you've been knowing since a very long time. Well, now you'd say, 'How the hell did Joshi know Kritika?' but the point is that once you're kidnapping or have kidnapped someone, the first thing that you do is to know the complete biography of your host. Till last night, Joshi had known nothing about Kritika. But tonight, he was aware of her life, her achievements, her job profile, her postings, her movements, the people she texted to, the people she spoke to over phone, her birthdate, her nickname, every single detail. And gradually

when you read and read and read, or better said stalk someone to this extent you gradually earn inquisitiveness towards the person to know them further at a personal level. And when the same person ends up being an absolutely stunning woman with a flabbergasting personality and a beautiful mind, no one needs a reason to fall for them.

But out of nowhere suddenly Kritika's eye balls rolled and just like holy water bringing life to the dead and the defeated, this one single splash of water managed to bring Kritika back to her senses. And watching the splash work upon her, he splashed some icy water even on Duryoy's face hoping maybe that would help him deal with the drowsiness

Joshi maintained his calm although his insides grooved with joy, and he along with his men walked out of the door as if nothing ever happened.

Constantly rewinding this piece of tiny interaction over and over again Joshi kept happily staring towards his blank screen. But self-realization struck him fast and hard and soon he went back to his unhappy, serious face.

Joshi through the corner of his eyes looked at Khalif's thoughtful face, hidden behind a large cloud of smoke from his twelfth cigarette of the day. The nicotine within his blood was what kept him running through this entire process, and more than that the smoke made him realize that even the hardest of the moments of life would disappear, just like the smoke does. But lately something had been concerning him much more than necessary.

Joshi sensed that. He felt he should ask him about it. But this was Khalif. You do not question Khalif. No one questions Khalif.

Silently maintaining his part of the decorum Joshi stood up "I should probably go and have a look at the two."

He minimized his screens and stretched his fingers.

"Didn't you just go a while ago?" asked one of the men who was keeping track of the media activity

"Yes, but the last time I saw them, barely were they responding to anything. I'm afraid we've dozed them more than necessary."

Khalif slowly uncoiled from his net of thoughts. He looked back at Joshi, and with a disinterested face he nodded absently. The concern over his face was all too clear that something wasn't occurring the way

he wanted it to happen.

Joshi turned to leave thinking that it was none of his business to interrupt someone's thoughts. But he paused midway. He knew no one questions Khalif back, but now someone had to. *For once*, Joshi thought *I must ask him 'what's the deal'*. If something was wrong then everyone had the right to know what it is. Transparency is always the primary necessity for such beneath-the-air operations.

Joshi came 3 steps closer to Khalif and without caring about the outcome, he straightaway asked him "Sir, I know I shouldn't be asking this to you but..." Khalif's face rose up, "but sir, is there something wrong?"

Khalif didn't react. Khalif's unappealing gaze fixed hard over to Joshi's face and Joshi could now smell the nicotine gliding out of Khalif's mouth. He remained still and prayed that this doesn't get any worse.

"I mean, if there is any way I could help, I would surely" Joshi explained meekly. But still the silence and the dead glare of Khalif continued.

Khalif slowly pulled the cigarette out between his fingers and with a thickening air around he replied, "I just received a news - Our client, who asked us to kidnap Duryoy and Kritika has disappeared."

THE PINK BOTTLE

Uneasiness and uncertainty were the only things that held on with Kritika and Duryoy. They both didn't know who kidnapped them, they both didn't know where they currently were and they both didn't even know why had they even been kidnapped, together.

The striking silence and the early chirping sounds explained that the dawn would set upon in some time. The room's temperature shot up like some oven as there hadn't been any conditioner or fans or even a ventilator to freshen up the air! The stale hot air suspended around the room had eased up the sweat glands as numerous tiny balls of sweat hung almost everywhere over their tired faces.

Duryoy kept looking around the room wondering where exactly was he? The place where he had been kept was this tiny suffocative long room with pungent smells of lubricants hanging around in the air, pieces

of outdated machineries and tools were all around. But those tools seemed more like used for fixing humans rather than machines. The wall around had plasters ripped off at places and damp crawling at the corners making the paints flaky. He knew that this wasn't some office building, rather it was some room within a factory or a garage as spoken by the smells and the inadequacy of lighting around them. There was a table lamp that served as a source of light for them and a window which had so much dust over it that it that it would barely allow sunlight to pass through. He needed to know which place what it and how big was it from the outside, but he had no idea apart from the fact that there sometimes there was a sound of doors opening and it seemed to be pretty far, yet the echoes managed to reach the room which meant it was a large area of closed place even outside. They were definitely in some tiny room within a huge factory.

Besides him was Kritika, her head involuntarily hanging downwards and her eyes shut, trying hard to think over how did it all happen? She was suffocated to an extent that even a sweat running over her face calmly creating a thin line of iciness, afforded to give her happiness. She could feel the sweat originating from her side curls of the hair, behind the right ear. Slowly it passed over the upper section of the right cheek, and then it steeply made its way towards her dried upper lip. And like a tiny Tarzan it clung over the upper lip and then slowly jumped over Kritika's tongue. And as soon as the sweat touched her tongue something really odd happened!

She quickly darted her tongue out trying to taste another and then another and one more again, as there were plenty of sweat balls near her lips. It looked gross. But when beautiful people do gross things, it becomes cute.

Duryoy kept giving her a blank stare trying hard to think whether she had really gone mad or even *this* was a work of the NURAC in her system. Or was it the comical half of being an Alzheimer patient?

"What exactly are you trying to do?" he said, not with much patience

She signalled him to pause his complaint and allow her to think, whatever she was thinking

"Wait! Duryoy, in which form does the NURACs exist?" Kritika asked looking closely at Duryoy.

“As tablets...” Duryoy answered narrowing his eyes, “... But it can also be diluted in water. Why do you ask that?”

“I don’t know about how *your* sweat tastes like, but mine tastes salty. And these balls of sweat dripping from my wet hair are not even near to being salty. These are unbelievably sweet!” Kritika said licking another droplet, “Now, what does your neuro-activating drugs taste like?”

“Sugary...” Duryoy replied in a tone of suspicion, trying to connect the dots, “High sucrose content.”

“So now these sweet sweat dripping down my hairs can either mean two things- One, I’m not a human being and my sweat tastes different. Or second, someone has sprinkled water-diluted-neuro-activating-drugs over ‘my’ face! And maybe that’s how these NURAC reached my system. Now it’s up to you Doctor, which one to believe in...”

Duryoy held his breath.

She did have a point.

He remembered back in CEPT, just outside the gate when Milan came out saying that they were being followed, Duryoy had quickly dumped all the NURACs into Dvijata’s pink bottle. And after mixing those drugs, he made sure Dvijata didn’t drink it, as it being strangely sweet could easily be made out that something has been mixed in it. And this was the very reason he had held the pink bottle till the point his senses gave up

Duryoy looked around in the room and for the first time that evening his statements had managed to reach its desired conclusion! He could see the same pink bottle, three quarter of it being emptied, as it solemnly stood at the corner of the cupboard besides the yellowish table-lamp.

An eerie grin took over Duryoy’s face as he shook his head in an animated way. His highly repulsive way of portrayal of his happiness undoubtedly tickled a thought in her mind saying *Thank God Dvijata didn’t marry this guy!*

“Excuse me?” Kritika spoke out trying to emphasize back her ignored presence, “Can you at least tell me what the matter is?”

“Well, yes!” Duryoy said with a gleeful smile, “I now *exactly* know how NURAC might have entered in your system. While I was being chased, I had diluted the NURAC in the pink bottle so that even if those guys caught me, they would have ended up finding nothing! No one

would believe such a high potent drug to be in a simple pink bottle! And the best thing being NURACs are colourless once mixed in water.”

“So, you’re saying someone unknowingly made me drink this water?”

“Exactly! They made you drink it- I don’t know when, maybe while you were losing your senses, or maybe while trying to wake you up. Because as much as I know, they constantly kept injecting us with sedatives. So, it’s highly possible that while waking us up they themselves having no water nearby splashed water from *the* pink bottle.”

Duryoy looked happily towards her and she didn’t smile back. It went on for a couple of seconds more and then it was officially getting awkward.

“That’s all” Duryoy said with a forced smile ‘We now know how you entered into my brain” he said with a fake enthusiasm.

“That’s all? That’s all?” the second one pitched a bit higher, “I need an apology for all that you said to me!”

“What did I say to you?”

“You frowned on me for no reason!”

“Come on, how old are we twelve?” Duryoy said pathetically continuing his pathetic smile

But Kritika didn’t seem to be enlightened by that tinier piece of motivation. Her creased forehead ran as abruptly as the subterranean deserts and her nostrils flaring with disappointment.

“Okay. Sorry. I over-reacted. I don’t have the energy to explain myself any more” Duryoy said loosening his shoulders and hanging his head low, giving out a deep breath of exhaust “Are we good now?”

“Not until you explain me everything I saw in my dreams.”

“DURYOY WAS NO ORDINARY DOCTOR”

It was one, good, animated scene, just as one usually sees in the movies of the West. Two men walking like lone wolves through an empty passageway, towards a door that stands at the end of the hall. Their footsteps reverberating around the hollow walls, in the middle of the night. The men weren’t looking towards each other. They had their eyes fixed to the door and motives fixed towards success. Had life a background music, they’d be resembling just like the ‘MEN In Black’ by now. They were just 10 feet away from the door when a beautiful girl,

walked in perpendicular to them. She stood near the door and peered towards the two with her beautiful eyes. The taller and the less older of the two looked at the other for some reaction. But he didn't receive a reaction.

ISRO's conference hall boomed into life as the door swung open and the hallway light, fell into the darkened room. Nothing inside the room other than the air conditioner seemed to be alive. And by the sudden commotion Milan jumped back to life from the little nap he unknowingly fell for. His red eyes peered towards the three dark figures standing at the door, staring right at him. One of them was a girl. Of course, that was Dvijata, unmistakable by the shady deep dark curve of her waist. The thinner sections of her fabric created a translucent shadow over the floor. The other two were undoubtedly men as there was nothing so exquisite about them

The shorter of the two men entered the room and disappeared into the darker corner, there was a tiny squeak sound just as the rodents make, then there were multiple cracking sounds and soon the dimly lit conference hall was now shining with bright white light all over, all around. And all the shadowy figures instantly gained their faces.

"And you must be Milan, right?" said the shorter man without expecting an answer, "I'm Chief Akram" he said as he shook hands with Milan. A strong handshake for a man of his age, Milan thought.

"And this is Aathman" Chief said pointing towards the taller man "He's a Secret Operation Specialist and has worked with ISRO. He'll be helping us get back Kritika... and the other guy."

"*Work-ed?*" Milan asked in a little surprise "Don't you work with ISRO anymore?"

With that sentence both Chief and Aathman shared a look.

"Aathman used to be the Head of Operations at CISO, but now he has switched to some other job. But he has agreed to help us on this. Back in his days, this guy used to be the best" Chief added with proud smile

Aathman and Milan shook hands like men and shared a professional smile. But somehow, somewhere down the line a light thought tweaked Aathman's mind as though he knew Milan. Milan's face was something he had seen previously, but he couldn't make out where, or even when.

Milan had noticed the extra milliseconds of eyes laid down on him,

but he chose to ignore it. Out of curiosity he looked back at Aathman again after a while and he caught him looking at him again and then they both chose to look at vaguely different directions. This has now started to sound like a gay thing, but I assure you there's nothing as such.

"Pardon me Chief, but aren't we informing the police about this?" Milan enquired trying to turn himself away from the partially-lustful glances of Aathman.

"Yes, we can" Chief said "But, we won't."

"We won't?" Milan said in an irritated tone

"Kritika is first an ISRO scientist, then a citizen of India. CISF deals with her first. And this kidnapping has certainly something to do with the device she has created. And we are in no position to reveal any fact regarding that project because that's something highly classified. And if we bring this case up to the police, in no time it would hit the media. And because this kidnapping has mostly everything to do with her project, the police officials would claim that this investigation cannot be put forward unless they get to know what sort of device she has created."

"But this means you're letting them die just because you do not want to disclose some shittier piece of information!" Milan yelled "How can you just give away someone who has dedicated her entire life for the cause of your organization?"

"You need to calm down Milan" interrupted Aathman.

"Listen, Milan." Chief said softly putting his hands over Milan's shoulder, "We aren't giving away any intel doesn't mean we don't care about Kritika. She had been one of the most prized possessions of ISRO. But you aren't getting the bigger picture here, son. Once we reveal her invention, it'll risk the life of many more scientists who were involved in this project because everything that we speak would definitely manage to get leaked. Every man has a price. And once this information reaches the hands of foreign spies, more kidnappings would follow this. More bloodshed, more gore, further loss of information will occur and this is an unending chain. So, if we want to see Kritika again, we need to settle this disquiet of ours and be patient."

"But why aren't we making any move then?"

"The most we can do for now is inform the CISF about this disappearance" Aathman suggested.

"Then why haven't we done that yet?"

“We cannot trust them entirely” Chief said with a pause “Sometimes these kidnappers have their men setup with the team and so every move that we choose to take unmistakably reaches the kidnappers. And if this goes on we can never take them off. And this isn’t the first time this is happening... Not at least for Aathman.”

“Yes, we can take help from them in bits just like hacking or face-recognition or geo-tracking. But we cannot entirely reveal the case to them because I’ve myself worked in that force a decade back. And you won’t even realise when the information has managed to slip off” Aathman said.

“Then how are we supposed to take a lead?” Dvijata interrupted. Her settled face barely managing words.

The female touch to the conversation had managed to neutralize the temper of the conversation. And by looking at Dvijata’s face, I bet it’s just impossible to say something that breaks her heart.

All men within that room had their curious eyes turned to Dvijata.

“And... Who’s she?” Aathman asked looking at Chief.

Chief explained something to Aathman, to which he nodded.

“Dear, what’s your name?”

“Dvijata.”

“Yes, Dvijata we’ll be doing our best to get your friend” Chief said with a hearty benevolence, “But you need to learn one thing that right now we’re not dealing with some local mafias or small-scale criminals. These happenings have international involvement, and very professional people carrying out the operations who can disappear in the sound of a breath. That’s how trained they are!”

“So you’re trying to tell me that there’s no way to get them back?” Dvijata said “That’s ridiculous!”

“No, we’re not saying we can’t get them back. We’ll fight back, of course. But you cannot expect us to win.”

“Listen I don’t want to know anything that you do not want me to know. But at least tell me if there is a hope that I get *Duryoy* back?” She had stopped asking about Kritika because she knew that it was all because of her that they mistook Duryoy as Milan and kidnapped him.

“Excuse me?” Aathman interrupted “Did you say, Duryoy?” he asked, pronouncing the name more clearly.

“Yes” Dvijata’s eyes narrowed.

“Duryoy Kundu? That kid from AIIMS?”

“You know him?”

“Of course. I’ve known him since the last 13 years.”

Awed faces waited for an explanation to that statement

“We both worked at ISRO!”

DURYOY’S GRIEF

“Duryoy, what is it that you’re hiding from me?” Kritika asked effortlessly inching her neck forward “This is no time to hold secrets!”

“I don’t need to hide anything. And the thing I’ve been hiding all life... I’ve already told you about that.”

“I saw you speaking to my father in that dream which you claim to be made of past memories!”

“It was just a random dream Kritika. Forget it! Dreams are culminations of past and present. It’s nothing new to see people who’ve already died in the past to be alive in your dreams!”

“Don’t contradict your words Duryoy. In dreams, we see only those things that we already know of, not a whole new theory of a probable time machine which came out of nowhere!” Kritika fired back “Duryoy you spoke to my father about the time machine which can function using NURAC, and then after I wake up you tell me that you’ve already manufactured NURAC. You promise my father that you’ll get into AIIMS, and guess what? You’re a pass-out from AIIMS! Do you need any reasons further to make me believe you or should I still believe the fact that I slept near a complete stranger in a close room and I got to know about his whole past in-detail in one dream!”

“Look, the drug in your system improves the brain activity- Agreed! But that doesn’t make all the things you saw to be true! Even I saw the 17-year-old you in a room and your parents quarrelling about getting a divorce. But did they?”

“YES THEY DID!” Kritika fired back, “My dad was one of the best scientists ISRO ever had, and for that he had to pay a price. Although this nation gleamed with pride over his excellence, there was this living hell his family had been witnessing! Every day, before leaving for school my mother looked at me and my twin brother as though she was looking at us for the last time. Armed men surrounded our house 24*7 and almost every alternate month my father received a letter threatening

to kidnap me or my twin brother, and they even once threatened to blow our entire house!”

“Look there must have been many problems in your past but that has absolutely nothing to do with me. I’m a neuropsychologist, your dad was an ISRO scientist. How do we even connect?”

“That’s what you’re supposed to explain me!”

“What, is this some sort of corporal pressure or what? Can’t a man have some privacy?”

“Duryoy don’t test my patience please” she said pressing her teeth hard together, “I’ve explained you enough.”

He was getting to stubborn to be resisted

“Aye, hey, hey, hey you don’t need to explain me your past. It’s unlikely that we even meet ever after, so I insist we must focus ourselves over more important issues like- How should we be escaping this damn perimeter, rather than discussing our meaningless pasts. Do you realise we will be killed after they extract information from us!”

“Fuck you Duryoy, fuck you!” Kritika said killing the echoes of Duryoy’s voice with a deadening silence “I don’t need your damn help, alright? Go die like one of those many who never had a damn identity. I’m ashamed to be strapped in here with a guy like you who’s so self-centred that he’d let me die rather than disclosing his research.”

And there was a photo still moment within the room, with Duryoy looking towards her with dark big eyes of repent and Kritika turning her head away from him with the deepest of disgust running through her blatant face.

Duryoy couldn’t comprehend the sudden outburst from Kritika. But had he known her a bit too closely he’d have known that the things she had shared with him held great significance for her. She never shared those with anyone. She wanted Duryoy to understand her, as a friend rather than a psychologist. And you know the main difference between a friend and a psychologist? You pay a psychologist to listen to you, but a friend pays you back with the stories of his life just to listen to you. Maybe she had started having feelings for Duryoy because that was one dark part of her past that she never preferred to talk about. But today while she spoke about it, Duryoy didn’t give a damn. That was indeed hard on her.

But it would be absolutely unfair to look at the situation through just

one perspective. Duryoy's condition was far beyond Kritika's reach. Barely could she realise the unsung battle fought within him. She had no idea how hard Dvijata's decision landed up on Duryoy. She never knew how hard it is not to be loved back by someone whom you cannot stop loving.

But the unforeseen stubbornness from Kritika's side made him realise how hard and nonsensical had he been throughout by taking off his part of grievances over a girl who just wanted to know about her father. Which child wouldn't want to listen about their parents whom they'd lost at a very early age! You cannot blame them for being overtly emotional just because you yourself never had one!

Duryoy's father used to be an army man who on one very unfortunate day took up his bag and said "Son, I've got to go to a war", and after that day he never returned. Some said he had died in that war. Some said he had married someone else. But whatever it was, his absence had left a void in Duryoy's heart.

The shrewd face of Duryoy had instantly melted to an apologetic one as he looked towards Kritika, who didn't care to look at him. Her eye liners had spread all over near her eyes and her wet skin over the layer of dry cosmetic made her face glisten like some Goddess. Her tired eyes and her slowed eyelids shutting down with inconsistent halts made her look even more beautiful. But Duryoy's heart was way beyond accepting the beauty of another woman.

Slowly trying to gather himself up he said "Kritika..." in a more considerate voice now "I don't have a better word to say, but I am sorry."

He sounded like he really meant it. But that didn't help. Well it never does!

Kritika continued to look away, but Duryoy knew he deserved that.

"You might never forget me for being this rude and idiotic but I think you'll at least care to understand the situation that I'm right now in" NO, she didn't turn

"Would you *at least* care to listen to it?", he reframed it once again "Will you *please* care to listen to me?"

"Why should I?" Kritika fired back "You never cared to listen to me, did you?"

"I heard every word you said. I just didn't agree to those/"

Kritika sniffed.

“But now I do, now I do” to which she eased a little, “I’ve always been fond of your psychologist friend. Always kept her close, never let her falter, always went by her side, always was on her side. But that wasn’t just because I cared for her, *I loved her*. Kept thinking that may be some day this friendship would turn up to be something more, but just today I came to know that she’s about to marry someone else” Duryoy said looking at Kritika, “I don’t think you know about this thing.”

“She did tell me about this” Kritika responded hesitantly.

“She told this to *you*?”

“But I thought she was talking about you.”

“Even I had been thinking the same... since the last 13 years.”

“Hadn’t you known her since just 7 years?” Kritika said politely, not trying to be nosy.

There was a pause over Duryoy’s face “Yeah, sorry, 7 years, whatever” he said hanging his head backwards looking up at the ceiling “7 fucking years with me and then she marries someone else, because her father thinks he suits better.”

“Do you even realise how pathetic do you sound?” Kritika said absolutely ignorant of Duryoy’s feelings “Even the beggars at the traffic signals try harder for a ten rupee than you’re trying for her Duryoy! You’re right now surrounded by that big ego which cannot handle rejection. But if you really want her, by now you should be ready to taste the grounds just for her sake. You should be doing anything and everything, you should be shamelessly chasing her, you should be fearlessly confessing to her what you want because ‘You want her’, ‘She doesn’t deserve you’. If you want something you do not deserve, you need to keep your pride and fear aside. I’ve got nothing much to say than this. You’ve invented a drug that can connect brains! Now use it to connect souls.”

That was one hell of a speech.

Duryoy was mesmerized by that impromptu monologue that Kritika had put up to cheer him up. He liked it. He liked it that someone cared about him, and his feelings. He liked it that there are people just as hard and ripped off as him. He knew that in this world of endless possibilities, there is someone somewhere in this earth who’s having the same set of problems as of his. And this made him realise that he was not alone.

“But” Duryoy said with a smile “I wish it was that simple...”

HOW DO YOU KNOW MY FATHER?

“Mom always thought that once dad retires, it would be an end to these frequent insecurities and we could live like normal people- *without any fear*. And more than that we’d be a normal family, surrounded by happiness rather than machine clad men. I knew about my mother’s dislike since I was too young to even know how young I was. But since the time I recall I’ve always found a fascination towards space. Yes, just like people get fascinated by movies, sports or books, for me it was the space. The never-ending, unexplored space. Maybe it was the way I grew-up roaming in the corridors at ISRO, maybe it was because I fancied my father so much. But whatever it was, the pull was too damn strong for me to resist. Well, we can hide what we like but we can never ignore it. And soon, one day I finally took up the courage to tell my parents that I wanted to pursue my career in space research, just like dad. And mom just couldn’t take it! She couldn’t afford spending another half of her life witnessing the same living hell. Her heart, her dream, her years of patience... all got shattered in a single blow of truth. According to her, it was because of dad that I wanted to pursue career in the same field, and she blamed him entirely for this. She never tried to convince me because all her life she had been tired of convincing her own self that this would end. Now she didn’t have the patience, or the courage.

I don’t know it was fate or misfortune but as I graduated my 12th I got a call from IIST (Indian Institute of Space Technology), Thiruvananthapuram. Those days AIEEE used to occur for engineering entrances and you need to be in the top 1000 to be getting a call from there. Now, that I got it I had one more dilemma to face, my family would have broken into bits if I took admission there. It was a tough decision. And as dad always used to say- It was never easy, I closed my heart and I didn’t take up the offer because family always matters more than education, right? And you never have the right to bet on your family’s happiness!

But no one knew my dreams better than dad. That was the best part of him. He even knew what my silence said. Without telling me or anyone about it, he went to the college campus, enrolled me into Astrophysics and there was just one thing that he said when he came

back-

Your dreams or your family! Choose any one and the choice isn't easy. It has never been easy...

Your family dies '30 years before you' die. But your dreams die, when 'you' die

You family won't always live up to your expectations. But your dreams will never disappoint you, if you ever give your best.

But well- Your family can wait, your dreams won't

I didn't want to deny it. I didn't deny it. I knew my dad was with me and will always be with me for whatever the situation might be. And the thing you saw in your dream Duryoy..." Kritika said, "... was the day when mom got to know that dad got me admitted into IIST, without her concern. She knew she had had enough. She left the house, divorced dad, took custody of my twin brother and left the town, the city and then even the country.

Since then, there had always been a hollowness within dad's eyes. Surely, he was a man of science, but he had a heart as fragile as any other human being. He sacrificed his life just to initiate mine, yet he never showed any regrets. And his soft face trying to hide the hardened emotions was what that made me follow my dreams even harder. His bet paid off as I got placed in ISRO signing me a research work and a scholarship cheque. At that time Mangalyan mission was just given thought of- how can someone send a satellite to Mars? But that's a different story. I know this story of mine sounds like some degraded version of some famous biopic, but I don't mind! *Because in the end, life's about the things you leave for the things you want to live...*

"Not really" Duryoy said with a tiny smile "The thing that you did needs courage. And I'd have applauded for you for doing that... only if my hands were free."

She smiled back, which was good and more than that, necessary.

"Your dad must have been real proud of you" Duryoy added.

"Ironically, dad could never see me become a scientist because even before I graduated, he was murdered..." Kritika shrugged, "See! You're not the only one who's got regrets in life."

"But your father died in a plane crash, didn't he?"

"That's just one way of sugarcoating the truth. We both know that

they are the one who killed him.”

“They?”

“Yes, you know who they are. They know who you are. They’ve always been with us, behind us, amidst us, but they’ve always been with us.”

“Wait, wait, I’m seriously missing a point here. I don’t know what and whom are you talking about!”

“NASA, ISRO, ROSCOSMOS (Russian Space Agency) these all have always been the most exceptional organizations on this planet when it comes to space research. Of course, US and Russians are behind one another and so they keep spying one another. But their attention got deviated towards India when there was a sudden boost in the core research industries of India- nuclear, space, thermal. And they knew that Indian brains have the potential to innovate, discover and reproduce technologies much faster than theirs. And this was an impending threat, because India had to be stopped or else India would have become the next superpower. Of course, when we do not get what we want, we try to steal it. When we cannot even steal it, we destroy the ones who have it. But this wasn’t just in India! Israel, Arab states, German, Russia, China, even Pakistan was undergoing such obstacles. But there was one common trait that had been followed all over the series of events- CIA”

“What makes you so sure about it?”

“These are certain things that everyone knows about. But no one chooses to talk about.”

“So, you blame CIA for the murder of your dad?”

“Not just my dad. CIA has had a consistent record- Dr Vikram Sarabhai, Homi Bhabha and even Indian ex-Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, you’ve heard over them right?”

“Hey, Shastra died due to heart attack, not some foreign terrorist activity” Duryoy reacted, as having remembered the day when he went with Dvijata to Chandni Chowk, the day he bought her a huge teddy bear- that very day they went to stroll around the Red Fort, from Red Fort the topic drifted to Prime Ministers and from Prime Ministers to x-Prime Ministers and from ex-Prime Ministers to Lal Bahadur Shastri.

Happy days, he thought

“Agreed, it was a heart attack. But how would you conclude the dark blue spots and the cut marks over his abdomen?”

“Well, dark blue spots are usually caused by poisoning” Duryoy said unsure “but... but he was the Prime Minister of India! Do you really think that no one ever questioned back even after seeing such marks over his body?”

“His very son questioned back but the post-mortem was never conducted or concluded properly. Although there’s a classified document regarding the investigation of his death, but RTI (Right to Information) applications to make the findings public had been rejected with reasons like –exemption, might disturb the International Relations and Parliamentary privileges may be hampered. And so, the death of ex-Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri could never be explained. And if this nation can afford to coldly suppress the death of a person as high as the Prime Minister, what’s my father then?”

“But how do you know it’s the CIA?” Duryoy argued back.

“I *do* have certain records which are more than enough to explain me who are responsible behind these killings, alright? And as much as I know this might be the same organization who have kidnapped us” Kritika said, lowering her voice a bit.

“Wait! If they kidnap space scientists, why on earth have they kidnapped me?”

“Maybe they mistook you as Milan...” Kritika shrugged “...he’s a from NASA.”

“Well, if you say that the kidnappers are funded by American government, then why would some nation pay to kidnap their own scientists?”

“That’s not the point Duryoy!” Kritika turned sharp with a darkened expression, “I told you all this just to let you know that even my father had undergone something similar. His disappearance had been concluded as death in a plane crash and I know that’s not true. I believe that you know something regarding my father, may that be irrelevant, may that even be just one formal meeting ... but I want to know about it because I saw you speaking to him in *that* dream and I know it was true. Every bit of information that you give me is crucial and I think that at least a child deserves to know things about his parents which she isn’t aware of!

So please Duryoy, **what do you know about my father?**”

SURVIVOR

“He didn’t work *in* ISRO. He worked *for* ISRO” Aathman corrected Dvijata as she continued to remain astounded, “He worked as an independent body but his research was funded by ISRO...”

“What research?” Dvijata said

“I don’t know!” Aathman objected “Projects in ISRO happen to be highly exclusive. I was just under the security division.”

“Then how do you know Duryoy?”

“He and I both worked under Dr Soni” Aathman paused “... Kritika’s father, I mean.”

“But, Duryoy knew Kritika’s father?” she said talking to herself “So I was right. Duryoy was *actually* into something which he didn’t want to tell me about.”

“Dr Soni had hired him, specifically for some work. I guess he must be really good at it, else no one recruits a 17-year-old to ISRO, not at least Dr Soni.”

There was an utter disappointment that could be spotted on Dvijata’s face. If given a chance she’d have definitely by now.

“Great! Is there anything *else* that I should be knowing about Duryoy?”

“He was working over some drug. That is all I know. And of course, he was a nice guy. Dr Soni always used to tell me that that kid would someday do wonders. He used to do his research in the AIIMS laboratories itself. I always went by once every month to make sure everything was alright. But am not very sure whether Duryoy could complete his project, because before he could do that the *unlikely* happened’.

“What *unlikely*?”

“You might not know about this, but Dr Soni had died in a plane crash.”

“Yes, I know about that!” Dvijata cut him quick, “That’s what gave Kritika the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.”

“Yes, but you don’t know what had *actually* happened inside the plane. Very few people know about this because it has been just buried deep into the piles of defence agencies because it was one of those which would have put the Indian defence forces into shame for its

inefficiency.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The plane crash. It wasn’t an accident.”

“Oh please! So, you’re telling me someone murdered Dr Soni.”

“Well why wouldn’t someone? He had information regarding every space program that was going on in India at that time. He was valued millions in the international market!”

“I’m not going to buy this thing Aathman!”

“Look, I don’t intend to make you believe anything. But there are three things you should be knowing about the plane crash. First, one of the 7 scientists who were travelling in the plane was the one who sold Dr Soni out because that time Dr Soni was involved in a project under DRDO (Defence Research and Development Organization). Second, the people inside the plane had died hours before the plane actually crashed. The lemonade that had been served was injected with poison and within except three, all other passengers died due to cardiac arrest. And third, the plane crashed because of the firing that took place within the cabin which had pierced the engines and fuselage causing the plane to crash. Most parts got burned down after the plane crashed so no one could predict that there had been bullets fired minutes before the crash.”

“And what about the poisoning thing?” Dvijata said “You’re trying to tell me that almost all passengers had been poisoned but none of their autopsy records could catch the presence, eh?”

“Yes, I’m not joking. Most bodies had been burned by then. But the ones that weren’t had no marks, nothing. Just a cardiac arrest all of a sudden. And guess what? In 1967 the Church Committee had confirmed that CIA had created biological weapons whose traces could escape autopsy. And the toxins were powerful enough to kill someone in just 15 minutes. Which was why our first doubt being the CIA, because America was the only one who’d have been benefitted the most if Indian space program suffered a backset.”

Dvijata could spot sense in Aathman’s words. No, that man wasn’t faking it. She could read it from his body language.

“Then how did *you* survive?”

“Well I don’t drink lemonades, and they didn’t poison Dr Soni because they had intel to gain from him.”

“Wait a minute. Who was the third guy on that plane then?”

“You’re joking, aren’t you?”

“Do I look like I am?” Dvijata said in a no-nonsense tone

“It was Duryoy! Wasn’t that obvious?”

THE DURYOY STORY

“Have you ever found someone who seems *just* perfect? As if she was meant for you, only you. She doesn’t look like the perfect girl you’ve always fantasized about and her laugh is really pathetic but still sitting by her makes you feel that time should just pause so that she keeps on speaking and you just lean a little back and watch her side face, covered by the beautiful brown shade of hairs and watch her cheeks bulge when she laughs at her own jokes” Duryoy said, himself being lost in some unknown pool of memories.

“Duryoy” Kritika said with a depressive sigh, “I realise that you miss Dvijata but by constantly thinking about her you’re just making yourself worse.”

“This is not about Dvijata!” Duryoy said cutting her sharp “There is no Dvijata in this, there was no Dvijata for me. I’m talking about the girl who fell from the second floor of Calcutta Medical College, the one who saw in my dream.”

“So that was real?”

“Every single thing that you saw about me, in there, was real” Duryoy hung his head low “She was with me in Durga pooja pandal, that evening. Her father had a heart attack that evening and was hospitalized. Her parents tried her phone but her phone was with me and I... I didn’t realise all this happening. I think the phone was in silent, maybe, maybe not. I was in love, love with her skin, love with her voice, love with her eyes, everything! And I never realised that love deprives us of our senses more than anesthesia does. On getting the news of her father’s attack, she hurried back to Calcutta Medical college, and never waited for once to catch her breath. That was one *wild* run she ran. And while rushing through the aisle she stepped over a wet patch. She lost her balance. Two swings, one crash over the low railing and she landed straight two floors down straight on her head” Duryoy let out a sigh, “On the spot death. She didn’t yell, she didn’t try to save herself. It was just a silent death with a just a light thud. All those thoughts that she had planted in me about marrying me someday, walking by me in the pandals as my wife,

and getting back home without worrying about being answerable to parents. All those tiny dreams got shattered in one damn second. Every single dream!”

Duryoy’s face was running on tears as they carried the guilt of being the reason for someone’s death. Someone whom he loved more than himself.

“That evening I urged her to stay a little longer. Had I not. She’d have been alive!” Duryoy cried and cried, as his voice broke “It was I who turned her phone to silent so that she could enjoy the evening with me. Had I not, she’d have been alive. And for all those things I did to her, she paid the price!” and he continued to shed tears as his head rolled from one shoulder to another “Why had life to be so unfair to her?”

“I’m so sorry Duryoy” she whispered “I could never fathom what you were going through. And, this might be a little discomfoting” Kritika added “But when I looked at the dead girl’s face, I saw Dvijata. Why was that?”

“That’s because you’ve never seen Saaera. So, your brain couldn’t create a face for someone it didn’t know. Hence it substituted the face with someone it knows.”

Kritika didn’t utter a question further because she knew this was not at all a good time. She just waited for Duryoy to deal with his emotions and be stable enough to continue the conversation.

“You might be thinking that what does a 17-year-old boy know about love?” Duryoy said, his eyes reddened immensely, “You know, it wasn’t the loss of love that shocked me. It was the death. People told me time would heal everything. They never told me that it always leaves a scar behind. Then began the nightmares and those dreams in which she’d come up to me saying ‘Duryoy, you could have saved me’, ‘Duryoy, help me!’ and I became paranoiac. Couldn’t sleep, couldn’t be awake, couldn’t cry, couldn’t eat! I always had to bunk one lecture past the lunch break just so she could finish her lunch” he smiled, “she was a slow eater.”

“But if it was that irresistible you could have at least tried expressing yourself to someone- may be your parents or maybe someone close to you.”

“With whom? Who would have the time to listen to the love story of a teenager? The people I’ve tried sharing with either said time would

heal everything, or they'd say there's much more to life than this. They don't care. They bloody don't care!"

"Tried sharing this with your father?" Kritika said gulping hard "Dads always know how to deal with these situations. They're the friend who afford our meals, they're the friend who take care of us, they're the friend who gives us shelter, they're the friend who fights for you when you're down, they're the friend who'd talk about your likes and dislikes and hate and love and they're the friend for whom buying you a doll with his first salary is more important than buying himself a purse. They're amazing, aren't they?"

"Not in my case" Duryoy said "My father left me and my mother all alone to serve for the country making us live the life of limited happiness. Of course, he was alive and still is and he always sends a fair share of his earned money to us, but I don't think money can ever buy you someone's presence" Duryoy said sticking his eyes to a point "But nevertheless the nightmares made me realise that your eyes accept death, but your heart never does. I knew that the girl would die only when I die. But I also realized that till the point I live, she lives."

"And so you came up with the idea of NURAC so that you can use dreams to visit her?" Kritika completed, trying to connect the missing dots.

"No, no, no. That's where I went wrong. I thought that creating NURAC would solve everything, but they did nothing more than increasing my capacity to remember dreams after they end. So, I tried to revive her. Skip the time, change the past and bring her back to life." Duryoy said sliding uncomfortably over his chair.

Their conversation came to a halt as a strong, wild punch landed over the door from outside. Duryoy ran back into full consciousness not uttering a word further regarding his project. They both shared a look and their eyes shared the same fear. They could hear a man with a heavy voice shouting and repeated slamming against the door, or maybe kicking it hard. **5:15 AM**

Kritika gave a naïve look at the door but nothing apart from some rambling footsteps happened outside the door. The men outside still thought that the two were unconscious. Then, on figuring out a safer moment as the minor intrusion came back to a permanent halt, Duryoy continued "And that's when I got an idea- If we can peep into our past

through dreams. Why can't we go into our past through dreams?"

"That's when you went to my father for help!" Kritika said with a smile on her subtle face for getting to know Duryoy's contribution to her father's life.

DURYOY'S THEORY OF HUMAN MIND

With a hint of motivation over his doleful face, the 17-year-old Duryoy approached the dark green chalk-board to the left corner of the room. Picking up a white chalk from the bunch of four, he hastily dusted the board with his bare palm. AND with an intense gaze over the board, he took in a deep breath, paused for a second and then drew a tiny brain at the centre of the board.

'Dr Soni, although by looking at this you'll say this is just a brain but it's not. This is the 'Mind', the human mind! The only difference between the brain and the mind is that- brains are physical objects and are mortal, while mind is an imagined entity yet existent- Just like body and soul!' the 17-year-old Duryoy said, slightly dusting his palms over his jeans '...Now, every moment that we witness is straightaway received by 'OUR MIND'- The moment I'm living right now, the thing that had occurred to me 10 hours back or may be 10 years back it all gets stored in my mind. That's why while sleeping sometimes we witness what we've went through the entire day or maybe something which we went through a decade earlier. So, if the mind is a library, our memories are the books. We can get back to any of it and witness it as many times we want'

'But what about the future? You said, brain keeps things that have already occurred with it, but future has never occurred to anyone! Then how is it possible to look into the future?' Dr Soni asked

'Dr Soni, this is the only set back of my theory- Although we can try and undoubtedly witness our past, yet we can never witness our future! Because the only things that gets stored in our brain are the ones which we have already lived. But because we've never lived the future, we cannot get into the future while dreaming...'

'But this is what we do in dreams, relive some moments of the past... but where is the change? What if I want to 'physically' change something in the past? Your theory is just like a visual help, it helps you to see your past but doesn't let you make any changes in it! Then what is

the use?’ Dr Soni said, getting a bit impatient.

‘Dr Soni, I know it is hard to understand this but you need to focus over the things that I’m going to say next because if we want to make changes in our past first we need to reach our past! And for that there’s a model named ‘Bicycle model of time’ which tells us that a human life is just like a bicycle wheel- There’s a circular tire, and in the inner section of the tire at equal distances it has spikes emerging from it, all converging to one particular point- the hub. The circular tire of the cycle represents time. Now, just imagine the circular tire as a circular clock. The human life begins with the second’s hand touching ‘12’, one complete circle through every hour of the clock, and the life ends when it touches ‘12’ again. So the portion of clock covered by second’s hand depicts the part of the lifetime a person has already lived! Same is the case with the tire, life begins at 12 and ends at 12. Every point of the tire is connected by the spikes which carries the memories of every living moment to THE MIND- the hub of the wheel. And this very concept would help us travel back in time...

For example... Like today when some hypothetical person X landed from the flight at 18:00 this evening, that moment is stored in his mind and then 3 hours later (at 21:00) Mr X realises that he had forgotten one of his baggage back in the airport. So he goes back to the airport to get his baggage back, but it has already disappeared or practically speaking- Has been stolen. Now the lost baggage of Mr X was quite important for him and he wanted it back badly, but what could he possibly do? Time travel? But how?

So according to ‘MY’ theory if Mr X would love to travel back in time, he’d take a NURAC and go to sleep. Now because every moment of life has a spike attached to it, even the current moment would. And hence using his in-dream consciousness Mr X would walk in through the ‘Spike of the moment’ and enter his own MIND. Now the mind is the hub of every moment a person has lived in his past. Every moment, let that be that of 10 years back or 10 minutes back would be connected to the mind by some spike. All Mr X needs to do is find the spike which is attached to the time he wants to be in, that is 3 hours back! And once figures it out, if he follows back through the spike... he’ll exactly reach the time he wants to be in! It’s like a reset button of time’

‘But wait a minute, how’s this time travel thing going to work? If Mr

X of 21:00 travels back to the time 18:00 then at 18:00 there would be two Mr X existing at the same time, right? One, the already existing Mr X and the other who just travelled in time! Don't you think this is a paradox to your theory?' Dr Soni asked looking closely at the board.

The doubt was genuine, because reasoning here served a major purpose

'You can give it a thought later, but for the time being I think that you should proceed with your research and try developing the neuroactivating drugs because it all depends over the drug. Do not think much over how will it perform and all, just develop the drug first and in the mean time I'll try solving the paradox' Dr Soni said, totally amazed by the dedication and the knowledge which the kid showed towards doing things which was never termed 'possible'. Although Dr Soni had his expectations low regarding this project yet the theory and the reasoning and the way the kid explained had somehow managed this reasoning mind to believe in something without a reason!

*The 17-year-old Duryoy started gathering his books with a bleak smile of satisfaction over his face. And Dr Soni kept looking onto him with a thousand thoughts running parallel- **How could this boy create something which no one ever thought of? What compelled this boy to take such a step that he couldn't resist without speaking to me? Why?** The thoughts kept buzzing in Dr Soni's mind as he suddenly out of nowhere his thoughts turned into a voice and he asked out 'What made you come to me in such urgency? You could have waited, right?'*

'I was late, sir' the boy said finally strapping his bag back to his shoulder 'I should have come here earlier, but couldn't.'

The boy's voice didn't choke, neither did it sound broken. Yet an annoying pessimism could be well figured out from his face. Maybe he was a little weird and Dr Soni was soon to figure that out, but there remained a suspended feeling over his face.

'Why do you want to travel back in time?' Dr Soni asked 'Children of your age are usually busy enjoying parties and making friends, late night drives. Why not you?'

*A decade-like-10-second pause existed between the two. The boy looked at his watch and said, 'Because sir, the only girl with whom I enjoyed parties and went out for long drives died **2 month, 3 days, 35 hours and 43 minutes ago**'*

‘Well... that was quite tragic’ Dr Soni said feeling sorry for the misfortune ‘But your time calculation was quite quick though’

‘Oh no, I didn’t calculate that! My watch begins from the day she died.’

‘DURYOY WAS IN THE PLANE THAT CRASHED’

“But you said, the plane crashed and you were the *only* survivor!” Dvijata argued “How come Duryoy survived then?”

“Well, aren’t you happy he survived?” asked Aathman

“That’s not my point. I mean why on earth was he on that plane? And how can anyone survive a plane that crashed from 35,000 feet?”

“He jumped off the plane before it crashed. Actually, someone threw him out of the plane with a parachute. He could never know who that man was, but neither was it Dr Soni nor me” Aathman said making no gestures. “In Dr Soni’s diary entires he had mentioned being threatened by one of CISF’s senior members. And therefore, Chief didn’t want this news to reach CISF. He believes CISF has members who’re directly linked with Kritika’s kidnappers... so taking help of CISF is no less than voluntarily putting a tracker over every move we make. That way we can never get the two of them back, alive.”

“Then what exactly are you?” Dvijata asked.

“Waiter at Danny’s.”

“What?”

“And an ex-CISF” Aathman said, a rim of pride shining over his words, “I’ve been Dr Soni’s in-charge of Security.”

“So why did you leave CISF?”

“I didn’t leave it, moreover, I was made to leave. I was the only survivor to the plane crash which the media doubted as my direct involvement with the hijackers. According to them no one could ever escape such a crash unless they are well aware of its occurrence. Slowly the sparks turned into flames and everyone believed that I was definitely the one who was involved in the crash. And so, they fired me and blacklisted my name. I had cases running over me, my engagement broke, and my life was permanently ruined. It’s not much difficult to build up cases using false witnesses you know?”

Aathman said pulling himself a chair.

There were papers lying in front of him that had rough notes

scribbled on them, some pages had pictures, some didn't, some portions were highlighted and some were underlined with a blunt pencil. It didn't look like a diary, nor did it look like some official document. He kept browsing his eyes over the paper with anemic movements, he ran his hand through his hairs showing disappointment, and itched his sweaty face out of cluelessness.

"And more than that" he continued "I had no one who could prove that I wasn't guilty."

Aathman suddenly got conscious about Dvijata straightaway looking at his papers. But he didn't mind. Rather he turned to her with a delighted smile which she returned back without a word.

"Something personal?" Dvijata asked pointing towards the pile of papers.

"Not really" Aathman said shrugging his shoulders, "These are case studies of various scientist disappearances, their research methods, and all... I keep them with me, always. Helps me keep a track with ISRO."

"May I ask you something?"

"Feel free."

"Didn't Duryoy know that you weren't guilty of the crime?"

"Yes, he knew that" Aathman's gaze shifted downwards and a bleak smile showed up on his face, "Infact, he was the only witness who survived, but I couldn't risk him. I promised Dr Soni that I would never ever risk Duryoy, let that be for anything. Had I revealed him in front of press maybe my job at CISF would have remained but by now Duryoy would have been no more... His research demanded secrecy and I couldn't risk that young man just to overcome my own guilt because more than a scientist, he was a very dear friend of mine."

"More dearer than me I suppose" Dvijata sighed. "He never told me anything about all this. He never told me that he worked for ISRO. He never told me that he knew Dr Soni. He never told me that he had escaped a plane crash. He never told me that some international agencies are trying to chase him down. Maybe all of this because, I was never eligible enough to know all this" Dvijata said, her voice burdened with displeasure, "I have never ever been supportive to him. Always trying to impose myself over him... My doubts, my reasons, my worries, my life, my problems. And look where it led to!"

Aathman wanted to rise up from his chair and comfort her with a

warm tight hug because he knew that right now Dvijata was suffering exactly the way he had once suffered. But his life of military rules had made him devoid of the emotional touch. He knew how to act when a terrorist attack hits by, but he didn't know how to act when some girl cries in front of him. He felt paralyzed, emotionally. But he had nothing to give other than his words.

"Listen, umm... Dvijata. It's not your fault" Aathman said composing himself, "I am not saying this to comfort you, I am just mirroring you the reality. It's been nearly a decade that I've been with scientists working under ISRO and nuclear programs and trust me they all are sworn to secrecy. It's not that Duryoy didn't trust you, but he knows that the moment he gives you the slightest of the information, he's not just risking his own life, but he'll be risking yours too. Maybe you're just too precious for him to be risked."

Dvijata froze to that conclusion.

"...And you guys aren't even married! Think of those scientists who're married and yet they cannot share a single thing with their spouse! I've seen families breaking up for this very reason. Dr Soni himself got divorced because of this. Life of a scientist is never as easy as it looks. And the toughest part is that, the world cannot know the reason for their death because it'd reveal necessary research information... and their stories remain unheard. This is the reality."

Sometimes in life things go so much out of hand that your mind questions you 'Whether all of this is real? Or just another dream?'

For Dvijata *this* was the moment.

"Just tell me one thing" Dvijata managed to speak out "Were you the one who sent the e-mail to Duryoy asking him to meet you outside AIIMS?"

"How'd you know that?"

"He used my computer to check mails" she shrugged with a tiny smile.

There was silence for a while.

Both had thoughts to convey yet not the words to speak.

"Do you know where Milan and Chief are?" Dvijata asked making an attempt to break the awkward silence.

"Yeah, they went to *the computer girl*..." Aathman replied uneasily

reverting back to his work.

WHY?

“Yes, we created NURAC! And some of it is still in your system right now...” Duryoy said as he watched Kritika peeping into his watch that had a tiny timer over the upper half that said 13.06.23.54 (Yr/Mon/Min/Sec).

“No, but the main aim for you was to travel back in time to save that girl from killing herself, right?” Kritika asked, “Could you save her?”

“Well, that’s something in which your father wasn’t involved...” Duryoy said putting forward his reluctance towards speaking up any further “I’ve told you everything that you wanted to hear. That was all between me and your father.”

“But you’re yet to tell me the conclusion! Did you both succeed or was my father killed in some experimental trial? I want to know!” Kritika asked

“Don’t be ridiculous! You already know that your dad was killed in a plane crash... Do I now need to prove that as well?”

“I just wanted a Yes or a NO! Whether you both could really travel back in time through dreams or not?”

“Kritika, I am here to tell you everything you ‘should’ know, not everything you ‘want’ to know. There’s something called privacy statement of a project and I believe you too know the pain of restraining yourself even after knowing everything that’s happening around. But that’s a work ethic that we need to follow!” Duryoy said with a reasonable patience. “Your father was just a part of the project which I was working on. He supported me with theories and assumptions while I kept working on my project. And before the project could end he was made to disappear! And that was all between your father and me!”

Kritika remained silent. Her crest fallen face with those dried up dark tear rails over her virtuous face but she couldn’t blame Duryoy too. He was right at his point. He had told her everything he knew about her father. What succeeded it shouldn’t really be her concern, as of now.

‘Why is it so important for you to know what happened in that experiment?’ asked Duryoy after a careful consideration of the little sympathy left within him.

“Because I want him back Duryoy!” Kritika said, her gaze fixed

downwards “I too want to go back in time, stop him from boarding that plane and give him a tight hug. Never letting him go anywhere alone. Just the way you didn’t want *Saaera* to die, even I didn’t want my father to die!”

“Kritika” he paused “You know after all the way experimenting with *time*... I’ve learnt that there’s one trick that time plays with us- **Things which aren’t meant for us would never belong to us, however hard we try.**”

THE COMPUTER GIRL

The computer girl.

She was one of the few people for whom Kritika actually meant it when she called her a friend. How they met was forgotten by both of them but what really mattered for them was the friendship. Kritika didn’t have much of friends and even with the little friends she had she wasn’t really much close to them. But this wasn’t the same with the computer girl....

The computer girl. She’s a pretty, little, fat girl- as chubby as a sponge, her face as white as milk but her fragrances nowhere near to the horrid smells of milk. It was jasmine, jasmine and rose, and also sweet like honey, actually the fragrance was something which you get on mixing every sweet things of this earth. And her beautiful fragrances complemented by her slow movements were quite opposite to her fingers which rammed the keypad at the speed of sonic jets.

And her short, square body was facing the computer screen as expected. Her thick glasses reflecting her screen and her fingers within their own world, coding something serious. And frankly, they hate to be interrupted. But the two men standing at the door waiting for the computer girl to look at them never understood that. They stepped into her cabin. The computer girl’s marble eyes shot a glance at Milan and went back again facing her computer screen “I’m busy. Wait for the software guys to come...” she announced bluntly

“Excuse me?” Milan asked, puzzled by her roughness “But this is important!”

“Hell, I am busy right now” she said with a big fat shrug with her big fat shoulders. She didn’t notice Chief standing behind Milan “I’ve no time. Take your friend with you too” she said without looking at

Chief.

“But...” Milan got irritated. *What sort of an audacity is this?*

“Oh, we’d love to do that dear” Chief interrupted making the computer girl look up from her screen, again. She looked irritated, again. And her eyebrows had arched themselves, again “But we have a situation here and you’re the best we could get. So, can you please help us?”

“Chief?” said the computer girl with an utter bewilderment. She instantly went on her knees, standing up, unstably, trying to keep her heavy body still “I am sorry sir, I didn’t notice you were here.”

“That’s all right, dear. Please sit, please sit.” Chief said getting closer to the small desk of the computer girl “We do really have a situation over here and your help is much needed. But before this I want to introduce you to Milan” Chief said pointing towards the silent, tall, skinny, Indo-American boy standing at the corner “He’s a flight trajectory specialist from NASA.”

“Milan, you mean her fiancé?”

“Yes” Milan replied hesitantly.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, sir” she said looking simultaneously at Chief and Milan. Milan was silently enjoying the immediate alteration her tone underwent when Chief showed up- as timid as though she smelled a snake in her room. “But I wasn’t informed of any visits sir. I checked the memo just 5 minutes ago, I’m very sure... no appointment had been scheduled” she kept mumbling hurriedly and apologetically. Tiny bits of saliva almost throwing up through the gap between her fat over-accessorised lips.

It was gross, but manageable. Her skills were needed more than her ethics.

“NO, no. This wasn’t something scheduled, but it’s a problem which came up last night” Chief said, “And this involves your friend Kritika.”

“Kritika?”

“Yes, but we need to be sure that you do not leak this information because this is supposed to be something highly confidential. And we cannot risk it... You know what I mean, right? Not even to the CISF”

“Yes sir” the computer girl nodded “But what’s the problem. Kritu is all right, right?”

Chief and Milan shared a look and Milan knew it was *his* turn to

Speak.

“Your friend, Kritika” he cleared his throat “has been kidnapped...”

LOVE CREATES ENEMIES

Two more hours had passed by and the dawn could be felt as the white curtains by the window got amiably illuminated.

Khalif's men were still on work as they kept a track on the CISF's activity. It was quite clear- ISRO wasn't ready to give up on Kritika, but no advances were made over searching either of the two, which was a better reason to worry because it meant, whatever was going inside the CISF wasn't able to reach Khalif. His contact within CISF had left no word with regard to any kidnapping leaving him at a blind spot! How could he plan his next move when he never knew his enemy's first?

Most days Khalif didn't feel like talking to anyone, and even today he didn't. But this scenario needed a joint measure, a collaborative decision that would keep them floating beneath the water. Because every passing second of nothingness was empowering the search teams who were looking for the scientists like wild hounds. If not taken, an effective measure, this would undoubtedly prove to be Khalif's last operation.

“Joshi...” Khalif called out in his rough usual voice “Meet me outside” he ordered, pushing the huge glass door of the control room and swiftly pacing out.

Joshi on the other hand was involved in something else. He took a photograph of Kritika and searched their database and the internet for any resemblance. He searched through newspaper photographs for the past 6 years, online magazines, Facebook profiles and finally had a face match named- *Kritika Soni*. He soon entered into her Facebook profile which he hacked using her Gmail account, which too he had hacked. And that's the job he had *actually* been hired for!

A computer engineer by origin and a master hacker, who had been jailed for illegal money transfer during his high-school days. Although what he underwent was way worse than his motive because the businessman whose account he had hacked was way too powerful because he had way too much money. The man had a thing with the local police officials, and they left no stakes to torture the boy as much

as possible. Joshi's entire career came to a dead-end. He was released after serving 3 years in the rehabilitation center as he got the benefit of being juvenile. Yet it did no good to him. He had been black-spotted for his entire life. No one would hire him, no one would give him a job leaving no option but to depend on petty jobs and thievery.

Well, no one ever asked him why he stole the money for. But the fact was, he had a mother who used to teach classical singing to the local kids. It never mattered to her if she had a bad throat or a tremendous cold. She had to sing in order to run the family. She over-stressed her throat on a daily basis, barely had any self-care and did all she could to earn her son an education. But one unfortunate day she had been detected with throat cancer. And his father, a mill worker whose emergency savings ranged till a maximum of 40,000 rupees, which by nowhere was enough to even keep his mother alive. Affording a treatment was way beyond imagination. His education too came to a halt as the money left would either help him afford his school fees for one more semester or would have allowed keeping his mother alive for one more month. And when God's adversity strikes someone, it's the God's gift that pays off the best. Joshi used his hacking skills to somehow afford his mother a life of near seven months! Hacked the account of some careless son of a rich businessman whose father credited his account with an amount that sliding nearly 4 digits from the net amount wouldn't make much difference.

Life was swift after that. He managed to pursue his schooling and a 7-month advance of his mother's treatment had been deposited. The family saving went down to 3 digits, and even those 3 digits were actually loans from relatives and his father's co-workers. Joshi's father began taking double shifts to repay the loan, and young Joshi began working every possible place where he could do a part time job- Petrol pumps, hotels, small ration shops. And the family managed to survive.

But it wasn't long enough when a second adversity had come and shook the entire family till the grounds. Joshi's mother's condition had suddenly worsened and the doctors demanded a prerequisite amount before the treatment could begin. His father had given up, and his mother, about to give up. And although he had his skills, he never wanted to put them to use because he knew, some or the other day this act of his would cost him quite high. But when your mother's life is at

stake you don't dare see what's ethical and what's not! But this time he didn't transfer money from the same account, instead he used an absolutely newer one because the needed amount was high this time, and a higher pre-existing amount is what was necessary to hide the stolen money.

But before he transferred the money to his account, he promised himself to repay every bit of it. And not just this one, even for the previous account he had used.

Finally, he made the last transition. But he knew the amount was too damn high to remain undetected. Soon the issue came afloat and Joshi had been arrested for illegal money transfer. His father's ancestral property had been seized by the bank and his family was left with nothing. Although the stolen money had extended his mother's life by over a year, but before he could get out of the rehabilitation center he received a news that his mother was no more.

Joshi minimized the screen as Khalif called him. The desktop background had a family photograph of his family which once existed. His mother who was dead, his father who couldn't take his mother's death and went mad, went missing and soon went nonexistent and the young Joshi who held each of his parent's hand.

Joshi gave it a quick look and quickly stood over his weak knees. Jerking his right leg lightly, he approached the door and in one push he exited the room.

His gaze searched for Khalif in the hallway and finally he saw Khalif standing right against the door in which the two scientists were kept.

"You wanted to see me sir?" Joshi asked, as he walked across the hall with a reassuring smile.

"Yeah, I was actually thinking of shifting our location because it won't be long that our location would be tracked... there are CCTVs all over the streets. Our car number must have been recorded. It won't be difficult to track us down once the search force figures out when and from where we kidnapped them" Khalif said with a concerned voice "And we aren't even getting any lead over the case! All I know about our hostages is that the girl is from ISRO and the guy once used to work with Dr Soni. And our bloody client, she isn't responding either... Damn

it!”

“Wait... sir...” Joshi asked hesitantly “Our client is a woman?”

“Yeah, she is, but she didn’t reveal her face... Just her voice.”

“Then maybe it’s a man who’s using voice modulator.”

“Possible.”

“But sir, you could have said NO to him.”

“Not to this man, Joshi. Not this one. He knew things which no one should know!”

Joshi felt like insisting over knowing a bit more but he was too surprised by the fact that there existed someone who could even threaten a man like Khalif! He felt the situation warming and easing simultaneously as there was no clue as to what to do further, yet Khalif was easing up over his personal front.

“Sir, I’ve got a small lead over the case but it’s not going anywhere” Joshi suggested.

Khalif didn’t react, yet he seemed interested enough to hear it out. “Sir from Kritika’s Gmail inbox, I figured out she’s suffering from a psychological disorder named PTSD. Her psychologist Dr Dvijata Shah is in her Facebook friend list and here’s the twist. Duryoy, the man we kidnapped, is a friend of Kritika’s psychologist!”

Khalif gave a confused look “You mean, these two don’t know each other?”

“NO, they might know each other but aren’t close enough... like not even Facebook close.”

“I know who the man is, Joshi” Khalif said “I just don’t know what our client needs from him. He was on the plane that crashed over the Indo-Pak border killing 7 ISRO scientists, including Dr Soni. Somehow our Mister Doctor seemed to have escaped before the plane crashed” Khalif said clutching his gigantic fists like some caged beast and fiercely punched over the door. Strong enough to break the door handle, as a slight awkward dent was now visible over the left corner of the door. He seemed ruthless as he yelled words too offensive to be penned down. He scratched and punched and pushed and shouted and kicked and again punched. And this went on for a while. **5:15**

All of a sudden, the control room door opened and a computer guy showed himself. He didn’t seem to stop as he approached for Khalif, totally ignoring Joshi’s ‘RETREAT!’ expressions.

“Sir, there’s a voicemail for you” he paused **“It’s from our client.”**

A TWIST IN THE TALE

Mornings had always been blissful for Dvijata. She was always the person who loved spending time with herself, observing things, making a big deal of the little things she experienced, fixing her gaze to the pure blue skyline, watching the sun turn itself from a tiny fresh orange to a huge torch, letting the cool morning breeze pass by under her ears, embracing her hairs. As though for the time, the entire problems of the world had just faded down into tiny dots.

The problem with the harsh moments in life is that somewhere the brain constantly keeps doubting the facts with dialogues likes ‘Is this really happening?’.

We fail to accept things the way they are because never ever have we been in such a worse situation! News of murders and blasts and suicides and kidnappings has been around us at such animated rates that we fail to realize there’s a world outside where these are *really* happening! And until we become the victim of this same misfortune, we might never realise how cruel can life actually be. Duryoy getting kidnapped, she meeting an ex-CISF man, being in the ISRO compound knowing Duryoy was a part of their research team! Life was now looking like a sci-fi movie.

Dvijata kept standing outside the Antariksh Bhavan watching the ISRO employees enter the compound as the early morning cuckoos from different trees continued pitching their voices higher and higher. Many of the employees walking-in eyed her through the corner of their eyes as her festive attire had undeniably managed to gain some attention.

But that didn’t stop her from reflecting the memories over herself. She still remembered the exact lines her father had told her over the phone, the day when her engagement had been fixed ‘Dvijata, Miss Raval has lost her husband long ago. Back in my days her husband and I used to be dearer than one could even think of. But that’s not the point. The thing is, her son works at NASA and is settled in Florida and earns quite a fortune. He’s well educated, holds a respectable position in NASA. Why don’t you just give your life a try with him? Miss Raval, she adores you a lot! And she being a widow has been singlehandedly driving the family since these many years. But I’m telling you all this

because I believe only a woman can understand the plight of the other'

And Dvijata didn't answer, which her father took to be 'Yes'.

Her father was a dominative and over-caring person. He hated all those who tried getting close to his daughter, example Duryoy, and cared for all those who've got nice jobs and handsome pay packages. (No I'm not stereotyping the fathers of Indian women, but it's true.)

Back in her college days, just because some guy from Delhi University confessed his affection towards her on a Confession page, her father made her deactivate her profile. When some guy tagged her in the School Reunion album her dad responded saying 'Why're you standing so close to him?', 'Why is this boy constantly messaging you?', 'Tell him not to contact you further or else I'd need to talk to his parents' and the dialogues continued. Although she had always hated Duryoy for pointing out these things regarding her father but now she realised that she herself was to be blamed for this.

But now it's too late! She told herself.

Wait! She remembered her father saying, he'd send the boy's pictures over WhatsApp and her phone did receive a message. *Oh yes! Dad must have sent me his picture.* And the curiosity within her kept knocking to see just one glimpse of the face that had so swiftly managed to ruin her entire evening, and was soon to ruin her entire life

I should show this man's picture to Milan, he too works at NASA, Florida. May be he knows him by face she thought, excitedly pulling her phone out and illuminating her whitish face with a whiter illumination from the mobile screen. Her heart was now beating faster than ever. She for the first time was going to have look over the man's face who was to become her future husband! She didn't like the thought though...

The picture was downloading as she read the caption saying 'Miss raval's son. isn't he handsome? his name is ARVIND' And she thunderously clicked the picture, gave it a closer look, narrowed her eyes, zoomed it, tried looking at it better, her heart pounding rapidly as she stood there in disbelief, and in shock, and in amazement and in utter confusion- **The picture was of Milan.** The same Milan whom Kritika claimed to be her fiancé

THE REVENGE

It was 6 past 10 in the morning when the events began to unroll

itself.

The momentary serenity of Duryoy and Kritika suddenly came to an abrupt end as the door swung open with a thunderous blow and two shadows fell over the floor below them. Their limbs ached back to life as the hearts skipped a beat and the ears turned just to hear four thudding steps rapidly approaching them. This was the first time when their kidnappers arrived while they were in their complete senses.

They both wanted answers, but by the time Duryoy's fearful face glimpsed the two men, they had reached for Kritika. One of them grabbed her jaw and pushed her forehead backwards "Open your mouth" demanded the man. Meanwhile the second man was busy untying her. "Open your mouth damn it!" sounded the first man as Kritika wrestled to keep her jaws tight.

"Hey! What the hell is going on?" Duryoy yelled

"Just shut your God damn mouth, okay?" said the first man as he slipped out a pocket knife from his left pocket and aimed it first at Duryoy and then pointed straight between Kritika's teeth like a nail.

"First leave her alone alright?" Duryoy said easing his voice "We can settle things! We can talk about it. I'll tell you whatever you want to know... just leave her!"

But both the men seemed to overhear Duryoy as they kept working on untying Kritika and constantly kept cursing her for having set her jaws tight.

"Listen you pretty girl, one last time I'm asking you to open your mouth..." said the first man getting very close to Kritika "If you don't open your mouth, I won't hesitate a bit into hammering this knife between your teeth. And I've done this before" the man said getting exceedingly close to Kritika's lips "So open up!"

Duryoy watched the man run his palms over Kritika's skin and it seemed like Kritika's face had managed to gain some unwanted attention.

Duryoy looked a bit stunted over the sudden behavioral change of the man, but not as much as Kritika herself when the man's lust-fueled gaze suddenly bent downward. A chill ran down Kritika's sullen lips as the man inched his face more into Kritika, close enough to run his nose over her neck. And from neck he kept cozily sliding his lips downwards as Kritika's face froze with the most undefinable fear of every girl's

nightmare.

Her limbs stopped trembling out of disgust and her eyeballs went stone still. A petrified gulp running down her wet neck was the only movement her body seemed to be having at the moment.

What the hell is he trying to do? Duryoy thought as he continued witnessing things he couldn't believe. Nor did he have any idea over how he should react. But one thing he was very sure of was that, silence won't help in any way. He couldn't resist to continue looking towards the animalistic act of watching a man snatching away a woman's soul from her. A voice within him kept urging him to speak out before it got too late. And with every passing second over the clock, his guilt was getting heavier! And at last, he couldn't tame his patience.

"STAY AWAY FROM HER" Duryoy yelled, totally letting his guilt speak through "GET YOUR FUCKING FACE OFF HER!" Duryoy screamed, but the man continued. The drive of lust had totally taken over the man's senses as with his large hands he groped Kritika from her slender waist and began running his fingers over her exposed part of the skin near the abdomen.

It seemed as though for the first time Kritika was not proud of having such a beautiful face. It wasn't her mistake yet she blamed herself as she coldly kept feeling the dirty wet lips running over her body, touching, kissing and wetting her already wet dress. Kritika's eyes met Duryoy's, cries of help tripping down her gaze as her heavily pounding heart kept inflating her lungs more and more, making the man's lips enjoy the touch of her sweaty breasts.

And with the sight of indecency being ripped off in front of his eyes, with a deafening scream Duryoy yelled "FUCK YOU bastard!" managing to create the biggest lump of saliva his dried-up mouth could afford and he spat it straight onto the man's face.

"Get your bloody hands off her" Duryoy added, as somehow his gross act made the man pause "Talk to me if you want to!"

The man stood up, wiping off his face. He didn't seem happy at all. That really was one good demeaning act from Duryoy's side. But Kritika wished he had thought a little about the consequences. The man flexed his athletic right leg, tipped it over its edge like a striker and with an open reflexive turn, he swung it hard towards Duryoy's face. The aim went straight towards his left cheek, straight where the jaw connects to

the skull. But Duryoy managed to pull his shoulder upwards at the correct moment saving the jaw from a painful fracture. The powerful blow over his left cheek however threw Duryoy with his entire chair to an anticlockwise freefall, straight onto the floor with a decisive cracking sound.

Duryoy's right elbow struck the ground first as he vividly felt a crack near the joint but it was bearable as compared to the tearing pain over his left cheek. And the fall was so sharp that the right handle of the chair broke. Although it sounds pathetic, yet it managed to loosen the rope on Duryoy's right hand, easing him up a bit. Suddenly he could feel the blood gushing into his fingers as the numbness of his right arm began to fade, and with the minimal control his right hand possessed over itself, he tried slipping his hand off the ropes.

The smell of the carpet beneath just got settled into Duryoy's nose as a part of his face continued to stick to the ground. He kept looking at the man-turned-beast who glared back at him like a wounded lion. Duryoy's eyes tilted slightly towards Kritika, more out of pain than pity. He needed help, but Kritika was the last person from whom he could have expected. He was happy to have managed to shift the man's gaze from Kritika's body to his own, but now what?

The man came near to Duryoy, lifted his tough black-leather-shoe-covered right leg. His leg being just inches away from smashing Duryoy's inclined face. Duryoy's palms continued to lose sweats in litres. The man grabbed his leg and pulled it towards himself preparing to smash Duryoy's face like a football.

Duryoy could feel it was all about to end. The voices had faded out as when he gave a last look towards the beautiful Kritika. She was crying, and trying to say something out loud to the man. But Duryoy was too petrified to hear that.

"Just know that if you try to kill him, you may never receive the information you kidnapped us for" she said. But it didn't matter. The man had already made up his mind.

The next instant he flung his muscular leg towards Duryoy and a deadly scream of agony pierced the air.

THE LATE REALIZATION

Milan and Chief headed back to the Conference hall with cups of tea

and buckets of information, after they ended their 20-minute talk with *the computer girl*. Their fast paced and repetitive footsteps could be heard all across the corridor. Milan kept blowing his tea inching his lips forward as the vapours from the fresh tea kept rising from the tea like fairies from the Wonderland. Now although Milan had been in Florida since this long, yet some parts of his character never lost the Indian touch, just like this one. Blowing the tea and taking small noisy sips from the plastic cup, letting the tongue feel the taste and embody the freshness and run it through the throat with a warm sensation. He missed all of this back in Florida. Not every Starbucks can give you the same satisfaction as a tea of Ten bucks does in India. He knew that, not just things but there are even habits which are indigenous only to India. Driving car in the wrong lane, a cute little cow mooing by you while you're standing on the roadside, the festive faces of some or the other group of people because this country is so secular that every day there undoubtedly *is* some festival to cheer people up, and every third person you speak to speaks one of the twenty-seven different languages existing in India (of course this doesn't happen daily) but still, we can at least be proud about the extreme flamboyance of cultures our country gifts us with.

But dropping back to reality- Chief walked briskly besides Milan, all tensed, somewhat relieved by the assurances given to him by the computer girl regarding the disclosure of the location where Kritika and Duryoy might have been taken. Just that there was a slight deviation in the plan this time- when the location would be gathered Chief thought of contacting to CISF and allowing *them* to deal with this in their way. Because now it was getting unbearable, for him, and the others who unwantedly had to be a part of this. With every passing second, they were losing the possibility of getting the two scientists back alive.

Scientists from ISRO and nuclear facilities have always been prone to kidnappings and unnatural deaths all the time, and it is the reality which needs to be gulped hard. Chief had often heard about these cases occurring around him- distant colleagues, immediate seniors, but he never thought that this might happen to one of his most loved persons.

These unnatural deaths of scientists often remain unexplained even after police investigations. Just like the one on 23 February 2010 when M Iyer, an engineer at BARC was found dead in his residence which

looked like a suicide, rather made to be look like one. Similar was the case where two high ranking officers who worked on India's first nuclear powered submarine INS Arihant- KK Josh and Abhish Shivam were found dead on the railway tracks. They weren't hit by the train as one knows by the markings and scratches over the body. Instead, they had been poisoned to death and their bodies were dumped over the railway tracks to make the deaths look as though it occurred by an accident, or rather suicide.

After investigating such cases, forensic experts revealed that not a single clue including the fingerprints or markings could be found on or around the body. And most of these cases end up as being called "unexplained". What irks more is the fact that Indian government although being aware of such losses of valuable persons who're crucial to the country's progress, yet it never issued any investigation on a serious note! They've just turned a blind eye towards every happening saying these cases are 'Unexplainable'.

So, one thing was very clear, had they not started doing anything soon, it won't be long enough that Chief would be watching Kritika's and Duryoy's body being pulled out from some isolated part of a swamp or may be some deep forest or some railway track.

But Chief had now begun doubting his own decisions. He knew if he shared the information with CISF then there were chances their moves get tracked and this way they will never be able to find the two scientists alive, ever again. But if he didn't, he was sure to lose the two. Ex-CISF Aathman was a capable man, but he wasn't strong enough to single-handedly take over the entire case. They needed external support. They needed muscle. It was a chance Chief *had* to take. He wanted to discuss about this with Milan, but he didn't want to ruin his first tea of the day. He waited for him to finish as they both passed by three employs who bid 'Good Morning' to Chief and an Office boy who wanted to know what he would like to have in lunch and a young woman in her 20s who wanted her leave to be sanctioned because she was getting married the next month.

"Chief" Milan said not sounding as normal as he was a while ago.

"Yes?" Chief said sensing the hesitation in his voice.

"Just a... nothing, leave"

"No, tell me! What is it?" Chief insisted

“Do you” he paused “Do you *really* think we can get Kritika back? Because I’m losing my hopes. I know we’re giving every last bit of ours but do you really think we’ll be able to outrun international terrorists?”

“Yes, of course! Why not?” Chief said, “But why do you ask me this?”

“Chief after I read about all these cases about nuclear and space scientists being kidnapped I don’t think Kritika would be able to survive through all this. She had been detected with Alzheimer and I don’t think she’d be able to live long in such a worsening condition.”

“W-H-A-T? When did *this* happen?” Chief asked, horrified by the mention of the disease “Alzheimer, but how come?”

“Dr Dvijata told this to me. I got a call from her prior to Kritika’s discharge informing me that Kritika had not been able to deal with her father’s death in a nice way. She was initially a patient of PTSD in which the patient gets highly stressed out. But the stress in turn made Kritika fall into a constant *depression*. And also she lived in fear that something quite similar might happen with her, causing *hypertension*. So, she exhibited two of the three reasons responsible for Alzheimer” Milan said “Many a times she even hallucinated.”

“Yeah. Just before she passed out she claimed to have seen her father in my office” Chief said, “It really freaked me out!”

“She does this every time. Sometimes she just calls me in the middle of the night saying ‘Ugh! Why didn’t you call me back Milan? Didn’t you see the five missed calls that I made!’, although it was I who called her 5 times. She sometimes starts thinking about things and then she thinks about it so intensely that she forgets to distinguish between the reality and what were merely just her thoughts.”

“How much time does she have?” Chief enquired

“Three to five years max” Milan said “But I wonder what effect will this kidnapping have on her brain. First her father dies and then this. It’s sad to say but I am losing hope Chief. Indeed I am...”

“Milan, I know it’s tough dealing with such things and it’s really brave of you to be still willing to marry Kritika even after knowing that she might live for just another five years. But right now, we cannot lose hope. It’s never too late to regret. But I am afraid this is all the time we have with us.”

“But Chief I’m talking about the international involvement in these

cases! These assassins and agents, they come and disappear just like smoke! How can we even track them? It's already been 7 hours since Kritika has got missing and we do not have a single lead!"

Chief abruptly paused mid-way as Milan took two steps forward before noticing the halt. He turned back at Chief saying "What's the matter Chief?", but Chief had an entire different set of horror bleeding down his aging face.

"Oh My God! Oh My God!" Chief said, the terror within his eyes now growing bigger and bigger. He was afraid, and terrified, as though having seen a ghost.

"Damn! We should have informed the CISF" Chief said holding his head with trembling, jittery hands "What have I done!"

"Would you care to speak up, please?" Milan asked getting agitated by Chief's repetitiveness of words, "Why CISF? You said kidnappers had their men inside the forces..."

"Yes, but if we had informed CISF then by now they'd have surely taken some action and blocked the roadways or may be increased the security checks at all the possible places from where the kidnappers could take Kritika and Duryoy away- The airports, highways, ports. But damn it! Why the hell didn't that occur to me?" Chief barked, like a loosened, frightful dog. His temper making him curse himself, "This case remains with us only till the point the two of them are inside the national boundaries. The moment they step off the international border, we lose them."

"Hey, hold on Chief. Take it easy" Milan said slowly patting Chief on his arms "If this was a reason to worry then Aathman must have taken this in consideration, definitely. He's an experienced guy."

"Yes but he had been off the grid for 8 years!" Chief yelled, his voices aching all over the hallway as every passer-by on the ends peeped in just to feed their inquisitiveness "Any man can make a mistake after staying 8 years off his job! And I cannot blame *him* because he's still trying to help us..."

"But we can still ask him, right?" Milan suggested "May be Aathman could realise his mistake and make a plan B? Or maybe he has a Plan B."

"No, no, no, I cannot take the risk to falter once again! This time if it goes wrong, I'll surely be living behind the bars for the rest of my life.

We need to talk to CISF, right now!”

“Then what about Aathman?” Milan asked pointing at the conference hall where Aathman was still on with his case studies

“He can continue to work with us” Chief said striding backwards with long, fast steps, as hurriedly as his old body could afford to walk “But CISF needs to know about this thing. We cannot crack this case with just intelligence. We need equipment and manpower too...”

“Alright am coming with you” Milan shrugged, took a step forward and stopped, immersed in thought.

“No, no, you stay here and check out what Aathman has got” Chief said, not turning back to see. He just waved his hand, took some loud echoing steps and disappeared, leaving Milan to wonder how did his life manage to change so much, in a single day?

WHO WAS MILAN?

The situation needed focus, an urgent focus. Dvijata was steeply shocked knowing that Milan Saini was actually using a fake name! He was trying to hide his identity from everyone, but why? He was an American citizen, a scientist at NASA, Kritika’s fiancé, all of Kritika’s staff knew of him, then why? And why didn’t Kritika ever tell Dvijata about this. Or maybe Milan was just trying to con her, who knows? But Kritika Soni isn’t a fool either. Since the time Dvijata had been treating her illness Kritika talked to her about Milan. So, was Kritika hiding something?

Dvijata took the fastest steps she could towards the Conference Hall in which Aathman was settled. She believed Aathman would be the most appropriate person to be trusted over in such a situation. She rechecked the photograph sent to her by her father just to be doubly sure it was Milan’s photograph, and yes! This time she was perfectly sure about that. Dvijata ran through the crowded first floor with CISF men doubting her activity, but at a place like ISRO people running with files in hand and urgency over their faces is not a very new thing. Dvijata quickly took the stairs, passed by some geeky scientists and some older ones and pushed herself through the corridor, took a left turn and, now the Conference Hall seemed to be in her reach. And BANG!

The wooden door swung open with a storm of colder air striking her sweaty face as both Milan and Aathman fretfully turned to her on having

the sudden noise cut through the silence of their work. And even before they could consider asking her what the matter was, she grabbed Milan by his collar swung pulled him closer to her temper eruptive face

“Who are you? Tell me!” she yelled

Aathman quickly bounced off his seat and grabbed Dvijata from behind trying to restrain her from nearly suffocating Milan to death “Dvijata leave him” he said battling to pull of her hands from his collars “What are you doing? Stop being ridiculous!”

“I... am being ridiculous?” she barked, her hands just about to scratch Milan’s eyes out “First ask him to reveal his true identity!”

“I *am* Milan, you crazy woman” Milan said as he her away from him, “What the hell is wrong with her?”. The over-excessive gust of anger that had taken over Dvijata made her immune to the fact that the extent to which she had pushed Milan backwards in his chair, was so high that any moment his chair could topple backwards. And the worst happened. There was a split second of the gravity-less feeling and then the feel of being pulled down by the earth from behind dominated that. Milan tried to save himself from the fall somehow making the chair land on its handle. And with one second of realization and the next second of pain, Milan was lying over the floor holding his aching hip bone, just beside the fallen chair and he couldn’t stop verbalizing his agony.

“What’s happening over here!” demanded Chief, who seemed to have heard the chaos occurring within the conference room as he was passing by “Don’t you guys have some decency left within you? You’re inside ISRO! Is this how you behave inside a professional space?”

But Dvijata wasn’t done yet and she charged back at Milan, again. Watching her get back to him Milan slid backwards like a terrified worm, slipping and falling yet backing off. Only this time Aathman had her arms locked and Dvijata could barely move a limb “Tell me who you are!”

“Dvijata calm down! I said calm down for a moment! Will you please?” Aathman yelled at her with an authoritative note in his voice, locking his arms further making her arms ache as though they were about to break “What is wrong with you? That *is* Milan! You’ve been with him this entire time!”

“No, this is not Milan” Dvijata said “This man is definitely *not* Milan. This man is faking. There *is* no Milan. There has never been a

man named Milan here in India.”

“Dvijata don’t be crazy. What the hell are you speaking anyway? He has all the documents needed to prove his identity. If not, he would not be standing *inside* ISRO. Do you get it?” Chief replied from behind “I think you’re highly deprived of sleep. You need to rest!”

“Chief I’m a doctor. I can speak for myself” Dvijata said jerking her hands trying to free herself from Aathman, but she couldn’t “If this man is Milan then tell me who is Arvind Raval, eh?” she said glaring at Milan ‘Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Mr Raval?”

Silence followed by an immediate change on Milan’s face followed the dialogue.

“And you although have nothing to do with ISRO, nothing to do with Kritika yet you’re standing in front of us, inside ISRO, suggesting us what to do and what not to. So Mr Arvind Raval” she said, “You better not in any way be involved in this kidnapping because if you are, trust me there’d be no one worse than me.”

“Wait, wait, wait a minute” Aathman said sounding totally confused “How do you know this?”

Aathman loosened his grip and set Dvijata free, luckily, she didn’t turn violent again.

She quickly picked her phone and said “It’s because my father had arranged my marriage with *this* man- Arvind Raval. And just today when he sent me his picture” Dvijata hastily swiped over the screen searching for the image her father had sent to her “I got to know that this man is not Milan”

“This is ridiculous!” Milan said from the distance “Throughout the evening Kritika had been calling me by my name. And why on earth will Kritika be with me if she doesn’t even know me? And where did you get this name for me?”

“Oh stop acting so innocent! I’ve every clue to prove you false” Dvijata fired back „My father talks to your mother, regularly! I know your whole damn family background and that you work at NASA. The point is why did you fake your identity?”

“That’s insane! What about my passports and all?”

“This isn’t the first time someone is hearing of a fake passport, alright Arvind? In an era where finger prints can be infringed you’re trying to sell me that you cannot create a fake passport?”

“Stop calling me Arvind!”

“Dvijata, but this is no proof” Chief said appearing from behind “We cannot just arrest someone just on the basis of some photographs your father had sent. It can be an error from his side too...”

“Oh yes, it can be!” Dvijata said “But you know what? If we doubt someone, we must call them right away! And BINGO, look what I’ve got” she said showing her phone to Milan “Kritika gave me this contact in case of emergencies, this indeed is the *real* Milan’s number.”

“*Real* Milan?” Aathman asked “So there’s actually a Milan?”

“Yes, and he’d be answering to this call of mine from Florida. Because that Milan indeed works at NASA” Kritika said pressing her phone against her ears. And the phone rang “It’s ringing” she said looking at Aathman and she put the phone on speaker “Why isn’t the phone in your pocket ringing then Mr Milan?” she asked looking at the man whose identity was hanging between two.

“Because I do not carry my American cell number here in India! I’m from NASA, I work for the American government and there’s always a chip in the phones of the employees who work for undercover projects so that our movements could be tracked making sure there’s no breach in information occurring. We’re scientists not pimps like you...”

“Hey mind your damned language, all right?” Aathman said pointing towards Milan. Aathman had somehow started to trust Dvijata’s words because he could feel something beneath the air happening around from the very beginning. Something was not just right.

The phone kept ringing out loud, unanswered and there was the silent communication between eyes of every person within the room. They just kept looking at each other and their ears all waiting for someone to answer the call

“Told you” Milan said shrugging his shoulders “This is absolutely...”

“Hello!” came a voice from the phone, as Milan’s face blew up instantly “Hel-low?” said the voice in the phone. It was accented but had an Indian touch to it.

“Hello.... hello am I audible?” Dvijata said pulling the phone closer to her mouth.

“Oh hi! Yes, you are” said the speaker “May I know who am I speaking to?”

“Yes, this is Dr Dvijata Shah, and Kritika’s psychologist. We’ve spoken earlier too” Dvijata said “And if I am not wrong, I am speaking to...”

“Oh! Milan... I’m Milan, Kritika’s fiancé” bragged the receiver “Is everything alright, doctor?”

“There can be many Milans!” opposed Milan, still sitting stubbornly over the floor.

“I’m sorry but which Milan are you?” Dvijata asked straightaway

“How many Milans do you know?” asked the receiver

“Actually, quite a many, am a doctor... same named patients are no longer any coincidence” Dvijata punned.

“Oh yeah, I am Milan SAINI. We’ve talked earlier too, Doctor. If you remember.”

“Oh I yes I think I do remember talking to you” Dvijata said trying to fill up the incomplete ends of the conversation “Actually Milan I was wondering if you could tell me your work address because I tried calling Kritika but she wasn’t picking up her phone. And I’ve to update my patient information list by today, so if you could just cooperate with me.”

“Yeah, sure, of course. You can just fill in the address as NASA, Florida, Kennedy Space Centre.”

“Thankyou” Kritika said instantly ending the call and tactfully spinning her phone between the fingers. The room was dead silent then and all eyes were transfixed over Dvijata.

“So are we done here or do we need more proofs that this man here isn’t Milan?”

A MESSAGE FROM THE CLIENT

The control room of SAW securities was set onto fire as a message from their client popped in Joshi’s mail window. The cups of coffee remained untouched as Khalif with his six other men began decrypting the message. Now, it was no ordinary message- The message was actually a video whose audio and video had been delinked. The audio was accessible and could be heard while the video had been secured and it needed a security code to watch it. And no one including Khalif was given any sort of security code by his client.

The message said “Get Kritika Soni and start interrogating her.”

Khalif kept waiting near the docile window for his men to bring up Kritika while Joshi was totally into his headphones, replaying the message they just received from their client. Joshi searched for any possible clue to decode the video by trying to figure out the surrounding sounds trying to make out the possible location where the video might have shot, but he didn't tamper much with it because some files are equipped with an inbuilt auto-destruct software, so the moment the system detects some unusual activity it just nullifies itself.

For the eleventh time Joshi played the audio as the same female voice continued to speak the same old words she had spoken in the last ten replays. It was eight seconds past the audio being played when a searing male scream tore through the room beside.

Everyone inside the control room, including Khalif happened to pause themselves so as to be sure of what they had just heard. Noticing the uncertain halt around himself, Joshi quickly pulled off his headphones and hassled towards the room in which Kritika and Duryoy were kept.

He secretly wished Kritika was all right as he strode through the hallway with the longest strides his legs could manage to take over the slippery marble flooring. With the last ten steps remaining his patience gave up and he began to run towards the door. And with his warm sweaty palms when he pushed the icy cold doorknob and swung the door open, an utterly distressing image of blood spilled out all over the carpet beneath and a man agonizing in deep pain was lying over the floor, crawling and turning over his own blood, tightly holding his leg that kept puffing out red fluid.

Joshi rolled his eyes around searching for Kritika, and finally he felt relieved on seeing her getting better, because this was for the first time past the last night's incident she was in her absolute senses.

Kritika looked across the hall just to see a man standing at the door, checking her out. Joshi's attention quickly wrenched back to the wounded man as Khalif entered the room with his forever heavy steps and all the heads swung to look at him. Even his presence demanded attention. The room remained silent as usual, yet Khalif's presence made it more frightening as always. This was for the first time Kritika was directly looking into the eyes of her kidnapper. But she had a faint sense of recognition that she had seen this man earlier too. Maybe it was the

day when she went to see her father off, ten years back, for the flight that never landed. Khalif was right there at the airport, but he didn't board the plane. Glimpses of her past kept flashing up in bits and pieces while Khalif looked upon every person in the room. He didn't utter a word, yet made it necessary that someone explains to him what has just happened.

The smell of the carpet beneath just got settled into Duryoy's nose as a part of his face continued to stick to the ground. He kept looking at the man-turned-beast who glared back at him like a wounded lion. Duryoy's eyes tilted slightly towards Kritika, more out of pain than pity. He needed help, but Kritika was the last person from whom he could have expected that. He was happy to have managed to shift the man's gaze from Kritika's body to his own, but now what?

Just as a snake staring a Snake charmer's organ, Duryoy kept looking into the heavy leather shoe of the man standing in front of him all set to kick blood out of his face. Like a frightened worm he kept slipping slowly backwards, although knowing it would do no good. Still, he gave life one last try. His right palm could feel the loosened broken handle of the chair.

The man in front of him showed no mercy and without the merest of contrition his leg flew forcefully towards Duryoy's placid face. And Duryoy, having nothing much to do for self-defence, stretched and inched his neck as far as possible just to save his face from getting smashed by a shoe. The first shot missed as the man got infuriated and went on for Duryoy's chest, which he resisted with a sharp blow over his left arm somehow saving his ribcage from cracking into bits. And then came the third blow straight across his abdomen, which Duryoy was sure he wouldn't survive.

Reflexively, his abdomen muscles contracted but not enough to resist the blow. But just when the leg touched his abdomen, with a shrilling pain Duryoy with all his strength managed to pull out the semi-broken piece of his chair handle. And before the man could pull his leg back, with the handful of bodily strength Duryoy dug the wooden piece deep into the man's calf. Deep enough to touch the bone within, as a gust of forced blood spilled out, and with a dreadful scream, the man collapsed over the floor.

Meanwhile, the blow over Duryoy's abdomen was so sharp that he

couldn't breathe any longer, his lungs starved for air and his throat felt too paralyzed to breathe. His respiration had halted. His surroundings seemed to be slowly fading as his struggle to breathe-in continued. And in no time Duryoy lost his consciousness.

"Sir... Sir, we were just trying to bring this girl to the next room... as you asked for, but this guy..." fumbled the second man as Duryoy's unconsciousness was noticed by Joshi.

"Hey, why is he lying unconscious?" Joshi asked, as he quickly stepped closer to Duryoy. He ran his fingers closer to Duryoy's nose as to his relief he felt him inhaling weakly "Still alive" Joshi concluded "But he needs immediate medical attention!" Joshi yelled as two more men from the medical room stepped into the room and took Duryoy in the medical room. Joshi accompanied them.

"Who did this to him?" Khalif asked, his tone serious than ever "They're our client's target and our client needs them alive. Which part of the instruction wasn't clear to you two?" Khalif asked, as he suddenly realised Kritika was still in the room listening to their conversation.

"He wasn't letting us do our job... and so..."

"And so you just threw his chair around, broke his chair's handle and kicked him till he nearly passed out?" yelled Khalif's shredded voice, "Is that what I had asked you to do? And how does a man who's tied from head to toe is supposed to obstruct you, I don't understand!"

Kritika kept looking at Khalif while the second man hung his head low. She remained speechless. The man remained speechless. The air remained speechless. The room remained speechless. The world remained speechless, when Khalif spoke.

And subduing the speechlessness, voices of hurried footsteps kept increasing near to the front door as after reaching the door, the footsteps stopped. The face of the man couldn't be seen, but his shadow could roughly make out that he was a short man wearing a cap. He whispered something to Khalif and on listening to it Khalif sharply knit his tight eye brows making Kritika conscious that something wasn't right.

"Bring her out! Right now!"

REVULSION

With this sudden disclosure of Milan's identity, all of a sudden the

man who had been claiming himself as Milan throughout the entire span of happening was now looked upon with hollow glimpses and unanswered doubts. There was a hesitation in his eyes and the shy of revelation, yet he was determined not to leave his point.

There were no further attempts made by the man to escape, which in a way could be looked upon as his confidence, or maybe he knew it would be just too useless to even attempt a blind breakout because he was inside India's one of the most reserved areas. He wasn't ready enough to welcome his own death in such a foolish manner. So instead, he silently sat there tactfully planning his next words rather than his next run.

"Who are you?" asked Aathman now stepping beside Dvijata "And why did you try entering this country with a fake ID?"

"Can we please focus over finding Kritika and the other man rather than debating over me?" said the man with a disappointed sigh "We have very less time left with us."

"Yes, but we do not need parasites hanging onto us" Dvijata interrupted.

The man did not seem to be interested in Dvijata's words but he had no choices left.

"Trust me, we need to hurry up" he said again.

"Not until you reveal your identity" Aathman said "I do not want any intruder breaking into my country and then breaking into ISRO with a fake ID. Did you know that you might now risk Chief's job if ISRO gets to know about you? He'll be called an anti-national or whatever craps, just because he let you inside this highly delicate area, blindly trusting your lies!"

"Aathman I know the consequences but I care of Kritika as much as you do! More than you do, in fact. And trust me, me hiding my identity has nothing to do with this."

"Then why did you hide it?"

"I have my reasons" the man shrugged

"Listen, I'm asking this for one last time" Aathman said getting his edgily muscular face close to him 'And believe me if you don't answer this right, I'll hand you over to CISF forces right away and Indian jails aren't something you'll like to stay inside. You're a scientist at NASA

and you've gained our respects. We just want to know what made you fake your identity?"

The man's reluctance to speak could be easily spotted on his face as he ran his over everyone inside the room. With nothing much to hide, he gave up.

"Alright I'm Arvind Raval" he said losing his stern "and I'm here just to help Kritika. Only because I got a call from Milan that Kritika had been admitted to the hospital."

"Did Kritika know you're not Milan?" Dvijata asked.

"More than anyone else!"

"Then why did she keep calling you Milan?"

"That's because she knew I'd be coming here with a fake identity! Why don't you get that?" demanded the Arvind with restlessness "Milan is my colleague at NASA. And it was I who made Kritika meet Milan. They met at a Collaborative program between NASA and ISRO."

"So Kritika knows you much before she knew Milan?"

"Decades... decades before she knew Milan" said the man with a cold smirk "She has been knowing me since 28 years."

"Don't bluff. Kritika herself is 28 years old" Dvijata said "Now don't tell me you met her at the hospital."

"Take it the way you want to Doctor" said Arvind "but it's always the hospitals where the twins know each other."

THE TWIN

Kritika had a twin brother, agreed. They hated each other because their parents hated each other. Kritika had no idea where her twin brother was and strongly disagreed towards having maintained any sort of contact with him. She didn't see him in years. She didn't see her mother in years. She never wanted to see the both in the upcoming years either. Those were the very words Kritika had to say regarding herself during the rare occasions when she popped out of the introverted heart of hers and found comfort within Dvijata's voice.

"You're Kritika's twin brother?" asked Aathman with disbelief screaming out of him

"Yes, I am!" said Arvind loudly, stretching himself outwards, totally frustrated because the team which is supposed to be finding his missing

sister is interrogating him instead “I am Kritika’s brother. She might have lied about me saying she didn’t maintain any contact with me, but yes she did! She did speak to me on a regular basis. For every tour she made to NASA she met me. She hated mom, and that was perfectly true when she used to state that she never spoke to mom. She never spoke to her since the divorce, although her mother kept in touch about her through Chief. But yes, the *useless* grand revelation you all have concerned yourselves for now is nothing grand at all. It makes no difference whether and how Kritika is related to me, all that matters is-where is she and is she safe? Isn’t anyone here sensible enough to understand what I am saying?”

“You’re saying you entered a country with fake identity, stepped into ISRO without informing us about it and you’re claiming ‘our’ concern to be useless?” Chief said, saliva spattering out of his rough old lips, a pretty little indication of an impending outburst “It’s people like you for which the nation suffers. And you’re trying to teach me what should I do and what I shouldn’t?”

Chief was already having a bad stressful day, and over that when someone vociferously claims his attempts as mere ‘*useless*’ thing, a volcanic enragement no longer is a surprise.

“Calm down Chief! Please calm down!” Aathman interrupted “We’ve a situation here. Two scientists have gone missing, that’s the main concern. We’ll have enough time to deal with Milan or Arvind or whoever the hell this man is...”

“Scums like you are the very reason why this country cannot progress” Chief continued totally ignoring Aathman “The nation feeds you, gives you everything you want, just so you could go outside and serve for another nation! And here you again come back here just to pull it further down? What guarantee can I take for you not being involved in this kidnapping?”

“Chief calm down please” Aathman pleaded still respecting Chief’s seniority “Allow me to handle this situation.”

“NO!” Chief said moving Aathman’s calm hands away from him “I want him behind the bars right now! And I don’t want to listen to any further word of him! Bloody trying to breach the national security and telling me what to do and what not.”

“Chief!” Aathman yelled, knowingly, intentionally, strongly, his

voice echoing throughout the room followed by a longer while of noiselessness “Do you trust me?” he asked, in a rather low voice.

Chief didn’t answer. With a blank wild stare he kept looking towards the infuriating face of Arvind.

“Chief, I’m waiting” Aathman said stepping closer, casting his huge shadow over Chief’s oily face. This time his movements gained some response as Chief turned towards Aathman with the same eyes ‘Do you trust me?’

Chief nodded

“So let me handle this my way. You calm down and check on the computer department, they must’ve figured something out by now. They need you there! I’ve got my way to deal with such people...” Aathman said feebly placing his hand over Chief’s shoulders “You just go” he said with an understanding nod “I’ll handle it... Trust me.”

Faintly approving to Aathman’s words Chief took a sharp turn towards the door without making any eye contact with anyone else in the room. On his way out Chief turned back with some pre-decided words in his mouth “You know what?” he said looking towards Arvind “If Dr Soni were alive, he would’ve been ashamed to have a son like you!”

And just like the 90s movies the door slammed behind.

“Is he always this annoying?” Arvind asked

ARVIND SPEAKS IT UP

“Back when our parents got divorced” Arvind said “My mother chose to shift to Chicago because her brother was an employee in an engineering firm there and he offered us a stay till we were stable and independent enough to be capable of living of our own. He actually had two houses there, one in which he lived, and the second which for him was more of a liability because just after he bought the house he got to know from the neighbourhood that some gruesome murder had taken place in that house, and since then no one stepped inside the house. But me and my mother being on the roads thought that a haunted house is much better than no house. There was reluctance at first, a light fear in our hearts but just like pain, even this faded with time. And no longer did the past of the house haunt us and the house got used to us, because in this era, nothing haunts our lives as much as humans do. And my uncle was absolutely fine with us living in that house because now he

didn't have to pay the land taxes and maintenance charges. He had dumped the living charges onto us saying he wasn't really in a good position due to the god-knows-which-recession. But it was fine by us. The alimony we were receiving was enough to earn a living in Chicago, although not very high standards or maybe not even the average standards of living where people go to pubs and hang out in coffee bars, but we afforded to live a normal life."

"Now genetic traits are something very amusing stuff, you know? Say the 4-year-old magician, or maybe 11-year-old kid who completed his MBBS, all are miracles of genetic superiority. And just like my father even I got the brain of a physicist. First Kritika got into IIST Thiruvananthapuram from where she got into ISRO. But I knew that people who scored very high in International Physics Olympiad, they're always welcomed to visit NASA and I had already studied for Aerospace engineering, so I considered giving the Olympiad a luck too. But one day a close relative from my mother's side told me that NASA doesn't usually prefer candidates having siblings in another space organisation, and not just siblings but any direct family members. This wasn't an official rule but that's what many people believed. I didn't know if it was true or not, but surely mom and I weren't really in a condition to 'try' things out and so we both changed our last name back to mom's family name- Raval. So that was the transition from Arvind Soni to Arvind Raval."

"Later I got into NASA and our living standards started acceding from average to normal and from normal it stayed on to there because now we realized the need for having a family saving. One year to my new job I bought the same house with our own independent money, although people asked us why we're paying to buy some haunted place. But maybe after all this ghost didn't seem as haunting as the fragility of human emotions."

Arvind paused to take a deep breath. It was rather moreover to think out what went ahead in life after the 'dream come true moment'.

"During my days of college, it was Kritika who supported me with her share of salary for my daily expenses... you know... Metro tickets, afternoon lunch which I told mom was provided by the college, stationery materials, and many more things that made me totally indebted to Kritika. Although every time I mentioned her role in my life,

she used to say, ‘There’s always more than one way to repay you debt, and someday you’ll realise that you’ve freed yourself from this guilt without even spending a single penny’. I didn’t know what she meant, but surely she had something in her mind. I didn’t ask her back. I never bothered her by asking her things which she didn’t feel like telling me. Because I trusted her. I trusted her instincts. And life went on then, I met Milan, another brilliant Indian physicist working for a foreign organization. He was the head of a particular module of the gigantic unit structure that NASA is still working on” Arvind shrugged “Kritika and I never shared our works not because we were too dedicated to our work ethics but because we knew possessing such information regarding foreign agencies will surmount our life with threats, and that was for sure. So it was better keeping things a mystery rather than yourself becoming a history. And we never met either, just yesterday when we met, it was nearly ten years since I last saw her. But you’d be wondering why did I change my name in order to arrive here, I could have done that with my own name, right?”

“NO, I couldn’t. Locations of every member working for such high profile programmes are constantly tracked all over the globe, movement, time, location, everything. Now I didn’t have any linkup with ISRO, nor anyone knows that I have a sister working there so in case I suddenly hop out of America and get into India, and that too straightaway to ISRO, undoubtedly, they’re going to run interrogative operations on me- Why did I go to ISRO? What all information have I leaked? What could be possible reason behind suddenly getting out of the country without any prior notice? And I’m still not in a situation to afford losing my job. But Milan on the other was working for the NASA-ISRO collaborative programme, remember? The same programme where he and Kritika met. And so Milan had no restrictions over movements to India and to ISRO. So if I used his identity to move to India no one would doubt me and Kritika guaranteed me a place in the ISRO guesthouse so in that way no one could have even doubted that it was I who was travelling to India using Milan’s ID.”

“And Milan knew about this and he fully understood me. Adding on to it, I was to become his brother-in-law so he never doubted my intentions. And when you work for such prestigious agencies, no doubt you start making contacts. So it took the least of the efforts for me to

develop the essentials needed to switch country without being noticed, at all.

Because had the kidnappers known *my* identity by now it would have been me along with Kritika and Duryoy” he joked.

“Not very true there” Aathman interrupted

“Why? You don’t believe me yet’

“No, but why would CIA kidnap someone from their own space program, eh?”

MAYBE

Khalif threw Kritika into his cabin, right onto his table. The files flew apart and the pen stand flew like some petrified pigeon and Kritika supported herself on her trembling arms. She was about to roll her tears. She felt devastated. She had had enough.

Things weren’t certain, neither for the victim nor for the kidnappers. With this, Khalif lost his patience and the patience lost control over itself and the patience-less impatience fired over to Kritika Soni. Khalif recklessly grabbed her by her neck and banged her head over his glass table, shattering the table’s left quarter into pieces. The broken pieces lay untouched next to Kritika as she sat beside, holding her head with trembling hands, trying to bear the throbbing pain. Her cornering hairs had begun getting heavier and wet, and seconds’ later blood began tripping off her dented forehead. The tinier pieces of wound still sticking to her cut made it worse but she somehow benumbed the pain.

“Tell me anything and everything you’ve got. I want the slightest details and I want it now!” Khalif growled, showing zero sympathy towards Kritika’s condition "Now, you’ve got very less time with yourself. Choice is yours.”

“And what if I don’t?” Kritika asked with a passive flatness.

“Sorry?”

“What if I don’t give you the information?”

“Then you’ll suffer the same fate as your father” Khalif said with a twitched smirk “Seriously, why can’t your family just coordinate with us and give us the information we need? Just like *any damn person* would!”

“Maybe that’s why *any damn person* doesn’t get into ISRO!”

“Stubborn people, I tell you!” Khalif said pulling out a cigarette “Did you know ISRO loses 45 lives every year, and all of this because of

non-cooperative punks like you...” Khalif said pointing his lighter towards Kritika “I know what this is all about.”

“Trust me, you don’t know shit about me or what I do.”

“You don’t get it girl” Khalif shook his head as he lighted up a 3-cm flame from his lighter and beetled his cigarette over the flame, “See, we get to the information irrespective of how much it costs us” he sucked in the flame hard, trying to brighten up the tip “Now if you don’t reveal anything, we definitely cannot send you back alive! So, it’s simple” he said releasing a cloud of smoke “You die. We move on to the next person who knows about this project... He tells, maybe he survives. If he doesn’t- plus one added to the count. Maybe you matter to the nation. But for us, you guys don’t.”

“You know what?” Kritika said, not hesitating even after knowing it was Khalif she was talking to “You’re barely as complex as you pretend to be. In fact, the words you just told me explains me how useless you really are!”

Khalif didn’t react. He didn’t want to. For all he knew was that- till the point she was inside the premise area she couldn’t even move an arm against his will.

“*KHALIF* you know... you’re still an amateur. And trust me it doesn’t matter how much you’d like to brag about your years of experience, you can never really earn *that* level of respect which even an intern at ISRO earns” Kritika said with a pacified direct voice “because by doing this you’re making a fool of yourself. Because all you do is first beg then threaten, then when even the feeblest of the scientists doesn’t break by your words, your dissatisfied ego forces you to kill them. But do you realise that these frail men have more sense of nationality than you, even though you claim yourself to be from NDA?” and she smiled “How much more are you going to demean yourself?”

Taking out the lighted cigarette from his heavy lips, Khalif leaped forward like a wounded dog. Holding her frail jaw he pressed the lighted cigarette hard into Kritika’s bare cut over her head. And just as the flames touched the fluid, a sound as vivid as a snake’s a hiss rose up and then came the grunting scream from Kritika. It was terrible. It was inhuman. Her voice broke out of pain and she was about to pass out as her eye balls rolled upwards, when Khalif chose to retreat.

She clenched her head tight and with a sniveling voice, she kept

crying and the dried up tear lines on her face continued to burn her cheeks. She kept twirling over the floor, like a dying fish. It was burning. The pain was tearing apart her head as she kept crying and screaming and cursing and dying.

“Was this all? Or should I show you further? My years of *useless* experience...” Khalif asked throwing away the cigarette. “If you weren’t important and had I not known your father, by now this cigarette would have been inside your eyes and all you’d be doing is dying to take back your words. So now you can at least thank your dead father for being any good to you!”

“Scums like you have no idea what a father’s sacrifice is all about” Kritika said pressing her jaw tightly, out of pain.

Khalif reciprocated with a deep exhale.

“Aren’t you afraid?” he asked with a pause

“Of you?”

“Of death.”

“A part of me died the day you killed my father, Khalif” Kritika said “But the rest that remained, had a reason strong enough to survive any death.”

“I wish you were as smart as your words are.”

“I may be dumb, Khalif. But I also know you won’t kill me. You cannot. No one knows about my research more than me”

“You really think I’m *that* stupid? I’ve got every single data related to your project- Chief and the South-Indian new recruit of yours have been a part of the research since May 2011 and November 2016, respectively” Khalif added “Your research included excavation of the xynim crystals from the Western Ghats and last morning you tested your device. You threw-in your necklace in order to verify your device functioning and later you collapsed since you’re a patient of PTSD, and you cannot handle enough stress. I know everything about you and people you’re surrounded by, and you don’t know a thing about me... so make sure you don’t try being a smart-ass in front of me, which includes the wrong idea that I won’t kill you.”

“You didn’t listen to what I said Khalif -*No one knows about my research more than me*- They can explain you what I did but they can’t explain you how I did. Either way, you lose.”

“And how is that possible?”

“Because you’ve got no idea what you’re doing!”

“So now you know about me, more than I know about myself, ah?”

“Well if you know everything then tell me why did you kidnap Duryoy? He and I just met 5 minutes before you and your men dropped by to ruin our evening” Kritika said “Your client never told you anything about him, didn’t even provide you with a *photograph*! Then how did you know it was Duryoy your client demanded for?” Kritika asked back with an atrocious gleam over her face.

“I’m not here to...” but suddenly Khalif held his words. His eyes narrowed, and so did his voice “How do you know about the photograph?” asked Khalif, getting closer to her “And how do you know my name?”

“Well, I belong to one of world’s toughest-to-get-into organization. You can expect some innate talent on my side” Kritika said with a smile.

“No one calls me by my name”

“Stop being fooled by your ego, Khalif. Your client won’t come back! By holding the two of us you’re only diversifying your own difficulties.”

“You don’t need to worry about me” Khalif retorted “Now, before I start forcing answers out of you, why don’t you yourself give them up?”

“You aren’t really going to kill me just because some voice message from a random stranger asked you to do so, right? Cause that’d be highly unprofessional of you.”

How does she know all this? yelled the insides of Khalif

“How did you know about the audio clip?” he said.

“Well, a woman always has more than one way to know what she wants to know.”

“This isn’t really a good time to joke, Kritika.”

“Well you’re the one who’s got one of the best hackers and you’re still unable to decode a damn video! And you’re saying I’m the one who’s joking?”

Khalif looked back at her with hollow eyes.

He was absolutely clueless on how Kritika was able to read his mind. In these many years of career never did any of his victims overshadow him to this extent! He felt as though the ground beneath him had been shaken to its very core!

“Khalif?” Kritika said interrupting his thoughts “If you’re

wondering how did I know about all this, then let me give you a hint. Did it ever occur to you that I could be your client?”

A DOUBT OVER CHIEF

The great writer Mark Twain once said ‘The two most important days of your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why’. That moment for Dvijata was- right now. This was the moment when friendship was changing to love, and this transition was way beyond overwhelming. And now that she knew that the man she was to be engaged to was Arvind, and the fact that she had absolutely zero affection towards him, her silent craving for Duryoy increased further. The only chains that were crossing her legs have now been set free, and her warmth towards Duryoy was growing insistently. And if the same went on for a few more slowed down moments then it won’t be long enough that her affection would start calling itself as an obsession. She enjoyed the feeling irrespective of how it made her feel.

“There’s one thing that Chief didn’t tell you all. And he didn’t tell *me* either” Aathman said interrupting Dvijata’s boulevard of dreams “That, Kritika was working on the same project on which Duryoy was-TIME. Yes...” he said looking at their awestruck faces “Kritika Soni was not *just* kidnapped, she had been kidnapped within 24 hours of the completion of her project which adds up a new dimension to our search. This morning just after Dvijata went out for a walk, I went on to freshen myself when on my way I saw Chief’s cabin, technically the last spot where Kritika was last seen in her full senses. So there should have been *something* inside the cabin which might give us a lead. And luckily Chief had left his cabin unlocked. Roughly going over the document papers scattered around I got to know that Kritika had created... um, an artificial wormhole.”

“WHAT?” said Arvind and Dvijata in unison.

“A working model?” Arvind asked, to which Aathman nodded
Arvind had his mouth wide agape “But that’s impossible!”

“I brought these papers along” Aathman said producing some terribly folded pieces of paper from his pocket “But this has brought a new dimension to our search.”

Arvind grabbed those papers and gave it a read as his eyes popped out of utter amazement “Un-fucking- believable!” he said running

through the page “Wow!”

“What’s more interesting is that Kritika got kidnapped within 24 hours after she completed her project.”

“What are you trying to infer?” Dvijata asked

“...and no one other than Chief knew about the completion of her project.”

WHAT WAS CHIEF HIDING?

From deep within the cabins of the Space Research and Development block to the greenish expanse outside, numerous ‘No smoking’ signs greeted Chief with their bold redness imprinted over the off-white boards. But Chief ignored them. He ignored them all, as he walked through the stairways, by the office-boys holding the Milton flasks with the 9-o-clock tea.

An increasing panic ran within his nerves, as the pressure kept shortening his breath and reddening up the tip of his nose. The loose ends of his unkept beard kept hoisting like some free flag and his temple kept bathing itself with sweat.

The building perimeter was exited and the hot closed air of the building was left behind and cut in by a fresher batch of cool air striking his face. His lungs kept filling in the air more and more and now he was walking far from the building, approaching the gigantic fenced walls of the campus perimeter, away from the curious eyes, deeper into the solitude. His senses were at peace as he pulled out a cigarette and dipped it’s tip into the lighter’s flame. The nicotine became his oxygen.

He puffed-in one last time before he heard a clinking noise of a metal behind his head. The sound wasn’t very alien as most fight sequences in a film begin with this sound. Chief didn’t turn. He threw away the cigarette crushing it beneath his shoe. And then he turned, slowly, steadily, carefully, and with an expression of being least surprised. His hands still cemented inside his pocket explaining his unwillingness to surrender.

“I knew this moment would arrive” he said as he paused to smile “And I knew it would arrive soon.”

Chief was standing at the gunpoint. The metal absolutely levelled to the man’s right shoulder, and his cold eyes searching Chief’s eyes for an answer “You’re still way too silent in your job” Chief acknowledged

“Couldn’t hear the cracking of a single leaf, and there you suddenly appear pointing a gun to my head.”

Absolute silence from the man holding the gun, but behind him were approaching noises of fast paced footsteps accompanied by the cracking noise of the dry twigs and leaves scattered all around. And those were the two familiar faces of Dvijata and Arvind. They came near and stopped.

Aathman was still holding the gun tight “What is it that you know Chief?” he asked.

“I hired you. And you doubt *my* intentions?”

“You hired me because you didn’t want the CISF to interfere” Aathman said “Only you knew about Kritika’s invention. And just 24 hours past her completion she had been kidnapped. This cannot be altogether a coincidence Chief.”

“What if I say it was?” Chief said looking straight to Aathman “What if I say that someone is trying to cross me? Isn’t it possible that Kritika told about her research to her fiancé? Or may be her brother?” he said pointing towards Arvind. “Aathman don’t be blinded by facts! Just because I was officially told about the project doesn’t mean I am the only one Kritika discussed this project with.”

“Kritika had no family. And since the past few days she wasn’t even in contact with Arvind. They only exchanged text messages, and she never picked a call from her fiancé. So it is impossible for anyone to know when she completed the project. There needs to be an internal hand in this...”

“And so you doubt *me*? you think it was I who sold her out?” Chief said absolutely astonished, or maybe pretending to be “I didn’t reveal the research because I’m still not sure about the kidnapper’s intentions. If I told *any damn person* that she created an artificial wormhole, do you really think by any chance she’d be safe after that?” Chief said sounding really convincing “I was thinking for the betterment of everyone, and I am sorry if I got inclined more towards Kritika’s safety because for me that comes first.”

“What sort of cooperation involves hiding the most important facts of the case from the research team?” Aathman asked in an irritated voice “You’re telling this to us after 7 hours of the kidnapping! Don’t you get it? We’d have reached so far if by any chance you’d have cared to tell us

about Kritika's research!"

"Kritika and her research have nothing to do with you. And who on earth said that she had been kidnapped for her research idea? There might be several other reasons to it!"

"Chief, a *scientist* has been kidnapped not some 12-year-old kid, alright? The only motive behind such a kidnapping is to get a lead over the research she was performing!"

"Even if the reason is her research, it can only be discussed after being verified and permitted by the government. Till then, we are adjured to secrecy. And if you consider me keeping this a secret, as some anti-national act, then let that be so. I value nation over relation."

"Chief, if you really cared for your country then you'd have told this to us in the very first hour. By keeping this away from us, you've just risked the life of a bright scientist and also the research information worth countless lives, because those men out there are trained field agents. They know very well how to derive information out of scientists. Believe me, it'd take them less than 5 minutes to know the entire research history of a scientist. And the next thing you'll find is the dead body of Kritika Soni lying on some railway track or maybe on the banks of some river! And you lose both- the information and her" Aathman said shifting his gunpoint away from Chief "So now you decide- which are the odds that you want to play with? Because if you don't want Kritika alive then I don't see the point of me being here."

There was a thoughtful silence between the two men as Chief kept looking eagerly towards the three of them. He still didn't want to risk leaking the information of Kritika's research because he knew once he does so; he too will be in the Most Wanted list of the foreign agencies who kidnap scientists for information. It was a risk he was playing on his life, but he couldn't speak that up either as it'd make him look like a coward. Throughout his entire career Chief had cremated many of his co-workers, and he knew all about their painful deaths. All those horrors had been engraved deep within his mind as a fear so immense that he never ever took a step which would endanger his life in any way.

But now for Chief this had become a situation of moral dilemma- Whether to help your closest friend's daughter by risking *your* own life?

And amidst the confusion between the voices in the brain, suddenly a siren blazed out loud from a distance and even though there was

nothing visible at the moment but an easy hunch could be made out that something very wrong was about to happen. The four gave each other a silent look, their eyes transfixed by curiosity and their limbs yet to react when suddenly called a loud mechanical voice 'FREEZE', "Pull your hands up and surrender yourself!", from Chief's right and Aathman's left. And then voices of approaching footsteps and voices of commanders yelling "Hold your fire, I repeat, hold your fire" came around and soon there were men with semi-automatic rifles running around in an organized commotion, their gun pointing straight towards Aathman as they spotted him pointing a pistol towards ISRO's one of the most influential scientists. Not much of a surprise that they mistook him as a terrorist.

Soon the area was now concentrically surrounded by armed CISF men- their eyes fixed and fingers having a light push over the trigger. One more movement and they'd fire a hole through Aathman.

This isn't a time when anyone would risk a life over the last word, but yet, Aathman did. Aathman had those last words still in his mind and he wanted Chief to know that he wasn't afraid to be sentenced to jail, or to welcome death either. But he was most concerned about the devastation that would follow if the information regarding Kritika's research would reach the foreign ears.

And so taking a deep breath, knowing any moment could be his last moment he slowly turned towards Chief and said "Chief, you still have time. Do the right thing."

And a gunshot was fired!

It echoed louder in the hearts than in the ears...

I COULD BE

"I don't know which part of me you didn't understand, but this isn't really a good time to be joking about" Khalif said brushing his left cheek.

"Just give it a thought Khalif, events have been falling in place, but you never noticed!" Kritika smirked pushing herself with her weak hands "You lost contact with your client just after you kidnapped me. Second, how did I come to know about the voice clip you received at 6 this morning?"

Her legs staggered but she managed to balance herself and leaned

over to the unbroken part of the table. Her attempts to move her limbs made her aware of how badly her hands had been scratched by the broken edges of the glass table. It felt as though someone ran a blade all over her skin. But she didn't care. Rubbing her wet hands over her wet *choli* as the tripping blood stained the sparkling yellow, she turned back to Khalif.

"Guns don't scare me" Kritika said on seeing Khalif point a gun at her.

"Guns aren't meant to scare people either..."

"I bet you don't want to know what happens to you if you kill me" Kritika said moving her wet curls from her face "Maybe you can escape the CISF and police force for a couple of months, but by now your name must be hanging in every police station this country under the National Terrorist category in the Most wanted list. You make a move, and you die. You don't make a move, still, you die."

"I've been in ISRO since the time when your father didn't know, who your mother was. So I don't really need to learn from you over what should be done and what not" Khalif said flexing his open arm, keeping the one with the gun unmoved, "And I shouldn't be saying this to you, but I've got men *inside* CISF. So even before they think of tracking me, I'd know about it. One doesn't simply become an international terrorist just because they *think* they're good at it."

"Khalif" Kritika said, not tolerating his words any further "If you think that by trading my father's life for a few bucks you're smarter than most of us, than you just claimed yourself to be the biggest fool I've ever come across! Because I hope you remember the evidence of your involvement in the plane crash still exists" Kritika said, referring to the video recording disc as the evidence in which the deal between Khalif and the CIA had been taped. And Khalif wasn't aware of this until his client had managed to get hold of it.

"How do you know about the video?"

"Well, nowadays if money can afford to buy human beings. What's the big deal in buying a video recording?"

"So you're saying you've got the video?" Khalif said loosening the gun

"Yes, and am sure we can make a trade, provided you answer my question."

“Funny thing, that even my client has got the video.”

“How does that matter?” Kritika said with a smile “You want the video. I have the video. So now tell- What was your involvement in my father’s plane crash?”

“I’m the one with the gun!”

“Not anymore” Kritika said pulling out the gun placed on the side desk. She pointed it straight at Khalif. But Khalif remained un-reactive to the gun point.

“Excellent move!”

“Shut up and tell me who funded you to kill my father?”

“You know who it was” he said “It’s always *them*.”

“I need a name!” she yelled

Kritika sensed a tinier movement happening behind her. She tried to ignore it but soon she caught a glimpse of a shadow crawling near her, from behind. And even before she could turn, two arms had managed to swiftly slide under her arms, turn around her shoulders and lock themselves behind her neck. Her tiny head arched downwards like a stressed cantilever with a tearing pain in her neck socket. She yelled and threw her limbs around, wriggling like a dying fish. But the NURAC and the sedatives in her system had made her terribly weak. She couldn’t manage to fight back any longer!

The man from behind was Joshi.

“Leave me!” she screeched.

“This foolish girl thought she could threaten me, hah!” Khalif said to Joshi “Heights!”

“Khalif, make him leave me or it won’t be good for you!”

Khalif didn’t utter a word further. He came four steps closer and, clenched his fists, and gave her one strong punch enough to pause her breath for the next few minutes as she crawled over the ground trying to breathe in. She was dying, and her eyes had popped out wide.

Joshi was horrified by the act and he quickly bent down to help her

“How did she get to know about our client’s message, Joshi?” Khalif asked as Joshi looked up in awe.

“She knows about it?” he asked, surprised, his one hand patting her softly “No, sir. It’s not what you think!”

“Only you were in the room when she returned to her senses.”

“But sir, I would never do such a thing. Please believe me!”

“It better be Joshi, it better be.”



Kritika had her hands held by someone from behind and her head hung all strength-less as she kept drooling, almost unconscious. Her stomach was aching terribly and her limbs no longer had the strength to resist anything. And amidst the silence a voice of a drill machine surrounded the room ‘SWUSSHHHHH’ and the noise kept getting closer until she knew that the machine was no more than a feet away from her ear. Her eyes looked up.

Khalif was now speeding and slowing the machine as he gazed at the rotating tip.

“You know” he said “This never fails to bring out answers”

Kritika’s horrified eyes bulged further with horror as Khalif pulled her right leg and inched the drill perpendicular to her knee.

“See Kritika, you can prevent this only, if you cooperate with me” Khalif said turning the drill to its fastest. “For the last time I am asking you, what’s the information my client wanted from you.”

“Khalif, I *am* your client.”

“Oh God!” Khalif said lifting his arm to put in the drill

“No, no, no” she yelled “Believe-me-I-am-your-client.”

“You really think that’s going to work!” Khalif said touching the drill to her skin

“This is the password!” Kritika yelled as the drill had touched her skin, and warmed up the region.

“What?” Khalif said, pausing the machine for a second.

“Yes, that is the password Khalif” Kritika said breathing a deep sigh.

There was an absolute silence and confusion within the room. Like, how? What the hell? How could she be the client? Why would anyone pay to kidnap themselves?

“This better not be one of your tricks” Khalif said looking into Kritika

“Do I look like I’m in a position to play tricks with you?”

“Joshi!”



With a careful glance Joshi entered the password, making sure he didn't miss any of the words. His fingers trembled, and a feeling of anxiety was what struggled within him as he typed every word. He knew she was bluffing and so he typed as slowly as he could, trying to extend Kritika's life.

I cannot let her die he said to himself *She's just too beautiful to encounter such a death! I think I should take the blame on myself saying I didn't type the password correctly. At least she'd be safe! I don't like saying this but she's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen and I cannot, just cannot manage to lose her. I've lost my family, lost my respect, lost my confidence, but I won't lose her. The last time I did something wrong for a good cause in my life and it proved to be pretty well for me. I want to give life another try. I must. Because every time in life I've suffered for someone else. For once, I want to suffer for myself. .*

He took in one deep breath and very reluctantly pressed the enter key

The cursor kept rolling and rolling and rolling, and what was feared had happened. The video didn't open, just the cursors unending loop kept killing time.

Joshi froze to still. Only he was the one who could save Kritika!

He really wished there was some way he could help her- maybe decode the video or maybe break down the lock using some software, but he just couldn't risk it. The stakes were too high... even on him. Kritika's image flashed in his mind and the fear of watching her dead was something that now seemed utterly unbearable. Joshi knew he had to do something. He involuntarily started patting his fingers on the desk repeatedly, sharply, at high discontinuous speed all out of anxiety. He thought and thought and thought of every possible way he could come up with and he interpreted how Khalif would react to it and then he also prepared answers to counteract Khalif's queries. It was altogether an intensive set of thought process which can executed only by a coder. And all of a sudden the screen flickered and it went all dark and then his computer just disagreed to start again, and the CPU continued to make high pitched noises and the screen remained dark as hell.

A terrible fear ran through Joshi because the computer had too many delicate information regarding various cases they've been into. And now

watching the screen go all blank Joshi couldn't stop thinking about the fury that would await him from Khalif's side. Maybe there was a software that would corrupt the computer if a wrong password was fed. And Joshi's heart throbbed to its optimum watching his life fall apart in front of him.

Just for the sake of helping a random woman he had jeopardized the information of the entire organization!

But suddenly...

A picture flashed on the screen, and the video got unlocked and it began to play. There was a two second pause when Joshi's senses had stopped to function on watching this impossibility happening in front of him.

How? What just happened? Why?

The video came absolutely in sync with the audio that had earlier been sent by their client.

And the voice and the face in the video belonged to none other than-Kritika Soni

FEAR

Just three inches to the left of Aathman's foot, a millisecond past the sound of gunshot that skipped a beat of all four standing there, a tiny cloud of dust burst into the air. Each pair of eyes looking towards the other three expecting a reaction, but were amazed to find those as astounded as of theirs. While for Aathman it was more than *just* a skip of heart.

Fear always has a way of displaying itself.

Well, for Aathman the sounds of gun-fires and gunshots falling all around him altogether brought him back to the day he lost his job and his pride- *That day in the plane, the same plane in which Dr Soni took his last breath, just moments before the crash, while Aathman was being fired upon recklessly by **the scientist** who tried extracting information related to ISRO's missile technology. And behind Aathman was Dr Soni trying to shield himself from the showering bullets, his hands trembling and his throat too petrified to even yell. Their feet galloping like horse's because one moment of slip and a bullet breaks you. The moment was intense, and clouds of carpet dust and seat plastics kept flying all around as the bullets missed their shots. Every passing bullet could be felt, and*

every added second seemed to be a bliss that God was plunking upon them.

Aathman waited for the gun cartridge to empty so that he could charge towards **the scientist** just as he would halt to reload his gun. But the firing continued way longer than expected, because just as **the scientist** was at the end of his cartridge, even the beautiful airhostess with thick red lips produced a gun strapped inside her long dark leggings, and began firing at the two.

And the most shocking thing that occurred was- it was the airhostess's bullet that struck Dr Soni near to his abdomen.

She seemed like a field agent as Aathman could easily sense the closeness she shared with weapons. Her arms were steady of the recoil and the way she levelled the gun using her thumb joint as the pointer, it was easy to spot her experience as a mercenary. And within seconds Dr Soni's shirt began to bleed. The hands covering the hurt area was overflowing with blood, and this mini deviation of Dr Soni being struck brought a halt to the showering gunfire giving Aathman to bring his own pistol out. He believed by that time he'd be shot by the airhostess, but it seemed even field agents tend to falter at times. And now with Aathman having a gun, one semi-fatal he shot straight towards **the scientist's** palm, and his palm bursts out like a balloon of a blood with overpowering red surrounded by darker ones. Needless to say **the scientist** was yelling at the tip of his vocals as he looked horridly towards his hands which now looked like red palm leaves hanging out of the two hands, and if specifically looked upon you might figure out a finger or two. And he was screaming again. Uncontrollable, intolerable, wild screams.

Well if magnified, this one bullet which Aathman had fired was the reason behind him becoming a suspect behind Dr Soni's murder because Dr Soni was struck with just one bullet and there was just one bullet missing from Aathman's pistol. Although Dr Soni in real was shot by the airhostess but the problem arose because the pistol which the airhostess used to shoot Dr Soni was exactly the same model used by Aathman, so even the bullets were similar. So after the crash when autopsy of Dr Soni's body was done they found out a bullet in his abdomen, from the gun which Aathman was using. That was how he became a prime suspect of Dr Soni's murder.

But just as Aathman fired the shot, the airhostess thunderously hid herself behind the extended edge of the lavatory area. And then there was this fear and excitement slowly crawling upon Aathman's heart as if the end was looming upon him from all sides and he knew he was just a gunshot away from death.

And same was the feeling which Aathman got as on watching thirty guns pointing straight towards him. But the sad truth being just one of the thirty was enough to take away his life.

He felt paralyzed. And after a sequence of blurred events Aathman found himself in a room with more military men and more weapons and more fear.

All three of them- Dvijata, Arvind and Aathman were made to sit side by side in a small gloomy room with no windows and damp air. The lightbulbs hanging were the only source of light in the room and just as every other torcher chamber in the world, even this room seemed quite spooky. There was silence and confusion amongst the people around, and Aathman slowly turned to Chief and uttered "Chief, tell them *everything*. We still have time..."

TECHIE'S FAULT- 1

Kritika Soni's dead gaze bore across the bewildered face of Khalif. Even for him this revelation was utterly disturbing. In one way he was ashamed for having beaten up his own client, which was partly her fault too! She invited that for herself.

Kritika walked her eyes through the small and gloomy Control Room with the faintest of daylight managing to enter the periphery. The room had suspended nicotine in such high amounts, it seemed like even the air-conditioners were puffing cigarettes. The room seemed like devil's own workshop- weapons, ammunitions, photographs pasted over the soft board, some of them crossed with red marker, some waiting to be crossed, bunch of phones and wired devices Kritika had no idea of.

Khalif held his silence waiting for Kritika to surface up and explain herself, and the weird strategy she had pulled up which currently made her look more of a psychopath

But why did she even do that? everyone thought

Kritika's tired neck leaned against her shoulder, too tired to carry its own weight. Her eyes hovered around the room while her feet enjoyed

the warm carpet. Now she had finally no fear of Khalif, at least for the next few hours. The untamed eagerness displayed by her face was now growing more and more- sometimes thoughtful, sometimes relieved, sometimes delicate, sometimes cautious, yet throughout the time... silent. She finally let out a deep sigh.

“So? What was all this for?” Khalif asked not being able to tame his patience further “You could have just asked us to get this man and we’d have taken care of it all by ourselves. Do you realise how much you risked *your* life?”

“Risky?” Kritika asked, bewildered “In fact this move saved my life!”

“And how is that?”

“First” Kritika said “no one would even think of *me* being the mastermind behind this kidnapping because of my excellent records, unlike you of course. Second, what do you think is the first thing ISRO would do when they find out one of their scientists has just been kidnapped?”

Khalif waited for her reply. But more than that he waited for a chance to reply her back.

“They’ll search for the names of people who have previously had hands under scientist abduction. That’s where *your* name would pop up at the topmost rank” Kritika said “Now because *I* have very recently invented a device, which only I know how to operate, they won’t risk me for anything... so just to get *me* back you can expect ISRO putting up their deepest sources to find out who was the man behind these kidnappings. And trust me, this time they aren’t going to take this lightly” Kritika said wearing her glasses again “Now, you’ve already been accused of abducting and killing my father. Plus, your name is attached to such splendidly scurrilous incidents it won’t really be difficult enough for them to figure out it is you. And even though you think that no one ever saw you while you kidnapped us, you’re wrong. People might not have seen you but surely the organizing guy appointed near the gate, did. That’s because you parked your car on the roads and the gate guy asked you to shift your car a number of times. But you didn’t. Remember?”

“That’s all you came up with?” Khalif asked with a devilish grin. “I’m on ISRO’s Most-wanted list. Do you really expect me to sit in front

of my car, with my window shades open, popping my face out and talking to strangers just to make it simpler for every passer-by to spot me out?” Khalif asked with a boastful laughter “That’s the difference between a scientist and a strategist, you know?”

“Are we done?” Kritika asked, sounding somewhat impatient “We really have more important things to do.”

“Oh, silly girl. I’ve my men inside CISF... and as of now ISRO isn’t even aware that one of their scientists has gone missing. For now, you can have as much time as you want” Khalif said pushing into his chair, sliding cosily over it “And what really makes you feel I should be afraid of a force whose security had been breached using just a fake ID, eh?”

Kritika didn’t have an answer for that. But indeed that was one major incident that managed to highlight the security negligence of the CISF. Khalif was referring to the incident of a 41-year-old woman named Buela M Sam who managed to enter the ISRO facility using a fake ID. She stayed at the ISRO guest house for a couple of days and later than she managed to enter the high security ‘Antariksh Bhavan’ in ISRO headquarters and roamed around for four hours before the CISF got suspicious of her movements. But this security breach sent a thunder down the throats of ISRO as this news had been widely debated over in news channels and newspapers. This even questioned the security arrangements of ISRO. Something that gave Khalif a further boost. He can never be detected by such a force!

“You know? The woman was wearing an ID from ISRO Mangalore. And the funny part is- there is no such branch of ISRO in Mangalore! Yet she remained undetected for three days. Such is the security of ISRO... and you ask me to fear *them*?”

“Khalif that was just one time!” Kritika said, imposing her words over him “We’re not in a position to underestimate the power of the CISF. And trust me, if you keep up this narcissistic attitude we’d soon be captured. And when that happens, I’ll be just the victim and you’ll be the kidnapper. It’s simply your life at stake... You’ve nothing to prove my involvement! Now it’s up to you whether to work like I say or to die while you relax.”

“Nothing to prove your involvement?” Khalif asked baffled by Kritika’s stupidity “There’s a whole damn recording in the video that you had just sent me!”

“Ever heard of an auto-destructive software Khalif?” Kritika sniffed “Am not so foolish to keep a digital footprint alive.”

“I don’t care. Since the last 10 years no one could track me, neither can anyone for the next ten. There are hundreds of criminals on the CISF list and for them it can be any one of the hundred.”

“What’s your point?”

“The point is- No one can connect me to this case, in any possible way.”

“No, they cannot connect *you*” Kritika paused “But your *techie*” she said pointing towards Joshi “He might...”

WHEN CISF INTERRUPTED

Certain decisions in life are made to look complicated because of the tiny little feelings attached to those situations. People often tend to revert from the fact that they can hide their feelings and hide their emotion but can they really hide what their heart wants to speak up?

*Choosing between two best friends, choosing between chocolate and strawberry cone at the ice cream parlour, choosing the right words when texting someone who’s really really important to you or may be choosing between ‘What **you** want from yourself, and what others want from you?’ It’s all a game of expectations. The stakes are high. High as such that the decisions which you make are irrevocable, and you need to start living with it, accepting it to the fullest without for once regretting over what you chose.*

Which road will you choose?

Chief was now in a very similar kind of situation where every word he would pour out would invariably vary the fate of the two scientists who have been kidnapped

The ethical dilemma being- If he revealed information about the research he’d be putting his life to danger, but if he didn’t, it’d be like voluntarily pushing Kritika to die. There was a promise that he made to his family to always remain outside issues which might risk his life, and then there was a promise he made to his closest friend- Dr Soni- to be always there for his daughter whenever she needed him.

Whether to be in silence for the little boy he fathered, or to speak up

for the girl he godfathered.

The immovable eyes of the CISF commandos clung on heavily on to the four of them and the expectations of the four kept clinging on to Chief, because whatever he'd choose to do would decide the consequences of the upcoming events. There was silence all around the room which meant those men wanted one of the four to start speaking. But before proceeding further it must be mentioned that Chief wasn't handcuffed. He was standing on the other side facing the three of them alongside the CISF commandos.

"Who are you people?" asked a man towards whom no one cared to look at

No one answered.

The CISF interrogator repeated himself- "Who are you?"

And silence. His voice was deliberately being ignored as though he didn't exist.

"Let me mention you that you've been arrested for trespassing inside a restricted area under the Central government. And the government has zero tolerance policy towards such uninvited activities. So before we hand you over to the government and allow you to rot in some jail in the Indian Ocean, we want you to cooperate with us. For the final time I'm asking- Who are you? And if you don't start speaking this time" he paused and a man stepped forward with a long shiny oiled stick. "We have other ways to make you speak."

Dvijata's eyebrows arched upwards, then her eyes and then her face. Not out of fear, but out of the belief that they had done nothing wrong and also for the fact that only the CISF had the resources to bring back Duryoy. She still had the glint of beauty in her eyes that could capture any man because the moment her eyes turned up, there were a few uneasy moments and silent communications amongst a few. You know, the sort of thing that happens in school when a pretty girl enters your class and all sort of non-verbal communications start occurring. Something like that. The only difference being, the situation was way denser than any school classroom.

"Dvijata Shah" she said "Neuro-psychologist, AIIMS, and Kritika Soni has been my patient for nearly a decade."

And there beside the interrogator a man with a notepad involved himself into scribbling notes in his notepad.

“Arvind Raval, Kritika’s brother” he said “...twin brother” he corrected himself.

A gust of mild murmur amongst the few CISF men who knew Kritika, and the divorce her father had been through.

“Flight Trajectory Specialist from NASA.”

With Arvind mentioning his NASA tag the murmurs rose further sharply as the interrogator had to ask his own men to maintain silence.

And now with all eyes stuck on to Aathman, he said “I am... Aat...” when suddenly a man with a thick shallow pitched voice dipped into the room out of nowhere saying “Aathman, ex-CISF officer, detained from service on 2005 for the murder of lead ISRO scientist Dr Soni...” he said appearing for the first time in front of the crowd “The only survivor of the plane that crashed with 7 other ISRO personnel. Accused of planning the plane crash in order to extract information from Dr Soni. 5 years later proven not guilty and was exculpated, and given an offer to re-join us at a higher rank, but never returned for his duty” said the man nodding his bald head “As said- A man’s honour is like a castle of sand, takes years to build and seconds to destroy” he said clasping his rough hands together. His oiled hairless head coming in the way of the bulb making his head look like the shadow of an eclipse. The corner of his head glistened like a distant galaxy and even though he was standing at a distance, Dvijata had to crane her neck in order to have a look at his face suggesting the man’s extraordinary 6’3” height. His lean but strong body looked like an Italian statue with its brawny arms resting over its waist like Superman.

“What intrigues me is that all three of you have just one thing in common” he fanatically opened his arms making a rare gesture over his French-bearded face “Kritika Soni. Now will any one of you tell me what the hell is wrong here, because I’ve come to know that Kritika Soni hasn’t been responding to our calls since this morning, and she hasn’t come to the office either which suggests me you might be knowing things which we do not.”

The three of them kept looking towards the bald man, trying to make up their own versions of reality in an attempt to defend themselves. But all three of the having the one same doubt- ‘Who is this man?’

“Oh by the way” the man said “I am Zayaan Dikshit, Dicisional

Head of CISF, ISRO Ahmedabad.”

TECHIE’S FAULT- 2

But your techie might?

“What did you mean by that?” Khalif asked sounding irritated “How could they even detect Joshi?” Khalif paused for a deeper inhale “Do you even know who he is?”

“... one of the best hackers in India, had hacked 2 bank accounts by the age of 17” Kritika said, cutting Khalif mid-way “Currently one of the most wanted cyber criminals. Lately spotted with you by the Times and has been undercover since then.”

“And you claim to know about computers more than *him*?” Khalif questioned with his suburban growl

“Not more than him, but it seems like he got a little misled while searching for my identity. And this happens every time. You’ve nothing to be conscious about. Even if you’d have tried your best you couldn’t have saved yourself, because my e-mail IDs have been designed specifically by a hacker himself” Kritika gave Joshi an eye “An official one...”

That irked!

“Care to explain?” Khalif asked

“I figured out that even though without any prior introduction you knew my name” Kritika said “which means your techie... Joshi... definitely has run a face match search of my photograph all over the internet. And the only website which could afford a face match and all the details you ever wanted- Facebook. Well even Google can give you the same info, but Joshi just like anyone else would... he took up Facebook, just for a simple reason that it’s more personal. But he couldn’t access my Facebook information because it’s blocked for anyone other than my friends to see. So Joshi just like any other hacker decides to use his fingers and hack my Facebook profile. And in order to hack my Facebook profile, he’d need my Log-In ID. And usually no one shows their e-mail ID in their Facebook basic information. But you see, in my basic information I’ve availed two of my e-mail IDs to everyone. So anyone, who might not even be in my friend list, can get my e-mail IDs.

Now in order to hack into my Facebook you need to hack one of the

two IDs. And in my Facebook profile I've displayed two IDs- *Kritika.soni85@gmail.com* and ilove_teddy@rediffmail.com. Needless to say your *techie* chose the first one because, the second one as anyone would guess might be created when I was very young, and possibly I won't even remember the password. And that's where you falter at the first place. But I'll get to it later. So *Mr Techie* hacks into my G-Mail and resets my Facebook password. And my Facebook is hacked!" Kritika ended, looking at the drastically bemused Khalif "But the problem comes at the first place when Mr Techie chose one of the 2 IDs. Because *Kritika.soni* is actually a dummy ID and *ilove_teddy* is the real one. And whenever the dummy G-mail ID is accessed, the cyber security department at ISRO gets to know that someone's trying to hack into my profiles. So the computer's IP address from where this account has been accessed, gets recorded. And it's not long enough that your location would get tracked" Kritika paused for an inhale "So, you still think that no one can track you down Khalif?"

"And didn't you for once think that we being such a huge organization will be using proxy servers to hide our location?" Joshi asked interesting himself within the conversation.

"Of course you can hide your computer's location. But you cannot hide the fact that the person using a proxy server and hacking into someone else's accounts isn't just a *regular* user. Definitely they'd suspect the presence of a professional hacker. Now back at the CEPT gate remember the kid who saw your face while you were sitting in the front seat? The one who kept asking you to park your car somewhere else because you were blocking the road."

Joshi and Khalif shared a look.

"Now, the parking-kid at CEPT would undoubtedly be asked by the local police to sketch the face that he saw inside the car and he'd roughly recreate Joshi's picture, because Joshi was in the front seat. Now if the recognition software can find *me* and my profile out of 6 billion people! A national hacker who had been jailed for illegal money laundering won't really be tough to find" Kritika said "And if I am not wrong-recently in the Times there was a headline... something related to 'ISRO's most-wanted Khalif, spotted with master hacker Poojan Joshi', right?"

The room went silent, again.

“Congratulations!” she said clasping again “You just made my work easier.”

Khalif was sitting bolt upright, his ego agonizing him more than his inability to read the circumstance. *But* there were lots of *ifs* in this situation. *If*, Joshi entered the first ID and *If*, the boy could re-create the face, *If* they could recognize Joshi as the mater-hacker and even *If* this all happens there was no guarantee that they connect Joshi to him just believing over some silly headlines.

But little did he know, all this time... she was merely bluffing, because making Khalif think that CISF knows about him and his position was the only way she could have some control over him.

THE INTERROGATION

The interrogation continued with questions and more questions being poured upon the three. Each having a different perspective over what had happened, each wanting some more out of the places where they flawed, each with a different answer. But there was this one thing they all shared in common- The guilt.

Each of them had a guilt that kept lasting along with them, reminding them that things could have been different if they choose wisely. And as and when the interrogation continued, those guilt could no longer be suppressed within as they broke out as- Rage, tears, silence and many more.

And after each of them revealed their parts, the situation was somewhat like- Dvijata rubbing her wet cheeks with the loose end of her cloth, stains of clotted blood hiding beneath Arvind’s skin as he hadn’t been too cooperative with the CISF and the CISF had to forcibly beat the words out of him. And Aathman as usual had no emotions, had no regrets, had nothing that could break him. He just wished for some cooperation from the CISF because all he said was he’d find Kritika and Duryoy irrespective of whether the CISF helped him or not.

And he had revealed all he knew about the case, except for one thing- Chief’s involvement.

“You say Duryoy got kidnapped because he was involved in some project with the ISRO that too ten years back! Then there should definitely be a reason for kidnapping Kritika!”

No one answered.

“Look this is no joke going on, alright? I can send each one of you behind...”

Zayaan looked towards Chief through his shoulders. Chief knew he was being cornered once again, but he did nothing that'd make him look more vulnerable. And with the eyes of pretentious confidence, he looked back at Zayaan. Took in a deep breath and grounded his eyes to Zayaan's without dropping the eyelid for once. He wanted to make sure he portrayed his fake confidence, spotlessly. And his eyes remained unusually still and confident. But the unusually still eyes were for Zayaan to know that there was something Chief was hiding. Criminal psychology - Humans tend to maintain eye contact more strongly and confidently after lying.

“Is there anything you want to say, Chief?” Zayaan said

Chief held his silence.

Instances had begun re-playing within his mind- How he ran off the night before his marriage, his first day in ISRO, the first time when he got promoted from being called a skilled labourer to an engineer in ISRO, the day he went to the parents of the same girl he was to marry some years ago just to ask back for her hands, the day he married the same girl after her parents agreed after a mild persuasion, the day when he met Dr Soni, the day Dr Soni's hands were occupied by his newly born twins- Kritika and Arvind and finally the day when Chief himself had a son of his own, the fatherly feeling, the warmth of parenthood, the responsibility within heart which he promised to the bearer of the little hands that held his tiny fingers.

And today, once Chief exposes the *incredible* research the genius daughter of Dr Soni had been performing behind the walls of ISRO, he knew he would definitely be the next in the line of the international agencies that kidnapped Kritika because it doesn't matter how gravely each person in ISRO is adjured to secrecy. This crucial information undoubtedly finds a way to reach the ears of the foreign governments. And as much as Chief knew Kritika, she'd hurt herself to death rather than giving up on information that might hamper the national security. So, the next thing those agencies would do is- kidnap *him* because no one (other than Kritika) knew about this project better than him.

But Chief didn't want to sacrifice himself! He still had a son to nurture, a wife to love, aging parents to take care of! He didn't want to

take any chances. He couldn't. And he wasn't ashamed of that. There was nothing to be ashamed of either! Nothing and absolutely nothing could compensate *his* loss for his family. So even at the cost of being called coward if a man could buy happiness for his family, he would. And he should. Because the country never loves you back the way your family does.

"Chief, I hope you know that your moments of silence can silence someone forever" Zayaan said wetting his dried lips "I don't know if you're hiding something or not, I even don't know if you're even related to this entire thing or not but I just want to tell you that there's a daughter of yours who's waiting for someone to come and rescue her" he paused "Kritika might not be your real daughter. But she adores you no less than her real father."

ME AND YOU

Khalif threw his infuriated chin upwards, his eyes aiming straight at Kritika.

"What possible reason can there be to backstab someone like this?" he yelled in a wilder growl. The tone was so deafening that even the men in his control room could hear him being at the tip of his vocals. His robust hands gripped the chair handle making it give out a cracking squeak. He stood up slipping out his handgun and aimed straight at Kritika's blank forehead "What possible reason can there be to do this other than taking revenge of your father's death, Dr Kritika Soni?"

Khalif pulled himself closer and closer. "I should have never trusted you. I should have known that this was all to get *me* killed. I just never believed that a woman could have this much courage to get this far" Khalif's gun now inches away from Kritika's diminutive head "Trust me Kritika if anything happens to me or any of my men, I won't care even if the CISF churns my body with bullets. But I'd make sure you never make out of here, alive."

"Khalif, if I really wanted to kill you... I'd have hired some paid assassin. And trust me, there are plenty of those. But I didn't! I need your service, that's why I called you. Whatever I've done it was for our own good"

"How being a prime suspect on the CISF watch-list be *good* for me?"

“May I explain?”

“You better...”

“Look, because *I* got kidnapped this case would directly become a case of scientist disappearance rather than an ordinary kidnapping case” Kritika explained “So first this case will be dealt by CISF, as to whether to involve the city police or not. And they also need to determine whether media should be aware of this or not. There’s a lot of thinking that needs to be done by them before they reveal any info. You see, these all decision making would actually buy us time. And mostly because my research is very delicate ISRO won’t afford to publicize my disappearance and hence this entire case would be dealt *only* by CISF. And... because you have your men inside the CISF, by this way we can keep a track on their moves. We’d be aware of every step they decide to take, and we can plan accordingly what next to be done! That’s why *me* getting kidnapped was very necessary. It deviates the entire case from Duryoy’s disappearance, to ‘Another ISRO scientist disappearance’. And time is what we need the most in this operation. Now you still think my presence made your job difficult?”

Everyone other than Kritika remained dumbstruck after that. She knew she deserved a loud applause, but in the presence of Khalif’s massive ego she won’t get any. But that was alright with her.

“You’ve got Joshi tracked through your e-mail ID! What about that?” Khalif asked

“Well, Khalif... just the way you hold a gun every time you want to control *me*. That’s my gun to control *you*. Fair enough?”

Khalif and Joshi remained speechless. They tried to hide the bewilderment from their faces because she was nowhere near to what they had thought of her. She seemed to be better than the best!

Finally, on watching the two most confident men confused with disbelief, Kritika’s beautiful cheeks bulged with a beatific smile ‘Am I not smart enough?’

THE LONG EPISODE

The Control Room of the SAW securities dimmed itself into darkness. The yellow plastic curtains near the window produced the minimum light needed to frolic around the room without tripping over the sofas and tables around. A technician pulled out the projection

screen, while Joshi continued focusing the projector over it. Finally after the three minute turmoil of trials and adjustments, the desktop screen had been projected over the white screen. Slightly tilted to left. But that would work. Everyone inside the room waited to hear out the plan Kritika had prepared because more than Kritika Soni, she was now 'The Girl' who had managed to par Khalif. The only person who had silenced Khalif by her brain.

Meanwhile, sitting over the sofa at the rightmost corner was Kritika Soni holding her face on her open palms like a fragile Italian pot, and her sleek fingers covering her burning eyes. Her tired legs supported her feeble arms as she sat motionless as turmoil of thoughts kept spinning all around her, and she wasn't sure if she was doing the right thing. Although she was very content over the first quarter of her plan shooting towards success, yet a major chunk was still suspended over possibilities. But just so you know, this giant drama that's now playing with many lives, this had all been planned by her.

Yes! Kritika meeting her psychologist Dr Dvijata Shah, Kritika's increasing friendship with Dvijata ... nothing was a coincidence. It was all a part of her plan. Although she falling unconscious should not be misunderstood with that because that was quite literal and unplanned.

Since the day Dr Soni died in the plane crash, Kritika knew that Duryoy knew something which she didn't. She knew he was involved with her father in a research because the last time she came to see her father off at the airport, even Duryoy was there. After the crash she had searched her father's cabin for files, she reviewed her father's emails, letters, cupboards and got to know that a boy named 'Duryoy' was doing a research on synthesizing a drug which could increase the brain functioning to extents that it'd enable humans to travel into their own past. But what she didn't know was that Duryoy had survived the crash.

The loss of both her father and the information had left her in an unrecoverable tremor- PTSD. That's when she met the young and blossoming Dr Dvijata Soni who treated her for severe depression and miraculously brought her back from the endless pit that Kritika thought she would never recover from. As years passed by, she continued searching for proofs of her father's research and Duryoy's involvement in it without getting any lead. But one sudden day the unbelievable revelation came in front of her- Duryoy Kundu was still alive!

She figured this out when she got to know that Dvijata was a very close friend of him, and she just couldn't thank God enough for this miraculous coincidence. But she also knew that if she directly approached Duryoy asking him for the details of his research and questions over what happened that day on the plane, he won't utter a single word. And moreover, it ran a risk of losing both- Duryoy and the reason, forever. Instead she chose to hold on to the fact that Dvijata and Duryoy were very close and would never leave her. This way, she kept a track on Duryoy for seven entire years while she devised *this* plan.

Master shot, wasn't it?

"We're done!" Khalif announced, resting himself over the sidewall on the left of the screen "We're running out of time, I believe."

Kritika's eyes shot open. And along with the new glimpse, was the beginning of the second part of her plan "Can you please log-in to my ISRO account?" she said "I have already shared the password and ID."

After a series of fast-paced keystroke sounds and Kritika's ID was open over the projector screen. And it was just like some ordinary professional e-mail account with unread and unmarked e-mails flying all over the screen.

"Go to drafts" she said as Joshi followed, "Yes, the latest one."

The newly opened draft had some picture files stored in them "The first one..." Kritika said standing up from the comfortable cushions.

She stood against the projector light, her face now shining brightly by the whitish-blue light from the projector. The first picture was of Duryoy.

"Dr Duryoy Kundu" she said "The man who's lying unconscious in the next room- To the world he's just a neuro-psychologist who works for AIIMS, treats his patients and gets back home with a life as normal as anyone. He has no reason to be suspected, nor any reason to be harmed. Or at least to the world, it's so. But there's more to this man which makes him hard to interpret because, this man knows how to play with time" Kritika said looking at Khalif. And just as usual, Khalif didn't seem to buy it "Now before it gets all complicated, Khalif, I want you to know something about the latest invention of mine, the one I completed the day before yesterday..."

Kritika signaled to flip to the next picture as the picture behind her changed. The Artificial Wormhole, a tube-shaped device with enlarged

ends and each end had a pad which looked like a calculator.

“Gentlemen, this is what I call ‘An Artificial Wormhole’- a wormhole which works within the range of earth” she said looking at the picture “Now this device can make things travel through space and time, which means if we insert any object inside this device, we get to choose the *place* and the *time* at which the object will exit.”

“Time also?” Joshi enquired

“Yes, we can send objects to past or future. But we must be aware that any changes we do while playing with time can cause permanent damage to the present and future because with every change you make in time, you enter a parallel universe.”

“Come on! Is this for real? I mean- Time machine, parallel universe, wormholes- you’re at a professional agency, not CERN!” Khalif interrupted, loudly patting his hand over his thigh

“No sir, actually parallel universes do exist’ Joshi’s voice came to Kritika’s support “Just that we cannot see them.”

“And why is it so?” Khalif smirked thinking when did Joshi start taking interest in space studies.

“Because human eye cannot see past the third dimension.”

“Past the third?” Khalif asked with a crooked smile “How many dimensions do you think actually exist?”

“Ten” replied Kritika, silencing everyone. As always.



“Hence whenever we send any object back in past through this device, we actually put something which never really existed at *that* time, so we are actually creating an anomaly in the flow of time. And anything you change in your past has a direct effect over the present. One flick, and you never know... you might never exist, or we may not even know each other, because you enter a parallel universe” Kritika said looking at the picture of the Artificial Wormhole.

“Haven’t you used this device before?” Joshi asked. His face, curious.

“I have. But the thing I had sent was too harmless to cause any drastic change” Kritika said moving out of the projector’s focus area “I thought we might enter a parallel universe by my change, but luckily, we didn’t. But if you go into the past and kill someone or maybe burn down

a place, it'll surely change the entire present."

"So what do you need *us* for?" Joshi asked

"If you get into the specifics you'll see that my device has a defect. The only defect that's keeping my device from international recognition."

"And that is?"

"My device can only send non-living objects through it. The rays used in the device are too harmful to burn down any sort of living tissue, so I've created a time machine through which humans cannot travel back in time! What good is it for, anyway then?"

"Why did you make us kidnap *him*?"

"Now we're talking some sense" Kritika nodded "You see, Duryoy had been covertly working with ISRO under my father over a highly confidential project. And this is something very few people know about. His research field is same as mine... but the twist is, he has found a way by which he can make humans travel back in time."

"Really?"

"He has done it, already" Kritika said looking back at Khalif "What do you think was I doing in the room after you sedated us?"

"We sedated both of you, with equal dosages! Quite unlikely of you to remain awake while he doesn't."

"It's because along with the sedatives there was another drug within our system. He calls it NURAC. And this drug has the potential to make the human brain travel back in time, through dreams."

"But how?"

"Well that's what I'm here to know!" Kritika said turning the projector off "Khalif, he knows how to use this drug and optimize the brain to be used as a time-machine. His research covers up the flaws of *my* research. His research completes mine! You get it? By getting to know how *his* time machine functions, I can send both humans as well as non-living objects back in time, which would make my invention the-Invention of the century."

Khalif nodded in accord. He realized he wasn't the only devil in the room.

"But Duryoy won't utter a single word over how this should be done. I'm very sure of this. He knows very well the pros and cons of a time travel. And in no way he'd agree to show me how his drugs

function, unless...”

“Unless I break some bones and threaten him with his life?” Khalif replied with a relative ease, reflecting his ideal job dialogue.

“Great! You’re catching up, Khalif...” Kritika winked



“So, the plan is- Duryoy doesn’t know that it is me who got him kidnapped. He still believes me to be a friend and he’d undoubtedly believe me in whatever I say to him” Kritika explained “Khalif, he believes *you* to be the main kidnapper and you need to behave like one. You don’t know me and you’ve gained the information you needed from my side. Now the next piece of information you need is something about my father’s research. But he’s no longer alive. So you’ll ask Duryoy to go back into the past, ‘using his drug’ and bring back my father alive, so that you can extract information from him.”

“WHAT?” both Joshi and Khalif said in unison. Their voices sounded startled. So were their faces.

“How could *he* bring a dead man back to life?” Joshi asked furiously.

“How can *anyone* bring back a dead man to life?” Khalif said.

“We’ll leave that part up to him. You’ve other things to worry about...”

“Hey have you got *any* idea, how much ridiculous you sound?”

“Khalif, I told you, you can leave that thing to me!” Kritika said looking irritated “Just for your information, the main reason for which Duryoy created those neuroactivating drugs was to get a girl named Saaera alive again, someone who died years ago.”

“And could he?”

“He didn’t tell me that” Kritika replied, staying stern to her point.

“That’s because he couldn’t!”

“I have seen his drug function over me and I’ve seen myself getting back into my past. So it’s up to you whether to believe or not. Either way it’s happening.”

Kritika never preferred the frequent interruptions Khalif came up with whenever she explained any damn thing. He never understood a word of science yet he wanted to differentiate between the possible and impossible. And whatever Kritika said would indeed seem impossible

for anyone who hears that! Not just a common man but even the greatest scientists would disagree. That's human nature, they all need proofs. What they don't realise is that *every possible thing that one sees around today was once termed impossible by someone in the past.*

But the interruption wasn't the only thing that bothered Kritika. The fact that Khalif was involved in her father's murder was a grudge within herself. The man who ruined her entire childhood was standing just in front of her yet she had to wait for his acceptance. Had she got a chance she'd choose to blow up Khalif's head, right away. But that'd never compensate the loss he caused to her family. Khalif didn't deserve such an easy death.

Inhaling a deeper breath Kritika said, "Look you're going to ask him to get Dr Soni back and he'd undoubtedly give it a try. He'll take me with him."

"And why would he?"

"Because you'd ask him to do so!" Kritika yelled impatiently.

"So he takes you into the past, get your father back to life and you get to do whatever research you want to! But I cannot still figure *my* job here!" Khalif said, his voice pitched higher as usual.

"Don't be silly Khalif. You need to keep a constant watch over every move of CISF. If they figure out our location then you'll need to deal with the entire situation all by yourself, because neither I nor Duryoy will be in our senses. Relocation, resistance, diversions, those all things you've to deal with."

"Hey! ISRO doesn't allow use of cell phones within the campus. Do you really think it is this easy for me to always stay updated with them?"

"Well" Kritika gave Khalif a careless look "What did I pay you for then?"

"Money doesn't buy you everything Kritika!" Khalif resisted

"Khalif we all are doing things that're beyond our reach. Each one of us is trying to push our limits to get the best. And once the job is done I'll hand you the tape, transfer the remaining money and we'll be done" she said stepping towards Khalif "But I want no mistakes this time."

Khalif gave an adamant nod. A concern of the unknown uprising within him

"Duryoy and I'd be fast asleep after we take the NURAC, so just make sure you do not disturb us or even try moving our bodies because

it's a time of total brain activity. Even a minor jerk can do lot damage. I don't want to take any more risk...s" Kritika's voice slowed down.

She had started to feel the heat of the situation she was going to throw herself into. She didn't know if she'd come back alive or not. She didn't know whether the universe would look the same, when she comes back. She didn't know that after doing all this if she could still remain undetected by the CISF. But she felt it was all worth a try.

And just while battling her thoughts and reality one of Khalif's men showed up at the door "Sir, the man has gained consciousness."

THE COMPUTER GIRL

The computer girl, her eyes were glued to the computer screen and her fingers involuntarily smashing the keyboard typing codes that would seem cryptic to any sane human being. Since the time Chief and Arvind met her she had been constantly onto grim attempts on locating Kritika over the globe. But every attempt of hers had been drowned to being unsuccessful and now she had begun losing hopes. Not that she had plenty of it when she started, but now that even her best attempts had given up, she had nothing but a belief that some miracle might occur that could get her Kritika's position. Anything, any damn thing might work, even a 2 second signal from her cell phone would get her position, but any possibility of such a luck was near to zero. It wasn't tough for the computer girl to know that the kidnappers were trained professionals and the only way Kritika could be tracked is if she finds a way to contact ISRO. She had to help herself out. But to even think of anything like that was a long shot in itself.

The computer girl searched for that one loophole which might have been existing in this flawless maze of this conspiracy. She searched and searched and searched as her tiring eyes had slowly started giving up. But suddenly she noticed that the geo-positioning software tab had started flickering from pale yellow to deep red.

"Oh my God!" she said as she sat bolt upright.

The beep on geo-track software meant Kritika's ISRO mail had been accessed somewhere on this planet. Not every ISRO mail has this facility but there are perks of having a friend in cyber security department.

This was one of the most special features of using a geo-tracker, that

it can be traced anywhere on the globe irrespective of the proxy servers one might have used to deviate and hide the true location of the computer. And on watching this hidden functionality of this software meeting its true purpose, for the first few seconds the computer girl remained absolutely awestruck.

“God knows how Kritika managed to do this” she said to herself, pushing herself back on her chair and taking a sip from the bottle of water beside her. Her eyes still over the illuminated screen. And this surely wasn’t by coincidence. Kritika undoubtedly knew that her ISRO ID can be traced from anywhere on the globe.

The next thing she did was swiftly take the printout of her current screen and submit it to Zayaan Dikshit.

Now for once she knew she’d surely be able to see her friend Kritika Soni in flesh because there were two good news awaiting- Zayaan was now in-charge of this case, and second, the undisclosed location where Duryoy and Kritika had been hidden was traced back to the city outskirts of Ahmedabad.

GAME OF WORDS

Heavy discontinuous breaths came up as Duryoy slowly tried turning his head, hoping he was still alive after the severely excruciating blow on his abdomen. The blow was so hard that he feared an internal bleeding near his rib cage as it was still hurting him, immensely. And not just his abdomen but every inch of his body ached, and he could feel his mind being abortive towards the entire situation. For a while he actually believed it was all a dream and soon he’d wake up beside Dvijata in the Kolkata-Ahmedabad flight. But reality is a bitch.

He could empathize with what the army men undergo when they’re captured by the enemy states! Even a few hours without water and food had made him consider giving up being an easier option. And these army men once captured undergo the most horrific torture one might not even bear to imagine- Amputation of body parts, having their hands tied and raw chilli powder being sprinkled over their eyes, bursting their eyes with the lighted end of a cigarette, and even a case came up where the terrorist militants were seen playing football with the heads of Indian soldiers.

Hatred always finds a way to extend itself.

He looked around for Kritika, but she wasn't there. The last thing he remembered about her was she being dragged out by a tall and heavy man, while he was lying over the ground, tightly clutching his abdomen and his vision fading into darkness.

There was this weird restlessness settled within Duryoy when he couldn't find Kritika near him. But in fact there wasn't any reason that he shouldn't be. She was the only one who spoke to him when there was no one to listen to, she was the one who disclosed every last bit of her research work without for once thinking whether she should trust a stranger or not, she had the same grief, she held the same feelings, she knew the pain of loss, she knew when to be rude and when not to be. She *was* Duryoy! She shared the same world as he did, just the happenings were different. She was the one who completed him!

There's a saying that whenever you feel low you must know there's *someone* somewhere in this world who's facing the exact same set of problems that you are. You aren't the only one!

And so good did it feel for Duryoy when he realised that the 'Someone' was none other than Kritika! He didn't know it was love or the feeling of finding someone who understood him, but whatever it was... the feeling was enough to keep him alive through the battle he was fighting with life.

He needed water. It was getting too tough for him to gulp anything- Let that be fluids or reality.

As he struggled to get close to the bottle of water, someone pushed the door, very softly. And it opened with a slow squeak. A shadow came up before even the person could appear, and even the shadow was enough to send shreds of joy into Duryoy's heart. Maybe in the past 24 hours he felt the thing called happiness for the first time.

It was Kritika.

Her hairs roughened, eyes darkened, arms weakened and voice flattened. Yet she managed a smile, a pretty one and a pretty smile from a pretty girl is all it needs to 'Shift + Del' your day's tragedy.

"How're you doing?" she asked him handing him the need of the hour- A bottle of water. He wanted water, he wanted to see Kritika- then, Kritika appears with a bottle of water. Could that *be* any better?

The water went down his throat. It tasted like honey.

And you just don't know how good he felt!

There was something Duryoy wanted to say but before he could speak, his hands made him take another gulp of water, And then another. And it continued until Kritika brought out her pleasant little smile saying “It’s okay! First drink it, and then tell me. There’s no hurry.”

“Thank God you’re alive!” Duryoy said calmly pacing his eyes towards her face “They didn’t hurt you right?”

“They won’t kill us until we disclose our research” Kritika whispered with a bleak forceful smile.

“So, you didn’t?”

“I did. But in a way, that’d help us get out of here.”

“How?”

“They wished to know about my research and I said I had my documents saved in my mail. So they let me log into my ISRO ID from one of their computers. And my ID has a geo-tracker so whenever I open my ISRO ID the location gets registered and a mail gets sent to the cyber security department automatically. They’ll soon come searching for us.”

“That was *some* move” Duryoy smiled “But what are we supposed to do now? Because I believe they won’t let us leave until we reveal our research to them. If CISF arrives they’ll either kill us or barter us for money. I mean, they can do whatever they want with us. We need something stronger.”

“Well, there is one way but it’s not really a very...” Kritika hesitated to speak, or rather pretended as such “...not a very considerable way.”

““Not a very considerable way’?” Duryoy asked impatiently “Are we really in a position to check feasibility?”

“No, but things might not be the same when we get out.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know” Kritika shrugged “Maybe we enter a parallel universe...”

Duryoy held himself back with an awestruck face. His silence told Kritika that he exactly knew what she was trying to say. She kept her fingers crossed hoping he agreed without much hesitation.

“I hope you aren’t suggesting me a time travel” Duryoy said narrowing his eyes “You better not!”

CHANCE

“It’s not what I *would* suggest or what I *should* suggest” Kritika said “It’s something any damn person would suggest! That’s what you created these drugs for!”

“Yes, but I never said, I succeeded.”

“Then we can give it a try, now...” Kritika suggested sounding reasonable, but not to Duryoy “We can go *back* in time, and kill the man who kidnapped us! If we do that, that man would cease to exist in *present* and automatically we would be free!”

“Do you even know who kidnapped us, that you pulled out such a ridiculous plan?”

“Even you know him Duryoy” Kritika smiled “Oh wait, you don’t know who kidnapped us, do you?” Kritika said with a little smile.

“I know him?”

“You’ve worked with him.”

“Who, Aathman?” Duryoy said popping his eyes in disbelief.

“The man who killed my father” she revealed silently.

“No way!” Duryoy reacted instantly “Khalif? How do you know?”

“Who do you think gave me these bruises” she said pointing towards her face “Listen, Duryoy. Khalif knows about NURAC and wants you to go *back* in time and get back my father, alive, because he still wants to get the intel my father had with him when the plane crashed.”

“He wasn’t even there on the plane!”

“Yeah, but that’s what Khalif told me!”

“And why did they even kidnap you?”

“That’s because I myself built a time machine!” Kritika said, irritated by Duryoy’s questioning.

Duryoy wasn’t sure had he heard it right or not.

“Wait. What? You created a time machine?”

“Not exactly a time machine...” Kritika said loosely realising that in the constant chase of knowing about Duryoy’s research she never disclosed to him her side of the story “It’s more of an artificial wormhole. Just that living tissues cannot pass through it. The radiations, they can pierce through the skin and burn down the muscles lying beneath it.”

“Wow!” Duryoy said having no better words to react to the situation “So like, it can transfer objects from anywhere to anywhere?”

“Yes, anywhere *on earth*” she nodded “But within 15 km from the ground level. And it can also transfer objects in time, although we could never verify it because we couldn’t get to the other side.”

“Oh God! And here, I kept thinking I was the reason because of whom you got kidnapped’ Duryoy said to himself ‘But why would someone need any information regarding a research program that was in action a decade back? By now far better technologies must have been developed!”

“Don’t you read news Duryoy?” Kritika said swinging her head hopelessly “The project came to a permanent halt because three major scientists of that program died in the plane crash! The missile technology died along with my father. But there’s *still* a demand in the international market for that technology.”

“What if I don’t?”

“He’ll kill you. And then he’ll kill me. And then he’d sell away the information of our life’s work to some foreign government. That’d rather be a lose-lose situation for us.”

“Kritika he’d do that anyway irrespective of we live or die. There’s no way we can stop Khalif from doing that! We need to search for alternates.”

“This is exactly what I am saying!” Kritika said in a joyous tone “If we really have to go back in time- why not we just eliminate Khalif once we get there! We both know that if we erase something from our past, the thing gets automatically eliminated in the present.”

“You really think you can take down an ex-CISF member all by yourself?” Duryoy asked in a sceptical tone “And you being a physicist should definitely know that the moment we make the smallest of the change in the past we’ll enter a parallel universe, don’t you? You’ll be creating ‘The Grandfather paradox’.”

“What?”

“The grandfather paradox!” Duryoy said sounding as if it is the most obvious thing “How could you not know it?”

“I know it Duryoy! If I go and kill my grandfather then my father will never be born and so will I, but this contradicts my own existence, hence I might threaten my own existence. But I’m asking you to kill the man who kidnapped us so that we can be free ourselves, that’s it! It won’t affect *our* existence in any way.”

“But there’s a possibility that we enter a different parallel universe on doing that.”

“Yes, but any damn thing would be better than *this*. Here, death is definite! At least we can give my plan a shot....”

“Kritika it’s not that easy” Duryoy said as he shook his head in not-so-optimistic-way “I’ve done this time travel thing earlier. Had made a small change back there, but when I got back to present... the world had changed to unbelievable extents. History had been re-written, governments had changed, market style, business, everything had changed! Before I went, the world wasn’t like this, like you see right now.”

“Oh come on Duryoy, how much drastic can the change be?”

“Big enough to welcome a second World War!” Duryoy said

“What? There has been only one World War!” Kritika corrected

“Just as I said. The world wasn’t like you see it right now. Before I made that change, there had been two World Wars, and the events accounted in the second one had sent shudders to the human race. A nuclear bomb was dropped on Hiroshima by the Americans. More than 100,000 people died in that blast, and the nuclear radiation aftereffects had haunted generations with disabilities because of radiation poisoning. 80 million people died during the war. Churchill coming power, bombing of Pearl Harbour, millions of Jews being slaughtered at Auschwitz, rise of Hitler, all this had indeed happened in the parallel universe where I came from. And here you have no damn idea who Hitler or Churchill is!’

“These all happened in 2007, over there?” Kritika questioned arching her eyebrows.

“Nope, 1942”

“But you made a change near to 2003 right?” Kritika said narrowing her eyes “I don’t get it how come a change you made in 2003 might affect an event that occurred in 1942?”

If you didn’t get what Kritika said, let me just explain you in simpler terms. Parallel universe is created exactly at that time when you create a change. So if someone gets back from 2007 to 2003 and changes a thing or two, then events would start changing from 2003 onwards. Because a parallel universe is created at 2003. But till 2003 every event remains unaltered. What Kritika really meant was exactly the same thing- 1942

comes nearly 60 years before 2003. Then how come a change made in 2003 affect something 60 years behind it?

“That’s exactly the uncertainty I needed your father’s help for” Duryoy said feeling happy to let Kritika know her father’s involvement in his work “The anomaly couldn’t be solved and this is why I do not prefer using NURAC, because it’s dangerous and uncertain! Luckily, me making a *small change* in the past shifted us to a parallel universe where there has been no such thing called the Second World War. A parallel universe where no bombings ever occurred. And so I saved the lives of 80 million people! I know this sounds absolutely ridiculous and in no way you’d agree to believe me, but this is the truth! And this is the only reason I don’t want to take chances over this one. We have not been able to understand time completely. It’s not as simple as you think. Changes in time have bi-directional effects into both past and future.”

“Not necessarily the change would be bad!” Kritika said in a low, polite tone “Who knows maybe even further good happens to humanity?”

“But you cannot just leave everything over a chance!” Duryoy resisted “It’s on a 50-50 chance Kritika for a good or bad outcome. Just for saving ourselves we cannot risk the life of millions of people. The changes we make in the past holds the potential to mould the entire present! If I can prevent a World War, I can make it happen too. I don’t think our lives would be worth that!”

“So are you suggesting me that we remain silent and accept death just because you don’t want risk the lives of so many people, who happen to be living on a chance!” Kritika said totally agitated by Duryoy’s generous take over the situation ‘Are you out of your mind Duryoy? That can be altered once again, not this. Once you die, this research of yours would remain undisclosed and no one would ever know that it was some man named Duryoy Kundu because of whom the World War 2 didn’t occur” Kritika paused for a shorter breath “Do you really expect people to buy that after you’re dead?”

“If I really wanted my accomplishments to be made public... I’d have done that a decade back, Kritika.”

THAT LEAD

Zayaan Dikshit, the head of security for ISRO-SAC Ahmedabad

facility had received the news he had been waiting for. All the things he demanded had been laid in front of him like a silver platter- the location, the agency providing the service, the surveillance camera recordings, in short everything that he needed to inflict ruin over the man who dared to take a step against him.

The latest picture of the area had been bought down by satellite imaging and a constant watch over the area had been installed. It was very much sure that the person who they were dealing with was no petty kidnapper Zayaan knew that there was something very grave about this situation because the kidnappers weren't taking any steps to secure their location or themselves. He always knew that during a situation of high risk when things go unusually silent and peaceful, there's always a greater comeback that is to happen.

The planning team was all set analysing the situation and local forces had been alerted. All the senior field officers were called back to the campus and the equipment division made sure that everything ranging from ammo to Kevlar was all set for use. Zayaan knew that Chief had been hiding something but Chief being a senior scientist couldn't be questioned back because he was a person with substantial amount of classified information regarding the institution and researches being carried on. And under the clause of confidentiality he had the right to refuse to answer any enquiry issued upon him. So till the point he himself didn't make up his mind to speak up, nothing would happen.

Zayaan was back in the interrogation cell with Aathman, Dvijata and Arvind, eager to know if there had been any recent development with regard to the case. Zayaan for the last time requested the three to disclose any information which they had about Duryoy or Kritika because time was running by.

Dvijata sighed because she had already given up everything she had in her mind and Aathman was totally disconnected to the occurrences. But then Arvind suddenly recalled a conversation he had with Kritika with regard to her new research partner. Someone named Shyamalan who knew about her research, other than Chief.

And in no time Shyamalan was in the interrogation chamber with a petrified face and dried up lips. He was sweating badly and his regarding what he had done remained unanswered. All he wanted was to run away

and run and run and run as far as he could get from ISRO.

Zayaan could sense his anxiety, but he didn't try to ease him. With a perfectly still face Zayaan stood beside Shyamalan. His shirt neatly tucked in, his hands slid inside the pocket and his body language yelling out confidence.

'This shouldn't be the first time you're hearing about an interrogation, are you?' Zayaan said

Shyamalan shook his head. His vocal chords were too paralysed to do their jobs

'So let me tell you one thing... The first rule of interrogation- The interrogator always wins. 'You' just get to decide when I shall win. The sooner you speak, the less you get hurt. And of course, the vice versa...' Zayaan said taking his hands out of the pocket

'You've been appointed to work along Kritika Soni exactly seven months, three days, back, for a highly classified project. It was made clear to you that the project should remain covert until and unless written orders arrive. But still, the information regarding the project has managed to get leaked. Now, one- you either tell us how did the information manage to go beyond the walls of your research lab? And two- What can be done to stop the misuse of this research. Answer at least one, or else we'll make you answer both' Zayaan said twitching his eyebrow.

There were 20 seconds of silence before Zayaan reassured Shyamalan that everything he would say would remain within this room. And then after several reassurances and whatifs, Shyamalan drained out the entire research idea and everything he knew about. He told Zayaan how the device could be misused in the wrong hands and also that Chief was the only person who knew about this research other than him. He said he didn't blame Chief for all this but just that it wasn't him who had any connection to this intel leak. He still didn't know that it had been nearly 13 hours since Kritika had been kidnapped.

'But she did say one thing' Shyamalan said 'If ever anything happens with regard to the device, always call her first because she'd always have an idea over what to do next'

Zayaan couldn't make any sense of that statement, but somehow he had a slight feeling as though Kritika knew that she was going to be kidnapped.

‘Sir, did you talk to Kritika?’ Shyamalan asked meekly.
‘I will, soon’ Zayaan said storming out of the room

YET AGAIN

Kritika Soni had set a sunken face as her attempts to convince Duryoy were failing miserably

Time was slipping fast. Khalif was a trained military man, not a trained kidnapper. His strength might supersede the two of them but not his brain. Kritika had a rough idea that by now CISF has known that her ID has been opened in some computer, and they’re currently sweating their brains out to decode the geographic location of the computer.

“I am sorry” Duryoy whispered looking towards the cute but dejected face of Kritika “But it’s for better good. Just because we can play with time, doesn’t give us the right to play with others’ lives.”

“I wish I could possibly remove the fear of devastation from your mind” Kritika replied coldly.

“I wish you saw the devastation the way I saw” Duryoy said “Just give it a thought, if I really want I can really make myself immortal with this NURAC, don’t you think? Like, every time I’m about to die I travel back in time and eradicate the reason that’s to cause my death. This way I would be invincible! But still I never did that! Did you ever think why didn’t I ever do that? Who doesn’t want to live forever?”

Kritika silently watched him talk.

“Your creation is a beast that only you can control. We need to think wisely.”

Kritika nodded as Duryoy tried to stand up.

“What was it you went for, that one time?” Kritika asked narrowing her eyes

Duryoy got slightly off the track on hearing that unwelcoming question.

“It was a *small task*” he said, now straight on his knees.

“What was the *small task*?”

“Confidentiality” Duryoy shrugged.

“Oh, do hell with your confidentiality!” Kritika fired back, outraged. Things had now started going above her head “Here we are battling our lives and all you care about is rights and duties! What’s fair and what’s not? What should be ethical and what not? Duryoy we are in a drowning

ship, death is certain for us! If there is by any chance we can save our lives, we need to take that chance. There comes no question of whether we should, or not? Why do you even care to look back at the world that gave you nothing but sufferings? You've done enough good for the humanity... You saved the world from a 'World War'! How many people do you think can do that?" she paused.

"Your creation can be a gift to millions. But for that you first need to get out of this situation we're trapped in! What's the use of possessing the greatest technological idea that never gets to reach the world? You can do a lot good to this world by doing just a little good to yourself. It's like Zuckerberg saying no to creating Facebook because he thinks if he does that he'd be killing the days of youth of the youngsters! You're seeing one side of the story, not the entire picture Duryoy. The world needs you, the world needs me. So by saving ourselves we're doing a greater good to the world, and more than that to our nation. So what possible can you now give for not travelling back into time?"

Duryoy's face remained unturned, somewhat convinced, more than the previous time of course. He knew Kritika was correct, he knew he himself too was. He could empathize with her but the vice versa wasn't occurring. Kritika was leaving no beads unturned to thrust her point upon Duryoy. But she barely had any idea about the severity of the decision Duryoy had to make. Because whatever decision he'd make, the world had to pay its price.

"I don't think he would understand this way" interrupted a heavy unmistakable voice from the door. The same voice he had heard before boarding the plane that crashed. A large beefy shadow protruded towards Duryoy, a part of the room's light falling over the tight military face of the man, half face bathed in light, the other half hidden behind the shadow. There was tiny orange light that flew from the man's mouth to down to his hand which first seemed like a firefly, but then fireflies don't smell like nicotine. And a white smoke smoothly appeared between the man's lips and then they escaped into the air.

"Remember me 'Dr' Kundu?"

TREMBLE

"Not many people are lucky enough to escape death, Duryoy" Khalif said getting closer to Duryoy as the part of his face hidden under

shadow swiftly revealed itself “Especially when it’s me you’re dealing with. By now you must have known that life doesn’t really give you a second chance- and you know it better than anyone else. But still, if life is grateful enough to offer you that chance once again, it expects you to be mature enough and choose what is right! Till the time you’re inside the walls of this building- I am your life, I am your death. So now go back and get Dr Soni for me and I’m asking you nicely because I don’t want you to suffer the ways she did” he said looking at the cigarette mark on Kritika’s head.

Duryoy’s corner of his eyes could witness Kritika slowly sliding away from Khalif.

She must really hate this man, he thought. He wondered how could she even resist standing by him without attempting to knock him down for once!

“Is this a choice?” Duryoy asked looking straight into Khalif’s eyes.

“Yes, it is” Khalif nodded “A choice between- Do as I say or die like I want.”

“You cannot kill me” Duryoy said with a confident tone.

“Why the hell do you guys have this wrong idea that I *won’t* kill you?”

“If you kill me, you lose the information, forever. And believe me when I say- NO one other than me can tell you how to use NURAC. So it’s more of you *cannot* kill me, than you *won’t* kill me” Duryoy shrugged.

“You know Dr Kundu” Khalif said placidly, with a cooled temper “When I was in army, for 5 years I had served for the Border Security Force Unit (BSF), at a place named Papa II. Ever heard about Papa II, Dr Kundu?”

Duryoy didn’t answer

“Well, it’s the only place where hell exists between the heavens. It’s actually an interrogation centre in Kashmir. You know how Kashmir is? Politically unstable, people are unhappy, government trying to take control, countries fighting over it, it’s pathetic. And we’d catch someone or the other every single day who either isn’t a resident of this country or belongs to a terrorist group. Detainees suspected of being militants were handed over to the Counter-Intelligence Kashmir (CIK) and were interrogated at Joint Interrogation Centres. Papa II was one of them, and

it's very infamous for the torture techniques it used to interrogate the detainees. 15,000 petitions had been filed calling the state authorities to reveal the situation of the detainees, but the authorities never answered them. And I worked in that centre during its peak time of terror. I don't add this thing to my credit but once you enter the walls of that horrid building, you return as a beast."

"People like you need a reason to become humans, not beasts" Kritika interrupted.

"You know what all things happened there, Dr Kundu?"

"Human Rights Violation..." Duryoy said coldly.

"That's a very very small word doctor" Khalif smiled "People just disappeared from there! Boom. Gone! Days, months, maybe years later their bodies would be found, floating down the rivers, bruised, cigarette marks all over their bodies, missing fingers, limbs, their ribs smashed, parts of their bodies being absolutely boneless as they had been crushed between heavy rollers. And you know what?" Khalif paused getting closer to Duryoy's face "Same all things would happen to you if you do not help me get what I want."

"And what if, I say I won't?" Duryoy asked. This time he knew he shouldn't have said that.

Khalif took a step back. He levelled the gun straight to the left side of Duryoy's face. The cold metal now touching his hair. Duryoy knew he won't really be doing anything, it was just to frighten him. But soon on noticing Khalif's thumb silently turned off the safety latch of the gun, real terror started to sink in.

He isn't really serious, right?

Duryoy's heart quickened and it felt as though adrenaline was flowing through his system in litres. His lungs got heavy and his eye balls trembled timidly when suddenly six sharp gunshots passed by his left ear with deafening sound and bright sparks. And Kritika had covered her eyes by now, unable to bear to see that happening. Glasses cracked, the vase on the table exploded, dust began to emanate out of the bricks, and Duryoy stood bolt upright with his face white and pale. Not a hair moving as he could still feel the warmth of the six bullets passing above his ear. Hadn't Khalif's gun had a silencer to it, by now Duryoy's ears would be draining with blood.

"Next time I won't spare you" Khalif said getting close to Duryoy's

perspiring face.

And he exited the room.

Duryoy stood expressionless. His hands and his voice and his legs and his fingers and his eyes and his eye lids trembling.

He slowly turned to Kritika

“Am getting a feeling that you’re now willing to agree on my idea, aren’t you?” Kritika said.

LIFE HURTS

The things were remarkable up to their very inches. Every moment, every second, every dialogue interchanged was distinctively clear and precise. Clear, because the thing they were about to need a sync between Duryoy and Kritika, an undisputable sync. And precise, because they get only once chance to do it. Either they make it worth or they suffer the consequence. But there was one thing Duryoy had to be proud of- For the first time ever the same man was traveling twice back in time because until now most of the people who claimed to have travelled backwards in time never returned back, and the fewer ones who returned, none ever dared to do that again.

Duryoy was tensed and concerned and filled with guilt and horror and he kept strolling across the room in quick, short steps. His twitching face and feebly trembling fingers was a reason of concern for Kritika. She couldn’t help herself from noticing the constant commotion he had created inside the room. NO, he wasn’t thinking ‘should I’ or ‘should I not’. Instead now the question was ‘How?’

Kritika on the other hand was sitting on a round chair, the ones we usually see in bars- Deep red and sparkly types. She had no idea what the chair was doing there, but she had other reasons to be concerned of. Until now, she had very well manipulated Khalif and Duryoy, parallel to each other. Both believed her to be on their side while she had an entirely different thing running behind her brains. But it was really a gamble she was playing with life. Since the time Kritika learnt that she was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, she had lost the caring attitude over herself. She knew death was certain for her, either now with Duryoy or, with the disease after 3 years. So in turn she decided to take the long shot...

“Is there by *any* way I can help you make feel better?” Kritika asked

turning her tired eyes towards Duryoy, breaking the silence.

“Yes, kill me right now” Duryoy said not looking back at her “At least I die in the hands of a beautiful woman rather than that obnoxious pest.”

“Duryoy, I don’t want to be very optimistic about this, but even though the world has been so hard on you till now, if you think, there’s a little possible chance that when we make the changes in the past and get back, we might land up in new parallel universe where you get Dvijata back. And who knows, when you come back, you might even be married to her!”

“That’s, *if* we come back” Duryoy reminded “Which happens *if* we’re able to kill Khalif inside a plane which would be flying at some 15,000 feet, and is sure to be crashed. *If* we escape all this then there’s a chance that I see Dvijata alive, set apart marrying her.”

Kritika realised it was useless to motivate a man who’s well aware of the reality.

“Can we just get back to our plan?” Kritika asked totally disinterested in Duryoy’s stats “We’re already running out of time.”

So the plan was to kill Khalif and try saving Dr Soni from the crash. Both of which could be done by getting into the day when the plane crashed. But the problem was Khalif never boarded the plane, so that was the first objective- To make sure Khalif boards the plane. Get the plane crashed along with Khalif after that. And if possible, before the plane crashes they’d try saving Dr Soni using a parachute or something.

But the women’s heart managed to gather sympathy and Kritika asked “Why let the plane crash? If we’re trying to save something, why not save the plane from crashing?”

“What difference does it make? All people inside the plane were dead long before the plane crashed. Only the hijackers were alive...”

“But we can at least save some lives! The airhostess, pilots” and other ridiculous things that Duryoy had no idea why he was listening to.

“We can do that” Duryoy nodded in a disinterested manner “but as per the theories of physics- preferably one must make as much less deviation from the actual happening as possible because more the deviation you create in the past, more is the deviation that occurs in the future. It’s like you have five random digits. When we make a slight change, it’s like adding +1 to every digit, so when the final sum is done

there's a change of +5. Now making a major change is like adding +3 to every digit, so in the sum there's a change of +15 from the original which's a high magnitude of change. And we never know how these higher magnitudes of changes might affect us. So we better not try them. Or at least shouldn't try that on ourselves."

"I wish you didn't make things sound so serious" Kritika shook her head "Anything else I need to know?"

"Yes, don't be surprised to see yourself getting younger by 11 years. You're getting back to 2007 so you'll be looking just as you looked in 2007. You'll be the same what you're right now, from within. Just the physical appearance alters."

"But how'd I know that it's *you* and not the 17-year-old Duryoy I am facing" Kritika asked

"If we stay together during the entire time travel, we'd enter the time together. So know for sure that it's me" Duryoy said trying to scrap down the complicacies, "Else after we reach there I'll give you a pinch, so you'll know it's me. And in response you give me a wink or something, so I'll know it is you. Alright?"

Kritika nodded weakly.

"Why can't I just straightaway go to you and ask if it's you or not?" Kritika asked irritated "Then we don't need to do this pinching and winking and cryptic coding stuffs..."

"No, no, no, no" Duryoy disagreed intensely "You cannot do that! Listen, when we get back to 2007 we need to behave like we did at that *time*. Did you know me in 2007?"

Kritika shook her head "No!"

"Then you need to behave like you don't know me!" Duryoy said with deep and serious eyes. He looked straight to Kritika "Kritika I'm saying this to you again, this is not a dream. We're doing a time travel, a real one! So after getting there do not think that you can fly or say anything to anyone or kill any person whom you want, because everything you do there would directly get reflected on the present."

"Can I just ask you how can our brains be used to travel back in time?" Kritika asked sounding uncertain "Because if that is possible why can't we just get into the hospital in which Khalif was born and kill him right there?"

"Listen, not *every* time of *every* place in the world can be remodeled

and lived again. You've never witnessed the time Khalif was born so you cannot possibly recreate that time. Only the time and places through which *you* have been can be changed. See wherever we live or walk through, our brain notices things, everything we see gets stored in our brain, and remains there forever as memories" Duryoy explained as he could see Kritika was going with his words "These memories that are already present inside us to recreate *that* time. Now I and you had both been in the airport in 2007, at the same date, same time. So when our memories combine we can recreate that day at the airport *again*. And once we do so we recreate a working model of time!"

"Then how are we going to exit *that* time, once we're inside it?" Kritika asked standing up.

"When do you exit a dream?"

"When I die in it."

"Yes, but don't do that here. Because once you kill yourself in the past your present gets erased automatically- Grandfather paradox. Only a hypnic jerk can get you out of this."

Kritika made a face so bad that Duryoy had to further explain what a hypnic jerk is.

"Hypnic jerk is any exterior activity that breaks your sleep. It can be someone splashing water on your face, to someone throwing you off the bed. Either way you wake up" Duryoy said getting up on his knees and stretching the aching muscles. He softly touched the lower portion of his rib cage and it still pained. There was a mild swelling up there and he hoped it better not be a crack. "I'll make sure Khalif arranges something to wake us out of the dream."

"Is that all Mr Time traveller?" Kritika said looking back at him with a smile.

"For now. The rest is up to us once we get there. And will you be boarding the flight too?"

"Yes, of course! How else am I supposed to help you?"

"Yeah right" Duryoy shrugged.

"Can I ask you one more thing?" Kritika asked with a pleasant smile. She knew she was getting them late but she had things she really wanted to know about. And she was really glad that Duryoy was so being so patient with her, even after having this rough patch of events.

"Feel free" Duryoy answered.

“How did you get off the plane while no one else could?”

“I didn’t” Duryoy said taking in a deep breath “Or at least, I did not do that voluntarily.”

“Then?”

“Well, in fact I was thrown out of the plane”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I don’t exactly remember who it was because the man’s face was shadowed and the man was immensely strong.”

“Could have been my dad’s bodyguard. What was his name... Aa..?”

“Aathman” Duryoy said correcting her “But it wasn’t him. The man was wearing a silver bracelet and maybe a necklace. Else he was covered in black from head to toe.”

“What colour was the necklace?” Kritika asked, somewhat doubtful of the necklace.

“Black, I guess” Duryoy said unclear about his words “Why do you ask me that?”

“Because Khalif used to wear one. And he gave it to me after the plane crashed.”

“Khalif didn’t board the plane, Kritika. It was someone else. Someone who was on our side”

“Did you try finding him?”

“I never even tried finding *myself* after the plane crash. Forget *him*.”

Kritika smiled back at him, wanting to say something further. But she limited herself to the smile

“And just make sure you do not to eat or drink anything they serve inside the plane. It’d be poisoned” Duryoy said producing a NURAC tablet that he had hid in his socks and mixed it into the pink bottle.

“You know you sound like a very concerned parent, when you do that” Kritika said opening her hair and straightening it with her long sleek arm “It’s for the third time you told me this”

“Whatever keeps you alive” Duryoy shrugged, filling the pink bottle with water watching the tablets turn colourless.

Kritika held her clip between her lips and kept moving her fingers tying up her hair like some fairy waving her fingers trying to enchant some magic spell. Her prettiness had exponentially increased since she had opened her hair, and her smoothly exposed waist with the golden

skin was almost impossible not to be noticed by the naked eyes.

“By the way” she said “How did you survive the poison? Don’t tell me you’ve created a drug that can counteract the effects of the poison.” she said mocking him over his own skill.

“I didn’t drink it” Duryoy said with a silent smile as he watched her take the clip from her mouth and stick it to her hair. Her clean face was now showing the exposed cut on the corner of her temple more vividly.

“When did *that* happen?” Duryoy said pointing with his eyebrows.

“Ah, nothing. Khalif had got into action for a while” Kritika replied sounding least concerned “Now it’s alright.”

“Doesn’t it hurt?”

“So does life, Duryoy. So does life”

LAST MOMENTS

“When I was 17, or maybe 18 I don’t know... 11th grade had just begun. And unlike most of the students of my age who were either pursuing their dream colleges or dream grades, I was pursuing my dream girl.”

Kritika raised her eyebrows just to be sure what she had heard of.

Where is this coming from? she thought

“Yes, love had unexpectedly knocked my doors. And I was well... well beyond happy! I was flying! It was like the best thing that could have happened to me!”

“You’re talking about Saaera, right?”

“Yes of course!” Duryoy said eagerly “Like you see- I see a girl, I fall for her beautiful eyes and hair and skin and face. Then one sudden day she comes up in my bus and there’s no one from our class or even near our age group in the bus other than the two of us. Just the two of us. I talk to her, know about her, listen to her, she asks me questions about myself, and I try to be humorous, I make a joke that makes me pity over myself, which I try to cover up with my exaggerated stories of school days. Her stop arrives. She bids me a goodbye. And I knew that those talks would be limited to the school bus only. The next day the pretty girl would forget that a guy like me even existed. But then from *bus talks* with her it tuned on to *after class talks* which turned into *lunchbreak talks* which turned into *bunk-classes-for-the-talks* and later these ‘Talk periphery’ even went beyond the school perimeter! Like it felt like all

my years of bad luck had finally resulted into something worth. Because she was beautiful, very beautiful indeed. And the worst part is- while comparing human faces it somehow gets on to being relative, which made me look further worse. But still, life seemed to have had drifted to its peak for those moments. Because those were the times when you won't do a single thing without one another. And even the nights seemed to be really long wait. Not that phones didn't exist, but along with phones there existed parents, and rules created by the parents. So in an attempt to keep things covert we both mutually decided never to call one another. And finally after the long wait, there came Durga pooja, Navratri as you people call it when her parents for a while decided to loosen their time limits after a long in-home parliamentary debate. And by late they meant before 12."

Duryoy continued telling the story as if every part of it was written in the air around him. He would pause for a sigh, he would smile for no reason and there were times when emotionless became an emotion on his face. His eyes for most of the time would remain as hard as a stone eye, and suddenly out of nowhere it would switch directions in short gaps as if there was someone else than Kritika in the room who was listening to his story. He never for an instant looked towards Kritika, who hadn't moved her eyes from him since the time he started narrating his story.

"That special evening we met at the Durga pooja pandal..."

"Wow!" Kritika interrupted in a disappointed voice "So romantic."

"It's not as bad as it sounds like" Duryoy said slowly turning back to Kritika "Durga poojas in Kolkata is more than just a festival. And this was *her* idea in the first place. She was new to this city and somehow she had fallen in love with the Bengali culture- the dressings style of women, the poetic handbags that the office going men would carry, the man-pull rickshaws snaking through the tiny lanes and the ringing bell of the trams before it entered the main roads- she figured out beauty in all those tiny things. And those *prasads* that we'd be given at the pandals, she'd distribute it among the poor kids sitting outside the pandal gates. She had a big heart. Something which made me fear that I'd lose her because she deserved a lot better than someone like me. That evening, for the first time I realized what romantic walks felt like. For a brief moment it felt like all my desires had just faded away till the time her hands were in mine. Our conversations might not have been too mature,

but surely our love was. And it was near 12:30 when I thought it would be best for her to leave, as it was getting too late for a girl to be out, all alone. Her phone was with me throughout for *some* reason which I never remember... I still try to remember what the reason was... but every time I feel like I've caught it, it just disappears, like, like some fairy tale dream which you always want to remember but never remember how the dream began...It might have been for the ice-cream, I think... But the time I realized that her phone was vibrating in my pocket, it was too late. 18 missed calls and 7 messages from her mother's number had already entered the phone. And this was the 19th call..." Duryoy sighed. "Her father had a heart attack. He was admitted to Calcutta Medical College. Her family was trying to reach her since then. And the moment I received the message, I was numbed, but at that time everything seemed to be occurring involuntarily, as though someone already knew it was all about to happen."

Duryoy fell silent. His lips seemed dry, but it wasn't the lips, it was his eyes... they were raining teardrops.

Kritika quickly stood up searching for a cloth to offer, well she found none so instead she decided to use her hands, but as she was about to do that her hands paused mid-air clinging to a silly thought *That wouldn't look right? Will it?* And slowly she her hands retreated.

"So Saaera's father didn't survive?" Kritika asked as softly as she could

Duryoy shook his head in disagreement, not uttering a single word. He turned towards Kritika, and said "Saaera didn't survive."

"WHAT? But how?"

"Very few people actually know about this. And the ones who know, I've told people them that while she was running she slipped over the wet floor and fell off the building. But I was lying" Duryoy sighed "In real, there were broken beads lying over the floor which she never noticed. She stepped on those, slipped" Duryoy said searching his pockets and soon it looked like he had held something "And she died"

"But why did you lie about that?"

"Kritika, when you lose someone close to you, every single thing matters to you. And most of all is the question- Who killed them? That's the only thing someone wants to know once their dear ones have been killed. You know how it feels, right? But these beads, I never knew who

they belonged to, no one to blame on, no one whom I could call guilty for Saaera's death. So I just made myself believe that it was all an accident. But how can one convince oneself a truth to be a lie?"

Kritika remained silent

"But I always carry this with myself to keep reminding me of the... the pain that I went through" he said producing the black beaded necklace from his pocket.

He gave it to her

And in the tiniest of the second Kritika went spellbound.

TWO DAYS AGO

'Chief, where'd you like to send the object to?' Kritika asked

'Can I give any location?'

'Within the earth's periphery of course' added Kritika 'Whose location coordinates you're aware of.'

'What say... Calcutta Medical College?' Chief asked taking out two eye gears from his back drawer.

'Any special reasons?' Kritika asked hesitantly, with a notorious smile.

Kritika's hands searched for objects near to the table but it was a failed attempt. Nothing could be found. Plus, she had the risk of putting her hands inside the device which might have made her permanently lose her hand. Hence, without giving much of a thought Kritika quickly took off her pearl black coloured beaded necklace, that didn't hold much of an emotional equivalence to her. Her untidy effort slipped two or three beads out but somehow managing to hold the remaining portion of the necklace, she threw it into the device and the light spilling out intensified further. And it disappeared.

"What are you so shocked about?" Duryoy asked looking at the displeasure on Kritika's face.

Kritika could now relate to Duryoy's words over how the smallest change in time can bring about the vast devastating effects in future.

"Kritika!" Duryoy said shaking her head, as Kritika got back to her senses "Are you alright? Are you sure they didn't inject you with any drug?"

"Yes I am" she said, her hearth churning out of pain "Yes I am"



The final moments of any journey are something that has a different aura within itself, always. There's a feeling of attachment, there's a fear of the unknown, there's a satisfaction to everything you have cherished, there's a depressive feel of separation. There's this weird little anxiety building up within you which keeps on trying to push itself out- as words, tears, anger, or maybe a hug, but all you do is remain silent trying to show how tough you are. You don't let the feelings take the hold of you. You just end up feeling restless.

Kritika's restlessness could be spotted by the way she got irritated by every tiny thing that bothered her- her wet clothes, her headache, her cut over her temple and even her sweat drops that kept occurring in numbers as the time approached. She looked for Duryoy trying to figure out how could he maintain his calm even before such a situation?

She saw him sketching something over a piece of paper! This was an hour of extreme adrenaline rush and this man was busy drawing? Like talent is necessary, but one must know to control their god damn urge! Kritika stepped forward to look at Duryoy's piece of art. Although the first thing she wanted to do was to turn him around, and yell at him for an indefinite period of time, till he understood the seriousness of the situation but all she did was stepped forward lay her keen eyes on his canvas and watch him peacefully sketch. It seemed like some animal with four legs and a weird mouth and a trunk. Maybe he was trying to draw an elephant! But the eyes were large and devilish, quite unlikely to be that of an elephant. And the skin was very rough, as though it had scales on it, or it was just his pathetic shading.

'You really need to work on your sketching skills' Kritika said leaning over, trying to figure out the animal he wished to draw

'Oh, you're back?' Duryoy said, feeling a little disturbed, 'I thought I should give you some time after you went blank.'

'Hallucinations have just become a part of my life, nothing to worry about' she shrugged 'What are you sketching anyway?'

'His name is Mo' Duryoy said with a smile on his face.

'That's a cute name!'

'If you've ever read any Japanese legend you'd find him. There are several stories in which Mo is said to have appeared.'

“And what exactly is Mo? Cause I’m not able to get which animal you’re trying to sketch.”

“Mo isn’t a unique animal. It’s more of a mixed breed type- It has the head of an elephant, legs of a tiger and eyes of a rhino. But in the legends, it’s usually mentioned to be looking similar to a tapir.”

“But why are you sketching Mo?” Kritika said, smiling to how cute the little name was.

“Well back in 14th century China and Japan, people believed that the spirit of Mo protects you from the terrors of bad dreams” Duryoy said pulling up the paper and showing it to Kritika. And Kritika kept looking at the sketch trying to connect it to the legend “And according to the legend in order to be protected by Mo, you need to draw a sketch of the beast before you fall asleep. And I believe we both are about to visit one of our worst nightmares again, so I thought that we should probably take a bit of help from Mo” Duryoy said

“Mo looks cute” Kritika complimented, her cheeks bulging upwards making her eyes look smaller.

“I know it sounds a little weird and I’m not forcing you to believe anything. But I believe humans have always been sensible enough throughout the anthropological timeline, let that be 14th century or 21st. So, if people of the 14th century believed something to be true, then there must be a reason to it! Of course, science cannot explain it and it seems so ridiculous that it’s now coined under mythology but I believe that there’s some truth behind it. Just because you cannot prove something exists, doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.”

Kritika said pushing aside the paper “You really are opening up since you told me that story.”

“Yeah, maybe it’s time I stop blaming myself for everything” Duryoy said shrugging his shoulders. And he cracked a joke on Mo and they laughed- loud, clear and happy. They didn’t remember what the joke was. They didn’t even know if it was a joke.

But still they laughed.

Setting apart the fact that Kritika manipulated two people just to get what she wanted, but this laughter was nothing regarding that. The laughter was the truth. The laughter was what made her feel free of the things from her past and the things about to pop up in the future. The laughter made her realise that however bad the past and future could get,

her present was a total bliss and she should rather enjoy every moment of this freedom. She continued with her laugh and Duryoy had this stupid grin over his face.

Maybe he felt the same level of affection from Kritika which he had always wanted from Dvijata. Maybe she had the thing which made her seem so irresistible. Maybe it was her pretty smile and her dark eyes glowing between her milky face that Duryoy was finding difficult to forget. Or maybe because her head was now over his shoulder. But all they knew was that they laughed like 2 mad men.

Duryoy could feel the saying- two seconds of drought might bond people more closely than a decade of abundance- literally coming true. And slowly between the laughter they 'Cheers-ed' the sips of NURAC from the pink bottle and emptied it with a smile over their *tired* faces. A smile over their *feeling-sleepy* faces. And a smile over their *already-asleep* faces.

And they both lay beside one another (with Mo, of course), happy, satisfied, content. And just to be sure, they kept holding hands as they continued to drift away from the reality because even if they couldn't make it out alive, at least they had each other!

THE CHAOS

RELIVING PAST

It was dark and it was entirely red for a moment in front of his eyes. The red turned into scarlet and again turned back to blackness. And in the blackness Duryoy could hear himself breathing. Breathing heavily. Almost panting. And along with his own sound, the sound of a mixed crowd with light chattering happening all around could be heard. The air around him was getting colder and the smell around him was changing too. The lighter smell of the air from the conditioners, and the leather cushions and the carpets around and the stronger perfumes sprinkled over expensive fabrics, all seemed to exist nearby, but he couldn't see a thing. Duryoy could now see a tiny beam of light arising from the far end, a small white hole maybe which kept increasing and increasing and increasing.

At first, the white light brought a slight optimism but soon the brightness got unbearable for the naked eyes and even with the eyelids shut, the brightness began to hurt his eyes. Suddenly, his vision had been darkened again, faded at the corners. He tried readjusting his eyes thrice but every time he did the brightness seemed to play with his brain- the lighter colours around were becoming brighter and dark unshaped circles were flying around his eyes, giving him an instant urge to puke, but he felt dehydrated and thirsty- and although it was a terrible scenario but

that was a good sign. The instant crave for water was an immediate symptom of the NURAC functioning.

There came a sudden surge of weakness in his legs as he started losing his balance and couldn't help himself from toppling sideways, like some drunkard. The imbalance was overpowering and he couldn't take that anymore! He instantly fell forward supporting himself over his hands and knees. He felt a hand over his shoulder and heard a concerned voice asking him if he needed some water, and Duryoy nodded hastily with an open mouth. He didn't seem to be inhaling enough oxygen to support his lungs. But with his blurred visions he could somewhat figure out that someone was holding a bottle of water in front of him. And he grabbed it like a hungry dog, turned the lid open and drank as much as his tiny throat could allow. The water kept and kept pouring as Duryoy felt his throat revive again.

"Are you all right champ?" asked a voice which sounded like that of young 30 year old Aathman "You can hear me, right?"

Duryoy nodded weakly. The blurred visions slowly gained its sharpness as Duryoy could see Aathman waving his hands

"Yes, yes" Duryoy said coughing violently and then sitting upright taking-in a deep breath

"Oh, finally!" Aathman said leaving a sigh of relief "For once I really thought you passed out..."

Duryoy nodded hesitantly "Yeah! I felt the same" he said and wow! His voice had changed. It seemed younger and shallower, a touch of shrillness in his voice

With the sudden change in the tone Duryoy tried feeling his Adam's apple just to realise there was none. Duryoy quickly turned aside and ran his hands over his face- he could feel his thin moustache, his skin seemed very smooth and there was this thinner patch of hair over his cheeks which would soon start calling themselves beards. The softness was astonishing! He ran his hands through his short neatly cropped hair and although he knew the haircut was pathetic yet it was nice to be 17 once again!

He saw his reflection over the glazed tiles beneath. He cosily smiled as he took another sip from the water bottle. He kept running his hands over his face and ears and hair and chest. But he soon realised that a guy touching himself, in the middle of an airport and feeling good about it

didn't really go well with the crowd around.

"You're alright?" Aathman asked doubtfully

"Yeah just a mild seizure" Duryoy said pretending it to be not a very big deal "I'm acrophobic, and the thought of flying so high over the clouds... freaks me out"

Acrophobia is the fear of heights, but Duryoy in real wasn't exactly acrophobic. He was basophobic. Because basophobia is the fear of falling down. Now these two phobias are almost undistinguishable but it's the way the brain perceives it decides its acrophobia or basophobia. Because basophobia can occur at low heights too, but not acrophobia.

And not indulging much into the differences between the fears of human minds, a tiny voice within Duryoy asked "Where is Kritika?"

And that had the panic mode within him turned on! They should have landed at the same time together! He hoped Kritika didn't drop early or do something silly because that'd drop her into some unknown time zone from where she might never come back!

"Aathman, where is Dr Soni?" Duryoy said laying his eyes around the airport

"Khalif sir is briefing him up with the security measures. They'll be here any minute"

"And Khalif isn't coming?" Duryoy paused "I mean Khalif sir"

"No, he's the divisional head, Duryoy!" Aathman said in an obvious manner 'they do not do such petty field jobs'

"Alright"

"What's the matter boy? You seem a little distracted today. Is there something that's concerning you?"

"No! Yeah, I mean. Can I ask you something?" Duryoy said getting closer to Aathman with a bleak smile 'don't judge me with this please'

"Yeah, anything man"

"Have you seen Kritika?"

And the big, broad smile on Aathman's face that followed after this statement said it all.

"No, Aathman, it's not what you think" Duryoy fumbled

With round and notorious eyes, Aathman asked "You know her?"

"Yeah, my boss has a beautiful daughter and you think I won't know about her?"

"And you have a crush on her?" Aathman whispered with narrowed

eyes and a notorious smile

“No!” Duryoy retorted with a shy look ‘she’s just too sweet... and pretty... and she’s very considerate... and innocent... and she has the face of her mother, I tell you!”

‘so you have a crush on her *mother*?’ Aathman corrected himself, with a sly smile on his face

“Come on!” Duryoy said as Aathman danced his eyebrows “NO!”

And they both cracked into laughter. Loud, very loud. Just like the old days when Aathman used to joke about Duryoy’s college happenings. Aathman used to come to AIIMS to take the research papers and they would sit and sip teas at the roadside stall, talk about all the non-sense they’ve been up to between the days of their visit and then they’d depart. Something that went on for 2 whole years!

It took just 2 minutes with Aathman for Duryoy to realise how badly he missed those small talks and useless puns, and the laughter that followed. Duryoy couldn’t be more glad, to be finally able to speak to Aathman. He really missed him. The man’s role in his life was immense! He gave up on himself, had served in jail, jeopardized his own career, and had been openly insulted for an act of which had never been he was never a part of. And all of this for Duryoy! And then there was Dvijata whom he had been with for ten years and in the end she gave up on him just because her father had better options.

Priorities!

“By the way” Aathman reminded, still laughing “Your girl has arrived” pointing towards the entry area “With your father-in-law” he said straightening up his rifle and posture

And although he loved the pun, but the dilemma of the situation left him short of words. After ten whole years Duryoy was looking at the man who created him, the man who trusted his every instinct and never let him down even when he himself was at his worst. Dr Soni, with his brisk steps, a brief case and truckload of respect entered the passenger terminal, followed by six of his fellow scientists who seemed to be tranced in their own worlds.

Even the way each of them walked radiated their importance.

And not to mention the most important thing that stuck to Duryoy’s rifling vision was the handsomely tall, young seventeen year old Kritika Soni with big, round horn-rimmed glasses and perfectly oiled hair, with

a sleek pony tail hanging behind her, walking on the footsteps of her father- literally now, figuratively in the future.

Although it was the 28 year old Kritika within her, yet she seemed to have mastered the art of acting, and in every possible way she acted like a seventeen year old would. Her eyes remained fixed rather than frolicking around, trying to portray the disheartenment towards her father leaving the country. She had inherited the role of 17 year old of herself, excellently.

Duryoy was so convinced by her acting that he continued to look at her without dropping an eyelid! The look became a stare, the stare became an awkward stare and the awkward stare became a demurring stare. And Aathman having noticed everything although wanted to tell this to Duryoy, but before he could, Kritika's eyes shot up.

A TWIST IN THE TALE

Kritika turned upwards to look at the large British clock hanging off the huge expanse of the airport slab. 17:01 it said. Her huge glasses kept reflecting the overhead lights hiding her eyes behind a blanket of white dots. She wasn't making much of an eye contact with anyone but the subconscious is very sharp when it comes to people staring at you.

How shameless! she thought as she saw a boy with absolutely zero dressing sense, spoilt hair and awful smile, staring her

Dr Soni kept obstructing the boy's view, and the boy kept inching rights and lefts out of desperation. The piercing male glimpses were making Kritika uncomfortable and her every effort to look offended didn't for once matter to the manner-less brat. Finally Kritika thought of breaking the ice and slowed her pace as she began lagging from her father and then she turned and gave the boy one sharp look. But rather the boy unexpectedly gave her a smile and tried waving at her, but then he didn't. Kritika turned back to check if it was someone else who he was looking at, but no! It was her. But she didn't remember having met him before. He looked at her as if he had known her since a very long time. He seemed to have wanting to say something but instead he just kept looking at her with open eyes. Not uttering a single word.

"Hey" Aathman said pushing Duryoy with his elbow as he prepared himself for a tight salute "Enough man! Dr Soni's arriving. Stop staring his daughter!" he whispered

Duryoy broke out of his tiny hymn and he quickly brushed himself as he saw Dr Soni walking towards him with a grand smile on his face. But the moment he looked at Duryoy, Duryoy skipped a beat. The feeling wasn't correct. Rather it was real creepy to see men walking; whom you know had died a decade ago. Duryoy was unsure about how to act back and he got all uneasy and his mouth started drying up and he clasped his hand as tightly as possible. But the smile was so wide it seemed as if Dr Soni too had been longing to see Duryoy since the last ten years.

Aathman greeted Dr Soni with a tight salute and stamped his foot hard as Dr Soni nodded at him with a smile and said "Good evening Aathman. Relax! Relax!" he said waving his hand 'this isn't ISRO"

He then went closer to Duryoy with a smiling face and his eyes gleaming with a pride. The man had too many things to be proud of- Successful life, excellent job, international recognition, honorary awards, beautiful daughter. Duryoy, even after having done the greater things in life felt underprivileged to be standing beside Dr Soni. His same old spectacles, the same old shirt he had worn, the same old briefcase, the same old golden watch, the same old rough patch of facial hair over his cheeks and the same old youth within the aging body.

'thank God you're on time" Dr Soni said smiling at Duryoy.

Well, Duryoy had always been infamous for getting late. Especially while catching flights.

"Good evening Dr Soni" Duryoy said pulling his hand forward for a warm hand shake. He could feel his hand quivering.

And Kritika standing beside her father made him further uneasy. Like he knew it was Kritika with whom he had shared everything with regard to his life but he still couldn't talk to her because in this world they have not yet met one another. The uneasiness within Duryoy was more than visible, loud enough to be caught by Dr Soni.

"Duryoy" Dr Soni said 'meet my daughter, Kritika" he said pointing towards Kritika "I don't think you've met each other before"

Finally! Duryoy thought, the uneasiness melting within him as he invited a handshake.

Kritika seemed a little surprised and moreover reluctant to be introduced to the boy who had been staring her since she stepped in as if she was the only women he had ever witnessed in his entire life.

‘Duryoy is pursuing his studies in Neuro-psychology at AIIMS’ Dr Soni said “And my daughter just got into IIST Trivandrum”

They both shot hands towards each other- Duryoy’s being confident and Kritika’s being nervous.

‘That’s great indeed’ Duryoy implemented

“I told her not to be in this field but like me even she wants to work for ISRO” fatherly pride emanating out of Dr Soni’s voice

Duryoy and Kritika shook hands and Duryoy took the chance to pinch her slightly near the base of the thumb telling her that it was him. But to his damned surprise- Kritika didn’t react like he expected her to.

Kritika’s eyes suddenly broadened and the anger within her yes pierced through Duryoy. Duryoy loosened his palm and she instantly left his hand, in a rather professional manner that *no one* noticed. And by *no one* it meant, no one other than Aathman because Aathman knew there was something wrong with Duryoy. He had been acting very strange lately.

But on watching Kritika retreat her hand Duryoy realised there was something very wrong happening there. The 28 year old Kritika had not managed to reach here along with him. Then where was she? They both travelled together so they both should have landed at the same time together! Duryoy didn’t want to revisit this day again without Kritika. He couldn’t do it without her. Escaping once was by luck. But luck isn’t graceful enough to save you twice from being butchered!

The 17 year old Kritika turned away and went back to her father with a dejected face and hugged him tightly “Come back soon, dad” she said not giving a thought to what the other six scientists looking at her might be thinking.

Duryoy looked around with the highest alarm of panic ringing over his face

There’s only one thing I asked her to do, and she isn’t even here for that! Duryoy cursed his fate

“It’s time sir” said a manly voice from the crowd “I think we should leave”

And on hearing that voice Duryoy’s senses landed back to its full consciousness. How hard could it be for him to guess out the only man who had singlehandedly sabotaged his entire life? How hard could it be to guess out the man because of whom he was currently trapped inside

the 17 year old body of himself? How hard could it be for him to bear the glimpse of the man in military posture? How hard could it be for Duryoy to recognize Khalif?

How the hell am I supposed to kill this man by myself? Duryoy thought. And how the hell am I supposed to compel him to board this plane? He knows this plane will crash! He'll never step on it. Kritika said she had a plan for everything, but I think she didn't consider showing herself up in the plan!

"What is wrong with you?" Aathman said getting a chance to whisper to Duryoy

"I'm panicking, that's it"

"Panicking doesn't make people pinch someone in the hand. What were you even thinking when you did that?" Aathman said bringing up the elder-brother tone 'don't be crazy Duryoy. Thank god she didn't react"

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I've been down lately" Duryoy said hanging his head low "It won't happen again"

"It better not!" Aathman said quickly holding the semi-automatic rifle hanging down his right shoulder and pressing it against his chest. He stepped ahead and took his position, ahead of Dr Soni

"Bye dad" Kritika said in a cold and disturbed voice. And she smiled sadly, waving a goodbye to her father

"Take care of her Khalif" Dr Soni said waving his daughter a goodbye and holding his briefcase as he walked away from her

"You do not worry sir, I'll keep you updated on her till you return" said Khalif arising from behind. They shook hands and Dr Soni patted on Khalif's shoulder. He then looked at Duryoy giving him a light nod "It's time"

But Duryoy didn't move

"Duryoy we need to leave!" Dr Soni repeated on watching Duryoy unmoved. Duryoy didn't want to board the plane without Khalif, but there was no way he could do that. He thought that probably buying some time would allow him to find a solution. But his suggestion only welcomed questions

"Umm, can we please wait for some more time sir?" Duryoy said, holding back.

"But Duryoy the plane is waiting for us!" said Dr Soni

“Yeah, actually this is my first flight and I’m really very nervous”

“Oh, you don’t need to be!” Dr Soni empathised “there’s nothing really to be afraid of...” and Dr Soni was about to continue when suddenly an airport guy dropped in, in great hurry, holding his walkie-talkie close to his lips and quickly handing a paper to Aathman. The paper had a stamp of Airport Authority of India which made it obvious that it was something of grave importance.

Aathman was surprised to receive a notice from the airport officials at such a moment, but he ran his eyes through it.

Khalif saw that too and approached Aathman to check if everything was alright.

Respected sir

Due to a technical glitch in the scheduled Air India flight we have arranged a Boeing B-47. Please proceed towards Gate 16 instead of Gate 21. We regret our negligence, and we’d make sure that this doesn’t get repeated in the future

Thanks for co-operating with us

Regards

Airport Authority of India

Duryoy slowly approached Aathman asking him “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing much” Aathman said with a literal ease “Our flight isn’t ready to take off, so the airport authorities have arranged a Boeing B-47 for us...”

Well there were two things that were very strange. Both of which Duryoy knew. Firstly - Boeing B-47 are turbojet powered strategic bomber designed to fly at subsonic speed whose primary objective for manufacture was to drop nuclear bombs over Soviet Union and second thing, it was last used in 1969.

What was this plane doing here?

THE RETURN

Duryoy held his violet bag and dragged it towards himself as the non-uniform wheel started making annoying sounds. After years of using the same bag he had learned the art of swiftly ignoring those weird sounds his bag made. He walked along with the gang of intellectual men

towards Gate 16 from where they'd be boarding a plane whose production had halted 3 decades back.

The last time he was here there had been no switching of planes, no hand shake with Kritika Soni. Changes were occurring. Although at a slower rate, but it was inevitably occurring.

Duryoy kept looking at Kritika, until she disappeared behind the pile of baggage kept near the counter, but this time more cautiously as he had already made himself look like a sex-offender by relentlessly staring at her earlier.

Duryoy gave her one last glimpse, as he saw the tall, muscular Khalif turning around to leave and poor Kritika looking at the last glimpse of her father. And all of a sudden, she collapsed.

And she collapsed so badly that, even from that distance Duryoy heard her crash onto the ground.

"Bring me some water" she said, coughing violently. Her throat had dried down to the last drop and her eyes had gone red as they flickered uneasily. She was on all four of her limbs and her vision kept irritating her by showering an extremely bright light over her eyes as she kept opening and shutting her eyelids. But nothing helped. She was now breathing heavily and trying to breathe-in as much air as possible. She was losing consciousness and something had to be done soon enough. Her hands began to quiver and she clutched her fists unable to bear this sudden torcher that imploded within her.

On watching her topple Duryoy blindly ran back towards her with all he had, throwing away his violet bag aside.

"What's the matter?" Dr Soni said on watching Duryoy sprint away. He quickly took a few steps back when he caught the glimpse of his daughter fighting consciousness

And without waiting for his brains to respond Dr Soni made a wild run towards his daughter

"Oh dear, what has happened to you Kritu? Are you all right...? Why aren't you saying something... What happened... Can someone please call the doctor?" Dr Soni shrieked at the top of his vocals.

Duryoy quickly took out the bottle of water and handed it to Kritika. Kritika quickly grabbed the bottle and began emptying it as some of the scientists went by to bring medical assistance. A small crowd had as usual had gathered around but Khalif and the airport security officers

had managed to keep the crowd away. Kritika was still drinking water like a thirsty pigeon, but her condition didn't seem to get better. Her eyes remained red and bulged up and she seemed to be devoid of her senses.

Kritika slowly pushed the bottle aside saying 'dad, don't leave me behind please' she begged. Tears started shredding down her moist eyes and she couldn't help but cry 'dad you promised me you'll never leave me behind. And I never asked you for any favours in this, but please for once' she said, sounding broken "Let me come with you."

Dr Soni hugged Kritika tightly. He was almost at his breaking point as he shut his eyes tight and patted his daughter softly, as if trying to make an infant fall asleep.

'dad please?' her voice choked, yet she spoke "I don't need any trips, I don't even need the red dress you selected for me for my birthday, I don't need mom either. I just want to come with you... this time"

"Kritika but this is an international conference, dear. It needs a lot of permissions to get there"

"That won't really be a problem sir" interrupted a scientist from behind "We can arrange it for you"

"Right now?" Dr Soni asked "But what about her plane ticket?" Dr Soni wanted to find a thing which he could hold on to so as to let Kritika stay back. He knew the threats he had been surmounted with and in no way, he could risk his daughter's safety.

'sir, one extra seat can definitely be managed' assured the scientist waiting for Dr Soni's reply

"But..." Dr Soni hesitated "I don't feel right about this"

'dad... There's a thing I wanted to tell you from a very long time' Kritika said as she paused.

"What?"

"Please promise me you won't overreact"

"Have I ever?"

Kritika took in a deep breath and trying to match her father's eyes, she said 'dad, I've been detected with Alzheimer.'

And the faces around looked as horrified and astounded as they could possibly get. There was a lacerating silence all around.

But only one face amidst the entire crowd radiated happiness, because- **Finally, Kritika was back**

THE ONE TIME WHEN ALZHEIMER HELPED

“Look dad” Kritika said pulling out a piece of paper from her back pocket ‘doctor’s report. I thought to hide this from you, but I couldn’t. I didn’t want to bother you with this, but you aren’t helping me by leaving me behind this way. I really need you to stay with me”

She handed the prescription letter to her father as Dr Soni continued reading the report with disbelief. Kritika waited for a reaction and Duryoy waited for a reason

Where did she get this letter from? he thought

Dr Soni handed Duryoy the prescription letter knowing he was a medical student.

Duryoy gave a look at the prescription letter and ***What the hell?*** The report she was showing was signed by Dvijata! And just as every time, even this time Dvijata forgot to write down the date she had issued the report on. Kritika definitely knew how to make the best of something.

As of 2005, Dvijata had just begun her college and there Kritika was showing her signature beneath her medical report and drug prescription. Thankfully Dr Soni didn’t doubt much on the report because it was very detailed indeed. He had only one doubt “When did you go to Ahmedabad Kritu?” he asked, reading the address of the hospital.

‘dad you remember the science trip you sent me for? During last vacations, at ISRO Ahmedabad. That time I got myself checked because I used to experience intense depression and sudden mood-swings” Kritika said. Although puberty could also be the answer to everything she was undergoing but she said it so desolately that it managed to gather immense sentiments from everyone standing around.

“And then I got to know this!” she said lowering her voice.

Duryoy just couldn’t believe how fluently she could make up stories within seconds! It was just unbelievable the way she made everything sound so real

But Khalif seemed to be getting impatient about this emotional family stuffs and he entered the conversation ‘Dr Soni, I am afraid we’re getting late” he reminded politely “If your daughter wants to go with you she can, there’s no harm in that.”

“Thank you Khalif” Dr Soni said sharply “But I can take my own decisions, especially when it’s related to my family. Right?”

Khalif remained silent with a blunt look over his face

‘dad I’ll explain everything to you...” Kritika whispered “Just let me come with you”

“Yes sir, she’s right actually. By this way she can be safe with us too. Going by the current situation, it’s better she comes with us” suggested another scientist “There’d be no difficulty in arranging things for her. And it’s just a 2 day trip sir. Let her come”

“But she’s suffering from a disease! Wouldn’t this affect her?” Dr Soni asked looking at him

“Duryoy?” Dr Soni said looking at him “What do you suggest? This is your field son.”

Kritika’s eyes instantly shot up at Duryoy and he was very sure that this indeed was the 28-year-old Kritika beneath.

“Alzheimer as you know Dr Soni” Duryoy said choosing his word carefully “is a mental disease and not some physical, so it’d be better if she goes to visit new places. It relaxes the brain which’s much needed for curing Alzheimer. Trust me, there’s no harm at all...”

And so the decision was final. Dr Soni always had his confidence over this little pal as ultimately Duryoy’s entire research was based on brain activity! Surely his words could be trusted upon.

“You’re coming with us Kritu” said Dr Soni hugging his beloved daughter back “You’re coming with us.”

“WE’VE BEEN TRICKED”

Within the same walls of the abandoned factory in which Duryoy and Kritika had been held, Khalif was hanging between restlessness and cluelessness. Restlessness, because Khalif had no idea towards what he was being dragged to, and cluelessness over what Kritika’s actual plan was.

What is this girl really up to? Khalif thought And how is all this going to end? She never told me!

Kritika, since the very beginning had been revealing her plan in parts which never let Khalif manipulate her. But it was very weird that even though she knew Khalif had killed her father, still, out of these many people she chose Khalif for this job. Well, this altogether couldn’t have been a mere coincidence. Khalif was starting to sense there was something wrong happening here. Something very wrong, to which if he

did not start acting soon, it won't be long enough for things to drift out of hand. No one is so tolerant enough to stand by their father's murderer not doing the slightest of harm to them

Certainly, in doubt, Khalif quickly stood up from his deep brown cushion and took large steps towards the room where Kritika and Duryoy were slumbering.

The door opened with a heavy squeak, but there was nothing unnatural! The room up to its very inches, remained the same since the last time he saw it. Both Duryoy and Kritika lying next to one another deep asleep and their faces so straight and innocent as they kept holding each other's hands

Weird lady Khalif thought sleeps with the guy whom she kidnapped.

Khalif walked around the two sleeping bodies trying to notice if there was anything that might interest him. He found the picture of an odd animal drawn by them on a piece of paper. But apart from that he found nothing which could interest him! He made plans, he made theories, yet he could find not a single thing that could compliment his thoughts. He hung his head low and shut his eyes trying to calm his mind. And now the low humming of the outside tractors, and the ticking of a clock were vividly audible. For Khalif this wasn't the first time when he had no idea over what was about to happen, but he was confident that whatever might turn up he'd be able to find a way out.

And a minute equivalent to 10 had passed as Joshi arrived in a deep hurry. The seriousness of what he was about to say could be read on his face. The news wasn't good.

"Sir, I think we've been tricked!"

BOEING B-47

"I should seriously consider acting as a career, shouldn't I?" Kritika whispered excitedly to Duryoy as they stood inside the tiny air-conditioned Air India bus that kept snaking through the taxi area, passing by the gigantic aeroplanes and the petite ground crew in their fluorescent jackets. The scientists had stayed back at the airport as they had come up with something urgent to discuss, so it was just the two of them inside the bus.

"From next time I'll make sure you do not get a report unless being verified by me" Duryoy said turning his back towards Kritika. "You

could have jeopardized our entire plan!”

“Relax Duryoy! My dad didn’t figure out that it was signed by Dvijata. He doesn’t even know Dvijata!”

“That’s not the point Kritika! By bringing objects from 2017 to 2007 you’re making changes. You’re creating diversions in space-time”

“Duryoy how could have I proved my disease without a report? And I found out that Dvijata didn’t enter the date in her report, so I thought I should make use of it.”

“Oh don’t tell me this was all a coincidence” Duryoy darted back “You always knew Dvijata never fills dates in her report. You just used her!”

“Yeah whatever” Kritika shrugged negligently “Take it the way you want to” she said “But remember, without me doing this, you could have never compelled to get Khalif on this plane!”

“I said make as less change as possible but here you are introducing things from the future!”

“Hey, I thought at least you would understand me, but no! You’re all the same...”

“And if by ‘understanding you’, you mean ‘understanding your insanity’ then I’m not at all a part of it, alright?”

“And may I ask which part of it did you think was insane?” Kritika asked nosily.

“Faking a mental illness that you’d be suffering 11 years from now, not at all insane?”

“Do you have any idea why the scientists stayed back at the airport?”

“Not that it is any of my business”

“It’s because I am travelling with dad, he’s concerned about my safety. And today we’re going to fly over Pakistan, so dad requested to the CISF for extra security. And because it would take time to avail forces right away, CISF will have no other option but to ask Khalif to board the flight as the security in-charge. And that’s how I’ve got Khalif to board the plane. Now, does me faking the entire mental disease make some sense to you?” Kritika asked as the bus halted with a silent ‘swoosh’ and the doors behind her opened.

“Have a safe flight” Kritika said swiftly turning around and getting off the bus like an unharmed warrior, as Duryoy stood behind, inside the

bus, totally out of words for the way Kritika had pulled things up.

“Hey?” Duryoy called from behind “But how did you teleport the medical report from 2017?”

Kritika turned back.

“Just the way I teleported the B-47 from 1956” she said.

THE CHANGE

REAL FACT- March 10, 1956. A B-47 carrying two nuclear weapon cores from MacDill Air Force Base in Florida to an overseas airbase disappeared during a scheduled air-to-air refueling over the Mediterranean Sea. After getting lost in a thick cloud bank at 14,500 feet, the plane was never heard from again and its wreckage, including the nuclear cores, was never found.

“WHAT? It... was *you* who disappeared the plane from 1956?” Duryoy asked hyperactively pushing his sleek face closer to Kritika “But WHY?” he yelled “Which part of- Don’t make much changes, didn’t you understand?”

Kritika folded her hands tight and looked back at Duryoy in surprise. The more she tried to help this man the further he got infuriated.

“Kritika you have no idea how different will the world look like when we get back in 2017.”

“Duryoy, enough!” Kritika said sternly pointing at Duryoy “I am not answerable to every of your minute query, alright? I know my job well. We both are equally in danger and we know that the only way out is to... you know that.”

“Then explain me, what reasoning will the people in future have towards a Boeing B-47 suddenly disappearing mid-air? And more than that, what was India doing with a Boeing B-47 in 2005 while it’s manufacture had been seized three decades earlier?”

“Duryoy, you are thinking about the “future”. But what is the future if you and I are not alive? We, the people who created real life time machines! What’s the use of having a future which does not get benefitted by us?” Kritika asked “And everything that exists doesn’t need a reason to exist. There are many unexplainable stuffs hanging all around us- The wow signal, UFO sightings of Arizona, the Bermuda

Triangle. And everyone has just accepted those uncertainties the way they are! We do not need to justify everything we do! And frankly, enough bossing around me. I am equally a part of this plan as much as you are so stop criticizing my actions! If you have a better plan then say it, else let me do it my way” Kritika said storming her way towards the B-47.

“At least tell me why you brought this B-47 here? The scheduled plane was perfectly fine!” Duryoy said from a distance

“This is a war plane, while that was a passenger jet. Last time it was the bullets that made the plane lose its hydraulics. But a war plane always has a much stronger body, so this time the plane won’t lose any controls. I hoped maybe we could save more lives”

“But our aim is to kill Khalif, not save lives!” Duryoy argued

“But why can’t we save people if we “can”?”

“Kritika, I am saying this for the millionth time- DO NOT MAKE CHANGES! Let things happen the way they happened. Just let those people die who were destined to die today in this crash!”

“Duryoy, by referring to ‘dead people’ you’re referring to my father too!”

“We’d rescue your father, alright? We don’t need to save the entire plane! And anyways people would be dead by then because of the poisoned lemonades! It has nothing to do with bullets. What the hell is wrong with you?” Duryoy said hopelessly grabbing his luggage and storming towards the towering grey war plane from the Second World War with long and noisy strides. He always knew it was a bad idea to travel back in time. Now he was definite about that.

“Won’t you ask me how I got this plane here?” Kritika asked in a low voice trying to be a little friendly. It was her way of patching things up. She always knew she had this bad habit of trying to stretch people’s limits, but she shouldn’t have forgotten that without Duryoy none of this would have been possible. She should have at least considered *his* words before taking such massive steps. But on the other hand, he’d have never let her go away with this, so she had a reason not to reveal everything to him.

“Duryoy?”

He didn’t answer. And kept walking away from her.

“You know the device I created- The Artificial Wormhole? I

actually made two of those of two different diameters so that one could easily get through another. The second one was more of unofficial construction, just for an emergency like this” she shrugged “I used the first one to send the second back in time to 1956- used it to teleport the B-47 to 2005”

“What? But how? And when?”

“Let’s keep these talks for after we get back to the real time?”

“Is this why you came late?”

“Yeah, I was busy teleporting a war plane” Kritika said sarcastically. And Duryoy as usual was awed by her. She loved it when she would reveal her plan and see the entirely blown off face of Duryoy. This was indeed one of the many things that made her happy, like truly happy. Kritika always wanted a husband who’d always question her, just to find how he was drastically wrong.

Duryoy seemed perfect for her.

Soon the bus filled with scientists stopped behind the two and the area got sparsely flooded by ISRO scientists chatting over physics and life and wife and physics again. Dr Soni got off the bus and was a little surprised to see his daughter having bonded so well with Duryoy in just 15 minutes. But it was alright for him. Not one of those over-reactive fathers like Dvijata’s.

He came closer to Duryoy and patted softly on his shoulder.

“After you sir” he said as Dr Soni passed him by and Kritika hugged her father and they both walked towards the plane together.

Duryoy watched them board the stairs and disappear into the shadows of the insides, as he kept looking at Kritika, weirdly hoping she might turn to give him a look. But those things happen only in films. But suddenly, miraculously, she seemed to have heard his mind, and just before she got in she turned back softly and raised her eyes. At first Duryoy felt as ecstatic as Raj got after getting a look from Simran. But slowly the hard realisation stumbled upon him that she wasn’t looking at him. Disappointment. Rather she was looking behind him, and so he too turned to what made Kritika turn.

Well, nothing great. But something of vast significance.

It was Khalif getting off the bus and boarding the plane with the most disappointed face one could ever have.

Kritika was right, again.

A SEAT NEXT TO YOUR CRUSH

It felt not just a little weird but really really weird for Duryoy to be stepping into a plane which might have taken hundreds of lives. A plane which had witnessed the Second World War. A plane which was used to carry nuclear bombs. Duryoy considered himself feeling attached to the age old history of the world and its delicate ego which when hurt lead to World Wars.

The plane was a piece of beauty- The cockpit nearly as high as a 747, the huge oval cross sectioned body of the plane, and just about the centre ran one single huge piece of wing, over the roof. It's always great to get on a War Plane, you never know the histories it was a part of. And not being much sentimental about this whole thing Duryoy quickly stepped into the cabin as a beautiful Air Hostess wished him (the same Air Hostess who had poisoned the lemonades in there). The last time he saw her, he was at her gunpoint when that unknown someone picked him up and very pleasantly threw him off the plane with a parachute.

The insides of the plane felt immensely stuffy. No windows, because this was a War Plane, all credits to Kritika Soni. Duryoy made his way through the central isle colliding and slipping and pushing and adjusting and finally reaching his seat just to find out that someone else was sitting there.

Guess who?

Kritika Soni.

Like how many times can even coincidence be called a coincidence?

Duryoy stood there clueless over what should he do next- skip the seat or ask her to slide?

And on watching Duryoy stand by herself and staring her, she pretended as if she didn't know him because her father was sitting right beside her

"Yes?" she said, with a level of genuineness as if she never knew who Duryoy was "Is there a problem?"

"Oh Duryoy!" Dr Soni said happily from the next seat "Come sit with us" he said pointing towards the third chair in the row

"No, no, no, sir... That's all right. Thank you" Duryoy said trying to walk ahead but ended up hitting his knee over a seat handle. Meanwhile

Aathman stood there enjoying Duryoy's dumbness, somehow resisting his urge to laugh out loud

"Come sit now." Dr Soni pleaded

"I should give you both some privacy" Duryoy added "I will find some place" he said looking around "Anyways this is Aathman's seat"

"Oh no, I can manage sir" Aathman said controlling his laughter. Even he too loved screwing with Duryoy.

"Oh come on Duryoy" Dr Soni pleaded "You too are a family!"

Without trying to figure out the optimistic side of Dr Soni's statement, Duryoy took the seat. He re-adjusted his tight jeans as it was going to be a long flight. And now with Kritika by him, this flight would seem even more longer.

Oh my damned luck, he thought and sat down, pushing himself into his seat cushions.

He strapped-in the belt tight as the humongous B-47 had started moving like a huge scavenger. The engine noise had started getting an edgy note to it and the note increased steeply as the plane kept increasing the power. The cabin announcements had been made, the cabin lights dimmed and the plane was preparing itself to leave the land behind.

Duryoy had a very unpleasant feeling, highly nauseating, something that happens when you revisit your past. And with every passing moment his heart skipped a beat thinking that he was getting closer to the time when there'll be firing taking place all around and he'd have to jump down this plane with his parachute.

The B-47 groaned like the Hulk, and with its entire strength, it began running over the runway.

It was evening and the sun was diluting itself into the orange sky. The airport lights had been put on and those lights could be seen through the only window which the plane had. And with some tiny jerks and louder noises, the plane tilted and began gaining altitude, shutting the ears partially. And soon into the open orange sky, it disappeared.

THE LATE REALISATION

Zayaan had a way of working towards his suspicion because he always found that when professional kidnappings happen, every step they manage to ignore claiming it to be "impossible" somehow turns out to be the way the entire thing took place. And so he followed the simple

rule of- Claiming no possibility as impossibility.

Zayaan knew there was something Chief had been hiding, and he had no damn evidence to prove it. He had no time. He had nothing other than bunch of clueless people who went on to save ISRO scientists from world class kidnappers without consulting to CISF. Duh!

The only solution could now be figured out is when Chief agrees to cooperate. Zayaan walked Chief into his cabin and had a brief talk with him. No one knows what conversation happened between the two but whatever it was, it was damn serious because Chief- who was the toughest shell to crack for the day, came out with his confession as smoothly as a knife through the butter. But listening to his confessions it was quite evident that Chief was not at all involved in the kidnapping. Chief even had trusted Zayaan and disclosed the entire research and each of his words matched with that of Shyamalan which made things very clear. There was absolute transparency between Shyamalan and Chief.

Now, in this entire world only three people knew about this project- one had been kidnapped and the remaining two had proved themselves to be innocent. Now either it was some fourth person who was entirely involved in this, or it was Kritika Soni herself. Although people getting themselves kidnapped never made any sense but 'Might be the main aim of the kidnapping was something completely different from what we are presuming it to be' was what Zayaan thought. And because under his thought Kritika Soni was under suspicion he had asked for the phone records of Kritika Soni from the telecom companies.

Now that the records were in his hands, he had discovered a brand-new clue which managed to bring the investigation back in track. A message had been sent from Kritika's phone some 30 minutes before she had been kidnaped. According to the geo-locator, the person she had sent the message to was standing outside the gates of CEPT campus, and the person wasn't Arvind. Nor it was her psychologist Dvijata or her kidnap companion Duryoy Kundu. Weirdly, roughly a couple of minutes after which Kritika had been kidnapped the phone had been switched off and it had not been switched on since then. And some days ago wanted criminal Khalif was in the news for having been spotted in Gujarat. And along with him was one of the most famous hackers of India- Joshi. And it has been found that Kritika's another gmail account has been opened

by a computer whose IP address cannot be traced back.

On top of that Kritika Soni, out of no reason had created two models of the same device while on her papers she had mentioned creating only one. And the CCTV recording of her lab had captured her packing-in one of the two devices in her handbag while she went out for a coffee with Shyamalan after completion of the project. The clues were scattered yet they were making a perfect sense.

For once the clues were pointing towards one specific thing, and it was just one step before Zayaan could have concluded anything. There were voices all over his head telling him what his conscience thought. But he just wanted to be sure about it

Zayaan stepped into the room where Arvind, Dvijata and Aathman had been held. All three of them were talking to each other about something but they all seemed to be agreeing at the same point, unlike moments ago when Arvind couldn't resist Dvijata and Aathman couldn't resist Arvind.

"Inform the special forces that there's an emergency situation" Zayaan said to one of his men "Call the head of Special Ops and tell him to meet me in my cabin, right now! And Aathman, I need you in here with me. We need to discuss certain things."

Aathman remained somewhat shook when being called out of nowhere

"I've told everything I had with me" he said "There's nothing more to it."

"I'm not calling you for interrogation. I'm calling you for your suggestion."

With that, he was out of words and his happiness watching no boundaries. And the shine on Aathman's face was ineluctable. You have no idea how privileged he felt to be have been considered worthy of being called to cooperate with the Special Forces.

"Did you find out the kidnapper?" Arvind asked Zayaan

"Yes" Zayaan cut short.

"And?"

"We're working on it."

"Who is it then?"

Zayaan paused to look around.

"You should learn something from your sister Arvind. She's way

smarter than what she seems.”

ROLLING OF EVENTS

90 minutes later

Plane over the Aravalli range

Near to Indo-Pak border

“Duryoy. Duryoy!” Kritika called out from besides, violently jerking Duryoy’s shoulder “Wake up!” But Duryoy was in too good a sleep to even move a single inch of his body part, let alone his eye lids “Have you forgotten? We’re still in 2007! Inside the plane.”

“Yeah Dvijata” he murmured sleepily “I love you too. Now let me sleep” he said cozily turning away from Kritika and sleeping like a content puppy. He let out a deep happy breath and smiled with his eyes closed, and went back to sleep again.

“Duryoy I said wake up!” Kritika whispered angrily straightaway pulling Duryoy’s hair as hard as if pulling up a rice sack.

“Ouch!” Duryoy groaned in pain, pulling his face up. Duryoy looked at her sluggishly, his eyes reddened his thick hairs ruffled and the weary look on his face, all demanding a reason for doing such a dreadful thing to a man who was sleeping such peacefully “What?” he said, in a cry baby tone

“You need to wake up, alright?” Kritika said handing Duryoy a bottle of water “Wash your face with this and buckle up. We’re almost reached the international border. The plane was to be crashed somewhere near here. We need to get to work...”

“What work?” Duryoy sounded confused

“For what we ‘actually’ came here! Save the plane from crashing...”

“What?” Duryoy said sounding surprised “No, no, no. We came here to make sure the plane crashed. And when it crashed Khalif would be in it so that he dies in the crash too. Why do you always keep changing the plan?”

“Yes, whatever. Just make sure my father survives”

Duryoy quickly inched forward looking at his left to make sure Dr Soni wasn’t hearing their conversation. But to his surprise Dr Soni wasn’t in his seat.

“Where’s your dad?” Duryoy asked hastily

“A scientist called him a while ago. He said he had something important to discuss. And dad went with him, near to the lavatory area” she said pointing ahead towards the cockpit “Wasn’t that the place where it all began the last time you were on the plane?”

“Yes, but, but what about the lemonades? You didn’t have those, right?”

“You asked me not to!”

“Oh! Thank God” Duryoy breath in a sigh of relief

Duryoy noticed that the scientists sitting in the row to the other side of the aisle, all of them seemed unconscious, and whitish saliva pouring out of their open mouth. Their bodies soullessly dancing to the jerks of the plane and their head cocking on to lefts and the rights as the plane switched directions

“Damn! I was asleep while this all happened” Duryoy cursed himself.

“But Duryoy” Kritika asked with terrified eyes, something very unlikely of her “My dad drank some of it!”

“No, that’s alright, he’ll be fine. *They* didn’t poison your father’s lemonade. They had information to be extracted from him. So they first killed everyone in this plane so that the conversation and exchange of the intel could be done without any interruption” Duryoy said

“*They*, who?”

“The scientist!” Duryoy said sounding obvious “He is the one who implemented this entire crash! And where’s Aathman?”

“He’s exactly behind you” Kritika said looking between the seats

“Dead or still alive?”

Kritika peeked in further “Oh, he’s alive” she said, a bit relieved on watching Aathman still awake and had his eyes fixed over to Dr Soni.

“But how?”

“He didn’t drink the lemonade” Kritika shrugged “said he didn’t like those. Hard to believe that sometimes even dislikes manage to keep you alive.”

BREAKEVEN

The off-whitish room smelled of the afternoon tea and had the sounds of the overhead fan lazily pushing the hot air around the room. Arvind and Dvijata sitting beside one another, both facing the blank wall

with achievements of ISRO hung carelessly over them. And between Dvijata and Arvind was an empty seat and an emptiness that comes from absence of words. Looking at Dvijata's face it didn't seem like she had the tiniest of the eagerness to make any conversation with Arvind. Maybe it was because of the way she was sitting. Maybe it was because of her disinterested eyes. Maybe because she had plugged in her earphones just to escape the reality and the offending people around her.

Zayaan was inside the room whose door was just next to the place the two unconnected souls were sitting, and behind the doors was the fate of Kritika and Duryoy probably being discussed. Aathman was in the room too which made it more definite that something serious was being planned in.

Dvijata was pretty disappointed by the way Chief brought hopes into their hearts and left them at a deserted end when things came upon him. She wasn't being emotional but the conditions she were facing as such that it would make any damn person self-introspect himself. Dvijata slowly realized that none of the persons she had ever met came close to her because of who she was. And that included Duryoy too. He came to her because she was beautiful. Chief came to her because she could help him find Kritika. Arvind was still with her because she was his sister's psychologist.

Everyone had a motive for which they came close to her. Was there anyone she could really trust upon?

Someone who came to her for who she really was?

She felt alone. She felt vulnerable. She felt like leaving all this for once and running away to live a life she always wanted to, because everyone around her had greed attached to them.

She kept listening to the songs in her earphone as "Breakeven by The Script" begun to play and it was literally as if she had a time lapse, sitting right there at the boring bench at ISRO. The songs had lyrics which any person could relate to, and the singer kept singing those two lines-

When the hearts break, they don't break even

And for once she knew that songs were the only things that understood her. She kept smiling as she remembered the night she was

listening to this song and Duryoy climbed over her father's car, clang on to the base of the veranda and entered her balcony with dusty clothes and not-so-rusty smile. And he waved to her so pathetically, just like poor kids begging at the traffic signals that the resemblance was uncanny, and she kept laughing and laughing from inside her room while this song kept playing on her earphones. And she didn't open the veranda door until her father called out from the ground floor saying "What's so funny up there?"

Poor Duryoy kept trying to unlock the door but she had locked it from inside and the off-golden doorknob kept turning a bit but never opened fully. And it went on and on and on as she kept looking at the doorknob beside her at ISRO and smiling to the lyrics of the song. But wait!

Someone was trying to open this doorknob too! Oh yes, someone really got locked inside the room. Dvijata thunderously got up on her knees and pushed her palms over the trembling doorknob. She didn't remember what happened after that but she remembered Arvind too getting up to help her out but he didn't do much apart from standing beside and slamming the door with his shoulder. And then she saw Zayaan coming out after the door finally opened and apologizing for the poor quality of lock and then from the room several other men came out like ants from an ant hole.

"Did we reach a conclusion?" Dvijata asked slightly tilting her face upwards to match Zayaan

"About the two of them, yes. About what you all just did without consulting the CISF, no."

"I'm sorry for having done that" she said in a lowered voice "But please, is there for anyway we can save them? I'm ready for everything that'd come up, but right now I want Duryoy and I want him safe."

Zayaan looked at her with edgy eyes. He knew what lingered behind her pretty light-brown eyes but he resisted himself from saying anything further "I'll see what I can do" he said walking away from her.

"Have we got any lead?" Dvijata asked watching him walk away from her.

"Yes, we have and no, I cannot tell you about it" he said without caring to turn

"The man there is... that man there, is supposed to be my husband!"

Dvijata shouted as there was a miniature pause all about her and for the next three seconds all eyes in the corridor apart from Zayaan's were on her. Arvind's eyes more surprised than they should be, but he never had a fine start with her anyway "And it's my right to know what you're doing to save him! You just cannot keep treating him as an attachment to Kritika just because Kritika works at ISRO and is more important to you guys! I remind you that Duryoy is one of the best neuro-psychologist this country ever had and he has worked for this country, and even for ISRO. I don't understand what sort of biasness are you putting up for people based on their organizations!"

Zayaan had halted his walk, but didn't turn yet. Dvijata wondered if she had said more than necessary.

"Ever seen Special Forces working?" Zayaan asked turning eerily to look back at her.

Dvijata shook her head in disagreement.

"Well then buckle up. You're about to witness one."

A FLIGHT OVER THE THAR

The plane was under severe turbulence as it passed over the Aravalli range North-West to which lies the world's 9th largest subtropical desert- The Great Indian Desert, also called the Thar desert with miles and miles of sand dunes covering the lands with their golden sands and just there in the endless distance where one might see the sky meeting the sandy earth, there lies the mirages looking as if a vast stretch of ocean is waiting for you to dive into. And besides those mirages are some low-lying Mimosa Hamata, and one might if lucky see the scene of raw nature with goats and camels feeding over them, and their shadows falling over the glowing sands like as if someone poured sharp blank ink over a golden canvas.

And the evening desert breeze blowing straight onto your face, hot and dry, yet so pleasing that it would carve a smile over your face. Ironically, sometimes aridness does yield happiness in other's lives.

The huge perpendicular and pointed mountains of Aravalli range causes what pilots usually call "Mountain waves" which are usually caused when the winds strike the windward side of the hill. The winds move from the tip of the mountains and spread outwards like a huge wave. This wave is the one that never fails to cause turbulence and so it

was very much predictable and easy to deal with. But a further of turbulence could also be expected because it was June, the month in which this region usually experiences its first showers of the rainy season. And getting gasped between some storm clouds is very much natural for airliners.

These mountain waves were something because of which the B-47 was now facing turbulence and it wasn't able to swiftly deal with it. Still somehow it continued to make its way through.

By now the plane had become a roller coaster ride, bumping up and down like a car moving through the Indian roads after rain. The elevation of the plane was constantly being varied in very short intervals and the pilot dimmed the cabin lights for saving engine power. The bumps were getting worse, and by now it was too difficult or let's say near impossible for anyone to even resist standing still without holding on to something near them.

The seat belt signs had been turned on and the plane was shriveling dangerously as Duryoy quickly clutched his seat handles.

And so did Kritika.

Just that her right hand tightly held Duryoy's left hand because Duryoy's left had already occupied her right handle.... And just as she held his hands, Duryoy's mind fell off the radar, very enough to pause his heart for some time.

That was quite unprofessional of him though. And he couldn't just stop looking at her hand over his through the corner of his eyes. Little things that women do to turn men on

For a moment the plane, the turbulence, the mechanical voice of the propellers outside, the announcements of the pilot, nothing existed. So impulsive was the touch. Duryoy silently moved his eyes to look at Kritika hoping she would look back at him and then she'll hold his hand even tighter. Optimism, you know? But to his blunt realization she wasn't even looking at him. She was so terrified that she didn't even realise holding his hand.

Reality sucks!

Duryoy didn't mind this coincidence though. Life had always been this partial to him- Raising his expectations to ionosphere and then slapping him back to hell.

Behind Duryoy was Aathman sitting in tight, himself fully strapped

but frantically looking around as to ‘Even after the warnings to strap-in the seat belts, why aren’t these men around me strapping in? How much deep can one sleep?’ he thought. The plump, short and potbellied scientist seated beside him on the other side of the aisle, with a straight moustache and hairs only on the sides and the back of his head, was sleeping like a dead man. His head swung senselessly along the plane as it underwent turbulence- right and left and swinging downwards from the neck and then sideward from the hip and straight back again.

Aathman wanted to get up and strap the man in (Rather slap him and wake him up, and then strap him in) but the turbulence was shaking the grounds to extents that it’d be very much difficult to even stand, let alone standing and adjusting someone else’s seat belt. So he waited for the plane to calm down instead.

There is definitely something wrong he said to himself.

THE VIP FEEL

There aren’t many instances in life when you get the privileges of being treated like a VIP especially when you’re a commoner like most of us. Getting caught up in jams because some VIP is passing by, flights getting delayed because a VIP has entered the airport. We’ve all been through this at some point of time and for once we’ve always wanted to be in the place of those VIPs trying to imagine how life would be, being them. Everything at your footstep, no traffic jams, no fear of getting caught by the traffic police, no fear of being late, nothing! And every person on the road keeps looking at you, waiting for the jams to clear up so they can continue their semi-mediocre lifestyle.

Feels good to create an artificial demand of yourself, doesn’t it?

Dvijata, as you know had always been a thinker. A person of mind and imagination who keeps on empathizing with others had once dreamt of being in such a car. And you sometimes know which dreams can come true and which are mere fantasies. For Dvijata this added to the latter one. But we should not forget in the power of miracles because that’s what makes life interesting! And out of nowhere this tiny little wish of Dvijata had managed to come true as she sat in the dark Toyota Innova, with a siren above it and curtains over the windows. And along with her Innova there were four other vehicles, ambulance, police vans and military trucks with men wearing black face masks, who had been

deployed specially to carry out this operation by the government. The entire Ahmedabad traffic had been halted for this convoy to pass on uninterrupted. And undoubtedly, this case was taken very seriously. The government didn't want this to become a national issue and wanted to show the extents till which they might go in order to save their precious brains. Hence the Special Forces were deployed to settle things down. And mainly because Zayaan was handling the entire situation, no one questioned back.

The convoy flowed through the roads with utter swiftness as Dvijata silently enjoyed the importance she was given. Finally, her voice had been heard.

And beside her was Arvind who impatiently kept patting his leg, and even though she didn't want to travel with that man any further but she had to. Aathman and Zayaan had things to discuss about and they were in the other vehicle.

Dvijata was silently happy that all of this happened because if not then she'd have ended up marrying a man whose voice she could barely resist. And more than that she realised Duryoy's importance in her life. There were things which were needed to be cleared between them, but for now all she was craving for was to see Duryoy and get to him and give him one tight hug and say that she loved him. She was blossoming from inside as she kept fantasizing that.

"Um, Dvijata?" called a voice from her left, breaking the dreams, she had been weaving.

Dvijata turned hesitantly towards Arvind as he turned silent again. She waited for him to speak.

"Um, I'm sorry for everything" he said actually trying to mean what he said "I had no idea about all this being decided between our parents. And sorry about making some inappropriate comments on you and Duryoy. There were plenty of things I had to think about while talking to you, all of which never let me show you who I truly am. I know you hate me for being so stiff and I don't mind that because I didn't really like it when you caught me hiding my identity. I was really really unhappy at first because you were ruining everything that I had been planning for months. And then you actually revealed who I am. I felt like you were the worst thing that happened to me because no one wants such perfectionist in their life. But when I thought upon it keeping aside

my personal guilt I realised what good hands Kritika is really under. And I thank you for that. If not you then I cannot wonder where Kritika might have been, now. You were with her since the time dad's plane crashed and you never left her since then. I appreciate you for everything that you've done for my sister."

Dvijata of course had an indecent expression on her face at the start. But as she listened to him and her rudeness towards him melted, and by now it was all gone. She now greeted him with a smile on her face and said "Yeah, I too am sorry for being so rude. It's just that Duryoy had always been with me through my ups and downs of my life be it personal or professional. And today when such a situation showed up and I had to deal with it all by myself, I lost it. I had no control over myself" Dvijata said with a defeated smile "Well, when people have problems they talk to their psychologist. But when psychologists have a problem, who are they supposed to talk to?"

"Well this was not exactly your fault. Any damn person would lose their calm in a situation like this."

"But thanks to you" she said "Had it not been you, I would have never realised how much I loved Duryoy. I needed this. I had started taking things for granted. And it's really great to be meeting you in person. I've only heard about you, but never got to see you in person. But you really have a childhood story worth sharing. Not many people can pull out from a no-money-background to a job at NASA."

Arvind kept thanking Dvijata when suddenly the cars slowed down. The road ahead seemed to be more uneven now as they had reached somewhere in the outskirts of Ahmedabad. The road wasn't a proper one and there was dust blowing all around as the view outside the window had changed from concrete buildings to open fields and dry shrubs all around

"What is this place?" Dvijata asked looking outside the window

"Just 4 kilometers away from our destination ma'am" said the driver as Arvind and Dvijata shared a look.

WHEN MONEY BUYS FEELINGS

Dr Soni stood against the scientist leaning onto the door, and the orangish overhead lamp brightening up both their foreheads while their hairs remained in shades of golden. Dr Soni kept eagerly waiting to

know what the scientist had for him as he sounded real serious. Now the scientist had a name but let's not add one more character to the already so many characters. We just keep referring to him as *the scientist*. The scientist was a man with a flat nose and curiously timid eyes like a fox, his skin aging up with the creases and pimples. His smell is something I would love to leave upon you but his forehead had creases and one side of his cheek was higher than the other, maybe because of the weird smirk that he gave which could be confused with a devilish grin.

And he had a peculiar way of speaking. He stressed too much on every word he spoke. He spoke slow but only the minimum necessary amount of words needed for someone to understand what he wanted to convey.

"So what is it that you wanted to talk about?" Dr Soni said with a comforting smile.

"Dr Soni, it's something related to your research at DRDO."

"Yes?"

"Before that I need you to listen to me very carefully" the scientist said stepping closer "Don't over-react or get too anxious about it, everything for now is under control"

"Why? What is it?"

"Dr Soni, your life is under threat. I have received intel that the CIA has deployed men to track every detail regarding your every movement-people you met, the time you had your lunch, the time you go to pick your daughter from the school, every single detail."

"Frankly" Dr Soni said with a calm "I knew a day would come when I'd have to face such a situation. This was inevitable! Undesired attention from undesired people officially or unofficially gets into your way, *especially* when you're dealing with projects on defence and space. Relax, there's nothing to worry about."

"But sir, it's different right now. You've got your daughter on the plane today"

"Yeah but it was just a matter of ten minutes within which the plan changed!"

"Dr Soni there's someone from *inside* who's involved into all this. How else do you think are the CIA tracking your moves? The one they have deployed is someone who must be with you from time to time. And not just for now, even during your after-work hours."

“But how did *you* know about the CIA activity?”

“CISF had tracked an international phone call between an unknown number and someone within ISRO. But they could not know who it was. Khalif told me about this and asked me to convey this to you, but you being amidst such a hectic schedule never allowed me to sit and explain all this.”

“You should have told this to me beforehand!” Dr Soni said still unable to believe what he was hearing “I... I never had any idea about such developments.”

“There had been many cases earlier too. We just didn’t let those reach you.”

“Then what did you want to know about?”

“Yes” the scientist said clasping his hands “Dr Soni, you’re being targeted because of your involvement in the development of the new Inter Ballistic Missile technology (IBM). But I’ve heard you have got certain documents regarding the calculations and aerodynamics of the missile that no one else has got?”

“Yes, I do” Dr Soni nodded

“Just to make sure that if ever something happens to you, those documents remain intact I suggest you share it with someone close to you, who may access it... in case, any adversity strikes you by... you know... I mean, God forbids nothing as such might ponder upon you, but in case it does... we at least have a plan B.”

“We do have a Plan B. I’ll immediately act on it... as soon as I land”

“Dr Soni we do not have that much time!”

“What makes you think so?” Dr Soni asked sensing that something seemed fishy “We have enough time to act upon. And we even have Khalif on board today. We can definitely wait till the plane lands!”

“Dr Soni we are not in a position to risk the information right now!”

“I do get it, and I have appropriate backups in DRDO that most people do not know about. So it’s all under control!”

“But Dr Soni I was just saying if you could share it...”

“And that’s final.” Dr Soni said slightly raising his voice, cutting him short of his words “I appreciate your concern regarding my safety and I’ll make sure we do something about it. For now we’re perfectly safe. And as of the DRDO project information, they’re perfectly safe so

you don't need to worry about those. DRDO doesn't work the way ISRO does, so I'm glad the way you're concerned but there's no reason to be as such. Now if you'll excuse me, I have my daughter on board and I'd love to enjoy some time with her rather than discussing what should rather be the concern of the CISF. So please..." Dr Soni said walking away towards the cabin with a forced smile on his face. This wasn't the first time someone tried skimming out research information from him through the sweet little 'Trust me' talks. And with the years of experience piling up Dr Soni now knew how to politely turn down a suggestion without offending anyone. And more than that- without revealing anything.

Dr Soni stepped out into the isle. He sensed the dead silence residing within the cabin, which mocked the ear at first, but there was nothing to doubt about it. It was a long flight and people were expected to fall asleep. But, not a single soul awake! That's something weird

"Dr Soni!" called the scientist from within on noticing Dr Soni take a pause at the untimed anomaly "Don't you think it is too silent for a plane carrying these many people?"

"What?" Dr Soni said, confused.

"Like, don't you spot something *weird* about this plane Dr Soni? Something unnatural? Something very grave?"

"I'm seriously not getting what you're trying to say."

"That's alright, let's take it other way around..." said the scientist nodding to himself. "Ever heard of Homi Bhabha?"

"What? Is this some kind of joke or what?"

"Answer me. Do you know Dr Homi Bhabha?"

"Of course I do!"

"Do you know how Dr Bhabha died?"

"No! What's the point?" Dr Soni said getting irritated. It was an absolutely pointless conversation that was happening.

"January 24th 1966 the Air India 101 flight he took to Vienna was cruising perfectly fine above the European Alps, no disturbances reported by the pilot, no stormy weather, nothing. And five minutes later, the plane crashed near Mont Blanc, killing him and 100 other Indian nationals. And the climax of this entire happening is that the Indian government did not order for any kind of investigation regarding

this plane crash and so no one really came to know what the actual reason behind the plane crash was”

“And how is this relevant to me?”

“Dr Soni, his research was very much similar to yours. Just like you derived the IBM missile aerodynamics and missile trajectory, even Dr Bhabha had derived an expression name Bhabha’s equation that could calculate the amount of energy in a nuclear reaction, and all this at the time when India was no more than *just* a developing nation striving to survive. You see the point?” said the scientist excitedly “Five years from now people will be comparing you to Dr Bhabha!”

“I see no reason for that.”

“Oh stop being so modest Dr Soni! The similarities you share with Dr Bhabha are impeccable! One, you both have gained international prominence even before reaching the peak of your careers. Two, you both have been on the CIA watchlist. And third, you both died in a plane crash.”

MEN IMMUNE TO POISON

The constant clattering of the seats and metals knocking over metals was something the ears had finally soothed themselves to. There was no panic in the air but an uncertainty in Aathman, a longing uncertainty as to what was happening inside the plane? Everyone was fast asleep, no one responded to the announcements of the pilot and an unusual calmness had filled in.

And suddenly, the scientist beside him who was unstrapped suddenly toppled off his seat and fell onto the floor. The man’s head seemed oddly tilted and his mouth wide agape. It was for sure that the man had lost his consciousness. But what further seemed weird to Aathman was that no one cared to have even responded to the man falling down over the aisle!

But it might be because of the turbulence too. The plane was quivering so intensely that one might not even dare to open his seat belts and stand up! Leave alone moving a heavy body back to its seat. So Aathman took the job as his duty and unstrapped himself, held the seats tightly and stood up and took a step closer to the man. Before he touched him or attempted waking him up he looked at Duryoy from the corner of his eyes and was relieved on finally seeing someone awake. And Kritika

too was awake, talking to Duryoy.

What do they have so much to talk about? He thought. *It's hardly 2 hours since they met.*

Aathman approached the man on the floor "Excuse me sir? Are you all right?" he asked, not receiving any response in return "Sir? Can you hear me?" he asked again, getting closer to the man's ears. He weakly knocked the man's head hoping for some response. But before he could turn and ask for some medical assistance he noticed frothy saliva ejecting out of the scientist's open mouth. Dense white, with bubbles all around and the lips had dried up and had a reddish shade to it. A pungent smell was emanating out of the open mouth and the eyes of the scientist were still open!

"Oh God!" Aathman said covering his nose. The terrified look on the man's face sent a shudder down his spine.

What if everyone around me is dead? He thought standing up and looking all around at the faces of everyone who were fast asleep. And a terrible realisation struck him- NO, these men aren't sleeping! They're all dead! Aathman tried waking another person up and then another but no one responded. For once he thought this cannot be real because practically he was inside 'A Plane of the dead'! Not a single person apart from him, Duryoy and Kritika could be seen moving.

Aathman started re-thinking where it had all gone wrong?

"And where is Dr Soni?" Aathman thought, his breaths shooting up. There was a vice within him that cried that Dr Soni was in grave danger. And in his field of profession, instincts are made to be relied upon.

Aathman furiously took his hands off the dead scientist, pulled off his rifle and was about to stand up when he felt a clicking sound on his forehead. Two shoes of a gigantic man stood in front of him. He looked up to witness 'the' Khalif, pulling a huge body shadow over his face, pressing a gun tightly against his forehead.

"Sir, Dr Soni is in danger" Aathman announced with a deepening horror in his voice.

"Remain seated" Khalif said, pointing towards the seat with his gunpoint "I never knew there are men who are immune to poison"

MAKE ME DO SOME WRONG

Back in the plane Aathman slowly stood up with his hands

surrendered.

“But I was trying to protect Dr Soni sir!” Aathman said again “I did no wrong.”

“Stay seated, else you’ll make **me** do some wrong” Khalif added waving his gun point. He then called out for the air-hostess calling her by her name. *But how does Khalif know the airhostess by name?*

“Lose your weapons” Khalif commanded, and Aathman without having much of options left took off the assault rifle hanging to his shoulders and placed it beneath “And also the pistol.”

And Aathman silently followed his commands.

A pretty lady in her mid-20s appeared from the section near to the cockpit. She was beautiful, nothing to be necessarily mentioned about, her lips were extra red and even in the faded lighting around her lips didn’t fail to expose their beauty, she was wearing the authentic red sari of Air India Hostesses from which her smooth skin and the curvier waist were clearly visible. She walked with a professional ego- friendly dark eyes and expressions enough to prove her pride worthy. Her hairs were tied, making one beautiful round bun behind her head, pierced by a clip which looked more like a chop-stick.

“Yes sir?” she asked with a polished fluency and a convincing smile “Is there a problem?”

But her beauty seemed to have no effect on Khalif “How come he’s not dead?” he bayed pointing towards Aathman.

“WHAT?” Aathman exclaimed his disbelief

Khalif sir wanted to kill me?

For a while there was complete commotion within his brain, and Aathman needed answers as to what was happening in here! But no one cared what he thought.

“Sir but, I...I... injected the poison in every drink!” continued to reassure the airhostess that she wasn’t wrong “Other than Dr Soni’s, of course.”

“Then how come this man is still alive?” Khalif yelled violently, exasperated by the air-hostess’s approach “And how come you didn’t notice that there’s a man still awake inside the cabin? An armed fucking man! He could have costed us our entire mission!”

“I’m sorry sir” the air-hostess said, almost close to tears by Khalif’s devilish voice “But there must have been some confusion. I’m really

sorry...”

“Do you know what your ‘confusion’ might have resulted into? This man is one of the most highly trained CISF officers, and you left a beast like him open. Had he understood the situation he could have taken all of us down!” Khalif said “Thank God I boarded the plane, or else by now you’d be in the jail waiting to be hung.”

The air hostess didn’t reply further. She simply kept staring the ground waiting for the terrible shower of words to halt.

“Damn you people! GO, get back there and make sure nothing goes wrong” Khalif commanded “And make sure everyone else is dead” Khalif added as the startled air-hostess made her way towards the cockpit trying hard to maintain her composure.

Khalif didn’t turn to check the air-hostess again.

Instead, his gaze was now fixed upon the invariably perspiring Aathman. His face so wet that parts of it had started roughly reflecting the overhead lights like small patches of white light. Encouraged by the fear in Aathman’s eyes, he levelled the gun to Aathman’s head “Maybe you deserved a death more painful than poison” Khalif said.

Aathman looked towards Khalif with eyes of forgiveness. Forgiveness for a crime he never committed. Forgiveness for sticking to his duty even when there was a gun pointing towards his temple. Forgiveness for trying to protect one of the brightest minds of ISRO. But when the deal is on life sometimes some wrongs are needed to be accepted as rights.

“I never knew all this time I had been working under a man who has sold this nation” Aathman said knowing that Khalif might pull the trigger anytime soon “It’s sad to know that the man who taught me the ethics of my job, himself had none. Trust me. You can never escape with this even if you kill me and burn me and try to overshadow my existence. That’s because the way you scarred this nation, you’ll have to pay for it!”

And Khalif pulled the trigger.

AN HOUR WITHIN A MILLISECOND

The millisecond reactions are something to which we are quite acquainted to, through our Hollywood movies. Someone jumps over a hundred floor building and when he’s just 2 cm from smashing the crap

out of himself he pushes a button and the whole world pauses, and he saves himself. Someone shoots a bullet and just before the bullet strikes the protagonist some freedom fighter leaps by with a fearless cry, himself taking the shot and finally taking back with him some sentimental last words from the protagonist, and death of course. And the hell of a coincidence is when a beautiful girl is taking the stairs, and every other surrounding eye is grounded to her and she misses a step, loses her balance, dwindles for a moment, is in the mid-air and milliseconds from a bad fall, and suddenly there appears a handsome, young, smart, muscular man who seems to be standing exactly at the same stair, exactly the same moment, exactly the same pose, as if he was waiting for someone to fall into his arms. And the girl would fall in his arms and they keep looking into their eyes for five unbelievable minutes. And then they fall in love.

Believable? I don't think so...

But this, one millisecond act was something which really happened. Nothing sort of supernatural, yet the precision was unbelievable. Because just the moment when Khalif pulled the trigger, a hand swung from beneath, with a fistful of bodily strength and punched the gun-holding hand with such fluidity Khalif absolutely lost his hold over the gun. And the gun, just like a terrified cat, glimpsed upwards and the bullet got fired upwards widely missing Aathman's head.

It was Duryoy.

And before the expression of awe could take up over Khalif's face, it was Aathman, and his nasty reflexes charging towards Khalif like a wild bull. His fists wide open and his face facing downwards, and with a suburban growl and all his strength he head-butted Khalif, right over the central portion of his inflated chest. And even though Khalif being a military man by nature was quite proficient enough to deal with the pain, yet the intensity of the strike sent shudder down his limbs and his breath seemed to have absolutely paused as there was a wild ache over the abdomen area. And there was a short expulsion of forceful air from his mouth and a sound resembling "Ouch!" and some saliva pouring outward and his eyes widening and his backbone bending inwards and his lungs feeling too paralysed to inhale. And before he could realise the simultaneous effects of the blow, Khalif collapsed backwards.

The gunshot made a metallic clink overhead but did no harm to the warplane. And the gun fell over the red carpeted floor with a low metallic thud. Duryoy grabbed the pistol with his unsteady hands, his hand continuing to quiver as the pistol happened to be a lot heavier than it looked.

Khalif for a brief moment seemed to have been weakened by the instantaneous outbreak, but he reminded himself that the war was lost, not the battle. This had always been the same for him since his days at NDA (National Defence Academy) when during the late hours, post the day's field training his battalion would surround the campfire and any two men would wrestle inside the small wrestling ring that they drew with dry twigs. And all other army men sitting by the warm fire in the cold December night would cheer their favourite. And as the match drew a conclusion the men would put the victor up on their shoulders and march around the campfire with shouts and cheers and manly hollers. And they'll yell his wife's name asking her to be proud of her husband and there'll be laughs and giggles all around. And this feeling of accomplishment was what allowed him to think straight even while the odds weren't in his favour. And with a tiny glimpse of those days, Khalif got fully cognizant of his senses, again.

Aathman's head was still stuck to his chest, pushing him backwards.

Khalif deliberately lifted his gigantic hands, bent them like an arrow, and struck hard over Aathman's back with his elbow, as if aiming a harpoon. And the blow wasn't wasted because Khalif could feel the grip on him loosen. With a loud "Uh!" Aathman fell over his knees, but his head still effortlessly tried pushing Khalif back.

Khalif used his hands like the arms of a dozer and pushed the heavy stout head away from him with all the strength his body could provide. The gap increased between them and Aathman couldn't help being pushed away, but he felt helpless trying to withstand the pain on his back.

And just when he had enough within him to stand on his legs Khalif swung his bony knee upwards. Aathman's chin came in the way, and with one powerful clattering of bones Aathman head tossed backwards like socket-less head. The jerk and the pain was intense and there were no words to describe the pungent darkness that took over in Aathman's head, as for a moment or two he couldn't feel his jaw. He fell backwards

or rather say bounced backwards, and lay straight over the warm red floor carpet, now welcoming him with the smell of suspended dust.

Meanwhile the aisle being blocked by the two ferocious fighters, one of which seemed to be down for the moment, Duryoy tried making his way out, over the seats filled with corpses of dead scientists. The handles were stern and broad, and if one could focus then making a way galloping over seat handles wasn't much big of a deal. Although the head height was a problem and Duryoy had to bend in order to reach the front part of the cabin without banging his head or breaking it into two. But that looked affordable.

He lifted his eyes to see Kritika already jumping over the seat handles making her way forward towards the cockpit. And she had made it quite far. Kritika was almost there for her father but she barely had any idea that there were two other people there.

Duryoy eagerly wanted to warn her, but his yelling would turn Khalif's focus over to him, which would cause Duryoy pain and agony and broken bones and maybe a bullet or a two. Even the rattling sounds of the overhead baggage were so loud that Kritika would not be able to hear him anyway.

On one hand he had Aathman who would soon die if he didn't help him, and on the other hand there was Kritika who was voluntarily jumping into a lion's den. What choice should he make? Both were equally important to him!

But he remembered that it was Kritika who had travelled back in time with him. And it was Kritika who knew how he felt towards everything that had been happening since last night. And it was Kritika who heard his life's story without doubting him for once. And it was Kritika's father because of whom he was everything he currently was. He had a duty. Kritika's safety was his duty. And he couldn't afford losing another girl whom he had been this close to. Because *every* time he went close too someone, that person had to suffer.

Not this time Duryoy said to himself *Definitely not this time.*

So grabbing the seat cushion with both his hands Duryoy tried to balance himself on the seat handle. There was a slight imbalance at first as the plane too was trembling in its own hymn but somehow, he managed to lift his leg, jump it across the seat and place it cautiously over the next seat handle and soon his both the legs were on the same

seat. And then he moved a seat ahead, then one more and soon this repetition gained a momentum and Duryoy was now walking over the seats much faster now.

Suddenly he heard a deafening cry from Dr Soni, from the far end of the cabin. The kind of cry that people usually make after being shot by a bullet.

HOW IT ALL ENDS

Back in 2005 ISRO along with the DRDO (Defence Research and Development Organization) was dealing with the manufacture of Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (IBM) named Twej whose functionality and technicalities were of much interest for the foreign powers. As even mentioned by Dr APJ Abdul Kalam in his book “Ignited Minds” that this specific technology would not be provided to us at any cost by any foreign nation, however good the relationship with them might be. But when it comes to tracking down the progress of our nation, every nation would take every possible measures to have their ears laid over the doors of India. And this entire kidnapping was intended to put a permanent halt on this growing progress of India.

“India is developing IBM missiles at some hidden locations, three of which I know, and five of which I don’t” said the scientist looking sharply at Dr Soni, stressing on each of his words “I want the locations and specifications of each of the five development centre”

On the other way, the air kept thickening inside the cabin. Sounds of men wrestling one another in their semi-animalistic forms echoed till the front sections. And there was an unusual behaviour pattern of the beautiful airhostess who seemed to be worried about something, cursing herself for doing something wrong. She kept pacing in short quick walks near the area where Dr Soni had been held, and in some discontinuous while she’d look at Dr Soni with arched eyebrows and creases over her smooth forehead.

“And I’ve also heard you’re into developing some sort of time machine.”

“I need to see my daughter” Dr Soni’s weak voice shriveled “Don’t do this to me, please. Tell me where is she?”

“It was you who brought her on the plane! I had no intentions of

harming your daughter. But just because of one girl I cannot scrap my entire plan.”

“Please? Just one look” Dr Soni groveled “I cannot afford to lose her. She’s all I have!”

“Dr Soni give it up. She’s dead by now. A single drop of the poison is strong enough to kill a man twice my size... It’s a lost cause.”

“...And you still wonder why the DRDO chose me instead of you as their Chief Advisor” Dr Soni said giving a low smile “I don’t give up on things. I chase them till the point there’s a slightest possibility of miracles occurring. And if you say that my daughter is dead, I won’t agree to that because she’s still there, waiting for me, waiting to be rescued. So allow me to go there or else...”

“Dr Soni look!” the scientist said throwing an empty bottle with two tiny red dots on it in front of Dr Soni “This is the bottle of the poison. Still want a proof that we’ve poisoned them?”

“I won’t believe anything until I see my daughter” Dr Soni said, refusing stringently. His face was trembling out of disbelief and his words or actions didn’t make much sense either. He was not at all ready to believe that he had lost Kritika forever. Even the thought of losing his daughter had sent shivers down his spine, and he would have done anything to get to his daughter. For the first time in his life he felt that he should have put his family before his duty. And today if he loses his daughter for the same reason his marriage broke he wouldn’t be able to take it any further.

“What did you do to her? What did you do?” Dr Soni kept blabbering a low voice “What did you do?” and he shouted at the peak of his voice “What harm did that little girl do to you? I need to see her! Kritika! I’m coming for you” he said storming towards the seating area

“Dr Soni, you’re not going anywhere” the scientist said, guarding the passage way

“You have nothing to threaten me with” Dr Soni said pushing his hand away.

“You have a family”

“I **had** a family” Dr Soni corrected “And you killed my family. And you know when is a man most vulnerable?”

“At the gunpoint?” the scientist made a blank guess and felt like laughing at his own joke.

“No” Dr Soni said “When it’s his family at the gunpoint.”

“Oh Soni, I pity you... Seriously, you’re ready to give up your life for a job that broke your family.”

“It’s not the job! But the terror of being kidnapped and killed by scums like you that broke my family!” Dr Soni said, tears running down his eyes. With every passing second, he was turning into a madman “Now, let me go to my daughter!”

“Uh, you won’t listen to me, but that’s alright. I have better ways to get information out of you” he said adjusting his pistol, looking at the inserted bullets and then again pointing it back to Dr Soni “From now on I’m going to set a time bar- For every 60 seconds of silence I’ll insert a bullet into one of your limbs. And trust me- You won’t die, but by the end you’ll be begging for death...”

“Let me get to my daughter” Dr Soni said holding the scientist by his collar and pushing him against the wall. The rage emanating from his eyes was raw and untamed. His eyes had turned red and his face went wet of the overflowing sweat. His age made his fingers tremble, and the boiling blood within him wanted to punch the flesh out of the scientist. But he didn’t

“So for starters” said the scientist, pulling his face slightly upwards trying to breathe in some air and BANG! A bright light flashed all around, and a bullet gushed straight into Dr Soni’s shin bone splashing drops of oozing red fluid all around the area and breaking the bone into tinier pieces, as Dr Soni collapsed on to the side of the hurt bone like an earthquake struck building. His expressions of horror giving out an unmentionable and unexplainable amount of tremendous pain he was going through.

And then came the shout.

The shout was ultrasonic. Almost deafening.

Something that was heard by every corner of that plane. And the shout somehow seemed to surpass louder than the engine sounds, and whoever heard the shriek had their eye brows raised for a moment, including Khalif’s.

Khalif being in the seating area paused himself, and after five seconds of nothingness, he hastily turned backwards trying to check what had happened. And as he turned back, the surprisingly alive Duryoy came to his view- standing over one of the seat handles, trying

to move forward by jumping over the seats, paused midway on hearing that unwelcoming noise. And before Duryoy got out of the shock of what he just heard, he felt a hand, a big, strong, muscular hand clutching his right leg.

The fear gripped him as he knew what that was.

Duryoy hastily turned backwards, and right through the edge of his shoulder he could see Khalif staring hard towards him with enraged eyes. And between the time of turning and staring, Duryoy felt a deadly pull on his leg and with his fickle hands unable to balance himself, his front portion of the body fell downwards, lowered over the seat cushion and was then dragged outwards in the aisle.

Now this is how it all ends, Duryoy told himself

RIGHT THINGS, WRONG WAY

“Sir, our cover has been blown up” Joshi stated with a great concern “The CISF knows about our location, and they can be here any minute now!”

It was a moment of severe uncertainty. The severity of the situation could be well judged by the way Joshi delivered his words, and more than that, there was fear in Joshi’s eyes. Fear more severe than the last time he got arrested. This right now was a case of national intolerance, and getting caught for abduction of a scientist would very easily lead to death penalty.

Joshi had a life ahead of him, or at least he thought so. He often kept the imaginary memories of that day when he’d be all free and have no cases stacked up against him and when he wouldn’t have to depend upon his computer to earn him a living. But it seemed like even imaginations had a limit when your mind itself is corrupt.

Khalif heard it sharp and clear. And although this was the worst thing that was expected to happen, yet Khalif kept his calm.

“Does this have anything to do with Kritika?” he asked.

“The mail that she opened in our computer to show us the photographs, it was no normal mail. It was her ISRO ID. And some ISRO IDs have geo-tracker within them and whenever they access their account, the location gets tracked. And even the proxy servers failed to hide our location... It’s an unnamed software that’s licensed to be used only by the high-ranking government officials. But whatever it is, it has

spotted us. Either we move them to a different location or we leave them here.”

“They cannot be moved” Khalif said looking towards the deeply asleep Kritika and Duryoy “There’s some high neural activity going inside their brains. We even move them slightly, they might die! And I don’t want another Indian scientist’s murder under my name.”

“But sir, staying here doesn’t make any sense either! Why can’t we just leave them here, absolutely unharmed?”

“What do you think? This girl” Khalif pointed towards the blissfully asleep Kritika “She doesn’t know me or my name? Eh? I’ve served her father for ten years. Have been to her home, had drove her and her brother to school once, have had dinner with them! That’s how closely she knows me. The moment she gains her consciousness she’d tell the CISF that it was I who kidnapped her”

“But she herself has funded us to do this thing! Why can’t we share this information with the CISF?”

“You really think they’ll believe us?” Khalif said, sounding rhetoric as always.

Joshi remained silent.

He knew he was young and his decisions in panic wouldn’t make much sense. But he trusted Khalif. Khalif was no less than a father to him- a father who nurtured him, a father who heard his stories, a father who made sure that he had his dinner every night, a father who made sure that however difficult the work might be but it doesn’t compromise his safety.

Joshi filled the regrets which Khalif had in his heart for having no one whom he could call his own. Although Khalif had that hardened look over his face and maintained distance with everyone, yet he always wanted Joshi to reach the heights which he himself wasn’t able to.

It was Khalif who taught Joshi that not all tough situations in life are meant to bring sorrows. Sometimes they beautify our lives even more. Although it was hard for Joshi to believe, yet he nodded. But Khalif never wanted him to nod at his orders. He wanted his principles to be inherited.

He remembered once when Khalif was in a good mood, he said to him “You know Joshi, once the Japanese came to ISRO for a visit. And while departing, they gifted the director of ISRO with a ‘broken’

Nabeshima ware dish”

“A broken one?” Joshi said being little sceptical “Wasn’t that disrespectful.”

“No that’s the twist!” Khalif replied eagerly waiting to prove his point “There’s this Japanese art named Kintsukuroi in which the broken pieces of a pottery is joined using gold because they believe that just like potteries, at some point of life even we break. But when we gather ourselves after the damage, we become stronger and more beautiful than what we used to be, just like the Kintsukuroi. So adversities in life occur just to make us even better. Never run away from them. They arrive to beautify you...”

Suddenly from that mini-wave of a past memory Joshi dropped back to present as he heard Khalif murmuring to himself. But it was audible.

“So that’s what Kritika had planned for me” Khalif said, for one moment smiling at himself, and the next moment dead serious, the next moment jerking his head off and the next moment punching the walls “I knew she always wanted to take the revenge of her father’s death! Never knew it would be this way!”

“Sir what’s the matter?”

“Don’t you see it?” Khalif said with a panic growing in his voice “She lured us into this! This, this was all a part of her plan.”

“Sir this can also be purely unintentional... If you look at this the other way” Joshi said with a slight hesitation, “It might have been Kritika never realised that her ID would be tracked! Or maybe she thought we had technologies that would prevent us from getting tracked.”

“No” Khalif said “I am very sure that this was all part of her plan! Cause it’s impossible to equip your account with a geo-tracker without yourself knowing about it. She definitely knew about this and this is exactly why she accessed her ID from our computer.”

“That indeed was quite smart” Joshi said giving it a thought.

“You have no idea how far her brain can reach. She wanted us to take the job, she wanted us to get that Doctor kidnapped, she wanted us to take the responsibility and got herself kidnapped along, so no one can doubt her involvement in this. Next, she discloses our location and goes to get her father back using the Doctor’s drug, so in this way she gained the trust of the Doctor, made sure that she gets her father back... and,

the final part of the plan of which she never told us about...” Khalif paused for a breath. He gasped “It’s that- by the time she gets back to the real world, the CISF would reach here and “I” would be behind the bars, accused for kidnapping an ISRO scientist. And I’d have nothing to prove her involvement in this, so I’d undoubtedly be sentenced to death. Something that she always wanted to happen... Damn! She indeed got me!”

Joshi silently held his panicking heart “So, now what, sir?”

“Well, maybe it’s time to do the right things in the wrong way” Khalif said, more to himself than to Joshi.

The pink bottle now clutched in his palm.

CHERRY BLACK

Duryoy was strangling between life and death, his eyes living between darkness and the blurring cabin lights. His vision was fading away. His heart pounded like an animal eager to tear out of his chest as the gigantic palm of Khalif had coiled around his sleek throat. To Duryoy it felt like it was his last moments, but surprisingly he didn’t feel any guilt over himself or his decision because somewhere down the line he knew when he took in the NURAC that he would never return.

But maybe he never wanted to return!

Life for Duryoy had ended there itself, back in CEPT when Dvijata said that she was going to marry someone else. And although till this point Duryoy seemed like some cry baby who was way too disappointed because the girl he loved was getting married to someone else, but now he was beyond the point of rights and wrongs. Duryoy knew what was right for him. Dvijata knew what was right for her. Yet, together they made a very wrong decision. A decision which had so deeply shook Duryoy that he wanted a way to escape. Escape from himself. Escape from the world. And sadly the only way to escape from oneself... is death.

The countdown to Duryoy’s life had begun as his face went beyond red, and his narrower veins of his neck had begun to pop themselves out. His eyeballs felt like they were about to explode, and any given time he would choke to death. Surely he wished that someone would get him out of this situation but everyone who could help were either yelling out of pain or lying unconsciously. And Kritika was nowhere in sight.

Slowly Duryoy was drifting into an involuntary sleep, his limbs weakening and his throat dried and tired and all set to give up. The voices around him fading away, as a darker haze invaded his sight

Khalif was beyond content to display his power, to be able to show that there was no force that could stop him from achieving what he wanted to. And he was just seconds apart from turning a living man dead when suddenly a heavy seizure took hold over his mind and an intense pain struck his brain as though someone inserted a drill machine into his skull. And the pain instantly became unbearable! He clutched his hair and pulled them like some madman. And to Duryoy it was no less than a miracle as a cool fresh pack of air went into his lungs and his chest puffed up to its maximum. He coughed ceaselessly as his dry throat was now starving for some water, and he collapsed on the floor. His eyes partially watching a huge man like Khalif fall on his knees and bang his head against the red carpeted floor of the plane. Tears and saliva tripping off Khalif's mouth as he groaned like a wild beast.

Khalif started searching for water like some mad dog as his throat went dry. He was on all four looking out madly at every tiny bottle that was around, but the only fluid he found near him were the bottles of poisoned lemonades.

Things have a really bad way of getting back to you, don't they?

Duryoy crawled over the ground like a limbless man, holding on to the seat bases as a support and pulling his aching body forward. His rough hair had begun to smell like dust, and his clothes got that typical "Cherry Black" shoe polish odour. Yet those were the things that concerned him the least. He kept crawling until he reached the third seat to his right where he saw a bottle of water inside the bottle holder.

For the first time his heart skipped for a non-living object!

He felt like crying but his body had no moisture left to waste.

Slowly supporting his weak hands over the seats, he leaned forward to get the bottle when he heard an unmistakable clinking sound. The distinct sound of a metal against metal. Something he didn't want to hear anymore. Not at least at this point of time. His head hung low out of dejection and his slow gaze turned to face the gun point *once again*.

Only this time, the holder was different- The airhostess.

"Not again!" he thought.

RE-RETURN

Dvijata and Arvind gazed out of the window in a literal awe as they reached their destination. The place seemed to be something that no one could have thought of. Of course, it was isolated and it was leviathan, but who would have guessed that the kidnappers would choose an outdated and out-of-use factory as their place to hide their victims?

The factory premises in front of them could better be called as ruins rather than abandoned because the gigantic structure stood amidst kilometres of deserted area, and parts of the building wall had collapsed as well. The window panes were broken at the top as the vagabonds might have broken into them just to scavenge through all the things that had been left behind. The walls were dusty and smells of decaying chemicals kept coming from within, mostly decaying rubber it was. And traces of oil all over the concrete paths.

The current condition of the factory claimed that it had been a victim of an unfortunate incident- a fire that had devastated the entire premises and the flames had left their mark as dark ruins over the walls of the factory. There were random stuffs around just like broken chairs and broken machine pieces which the trapped men might have used to break the window panes in order to escape.

No one had any idea how many people might have lost their lives in that unfortunate event, yet it seemed as though there were voices of men calling from within, still waiting to be saved.

Dvijata was reluctant to get inside that building. She didn't get the right vibes even by looking at it through the car window. She got off the car and covered her eyes as the overhead sun shone mercilessly. And a small pack of local villagers standing at a distance had interested themselves into what the matter was.

"But this is a complete ruin!" Arvind said looking at Kritika "Are they sure?"

"I hope so" she said craning her neck upwards to look at the topmost part of the facility "It doesn't look like anyone would even care to live in such an isolated area!"

"Well you would" said a voice from behind "When you're on the international terrorism's most wanted list and there are 12 different agencies around the world that is trying to hunt you down. Many a times

they hide themselves within the mountains, sheltering themselves in caves, just to stay off the radar.”

Both Dvijata and Arvind turned back to look at the man who had quite indecently been hearing to their conversation.

Chief.

Standing all alone behind them. His face knowing all the wrongs he had done.

There was a tiny shock amongst the two on watching him appear so unexpectedly. But since the last evening there had been so many unexpected things getting into their way that now even uncertainty became a certainty.

“I’m sorry” Chief said ending the silence “I had my reasons and I don’t expect you to understand those. But I realized that it would very wrong of me to leave someone when they need me the most.”

“We don’t need you Chief” Dvijata said turning her face away.

“I know that, but now I’m not here to lead you. I’m here to be there for you. I want to be in this together. I want it to end with the people with whom I began. I feel awful to have given upon you guys” Chief said stepping closer “Please, allow me to help you. I assure you I won’t disappoint you this time”

Arvind shot a glimpse at Dvijata.

She didn’t seem like someone who handled betrayal that well. She didn’t even care looking at Arvind either.

“I know you won’t trust me, but believe me I was the one who had helped the computer girl in tracking this place. Believe me, for once. That’s all I want. I wanted to help you out but I was afraid that maybe me helping you people would get me on ‘the LIST’. And I cannot afford to die! I have a family, and I don’t think it’s silly for a man to think of his family first. I know it’s mean and I know that it makes me look so bad, but, but, a man lives his life for his family. But for that moment I had asked myself if it was worth to be risking my family for something like this? And I know you will not understand this and I don’t expect you to, but for once will you please?” Chief pleaded

And with that Dvijata couldn’t contain herself, as she thundered upon Chief with everything she had.

“Those persons in there are our family, Chief. I know it’s not fair to compromise your family’s security, but does that give you the right to

play with other's family? Did you know that your one step might have made us lose Duryoy and Kritika forever? Did you realise that if Kritika dies what a loss will it be for the nation? No, you didn't because all you care about is your family! And rest all human beings are just temporary extensions of your greed..."

Chief had nothing but regret within his mind for his momentary antipathy.

Dvijata knew that what she was doing wasn't morally correct because Chief was way older to her. But, what's wrong is wrong...

But before she could be saying a few more demeaning things to Chief Arvind interrupted.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah alright! We'll talk about it later" Arvind said easing up the situation as Dvijata went back to her favourite posture of folding hands and looking away as if nothing in the world matters

"But are you sure this is the place?" Arvind asked, turning to Chief.

"Well the instruments that can find a tiny spot on the surface of Mars can absolutely find a huge abandoned factory on earth!"

THE SURVIVOR

Somehow even with his blurred visions and dried throat Duryoy could tell that the woman he was facing was very beautiful. Her fair complexioned face glowed like some reflector in a low light, and her smoothly curved boy-cut hairstyle made a diagonal cut over her forehead making her look like some 90s American dancer and her curved frame was so bewildering that it could even make a subject like Engineering Graphics sound interesting.

On the contrary she was holding a gun and wanted to kill Duryoy, so now she didn't seem that fascinating to him either.

"I think I should have focussed more while injecting the poison" said the airhostess taking a silent step forward "I spot too many survivors here" she shrugged "Maybe the poison had lost its potency."

Duryoy was confused. But he knew that the more he'd speak, more are the added seconds he'd get to stay alive. May be by then Kritika would hop from behind or may be Aathman would recover and shoot a bullet at her.

Possibilities! What's life without those?

Duryoy raised his arms to surrender. The man had nothing left with

him.

“I never knew that even CIA field agents could cause a blunder” Duryoy said laughing to himself.

“And what makes you think that I’m from CIA?”

“Your inhumanity” Duryoy said coughing violently. His dry throat did no good to him.

“You know I have always hated philosophy” said the airhostess throwing a bottle of water at Duryoy “You cannot just assume something to be true *just* because you found a way to prove that.”

Duryoy remained confused with that sudden gesture of kindness put forward by his to-be-assassin. He knew there was something wrong with the water too.

“No, it’s not poisoned” she said, spotting his reluctance “I have better ways to kill you hon.”

Duryoy tried smelling the bottle from the top but he didn’t smell anything unusual. And his inners were craving for some water. Hence not giving much of a thought he just drank it! The poison if present could kill him in a few minutes. But he just did it in the inch of a moment. He didn’t have the patience to wait any further.

And those few drops tasted better than honey!

The feeling was ineffable

After having finished most of the water inside the bottle...

“Why do you want to kill me?” Duryoy asked keeping the bottle aside, all content. He genuinely wished to know that.

“It’s not like I want to kill you, hon. But we can’t afford keep anyone in this plane alive... so you see, you have to die.”

“But you’ll crash the plane anyway!”

“And why is that so?”

“Well, you surely do not want to keep any living evidence behind. And I’m pretty sure the pilot is the last person who can describe what really happened in this plane. So just to make sure that no one survives, you’ll crash the plane trying to make it look as though it all happened due to some technical failure. And you’ll be crashing it on the Pakistani side of the border just to make sure that Indian government gets no chance to investigate the plane crash. This would raise a dispute at an international level causing widespread debate and an entire shift of the issue towards a political front. And by the time people rise up from the

shock you'd have left the country with all the intel that you wanted from Dr Soni" Duryoy paused for a second sip, "And just like always CIA would disappear even before someone doubts their involvement."

She waited for a couple of seconds to answer to that but she had none. That was way too precise for an outsider to guess.

"Why do you keep referring to me as CIA?"

"Your poison" Duryoy said pointing at one of the lemonade bottles "Your poison made it very clear that you're the CIA. And the symptoms of the poisoned people have just verified my guesses"

"So you don't think the Israelis and Russian spies use poison?"

"Yes they do, but the one that is right now in the systems of the dead scientists is common only to the CIA" Duryoy revealed, his words now clear and calm "Saxitoxin (STX), once widely used by the CIA to kill people. And the death occurs very cleanly! They used it as a dart gun with frozen poison at its tip that would break into the bloodstream and melt, initially causing paralysis of limbs, and after that, a heart attack. Something that I spot in every dead person around me. So... you still want to deny that you're from CIA?"

"Never denied it" she shrugged

"Never accepted it either."

She smiled biting her lower lip.

"Well surely you're much older than you look" she said.

"I bet I am" Duryoy whispered.



It was two bullets down from the scientist's gun, and two deep wounds dug over Dr Soni's legs. Dr Soni was down on the floor, yelling out of pain, crying out of misery. He couldn't stand. The two bullets although weren't fatal enough to take away his life, but were critical enough to take away his ability to stand.

"Still want to be silent about this Dr Soni?" said the scientist, looking towards Dr Soni with an arrogant pride.

"Never thought that the best scientist of ISRO would someday be kneeling in front of me" said the scientist watching Dr Soni fallen over the floor.

The plane's tremble hadn't eased yet, and was still magnifying the visual intensity of the situation. Of course, when the plane trembles at

such a high-altitude light seizure is sure to be experienced, to which the scientist felt slightly uneasy. A mild dizziness was taking over him, but still the ecstasy of becoming a millionaire by selling the information to the foreign powers kept his spirits high.

“Tik-tok, Dr Soni... 3 minutes are about to be over” he said “Come on, Dr Soni. Is really a job worth if it takes away your life? This third bullet is soon going to be inside you. If I were you I’d have exposed myself by now because this third bullet would mean you spend the rest of your life on a wheel chair. And there’s no one to take care of you... not even your daughter.”

Listening to the last part an impulsive rage burst within Dr Soni and he charged towards the scientist with all that little strength he had within himself. But with two broken legs there wasn’t much that DR Soni could have done. And the scientist in the inch of time leaped backwards and swung his heavy shoe at DR Soni, as if kicking some mad dog. And with that blow over the face, tiny splatters of blood and saliva darted outwards from Dr Soni’s mouth. And Dr Soni momentarily fell rightwards like some lifeless sack of rice. There was no more strength left in him. He had given up all he had. Dr Soni slowly shut his eyes, as memories of Kritika drained down his moist eyes as tear drops. His heavy heart was still not able to believe the fact that his daughter was dead.

Not until I see her body he said to himself.

His body was aching with broken bits of bones and memories.

Dr Soni knew it was time for him to depart, but he was happy because he was losing his life for the most beloved piece of his soul. He was departing just to reunite with his daughter. There was a smile on his face as he thought- What better reason could be there for a father to die than “Died while trying to save his daughter.”

There were many regrets he had within himself for which he wanted to apologize from Kritika- for not being a perfect father, for not being able to save her, for not being able to keep his family together- he knew how much she missed her mother. And if given another chance he’d go straight to his wife and son and urge them to come back home, readily accepting to leave his job. He felt like a fool to have chosen his duty over his family. He knew he was the only one who was responsible for shattering his family into halves. And in the last moments he could

literally feel the 5-year-old Kritika holding his left hand, Arvind holding his right, ice-cream sticks in their tiny fists which they licked happily with their lovely pink tongues, and eventually they'd look up and smile at him. And then he felt an added weight over his shoulder, slowly there was a fragrance of strawberry softly filling the air around and then some strands of long silky hair sticking over his face. He knew what it was just not sure whether it was all real. His eyes looked at is corner and it was his wife resting her head over his shoulder just like the young old days when she'd say "this place makes me feel the safest woman on earth" and she'd hold his hand even more tightly.

How it had all changed! How he still wished that he could complete his family. How late he realized that- *Money isn't something that buys you a life, money is something that buys your life.*

And the whole air around him went silent as Dr Soni fixed his gaze over that thin white partition wall on which he could see his life being played over in parts. And then there was a loud and clear sound of the gunshot. A light recoil over the gun, a bullet pounding outward with great force, and between the bullet and Dr Soni, there remained the last milliseconds of Dr Soni's life.

TELL APATHY

The CISF forces had deployed men all around the abandoned factory premises from all sides. It was a warm and windy day and the pre-winter sun was baking the sands up while the forces arranged themselves in position. It was a first-time experience for both Dvijata and Arvind who were given the option of staying back at ISRO, but after the repetitive insisting of the two, Zayaan agreed, provided they agreed to follow certain safety regulations.

First of which being Dvijata given a helmet that was way bigger than her head making her look like a cute little schoolgirl wearing an over-sized hat. And they had been given the blue coloured bullet-proof jackets as suggested by Aathman as he made sure that the two were properly covered. CISF had even appointed two guards for their safety, and their vehicle was made to park nearly a hundred metres apart from the special force's convoy.

The second thing that was needed to be followed strictly, and without any question-backs was that- Unless and until either of Aathman

or Zayaan or any of the senior officers cleared the area ahead and marked it to be completely safe, Arvind and Dvijata weren't allowed to step into it.

A sense of great privilege ran through Aathman's heart to be able to wear all those gears and stand by the mission scene discussing plans with his fellow officers. The pride, the feeling of responsibility for the country, the adrenaline rush, the uncertainty, the guns and ammunitions and the discipline were all too overwhelming for him. This was what the climax moments of his dream job looked like. This was what made him relive his past. This was what that made him realise where he really belonged to. This was what made him realise that it was too foolish on his side to never return to his job even when offered just because his drenched ego couldn't take it.

All he wanted was respect.

Now that he finally got what he wanted, he made sure he made the best out of it.

He could see Zayaan briefing the plan to the junior officers as the Operation Specialists kept suggesting him changes, while they analysed the blue-print of the building. There were many possible positions where the kidnappers might have held the hostages but Zayaan couldn't go on checking one after the other until he was completely sure about it. He preferred the "Rapid clear-down technique" rather than the 'door to door' because they didn't have time. And they had very less to risk.

All the probable exit spots had been blocked the basement exits had been detonated with the C4 making sure that they do not escape through the electrical grooves or underground pipe supply networks. There were lots and lots and lots of precautions being taken, but every precaution would get in vain unless they figure out which part of the building had the two of them been kept. There was no source of communication, and of course a chopper inspection would be like bare-footedly walking over a broken glass.

Aathman came out of the circle and approached Dvijata as the men continued to sweat their brains

"Dvijata" he said from a distance "There's something I want you to do, and I want you to do it right now."

"Is everything OK?" she asked, sounding concerned.

"Yes, yes, there's nothing to worry about. A tiny hurdle that we're

facing. Only you can help us out though.”

“What? I? But how?”

“Like it’s a crazy idea but you need to give it a thought. Duryoy had once told me that whenever two people know each other for a very long time they kind of develop some sort of intuitive power about what the other is thinking or feeling like. Just like in the twins! Telepathy, as they call it.”

“Of course, Aathman!” she said with an obvious nod. She herself was a psychologist after-all.

“Now I know it’s totally unreliable, but for once just tell us where they might have kept Duryoy. Just guess it, doesn’t matter.”

“But that’s silly!” she said with a fake smile “You cannot just base an entire military operation based on my instincts!”

“Some clue is better than no clue Dvijata!”

“But this is just a random guess! And telepathy hasn’t been officially proved. Only a slight chance of its existence has been explained. And I cannot do this! Because if anything happens to Duryoy... or Kritika, because of this I will not be able to forgive myself. Please don’t make me do this...”

“Dvijata, if anyone around here is close to knowing where Duryoy is, it is you. We of course, will be searching the entire building but we’d just start our search from the place where you’d say because that’s where I believe there’s the highest chance of finding Duryoy. And you already know that he used to deal with neural drugs, he must have tried communicating with you through telepathy”

“But that’s not voluntary, Aathman!”

“I know! But there’s a higher chance of telepathy of ‘yours’ with Duryoy than anyone else over here”

Dvijata still wasn’t confident to do this thing.

“Please, Dvijata. Just a guess, anything”

“You can talk to Arvind! He and Kritika are twins. They definitely have better telepathy than mine!”

“We’ve done that already. We are waiting for your answer. Please?”

Dvijata didn’t find any sense saying no to that. In the end they just wanted a guess from her.

“Alright” she shrugged closing her eyes for a couple of seconds.

*She took a pen and wrote “third floor extreme left”
And with a closed smile she handed over the chit to Aathman.
“Thanks” Aathman said silently reading it and walking away*

*Aathman walked to Zayaan waving both the chits.
“Now we know where to start from” he winked.*

Arvind’s chit saying: Third floor, east
COINCIDENCES

Exactly when the bullet was shot towards Dr Soni, a can-like object appeared in the frame, swinging in the air and a bright blue light gleaming from within. The device came between Dr Soni and the bullet, and the bullet swiftly passed through the can like object and disappeared. Just disappeared. And the device collided over the side wall and lay there motionless as Dr Soni and the scientist kept looking at it.

The self-explanatory moments didn’t conclude themselves because even though a bullet was shot but nothing as tiny as even a dust particle touched Dr Soni. Dr Soni’s eyes bulged out in disbelief as he tried calming his over-beating heart. His breaths still reverberated the fear within him.

The scientist too had a mental halt for a moment and just to be sure he checked his gun barrel. Yes, five out of six bullets were in there. *I had shot the bullet. I remember pulling the trigger. Very distinctly!* He quickly shut the barrel and reflexively pointed the gun at Dr Soni and made sure he pressed the trigger extra hard this time.

The moment his soft fingertip touched the cold metal of the trigger a tiny portal opened behind him and within seconds a ‘suhhhhup’ kind of sound came up. With that, the scientist’s eye got dangerously enlarged and his posture hardened. He remained rock still for a couple of seconds and then with an exhaustive exhale his body collapsed like a stone statue and dropped down to remain as calm as a corpse. Or better said, he died.

Dr Soni still couldn’t comprehend the situation, but he was very sure the laws of physics were being bent all around him. This was an absolute impossibility he was witnessing! Dr Soni inched forward to check if the scientist was really dead when he discovered a bullet hole behind the scientist’s neck and blood flowing out of it like water from an overflowing tank

Dr Soni drew himself back in horror. He still couldn't believe that something just came in and gulped an entire bullet!

Who threw that device at me? he thought, and his neck turned ninety to his right, and with that the shine of his eyes jumped back to life when he saw Kritika standing at a distance, looking at him with a happiness which even her smile couldn't define, and her lips so happy that it couldn't decide which word to begin with. And so there remained these few seconds of silent happiness between the father and daughter for which Kritika had been craving since a decade.

Even Dr Soni, for a brief period had completely broken down knowing his daughter was no more. But to see her again with the brightest of her smiles was maybe the one thing that he'd never forget in his lifetime.

Tears rolled down Dr Soni's salty eyes watching the memories flash in front of his eyes

Only a person who has witnessed death can define what life is.

He got up to his knees, took a deep sneezy breath, and ignoring every other pain that resided within him, DR Soni opened his arms wide and Kritika ran into him, and the father daughter embraced each other as if they had been kept apart for years.

Seeming metaphorical to Dr Soni. Literal to Kritika Soni.

FACTS CAN BE MISLEADING

The squad had been lined up and formations re-verified but surprisingly the number of men that were being sent-in was too low. More stress had been laid over layouts and blockages and covering alternate routes rather than muscle power.

"Zayaan" Aathman called when he found him all alone, drying the sweat off his bald head. He didn't answer but was eager to listen to Aathman. Since the time Aathman had done the telepathy thing it had completely left him without words. Post that incident he kept thinking of Aathman highly, because no one could ever think the way like he did some time ago.

"Don't you think we need more muscle power?" Aathman said in the politest way possible "I mean we're trying to take down an ex-military officer. We need more men!"

"Yeah but the person we're dealing with is more of a mind-person

rather than power. If we want to stop them we need to think like them”

“But we’ve already closed all possible exits. So we cannot just expect that Khalif won’t fire back! He will, he definitely will. That’s his only option. And we need to be prepared for such an ambush because even though I hate that man but I respect his experience. He has immense of it. He had dealt with the Kashmiri militants, POWs, everyone. Believe me, if given a chance that man can flee away not leaving a single trace behind, even though we’re sending an entire special force unit. We must not forget that there was a time he used to train the units we’re sending to take him down today. He must and most definitely might have thought of dealing with us, and he knows how we think” Aathman paused having realised that he had explained himself too much “All I mean to say is- We need more men!”

Zayaan nodded, wearing back his cap

“But who is trying to take Khalif down?” he said looking at Aathman “Khalif was never our target!”

“W-H-A-T?” Aathman exclaimed “What, what are you talking about? You yourself said in ISRO that Khalif is behind this entire kidnapping!”

“Yeah, because we cannot reveal everything to you Aathman” he said handing Aathman a file “Open it”

Aathman ran through the pages some of which constituted the most confidential information regarding agents and terrorist organizations. But Aathman didn’t lay his eyes on the things that he wasn’t supposed to know.

“Turn to page 53” Zayaan said looking at the file through the corner.

And reading the first few line of page 53, Aathman went into a shock he thought he could never recover from.

It read:

Mohammad A Khalif, undercover agent disguised as an international terrorist in order to extract information regarding to the internal activity of terrorist organizations around the globe. Currently dealing with cases of...

Aathman turned to Zayaan with two large eyes waiting for an explanation

“It’s true” Zayaan said “He is still working for the Indian government”

BACKSTAB

Duryoy was on his knees and was feeling too drained out to even stand and face his death. His legs were quivering and his sleek hands tried to hold a seat and stabilize his tired body. He felt that from time to time his life was being embroiled towards death and all he could do was watch himself being stultified by the mimics named coincidences.

The airhostess’s gun continued to point at Duryoy as he kept counting seconds considering any moment to be his last. Behind him he could listen to Khalif hold his skull and groan out of pain. Sliding and changing sides like a petrified caterpillar.

“Aren’t you a bit young to be working for ISRO?” asked the airhostess waving her gun around Duryoy’s face

“Aren’t you a bit foolish to be killing a plane full of ISRO scientists, and still expecting to live?”

“I gave up the idea of living the day I got into this profession, child” she said pulling off the safety latch of the gun

The end was approaching.

Duryoy’s heartbeat fastened as crazier thoughts of jumping away or maybe running away kept flashing in his mind. But that’s not something one might risk attempting in front of a CIA agent. Duryoy gulped hard as his restless eyes tried finding something that would help him deviate her. But he found none. And before he could even react

BANG!

BANG!

With two loud yellow sparks of the gunshots blood got splattered all around the carpet, the sounds of the gunshots came echoing back through all sides, and there was a momentary pause all around. Everything seemed to have stopped completely.

Kritika too had heard those gunshots that were followed by the mild ‘thud’ of a dead lifeless body falling over the floor. She immediately left her father’s warmth and came running out into the main cabin cursing herself for have totally forgotten about Duryoy.

If something happens to him I can never forgive myself.

Slowly the fear of losing Duryoy began gripping her as she couldn’t

see anyone inside the seating area. But as she gazed downwards, her heart seemed to have stopped for a few unending seconds as the nauseating feel of watching a dead body lying in front of her crept over her. She turned away from the body in order to prevent herself from puking. She bent down and had her hands support her from collapsing to these terrifying visuals. She kept taking deep breaths to bring herself back to normal as tears began drawing out of her eyes. These things were indeed stretching her limits of her already serious mental condition. She knew she couldn't handle anxiety much, and right now the emotional swing she was going through were polar opposites- Happiness and drop-dead gloominess both at the same time.

She thanked God it wasn't Duryoy. Instead it was the airhostess. Very impossible thing to believe but Kritika rechecked from the corner of her eyes and it was the airhostess herself lying motionless over the floor. She kept looking downwards till she felt good enough to lift her glance again.

But all of a sudden her emotional string got interrupted by the same old sound of metals clinking. Only this time there were two of those.

She placidly drew her face up. And right in front of her stood Khalif and Duryoy standing alongside one another, both glaring at her with infuriated scowls and both having their guns pointed at her.

Everything around remained so still, that it seemed like a living photo frame.

"Kritika Soni" Khalif said stepping forward with his shadow climbing closer, "We're done."

TWISTED IDENTITY

If you remember in the early 2000s India took some major steps in fighting against the crimes committed against the scientists. Creation of Zenetrix, thrusting extra security on the Top 6 ISRO scientists, there was a third part to it which no one knew about. Some of the most capable persons within the Indian army had been summoned to form a group that would involve itself within the terrorist activities, debunk their plans and send it to the government before-hand. Members of this team could be anything ranging from field agents to operation planning team. Everyone knew everything. And as the team came into action there had been many terrorist operations which had been turned unsuccessful by

this team- Chinese, Russian, British. But there was one setback that this team faced- They still couldn't find the link to CIA. And CIA as you know was well beyond popular for carrying out such operations, and sad to say but they're good at what they do. So finding a link to CIA was a dire necessity. If not then our most precious operations could have been under a major risk, one of which was the manufacture of the IBM technology.

CIA those days had a very strong and trusted network, and it was literally impenetrable. The government knew the CIA had men within their research organizations but they were untraceable. But Khalif being the in-charge of Security at ISRO knew that if there was anyone the CIA would target, it was Dr Soni. He had a 24*7 check on Dr Soni making sure nothing happened to him, and had deployed his best officer- Aathman as Dr Soni's personal bodyguard.

That day at the airport when Dr Soni was boarding his flight for the International Conference (the plane that crashed), Khalif got a call from the intelligence that the plane was to be crashed. It was just a news but the intelligence even suggested there's a thin chance that the CIA link to ISRO was inside the plane. And this was the opportunity of a lifetime. If lost, the CIA link might be lost forever which would mean hundreds of lives lost again! Khalif couldn't miss it, but what would happen if the plane just exploded mid-air? He'd die! He couldn't die! He had a greater purpose to serve. But what if this was the purpose? This was his chance to do something for the country!

So even though no one knew about this but Khalif actually boarded the plane, and when he figured out who the real CIA link was (the scientist), he tried to act as if he too was a part of CIA and was helping the scientist in whatever he wanted to extract which luckily the scientist believed in because- one, CIA is known to have great holds, so when the divisional head of CISF claims himself to be connected to CIA it's somehow believable. Second, the scientist had no way to verify, so he agreed.

Khalif had brought a couple of parachutes with him, and after a point of time when everyone other than Dr Soni and Duryoy had been poisoned and there was cross firing occurring between the airhostess and Aathman, and the airplane door had somehow been opened, Khalif immediately ran to Duryoy amidst the firing, held him by his collar and

flung him out of the plane. And then he threw one of his parachutes to him. And this was how Duryoy actually survived the crash. The gigantic man he kept mentioning about, whom he couldn't recognize was none other than Khalif.



Khalif wanted to give away the second parachute bag to Dr Soni, but he was near the lavatory space and he was covered by the scientist and the airhostess. The plane was gliding very low and Khalif knew that in no way he could get the parachute back to Dr Soni. In turn, he himself jumped off the plane with the parachute. Every single cell of his wanted to give away the parachute to Aathman. But the plan that he had in his mind needed him to be alive, because if he died India would lose a bucket-load of information. He knew losing Aathman was a great loss for the country, but for the moment he had to think strategically and not morally.

People might take Khalif's act as an act of a coward, but this one decision that he made had major implications when it came to the future years. But before Khalif could act on the information he had gained, Aathman had survived the crash and was surprised to see how people blamed him for being the one involved in the crash. He saw everything but could reveal only a little to the world.

As and when Khalif reported the issue to his team they took Khalif's position to an advantage. They had put forward a plan that they can portray to the world through the media claiming that Khalif was the facilitator behind the entire plane crash. They'd create fake cases against him and hype him to an extent that he comes in the eyes of CIA. Now CIA had already lost their existing nod- the scientist- in the plane crash, and Khalif being the Divisional Head of Security of ISRO could be of greater significance for them. And because of the false claims that he had facilitated all this, it's easier for the CIA to trust him with more sensitive operations.

But it all depended on Khalif. Only if he accepted the self-burial of himself, this entire plan would be of any good. And after giving it a deep thought, and after hours of persuasion Khalif finally agreed upon the plan. But he had put forward one clause- That the government publicly apologizes to Aathman and honours him publicly with the same job and

a promotion.

The Government agreed.

And so this was how Khalif was accepted into CIA.

And just imagine what Aathman's reaction was when he came to know that the man whom throughout his life he kept cursing in the worst possible way was actually the one who gave up his entire identity making sure that Aathman got his job and honour back.

And undeniable tears kept tripping off those reddened eyes.

SWITCHING SIDES

"Alright take it easy" Kritika said slowly raising her hands on watching Duryoy and Khalif point their guns at her "Will someone explain me what's happening here?"

She got no response to that

"Duryoy? What is it?" she insisted. She couldn't understand why would Duryoy backstab her like this after getting along all this way?

"Will you care to explain me what is it?" Duryoy said with a face as cold as a stone

"I'm sorry?" Kritika said with a mild discomfort on her face

"Kritika... who got me kidnapped?"

"I don't get it. What are you talking about? We both got kidnapped, together!"

"You still won't give up will you?" Duryoy said trying hard to resist himself from doing something he might regret later "Whose idea was it to know how my drugs function?", "Whose idea was it to kill Khalif?", "Whose idea was it to get on a plane that is sure to crash?", "Whose idea was it to play with time and restore changes from the past?" and by the time he reached the last sentence Duryoy was literally yelling on her. He had completely lost the trust Kritika had managed to build after the endless hours of persuasions. All his dreams and thoughts and mind-sets regarding Kritika had shattered in a second's time.

Believe me, it was just her beautiful face that kept Duryoy from pulling the trigger.

At first she seemed to look like as if she had no idea as to what was being said to her. But she could see her efforts going futile as there was no sympathy from the other end. This was the first time something didn't

go according to what she planned for.

She had no idea how Khalif and Duryoy seemed to have teamed up. What she didn't know was that- The Khalif she was facing was from the original time. She slowly dropped her eyes and her expressions loosened on knowing it was useless to try any further.

"I never knew that *you* out of all people would prove to be like this!"

"Duryoy it's not what you think. What did he tell about me?" she said pointing at Khalif

"Then what is it?" Duryoy said with a terrible calm "You used both our weaknesses and used them against one another! I trusted you with my life and this is how you pay me back?"

"Wait Duryoy what are you talking about?"

"Time's up Kritika" Khalif said interrupting her voice "We both know what you had planned for us. You used me to get him to operate with his drug, and then use this same drug to terminate me. Wow!"

"How did you know all this?"

"Guess what? We aren't the only one who know how to travel in time" Duryoy said inclining his head towards Khalif.

"Why don't I just shoot a bullet through her head and end all this?" Khalif said clutching his gun tight.

"Don't!" Duryoy said sternly looking at her "She deserves worse"

"What?" Kritika said, still not believing that Duryoy had turned so cold towards her "What makes you think that this man is speaking the truth, Duryoy? And just because he saved you from the airhostess doesn't really mean his intentions aren't evil!"

"He didn't come here to save me from the airhostess, Kritika. He came here to save me from you."



"You know, there was a time after I was kidnapped when I was really glad that it happened. I was glad I got to know someone like you, someone who just like me was driven by the pain of loss rather than the monotony of life. I was glad I wasn't the only one who could dive into crazy extents to bring back someone I have lost. I was happy to have finally found someone who could find sense in my non-sense. And even though I opened up every darkest corner of mine to you thinking that

you did the same to me, but you didn't. Those words of sympathy, those tears, those moving words were all just to compel me to travel back in time!" Duryoy said declining his gun, his face sort of broken "You didn't need to do all this Kritika. Only if you'd have come and explained me what you really wanted, I'd have come along with you!"

"What difference would have that made" she asked.

"I wouldn't have known you" Duryoy gave a forced smile "It'd have been much easier for me to survive not knowing that there's someone in the world who is just like me. Now that I know, it's got even harder for me."

She kept looking at him with her large brown eyes

"Kritika tell me, why didn't you just *try* asking me?" Duryoy asked "If your cause was real, I'd have definitely stood alongside you."

"Some things cannot be risked on chances" she replied

"But this doesn't give you the right to do this much wrong to these many people!"

"Sometimes a little wrong needs to be done in order to do a greater good, Duryoy"

"Those lines appear to be true in the Shakespearean texts only! You've no idea of all the things that you have done"

"I've done no wrong Duryoy, believe me, I've done no wrong" Kritika repeated herself.

"You have Kritika" Duryoy said "Only if you knew the real story behind, you'd have never tried making such a plan."

"My father's death is no 'story', and this man is no innocent!" she said pointing at Khalif "You're asking me what gives me the right to play with the lives of these many people? Why didn't you ever try asking *him* that? Had he not done this in the first place, none of this would have ever happened!"

"Kritika, you never knew the story behind Khalif!"

"This man is messing with your mind Duryoy. This isn't the first time he's doing that!"

"I told you it is useless explaining her" Khalif said "She never jumps out of her perceptions"

"You should be the last person to be saying that Khalif!"

"Kritika!" Duryoy said waiting for her to calm down "He is the one because of whom you're still alive"

“Come on!” she said rejecting it on the face, “Heights.”

“If not for you he’d have never got into this in the first place! Khalif was and still is a part of the Indian government. He took the blame of your father’s plane crash only so that he could be thrust into the world of terrorist activity. He had been working undercover for the government since then.”

“And you believe that, hah?”

“I have enough reasons to believe that” Duryoy said pushing himself forward “Remember when I said that when the plane was about to crash someone came in from the shadows and threw me out of the plane with a parachute? It was none other than him” he said pointing to Khalif “And he is still wearing the black necklace that I last saw of him.”

“But he never boarded the plane!”

“Yes he did. But no one ever knew about that. And he did that only to save your father, but he couldn’t.”

“I don’t believe this. And I don’t believe the fact that you’re believing this! The killings at Syria, ammunition supply to Afghanistan, the Islamabad bomb blast, all were linked to Khalif. And you still believe this man to be innocent?”

“Well that is the only way you gain confidence of the secret services and terror groups! While star gazing, you never search for a star in the sky, you just look at the one that shines the brightest” Khalif added “In order for those groups to believe in you, you first need to prove them that you are capable of doing stuffs.”

“Then why did take the contract of kidnapping me and you when he was on our side?” Kritika questioned.

No, she was in no way ready to accept that Khalif was really on their side. She was well beyond that.

“That’s because it was my only chance to get in touch with the CIA!” Khalif interrupted “When I got to know someone wanted to kidnap an ISRO scientist, I definitely knew it was the CIA because I had intel from every other organization other than CIA, none of which matched it. So the team enrolled into it, did as the ‘kidnapper’ asked us to do thinking that this way we can reach the CIA mastermind heading these operations in India. But then I realised that it was *you* who tricked me to get yourself kidnapped so as to take revenge of your father’s death. Yes, this is what I get in return of dedicating my entire life for

your family's security..."

And Khalif continued as she kept listening to every word falling into the perfect square and making the perfect sense as the entire world of hers kept turning upside down and all she could ask herself was "How is that even possible?". A decade long of hatred towards a man who had actually been on their side. How could she ever forgive herself? And all those things she made Duryoy go through. And all the many ways she had changed the world!

All those planning she had done since her father died, waiting for this day to happen. And when it happens, this is what she ends up with. And the words no more got into her ears as she wrapped herself in one corner of her mind still wondering how wrong she had been.

And her world kept shattering with every passing second.

May be in order to win her greed, she might have lost herself into it

SOMEDAY

With an unusually thick diary in his hand and a few words in his mind Aathman walked to Dvijata. The moments were getting so deep that the silence was growing slowly within everyone. People were tensed, people were uncertain and people believed in the Special Forces to solve everything, something that added up to the plight of expectations of these men.

"Remember the mail I sent to Duryoy?" he said "The one that you read?"

"Yes?" Dvijata said nodding lightly. Aathman was too tall for her, and the sun was right at the top, so she had to use her hand as a cap in order look into his face.

"Remember the last line?"

"Yes, you asked him to collect some diary from you"

"But he never did" Aathman said pulling up the diary and laying it onto Dvijata's tiny palms "So... you have it"

"You can give him yourself once you rescue him!" Dvijata suggested "This way he'd be more happy"

"You need this more than me"

"Why so?" she said looking at the dark brown diary

"Because you were the one who said that you've known him for the

last ten years but still you feel you never knew him! Here, this is where all his life is written in. Go on! Read it. Life's too short for keeping secrets from ones you love Dvijata."

Aathman strapped-in his bullet-proof vest and arched his shoulders as he watched Dvijata happily looking at the diary.

"You read it, while I get him back to you" he said wearing his eye gear "Goodbye."

And he walked away towards his team who were waiting for him near the vehicles

"Aathman!" Dvijata called out, he stopped and turned back in surprise "Why do you think I need to read this?" she said waving the heavy diary

"You'll understand when you read it" he said with a smile "Further explanations... after the operation" he yelled happily waving his hand high, as Dvijata waved him back. She had the smile on her face until Aathman went far away and disappeared amongst the men in green, who were all set to swarm into the building.

She ran her fingers over the smudged surface of the diary and could feel that all she had ever wanted to know about Duryoy was right in her hands. She felt the broken seal over the diary. Her hands quivered a little as she opened the diary and a fresh gust of rotting paper invited her to the world of Duryoy.

What was it Duryoy? What was it that you had been hiding all your life?

ENTRIES DATED 10 YEARS BACK

Dear Diary

There are many insane things one does within his lifetime. Some live, some die, some lose a part of themselves while some find a part of themselves they never knew about, in this process. But what I have learnt from these 17 years of living on the planet is that insanity is what makes a man do things one could have never done otherwise. I've heard about people falling in love. The thing that makes poet out of an artless man, the thing that makes the man shave who hasn't taken bath in years, the thing that makes a ignoramus start caring about things, the thing that makes you look one extra second in the mirror before you depart. I've

been through this. And the magic that love creates in our heart is the worst thing that can ever happen to you. Because when love begins, there's one person who dies caring about you every day while the other has no idea that someone like that even exists.

Since I've been a young kid I've always craved for cars whenever I went to the Bodo Bajar with my mother. There'd be villagers from the rural areas who'd come and sell toys on the roadside and there'd be many people coming from all around Kolkata, and not just the poor ones, but even the rich, middle, middle upper and every sort of division that men has created based on a piece of paper. And in Bodo Bazaar there'd definitely be some toy that'd catch my eye and I'd crave for it from the time I see it. Mamma would say "No" and "No" and "Later" and "No" again, but I'd stick to the love of my car. And I knew that after mamma is done with her part of shopping she'd slowly ask me where I had seen the car and will tell to me that because I had been a good boy she's going to buy me one.

But you know what? This is something that might have spoilt me, because now when I crave for the girl in brown eyes and black watch, I cannot help myself! I don't even know her name but know how beautiful she looks when she gets into the bus. The window by her side remains open and her hairs start sticking to her face. And every day while she searches for a seat, I expect her to look at me, for once so that I can give her a smile or something. But no. Whenever she looks at me, she looks through me. And all I do is empathise with the man who created the word- "Impossible"

Dear diary

Her name is Saaera. Yes, her name is as beautiful as she herself is, AND SHE SPOKE TO ME TODAY!!!!!! for the first time I loved my bus ride so much, for the first time these tiny little kids didn't irritate me, for the first time I smiled back at the conductor when he frowned at me for being late, for the first time one of those strands that I've always appreciated fell on me and she said 'sorry', and I just wondered why would someone say sorry for giving a moment so priceless? She sat by me and she was the only one from my grade, else everyone around us were between first to fifth graders who kept talking about Shinchan and things that barely matter to you.

But she talked to me! Ikr I still cannot believe this happened!!
God is indeed there!

Dvijata flipped through the pages searching for Saera's pictures. She really wanted to know how that girl looked like. But nah, no luck. And she continued to read further.

THE SECRET

How would you feel when all through your life you have hated a person so bad that you cannot manage to resist his face for more than a couple of seconds. Their presence suffocates you and their voice just shoots up your temper and you know what they've done to you but still they show no regrets. And they even the audacity to pretend as if nothing happened. You'd want to beat them up, or just for once pull the trigger and kill them. But that won't do justice to you or to them, because they never deserved such an easy death! You make sure they land up in hell by making their life on earth a living hell.

And then one sudden day you realise that they never did the thing you had accused him for all through your life. Now now there's a void in your heart that gets created because that man had always been innocent! All throughout the time! And over that he had been the one who had helped the most. Can you take it? Can you accept the fact that the man was never a culprit? Can you even accept yourself for all the ill-will you've been mentally imparting to that innocent man? Can you accept The Truth?

The scenario within the B-47 was that of the dreadful silence that occurs after a gruesome battle. There were dead bodies all around, men with weapons, a defeated woman who didn't make eye contact with anyone else and the plane that kept flying in the winds.

Kritika was undergoing a hard time as all her thoughts had been proved wrong, and Duryoy knew it would take a while before she could start getting normal again. She was running through a guilt trip and because all her life she had somehow surpassed people with her intelligence, it was unacceptable for her- How could she make such a mistake?

She sat at the corner of the aisle over the floor with her hands lifelessly touching the floor and her hair ruffled up. She wasn't wearing

her glasses anymore and had her head pulled downwards and at times sideways trying not to face anyone.

Duryoy sat by her on the nearby seat, himself dripped into his own set of melancholy.

What was to be done next? Kritika wished to get back her father and he was now alive. She wanted to kill Khalif, but knowing that he did no harm to her ever, she retreated. The plane didn't crash and had already crossed the international border, so everything was done. It was time for them to get back to the real time, which undoubtedly will be a parallel universe because of these many changes that they made

"Good evening. This is Captain Dhaval Pandya" cracked the speakers "Requesting cabin crew to reach the cockpit immediately. It's urgent"

The news sounded somewhat un-pleasant-ish, but how worse could it get than the last 24 hours?

Seeing no response from Duryoy or Kritika, Khalif walked over.

"Am going to check what's wrong there" Khalif said putting his weapon down "I'll be right back. As it is there is no cabin crew left to attend him."

And with long wide steps he passed by Kritika and exited the cabin.

And now it was just the two of them, and awkwardness.

Kritika's heart kept pounding loudly, quite evident by her heavy discontinuous breaths. Her silkier hair had settled for a thin black line, and the anxiety of a 28-year-old portrayed by the 17 year old face wasn't going quite in sync either.

Duryoy knew her thoughts were suspended between guilt and tremor. And that was how it should happen! Because in the end, she had manipulated two such people who were one of the bests in their fields. But however devious she might have been, neither Duryoy nor Khalif could disagree to the fact that she was unbelievably smart. No ordinary brain could have pulled this out, all by itself.

Duryoy didn't know how to act to it. Like there he had a conglomerate of emotions lying within him, all set to be released one after the other. And for what she had done Duryoy had enough hatred for her enough to never talk to her ever. But what good will it yield? He'd pounce upon with a few angry words, break everything they had between them and then say sorry just to sum it up. But that won't help in

any way!

The worse was over and it's better to solve the issues rather than worrying unnecessarily upon them. And suppressing the anger within his voice, Duryoy had finally made up his mind.

"Kritika" he said softly, getting close to her and sitting on his knees "I know you won't look at me. And I know you won't talk to me because you think I won't get you. And you may be right. But whatever it is I do not claim you to be at fault. When it's for the person you love, I don't think there are any boundaries. I know, all you wanted was to bring your father back to life, and I think you've managed to do that pretty cleanly. Of course, the changes we have caused would have certain consequences in the future, but that's all right. You can never throw a stone in the river hoping ripples don't occur. We both were in this together and I promise you I'll be with you for this after we get back in the real time. You need not feel guilty about anything you've done. And after all we've been through I don't think there is anything that we cannot talk about. So forget that this ever happened. I think, for now we must focus over the good side to everything that happened- Dr Soni is alive and sitting right there waiting for his daughter to come and talk to him. So come on! Go there and talk to him. Let him know how much you love him. Let him know how much you missed him. Tell him about the miracles you've created using science. Tell him how you his name changed from 'Dr Soni' to 'Father of Kritika Soni'. Tell him how you felt, every time you passed by his cabin thinking that for once you'd open the door and find him sitting at his desk. Tell him that when it's late and you're hungry you wanted him to come and pick you up and take you to some roadside stall for some Chinese. Tell him that you miss your mom even though you pretend to hate her. Tell him everything! Because feelings are meant to be shared, not decayed. The moment we get back to the real time your father will be alive. *That* impossible job we were talking about all evening is done. Thanks to you. And I find myself lucky that I travelled in time twice, and I managed to come out alive, both time" Duryoy said smiling over himself.

It didn't seem like Kritika was completely out of her dilemma, but Duryoy saw that she was listening to him. She wanted to hear him. She suddenly wanted to know everything about him. Now, she loved him even more for accepting her the ways she was, even though it was really

her fault. This was the new Duryoy! The one who knew how to let things go. The one who valued life the way it is. And this new Duryoy was indeed quite likeable because Kritika indeed thought that after what she had done to him, he'd hate her to extents that he might not even acknowledge her existence. But he didn't do anything as such. And at a saddening thought instantly stumbled across Kritika that soon they both will be back to the original time and things will change again forever. Maybe Duryoy marries Dvijata. Maybe she gets married to Milan. Maybe her parents get back together. Maybe Duryoy solves issues with his father and lives a normal life. (Wait, no, that man can never live a normal life). But she knew that everything will be lost in the stitch of a moment

"Duryoy?" Kritika said in a low, cold voice "Doesn't it frighten you that when we get back to the real time, it may be possible that Dvijata never existed? Parallel universes can have many variations. Aren't you afraid of *this* one?"

"Yes, it is" he nodded sadly "But I've learnt one bad thing about myself that I always try holding on to things even when they're gone. Although I'm glad that for once I didn't let things go, else I'd have never created NURAC. I'd never have had the chance to work for ISRO. I'd have never known that I held the potential to create one of the most ground-breaking drug ever created. And most of all, I wouldn't have met you" Duryoy smiled "But, now I know that it's sometimes better to let certain things go. Because holding on to the things that don't value us, is kind of lame. I would rather polish my ego rather than polishing someone else's. Thanks to you..." Duryoy slowly held her warm loose hands tightly as he could still feel her hands tremble "I'd have never realised this if I never met you"

"Now I know why it was so important for my father to save you..." Kritika whispered with a sweet little smile on her face "How should I thank you for trusting a stranger like me with your deepest secret?"

"No, it's actually me who should be thanking you!"

"Duryoy, this isn't a formality. Relax! And don't keep thanking the person who manipulated you this entire time."

"It's because of your manipulation that I realised what a broken person I was from inside! I am a psychologist and we're expected to be perfect in every sense. Lives depend on us, and you cannot treat people

in stress with yourself being stressed. I wanted life to be perfectly defined. I wanted marriage, I wanted family, I wanted Dvijata to be my child's mother and I loved thinking about how we'd take alternate shifts just to make sure our kids don't have alone time. But life doesn't work the way we expect it to. I screwed things up, big time and I just couldn't forgive myself for doing that! Last night I kept cursing myself every moment for not having the courage to say what my heart wanted to and now some American-Indian is going to marry her. That's how you screw a big time!" Duryoy paused for a breath "But now I know that a screwed-up life is actually a life worth talking about. Because everyone in their life should once come across a situation that makes them look like some Hollywood star. And in our case, we literally made that happen" Duryoy said trying to bring Kritika up from her unending silence.

"Ummm hmm" Kritika nodded with a gleeful face. It was good to see her smile again. "What else did you learn doctor?" she said pulling her chin and supporting it on her palm

"Let me think" Duryoy said dramatically stretching his eyebrows upwards "Yeah! I also learnt that not all ISRO scientists are ugly looking."

"Don't start behaving like Chandler!"

"Oh Kritika. Could you *be* any better?"

And the next thing they knew they both laughed and smiled and happily looked into each other's eyes. It was for the first time since last night they both *actually* smiled with their hearts out without the threat of life dangling upon them. There was a feeling of both satisfaction as well as emptiness within their hearts. Satisfaction to have completed a task worth writing in a sci-fi novel and to have found each other, but emptiness that these moments will be lost forever. There was a spark between the two. But this spark could never turn into flames because both had different priorities- Duryoy loved someone else and Kritika was engaged. They both were on paths they could never retreat. But for once a thought must have crossed your mind as to how pretty awesome would their life be if they had each other.

"Hey, I'm glad you're fine" Duryoy said running his hand over Kritika's smooth hair "I was really worried I'd never be able to see you again the way I used to see you"

“Aren’t you mad at me for breaking your trust?” she said, her dark eyes eagerly waiting for an answer.

“Yes I was when I heard the truth, but then I realised that incomplete human beings are very vulnerable. You see, I lost the girl I loved and created a drug that could get her back. You lost your father and you created a plan to get him back. So it wasn’t really your fault. You just did what you could do the best to get back what you lost. It’s human psychology! When poor people do not get money they switch to robbery. Does that make them a bad person? No! It’s always the situation that decides whether a man is good or bad. It’s never absolute”

“So do you still trust me?” Kritika asked with a sceptical smirk. Moments ago she had dropped a few tears which she thought no one had noticed. But her deep kaajal along with the tears had sketched two black lines over her pale cheeks making her look cuter than usual. Well there was something about this girl that would make you love her even though you try your hardest to hate her.

“Yes I do” Duryoy said not waiting for a moment to think about the answer “I do trust you and will always do”

“Well” Kritika hesitated to speak “Then can I trust you with one more secret of mine?”

“Is there *still* something left to be known?”

Kritika slowly slid her hand behind his head, ran her fingers through his silky hairs and held his face tight with her sleek palm and pulled it closer. And in no time their warm lips touched each other’s, and they kissed like never before. For that moment the whole world faded down, the noise of the jet engines, the fact that they had to get back to the original time, the fact that Kritika was engaged and Duryoy still had feelings for Dvijata , everything, everything was gone. Just the two of them, and they had each other.

Who said you need a time machine to travel through time? Sometimes even the warmth of a woman does too.

She tasted his fears. He tasted her tears. And they both embraced into each other the way as if they both knew it was the first and the last time they’d be this close.

Duryoy slowly held her face with his softest touch, slowly pushed her away just to look at her. And their moist eyes resonated the things they had been through, together. He looked towards her as if holding a

Picasso with his bare hands. He could still feel her hands tremble. And she neither smiled, nor uttered a word. But he could feel the fulfilment abiding within her.

Duryoy politely whispered to her- “Why do all your secrets turn my world upside-down?”

THE LAST NIGHT

Dear diary

Tomorrow is the last night of Durga pooja and I’m really really tensed. I don’t know why in love everything looks so damn difficult? It’s the “one” deviation in life I am unable to deal with. Like one year back I was thinking which college to join, which course should I choose, what I’d be doing when I grow up and how’d my future villa look like. But now that Saaera is with me now every failure has a reason to be happy about- “At least she’s with me”. I’m still dreaming the same things but now for the two of us. I can see my 30 year old self standing in the drawing hall watching movie with a bowl of popcorn in one hand and her warm hands in the other. But even though “I think” Saaera likes me, she has never said anything to me as such. But gestures. Gestures is all she speaks with. Like she’ll care for me and stand by me when I’m getting bored by her friends, she’ll tease me with the things I don’t want to hear, she’ll hold my hands when we cross the road but then she leaves it like that never mattered to her, she’ll laugh and look at me like there’s something she wants to tell me. But some days the same eyes look so cold and distant that they just look at me and ignore me.

But, the good news is that I’ve finally asked her out and luckily she said Yes! Although that was more out of because she wanted to know my culture, but you know, everything’s fair until it gets you there. So tomorrow I’m meeting her at the Durga pooja pandal. I even called Dattani to my house so I could get some tips on how to sound interesting. He really had points I could never think of, what a genius he is! He told me to buy her an ice-cream when she wanted to leave, so that way I could make her wait for some more time. Plus he also told me specifically to buy her a cone. Neither a stick nor a cup, pure cone only. Because stick ice-creams melt quickly and so she’d hurry up and not focus on what we’re talking... And cups, wtf?

Plus she’ll be staying up late! Her parents allowed her to be back

before 12, although that needed a lot of persuasion from her side to her mother, and my side to her. But somehow things fell in place. And so tomorrow is the day. Wish me luck dear diary, and I hope that I have something really interesting to write on you tomorrow. Good night. I need to look fresh for tomorrow.

FULL HEART, EMPTY GUNS

Duryoy and Kritika were sitting by one another over the carpeted floor without any romantic postures, of course. Just contentment in their hearts and happy gleeful silence persisting between them. They had been waiting for Khalif so that all three of them could exit at the same time. But there was a problem. In the real world Khalif was supposed to give the hypnic jerk that would wake them up. But now with Khalif himself being here the problem was- “Who was supposed to trigger the jerk?”

And what would happen to Khalif once he gets back? Like imprisoned, or will he lead a normal life, or the same old life he had been living till now- the undercover one?

Maybe the government knows about him being undercover and would do something to get him out of this, Duryoy hoped

“Can I ask you something” Kritika said turning slowly to Duryoy. She didn’t wait for him to answer. It wasn’t even a question actually. “Do you *really* trust Khalif?”

Duryoy was having a mild headache because of the long sleepless drive he was on since the last evening. He squinted his sleepy eyes saying “Look, Kritika, I’ve known Khalif for years as the worst a man can be. The man beat Aathman to death and had no regrets after he shot that beautiful airhostess. I too hated him *as much as you did*.”

Kritika eyed sharply at him.

“Okay, may be less than you” Duryoy shrugged “But I don’t think you should jump to conclusions by the stories you hear. I never knew the man with the necklace was actually Khalif until I saw him wearing that today. I don’t know Khalif much but the way he spoke to me regarding every single detail for which he had been suspected I had no other choice than to believe!”

“Or maybe he’s just faking it! I mean how difficult can that be for a man to pretend to be your friend, who all through his life had pretended to be someone else?”

“Kritika, he had been pretending just to make sure that the foreign countries do not have any hold over the movement of our scientists! He did that for the purpose of national security! For your safety, our safety!”

Kritika shook her head in disagreement “Duryoy, doesn’t matter how hard you try, this man is the one who took away half my youth from me”

“Kritika” Duryoy said sliding across in order to face her, he held her hands tight “We’ve talked about this. It was the CIA that devised the plan to kill your father!”

“My point is- If CIA really killed my father once, how hard could it be for them to kill him the second time? What we are doing doesn’t eliminate the threat, it just prolongs it to some other time!”

“Yes, but death is inevitable! You can prevent someone from dying a hundred times but this doesn’t mean he won’t die in the hundred-first time. You need to accept certain things the way they are”

Duryoy sounded reasonable but Kritika wasn’t here for reasons.

“I still don’t find this right Duryoy?” she said hiding her face behind her arms

“Oh come on! If we go by the way you’re thinking then we need to blow up the entire CIA in order to stop them from committing these crimes” Duryoy shouted out of anxiety. But watching Kritika’s crestfallen face he returned back to the humane level. Lowering his voice he said “We both knew that all you wanted was just one chance to bring your father back, right?”

Kritika nodded feebly

“Now this time I am asking you to trust me” Duryoy said in the most serious tone he could ever bring out “If he messes us, I guarantee you I will get back in time and kill him, all by myself. But at least this man a chance. He ended up kidnapping us in order to catch the man who wanted to kidnap us! He never had anything to do with us. He was just using us as his bait. It’s our turn to do something good to him. Even I trusted you with NURAC without asking you a single question...”

“Oh really?” Kritika’s eyes widened

“I mean a little questioning ... but it was because I didn’t know you. Now that I know you, I know that you do trust me and I’m asking you for one Yes. Give this man a chance to live.”

“Let me ask you something, Duryoy” Kritika said sliding

uncomfortably in her place “Do you really know Khalif as long as you claim to know him?”

“Sorry?”

“I mean you said you know Khalif for years” Kritika said in a sceptical tone “How many years? Like you seem to know him *pretty* well”

“Kritika, what sort of a question is that? Why can’t you just trust me?”

Kritika gave back Duryoy a smile still looking back into his eyes. The moment was so intense that even the short and repetitive inhales of both could be distinctly heard “I’m sorry” she said shrugging her shoulders “I think some things are just hard to accept” Duryoy getting the true meaning of that line “Well, this time, I am trusting you. But ...” Kritika said taking her hand away from Duryoy.

Duryoy noticed that.

“I am giving this to you” she said handing Duryoy her gun “I leave it up to you whether to shoot him or not. In case you change your mind.”

“I have my own weapon!”

“Yours never had any bullet.”

THE D

Dear diary

That was the evening I had been waiting for the last one year of my life. The dream evening that every man dreams of spending with his loved one. Yes, that was how excellent it was

It was the perfect evening I had ever witnessed in my entire life! You have no idea how much I was terrified because I knew things wouldn’t work out the way I wanted them to. It was the first time I was with a girl, alone, and unfortunately I had to talk about myself. I hated that! Like you cannot talk about your friends because that’d sound a little lame, you cannot talk about your parents because she isn’t that close either, you cannot talk about your feelings else she’d leave you right away and you cannot talk about her feelings because that was what this was all about! Then what should I talk about?

Multiple insecurities had exhausted my brain so I was all up to her mercy. If she liked me, well and good. If not, not a problem! No one minds spending alone time with their crush.

But the day had been perfect!

She walked by me, understood when I felt loose, shred away my fears, talked about my life and damn! How can someone be so perfect!

I kept thanking God that yes, she was all I needed. And this was the one evening I should never forget!

But I guess God had different plans for me.

While we were having the best time of our lives her father had a heart attack. I took her to CMC where she just ran towards her father cabin. I do remember asking her to slow down but she listened to me. And on the second floor she stepped on a round black beaded necklace lying on the floor. Her foot twisted, she collided with the railing and fell off the second floor. Landed straight on her head.

I don't even remember the last thing she said to me. And that's how it all happened. She just died. What a way did God take to separate her from me. But I always keep wondering who the fuck kept those black beads over the corridor. I argued with the nurses, the cleaning staffs, the doctors but no one had any answer. And I had no one to blame for the one person who mattered the most to me!

I'm right now crying as I type down every word. This is to remind myself the darkest hours of my life because this is one of those things that better remain as words and not memories.

I've collected the necklace and I promised her to keep it with me wherever I go. This way I can be close to her. And the most astonishing thing was that somebody had scratched a 'D' over one of the beads. I don't know what that stands for but that's how I remember it- The necklace with a D scratched on it.

A SUN IN THE NIGHT SKY

It was again the long motionless silence and a weirdly increased turbulence that kept Duryoy's eyes busy outside the window. He kept looking into the dark sky since the turbulence had been there for quite some time. This one was a different kind though because it made the plane tremble more. The lights flickered as they ran out of power, the engines were being operated at their full thrust in order to keep the plane under control.

They both held on to the metal bar above their heads as the plane swam through the winds

Khalif reappeared from the cockpit supporting himself over to the provided side rails. His face suggested that there was something bad to be disclosed. He quickly entered into the main cabin area called out loud ‘doctor, we have a situation here’ he said itching his chin.

“You need me” Duryoy asked, surprised. Khalif never needed anyone!

What possible can it be that has made “Khalif” clueless?

Duryoy quickly bounced back on his feet, “What happened?”

“This might sound a little weird but...”

“Is this about Dr Soni?”

“No, no, he’s alright. He’s checking out *her* device. He seems pretty amazed”

Kritika had a 2 cm smile down on her left lip knowing that her father had found her work worthy of appreciation.

“Then what’s the matter?”

“What do you think which country are we flying over?” Khalif asked

“India. India, of course. Or maybe Pakistan, I guess” Duryoy said sounding confused “Pakistan it is by now” he said looking at his watch that said 21:53

Meanwhile all of a sudden, sunrays pierced through the windows in the front row suddenly lighting up the cabin with the window hole glowing like elliptical bulbs and a blue horizon outside it.

Wasn’t it night a while ago?

The plane had reached a sudden calm and was now gliding smoothly through the morning sky. The engine noises deleted and the B-47 straightened. Duryoy re-checked his watch again “21:55”

“What the hell is happening?” he said looking outside the window ‘time zones do change while travelling, but never this fast!’

“This is what I wanted to talk about” Khalif said waiting for Duryoy to look back

“What?”

“That we’re over the Virginia air space”

“W-H-A-T? Seriously? Like United States, Virginia?”

“Yes, damn it. How many Virginias do you happen to know?” Khalif grumbled over the silly question ‘since quite some time the Geo-Positioning System of the plane had lost its track. The plane lost its way

into a sudden cloud of bright blue light that caused the turbulence and we're now in Virginia! That's why it is day outside"

"But the plane just lost its GPS. It didn't gain some goddamn power boosters that we travelled right through the globe to the other end of the earth! This cannot be GPS!" Duryoy said totally disagreeing to Khalif's words "And we're too far from Bermuda Triangle to undergo this type of transition!"

"Bermuda triangle?" Khalif said narrowing his eyes

"Yes, such events of sudden long distance travel occurs around Bermuda Triangle. The clouds over the triangle are said to possess some weird kind of formation, spiral tunnel precisely, through which when planes pass the other end of the tunnel seems to be very unexpected- An entirely different place, and sometimes and entirely different time"

"You mean just like wormholes?" Khalif asked as Duryoy's eyes turned towards him in awe. Somehow for that brief moment the focus had switched towards Khalif rather than the fact that they were in a damn wrong country!

"What're you looking at?" Khalif asked in his natural, careless tone "Can't I know about wormholes?"

"Yes, yes" Duryoy said jerking his head in order to restrain himself from shifting his focus "But that's not possible unless someone tampers with the weather."

"Well HAARP can tamper with the weather."

"What HAARP?" Duryoy asked

"HAARP- High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program" Khalif said as if that's something everyone knows about "It's an American agency which is said to be able to control weather using some electromagnetic waves and all" Khalif said boasting about his knowledge 'my work as an undercover agent has yield me such information over years. Scientists from NASA are usually transferred to HAARP for research help and technical supervision."

"But it's just a conspiracy theory!"

"No one asked you to believe it" Khalif said without caring much of Duryoy's opinions.

Duryoy couldn't make sense to any of that but a thought crossed his mind that Kritika's fiancé Milan worked for NASA. May be she had some idea over this entire weather control program. It was a long shot

though, but what's the harm in asking?

Duryoy turned towards Kritika saying "Kritika, is there by any chance..." but she wasn't there! "Where's Krit..." Duryoy said looking around.

"Over there" Khalif pointed. She was standing by the air plane door with an indescribable expression over her face. She had the airplane door gear in her hand and she was waiting for Duryoy to find her. She had things she wished to share with him.

"What's the matter?" Duryoy asked watching her behave unusually.

She raised her eyebrows and looked towards Duryoy like it was the last time she'd be doing that. Her pale taut cheeks had turned yellow and she was breathing heavily, as if trying to calm herself down.

"Duryoy, you remember what I told you before we came here?" she asked. Her voice shrivelling.

"That all you ever wanted was to get your father back!"

"I lied."

MAPS

Dear diary

I've had it enough and I've tried to forget her but no. It's getting over my nerves. Mood swings are one thing but this is getting unbearable. I never knew she had opened so many chambers in my heart that everything I look at reminds me of her. I keep spending my nights in the terrace, I have stopped meeting my school friends, I've delinked my TV because I don't really need it now and it has been months since I've touched my books. My boards are approaching and now my mother is creating tantrums regarding how my future should be. She's a single mother and my father left her when I was young because his battalion was into some war where he couldn't leave his men behind. And he never returned. Mom never talked about or how he was in-person, and I totally get it. I didn't want to burden myself either with the thoughts of a man who didn't care about.

Of course I respect his decisions, but I don't respect him. It's because of him we shifted back to Calcutta. It's because of him I went to the school I didn't want to. It's because of him I met Saaera at the bus. It's because of him that now I'm thinking of ways I should try killing myself. Maybe slicing my arms would be easy or maybe I should pop in

some sleeping pills or maybe copper sulphate? But that chemist keeps asking me for what purpose I need it and the quantity he gives me is not enough to kill me, but damn, that quantity is enough to bring me near to death yet not kill me. That's definitely not what I want. I don't want pain! I've had enough of it. I just want a fast clean exit from this world. Oh wait. Why not I just jump out of this terrace? But I don't think it's too high. I don't want to spend my nights in jail with a broken leg and "Attempt to suicide" case under my name.

I've been listening to Maps all this time and trust me, songs are the only things that I feel can understand me

I miss the taste of the sweeter life
I miss the conversation
I'm searching for a song tonight
I'm changing all other stations

I was there for you
In your darkest times
I was there for you
In your darkest night
But I wonder, where were you?
When I was at my worst
Down on my knees
And you said you had my back
So I wonder, where were you?
All the roads you took came back to me
So I'm following the map that leads to you

I need to bring her back. I'll make a dead person alive. Right now it sounds ridiculous, but trust me I would do it.

THE IMPOSSIBLE TASK

"You lied?" Duryoy sounded surprised "What does it even mean?"

Kritika tried not losing her calm and she closed her eyes for a brief moment with nullity hanging over her face

"Kritika, answer me! We're flying over the wrong country and in no time we'll be chased down by the American Airforce! What is it that you know?" Duryoy yelled impatiently "And why are you holding the door

handle? You pull it and the suction will throw us all out of the plane!”

“Do you know what has been the biggest regret of my life?” Kritika said looking at Duryoy. No, she still hadn’t forgiven Khalif. Rather she chose to ignore his presence.

“NO! I don’t know! And stop acting so creepy and tell us what is the problem Kritika?” Duryoy said in a highly impatient tone “We’re not here to understand the principles behind your every move. We’re running out of time, so speak up!”

“Do you want the answer or not?” she asked in a monotonous voice. Her emotionless eyes looking right through Duryoy trying to hide the anxiety building within her.

“Yes! That you...”

“Oh come on! Enough of it” Khalif interrupted, stepping forward totally forgetting that he was unarmed.

“Don’t” Kritika said straightaway pointing her gun at him, “Just don’t” she said signalling Khalif to step back.

She had now become really very handy towards pointing gun at random people. But one must realise that she never ever pointed the gun at Duryoy whatever the situation might be. She wanted him to realise that himself.

When did she have a gun? Khalif thought Wait! That’s my gun! But how?

“My biggest regret in life was that- Life chose to take away everything that was close to me. Life is not always fair. But who defines the time till which it is fair for life to be unfair?” Kritika said, her words attaining an internal rudeness as she spoke “Just like everyone else I too had a family, but that broke. I had a father, and I lose him in a plane crash. I was living healthy, but life gave me Alzheimer. Life could never watch me get happy! And for the next ten years when people of my age went about living the so called ‘youth’ there I was sitting in an isolated corner of ISRO trying to create a device that might bring me back all the things that I lost to time. I thought I was trying to escape my fears. But in fact I was trying to escape the reality. Which part of this do you think was fair?”

“Kritika, your father is alive again. As soon as you go back into the real time you’ll be having him besides you for everything you wanted him to be there for. We have changed the past, and also your life. Then

why are you still being so despondent?” Duryoy asked

“What is it that is still concerning you?”

“Have you ever been in love, Duryoy?”

“Do I still need to answer that question?”

“Then you’ll always know, that the fear of loss always manages to overcome the ecstasy of happiness.”

“Where is this going Kritika?” Duryoy said

“Don’t you get it? Every loss in my life was directly or indirectly related to one thing- CIA. My dad’s divorce, his death, me living my next ten years in a fear that I might die any day, this organization was there in every nightmare of mine. And till the point this organization ceases to exist, a true carefree existence will always remain a myth. Not just for me but for all the people for whom nothing else other than the integrity of their country matters. They’ve killed my father once. How difficult could it be to kill him once again? And it’s not just the question of my father but about the safety of all the brightest brains our nation possesses. Because doesn’t matter how good we are the CIA will find a way to crack our system and hack those precious minds through paper or point. This whole damn recklessness needs to be stopped! NO one cares if we lose a scientist or two, but do the people realise that by losing one brain we’re actually losing a decade equivalent of research from the future? Why do we keep letting this happen? Why can’t we just make sure that these people who’re sacrificing their life behind the scientific welfare of our country need to be protected. They’re simple people with simple tastes, can’t the government do this much for them? Can’t the government just ensure security to them and to their family?”

“The government does ensure security to the scientists under every research organisation, Kritika” Khalif said sensing that he needed to interrupt the conversation before it went overboard “Every year hundreds of CISF men are deployed into airfields and research centres just to ensure safety of scientists like you. And it’s not possible for us to make sure each and every scientist is safe enough because that’s illogical. Absolute control over anything is barely possible when the governed body itself is so large.”

“Accept it Khalif. That’s just one way of hiding your inability” Kritika said with an inappropriate bluntness.

“Do you think that the whole CISF force is a bunch of useless men

hanging around in uniforms? DO you even know how much pain and training it takes for a CISF officer before he's ready to be sent for a field job? Have you even cared to ask?"

"No, I didn't" Kritika said cutting him sharp "And I don't want to, because doesn't matter how good our forces are, the CIA manages to do their job without leaving a single clue behind. I don't know what should I call that- Their excellence, or your negligence. But whatever they do, they're really good at it. And their good is better than your best. So we need a change."

Khalif seemed to be really annoyed by the constant mocks that Kritika had been putting up against him and his forces. But sadly, she was right. True yet unacceptable.

"And just to make sure that this never happens again" Kritika paused for a breath "Someone needs to make sure that CIA's voice is shut down, permanently"

"And how are you planning to do that pretty woman? By making another device that'd kill all CIA agents?"

"This is why you could never make it to ISRO, Khalif" Kritika said bringing sliding her hands deep inside her jeans pocket and producing a tiny green button "We're flying over Virginia for a reason."

"You knew this would happen?" Duryoy said.

"Even before you knew me, Duryoy."

But before getting in detail with "Why flying over Virginia?" you should know that the CIA Headquarters is situated in Virginia and that might have meant something to the way Kritika was criticizing the organization. But even if she did, this would be the silliest cum bravest act someone would have ever attempted in the history of the world, because CIA was the brain of America. And attempting anything wasn't just a suicide mission but a voluntary attempt to bring ruin over your country.

"You're not planning to do anything to the CIA Headquarters, right?" Khalif asked in concerned voice as he knew she was able to pull down any damn thing "I know you don't like hearing this a lot but if you're even thinking of something like crashing this plane into the CIA headquarters then let me tell you this really is an *impossible task*. The moment anything enters a kilometre or two within the building radius ground range missiles get launched and even before you can touch the

building you'll be turned down into ashes. There's no point in the bravery that'd make you look like a fool!"

"Well that's the thing with nuclear weapons. It inflicts ruin wherever it explodes."

"And where do you think we'll get nuclear weapons from?"

"We don't need to get them. We already have two of those in this plane."

"This plane has nuclear cores?"

"Why else do you think I brought an American plane, specifically from the Second World War?"

MEETING DR SONI

Dear diary,

It sounds a little weird but for the first time I've come across the person whom I always wanted to meet. Like, everyone has an idol, right? And you know Dr Soni had always been my idol, and if not for him I would have never had the courage to think of doing something like what I had thought of, right now! I still cannot imagine how badly I didn't want to go to that science convention which my mother forced me into. That was where I heard Dr Soni for the first time. And I just cannot explain how awed was I listening to him talking about stars and galaxies. And I don't know what was it that took hold of me, but the simplicity with which the man talked about space, just made me fall in love with his character, if not his knowledge. And I had followed his work since then, and today I actually met him!

For a minute or two I ran completely blank in front of him. And every damn second I was having a second thought over should I be telling my theory to him or not? The one in which we use a drug to travel back in time. Because what if he doesn't like it? What if he just starts laughing to how silly it is? What if he never lets me enter ISRO again?

I felt very small standing in front of him, but I never knew that a person with such honourable badges over himself would even care to listen to me. And what was more, he liked it! He damn liked it! He was so convinced on hearing my theory that he even asked me to pursue my future in the field of medical sciences and suggested me a college-AIIMS. I don't know how it is but surely if Dr Soni has suggested then

there it must be something good.

I told you. I would bring Saaera back. And I'm not doing this because of guilt or something. I'm doing this just so that I can have a story to tell to her when she returns. Just so that someday she realises how much I loved her.

JERK

This was exactly what Kritika had planned for.

For her, faking an illness, travelling in time, saving her father from being killed were just the tinier parts of the plan that would add up to the major conclusion of completely extirpating the cause of all her problems- CIA. Yes, CIA, the organization behind some of the most shocking events this world ever experienced, was about to be blown down by a girl who had used nothing but her brain to penetrate the highest level of security system implied by any country. Of course no one could have ever imagined a plane from the Second World War suddenly appearing from nowhere. But now that the American Airforce had tracked the presence of a foreign body within the air space of the United States, time was now an exhausting resource.

Kritika indeed had a layered mind. Unless you are able to cross one, you can never understand what lies next. Understanding her had never been easy, and never will it be. And countermanding the excellence of such a brain was something no one could even dare at the present moment. But the harsh truth was- The only way to stop her was to be better than her.

She turned the huge red lever that in turn opened the door of the warplane, creating a sudden high intensity suction pulling almost everything out of the plane. The tremendous pulling force was accompanied by massive sound of the airplane engines, and the bulk of air through which the plane was chiselling through created a loud hollow noise that kept adding up to the adrenaline rush each of the three were experiencing. The plane began to dwindle and lose altitude due to the sudden pressure difference between the insides and the outside. She tightly held on to the lever, pushing her back against the wall beside the open door, and Khalif and Duryoy clutched anything and everything that got into their sight. Luggage, parachute bags, chair handles, anything that would keep them within the plane.

She raised the button and turned to Duryoy “I’m sorry, Duryoy. But I have to do this. Not for myself, not for my father, not for the mankind. I’m doing it only and only for the sake of my country. I don’t care even if it brings me on the page of international terrorism. This had to be done- by someone or the other. So let’s not delay things any further” she said pulling her face out of the plane and checking the space over which they were flying.

“This is madness!” Khalif yelled ‘doing this will doom our own country! It’s sheer madness to even think of challenging the nation with the maximum military power in the world!”

“Allowing them to doom the best brains of our country will do no good to us either”

“Kritika, listen to me!” Duryoy pleaded “I do get your reasons, but dropping a nuclear core would change the entire course of future and will have unbelievable repercussions in the past. Is it really worth it?”

“I understand what you’re saying Duryoy, but you should know that we don’t use logic to counter illogical minds.”

Duryoy didn’t know what she meant. But surely he didn’t have an answer to counter with either

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and pulled her face outside the plane feeling the bulk of air kissing her face. Slowly placing her thumb over the launch button she could feel her thumb trembling with anxiety. All her senses for the moment had been concentrated to her thumb. One press and her life would change forever. And so will the world. But long before she began working on this, she was well aware of the consequences.

“Kritika!” Duryoy said, imparting the last bit of his words “I know I cannot stop you from doing what you want to. I’ve known that and I’ve seen that...”

“Give it up Duryoy”

“I’m not stopping you from doing anything!” Duryoy said as Khalif turned to him in surprise “But what after that?”

“What do you mean?” she said partially turning back. The side of her face could be seen throwing words.

“I mean, you do not know how to exit this time. And if you do this no way I’m going to tell you how to get back to the original time and you’d be stuck in this 17 year old body forever!” Duryoy said making

Kritika's nerves run still "It's better you drop off the button and be happy for what you've got."

Going with the thrust of the situation Duryoy knew that only one man could have stopped from making this happen and that man was right there inside the plane, alive. Yet for some reason Duryoy couldn't find him. A few sentimental words dropping out of Dr Soni's mouth and his daughter would melt like an iceberg in the Sahara. *But where the hell Dr Soni is?*

On seeing Kritika run still there was a sigh of relief on everyone's face. She never knew the destruction that a nuclear bomb would create because she came from the time that had never seen the Second World War! Only if she knew that even 80 years past the event of Hiroshima the damage was still visible, she'd have never thought this way.

"So are we good?" Duryoy shouted trying to suppress the surrounding noises

"I always knew that a man who could make people travel in time, would definitely have something within him" Kritika said cautiously turning around and holding to the support bar provided upside the door "And I knew the most difficult part of the plan won't be *this*" she said making her eyebrows point towards the button "Rather it would be to outrun a brain like yours, Duryoy."

"You didn't need to, if you stayed by my side"

"Well I knew this difference in our perspectives would irk me sometime. So I made sure that any point of the time I'm not weakened by your wit."

"And?"

"This thing we're right now in, is just like a dream that is real, isn't it?"

"Yes but you cannot exit this dimension just the way you exit a dream. You kill yourself to exit a dream, but you do that here you'll die indeed. Because this is just like the real world."

"I am not that foolish either. I know hypnic jerks can be used to exit this dimension. What do you think, I didn't pay attention to your words?"

"No, of course you did. But what you missed out was that- Khalif was supposed to produce the jerk. But right now he's with us inside the plane. So you cannot exit this dimension, unless I tell you how to"

Duryoy shrugged with a winning smile as Khalif took a sigh of relief.

“Duryoy” she smiled back “I planned for giving America a nuclear winter. Don’t you think I’d plan for something as trivial as a hypnic jerk?”

THE GOODBYE NOTE

Dear diary

The NURAC has been created. Finally, finally, finally, I’ve made the most unbelievable substance in the world. I always thought resurrection was something that only the Gods can do. But today I’d just prove that through science somewhere down the line humans can become Gods if not for eternity, at least for a while.

After this I don’t know what will happen because today I’ll be using my drug for the first time. But it can have side-effects too. And this note can be taken as my parting note, in case I never recover from my drug. But you know what? Please don’t blame my parents or anyone else for this. This is my own decision and I would be more than happy to die in the hands of my own creation.

Mamma I love you, and tell daddy I hated him. There wasn’t just one moment in my life I can say I loved him because he never showed up! This might sound crazy and would look like crazy teenager stuff to be dying for a girl, but it is the way it is. Just be happy for me because I’ll either bring her back to this world, or I’ll go back into her world.

Either way, I win.

There’s a sample of the drug in the last page along with the process in case somebody wants to re-create it.

Dr Soni, thanks a lot. Wouldn’t have been possible without you.

Goodbye diary ☺

THE LONGEST 120

Joshi was undoubtedly having the worst day of his life. His shirt was totally soaked in sweat and his throat demanded water within every ten minutes. His breaths went from heavy to discontinuous, and his heart pounded like an untamed beast. And apart from the bodily anomalies, even the fate of the entire operation was now over him.

Till now it seemed that Khalif owned the entire SAW Security agency, but that wasn’t true. He had just been given a significant

position in the agency because of his long years of experience in the work field, and also as a favour by an old friend. In particular Khalif had never released any information to the SAW Security bouncers that this whole thing was actually an act of "Abduction". He just asked his men to track the two of them and bring them back to the agency. Further things were to be dealt by him. So this way Khalif made sure nothing seemed suspicious, even while getting his job done. And Khalif had declared the next day holiday, owing the whole office of the SAW Securities to himself which he took advantage of by shifting the victims from the SAW Securities building to the factory they were currently inside.

Joshi had turned down the curtains from all sides. And eyeing towards the unwanted development from the corner of the window he could literally see his own fate being more and more cruel towards him, as the CISF continued summing up in numbers all around the building. The chances of escaping the perimeter were dropping to zero and there were no signs of Khalif waking up since the time he took in the NURAC and slept. Joshi kept running his eyes through the building blueprint trying to figure out an exit way.

Before taking NURAC Khalif had asked him to make sure no disturbance occurs around them. And Khalif ensured everything would happen as he planned. But now it seemed that the beautiful woman who was lying next to Duryoy was right. She somehow guessed that the CISF forces would arrive there soon looking for the two. And so she secretly mentioned to Joshi that "If there is no way out and the CISF forces come searching for you and Khalif, then wake me up! Set your watch to zero and exactly after 200 minutes wake me up. But make sure you do not wake up before 200. And not to mention that CISF would believe "only my words" as evidence, so if you want to be safe and not spend next 50 years of your life in the jail then do as I say. And I don't think I need to mention this but still, whatever I just said should remain between the two of us. So are we good?"

Joshi that time had responded with a doubtful nod, but now Kritika's words were starting to prove themselves true, and now it was only she who could get him out of this building without being arrested.

Joshi had a hard decision to take. Either to be with the man who considered him as his own child or to be with the girl who could at least

get him out of here. It was quite evidently a battle between past and future. A battle between his heart and brain. And now, choosing one of the two now seemed harder than cracking security firewalls. But he had to choose one.

“Khalif has lived his life Joshi. It’s now your turn to! Do not fall for the- What is fair? Sort of crap. This is your life and you still have things to do. For the sake of your own future, just wake the girl up!” said the future-biased Joshi

“But Khalif is the one who helped you get back on your feet when there had been no one by your side. You are what you are because of him. You just cannot betray the man who created you! What sort of an impression does that put upon you? He’s like your father! The only trustworthy relation you have in this world. And you just want sabotage this beautiful thing by just thinking about yourself?” was what the past-biased mind of Joshi replied

‘there’s no turning back from jail, Joshi! And once you get there you’re in there forever. So either use your brain and extend your life, or use your heart and live the rest 5 decades cramped inside some high security prison”

And after this tiny battle of minds Joshi gave a moment’s look towards Kritika. Her face was as captivating as her words, but it was hard to trust on her innocence. But had he any other options?

He glimpsed at his watch- It was 2 minutes to 200.

He knew it would be the longest 120 seconds he would ever live.

SPLIT

“Goodbye folks” Kritika shrugged “It’s time I put things into action just to show that a girl like me did things which governments couldn’t. And if lucky I’ll meet you on the other side”

“You seriously aren’t...”

And she pressed the button! No climax halt, no action dialogue, no classy effects. Just BAM! And the nuclear core left the plane accelerating to hug the earth.. No guilt, no thoughts, no fear, no words- Just a tiny click

The world seemed to have halted for Duryoy and Khalif. Their brains happened to have stopped working and their eyes still not able to believe what they just saw. Their legs felt a million times heavier to even

move a step further and their hands remained paralysed by shock. They had stiffened so much for that second that they happened to have stopped breathing for a brief span.

Kritika could see the heavy round greyish-black nuclear bomb departing the plane in its own trajectory, slowly and slowly diminishing in size. And she bid it goodbye with a smile. The CIA headquarters was evidently visible, and the tiny black dot in the sky approached the massive building

Now this world will change forever, she said to herself

She slid inwards from the door, turned to Duryoy with a heavy heart knowing that this might be the last time she'd be looking at him "I know you'll hate me forever after this. But just so you know, not everything I told you was a lie, Duryoy" she said, her gaze transfixed, "For a brief moment I did fall in love with you. And I still do. And I really can't imagine having someone better than you to spend my life with. But then, there are priorities."

Kritika's expressions had suddenly begun to change. There was an uneasiness over her face, a mild displeasure kept intensifying itself till the point she had to hold on to the chair beside for support, she was falling short of oxygen and had to bend down in order to take in oxygen. Kritika fell on her knees and had gripped her chest tightly. She was unable to breathe. Her eyes enlarged, face reddened, her mouth wide open just to breathe-in even the slightest of the oxygen if she could. But she couldn't. Her lungs felt as if they had just frozen completely.

Duryoy wanted to get close to her and help her out but even before he could act on it, just like a lifeless clone Kritika collapsed on the floor. Dead still.

The hypnic jerk had occurred in the original time and the 28-year-old Kritika Soni was gone. She was back to the time real time, leaving the two of them suspended in a plane while there was a nuclear bomb about to explode 20,000 feet beneath them. The history was set to change drastically and so was the fate of America's first line of defence. There was hardly a minute to act over all this, and no one in this world would like to be in a situation where they've to decide how to save a country from a nuclear bomb, in less than a minute's time. They could have pulled the plane upwards and there was a thin chance that they could exit the blast radius. But the heat that was to be emanated from the

nuclear bomb was approximately three times the temperature of the sun. So even the hardest of metals would melt in the split of a second.

Now what?

THE FINAL ACT

Hypnic jerks are never really pleasant. It's one of the worse feeling accompanied by the fear of death and anxiety of the unknown. It usually happens in dreams that you fall off a cliff or from the top of a huge building or find yourself amidst a vast ocean with no land visible to the farthest your eye reaches. And then you do not know what further has to be done and you try to live but things get worse and worse and worse and then finally, you give up and die!

And the moment you die, you feel a strong driving force within you, trying to tear you down and you suddenly wake up in the realworld trembling with fear and your lungs seeming to be paralysed for the moment and absolutely shaken up by what had just happened and after looking all around yourself you realise that it was all a dream.

Kritika knew that even though it was for her own good but the feeling to break out of a dream-state will be very displeasing. Yet it was her idea to ask Joshi to stop her breath after the 200th minute by pressing a cloth over her nostrils, this way she'd be unable to breathe while asleep and wake up in a jerk. And that was exactly what he did.

Kritika broke off her sleep. And the fact that she had woken up in the most horrible way was the proof that she had been successful with everything she had ever planned of. The feeling that it had all been accomplished was something she couldn't yet believe. She had been planning this since nearly a decade back and all of this suddenly getting to a perfect end, in the exact manner was eerily satisfying. But her job wasn't done yet. The last part of the plan was still to be done.

She quickly gathered herself up, but felt her left hand to be strangely warm. She shot a glance at it just to realise that she had been holding Duryoy's hands since the time they went into sleep. That indeed struck a chord within her. She heaved out a deep sigh and paused for a second to look at Duryoy's face. Now she knew that she had fallen for him. Very unprofessional of her, but very fulfilling was the feel to know that man.

Joshi saw the look her face but pretended not to notice it. He could feel it that she wasn't ready to leave Duryoy there, all alone, but she had

responsibilities that overweighed her heart's will.

"We've been surrounded by CISF from all sides!" Joshi said in a concerned voice on watching Kritika act so sluggishly.

Kritika looked at him trying to comprehend what he just said. She looked down, though over it for a while and "Come" Kritika said slowly slipping her hand out of Duryoy's "It's time we leave!" she said standing up. Slowly. Initially feeling drowsy and weak and a slight imbalance beneath her legs. But she somehow managed to walk forward with loose steps.

"What about him?" he said pointing towards Khalif "I cannot leave sir like this!"

"Joshi as much as I know about your sir he isn't really the one you should try being with because he isn't what he claims to be. Now I'd like to explain what I just said but that would mean the CISF forces would be here any moment and they'd shoot you down before even I try explaining anything to them. So either do as I say, or die. Choice is yours..." Kritika said that in a straight and somber manner. She knew what would be his answer anyway. It was just a second's wait and then Joshi nodded silently.

Joshi and Kritika ran through the empty factory passage, their footsteps substituted by light rhythm-less thuds across the gigantic metallic pipes that ran everywhere. Joshi lead the way till they both reached the central way. After that Kritika took the lead and outpaced Joshi asking him to stay behind her.

"If they ask you, just tell them you tracked my signal on the Geo-locator and came to save me. You found me tied to a chair and even though you wanted to free Duryoy but he was unconscious and so you decided to bring me out first" Kritika said as they both took on the stairs.

Joshi nodded obediently. But there was one minute problem- CISF was in search of Joshi too and although he was disguised pretty well by shaping his facial hair pretty well, yet there was a slight possibility that the forces might recognize Joshi and capture him. But that was a shot needed to be taken. And also there wasn't any other way out.

Joshi knew the odds and was hoping it all worked out the way she wanted. Of course he didn't know what a perfectionist Kritika was; else he'd have no difficulty trusting her.

The CISFs were inside the factory premises and any moment they could encounter them. The heat of the situation kept increasing as one floor down they could hear the hissing voices of soles sliding over the metal stairs. It was eerily quiet, and the sharp and loud footsteps of the two kept echoing through the walls. By now the CISFs were definite that the sounds were coming from the third floor and rapidly approaching the ground.

The two of them got another floor down, and over to another set of stairs. And just when the beam of the upper floor no longer obstructed their vision, their way was obstructed by a wall of heavily armed CISF men all strategically positioned in such a way as if they knew the two would get down from there itself!

Kritika and Joshi froze to death.

“Freeze!” someone commanded as there were 25 guns pointing at Joshi. Kritika saw the familiar face of a tall, bald, confident man looking at her. His hands resting on his waist, and his eyes so hard that they didn’t drop an eyelid for once. The scene lacked movement to an extent that it seemed like a bunch of statues just looking into one another. Kritika maintained her calm and waited for the CISF to make a move because whatever it would be they’d never harm her because for the CISF she was the victim.

All ears of the armed CISF men were irresistibly stuck on for Zayaan Dikshit’s order.

Zayaan took in a deep breath and looked towards Kritika with a reassuring nod. But that nod seemed to have meant something. The hiddenness within Zayaan’s look made Kritika doubt that something wasn’t right. She slowly moved forward trying to justify herself with another fake tale, because the problem was, she knew that she was sharp. And she was pretty well aware that even if the CISF tried their best they could never decipher her plan, because going by her words- “It was just too impossible!”

She looked back at Zayaan with confident eyes, but with a face that demanded sympathy. Her expressions and her completely ruined clothes showed that she was in need of help, and that she was happy to see the CISF again. Her eyes shone as if all her miseries had come to an end and her lips had upward curve of suppressed happiness. All too real to make anyone believe that she had been kidnapped and was now lucky to

find herself alive and safe under the hands of CISF.

Zayaan nodded to her with a bleak smile.

“Arrest her!”

LEAP OF FAITH

Duryoy shot a glimpse of horror towards Khalif who had witnessed everything but had nothing more to do than to stand and wonder “Is this really happening?” This was a situation that no one had answers to. It’s like asking to diffuse a time-bomb which has just 60 seconds left in its timer. It was a suicide mission. And the only safe thing that could be done at the moment was to make the plane glide more and more upwards so that it at least crossed the blast radius. That was the only logical thing that attacked simultaneously to both Duryoy and Khalif. They shared a look and Khalif hastily turned around and was about to make a move when suddenly Dr Soni managed to drag himself into the cabin.

It was a real pleasure to see him alive, for both, but not in this current situation.

“Duryoy!” he shouted and threw something towards him. It was the Artificial Wormhole that Kritika had used to save her father from the scientist’s bullet. Duryoy caught it perfectly but was still wondering why did he throw this at him?

This device could be used to transfer objects from one place to another and so it could even teleport the plane. But Kritika had warned that the radiations being used by this thing is something that humans cannot sustain. This device was strictly meant for teleportation of non-living objects and so even if Duryoy tried teleporting the plane through it, it’s highly probable that everyone inside it dies. But unfortunately, death had now attached itself to either of the road that he’d take. It all came down to manipulating risks and choosing the better of the worst.

On having read Duryoy’s mind, Khalif instructed the pilot to glide upwards as fast as possible.

Duryoy on the other hand knew it was the right thing to do because getting out of the plane, and creating a wormhole through which the plane could pass wasn’t something that seemed too real, although Kritika herself had managed to get this plane through the device all by herself.

“Doctor this is not possible” Duryoy said to Dr Soni “It’s been 15 seconds since the bomb was launched. We do not have time to go and

create a wormhole outside the plane!”

“What are you talking about?” Dr Soni said with an expression that looked like he didn’t really want to hear that “Use that device to teleport the bomb, not the plane!”

“How do I do that? It’s been 15 seconds, already!”

“Then JUMP, you moron!” Khalif said holding Duryoy by his collar the same way he did ten years back, pulling him upwards with his gigantic hands the same way he did ten years back and tossed him out of the plane like a weightless dummy the same way he did ten years back. And even before realisation could strike Duryoy, there he was being pulled closer and closer towards the earth by the gravity, and tons off swooshing air passing by his ears making a horrifying sound that brought him closer and closer to death.

He kept twirling upside down in the mid-air, one time facing the city of Virginia, and the next moment facing the plane. Yet he held the device strongly because if nothing happens then at least as a last resort he could try teleporting himself through that device. The second time he looked towards the plane, he saw something else being thrown out of the plane just the way he did ten years back. He couldn’t make out what it was, but it was black in colour and it wasn’t a human being, so a sigh of relief for that. Duryoy stretched his limbs and increased his body’s surface area in every possible way so that he could decrease his velocity and in three or four seconds the object reached him- It was a parachute bag. Because doesn’t matter if there is a nuclear bomb about to be dropped on the ground where you’d be landing. Your safety should be your primary concern.

Duryoy touched his pocket making sure the beaded necklace pieces were still intact

Duryoy quickly wore the parachute bag and inclined himself to a perfect ninety to the ground, and his velocity increased suddenly and drastically as he kept chiselling through the air at the speed of a sonic jet (or at least he thought so). He could feel the velocity with which he was nearing towards the ground and the Artificial Wormhole being a heavy device helped him move faster. Soon the bomb came to the view. But it was so far apart from him that he knew that even if he reached it in a second or two he’d crash the ground after that. The bomb was bulkier at the centre and so the surface area decreased its falling velocity, yet

because of its weight too much gravity was acting on it.

The positive side of a harsh situation is that losing your life doesn't really seem like a bad idea any longer. Duryoy had already given up the idea of staying alive the moment he was dropped from the plane but he made sure that at least he could prevent this catastrophe from occurring, even if it would mean an end to everything he did and a silence to this admirable story he had been through since the last evening.

The ground beneath seemed to get larger and larger, and the buildings and the houses began to evolve from tinier dots into squares and rectangles. The two-dimensioned structures had started to gain perspective and this wasn't a pretty thing to notice. Twenty more seconds of fall and the bomb was certainly within Duryoy's reach, but it was already too late for any parachute to do its job because even though the clearance height was very much yet the inertia was too damn high! Even if he managed to open the parachute, gravity would drag him downwards at the speed of sound.

A few more seconds and now Duryoy and the bomb flew like two huge vultures diving towards the earth, flying parallel to one another. He was surprised to see that the bomb was nearly of his size. And as he reached extremely close to the bomb all he had to do was, go exactly beneath the bomb and activate the wormhole.

He made sure whatever he did, was done with utmost precision. And made sure no cell of his body dared touch the bomb. He swiftly arched himself a bit more and was now beneath the bomb although it was very tough to maintain equal gaps between objects while floating in air. He activated the artificial wormhole and positioned it perfectly beneath the bomb and just waited for it to fall through but the device seemed to have run out of power because it didn't start. Duryoy tried restarting it once again, but there was no damn blue light emanating from the device! And this was the worst time for this device to lose its power. But suddenly Duryoy realised that he didn't enter the destination coordinates and time, because of which the device wasn't starting. He instantly thought of pulling the device back but this would mean another ten seconds and now he was so close that now by the fifteenth second he'd crash the ground. So if it had to be done, it had to be done right then. Duryoy blindly rotated the tiny dials of the device in one particular direction, enough to know that it was either too many decades into the past or the

future in which the bomb would land. He changed the exit coordinates because the last exit coordinates were over India, just inside the plane when Kritika used it to save her father from the bullet. And with coordinates entered, the device surged back to life releasing an extremely high intensity blue light, spreading the colour in all directions. And Duryoy had his moment!

The bomb with an extremely high velocity just swooped into the device as swift as butter and in a matter of seconds disappeared! Just gone! Absolutely null! There was no clue of the existence of the nuclear bomb which moments ago was all set to blow down the city of Virginia.

The moment the bomb happened to lose itself into the device Duryoy threw away the device. He had temporarily been blinded by the high intensity light from the device, but yet with all his strength he pulled the parachute strap. But it was too late.

The parachute had opened. He even glided for a few seconds, but it was not enough. And then...

It was darkness. Absolute darkness. All around.

Down on the ground, lying a few kilometres away from the terribly injured Duryoy was the device that had saved the entire city from turning into ashes. Its digital displays still hazily shining with the geographic information of the place where the bomb had been released.

Date: 06-08-1945

Time: 08:15 AM

Coordinate: 34.3°N, 132.45°E (Hiroshima)

THE NAKED TRUTH

WIFE

And with that Duryoy let out a scream at the peak of his vocals, out of panic, out of pain and out of fear as he abruptly rose up from the deep sleep he was into. His heart was beating at the rate of a sparrow's heart and his blood pressure shot up to grievous levels. His lungs trying to suck down every last possible bit of oxygen needed to lower his heart-rate, and his tear glands had involuntarily begun secreting streams of salt water that ran over Duryoy's cheeks. His deep red eyes had popped outwards with a burning sensation as the warm tears tried cooling them down.

Duryoy witnessed the true meaning of the saying "It's the fear of death we fear more than the death itself!" He now had a reason to never take the NURACs ever again. His body was shrivelling like a hypothermic patient and it took a while for his nerves to relax. His visions had not been perfectly back but by the blurry scenes of the room around him he couldn't make out where he was. Whatever it was, all that mattered to him was that he was still alive.

He could figure out that there was a bulb hanging overhead and he was inside a tiny dark chamber with only one door and a mirror on the side wall. The conditioners had been turned down for quite some time

going by Duryoy's neck which was completely drenched in sweat. There was no one inside the room, yet there was this nauseating feel of being looked down by some unseen eyes. He leaned back over his chair and kept looking at the bulb like he was looking at some floating fairy overhead while he used his collar to wipe off his sweaty neck. His pulses were slowly comforting back to normal and he could feel his vision gaining sharpness as the bulb began to hurt his eyes. He slid backwards comfortably pretty sure this wasn't the place he left from.

Where is Kritika? Where is Khalif? Which place am I in, right now?

And the one thing that he still couldn't believe was "How on earth am I still alive?"

Because 20,000 feet is a huge distance you know?

He could feel that his arms were free, and more than that- in a single piece. No broken bones, no disfigured limbs. He touched his face expecting some cuts but he felt nothing more than a rough stubble. He checked his hands; the hands were that of a grown man and not some 17-year-old boy. So at least this was for sure that he was back in his original time.

Something to be relieved about, he thought But the time I left I had a clean shave! And I was wearing a kurta! He looked into himself- he was wearing a white dress, like the ones being worn by the hospital patients and he had a shabby piece of paper made to look like an ID card stuck to his left pocket with a loose dangling pin, with the number **15** written over it in bold.

On looking at the ID card he sensed that there was something gleaming towards him from the left corner of the room. Sort of a vase or something. He tried making sense of it but the most his eyes could deduce was- nothing. Although the vase moreover resembled a human face with two small beads shining like a jackal's eye, a little region of abruptness just where the nose should be, and a straight horizontal line depicting a mouth. And the smooth upper side finish of the vase made it look like the man had no hair.

Or wait a minute, can't that just be a bald man?

Duryoy kept eyeing towards the thing for quite some time till it finally moved from its place and approached him. *Jesus! That indeed is a bald man!*

The bald man walked out of the darkness, and his bald patch of head

shining as bright as the bulb itself

“For the first time I’ve ever met a man who slept during his interrogation” said the bald man leaning over the table in front of Duryoy.

Interrogation? What the hell am I being interrogated for? It was all Kritika’s fault!

“Sorry, but, what am I doing here?” Duryoy asked looking at the bald man’s bald head “And who are you? Don’t tell me you’re another kidnapper because I seriously cannot take it anymore”

“What makes you think I’d kidnap you?”

“Since the last 23 hours I had been kidnapped and was being used as a bait to travel back in time. I even saved the CIA headquarters at Virginia from a nuclear bomb by teleporting it to some other time. Later I found that the bomb dropped at Hiroshima in 1945” Duryoy said with zero emotions on his face. He had nothing to hide, and he didn’t either. He knew he was at that point in life that the truth would be too unbelievable for normal people to believe “Wait a minute” he said looking up “How many World Wars have occurred over here?”

“What?” the man said bemused by Duryoy’s words “Two” he answered hesitantly.

“Hah, thank God” he said letting loose his heavy head “I was afraid it didn’t turn into three or four, once I get back here. So rise of Hitler, Indian freedom movement, the 9/11 have all occurred in this universe?”

“Yes they have” said the man very politely somehow trying to make sense over what Duryoy was speaking.

“Damn! I have to re-read the entire world history again”

“What was the Hiroshima thing you were talking about?” said the man slowly trying to extract information from him as he turned the audio recorder attached to his pocket on.

“Oh nothing, I... um, somehow teleported a nuclear bomb to Hiroshima because of which the blast occurred”

“Wasn’t that the Americans who dropped it?”

“Well, there’s a self-healing property of time, just like our wounds” Duryoy said stopping himself.

He was barely trying to reveal anything once he noticed that the man kept urging him to speak more and more, even without introducing himself. And he like an open book kept narrating his tale of un-

believability.

“It’s simple- If a knife cuts your skin, your skin heals by itself. The healing process doesn’t need the knife in any way. Similarly, when I create a distortion in time it doesn’t really need *me* to fix it. There are things that time creates by itself in the backward direction. So when all of a sudden a nuclear bomb appeared in the sky of Hiroshima for no apparent reasons, time recreated a reason backwards making it look more realistic! But I know you won’t get it and don’t even try to. What I would suggest is that you believe my second theory that-Maybe there was an American airplane flying over Hiroshima and it must have definitely launched the nuclear bomb, but what guarantee does it make that the bomb really exploded?”

“Well it could have been for your case too. What if *your* bomb never exploded?”

“See, this is why I called for an alternate theory” Duryoy shrugged “Too many pessimists around here.”

The man took a step back. He started clapping loudly as the claps echoed all around the walls.

“I knew *he* wouldn’t recall anything... AGAIN!” said the man with a deceiving smile to someone else in the room. Duryoy looked around trying to figure out who was the bald man talking to. But there seemed no one in the room other than the two

“Is there anyone else?”

“Duryoy, let me put it this way. Are you aware of your mental condition?”

“*What* mental condition?” Duryoy asked

“That... you... are a patient of... paranoid schizophrenia. And what you’re currently undergoing is just one of its phases.”

“What! What? WHAT? Me and paranoid schizophrenia? Are you kidding me?”

“Yes, it’s a mental disorder.”

“Oh you don’t need to explain *me* schizophrenia. I am a psychologist! And you don’t even look like a doctor!”

“First, you’re not a psychologist. Second, just let the phase pass Duryoy. Try recalling everything you can recall from the past, and your memory would start responding.”

“I recall everything damn it!” Duryoy said getting highly irritated by

the man's defensive way of talking "Why don't you just clearly tell me what the deal is all about?"

"Well, the deal is about your schizophrenia causing problem in our interrogation!"

"I am not schizophrenic! I don't know you! And I don't want to talk to you any further!" Duryoy said boldly pushing his chair to leave the room "I have no interest in your bloody interrogation"

"Duryoy!" called the man, as Duryoy wildly walked towards the door and tried opening the knob. But it was locked. He tried and tried, used both hands but still it didn't open

Duryoy turned towards the man "Get me out of this fucking place. RIGHT NOW!" he yelled.

"I will" said the man "Only if you answer me one question"

Duryoy waited for the question

"You say you're not schizophrenic" said the man folding his hands "Then tell me, what is my name?"

"How the fuck am *I* supposed to know that?" Duryoy argued in a rough voice as the bald man turned towards the mirror as though someone was standing right behind it.

Duryoy immediately turned to check the mirror, but it was just an ordinary mirror. Nothing more.

"Mr Kundu, your answers are being recorded for documentations so I hope that you keep your language under control"

"Well then don't irritate me!"

"Alright, I'm Zayaan Dikshit" said the bald man not reacting to Duryoy's roughness in any way "Can I ask you, how long have we been speaking for?" he asked

"We've *just* met!" Duryoy said with utter impatience.

Zayaan remained unmoved. He just gave another look at the mirror.

"Hey, I'm seeing you for the first time this *morning*, alright?"

"It's 7:30 in the evening right now. And I'm pretty sure you have no idea what you're interrogated for."

"I just told you that I dropped from a parallel universe! Things have changed for me. I need time to get acquainted to this setting."

"Zero progress" Zayaan said looking at mirror once again.

"That's enough alright. Now who the hell is there" Duryoy said looking at the mirror. He ran close to the mirror tried looking at it from

every direction, but it remained just a mirror. He took one of his fingers and pointed it perpendicular on the mirror, but to his surprise there was a gap between his finger and the reflection “Two-sided mirror?” he said turning to Zayaan.

“I thought you were aware of that.”

“Why the hell do you keep thinking that I am aware of everything- What your name is, which place this is, what time it is...” Duryoy said getting immensely irritated on the tiniest things. Sleep deprivation was indeed catching on him “Who is on the other side?”

“Doctors... who’re trying to analyse your disease.”

“Hey, stop bullshitting me with the schizophrenia, alright? Don’t make me look like something that I am not. I know what schizophrenia is, I’ve treated patients with schizophrenia and I hold a degree from AIIMS in psychology. And let me tell you that even if you do not believe but I did save the world from a nuclear attack. And if because of that conclude me as a schizophrenic, then be it. I don’t give a damn! Just tell that imprudent doctors on the other side that I was one of the bet neuro-psychologist of my time and I still am”

“Alright” Zayaan said, cutting him short “Just so you know- it has been three hours since we met and you say that we’re meeting right now for the first time. I have a video recording of your entire session in case you do not believe me, and end up calling *me* a schizophrenic. You’ve slept twice during this interrogation and after every time you wake up you’ve said that you don’t recognize me. Here I have the reports of your psychologist...”

“Who the hell is my psychologist?”

“Doesn’t matter. But should *really* matter to you is that it is mentioned in bold” Zayaan said showing Duryoy his file ‘**SCHEZROPHENIC**’ written in bold “You cannot distinguish between dreams and reality! Most things that you think is real is either things that you’ve either just sometime thought of, or might have come across subconsciously. And there are many things that you’ve told us in the last three hours. Do you recall any of those?”

Duryoy had no answer to that thing.

“Did you know that you told us that you had been kidnapped along with an ISRO scientist? Did you know that you said that you created a drug that can make you travel in time through dreams? Did you know

that you said that you have saved the CIA headquarters from being blown down by a crazy woman? Did you know that you're currently inside the campus of Calcutta Medical College? You don't remember anything!" Zayaan said silently placing the file on the table. In reality, Zayaan wished he could slam the file on Duryoy's face for being such a prick, but then there wouldn't have been much difference between him and the man who had no idea who he was.

Duryoy walked closer to the table and slowly started reading his file. And the more he read, the more he started doubting himself. Public violence, attempted suicide twice, had given life threats to his boss at his workplace who had filed an official complaint against him, and last and the most shocking one...

Domestic violence.

"Zayaan?" Duryoy said re-reading the last two words for the tenth time "Do I have a wife?"

THE UNIVERSE IS SHOWING SIGNS

Schizophrenia, in layman terms is a sort of mental disorder with various symptoms, but as of now the symptom shown by Duryoy was- Inability to differentiate between dreams and reality. For example, just imagine you thought of taking a walk outside in the park and having an *adrak waali chaai* and return back home. You start thinking about the walk so intensely that you somehow make yourself believe that it really happened! But still, you know that you didn't go. But schizophrenic patients overthink things to a level that they really start believing what they thought. And that's where they lose the touch between dreams and reality.

Duryoy wasn't ready to believe all that he was a schizophrenic patient. He was just waiting for either of Kritika or Khalif, who could verify that what he said was true. Unbelievable, yet true. Duryoy looked around in the room and found himself all alone with the desk in front of him and the overhanging bulb. Zayaan went to call someone from the outside.

Meanwhile what caught Duryoy's interest was that, the desk had various newspaper cut-outs and each of those were concerned directly or indirectly Duryoy.

“Plane of the dead” (Dated 2005)- A Boeing B-47 carrying a group of ISRO scientists had to make an emergency landing in Richmond International Airport, Virginia last morning near to 9 AM . As per the pilots, the plane seemed to have caught amidst a weird portal made of clouds that teleported it straight from India to over Virginia. And the most intriguing thing about this plane was that when the flight landed, out of a total of 21 passengers including two flight attendants, there were only 6 survivors, two of which were the pilots. And the remaining four of the survivors hardly remember a thing about how it all happened. Sources say...

“Bizarre kid survives a jump from 20,000 feet”- Duryoy Kundu, the 17-year-old boy is the most trending topic in the internet today for having survived a jump from 20,000 feet after his parachute failed. He was said to have jumped from the same B-47 that had surprisingly entered the Virginia airspace. The reason for his jump is still as unknown as the reason behind the B-47 entering the Virginia airspace. Duryoy has been admitted to the general hospital and the medical condition of the kid is serious, as said by the doctors. Physical injuries include breaking of the hip-joint, multiple fractures of his right hand and leg and three broken ribs. And he’s now stable and there has been no external injury to his brain but he seems to have permanently lost his memory...

“A word with the survivors of ‘the Plane of the Dead’” - Two of the four survivors of the B-47 incident- Krina and Malik (names changed) have revealed their part of the story. The 17-year-old Krina had said that she remembered nothing since she entered the airport to see-off her father. She was not even supposed to take the flight and was surprised to find herself in the plane.

Further information about the happenings inside the mysterious plane could be obtained from the In-charge of the security, Malik, who said that the lemonades served in the plane had been poisoned. There had been cross-firing between the security forces and the hijackers of the plane. One of the scientists was said to have been involved with a foreign agency, and this entire happening was a planned event. Kudos to the CISF who successfully managed to pull off this impending disaster saving six lives. Malik mentioned that he was trying to wrestle with

someone when suddenly he lost his consciousness and hence couldn't recall anything further...

“Is the history repeating itself?”- The highly talked about ‘the plane of the dead’ isn't the only disappearance that has made its mark in the history. A similar case had been reported on **March 10, 1956**- A B-47 carrying two nuclear weapon cores from MacDill Air Force Base in Florida to an overseas airbase disappeared during a scheduled air-to-air refuelling over the Mediterranean Sea. After getting lost in a thick cloud bank at 14,500 feet, the plane was never heard from again and its wreckage, including the nuclear cores, was never found. And also the most recent arguments state that “How did India come in possession of a B-47, whose manufacturing had been stopped nearly 30 years ago?”. Conspiracy theorists claim that ‘the plane of the dead’ is the same plane that got disappeared in 1956. Further proofs...

Duryoy continued reading the newspapers having realised one thing that everything had occurred as it was supposed to. The plane was saved from crashing and everyone including Kritika, Aathman, Khalif and Dr Soni were alive. And even the nuclear bomb didn't explode over Virginia so it was all good. But unlike Kritika, he couldn't make it to the real time! He was too busy saving the city from a nuclear holocaust, and just when he did that he crashed over the ground and lost his consciousness. But the problem was, he never got back to the time he originally belonged to. He never left the time he entered along with Kritika.

In this universe Duryoy had no NURAC left, he had no idea whether Kritika of *this* universe even knows him or not, he didn't know whether Dvijata still cares about him in this universe or not, he had no idea whether Khalif remembers him or not, and he didn't even know whether all these people were still alive or not in this universe.

But one thing he did know was that- In this parallel universe he has a wife!

He wasn't getting optimistic but he kept looking backwards to his lifelong dream of how he always wanted to be married to Dvijata. Of course what happened in the plane was an absolutely different thing and now he couldn't even bare the idea of having kissed a woman who had kept using him all this time for her own needs. Duryoy clearly

remembered the way Kritika departed by saying that she loved him, but at the very moment he promised himself not to have any further contact with her. She had been an opportunist, self-obsessed and not to mention psychopathic to have manipulated these many people and devised a plan to blow up the CIA just because she wanted our scientists to live in peace. And the more he thought of Kritika, the lovelier Dvijata seemed to be. Dvijata never had any of those things that he hated so badly. And now that everything was back a gain to normal, and the fact that in this universe he had a wife, he just couldn't contain the thoughts of being married to Dvijata. He wished that after all these years of a not-so-good-luck may be life for once decides to give him what he always wanted.

And amidst wondering about the various mental pictures of Dvijata, the door of the interrogation chamber swung open once again.

It was Zayaan.

Duh!

But wait! And what followed the ugly Zayaan was what skipped Duryoy's heart to the seventh heaven.

Yes! The girl he had just been thinking of was there to see him.

She got in, her eyes searching for Duryoy and soon, when their eyes met...

That. Was. The. Moment.

REUNION

Well everyone has that someone whom they always dreamt to be with but they never could, because either she was too beautiful or either we were too ugly to be considered. You show her pictures to your friends and they applaud for even daring to think of having her, you show your face to the mirror and the mirror applauds for being so courageous, and you try showing her your picture, well she doesn't really care you exist. But one fine day you enter into some weird universe and then you see that you've been suddenly married to her, how would you feel like, eh?

There were viola's and harps and violins and pianos playing around Duryoy as he watched the lady of his dreams enter into the room again. She gracefully turned to look towards Duryoy and she welcomed him with a gleeful smile that made Duryoy's heart leap to the seventh heaven. Yet for some reason her eyes seemed distant, as if they two

barely shared a bond. She was behaving quite formally in front of him, and Duryoy sensed that somehow Dvijata wasn't feeling too comfortable with his presence. But screw it, she had always bothered herself with things to worry about- poor people, feelings, marriage, family, her father and what not!

Duryoy saw a beautiful engagement ring wrapped around Dvijata's ring finger, and his heart skipped a beat.

Zayaan let Dvijata take the seat in front of Duryoy, and he himself stood at the same darkened corner of the room. Dvijata pulled her chair without making an eye contact

"I hope you remember me, right Duryoy?" she said with that age old voice of hers.

Oh how badly did I miss that voice Duryoy thought on hearing her.

She seemed too shy to look at him. Mixed signals never fail to turn men on.

She sat down looking at the newspaper clippings all over the table, and playfully pushed a strand of hair behind her ear

"Of course! Why would I forget you?" Duryoy asked, a little surprised by her take on the conversation.

"Because lately you've been forgetting quite many things" she shrugged, and the smile was back on her face

"No I haven't! I remember that we both went to college together. I remember that you have a father who hates me. I remember who your closest patient is..."

"Who's he?" Dvijata asked leaning forward on her desk.

"He? It's not *he*! I'm talking about Kritika Soni. PTSD patient, after she lost her father. Remember?"

"I believe I do not Duryoy, because Kritika is absolutely perfect and her father is still alive!" Dvijata said with a pinch of doubt on her face as she took her pen to scribble something on the prescription file

"Sorry, it was just a tiny mistake" Duryoy smiled realising that he was now in a parallel universe, and that he better thought before he said something "Please don't conclude me as schizophrenic for these."

"No, it's alright Duryoy" she said, still not leaving the pen "You know it's me, you can trust me with anything."

"Why are you acting so weird?" Duryoy asked "Is there something bothering you?"

“No! No... But... yes I mean, can I ask you something?”

“When did you need to start taking permissions from me?”

“Why did you just mention that Kritika was a patient of PTSD?”

“Because she *is*! An Alzheimer patient who has sudden kickbacks. If you had been standing outside you must have known by now that I’m from a parallel universe. And the universe I came from was the one in which Kritika’s father was killed in a plane crash after which she developed PTSD.”

Dvijata took in a deep breath trying to accept that everything he said was true and wrote down a few more things in the file. She once gave a look at Duryoy who was busy trying to imagine why was there a number attached to his shirt

“Alright, let’s talk about something else” Dvijata said shutting her file “Where do you live Duryoy?”

“I don’t really have a permanent home. I’m always moving from place to place, with *you* of course. Why do you ask this?”

“Bear with me for a moment Duryoy; I was just checking your memory” Dvijata said faking a smile.

“Leave those things to be dealt by my psychologist, alright?” Duryoy fired back, really getting uncomfortable with the conversation.

“Dvijata” Duryoy said in a serious voice. Serious enough to raise her eyes and look towards him, “What is it that you’re hiding from me? This man said that I’ve been detected by paranoid schizophrenia by my God-know-who psychologist, I don’t know why I am here being interrogated over something that had occurred eleven years ago and here you’re constantly asking me things that we both know about. WHAT IS THE DEAL, DVIJATA? Why don’t you just directly say it to me? I’m tired of all this!”

There was silence for a while when they both kept looking at each other searching for answers. Dvijata took in a deep breath and pushed her hands over the table and slid backwards, now resting her back over the chair handle and still continuing to look at Duryoy. She waved towards the mirror without turning to look at it, and after five seconds the door had been opened and someone came through it. The ceiling shadow kept falling over the person’s head not enabling to see his face. When he came closer Duryoy realised it’s not *he*, it’s actually *she*. And when he saw who the *she* was, he lost even the tiniest amount of

expression that his face had managed to gain. Just when he thought that life could be too simple without people like Kritika, there she was again.

“Remember her?” Dvijata asked looking at Duryoy’s frozen face

“It’s not very easy to forget people who try to blow down an entire organization just to seek some revenge!” Duryoy said politely. His hatred towards her not trying to get the worse out of him.

He tried explaining himself that Kritika of this universe might be everything she was in the previous one, but she wasn’t the one who had deceived him. This poor girl barely had any idea what wrong she had done, such that Duryoy couldn’t even bear to look at her.

“What’s her name?” Dvijata said, spotting the sudden numbness

Duryoy smiled “The Miss Kritika Soni, of course”

“Wrong.” Dvijata said with a pause “She’s, Mrs Kritika Kundu”

HI-S-TORY

What if one fine day you just wake up and find that the last person you wanted to get married to is now your wife, for real! And you’ve got to bear with it for the rest of your life.

Could you?

Bad things happen to us all the time and we somehow cope with it because we know that once we reach the lowest we could ever be at, life will only go up and up. But what if the point you think you’re at the lowest is actually a part of the huge treacherous pit of darkness that you see yourself moving towards?

Duryoy had nothing in the world left that he could believe in. The only good thing that he expected from life had just turned out to be the worst surprise. And he didn’t know what to do, like he began to laugh and pat Dvijata saying “She had a pretty nice sense of humour”, he even felt that it was all a prank and then suddenly people standing behind the mirror would just jump out crying ‘surprise!’, and things would get back to normal. But nothing as such happened. But instead what *had* happened was that Duryoy’s heartless laugh on watching Kritika as his wife, had embarrassed her so much that she was about to burst a tear and run away, never to see him again. But before that could happen, Dvijata kicked Duryoy out of the interrogation chamber, and now since the last ten minutes he was just sitting idly over the stool outside the door while there were people inside, discussing about him.

Life was indeed ripping him apart as he blankly stared at the thing that currently seemed to him the biggest burden of his life- His engagement ring.



Inside the chamber of secrets, his *innocent* wife Kritika had been sobbing and trying to portray herself as a strong woman who had the courage to fake a smile even though her husband was dealing with a serious mental condition. And Dvijata had the patient file opened right in front of her as she waited for the right moment when Kritika would stop sobbing and be stable enough to understand what she was to say.

After a while when both the women reached an unsaid agreement, Dvijata smiled

“I know that things are going rough with you *and your family*” she said eying at the door “But I’d ask you not to take his words too seriously. This is one of his many phases, and just like others even this would pass and you’ll have him back...”

“When?” Kritika interrupted in her weak voice. Her eyes had reddened of the continuous crying and her cheeks had settled to make her cheek bones seem larger. And not a single meal did she have since Duryoy had suddenly fled away from home. He was found by the Vivekananda Setu where he was to jump off the bridge but the people in the evening ferries and fishermen had spotted him, and before he could leap off the bridge, people on the bridge held him and took him to the police station where he spent an entire night.

The next day he came back home and had an immensely heated altercation with Kritika. And he fled again, and they caught him again, and it repeated again and again and again. Kritika didn’t know what was to be done and the tension between them kept increasing till the point one day he just went from human to beast and slapped her and threw her over the table in his drawing room. Her head crashed over the glass section and shattered the entire glass into pieces, as her temple kept bleeding profusely. And her face had red marks which she had hid beneath the layer of makeup. And before being arrested he threatened to kill her. Something which still sent shudder to her heart, but in the end - a husband is a husband. Psychologists kept telling her that it was just a phase and it’d pass. But WHEN?

They needed to know that everyone has a breaking point!

“When, Dvijata?” Kritika said shining her beautiful wet eyes. She had no more tears to spare. “When am I going to get my husband back? I have had enough of it Dvijata. If he cannot come back to this world maybe give me something that would take me to *his*. How long am I supposed to live like a vagabond?”

Dvijata paused to choose her next words.

“How could you?” she said smiling at Kritika “How could you stay by him even though all this time he has done nothing but demean you. Rammed a glass to you head and threatened to kill you yet you don’t leave him. What sort of courage is this? Or should I just say insanity?”

“I’ve been clinging on to two of your words Dvijata- One, that this is not Duryoy. And two, that one fine day he’ll return back to me with all his love, and I can take him back home to start a new life. I’m still waiting for that day Dvijata” she said looking lost in her words.

But if for once you’re thinking that what an animal Duryoy is, let me tell you he was not always like this. He was the perfect prototype of a caring husband who’d take his wife for candle light dinners, the evening concerts and late night walks around the city. Life had been at its best.

But one sudden day he just had one of the many phases he was currently undergoing, and all of a sudden he lost everything. Everything. Every last bit of his memory was erased. He recognized people but could never tell who was who, the relationship he shared with them and he was confident about every detail he’d speak, but he didn’t know that none of it was true.

Confused?

“Usually schizophrenic patients live in an entirely different world, have their own set of ideologies, find it difficult to recognize people and mostly find it difficult to trust others” Dvijata said as she shuffled through the pages in Duryoy’s report “But interestingly I’ve found a pattern in Duryoy’s behaviour. And this is the first time I and my team is encountering such a case. It’s neither completely schizophrenia, nor dissociative identity disorder, but a part of both is within him because as of Duryoy- he recognizes people, he even recognizes the events that had occurred with him. He just cannot put the right people in the right set of events...”

“Sorry?”

“Listen to me carefully. Duryoy remembers what has happened to him and *he believes* he knows who did that to him. But not always his beliefs are right. For example- Someone betrayed him, and broke his trust in the past. But he thinks that it was you. And schizophrenic patients over-think to a level that they start believing what they thought. They cannot differentiate between dreams and reality.”

“Well that explains how he came up with a story in which I ruined his entire life” Kritika said to herself.

“Exactly. His real life emotions had been portrayed perfectly in the story. In real life, during the phases he hated being with you because you’d argue and fight with him and so he thought negative of you which in turn made you a negative character in his imaginary self-woven story. But still you can see that the story he had built is not a simple one. It is complex, had too many emotions and had almost everything that would make it sound perfectly real, which tells me that *his* brain is still more active than that of others. And I’ve come across something that can exactly explain how he came up with the story.”

Dvijata turned her file to Kritika which had sketches of a maze of incidents interconnected with each other, as explained in Duryoy’s story.

“Now going by Duryoy’s diary entries, there was indeed a girl named Saaera who he was in love with. And she indeed had a tragic death- falling down the second floor at Calcutta Medical College. I searched for her records but had no luck with that. But yes, it was *that* incident after which Duryoy *himself* became a patient of Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder- a disorder which in *his story* he claimed as something that *you* were suffering from. And later in the real world he came to me as my patient while in *his story* I had *you* as my patient. And even in real life he was the one who beat you and threw you over the table and you had hurt your temple, while in the story the exact things were done to you by Khalif.”

Kritika remained speechless by the amount of similarities Dvijata had drawn out from a mere story which everyone knew was a lie!

“This entire story he had been telling us was the story of his *own* life, just the characters had changed. After Saaera’s death, all the time he wished that he could make a machine that could take him back in time and help him revive Saaera again. And in *his story* he actually thought

he made a pill that could connect brains and travel through time. He got drifted away from the reality to an extent that he started considering himself to be a neuropsychologist. And there were parts of the story that were indeed completely real. He told exactly what all happened inside *that* plane because it was only him who was in his full senses. He also perfectly recalled the day he came to Calcutta for a check-up and had almost missed his flight to Ahmedabad. And he was right, I was in the flight too. And I stopped the flight for him. Which means he hadn't entirely made-up the story all by himself. He had some portion of his real life and dream-life jumbled. And schizophrenic patients are very sensitive. They're afraid of being hurt so much that they'd rather detach themselves from others than being hurt. And the Second World War was something where millions lost their lives, and this tragic event might have somehow made a great impact on *his* life. Maybe he couldn't withstand the thought of these many people dying together. So he even included a part where he saves the world from a nuclear blast."

Kritika nodded. Just nodded. She was way out of words to express anything

"Yes, and he even named his story" Dvijata said with a smile "The Machiavellian, pretty name though."

"He named it after me..."

"No, Kritika don't take it this way. Just as I said, he remembers everything but has misplaced every person's place. If you carefully understand his story you'll know that most of the places where he had mentioned you, were the situations that he himself underwent in the real life- the Stress disorder part, the time machine, inability to accept a loved one's death. This might sound confusing, but in his story, he used you to express all his repressed emotions. And the best part of it is that he still cares about you and I'm sure of that because even in the story- it didn't matter how many times you disappointed him and argued with him, in the end he couldn't stop loving you. So you need not worry Kritika, your husband is absolutely safe and will be back to you with the same love. It's just a matter of time before that happens because with this story, he has no grudges left within him. He has released all of his repressed emotions in one go! He's just like a stubborn kid, no matter how wrong he is he'll never admit it that he did something wrong."

"So you're telling me that this entire story was an attempt to release

suppressed emotions using just imagination?”

“Absolutely” Dvijata said heavily, leaning back in her chair “You see, the human mind is just like a pressure cooker, and the whistle varies from person to person. Whistle as you know drains out the excess pressure, hence for some whistle may be some sort of art like writing, painting, photography, or some sort of sport like boxing, swimming, something that’d release the pressure that’s budding inside the person. But Duryoy had no outlet for his frustrations, and the pressure kept accumulating to a point when suddenly he came up with an extraordinary story with extremely realistic features just to express the emotions and regrets that were suppressed inside him. And in this process of thinking out a story he lost himself so much that he actually believed that the happenings in *his story* had actually happened in real life! May that be having a fist fight with Khalif, saving the world from a nuclear holocaust or creating a drug that can let you travel in time. You can call it all as an emotional outburst. Although the jumping off the plane thing... he really did that!”

“And he calls *me* crazy!” Kritika chuckled.

“And that’s not all” Dvijata said straightening her posture as if the best part was yet to come “Duryoy happened to mentioned himself in the story without happening to know that it was him.”

Kritika didn’t seem to buy it. Rather she didn’t seem to have understood that “What? I mean when?”

“What’s Duryoy’s bed number?”

“Fifteen”

“Do you remember the bed number of the patient in the story he treated before boarding the plane?”

“What’s the reason behind his... pathetic condition?” Duryoy asked looking at the patient at Bed 15 whose back was facing them, and the face couldn’t be imagined “Rejection by some over-fantasized female, drugs, gambling...”

“When he was 17 he had a flight accident after which he somewhat lost his memory” Dvijata said in a flat voice, deigning at the suffering of the young man “Be kind to him. He’s way more qualified than you think he is.”

Duryoy’s eyes were still rolling over the patient records- ‘says that

he's from a parallel dimension" and 'mentions himself as the one who dropped the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima'.

Crazy man! Duryoy thought looking at his bed number- 15

"He still believes that the dimension he came from had only one World War" Dvijata said watching Duryoy read the 'Parallel dimension' statement "Too much obsessed with World History I suppose" Dvijata said taking off her Doctor's coat

"Oh, oh, oh my God! Damn! How could you even relate that?" Kritika asked. Her expressions said it all. She was just too awed to have even moved her jaw.

"And you remember what the patient at bed 15 used to do?"

"No, not exactly. But yes, I think... he used to sketch something on a piece of paper, right? Some weird animal?"

"And you won't believe this but in his story at one point Duryoy claims that the patient at Bed 15 sketched a weird animal before he went to sleep. While in real life, he Duryoy is the one who sketches such animals before going to sleep."

"Mo isn't a unique animal" Duryoy said "It's more of a combined animal- It has the head of an elephant, legs of a tiger and eyes of a rhino. But in the legends it's usually mentioned to be looking similar to a tapir"

"But why are you sketching Mo?" Kritika said, smiling to how cute the little name was

"Well back in 14th century China and Japan, people believed that the spirit of Mo protects you from the terrors of bad dreams" Duryoy said pulling up the paper and showing it to Kritika. And Kritika kept looking at the sketch trying to connect it to the legend "And according to the legend in order to be protected by Mo, you need to draw a sketch of the beast before you fall asleep. And I believe we both are about to visit one of our worst nightmares again, so I thought that should probably take a bit of help from Mo"

"See!" Dvijata said pulling out a piece of paper from the numerous paper clippings on the table. There was a weird animal sketched on the newspaper with a black inked pen "He knows there is a patient at bed 15. He knows Dr Dvijata Shah treats the patient at Bed 15. But he forgets

that he himself is the patient of Bed 15. That's how complicated he is!" she said closing her smile "He has been the best case study I have ever had till now."

"Well case studies don't stick to you for a lifetime. But husbands do."

"Kritika, I'm very sure that if you give him time and some emotional support he'd indeed recover his memory. He's just devoid of emotional strength because you see every event that he had mentioned in *his story* had strong emotional meaning in his life. Keep telling him about how you two met, keep telling showing him photographs, keep mentioning to him the happier moments which you two have lived together and slowly his memory would start responding. Try engaging him in talks and keep him grounded to the reality because his mind is no less than some air balloon, lose a hook over it and you've no idea where he'll be lost"

"But how long am I supposed to try this Dvijata?" Kritika said with a desolate smile "It's sad to say but I am running out of patience". She hung her head low.

"You don't need to."

Kritika slowly looked up

"The sole purpose I had this session with you today was to tell you that Duryoy has reached a stable mind Kritika. You've heard this story for the first time, but for me it was my third. And I wanted to see the change in the pattern of the story which would define how his mind is fluctuating. But since the last three times there had been very slight variations in the story which means his mental condition is getting stable, and unlike yesterday where he threw the file on Zayaan's face, today he just walked out of the chamber. He is progressing! And so today he's clear to be released."

And even though you might know how good it feels after you clear an interview or when you get admitted into your dream college, but the ecstasy on hearing that your loved one is cured of a disease (even though partially) and is free to get back home is one of 'the' best feeling you can ever have! You'll be thanking God for a million times, shaking hands with your doctor as if she had been no less than the deity of life, you'll feel that happiness imploding within you but you do not know

how to express that, all your relatives will be calling you and all you know is that you'll be able to look at him the way you used to when he took vows in front of the fire.

And with that she and the doctor shared a laugh.

A free, frank and the happiest laugh they ever had. It feels exaggerated but it was the truth. Kritika was just too damn happy that her smile said it all. But no one could tell what exactly the reason for those overwhelming feelings was. Maybe it was because Duryoy would no longer need a treatment and was well to go by himself. Or maybe because Kritika could run back to her normal life as an ISRO scientist knowing that her husband is on a recovery. Or maybe because this was the last time she was seeing Dvijata in person as Dvijata was getting married to a guy whom her father had chosen for her- Milan Kundera. And he worked at NASA so she'd be soon shifting over to Florida in a few months.

But still the girls continued their happy times with no maybes stopping them from laughing their hearts out, because there's something about the "Last times"- You say you're happy but you aren't. You smile the widest but your heart's crying at its loudest. You wish the person's well-being, but all your heart wishes for is an extra day together. And even though after nearly a decade long of knowing each other, Dvijata and Kritika they both departed with tears slipping out of their red eyes. (Yes, Dvijata had been treating Duryoy for ten years!) And before the two departed, they had one final tight hug where Dvijata whispered to Kritika "Make sure you take good care of him. Else I'll have him. He's already inclined towards me..." Dvijata winked notoriously.

"But still I was the one who he kissed" Kritika winked back.

CLOSER

Dr Dvijata Shah was finally done with that one patient with whom she indeed had made the deepest of connections. And this was more than a professional relationship! The frankness that Duryoy shared with her couldn't be explained with words. And this is one of the most hurtful things of being a psychologist. People open their hearts to them, their fear, their anxieties, their problems, their infatuations, everything, and how hard can it be to just get attached to the person who has just opened up his entire life in front of you?

Because all you ever need to fall in love with someone is, know their story.

It is of course against the work ethics for a doctor to start growing feelings for his patient, but you can never expect to play with fire without getting your fingers burnt. The feelings that Dvijata had within her was not confined to either Duryoy or to Kritika. It was extended to them as a couple. Knowing these two people since ten years, she felt herself as a part of the family!

She had seen him after he had lost of the plane and barely remembered a thing, she had seen him graduating as a Mechanical Engineer, she had seen him getting a job at ISRO, she had seen him fall for one of his fellow employee whom he finally married, she was invited to their wedding ceremony and then as days passed by Duryoy's behaviour kept changing and his wife's visit to her had increased exponentially. And soon she came to know astrophysicist Kritika Soni was not as boring as her job made her look like.

Several things had happened between those days and today. Those late night calls when Kritika would cry and say that Duryoy is unable to recognize her, when Kritika would meet her at the end of every week trying to know whether Duryoy will ever recover or not. Those nights of concern and the days of recklessness had indeed created a special bond between Dvijata and *the couple*.

Dvijata kept stacking her files maintaining a stern face. Her eyes were wet but she saved those tears for later. Kritika slowly pulled the door and as a ray of passageway light sliced into the partially lit room "Goodbye Doctor" she said turning towards Dvijata "Stay in touch."

"You too" Dvijata said pausing for a moment to turn towards her and then she was back to hastily rearranging the table and stuffing the files into her bag.

But Kritika didn't move. She still had something in her mind that was keeping her from opening up. Dvijata did notice that, and she stopped arranging the files "Kritika" she said "I'm telling you there's no threat to your marriage. You don't need to worry about that! I know Duryoy he'll do anything to make you happy, even if that means buying you a teddy bear from the *Chandni Chowk* market. Don't freak out!"

"What?" Kritika said first a bit confused then she had a glittering smile on her face "No, no, no, that's not what I was asking for..."

“Then?”

“How did you know that the story Duryoy said wasn’t real?” Kritika asked “I mean of course he had made up things and the story did sound like some science-fiction thing but still he had every reason to make the story sound genuine. Then how come you knew that it wasn’t entirely real?”

“You still believe in what he said, don’t you?” Dvijata said with a smile.

“Well I sometimes take my marriage vows too seriously” Kritika shrugged

“I appreciate that” Dvijata said with a smile “That’s because even though his entire story sounded real, yet he knew about the parts that he was never a part of! Like he claimed himself to be strapped in some isolated factory in some corner of the city, but he still knew what was going on inside ISRO! How did he know that Kritika Soni was arrested when he never came out of the dream? How did he know about Kritika and her tests with Chief and the South Indian boy, even though all those things happened before he met Kritika! If this was real you’d have got a first person perspective, but his entire story was based on third person. And I don’t know much about laws of physics but what I do know is that a person cannot exist at two places at the same time.”

Dvijata waited for Kritika to show some response.

“You definitely are the best” said Kritika shutting the door behind.

THE SOUVENIER

Kritika exited the room with silence over her face, exhaustion in her eyes and satisfaction in her heart. There was a brown envelope tucked in her right arm as she left the cabin. Zayaan said it belonged to Duryoy, and wanted to return it to him ten years back but could never find a day better day than this.

This entire episode although seemed like some psychological therapy where Dr Dvijata Shah spun her brain around to astounding conclusions, yet it was actually an ISRO interrogation being performed by the CISF trying to know what really happened that day on the plane. Yes, they got their answer. No, they weren’t able to believe it one bit. Duryoy was the only person who was throughout his senses during the entire flight till he crashed, and there was no existing proof of the

incident other than his memory. But when the only proof of something happening lies within the brain of a schizophrenic patient, the news is as good as lost. Hence, as suggested by Dr Dvijata Shah, until and unless Duryoy's memory starts fully responding, there's no option to know about the happening then to wait. Which meant the case was as good as being closed.

But all those petty concerns of Zayaan and the CISF to know about the truth never mattered to Kritika. All she was happy about was that her husband was as normal as any person can be (just a bit too imaginative at times).

Kritika smiled on herself for having remembered a dialogue she used to constantly say to Duryoy- "You know I want *us* to be different. Our life-story should be uncommon. It shouldn't just have getting married having kids and dying like everyone else. It should be such that whoever listens to it can barely believe it! That's what I want from *us* Duryoy. Can you give such a life to me?"

And now it seems as though Duryoy took her words way too seriously. But unfortunately the dreams of being uncommon, is the most common dream.

At least he can say that once in his lifetime he forgot who his wife was Kritika thought, walking out of the interrogation chamber and entering into the empty corridors of the Calcutta Medical College. It was evening time and also the last night of Navratri so the offices were deprived of life more than usual. Her shadow kept circling her about her toe as she walked by the tiny flickering lights- red, blue, green, yellow, and then red again.... She took a sharp right and then disappeared into the numerous dark stairs going down straight to the parking area where Duryoy was waiting for her.

Finally it was all over



In no time Kritika and Duryoy were inside the car, leaving the Calcutta Medical College campus behind. Dr Soni was waiting for his daughter and partially psychotic son-in-law at home and by now he had called Kritika twice just to know whether to prepare dinner or not. There was a lot and lot and lot to talk about with Duryoy and she wanted the whole thing to be personal. Maybe a long drive would work?

The monotonous voice of air conditioner inside the car kept filling the silence between the two. Both were trying to look away as much as they could from one another, especially Duryoy. His head was turned to his left by ninety degrees and in discontinuous moments he kept stealing glances of Kritika from the rare view mirror fitted outside the car door. She seemed angry, but Duryoy still believed that he was from a parallel universe where he had no wife. As said, it's nearly impossible to make the schizophrenic patients realize that they're wrong until they realize it themselves. Duryoy had things to talk to Kritika about, but for the moment, silence was golden. He didn't want things to get too much out of hand in one single night because he had heard from his colleagues about their wife's reaction when they forgot their anniversary. And that surely wasn't pleasant. And here Duryoy had forgotten his wife, as a whole. He surely was up for some lifetime experience.

He once again eyed towards Kritika from the rare-view mirror trying to guess out how angry was her face, but when he did she was already looking back at him through the mirror. He quickly looked away from the mirror as her hand pounced over the mirror like a cat's paw and switched its direction.

Duryoy went back to gazing the city pass by him.

The silence, it's irritating. It really was!

Maybe a song would lighten it up

Duryoy swung his hand to turn on the radio.

"Don't!" Kritika said not looking back at him "Just don't."

Duryoy's mid-air-paused hands retreated twice as fast as it went.

Duryoy was now confused, truly confused. He didn't know what to believe and what not to. He wasn't ready to believe that all of the things he said had never happened. But then he had a phone whose gallery was filled with photographs of the events he didn't remember at all. They had all happened, and that was for sure. The proof of his forgetful memory was lying over his empty palms staring right back at him. Yet Duryoy didn't want to believe the truth.

He thought it would be simpler enough to just ask Kritika about what was wrong. It was really useless to complicate stuffs for no reason. And he knew Kritika Soni. If he'd wait for *her* to make the first move it might cost him his entire lifetime.

"Kritika..." Duryoy said in a tired voice turning entirely towards her

“We need to talk.”

Silence. She didn't look back.

“I'm not able to comprehend the situation... which *we're* facing right now. And then I see, you're mad at me for no apparent reasons. Can you please, please, please tell me what the problem is? I have some memories of the past, none of which I can see when I go through the pictures in my phone's gallery. I have contacts in my phone that I don't know. I'm receiving e-mails from an organization I don't even work for! Trust me, this all is making “NO” sense to me...”

“Would a divorce make sense to you?” Kritika said looking at him with worst look a person can expect to be looked at.

But Duryoy didn't hold himself this time.

“Is there anything you want to clear up with me, I'm all yours for that purpose. I'll answer anything and everything that you ask me, but try to understand my situation Kritika. Right now silence isn't helping me in any way!”

“Yeah, may be jumping off some bridge or hitting your wife might.”

“I told you my memory isn't towards the right direction Kritika! Why don't you get it? I don't even remember doing any of those...”

“What? What is it that I should believe?” Kritika sad raising her voice ‘that you keep forgetting stuffs? That I am the one who spoilt your entire life? Or the fact that I'm so fragile in your memories that you still don't realise that *I* am your wife?”

“Kritika, you might find this weird but I... I *indeed* came from a parallel universe!” Duryoy emphasized “You're a space scientist, you know that people can sometimes get swiped into parallel universes.”

“HYPOTHETICALLY, Duryoy, HYPOTHETICALLY!!”

“No, it's not hypothetical! And this isn't the first time a man dropped into a parallel universe. Just like me there was another 28 year old man named Rudolph Fentz who was hit by a taxi at the Time's square in the 1950s...”

“Duryoy, relax! Alright? Don't make up another story to hide your fault!”

“Just let me finish!” Duryoy said yelling back at Kritika, “The man was wearing clothes that people usually wore in the 1800s. When the man was taken to hospital, the staff found a copper token for a beer, a bill related to his horse's maintenance and a letter from 1876. And none

of it had any signs of aging. And in the police records it was found that there was a man who had disappeared from 1876 at the age of 28. Now you still want to tell me that this situation is not possible?”

She didn't answer back

“Why aren't you saying something, now?”

Kritika moved her face in a manner that seemed as though she was trying to restrain herself from speaking further

“Kritika, I'm asking you something!”

“Duryoy” she said in a low voice “It was *I* who told you this story last night when we were discussing about time travel. Every single thing that you said in the interrogation chamber were the things *I* had told you last night just after we watched the documentary on CIA! And xynim crystals? Come on! *Really?* Xynim is the name of a soft toy company!”

“What? No way!”

“That teddy that you gifted to Dvijata, was manufactured by *this* company. God!”

And Duryoy's face dropped as fast his blood pressure shot up

‘duryoy, you are schizophrenic’ Kritika continued ‘try accepting this fact and life will be easier. You're the one who's complicating your own life. The harder you think that something is true, the harder will it be for you to prove it false. And these aren't my words, these are the words of Dvijata!’

But those words seemed to mean nothing to him. He just hung his head low and continued to look outside the car window

Kritika looked at him from the corner of her eye, this time with the glance of pity rather than disgust. She felt sorry for him. She knew she had said too much and she wanted to apologize, but his face was too much towards the window to even notice her. In the end he was just a patient with a psychological disorder. Had he been perfectly sane he'd never done all of this. She knew she had to get in sync with his emotional level if she wanted to understand him. But how?

Suddenly the car boomed into life with a mild 90s song as Kritika turned on the stereo

*Bheegi Bheegi raaato mei,
phir tho aao naa
Aisi barsaato mei,*

aa0 naa...

Duryoy looked back at Kritika who was swinging her head to the softer beats of the song. And that song happened to somehow magically vaporize the tension that had built up a while ago

He laid his eyes on her for two extra seconds and letting out a deep sigh he said “Kritika, I’m really so...”

“Sshh” Kritika said raising her finger, pausing it mid-air and then swung it along with the tune of the song.

“Aren’t you mad at me?” he asked

“Whatever it is that you’re facing, we’re in this together” she said carving a smile over her face “and this time it’s for real. I just want you to accept who you are and that you’ll do everything you can to recover.”

“But that’s not true!”

“Not again!” she said slamming the steering wheel as the car horn blew out loud “How can you expect someone to help you when in first place you keep thinking that you do not need any help? Accept your flaws Duryoy. You always take time to accept things, and till now this virtue has done no good to you. For once, believe me and let it go. I know it’s not at all easy for you when people just ask you to forget what you know. But Duryoy, you have been detected with an illness and you need to get over it. Think of it as a breakup. You’ll never get over it if you keep remembering that person every day. You need to overwrite that person with new people, new experiences! You need to start rewriting you existing memory with the things that are true, with the things that are real and with the things that you’ll never lose! That’s how you will recover Duryoy. And I’m with you, but the first step towards this success comes by accepting your defeat. Just say yes, and I’m there for you.”

“What do you want me to accept?”

“You can begin with cutting out the parallel universe story.”

“That is not a story. I really had created a drug...”

“Damn you Duryoy!” she yelled. So loud that even the person riding the two-wheeler beside had to peep inside the car.

“Alright, fine!” Duryoy retreated pushing himself back in his seat “As you say...”

“No, if you think that I’m trying to thrust this thing upon you then

you're wrong Duryoy! It had been this way and we've had this conversation earlier too! But every time you convince me that what you're telling is true and then again you have those phases in which you forget everything and come up with an entirely new story. There is no way that we could make you stop believe that you're from a parallel universe and this is why I now have to impose my thoughts upon you. Everything you think to be true is just a part of your imagination!"

"What? No, no, no Kritika... It is!"

"Duryoy you forgot *me*, you forgot everything that had happened in our life! Don't you ever feel this way that you remember everything precisely till the plane crash and after that where you had a brain injury, you have started making stories. So didn't it ever strike you that it must be that you had an internal injury in your brain? And you know that the entire world is telling you that you're wrong, then don't you think that there might be something *really* wrong with you? Or are you even more ridiculous to think that the whole world is wrong."

"So what all I just said never really happened?"

"NO you didn't create a drug, NO I never made a wormhole, NO you're not from a parallel universe and NO, you didn't. Just stop being ridiculous Duryoy and give yourself a thought..."

Duryoy didn't know what to speak and what not. He seemed to have thought and lived each of those moments so vividly that now he didn't know what reality is and what's a dream! Like even right now could be a dream because all those moments which he thought to be real were actually dreams! Those were all fragments of his imagination that had been turned into reality due to over-thinking! He started shrivelling as he began to immerse more and more into his thoughts. He kept looking into his phone's gallery and tried to remember the events, but the more he went into the more he realised how less he knew himself.

He never really was aware of the grave silence he had shifted himself into. And that was what Kritika feared the most because whenever he went this silent he'd undergo a new phase where everything had to be explained to him from the start.

Kritika couldn't lose him this time! She remembered Dvijata asking her to be soft on him and allow him to recover at his own pace. Now she knew why she had said that!

She had called Duryoy for four times asking him what's the matter

but he didn't reply at all and she knew she had to do something real quick, or else she'll lose him again. Trying to scourge from all the things that Dvijata had said to her she suddenly remembered one of the most important thing 'trigger objects!'

Yes!

Every person has undergone certain events in their life that had substantially changed their life in various ways. We often remember those events as a whole but on getting deeper we get to know that these events are actually related to a certain stimuli that make us remember the entire incident. The stimuli may be a pen, or a flower or a ring or sometimes a song. It varies from person to person. But whenever these stimuli/ trigger objects are brought in contact with us, we instantly remember the incident it was related to. Usually it this method is used to treat patients with Memory loss. And this was suggested to Kritika by Dvijata.

She tried feeling Duryoy's pulse. It was weakening. His eyes went floppy and he seemed to be devoid of any senses.

With one hand on the steering Kritika kept searching for something that Duryoy could relate to but she found none. She was again close to tears when she realised that before leaving Zayaan had given her a brown envelope saying it belonged to Duryoy. And she grabbed the envelope, held Duryoy by his collar and shook him so heavily that he had to get back to his senses just to stop her from doing that

"What?" Duryoy said in a weak, irritated voice

"Open it. There's something in there for you" she said giving him the envelope.

"Can't I open it later? After getting back home maybe?"

"No, I want to see what's in it" Kritika said slowing down the car, eagerly looking towards the envelope. She could see Duryoy's consciousness getting back and his eyes broadening up as he looked at the envelope.

He knew that it would be useless to Kritika.

"Alright" he shrugged, tearing open the cover.

It was the black beaded necklace with a "D" scratched on it.

EPILOGUE

After all that I have been through, this would be my last entry. I've written some of the happiest moments I've come across in my life in here, and although knowing that a person like me never deserved something like this yet I was made to believe that something which I always presumed to be impossible is not always the way it seems. Reading this diary makes me know that somewhere down the line God expects us all to stand up for something which we always believe was never in our court. We call it optimism, but doesn't God know that optimism has a price?

It's been three days since I've locked myself in. Now the dusk and the dawn don't matter anymore. The bitterest of the memories have just faded into nothingness and all that remains is this hungover of a missing love.

And since you see that I'm alive and writing even after consuming my drug, I should tell you that yes indeed it does function! And it did take me to my past and made me re-live every moment with Saaera, once again. The day we first spoke, the day I first met her for a cup of tasteless tea, the day we talked on the phone for two hours and seventeen minutes, the day we went to buy the red watch for her brother, the day we went to the Pooja pandal together and finally the moment she just dropped off to death. I've revived each of those moments precisely, not willing to change them one bit because all I was afraid was that maybe my slightest change would deprive me of the sweetest memories I could ever have. But something had to be done, because by letting things stay the way they were would mean that her death was definite.

For the first time I dared to bring about a change in the timeline, although knowing that altering it might cost me a lot. But when in love even the devil plays fair. And so the next time I pulled myself to the moment when we reached the Calcutta Medical College, and before she could run I ran ahead of her and kicked those beads out of the way. This way she never fell down. But when she reached the room in which her father was admitted, by that time he had already taken his last breath. And there was just sorrow all around within the room. Her mother was crying with broken bangles lying on the bed and her sister had wrapped herself in her arms in one corner of the room and continued to so with those blood red eyes. And Saaera, when she entered she just couldn't hold her anxiety. And she yelled and cried and blamed herself for being

so careless and, and I just cannot express those with words. You just imagine what I was undergoing? It just hurts me when she doesn't reply to my phone calls and today I was watching her tear her heart out and cry this bad. You really think I could bare that? Maybe she would have stayed with me after that, and maybe many good things were about to come my way but would it really be worth? I mean, she'll never be the same again! She'll never be the person I had loved her for. She'd never laugh at to my silliness, never hold my hand in public saying "don't think about what people would think", she'll never have those after-school walks with me! And some or the other day she would definitely blame *me* for this. I couldn't have lived with the guilt that it was because she was with me because of which she couldn't even be there to witness her father's final moments. And some or the other day I would lose her.

And I couldn't lose her.

I know what I went through once I lost her. And I know I cannot take that again for the slightest. People might call me self-centred and mean on knowing this, but they won't if they ever truly loved someone.

And so I went back in time, again, this time making sure she didn't reach the hospital at all. I swiftly ignored those calls that her sister made and never for once uttered a word about her phone. And things were pretty smooth after that as on our way back home over the *Duro* she admitted this being one of the loveliest nights she had ever lived, and she hugged me from behind. But with that sudden action my heart missed a beat so quick that I couldn't contain my hands from not shivering as by mistake we entered the opposite lane , and it was a crossroad and before I could bring the vehicle under control, a truck appeared from the right and in seconds flung us to the other side of the road like lifeless puppets. I had been lucky for I crashed on a roadside parked car, but Saaera had collided with those edgy signboards and had banged her head over the kerbs.

I had my left side paining terribly as I knew there was a fracture in my left arm, yet I ran towards her but I never knew that things were about to get overboard. As I reached I could see blood spilling out everywhere, and she had already lost her senses. I ran about madly trying to find a cloth that I could tie around her head, but no luck! I took off my kurta and tried stopping the blood-loss but in a few minutes even the kurta was drenched in blood. And I was partly crying, partly begging

to the people around to call an ambulance, and partly talking to Saaera telling her that she'll be alive.

And the ambulance arrived after twenty minutes.

The doctor had declared her dead by then.

And I sat there, by her, looking at her blood-covered face, the corner of her lips still having a thin layer of ice-cream, and all I could do was think- "Where had I gone wrong?"

I travelled back in time twice, had lived by her thrice, but every time something or the other takes her away from me. And after forty-five minutes sitting by her dead body I realised that maybe she could never be happy with me by her side! Because irrespective of however hard I tried things just pushed me away from her. And my presence had always brought her miseries, and to extents that she had to lose her life twice. My love for her was necessary but not surpassing her life!

And I knew she wouldn't understand this, once she gets to know me.

So what if I never met her?

What if that day I never sat by her in the bus?

What if I just suppress my desires and try living a life without her? Maybe then she'd be able to live, at the cost of me dying every day.

And I did exactly that.

The third time I travelled back straight to that day in the bus in where I first met her. I watched her board it, I watched her sit alone in the same two-seater, and I knew what life had for me if I went there and sat by her. But I didn't. I did not move a single inch. Just kept looking at her, and her open hairs gliding lightly with the breeze from the open window. Every part of me cursing me for doing that. But maybe this was true love.

I just sat and smiled as I watched her get off the bus and depart into the crowded road without letting her know that someone like me exists, one who'd travel back in time just to keep her alive!

Unfortunately she would never know what a great story had she been a part of.

And the moment I returned back to the real time I had no phone number written behind my Biology book, I had no birthday card wishing me a long life, I had no notebook with her name from which I'd copy my notes, I had no red coloured watch on my wrist, I had no smile on my face and after a long time I gave company to my TV set.

It felt like one moment I had everything, and the next moment I had nothing but emptiness left in my life.

And even though I promised that I'd never try seeing her again, yet after coming back in the real time I had an uncontrolled urge to know where she was. And I gave my every last drop trying to search her. Roamed around Kolkata in the evenings, at the parks and the streets, in the metros and local trains, took trams to Salt Lake hoping that one of the million faces I see there, one would be hers.

But I could never find her.

And thereafter I gave up all hopes and went deep into my course at AIIMS. With not much deviation from Dr Soni or my destructive heart- now I am one of those boring students from AIIMS whose name coaching institutes flash on their boards making the 99% of Indians feel inferior about their mental excellence. I study 16 hours a day and sleep for 6 hours and the remaining 2 just goes off with me, my thoughts and my diary. Sometimes I even tried making tiny changes in time trying to know how it affects the present and future, but nothing too drastic. And life was pretty much the same...

Until yesterday.

And now if I tell you what happened next, you wouldn't believe me for once. But believe me, for it is true

Yesterday, I met her *again* in our college canteen. And she was as beautiful as she was the last time I saw her.

And like I mentioned that with every change we make in time there are varied repercussions in both future as well as past, similarly, somehow with all my multiple researches back with time, one very surprising repercussion was- A change in name!

And somehow her name happened to change to Dvijata.

Yes, Dr Dvijata Shah, not bad though. And she happens to be my senior here!

Funny hah?

Because "Dvijata" actually is derived from the Sanskrit word "Dvija" which means twice born. Ironically, very true indeed.

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