



SECRET OF THE HIMALAYAN TREASURE

DIVYANSH MUNDRA

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by

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To all the amazing people on Quora; without whom i
would have become another rom-com writer

probably!

PRAISE FOR SECRET OF THE HIMALAYAN TREASURE

Mind blowing narration. Fast moving plot. The way the author captured myriad of human emotions is commendable ~ *Preethi Babu*

Started and read continuously till I finished. Narration was incredible, plot twists were hard to predict, storytelling was great. Aarav can be the protagonist of a whole series of books, starting from this one
~ *Tuhin Mondal*

This is by far the best thing I've read in years.
~ *Adeeb Z. Naqvi*

The author has such an amazing ability to spellbind readers through his choice of words that you feel as if a movie is running in the back of your head.
~ *Arjun S. Dyarakoti*

Mind Blowing. An action packed thriller with a heart moving love story.
~ *Pallavi M. Vutharkar*

Fusion of all possible emotions raised to an ultimate level.
~ *Akshay Shinde*

The only problem with it is.. that you can't put it down. Words aren't enough to describe the magnificence of this book.
~ *Manas Dutt*

The story has an eclectic mix of high voltage action, mysterious and thrilling history of the ancient world and heart wrenching emotions.

~ Vishnu Elayath

Did you thrive for thrill? READ THIS. Did you thrive for mass action?
READ THIS. You'll experience live while reading it.

~ Govardhan S. Pinni

Amazed to see the innumerable ways in which the human mind can work.

~Yastica Sikaria

You'll not regret reading this.

~ Shubham Jaiswal

Everything blended in the right proportion to give a wonderful masterpiece.

~ Shivam Pande

Spectacular. Truly hard to put down. A real page turner.

~ Akash M.

The narration is so good. One of the best works I've read in a long time.

Loved every bit of it.

~ Manisha Sarade

The way the author has portrayed the historical facts and human emotions is simply exquisite. Finished the book in one go due to fast moving plot and mind blowing narration.

~ Sushant Kabra

The book is really very engaging. I read it continuously for hours and slept at

3.

~Vidushi

The puzzles and riddles will leave the readers spellbound.

~ Manish E.

First shot and it's out of the park.

~Vaibhav

Very well written with a great plot.
~ *Sam Kothari*

Not an ebook guy. But I am honestly glad that I bought it.
~ *Gurbaj Singh*

Describing the plot as awesome and refreshing, would be as crass as a foodie describing haute cuisine as yummy.
~ *Arvind G.*

The people who love suspense thrillers would love it.
~ *Monica Bhavani*

Suits everyone out there.
~ *Arjun Dubey*

Don't read the book if you don't have enough time to finish it. There is no escape in between 322 pages. Once you start reading it, you are beyond your control.
~ *Kaushal Popat*

Couldn't have expected anything better than this.
~ *Abhishek*

Stupendous. Well researched. And brilliantly written.
~ *Krishna Adhaluk*

The plot is really good. Amazing descriptions of the locations. After buying Kindle, this is the first book that I bought.
~ *Avinash K R*

Thrilling. Spine-chilling experience. The book is an excellent tribute to the vast history of India.
~ *Omkar*

Amazing work. I have no words for the narration.

~ *Sajida Shaik*

Felt as if Dan Brown was writing another treasure hunt.

~ *Roshni Choubey*

A perfect blend of everything, be it thriller, romance, adventure, history,
philosophy, or drama.

~ *Siya Verma*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is entirely a work of fiction and a brainchild of the author's bored mind. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All the locations and monuments depicted in the novel are real and every effort has been made to adhere to their actual descriptions.

Utmost care has been taken to make this book devoid of any errors. However, if the reader finds certain aspects which might need editing, they can send their queries to: divyansh.mundra@gmail.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author of this book has adored great stories and engaging plots since he was a little kid. He started out writing fantastic Pokemon short stories at the age of seven, progressed to depressing teenage love stories which never saw the light of day, started a fantasy novel which he never completed even after writing a hundred thousand words, and ultimately had the idea to write a treasure hunt one day, because who doesn't like treasure stories.

He sort of became internet famous after starting to write fictional crossovers on Quora, where he would scribble about 'What would happen if a fictional character would meet another one from a different world?'

A die hard Sherlock Holmes fan, he could recite the dialogues of Sherlock TV series scene by scene, and create ones of his own when he gets bored. Being a Doyle fan, he has also penned down three Sherlock Holmes short stories, which he felt, were surprisingly awesome.

He is 21 years old, living in Mumbai, India and pursuing Chartered Accountancy. He likes to read, scream to Linkin Park songs when left alone, run far away from social obligations and create fantastic stories whenever he gets time.

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“Not all those who wander are lost”

~ J. R. R. TOLKIEN

Prologue

The Battle Of Kalinga

262 BCE

Somewhere on the banks of Daya River

He could see them running towards him; an army, a hundred thousand men strong. He could feel the vibrating earth beneath his feet, he could smell the dust being created by their stomping, and he could foretell the spillage of blood that would soak the land red when his army would collide with his enemy's. He looked towards the commander standing to his right, who blew a gigantic horn, marking the commencement of the battle.

Three thousand angry war-elephants, who were barely able to control their madness, burst with fury as they heard the horn. And he had a smile on his face as he saw his magnificent beasts charge with fervor towards his enemy. "I will win this war for you, grandfather", he spoke to himself. "And I will find the greatest treasure that the human eyes have ever seen".

"My king!" his commander interrupted, drawing him out of his thoughts. "We are here at last", he continued as he drew out his sword and waited for the enemy.

"Yes my friend!" the king replied. "Here we are. And here begins the greatest battle in the history of mankind". He pulled out his own sword; the heavy blade gleaming in the light of the morning sun. "*Satyameva Jayate!*" he yelled at the top of his voice, as his massive army repeated their battle cry and ran ahead, following his lead.

The stage was set. The curtain to the bloodiest battle in history was about to be lifted. And it would go on to be a battle that would influence millions of people, for a thousand years to come.

The war-elephants were the first to meet the enemy; their might enough to break the enemy formations. The mad beasts trumpeted hard and stomped even harder, as they squabbled with the other army. Ruckus and chaos ensued as elephant after elephant tore further into the enemy lines, crushing their chariots and breaking their bones. They ran as hard as they could and caused

the most impact that a herd of mad animals can, taking down at least a couple of thousands in an instant and creating more fatalities as they moved forward. The men in the front lines, who were lucky enough to survive the attack from the warring elephants, were met by an even mightier force— iron. The charge led by the king was scarier than that of the trunk-bearing beasts, its effectiveness unmatched by any ground combat force in the world.

The foot soldiers met their scared enemies with vigor, as they showed no mercy and got to the business as soon as they could. Metal clashed with metal, cries of agony and shrieks of horror emanated from the land near the Daya River, and the pungent smell of blood reeked the morning air. The enemy soldiers, whose battle formations were already broken, met the blades of the disciplined army of the king, who himself led the charge to the first and what would prove to be the only battle in his lifetime.

He sported his blade horizontally as he made the first impact, his sword piercing the heart of an unfortunate soldier and passing through to the other side. He pulled it out immediately and turned around to smack it diagonally on the face of an oncoming soldier, disfiguring and killing him the very same moment. He strode further ahead as the tip of his sword punctured the eyeball of another soldier and turned around to bring his weapon with might, cleanly swiping off the arm of a soldier attacking at him from behind. He took a brief pause to wipe off the thick layer of blood accumulating on his beard before picking up another sword of a fallen soldier and moving ahead, wreaking havoc with both his hands this time. His other hand moved with equal precision as he went ahead to perform the surgery. His attacks were more a work of art than haphazard chaos, his kills precise amidst the carnage happening in that hell hole. He juggled with a few weapons, picking up the spears and shields of his fallen men while continuing to move forward. His army pushed hard, and emulating the strength of their king, they worked their way along the banks of Daya River like a well-oiled machine; killing their enemy, stomping on the dead ones and repeating the suit.

Within a few hours, tens of thousands were dead. The silent waters of the river bled red. The carnage wreaked by the war elephants was only intensified many folds by the walking army of the king. Death, was all that marked the place.

The king smiled a little as he heard the enemy horns go off well before the

sunset, just as he had expected. *The sound of retreat!*

His enemies withered like a hive of bees struck by a stone. They were fighting aimlessly, and now they retreated aimlessly. Their bravery had betrayed them, their numbers had defeated them. And they ran back to fight another day.

The commander came panting by the side of his king. “How was your day, my king?” he asked with a smile.

“A bloody good one”, the king replied as he came atop a low hill and watched his enemy forces run away for their lives.

“Your grandfather would be proud”.

“I still have a long way to go to match the might of my grandfather.”

“But Kalinga will know today that a new age has begun. The Age of Ashoka”.

Ashoka smiled a little as he wiped off the blood from his face and looked up at the blazing sun in the clear sky.

The Age of Ashoka! He muttered in his head, satisfied by the sound of it.

Chapter 1

The Ring of the Seven

Present day
Mumbai, India

Mr. Harish Vashishtha was staring at the colt mustang pocketlite gun in his hands. He gently caressed his fingers on its cold, metal surface. He couldn't believe that after all his sacrifices and hard work, it had come down to this moment. He was born as the heir to one of the wealthiest families in India. His forefathers had left unimaginable amounts of money, and every successor had only multiplied the wealth in his family. The big moment came when his father had taken up to start his own steel plants right after the independence of the nation and by the time Harish turned twenty one, his father was called the Steel King of Asia. Even then his father was extremely cautious in raising up his only child. He did not let the wealth spoil his son. Harish was brought up in the most loving and disciplined way, which ensured that he would grow up to expand the family's name. And he had lived up to his family's expectations.

When he turned forty, the Vashishtha Group were not only the largest exporters of steel from India but also had their hands in airlines, banking, telecommunications, and retail industries. It was then that his father had a heart attack and upon his deathbed he passed on the greatest secret of their family to Harish, who was sworn to secrecy and had to promise his father that he would never ever speak of it. For twenty years he had kept it from everyone until that fateful day.

He was sitting in the courtyard outside his mansion in Mumbai. He had called a press conference and could see the hustle in the vast crowd before him. There were multiple media vans and guards were trying to control the ever enthusiastic reporters. For the past few months Harish's life had been vastly covered on media because of multiple death threats, an attack on his steel

plant which had left forty one dead, the landslide of his company's shares, and a failed assassination attempt that very morning. People knew that somehow he had got himself deep in trouble with the wrong guys. Everyone was expecting some sort of a big revelation from the press conference and thus every news channel was broadcasting it live. It was eight thirty in the night and thousands of Indians were glued to their TV sets.

"I would like to express my gratitude to every media person present here who came on such a short notice", he began addressing the gathering. "As you all know that there have been a few unanswered questions in the recent past which has left the entire nation wondering as to what is wrong with this lovely old man. It has been so many years now that I have built one of the most prominent business empires in the whole of Asia. I have seen so much wealth that no one could even imagine in their daydreams. It is as if I was an alchemist who knew how to convert metal into gold", he said with a smile while his face showed a sign of calmness and serenity. "Well today is your lucky day gentlemen. I am all ready to spill the beans about the recent attacks on me and my business empire", he said with a sigh. He stopped for a moment to phrase his words and nervously moved his hands over his coat's inner pocket to feel the gun he had there.

"As you all know now that there was an attempt to kill me this morning, just like there have been some in the past few months. But today they managed to get really close. As I walked down my car and headed to the main gate of my office, some sniper took an aim at me and pulled the trigger. Well fortunately for me, the bullet missed its mark by a whisker. It was so close that I could have felt its heat, that I could smell the gunpowder. I honestly swear to god that if I had been even one step to my left, all you media men present here might have been covering my funeral right now. But there is one more thing about today's attempt to assassinate me. It has freed me of my fear to die. In the recent past, I sure was afraid of death, but today I have become tired of it", he took a pause to glance at a few anxious faces he could see in the vast ocean of humanity before him. "In this press conference, I am ready to reveal a secret which my father had told me upon his deathbed, which he was perhaps told by my grandfather when he was on his. My family has been part of a group, a secret group whose purpose is to protect one of the most fabled and valuable secrets of the ancient world. Perhaps that is the reason that my family has been one of the wealthiest since god only knows when". He

paused as there was a sudden roar of whispers from the crowd.

“About a year ago, an event occurred, which has led me to believe that all of a sudden I have become useless to this society. And how do they deal with him? They try to eliminate him. They blow up his steel plant. They try to destroy his business empire. They attempt to kill one of the most influential men of the country. Yes my friends, it is this very society which is trying to erase the name of the Vashishthas from the face of this planet. And do I let them do it? Do I let them kill me after all the sacrifices my forefathers have made to protect the identity of this institution? Absolutely not”, he said with an expression of solitude on his face.

“The man who tried to kill me today is present right here”. He said with boldness in his voice so as to overpower the commotion which his words had caused in the crowd before him. “Yes, it is true. He is sitting right between you folks, staring at me steadily, waiting for the moment when I disclose something relevant so that he could have the perfect excuse to kill me”, he said in an absolute tone. His face was expressionless. He always carried this face whenever he was about to do something big. Anyone who was watching it live on their TV sets could surely guess that something unnatural was about to transpire. Harish Vashishtha slowly moved his hand to the inside of his coat pocket and placed his finger on the trigger of the fully loaded colt mustang resting there.

“Now I speak directly to the masters”, he narrowed his tone suddenly. “Whatever actions I have taken were directly aimed at the benefit of our secrets, to keep our history alive, to keep our brotherhood alive. But there is one thing you should know for sure. I tried my best to save our secret from the evil. If there was anything that I could have done to prevent it, I surely would have. But you all should know that I always was, and will always remain loyal to our cause”. He picked a pen and wrote something on a paper before him. The crowd was silent, the media men anxiously waiting for something big to happen. He took out his gun and kept it in his lap; the prying eyes of the people unaware of what transpired under the table.

Harish Vashishtha took a deep breath and looked at a man in the front row, who hastily removed the buttons of his coat and took out a revolver. He was waiting for Harish to make a silly move and he would pull the trigger without any hesitation. The man had a strange tattoo towards the left side of his neck;

a bull, one which Harish recognized seeing that very morning. Harish firmly held onto his gun. His face showed a glimpse of smile as the man with the bull tattoo was well within the range of his bullet. Moreover, the man was unaware that Harish too had a weapon.

“I have always been responsible and had followed my duties uprightly. I tried to save our secret”, he said without shifting his gaze. “And masters, I know that you will be pretty much satisfied with what I am about to do”.

The crowd shrieked in horror as he took out the gun in the full view of the cameras. The man with the bull tattoo was abruptly about to make his move when he heard Harish speak. “I am now with you Sumathi”. Tears rolled down his eyes as he took the gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

The nation fell silent as they saw blood spurting out the other side of Harish Vashishtha’s face. Everyone was stunned to even make a move. The sound of the gunshot echoed through the silence of the masses, as they saw the lifeless body of one of the most influential figures of the country, swaying to the right and falling down.

It took some time for the TV viewers to realize that it was all happening right before them; live. They came to their senses when they saw people rushing up the stage. All of a sudden there was a roar of cries emerging like fire, quickly filling up the vacuum which was created. There was rumbling in the crowd. Cameramen plunged to the stage to capture the best of the horrific moment. They wanted to send out the live images to the world before the guards would stop them. Sahil was struggling along with the other cameramen who were being thrown off by the guards. There was total commotion everywhere on the stage and cries were still being heard. Sahil managed to punch through two guards and brought his camera close to the lifeless body of Mr. Vashishtha. His disfigured face was brought to the attention of millions of Indians watching it live on their TV sets. Sahil moved back two steps when he instead shifted his focus to a piece of paper lying on the table where Harish was sitting earlier. It was the same paper where Harish had written something just seconds before his death. Sahil managed to zoom in on the writing before being stormed off by a guard. What it read was going to haunt the minds of the countrymen for the rest of their lives.

The Ring of the Seven

Chapter 2

The Treasure Hunters

“The thing about treasure hunting is that it is always the unexpected. I started out, looking to solve the mystery of the lineage of an ancient family of my hometown and ended up finding an invaluable pearl. A similar thing happened when I was vacationing near Maldives and ended up finding the sunken treasure of a seventeenth century Portuguese fleet. And don’t even get me started about the mystery of the haunted fort in Rajasthan... that one, was exquisite by all measures. I never seek the treasure, you see... it is the treasure itself that finds me”, he looked away from the camera towards an elegant woman standing towards his right. “IT IS THE TREASURE ITSELF THAT FINDS ME? Seriously? What are you guys doing? Want to make me sound like a magician?”

“No Aarav, it is not that. We just thought that it would suit our narrative better...” the woman tried speaking but was chided by the other man the very same moment.

“Oh god! Why on earth am I shedding so much money on PR? Why the hell do I even need your services?”

“Just finish with interview”, his friend who was standing in the back requested him.

“I am trying to. You know I really am. I don’t like it either, to sit with so much make-up caked on my face, and repeat these boring lines like a robot the entire day. I have work to do. Much important work than any of these pesky PR guys will understand. Actually, you know what, let’s do the entire thing without a script. From the beginning. Let us roll the cameras again.”

The cameraman rolled his eyes before starting recording the interview over for the third time since that morning.

“I never started out to be a treasure hunter you see”, Aarav spoke looking hard into the camera and clearing his throat. “For the others it is just a whole lot of adventure with a little bit of history, but the reality is far from what they show in the movies. It all begins with the utmost trust like any other job.

You have to believe that there is plenty of treasure out there, lying under cold dark waters for ages, waiting to be found by you. Because the truth is that most people whom I've met in this field have sacrificed their lives in search of that treasure which would make them rich, and yet they live out their days into the oblivion, forever unknown and forgotten in the end. I am not in this field for the money you see; that is collateral to the art. I'm a treasure hunter because I love it, because the mere thought that there is tons of forgotten treasure sitting out there, waiting to be found by me fills me up with excitement and makes me...", he paused all of a sudden as an elderly woman interrupted his interview.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt you again, but there is someone at the gates for you. She says it is paramount that she meets you right at this very moment", the lady spoke as peacefully as she could.

"Interrupting my interview? For the second time today? That is it. Sorry folks, but I'm done", Aarav spoke as he got up and removed a mic buttoned to his shirt.

"Aarav c'mon, don't be a drama queen", his friend remarked as he tried to stop Aarav from getting up from his chair. "He will be with the visitor in half an hour", he told the old woman. The PR lady rolled up her sleeves and almost gave up on Aarav as she grunted in disgust and moved back to grab a chair.

"What are you so angry about? It is my interview that is being interrupted again and again", Aarav lashed out at her.

"We are never going to finish this interview, I tell you", the PR lady spoke to him as she took out her mobile and started toying with it.

"Are you mocking me?" Aarav suddenly became serious.

"Aarav, I'm sure that she's not mocking you. Now let's get over with the interview", his friend tried to calm him down.

"She's mocking me Rehann. She's laughing right in my face."

"I didn't mean that", the PR lady tried defending herself.

"Nah-uh-uh, you know what? You're fired. I am done with your charades."

“You can’t just fire me!”

“Oh! Guess what? I think I just did. And look, I just texted security to escort you safely out of my house. They’ll be on their way”, Aarav snubbed.

The PR lady stood there for a moment, wondering in disbelief that what had happened was true.

“Bu...bye”, Aarav muttered carelessly as he waved his hand.

“You’re such a jerk” she yelled before grabbing her handbag and storming off.

“Well... I would say that it gets better. But something tells me that you already have quite some experience with regards to that”, his friend Rehann remarked as he made Aarav settle down for the interview again.

“What about the visitor?” the old lady argued.

“Oh! Send her away. I’m not in mood for visitors today. Or better yet, keep her waiting for an hour before telling her that I’ll be unavailable”.

“No wonder you’re single”, his friend remarked as he went ahead with the old lady to meet the visitor and inform her of Aarav’s unavailability.

Aarav settled back on his chair and adjusted his coat before staring into a monitor placed to his front. He shook his head a little and adjusted his dark brown hair before turning to the camera and continuing again. “As I was speaking. I never started out as a treasure hunter. To be honest, I have always abstained from being referred to by this term. But when my third hunt turned out to be a lot bigger than what I had expected, it became hard to suppress these fancy names which the media gave me. To be honest, fame doesn’t suit the job of a treasure hunter. It draws unwanted attention and hampers with my searches. Still one does enjoy the occasional recognition and it could sometimes even save the trouble of going through...”

“Aarav”, his friend Rehann interrupted the interview, yet again.

“Interruption? Again? Rehann are you for real?” Aarav barked in fury.

“I don’t think you’ll be carrying on with the interview after hearing who your visitor is.”

“Is it the Prime Minister? If not then I’m sure that whoever it is, can wait.”

“It’s Aanya.”

“Aanya who?”

“Aanya Vashishtha”, Rehann declared with a firm voice.

“Aanya Vas...”, Aarav stopped speaking as a smile carved up on his face, making him almost jump up in joy as he focused again on the last name.

“It is the daughter”, Rehann continued. “The last surviving Vashishtha.”

“Finally! I’ve been waiting for this for some time Rehann. Can’t believe that the opportunity has presented itself this soon. Escort her to the visitor’s room. I’ll be on my way”, he spoke while jumping up from his chair and taking out the mic. “Sorry but we’ll have to do this again sometime else”, he spoke to the cameraman before exiting.

“Miss Aanya, this is Aarav Kohrrathi. Aarav, this is Miss Aanya Vashishtha, the daughter of..”

“The daughter of Mr. Harish Vashishtha, of course. I am sorry for your loss”, Aarav spoke while shaking hands with Aanya, further urging her to settle comfortably on the couch. “May I ask what is it that brings you to my humble abode?”

Aanya looked suspiciously towards Rehann before turning her gaze at Aarav. “What I am about to say to you, what I am about to tell you, is probably the most secretive thing that one could say. Hence, it is of importance that whatever I speak to you doesn’t leave this room.”

“You can be assured of Rehann’s credibility ma’am. Not only is he my very good friend but is also of primary importance on my hunts. And of course, if you know who I am, you’d know who he is.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend anyone. It is just that the matter which I bring to you is quite vital.”

“Of course. We understand”, Aarav spoke while drawing his hands together and placing them over the tip of his nose. “Take us through your story. From

the start.”

Aanya drew in a deep breath as she placed her Bulgari sunglasses on the table and loosened a scarf wrapped around her neck. “We didn’t exactly see eye to eye. He wanted me to join the family business, my father. Being the single child, his expectations were quite high from me. So ultimately when I decided to move to London to pursue a career in fashion, we had a fight. It has been three years that I have been living away. We last met six months back at a relative’s wedding in Vienna, and then I saw him on the television three weeks ago, along with the entire world.”

“Wait! Did you say Vienna?” Aarav questioned her.

“Yes! Why?” she asked.

“Nothing. Struck a chord somewhere. Six months ago you said?” Aarav continued while taking down notes in his notebook.

“Yes!”

“Okay. And how was his mood at the time. Was there something bothering him?”

“I don’t know. We didn’t speak much. It was hard to tell”, she responded as she broke her gaze to take a cup of tea from the old lady who came into the room.

“Thank you so much. I must say Mr. Kohrrathi, you have quite a gifted housekeeper”, she spoke while taking a sip.

“It is a cross I have to bear”, Aarav responded while smirking at the old lady.

“I’m done with your charades Aarav. Wait till your father comes home”, the elder lady spoke rather rudely before storming off.

“Maybe he’ll be interested in being my butler”, Aarav playfully raised his voice as he saw the old lady walking away.

“Sorry. Did I say something wrong?” Aanya asked Rehann.

“She’s not the housekeeper. She is his mother”, Rehann replied to the embarrassment of Aanya.

“Oh! I’m so sorry Mr. Kohrrathi. I didn’t mean to...”

“Please call me Aarav. And it is fine, she won’t mind it”, Aarav spoke before getting serious again. “It has been three weeks since your father passed away. What is it that brings you to me of all people?”

“When my father died...” Aanya took a moment to continue. “Right before he... shot himself, he wrote down a name on a piece of paper. The Ring ...”

“The Ring of the Seven”, Rehann continued her words.

“Yes. The Ring of the Seven. I looked it up on the web and your ...”

“My blog showed up. Of course!” Aarav continued.

“I had heard about your previous exploits. The treasure you found at the fort of Chittorgarh was covered quite well even in the British media.”

“Yes! That hunt made him quite a fortune”, Rehann filled in.

“Him? Or us?” Aarav corrected Rehann. “And hence you decided to pay me a visit. Because of my blog. Well that is disappointing.”

“Why?” Aanya asked, concerned.

Aarav took in a deep breath before wondering how much he was supposed to reveal to Aanya. “I assumed that your father must have told you something more about this League. I was hoping to gather some more intel about this group. You see, I was chasing them even before your father brought them out in the open.”

“Well. I am afraid I could be of no more help. As I said, we weren’t on speaking terms with each other. He did call me that evening before he took his life but I wasn’t able to attend the call. If only I had known that he was calling me for the last time, I...” she choked.

“It is okay”, Rehann comforted her.

“When I came back home. The lawyers gave me lots of papers to sign, there was a lot of documentation and legal work to be done. He had just left a letter for me. It was nothing much but more of a strange farewell note as to how he has failed me as a father.”

“Can we have a look at the letter? If it is okay with you?” Aarav asked her politely.

“Yes of course. Although I don’t know if it would be of any help”, Aanya spoke as she pulled out the letter from her handbag and presented it to Aarav.

Aanya,

Surely it will be tragic, especially since it has been expected of a loving and kind father to always be loving and kind and hopefully own it to his daughter- ‘cause he was supposedly a knight, who protected her till eternity. But has been so reckless and irresponsible and utmost manic when he tried raising you without your mother, to relax and comfort and provide ogles of affection you deserved. Of course, it is quite mechanical to expect a one certain man who has about only a few hours till death, to impart wisdom. So expectedly, I’ll be dead in four hours and thirty two minutes.

Love,

Your Father

Aarav looked up towards Aanya, perplexed and bewildered, his dark brown eyes growing wide in amazement. “It’s not a farewell note Miss Vashishtha”, he spoke. “It is a code.”

“What?” she stood up and came ahead as she took the note from Aarav’s hands. “What do you mean it is a code?”

“Oh! It was ingenious of you to come to me. Ecstatic. Amazing. This is better than what I had expected”, he continued.

“What are you trying to say Aarav?” Rehann asked, himself glancing at the note in Aanya’s hands.

“Let’s head to the study, shall we?” Aarav jumped up and led the way, urging his two companions to follow.

They all soon entered Aarav’s study room and it was a sight to behold. The room was built of humongous proportions, courtesy of the bungalow Aarav had purchased from his last treasure money. On the main wall was painted a huge world map, various spots on it marked with an X and notes and memos stuck on others, all being connected by long colored threads. There were pictures stuck of many historical men, there were pictures stuck of many men Aanya didn’t even know. The rest of the room was littered with hundreds of

books. A few laptops adorned the empty tables placed towards the center of the room, while white boards with lots of writings adorned the other walls.

“So this is the mess your mother warned me about?” Rehann exclaimed, surprised at seeing the condition of his friend’s study room.

“You don’t come here?” Aanya asked her.

“He doesn’t bring people into this room much. Consider yourself fortunate”, he spoke with a smile.

“Here. Look”, Aarav said as he displayed an image of a man from his projector on a wall. “Do you know him?”

“I don’t think so”, Aanya replied.

“He was Sir Stefan La Vache, a Frenchman born in Slovakia. He was the pioneer of Glavach Industries, and among other things they made quite a fortune selling guns during the Cold War. He was found murdered at his residence in the Slovakian capital, Bratislava around six months ago. Right around the time your father met you in Vienna.”

“What does this has to do with my father?” Aanya asked.

“In his press conference, your father mentioned that an incident happened a few months ago which changed his perception about the masters of the Ring of the Seven. It is my belief that your father was referring to Sir La Vache’s murder. I had long suspected him to be one of the masters and although his murder was carefully covered up, with hardly any mention in the western media, I had my doubts that something was wrong within the League.”

“The League?” she enquired.

“Yes. That is what I used to call them. The Ring of the Seven was taken up by the media after your father’s death. Nonetheless, if one of the masters was murdered, it was obvious that the other masters would have paid him a visit.”

“So that is why you asked me to hack into the Slovakian servers that day?” Rehann interrupted.

“Precisely. I tried tracking the prominent people who flew into Bratislava for around a week after his murder but didn’t come across any leads. Of course, the masters would have been very careful so as to keep their identities a

secret. Hence your father, flew to Vienna to attend a wedding, which is less than a hundred kilometers from Bratislava.”

“The Ring of the Seven? Does this mean that there are seven masters? And what are they? Some sort of a secret society?” Rehann asked Aarav.

“From whatever I have heard and researched in this matter, it is clear that there is a secret society guarding an ancient treasure. A society existing since the time of Ashoka.”

“Ashoka? You mean Emperor Ashoka?” Aanya asked.

“Of course. Who else?” Aarav snubbed at the silliness of the question. “It is believed that Ashoka uncovered a secret treasure, a treasure so rich that it could bring entire kingdoms out of poverty, a treasure unimaginable, which could make its possessor the most powerful person in history. It is believed that he had hidden it somewhere and set up a council of nine men who secretly served as the guardians of the treasure. He called them ‘*Navratna*’, or his nine gems. It is widely believed that the nine men secretly held power in various fields; from arts to administration, from military to religion; they were everywhere. They passed on their powers to the person of their choosing and thus ensured that the knowledge of the location of the hidden treasure survived. You can find their mention somewhere or the other throughout history. They are referred to as the Nine Unknown Men by the secret society enthusiasts. I preferred to call them the league since I was unsure if their number would have remained the same through thousands of years. But looks like we finally have their name and count out in the open after all.”

“It’s like the Illuminati then?” Rehann spoke up.

“Only much older and much powerful”, Aarav replied. “Dan Brown will write a novel about them one day, I tell you.”

“My father’s farewell note. You said that it was a code. How?” Aanya asked.

“Oh yes! That’s not a note. It’s a cipher. Look.” He took away the note from her hand and placed it on a platform at his desk, making the projector display the image in an enlarged fashion. “Look again at the note. It is a simple cipher. People use these kind of ciphers to hide a message in plain and ordinary looking texts. Look closely at the note again and pick out the first

letter out of every fifth word. The letters of your name are an indication you see. Your father devised it that way. Here. See.”

Aarav took a highlighter and went along highlighting the first letter of every fifth word.

Aanya,

*Surely it will be tragic, **e**specially since it has been **e**xpected of a loving and **k**ind father to always be **l**oving and kind and hopefully **o**wn it to his daughter ‘**c**ause he was supposedly a **k**night, who protected her till **e**ternity. But has been so **r**eckless and irresponsible and utmost **m**anic when he tried raising **y**ou without your mother, to **r**elax and comfort and provide **o**gles of affection to you. **O**f course, it is quite **m**echanical to expect a one **c**ertain man who has about **o**nly a few hours till **d**eath, to impart wisdom. So **e**xpectedly, I’ll be dead in four hours and thirty two minutes.*

Love,

Your Father

“SEEK. LOCKER. MY. ROOM. CODE”, Aarav highlighted the message.

“Unbelievable”, Aanya exclaimed.

“Fantastic”, Rehann uttered. “But what is the code?”

“Don’t you think that the man was a little too precise with the time remaining until his death?” Aarav smiled a little. “I think we will get a few more answers from a certain locker in your father’s room”, he continued before heading towards the door, leaving both Rehann and Aanya wondering behind.

They all arrived at the mansion of the Vashishthas in about an hour and rushed towards Mr. Harish’s room.

“This house is even better than I had imagined”, Rehann whispered to Aarav who was unbothered by the magnificence of the mansion of the richest man

of India.

“I have personally been to his room countless times, but I have never seen any locker here”, Aanya exclaimed as she led both the men to her father’s room.

“We’ll have to dig deeper, I guess”, Aarav replied. “Whatever it is in the locker, he obviously didn’t want anyone else to find out.”

Aarav and Rehann started with the corners while Aanya opened the cupboards and started taking out her father’s stuff. She shuffled through his array of suits and shoes to look for a hidden locker but didn’t find anything. Aarav and Rehann were left empty handed too and Aarav shifted his gaze to admire the well maintained mini-library of Mr. Vashishtha on a wall to his right. The others continued with the search but weren’t able to find a locker to their dismay.

“The Maps of Shangri La?” Aarav gazed at a title that seemed rather misplaced between the collections of non-fiction books. “That’s odd”, he went ahead and pulled out the book from the shelf which suddenly gave way to a slightest of click sound from under the rug.

“Did you hear that?” Rehann uttered as he pulled up the rug and started stomping his feet on the marble floor. His feet soon made a hollow sound upon the floor as both Aanya and Aarav gathered around. “I think that if I press this it will...”, he stopped speaking as a marble tile slid up, revealing a square compartment with a little locker resting in the middle. “There’s our locker”, Rehann continued as he picked it out and kept it on a table nearby. The locker was jet black in color and petite, with four scrolling bars at the front and numbers marked on their faces.

“SEEK. LOCKER. MY. ROOM”, Aarav uttered. “So far so good. Now let’s enter the code”. He moved ahead and scrolled the digits on the face of the locker. “Zero. Four. Three. Two”, he muttered as he progressed before turning a little knob and opening the locker. Inside it, they found a little brown book with the symbol of a lion made on the top. Aarav took out the book and was about to open it, but Rehann signaled him to pass it over to Aanya first, as a courtesy. Aarav did the same, although he appeared to be disappointed while handing it over.

“It is okay. You can open it. I wouldn’t have been able to find this book without you in the first place”, Aanya responded.

“Very well”, Aarav opened the diary and displayed it across for all of them to read.

Dear Aanya,

If you are reading this, it means that I am dead. And thus it is my duty to pass over this information to you since it is of essence that you, my only heir, come to know about who your old man really was. I was told this secret when my father was on his deathbed, and even though by that time I had had my doubts, I could have never imagined the kind of history our family goes back to. Among other things, the Vashishthas were always rich. My father was an industrialist, his father was a prominent landlord during the time of the British rule, and his forefathers held various high and powerful positions under the reign of their respective rulers. My father told me that he was a member of an ancient group, a society of powerful individuals, who all were designated protectors of an ancient treasure. It all began during the times of Emperor Ashoka. He believed that the kingdom of Kalinga had their coffers filled with a historic treasure of the gods. His grandfather, the great Chandragupta Maurya tried to claim the treasure, but failed. So did his father Bindusara. Hence it was only after Ashoka waged and won the greatest battle in the history of our nation that he finally uncovered that treasure.

But the war had changed him. He was so much moved by the bloodshed that he realized that there was more to being a ruler than just waging wars and annexing empires. He came to the conclusion that the lust of the Kalinga treasure had blinded him. Thus he moved the entire wealth secretly at some place in the Himalayas, ensuring that no one could ever access those riches, because whoever was to lay his hands on it, would become the most powerful person in the history of mankind.

He then created nine guardians, nine masters whose purpose was to guard the treasure forever. After his passing, the nine masters collected together and brainstormed on a way which could ensure the survival of the treasure and prevent anyone from among them to betray the others and claim it. They thus created sacred books, nine books of nine different arts which each of

them had mastered and fashioned a map which could highlight the location of the treasure when each of the books were combined. They picked out the heirs to continue their secrets and thus ensured the survival of the map.

Within the first hundred years however, two of the masters tried claiming the treasure, leading to a messy war, making the other masters eliminate them in the end, thus shortening the number of masters and leading them to rewrite the books among themselves, effectively giving birth to the Ring of the Seven.

The seven masters had seven secret books and then they decided to part ways. In each book, a single other master's name was mentioned, thus making each master responsible to keep a watch over one other, and that master wouldn't know about the one watching over him. The system worked effectively for hundreds of years, until recently when I suspected that someone had killed a man, whom I had doubted to be a master. I supposed that someone from the inside had ordered a hit, and my suspicion was proven when I discovered that two more masters were murdered. Soon I learnt that I was their next target. And hence I tried to sort out this chaos. I tried to find other masters, for their identity was unknown to me. But if you're reading this note, it probably means that they got to me.

Consider this note my farewell, my dear child. I know we have had our differences and I wasn't able to raise you with the love and affection that your mother showered upon you. I know that I was not a great father to you, and I only wish it was possible for us to spend some time together, happily and without any regrets. I wish for the time to stop and go a little back in history, to a place when your mother was free of cancer and you were still my baby girl, who would walk in the halls of this house wearing huge glasses of your mother on your petite face and pretend to be a grown up. I wish I had paid more attention to my family. I wish I got to spend some more time with both of you. I wish... that I could get that time back, somehow. And I am willing to shed all my wealth, trade all my secrets for just a single day with both of you....

But I am afraid that I do have a motive behind writing this note. I know that I got myself in deep with somebody who is hell bent on killing the other masters and claim the secret treasure of the Himalayas once and for all. Unfortunately the ones I found were already murdered. And if you are indeed reading this letter, it means that I am gone too. I am losing my will to fight this anonymous foe, who for all that we know, could well become the most

powerful man on Earth. So if it isn't much to ask, consider this my dying wish.

I want you to complete this task.

I want you to end what I started, to find the secret treasure in the Himalayas and prevent it from falling in the wrong hands. You are stronger than you think you are. Do whatever you can, by employing any necessary tactic that you can think of. But you have to stop that evil from laying his hands on the treasure of the gods.

In the end, I can only say that it all does matter. Your opinions, your choices, which I was too blind to see. It all does matter. I was scared when you decided to make your own career. But, now I will go with a smile on my face, knowing how strong a woman you have become.

Guess you are like your mother only, after all.

Go to the location I will mention on the next page and you will find your answers. I know I failed to realize this, but you are the best thing that has ever happened to me.

Stay safe. Stay strong.

Love

Harish.

By then, Aanya had tears rolling down her eyes. No matter her differences, she had loved her father and adored how he led his life with his principles. The memories of all the good times she had spent with him came rushing back, making her sit down on her knees and cry vehemently. Rehann held her up by the shoulder and dragged a chair for her. Aarav on the other hand, had turned the note and looked at the address:

The Asiatic Society of Mumbai

Contact: Mrs. Jolly Daruwala

Aarav had a smile on his face. "The Asiatic Society of Mumbai. Fantastic. It's hardly an hour from here."

“Aarav”, Rehann whispered to him and then pointed towards Aanya, trying to control Aarav’s excitement and make him focus more towards Aanya’s memory of her father. They both stood there for a moment. Aarav trying to awkwardly handle the situation and Rehann understandingly comforting her.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to... sorry. Can you both please excuse me for a moment”, Aanya managed to speak.

“Of course”, Rehann spoke and went for the gate before signaling Aarav to follow him.

“It is almost half past four”, Aarav pointed to his wristwatch once he was out of Harish’s room.

“So?” Rehann enquired.

“So... the library is almost an hour from this place. If we get there by six and find the Jolly person, than we can probably get our hands on Mr. Vashishtha’s secret book before it closes.”

“She is grieving Aarav. She had just lost her father. You can’t just expect her to give up on her emotions and follow you on some treasure chase.”

“Rehann, didn’t you read the things he had mentioned in that letter? Didn’t you read his exact warning about the kind of evil that is chasing this gold? This is the biggest secret in the history of mankind. Much bigger than I would’ve fathomed. Thousands died in the Battle of Kalinga and many have been murdered since for the protection of the location of this treasure. And now, after so many centuries, someone is on his way to claim it. Someone evil, who’ll probably misuse it. Can’t you see the history associated with it? The greatest Indian emperor waged the most brutal war in our history for the sake of finding this treasure, and upon seeing the bloodshed and the deaths it had caused, he converted to Buddhism and helped in spreading one of the most prominent religions of Asia. This treasure is our history, you see. It is our heritage. And there is nothing bigger than that.”

Rehann looked at Aarav with a blank face. He was out of words. The way Aarav had explained the value of the treasure to him made him realize the magnitude of the problem looming over it. He had always been mesmerized by the way Aarav perceived the things differently. More than the value that the treasure carried, Aarav cared more about the history associated with it. “I

forgot that you were always a history geek”, Rehann mocked him.

“That’s how I make my living my friend”, Aarav replied with a smile. “But what should we do now? If she is not in a position to come, should we head out to the Asiatic Society on our own?”

“And hijack her quest? Mr. Vashishtha didn’t write that note for us Aarav. He wrote it for her.”

“I don’t think that Mr. Vashishtha would mind much if I solve this mystery and save the treasure from going in the hands of some madman.”

“You can’t do this Aarav. I won’t let you go without her.”

“What are you going to do? Hit me?”

“You don’t want me swinging punches at you. I have a black belt in Karate, remember?”

“Which you got in fifth standard and then left Karate to focus more on your love of computers. Like it or not, but you are just another computer nerd.”

“We are waiting for her, Aarav. And that is final.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you won’t come, Rehann. In fact, I would be honored if you stayed behind and erm... comforted her.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Well, it is quite obvious. Isn’t it? There is a beautiful damsel in distress and you just can’t stop yourself from rushing for her help.”

“You... are mad. You’ve lost it”, Rehann spoke with a blush on his face.

“It is just like the last time you see. Only more obvious on this occasion. What was the name of your ex?”

“Shut up Aarav. Now”.

“She was the daughter of the hotelier, wasn’t she? Or was she the one before the daughter of that builder from Delhi? I must say Rehann, your taste in women is quite rich.”

“You are an utter moron, Aarav. And at least I have a taste in women. What about you? When was the last time you went on a date? In tenth standard I

think, with the daughter of our English teacher, right? That didn't end well", Rehann uttered with a smile.

"Oh! She was a charmer. I would marry her tomorrow if I meet her again."

"She is my friend still. I must tell you, she is fat now."

"Love doesn't see shape or size, my friend", Aarav spoke shedding some knowledge about a topic he knew nothing about.

All of a sudden, the big doors to the room of Harish Vashishtha flung open and Aanya stepped out. She had washed her face, put her glasses back on and composed herself.

"Miss Aanya, are you alright?" Rehann went at once to her aid.

"Yes. I'm fine. Thank you", she replied. "The address was the Asiatic Society of Mumbai, wasn't it? I think that if we leave right now, we could reach there on time."

"Of course", Rehann spoke as he looked at Aarav.

"I'll meet you both outside in a moment. I have to go to my room first", she spoke before calling out an attendant. "Nancy, ask Ashok to pull out the Rolls please", she uttered before exiting.

"Save it Aarav", Rehann stopped him from speaking as they both headed out of the house.

Chapter-3

The Secret Book

“Oh! Wow!” Rehann exclaimed as they arrived at the Asiatic Society of Mumbai. “I have been born and brought up in this city, how come I have never seen this building? It is magnificent.”

“My father used to drop me here during my school days sometimes. It is one of the finest libraries in the country”, Aanya remarked.

“And one of the oldest”, Aarav continued. “It was built sometime in the early nineteenth century and was home to the Chief Judge of Bombay, who formed the Bombay Literary Society here, for intellectuals to meet and discuss various aspects of the Indian sub-continent. The group later evolved into the Asiatic Society of Bombay and then to Asiatic Society of Mumbai after the renaming of the city. The library here houses over a hundred thousand books, many of which have been classified as rare and valuable. It also has one of the only two known original copies of Dante Alighieri’s famous poem, Divine Comedy among many rare and ancient texts in Sanskrit, Persian, Prakrit and Pali. This place you see, is heaven on Earth to a man like me.”

“They have an original copy of Divine Comedy? I didn’t know that”, Aanya said, surprised.

“In fact Mussolini offered them one million pounds for that copy in 1930, only to be turned down. I’m guessing that your forefathers might have played a role in that, Miss Aanya.”

“Please don’t call me Miss. It makes me sound old.”

“Alright”, Aarav spoke as the car stopped. “Shall we?”

Rehann was awestruck by the beauty of the building. It was heavily influenced by the classic Roman and Greek architecture and had a portico with eight pillars supporting it. A flight of thirty steps led up to the library, and the vastness of the building only exemplified the kind of history it carried. Aarav was growing more and more excited, imagining what next

secret will greet him inside the library. He was almost skipping the steps while climbing up, asking both Rehann and Aanya to keep up with him. The library was splendid. Tall statues of prominent men and busts of historical figures adored the various hallways of the building. But the best part about the place lit up Aarav's eyes and made him nostalgic; soaring shelves and cupboards, stacked with various pieces of literature adorned the giant rooms, and invoked the love which he shared for reading.

"I've never said this about a library before, but this place is beautiful", Rehann spoke before stopping in his tracks and pointing to a table in the corner. "Hey guys! I think I found her."

That table was graced by a tiny brass nameplate, bearing the name of the head librarian, Mrs. Jolly Daruwala. The three of them moved towards the desk, behind which sat an old lady, who was typing something on a computer.

"Excuse me", Aanya spoke to her.

"If you want to borrow a book, come tomorrow", the old lady uttered without shifting her gaze. "We are closing early today due to some restoration work and so it is..." she stopped speaking as she looked up and gazed at the face of Aanya. She soon looked at the men standing with her suspiciously, before getting up from her chair and bringing her hand forward to grab a bell placed on her desk. She rung it around five times as she grabbed the attention of the few men who were sitting in the library. "We are closed now", she mustered all her strength to speak as loudly as she could in her mellow voice. "You can all head out. We are having some restoration work done here today. Please stack your books in the columns you took them from before leaving. Thank you."

"I am ...", Aanya tried speaking before the librarian shushed her away.

"I know who you are. But we don't want everyone else to know about it, do we? Now. Quick. Follow me", she spoke as she led them away.

Mrs. Daruwala made them follow her atop a flight of stairs before heading to her right through a wide hallway. They walked silently and stopped once they came across a room to the very end. A marble stone greeted the entrance of the room, reading: *Donated by Mr. Radheshyam Motilal Vashishtha to the*

Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1947.

“This way”, Mrs. Daruwala instructed the trio as she unlocked the door to the room. The room was largely empty and comparatively smaller to the rest of the place. It was built entirely out of white marble. Four columns stacked with books were placed to a side while the rest of the room was adorned by a few paintings. In the center was placed a big round table, with four chairs accompanying it.

“I’m sorry for your loss Miss Aanya”, the librarian spoke to her once they were inside. “Your father visited this place quite often. This entire wing, in fact, was donated to this society by your grandfather. I remember that the last time Mr. Vashishtha had visited this room. He had asked me to only allow you after him.”

“When was the last time he came here?” Aarav asked her.

“I don’t think it is necessary for treasure hunters to come here and spoil the legacy of a great man.”

Aarav gave her a puzzled look, but before he could retort Aanya came to his defense. “He is a friend of mine, ma’am. You can answer whatever he asks.”

The librarian looked at Aarav displeasingly before she replied to him. “He came here about a month ago, before he passed away.”

“And how frequently did he visit this place?” Aarav continued with his questions.

“About seven to ten times in a year. Sometimes more.”

“Did he visit any other rooms in this library?”

“No. He came to the reading room a couple of times to chat with me. He was a humble man. But apart from that, I don’t recollect him visiting any other rooms. He always came on Sundays when the library was closed, and his men used to contact me and tell me about his arrival two or three days in advance.”

“And what exactly it is that he did here?”

“I don’t know. I only opened the gate for him and never stayed. I think he maintains his own private collection of rare books here.”

“Thank you very much. You were of great help.”

“If you need any assistance from me, you can find me at my desk.”

“We will. Thank you”, Aanya spoke as Mrs. Daruwala left the room.

Rehann went ahead and closed the door from the inside. “What now?” he uttered.

Aarav immediately went to the books stacked in the columns and started examining them. “Let’s see what we have here”, he uttered. “The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, War and Peace, Catch-22, Great Expectations, Lord of the Rings, The Chronicles of Narnia, Robinson Crusoe, Republic, Homage to Catalonia, Pride and Prejudice. No there is nothing odd here. Let’s see this shelf. A Tale of Two Cities, Harry Potter, The Godfather, Tales of Mystery and Terror, An Empire Lost... huh, that’s a strange title. Nothing here too. Let’s see that one. Godan, Madhushala, Raag Darbari, Chandrakanta, Rashmirathi, Nirmala, Chitralkha, Geetanjali, Bhagavad Gita.” Aarav moved his arms over his hair and pulled himself away in frustration. “There is a pattern here. I know it. But what could it be. There is nothing out of the ordinary here. Those are all classics. First editions probably. But what does it mean?”

“Maybe he wrote a code hidden in the note? Again?” Rehann asked.

“No. I went through it. That is a genuine note. It would have been difficult for him to hide a cryptogram in a letter that long. This doesn’t make any sense.”

Aarav went through all the books again, pulling each one out and hearing hard for any clicks. But to his dismay, those were just a bunch of books, nothing else. “He must have a book hidden here somewhere. He mentioned it in his letter. Each of the masters had a secret book pertaining to a secret art, and all the books combined would reveal the map of the treasure.”

“Wait!” Rehann spoke up. “You just saw the covers of the books. What if the material inside is something else?”

They both looked at each other for a moment before rushing to pick out the books and going through all of them, one by one. “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times”, Aarav picked out a book and started reading before

shuffling to another one. "... Under such circumstances, I naturally gravitated to London, that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained..." he put the book back as he wiped a trickle of sweat from his forehead and switching over to another one. "The sun shone bright over the Maltar glacier, its soft blaze pelting on the bloodied ice cover". He stopped and thrust the book back into the shelf. "This isn't the secret book. Rehann, you pick up the books in Hindi and Urdu. I will go through the ones on this shelf."

Aarav picked up another one and started shuffling through the pages. His dark brown hair, which he carefully set himself by applying products, were falling down effortlessly over his forehead; his eyes, which matched the color of his hair, pacing through pages of the classics of literature. He was biting his lips due to anxiousness, his snub nose twitching along with it. Aarav was a man of incredible focus when it came to the things he loved. Yet he would delay the tasks he hated till the very last second, be it the subjects he never liked in school or paying his taxes when he grew up. He was twenty four years old, a fact which surprised many and quite young for the way he looked. He was extremely conscious of his public image and always made sure that he was spotted in the best of attires outside whenever he left his home. He was born in a middle-class family in the town of Ratlam, somewhere leaning towards the western end of central India. He was prodigious from a young age, and displayed remarkable prowess when it came to languages and history. He was shy by nature and never really opened up, always remaining quiet and to himself. His nature was only worsened when he was sent to the bustling metropolis of Mumbai for his studies at a young age, turning his shyness into being perceived as rudeness by many. He was at his hometown on vacations from the first year of college, that he made his first treasure hunt and helped in discovering an ancient Mughal gem that was gifted to one of the oldest families of Ratlam. He had progressed a lot in the eight years since, and became particularly famous when he uncovered an ancient treasure in the fort of Chittorgarh. That discovery was covered massively by the Indian media, thanks to no big news happening in that week, making Aarav Kohrrathi a celebrity overnight, a treasure hunter, one of the only few in the world. The treasure also brought him riches. The government claimed control over the discovery and gave an undisclosed amount, a share from the treasure to each of the hunters. Aarav's was the largest share. He purchased a huge bungalow in Mumbai, and gave the rest of

his money to his father, a chartered accountant by profession, to make and manage his investments. Yet the hunt for the secret Himalayan treasure was one of the biggest challenges he had undertaken. He wasn't himself sure as to his ability to solve a mystery that was more than two thousand years old. Especially when he wasn't even able to find a book in a library.

"No! No! No! He grunted in frustration after about half an hour. None of the books have anything irregular with them. He placed them back in the same order as they were and sat on one of the chairs before closing his eyes to think.

"I didn't find anything either", Rehann spoke to Aanya. "Might have torn a page or two of some medieval Urdu couplets rather."

Aanya passed a genuine smile, her first in many days. "I didn't find anything out of ordinary with the books placed on the shelf in the back either. Maybe we are looking at it wrong. Maybe the books have nothing to do with what my father wanted me to find."

"There is nothing else in this room that stands out of the ordinary. I stomped the floor and knocked at the walls too. But guess what? No hollow sounds", Rehann spoke in frustration. "There is nothing else in this room apart from the ceiling fan with so many fancy lights, four ordinary paintings and a set of table and chairs."

"A ceiling fan with many fancy lights", Aarav's face lit up as he turned his gaze towards the huge fan overlooking the room. The fan was abnormally big, with four bronze colored wings which had lights dropping down in an asymmetric fashion. The fan was more of a decorative piece than to be used for what it was meant to. "Of course, the ceiling fan", Aarav uttered again.

"I was just naming the things I could see here", Rehann spoke, unsure of Aarav's conjecture.

"No! Rehann, it is the best suggestion you have given me in your life. It is fantastic. And so obvious when I think of it now."

"It's not obvious to me."

"You are seeing it my friend but you don't perceive the facts. We have a fan in the room. Correct. But where is the switch to turn on the fan?"

Rehann gazed across the room again in amazement. “I’ll be damned. There is no switch.”

“Now look at the lights hanging down from it”, Aarav continued. “Nine lights in total. That is nine lights dropping from four wings. Eight of them are in symmetry, two each for a wing. But there is something odd about the third wing you see, there is an extra light attached towards the front. Absolutely fantastic.”

“What does it mean?” Rehann spoke again. “Do we have to pull it?”

“Pull it. Or shake it. Either way, we need a lasso or something like that.”

Aanya, who standing at the back all this while, watching the two men engage in a brainstorming session about a ceiling fan expressed her displeasure at last. “I don’t think that my father would make it all so absurd, such that it would require him to create a lasso and pull a light from a ceiling fan every time that he visited this place.”

Both Aarav and Rehann stared at their feet after hearing Aanya’s words. “What do you mean? There is nothing else out of the ordinary at this place”, Aarav expressed his frustration at being unable to come up with a solution.

“You see that painting?” Aanya spoke while pointing at one of the works of art adorning the walls of the room. “A similar painting hangs on a wall in my mother’s library. The only thing that stands out from both is that the sun is towards the right side of the frame in the one in my mother’s library, but it is on the left in this one.” Aanya moved ahead and pressed her fingers at the bottom of the golden frame of the painting, which landed on a button hardly a second later. The entire painting slid up all of a sudden, revealing a safe lodged inside the wall behind it. Aanya looked at both the men in her company and passed a victorious smile.

“I didn’t even knew that your mother had her own separate library, let alone about a similar painting hanging on its walls. I had to go with the information that I had at hand and work with it”, Aarav defended himself.

“I know”, Aanya spoke smilingly again as she proceeded towards the safe.

“Fingerprint scanner. No codes for this one”, Aarav gave a subtle hint to his fellows that he was right about there being no code in the note left by Mr.

Vashishtha.

Aanya placed her thumb on the scanner and a message displayed across the digital screen to the side of the locker: *Fingerprint scan successful. Stand straight for the retinal scan.*

“Your father knows how to protect his secrets”, Rehann said to Aanya as she moved ahead and opened her eyes wide. The safe made a sound and Aanya grabbed its handle to open it. Inside the secured container awaited a book that was centuries old, much older than any other book in the room. Aanya picked it out carefully. It was surprisingly cold, the container was specially modified to prevent the book from any kind of erosion.

Aanya carefully brought it out and placed it on the table. The book had a golden cover, surprisingly modern for an ancient text like that. On its surface was written: *The Book of Alchemy* in black.

“The Book of Alchemy”, Aarav muttered under his breath. “Oh! Of course! How can I be such a big fool?” he grew excited.

“What now?” Aanya asked.

“Your father said it in the interview, right before he shot him...”, he stopped speaking, seeing the expressions of both Rehann and Aanya change. “I’m sorry”, he continued. “But in his speech, he did say that he had seen so much wealth in his lifetime that it was as if he was an alchemist who knew how to convert metal into gold.”

“Oh! Yes he did”, Rehann spoke.

“Your father laid his biggest secret out in the world in front of thousands of people watching him, yet not a single soul exists who could find it out. He had the Book of Alchemy. Your forefathers knew how to covert metals into gold. That is how your family has always been affluent. That is why your family has been rich since so long. Your ancestors knew the secret to make gold out of nothing”, Aarav stopped to grab his breath.

“Fantastic”, Rehann uttered. “I wonder what secrets rest of the books hold.”

“But how come it is written in English?” she asked Aarav.

“I think that the successors of this book continued translating this work to the

language prevalent during their times. I am sure that we will find a lot of other languages when we read the book. You can tell it by the color of the pages. Look how they change consistently. Paper as we know it wasn't invented at the time when this book was written. Ashoka probably died in 232 BC while the precursor to modern paper was invented in China somewhere around 200 BC. There are evidences of writings in India on hemp based fibers dating back to around the same time. If the initial pages of this book are indeed made from the same or some other material, it would be a massive breakthrough to understand the beginning of the art of writing in our country. It could further verify in approximating the year in which Emperor Ashoka died and serve as a check to what we know presently. Ah! So much history could be proven from just the quality of material used in the earliest versions of this document that I feel like crying right now."

Rehann again admired Aarav's perception, which made him appreciate the history associated with the book, rather than just the fact that it contained the process to convert metal into gold. Sadly, Aanya didn't.

"I'm sorry", she spoke while pulling the book back as soon as Aarav tried to reach for it. "If this book indeed contains the secret to make gold, I cannot share the contents of it with anybody. It is my family's legacy after all."

"But we really don't care about the gold. You can trust us", Rehann spoke, concerned; while Aarav took in a deep breath to limit his excitement and control himself.

"You are treasure hunters. Of course you care about the gold", Aanya retorted. "I only met the both of you today and I have already shared a lot of details with you than one can imagine."

"It is fine", Aarav spoke. "We don't need to see the procedure to make gold from metals. We just need the details of the master your father was supposed to watch over. He mentioned in his note that he had to search for the three masters himself and then he found out that they were murdered. So if he had to search for them, it means that the master he was supposed to watch over is still alive. We just need that information from this book to continue on the quest. Oh and also, I would like to borrow it once to perform some tests on the paper in my lab. It will be completely fine. There will be no damage I promise you."

“No”, Aanya stood her ground. “I cannot let anyone look through the book. It just cannot happen. I will read the details about the master myself and let you both know. And I cannot allow you to carry any tests on the papers of this book Aarav.”

“But I promise that I...”

“Are you telling me that you will conduct these tests on the papers without opening the book?”

“No. But can’t you see? Can’t you admire the kind of history we can uncover just from the pages of the document you are holding? After everything I told you?”

“Yes. I admire that. I can understand your curiosity about the history. But it is my family’s legacy.”

“God! Your father went public with your family’s legacy”, Aarav raised his voice.

“Aarav”, Rehann tried to calm him down, for he knew that Aarav didn’t handle situations well when he got angry.

“No. I am serious about this”, he took in a deep breath. “I can’t understand why people always underappreciate the history. It is our heritage, it is our culture, it is our religion, and it is our boundaries and borders. It is in the spices you use in your food and it is in the temple you visit every morning. It is in the plantations from where your tea comes from and it is in the city you were born in. You see, I don’t care about some formula that can make me gold. I care about the book in your hand Aanya that can probably help me understand and validate the beginning of the writing system in India.”

“I understand Aarav, but I am afraid I cannot help”, she replied as she turned back to leave.

“Will you both stop fighting? Don’t we have a treasure to find?” Rehann interrupted.

“What treasure?” Aarav was at his wits end and fuming with rage. “Why does it matter if she is going to stop me from searching the history behind it anyway?”

“Aarav, now you are being a moron”, Aanya raised her voice too. “This is the last we are speaking on this matter. I am not giving up this book for any tests, on any of the pages, at any point of time, by anyone.”

“Fine! Then I won’t continue helping you or rather guiding you through this treasure hunt. I bet you’ll drop that book twice before even exiting this library in your fancy Louboutin heels”, Aarav’s ego got the better of him.

“Aarav. Stop it. Now”, Rehann finally raised his voice.

“Oh what, have you changed sides now that you have a crush on the pretty lady?”

Rehann was left with his mouth open. He knew how ignorant and mad Aarav got when he didn’t have what he wished. But he had never lost his calm on Rehann before.

“Oh my god”, Aanya looked questioningly at Rehann before shifting her gaze with disgust. “You know what. Thank you for your help so far. I’ll continue the quest from here myself.”

“Oh really? Don’t cry later when you are unable to solve even a simple Caesar’s cipher, assuming that you even know what it is. It will ruin your thousand dollar makeup”, Aarav continued spewing venom.

“Right! I found this book. If it wasn’t for me you’d still be pulling down that light with a lasso right now”, she barked at him.

“Oh that again. I didn’t have the necessary information at hand to solve the puzzle. And if I hadn’t decoded that first note you brought to me, you’d still have no idea about the very legacy you are bragging about.”

“I have heard enough from you. I don’t ever want to see your face again Mr. Kohrrathi.”

“Oh I hope the very same Miss Vashishtha. I wish you luck on your pretty treasure hunt ahead. You are a strong and independent woman after all. I hope I don’t have to see you holding a press conference soon too.”

“AARAV!” Rehann shouted at him. “Apologize to her. Now.”

Aarav’s gaze met the wet eyes of Aanya and he realized for a moment that he had crossed a line. But his ego made him simply pass an irritated stare

towards Rehann, making him excuse himself and walking away.

Chapter 4

First Blood

Aarav woke up in the afternoon the next day when the doorbell blasted through his ears. He held his head and woke up irritably before cursing the day and slowly waddling his way down to the main door of his bungalow. He saw the silhouette of a tall, lean man through the glass and knew at once who he was.

“Opening your own door? That’s a first”, Rehann spoke as he moved his lean body inside Aarav’s house and scratched his beard as he saw the condition of his friend.

Aarav took a deep yawn before finally speaking. “Parents went back to Ratlam. Cousin’s wedding.”

“And you weren’t invited?”

“Was. But there would be too many relatives with too many questions. My shyness and awkwardness achieves a whole new level when I am around them”, Aarav spoke as he continued waddling back and yawning loudly; his eyes still half closed and crashed on a couch in the drawing room.

“I have called you more than ten times since the morning”, Rehann spoke still disappointed with Aarav’s behavior from the previous night.

“And then you came to check in on me. You are not my girlfriend Rehann. People might start getting wrong ideas.”

“Right! Because you don’t have a girlfriend.”

Aarav opened his eyes and stared at Rehann before turning the other way and retiring back to sleep.

“It is one in the afternoon. How can you still be sleeping?”

“I had a rough night. Got in a messy fight with a pretty girl. She broke my heart.”

Rehann settled down on the opposite couch and turned on the TV. He started flipping through the channels and continued the suit for about ten minutes as none of them spoke.

“You can put on cartoons you know. They keep on showing the reruns of Pokemon and Shin Chan.”

“You and your love of cartoons. When will you grow up Aarav?”

“Some of the cartoons have much better plots and storylines than the biggest of blockbusters. And they do provide quite a high entertainment value. Half the adults won’t mind turning to cartoon shows when there is nobody in the room I tell you.”

“Are you done?” Rehann finally decided to bring up the topic of discussion.

“Done with what?”

“Your drama. Are we going to speak about what happened last night?”

“I don’t feel well you know. How about we first prepare a cup of coffee?”

“You crossed the line Aarav. You crossed the line and you were offensive and disgraceful.”

“Circumstances can change a person ...”

“You insulted her”, Rehann raised his voice. “You insulted her. And you hurt her. And the things you said about her father? I have seen you through some of your worst behaviors Aarav. I know about your anger issues, and self-obsession and your ego the size of a mountain. But I always thought that there was a limit to it. That there is only so much you can fall.”

Aarav looked up to meet Rehann’s stare and sulked.

“You insulted her Aarav. And I know that you have your own issues when you try to talk to women, but I have never seen you go down to this level to humiliate someone.”

“I’m sorry.” Aarav uttered in the lowest of voices. Rehann still stared at him as he gazed at his feet, admitting his fallacy. They both stayed silent for a while and only the sound from some news channel echoed in the hall.

“You are brilliant. You are the smartest man I have probably met. You know

your field better than anyone. And god knows I have always admired the passion which you have for it. But maybe it is time that you start learning about the human emotions a bit. Perhaps that will help you realize what a jerk you can be.”

“I said I am sorry. I know I overreacted. I don’t know what happened but when she refused my offer, I became frustrated. I mean, I know she is probably right morally. Even someone like me can understand her emotions. But don’t you tell me that my demands were wrong. Because any man who would judge that situation based on logic could understand the importance of the things I was trying to explain.”

“Oh my god”, Rehann suddenly stood up and reached for the remote to increase the volume of the TV. “Aarav. Look”, he pointed to the screen as they both saw something that shook the daylights out of them.

The headline on the news channel ran: *Woman found murdered in the Asiatic Society of Mumbai library.*

“Oh god!” Rehann muttered as he closely listened to the news.

“Call Aanya. Now. Tell her that we’ll be at her place in an hour”, Aarav managed to speak as he dashed towards his room.

They arrived at the Vashishtha’s mansion soon and were directed straight towards the living room where Aanya was already waiting for them.

“I just heard about it. What happened? How?” she asked Rehann, concerned.

“Mrs. Daruwala was murdered last night”, he shed light on the incident.

“Media reports say that she was shot by someone at around nine.”

“We must have been followed”, Aarav joined the conversation. “I think the killer would have questioned her about us. About what we did at the place. Whoever that evil master is, he knows that Mr. Vashishtha would have passed over the secret book to his only heir. And in order to get to the other master, the one your father was supposed to watch over, he would need that book at any cost. Please tell me that you didn’t leave it back in the library?”

“It is... safe with me”, Aanya spoke ignorantly.

“Good. I would just say that the book is paramount for the killer. And he

would like to get his hands on it anyway that he could. Just... stay safe as you move along on your quest.”

“I’ll remember”, she snubbed.

“Guys! Come on. Let us forget what happened last night and focus on the bigger picture at hand”, Rehann interfered, trying to sort out the quarrel. “We all said somethings and...”

“I didn’t”, she interfered.

“Remember the whole lasso episode?” Aarav tried proving her wrong.

“Guys, please. Not again. We have much more to lose from this silly fight”, Rehann again jumped to put out the fire. “Aanya, you have to protect your family’s legacy and fulfil your father’s dying wish by finding this treasure first. And Aarav, think about the kind of history you can uncover further on the quest. I mean that treasure could have artifacts dating to hundreds of years before Ashoka was even born. Isn’t that something that could influence the history of our country on a much larger scale than the kind of fiber those ancient people used to write on?”

Aarav tried speaking something but decided it better to keep it to himself.

“The truth is”, he started talking, “that the danger associated with this quest just increased many folds. There is a killer out there who wouldn’t think twice before killing us and so it is necessary that the three of us put aside our differences for the time being and stick together.”

“Okay”, Aanya also understood. “As long as you don’t talk to me about anything that isn’t related to this quest, we’re good.”

“It’s fine with me”, Aarav breathed a sigh of relief and finally decided to get to the point. “Now. Did you see the name of the master?”

Aanya realized Aarav’s lack of empathy, shrugged it off and decided to surrender. “It’s even better. Come to my father’s library, I’ll show you.”

Soon she took out the Book of Alchemy from a safe and headed to the library. She directly opened the very last page, on which her father had scribbled a lot. “This is much better. My father also mentioned the names of the masters who were murdered. He had scribbled a lot of names, crossed out many, but specifically highlighted the masters he knew about and the books

they possess.

“Can we take a look at it?” Rehann asked her politely.

“Of course. There is nothing about the process of alchemy on the last few pages. I went through it yesterday and trust me, you won’t be able to follow the formula even if you were a genius chemist.”

Rehann took the book and Aarav peeped in from the corner of his eye as they went through the names highlighted on the page.

<i>Eliminated</i>	<i>Indira Chatterjee (The Performer) – Book of Arts –</i> <i>watched over..</i>
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<i>Eliminated</i>	<i>Sir Stefan La Vache (The Commander) – Book of Weaponry –</i> <i>watched over..</i>
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<i>Eliminated</i>	<i>Jagdish Rao (The Guru) – Book of Sight –</i> <i>watched over..</i>
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<i>Alchemy</i>	<i>Harish Vashishtha (The Alchemist) – Book of</i> <i>watching over..</i>
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<i>Finance</i>	<i>Shayna Maheshwari (The Capitalist) – Book of</i> <i>watching over..</i>
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“Indira Chatterjee, the famous actress, died of an apparent drug overdose around a year ago. Sir Stephen La Vache, tycoon of the western defense industry, died around six months ago by multiple stabbings from a sharp object. I was right about him being a master then. Jagdish Rao, the spiritual healer, prayed as a god by millions in the country, died of a car accident in the United States about two months ago. It means that the killer already has four books out of seven, including the one of the evil master himself. This is

bad news”, Aarav spoke.

“And the next master is Shayna Maheshwari. Isn’t she the CEO of Renaissance Bank?” Rehann asked.

“Yes”, Aanya replied. “She also sits on the Board of Directors of my father’s company. I have met her a couple of times myself. She’s as ruthless as she is charming.”

“And now that she knows that your father was one of the masters, she would meet us if you ask her”, Rehann continued.

“Where does she live?” Aarav asked Aanya.

“New Delhi”, she replied. “I think I can call her. Set up a meeting today itself.”

“It is dangerous for us to leave this mansion right now. The killer must still be following us. We can’t just lead him right up to another master”, Aarav expressed his concern.

“Don’t worry”, Aanya replied without looking at him. “I have it figured out. We’ll take my father’s private jet.” she started walking away as she made the call.

“Don’t say it”, Rehann spoke to Aarav as soon as Aanya went out of the room.

“You don’t know what I was going to say”, Aarav snapped.

“Something about the private jet and my taste in women with super rich fathers?”

“Well... that covers just sixty percent of what I wanted to say.”

“Drove in a Rolls Royce yesterday. Will fly in a private jet today. This is the best of the hunts we have been on so far.”

They both laughed a little as an attendant entered and served them with cakes.

“So this Shayna Maheshwari”, Aarav continued. “Tell me more about her.”

“I don’t know much other than the fact that she founded one of the biggest banks of India and sits on the board of many companies. She also invests a

lot in startups. That's how I came to know about her. A friend of mine pitched her his idea once. Got rejected unfortunately."

"Really? What was his idea?"

"Something about creating a hub for all the trolls and memes on the internet and using that as an aggregator for shadow promotion of brands by ridiculing them and turning them into a fad."

"Oh! That's quite genius".

"Yes. He created another startup though. Online grocery shopping app; he is a millionaire today."

"Rehann. Tell me. If you're good with computers, why not do something with computers. I bet you can become a millionaire entrepreneur with your skills."

"Yes. But I am a millionaire treasure hunter now."

"But if you were an entrepreneur, you'd be able to lead your own team; control people as you like to do."

"True. But then I won't be flying in private jets", he said with a smile.

"It's done. I spoke to her secretary. She'll meet us in the evening", Aanya spoke as she entered the room again.

"We'll go to our homes then. Will catch up with you at the airport in an hour", Rehann uttered as he got up.

They touched down in New Delhi four hours later and had a Jaguar waiting for them at the gates as they left the airport. They arrived at the Renaissance Towers an hour late than their scheduled meeting, courtesy of the brutal Delhi traffic, but it was a sight to behold. The towers of the Renaissance Bank stood tall and ended in triumphant arches towards the top; one of the buildings forty story high, and the twenty five story shorter one seemingly holding onto it. The towers were located in a business park sprawling with giant skyscrapers and yet managed to stand out from the rest. Bright lights ran up the buildings and reflected on their glass exterior as the towers glowed in the twilight sky. Stars were already starting to appear on the horizon as the

trio dashed into Tower-I and soon after the security checks, hurried to the elevators to reach the top most floor. Even though they were behind schedule, they didn't have to wait and were guided inside to Shayna Maheshwari's office.

"Aanya I am so sorry for your loss", she stood up from her desk and walked ahead slowly as she greeted them. "I never could have imagined that Harish was a member of the Ring too."

Aanya went ahead and shook her hand, accepting her condolences. Aarav on the other hand stood frozen in his tracks. He was expecting that some old woman in thick glasses and a low voice would greet them. Instead, he was captivated by Shayna's beauty. She must have probably been in her late thirties, but had maintained herself like someone fifteen years younger than her. She had silky, dark brown hair ending in blonde highlights towards the bottom, falling all the way down to her hips. She was blessed with alluring blue eyes, perfect fuller lips and an impeccable voluptuous body. She wore a purple business suit with a skirt ending just short of her knees, accentuating her figure further. She wore no accessories barring a watch on her wrist and a diamond necklace on her neck. She darted her blue eyes and stared at Aarav's brown ones for a moment before continuing to speak with Aanya in a low voice.

"Your staring game is so hard man. Remind me to never challenge you", Rehann whispered in his ears as slowly as he could.

"What?" Aarav was brought back to reality.

"Did you hear the violins go on in the back of your head? Did everything else become a blur and you could just focus on her face? Were you even staring at her face or...?"

"Shut up Rehann. This is not the time for jokes."

"At least don't keep your mouth open when you ogle at someone. It will make you less of a creep."

"Rehann! Shut up. Now."

"Isn't she a little erm... old for you? Oh, now I get it. You like older women, don't you? Now I know your type."

“Rehann I will hit you now.”

“Cougars? Really Aarav?”

“It’s enough now Rehann. Stop it”.

“Look at you blushing. Could your face be more red right now? She must be more than ten years older than you. I mean I agree that she is powerful and drop dead gorgeous and super rich and beautiful and oh my god, did you see her dress? But she is probably married Aarav.”

“She’s not. There are no rings on her fingers.”

Rehann continued looking at him with a devilish smile and only turned back once Aanya asked them to come forward and introduced them to Shayna.

“Aarav Kohrrathi”, Shayna went ahead and shook his hand. “When I saw your name in some newspaper headline saying that you had discovered a treasure, I swear to god I almost died”, she laughed and went ahead to shake Rehann’s hand. Aarav wasn’t able to muster up words to his mouth and was attracted to her even more when he heard her British accent. “Let’s move to the lounge, shall we?” she asked them. “It’s past the office hours. Would you people care for a drink? We will discuss whatever it is that needs discussing over there.”

“You have a lounge and a bar in your office?” Rehann asked her, still mesmerized by the view from that floor.

“I had them redecorate this level especially for me”, she smiled and said in her soft voice as she led them away.

Once they were served their scotches and had gossiped for a while, they finally arrived at the key topic.

“He was a fine man, your father. Invested in one of my earliest ventures. That’s how I knew him. He was like my mentor. He was always there to help me; like he was watching over me. Turns out, he actually was watching over me”, she spoke as she took a sip from her glass and pulled her hair back over her shoulders. “I was devastated when I saw his interview. When he spoke about the Ring of the Seven, and about somebody trying to kill him, I was scared. I had sensed that something was wrong, that something was amiss with our society, but I didn’t understand the gravity of the situation till I got

your call. How many masters did you say have been murdered?”

“Three”, Aanya replied.

“Dear god!” Shayna exclaimed as she again went for her glass. “This is bad. This is very, very bad.”

“Can you tell us about the master you are supposed to watch over?” Aarav asked Shayna.

“Before we talk about me and my duties with the Ring; I would like to know why treasure hunters are being allowed to intrude in our organization. What is your play here? What is your end goal? Are you planning to find the treasure yourself? If that is the case then I don’t know what the difference is between you and the master who is trying to claim it.”

“We are not murdering people, for one. That’s quite a big difference from where I am standing”, Aarav started with his smart talk.

“You are on your way towards the greatest treasure in the world, without even being a part of our secret. You seem like quite a gold digger from where I am standing.”

Aarav lifted his left eyebrow and stared at Shayna. “I am not a gold digger. I don’t care about the pot at the end of the rainbow. I seek the thrill in the journey behind reaching there.”

“Ms. Shayna. Look. We are not chasing the treasure”, Aanya lied. “If it was up to me, I wouldn’t have even given a second thought about the Ring of the Seven and all the myths and mysteries associated with it. But the truth is, that someone is killing people for the treasure. Someone out there forced my father to commit suicide. And he can murder anyone of us to get what he wants.”

“I concur”, Rehann joined in the lie. “The truth is, that four of the seven masters are dead. It means that one of the other two masters has to be the one who is behind it. Our end goal here is to find him and stop him. It doesn’t matter if we get to the treasure or not. We have to get to him first.”

“The master whom I am supposed to watch over is not the killer. Trust me”, Shayna spoke as she took another sip, her lipstick embossing the glass.

“What makes you say so?” Aarav asked her after he sneaked a peek at her glass.

“Clever. But I am not revealing anything about that master to you”, she said with a relaxed smile.

“So are you not going to help us?” Aanya asked.

“I want to. I really do. But I am a master of the Ring of the Seven. I have some responsibility towards keeping our secret alive.”

“I don’t think you realize that there is now no seven in the ring”, Aarav raised his voice a bit.

“And that increases my responsibilities even more.”

“By letting some psychopath kill everyone and destroy the Ring?”

“No. By standing up to protect our legacy, our secrets from treasurer hunters like you”, she spoke as she looked at an incoming call on her mobile phone and declined it.

“And what legacy are you trying to protect? Have you even seen the treasure with your own eyes? For all we know, some British explorer who was scouting the Himalayas would have uncovered it in the 19th century and took it all for his queen secretly while the Ring was busy trying to infiltrate the company.”

Shayna again declined the call and she texted someone before continuing.

“You don’t like us, do you?” she added a smile as she went to refill her glass.

“Ever since you came here, you haven’t exchanged a word with Aanya. She has been largely ignoring you. I’m guessing that you had a falling out with one of the masters and are trying to get on the nerve of another one.”

Aanya looked at Aarav briefly as he continued. “What happened between us is irrelevant to this quest. We are still on the same page when it comes to the bigger picture. It doesn’t matter if I am not speaking with one of the masters.”

“I don’t think so”, Shayna replied mischievously.

“I’m speaking to you.”

“Does that make me special?”

“No. But I can tell that you are enjoying this”, Aarav spoke getting angrier.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interfere”, Shayna continued as she declined another call. “It was probably the liquor talking. I have to try and cut it off.”

Suddenly a plump woman came rushing into the lounge. She was dressed in business formals, but they were spoiled as she was sweating profusely. It looked like she had been running for a while and it took her some time to grab her breath before speaking.

“Ms. Maheshwari”, she couldn’t speak further as she stopped to breathe deeply.

“What is it now Raksha?” Shayna asked her, least concerned.

“I tried calling you”, Raksha was panting hard. “I tried to reach you.”

“Grab your breath. Is everything okay?”

“No ma’am. Some armed men have entered the tower. They are shooting their way past the security.”

“What?” the four of them uttered almost simultaneously as they stood up.

“Yes. I think they killed the security in the lobby and are headed up. We need to get you out of here ma’am.”

“You don’t think they are here for us. Right?” Rehann asked only to get no reply from anyone as they all stood frozen.

“The book. Is it here?” Aarav asked Shayna.

“I can’t tell you”, she replied, trying to compose herself.

“Ms. Shayna please.” Aarav went near her. “This is not the time. Is it here or is it not?”

“My security is outside. They will tackle those men. We can go to the fire exit and take my chopper from the helipad on the floor above.”

“Those are killers, Ms. Maheshwari. They went past the security on the ground floor. Do you think they can’t get past a few guards who haven’t even fired a bullet?”

Shayna thought something for a moment. “We will be fine”, she said as she picked up her glass and emptied it in a single gulp before rushing towards a drawer of a table in a corner. “Raksha call my chopper right now”, she ordered her as she took out a handgun from the drawer.

“I don’t think that will be enough”, Aarav blurted.

“There is a door behind the bar that leads to a fire escape. We will get out from there”, she continued speaking as she further stomped ahead and pulled the fire alarm. The lights suddenly dimmed and an earsplitting noise enveloped the towers. Water sprays suddenly started showering on them and it almost became hard to see in the dim red and white lights. Aarav went ahead, held Shayna by her hand and turned her towards him.

“Is the Book of Finance here?” he shouted at the top of his voice, trying to shroud the shrill sound of the fire alarm.

Shayna looked into his eyes for a moment, analyzing if it was right to trust her secret on a treasure hunter. She appeared to be unfazed by the attack, imitating the persona of a powerful and charming woman that she carried. But from the inside, she was worried. She doled her blue eyes into Aarav’s dark brown ones for a moment before she moved her head into the slightest of nods.

“Then go get it. Now. We cannot let them have it”, Aarav continued speaking as he let go of her arm. “Aanya, save your book from the water of the sprays. Rehann, find and open the door towards the fire exit. And Shayna, get your book while I’ll handle them”, he continued speaking as he moved his hands down Shayna’s wrists and slowly pulled the handgun from her fingers.

“The chopper will be here in a few minutes”, Raksha spoke to them.

“That would be too late”, Rehann spoke. And he was right.

The glass of Shayna’s office door was shattered as four men barged inside. One of them aimed his gun at the fire alarm and shot, cutting off the shrill noise from that end of the floor. They were all dressed in a black and red attire, while golden masks covered their faces. The masks were distinct, with a single glass panel covering both of their eyes, while protruding outwards like gas masks, from below the nose. Two curved horns raised from the sides of the masks, giving them the appearance of a bull. The men soon plodded

ahead and entered the lounge where all the others were present.

“Put your hands up. Nobody moves. Or we’ll put a hole in your brains”, one of the masked men shouted. To his surprise though, a bullet made home into his own brain instead as Aarav fired thrice, one of his shots hitting the mark. That man went down as the bullet came out from the back of his head, killing him instantly.

“Take cover”, Aarav yelled at the top of his voice as he grabbed Shayna by her waist and pulled her behind a pillar in a corner. Aanya, Rehann and Raksha, who were standing on the other side took cover behind the bar counter, luckily in time as the others opened fire.

“How many bullets does this one have?” Aarav asked Shayna.

“Six”, she replied, panicked. “How many did you fire?”

Aarav pulled her down as the bullets started coming their way. “Three”, he spoke, concerned.

“Did you just kill that man?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see.” He threw his right arm out from behind the pillar and fired two more shots without even looking. But that didn’t deter the volley of bullets that were being showered upon them by the men in golden bull masks.

“What do we do now?” she clung on to him as she panicked.

“Whatever may happen, don’t give them your book”, he spoke as pieces of broken tiles started raining upon them due to the impact from the assault.

All of a sudden, the assailants stopped firing. The lounge, which had been lit up by the sounds of gunfire finally fell quiet, only the echoes of fire alarms going off on the rest of the floors were being heard. Shayna and Aarav looked at each other, both stood nervous and scared and panted hard as they curled in a corner behind the pillar. The dim red lights of the lounge were flickering and the noise and chaos of the people who had rushed out of the tower could be faintly heard. Police sirens were going off in the distance. But neither Aarav nor Shayna were able to think of a way to escape the place.

“Aarav”, they heard Aanya’s voice. “Shayna”, she spoke again as she

shivered.

Aarav closed his eyes and grunted in frustration.

“Come on now. We are not playing hide and seek the entire night”, one of the men spoke out loud.

Aarav was the first one to come out with both his hands held up. Shayna followed him next as she stared at the masks of her assailants. The three men had each of their guns on the heads of Aanya, Rehann and Raksha, who were all forced out from hiding and were made to sit on their knees, while the dead body of the fourth assassin drowned in his own blood before them.

“You”, the masked man continued speaking to Shayna. “Bring me the other book. Now”, he muttered as he showed off the Book of Alchemy in his hand. “Did you not hear me?” he barked. “I said, bring me your book. Now.”

“I can’t. It is not here”, Shayna lied.

“I’m not interested in playing this game. Bring me the damn book.”

“But it is not here. I’m telling the truth. Believe me”.

The man slowly closed his eyes inside his mask before speaking again. “F, I’m going to count till five. If by that time she doesn’t agree to bring me her book, shoot whoever you are holding.”

“The book is not here”, Shayna uttered in frustration.

“Five”, the man yelled.

“But I don’t have it.”

“Four.”

“God! Believe me please.”

“Three.”

“She’s speaking the truth. Don’t be absurd. Stop this. Now”, Aarav defended her.

“Two”, he fired a bullet at Aarav, barely missing him by inches.

“It’s not here”, she yelled.

“Oh! I’m ready to believe you. One.”

“I don’t have the book. Please. Stop it”, she shrieked at the top of her voice.

The man stopped counting. He looked at Shayna’s blue eyes for a few seconds before speaking again. “Do it.”

A loud bang echoed in the lounge and suddenly everything went silent. The man called F didn’t hesitate in pulling the trigger of his gun, which he had kept to the side of Raksha’s head. Pieces of her brain and bones sprayed on Rehann’s face, who was held next to her, along with a shower of thick, warm blood. He stood frozen. They all did. His eyes grew wide as he looked to his left and saw Raksha’s body slowly falling down on the floor. The bullet never passed through her head. Or maybe it did; it was hard to tell. Her eyes were still open as her body hit the floor, staring at Rehann hauntingly. Aanya and Shayna held their hands over their mouths and closed their eyes at once. Aarav looked at Rehann, his eyes widening with the same horror.

“That’s tit for tat”, the masked guard holding Rehann spoke again.

“Who is behind you? Who is paying you to do this? Who is that master?” Aarav shrieked.

“You are in no position to question me. I, on the other hand have three more people to kill if the pretty lady doesn’t bring me what I want. F, why don’t you go ahead and give this blabbering baboon a taste of your medicine?”

F stomped on Raksha’s dead hands as he moved ahead. He increased the pace of his walk, almost ran as he neared Aarav and brought his knee up to meet Aarav’s abdomen. The blow was hard and it immediately threw Aarav back. He brought his hands up to defend himself but failed against the massive arms of F. A punch rocked the left side of his face soon, followed by another one, and another one, and another one, until Aarav was forced down on the floor. Then F decided to flex his legs as he stomped his shoes on Aarav’s chest again and again.

“Stop this madness. Now”, Shayna struggled as tears started welling up in her eyes.

But F didn’t. He went ahead, sat on Aarav’s chest and started punching his face again. “That’s enough”, the man in the mask ordered F to stop. “He

killed C. I will have my fun with him later. But right now, I realized that since I have the Book of Alchemy, I no longer need the Alchemist in the equation. Do I?"

Shayna could imagine his devilish laugh from under his mask as he went past Rehann and crouched as he came close to Aanya. He touched the tip of his gun on the temple of her head and slowly swiveled it down her long nose, only stopping on her lower lip.

"Oh it would break my heart to kill you", he continued speaking. "I enjoyed following you for the past few days. Chasing you and your fancy cars, it was amazing. It was something new." He went ahead and grabbed her by her neck with his other hand. "I also enjoyed questioning that old lady in the library. She was a tuff one, didn't give anything away."

Tears started rolling down Aanya's eyes.

"I carved her face more beautifully than I had carved my mother's", the man continued speaking.

"Leave her out of this", Rehann defended her.

"And who are you? Why are you even here? You have nothing to do with the Ring in the first place. U, teach him some manners, will you?"

U, who was holding Aanya, went ahead and landed a solid one on the back of Rehann's head, making him fall down.

The man in charge however, pulled Aanya by her hair and started stroking his hand all across her face. "I saw your father killing himself, you know. I saw him take out his pistol and blow his brains off. Poof. Just like that. I was there. I could feel him looking at me before he pulled the trigger. I think he knew that I was there to kill him."

"You bastard", Aanya yelled as she started hitting his mask with her hands.

"No, no, no, no. No. No. Calm down now", he twisted her arm and forced her head down on the floor as he kept his gun on the side of her head. "Oh she's a feisty one", he spoke to Shayna. "Now. I will count to three this time. Bring me my book or I spoil her pretty face. One."

"Stop", Shayna broke. "I'll bring it."

“That’s like my good girl. F, bring the treasure hunter to U and then go with her.”

F dragged Aarav’s broken body to U, who held both Rehann and Aarav, and then went towards Shayna. Aarav looked into Shayna’s eyes and nodded his head slowly. Shayna turned and led F to another room.

“Now. You. Aarav Kohrrathi. The famous treasure hunter. You killed one of my boys”, the man left Aanya and walked towards Aarav. He grabbed Aarav by his hair and pulled his face ahead towards C’s dead body. “Look at the mess you made. Poor guy. He had two little children you know. They are never meeting their father again. He also had a pretty wife. A city girl he met in a fair. She is quite fine you know. Tall, set in her manners and oh, her bosom is remarkable. I mean not as good as Shayna Maheshwari’s, but a fine one nonetheless. Sadly, even she won’t see him again. Maybe I’ll pay her a visit. I always wanted to know what it feels like to have a wife”, he laughed as he smacked Aarav’s head with the hilt of his gun. “I never liked him to be honest. Would have killed him myself someday probably. Glad you did it. But you still killed one of my men and you have to be punished.”

U, who was holding Aarav and Rehann, started hitting them hard.

“Stop it. You have what you want”, Rehann tried to speak up but was met with U’s fist.

“Oh! You men are pathetic”, the man in-charge continued. “So weak. So frail. In our days, we used to wrestle in sand in our village. And instead of going for higher studies, we trained and served in the army.”

“It is taking F too much time K”, U reminded him.

“Don’t worry. She’s guarding a treasure. She would have hidden the book somewhere with a lot of protection. It will take her time”, K said. “What? Are you tired of punching them already? They told me you were the bloody best boxer in the navy.”

U started hitting them again. Aarav kept looking at Rehann through the beating, who somehow sensed that Aarav had a plan in mind.

“What are you both looking at? You two in love? It is still illegal in our country you know that?”

“What has the evil master promised you? Has he promised you a piece of the treasure? He will kill you, you know; as soon as he gets what he wants, he will kill each and every one of you”, Aarav warned K as he spit blood from his mouth.

K again pulled Aarav by his hair and dragged him ahead. “You know what is going to happen once she brings me the book?”

“Oh let me guess. You kill us.”

K laughed. “Oh I’ll kill you all definitely. Not with a bullet though, it will be too fast. I like to be a bit creative when I feel like playing. I drugged Indira Chatterjee you know, she was easy. She kept asking for more and more of it until she choked on her own vomit. She wasn’t a good master I must say. Kept the Book of Arts in her library without any protection. Killing that Serbian on the other hand, was a struggle though.”

“Slovakian”, U corrected him.

“They are all the same to me. He turned out to be quite a fighter actually”, K continued. “Took down one of my men and blinded another. Never seen a fat man like him fight like that. He reminded me of that panda movie”, he laughed hard. “I carved him up real nice you know. I stabbed him so many times that I lost count. The man was bleeding fountains when we left with the Book of Weaponry.”

“And the guru?” Aarav asked him, trying to keep him busy. “A car accident doesn’t sound very creative.”

“Oh that was an outside job. I am not allowed to enter in America. So we... what do you people say? Outsourced it. They outsource us IT services and we outsource them hits. I’m all about improving cooperation between the two countries you see. But I wanted to fill the void of that hit. So I went for something big. We had information that Vashishtha would visit one of his steel plants so we bombed it. That sight was glorious. But sadly the old man postponed his visit. Then I took an aim at him but he evaded that too. Your father was a shrewd one girl. I think he had it all figured out. But that coward shot himself. That sucked.”

“I will kill you”, Aanya spoke to him clenching her teeth.

“Wipe your tears first honey”, K uttered. “So I have decided it now. I will cut the throat of this one first”, he pointed towards Rehann. “Then I will throw the treasure hunter from that window”, he laughed. “I will take both the pretty women with me though. I will give this one to my boys. Sorry honey, but there are a lot more waiting at home and unfortunately they are hungry.”

Aanya got up and came ahead throwing a slap at him but U intervened before she could hit her target.

“Oh! Feisty. I will let them kill you any way they may want to. If you’re good, you can convince them to kill you swiftly. And I will take the banker for myself. Oh! I like smart women, especially smart women with a body like that. I can’t promise to be creative with her end though. I will probably choke her with my own hands or drown her in the bathtub.”

“Or maybe she’ll kick your ass”, Aarav spoke.

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean this”.

A loud bang suddenly went off in the room where Shayna had taken F. K and U were both startled and in the process of looking for the source of the sound, left their flanks open.

“To the mains”, Aarav yelled as he sprung up and brought his kick with full fervor to meet the groin of K. Rehann followed the command, turned back hurriedly and jammed his fist with all its might on U’s crotch. Both K and U flinched and went down instantly. Aarav stood up and kicked K hard in his face twice before kicking at the gun in his hand, catapulting it away. Aanya ran ahead and started hitting U along with Rehann. Aarav bent a little and landed a punch straight at K’s chin, opening a gash, before grabbing the Book of Alchemy which he had kept inside his jacket. Aanya had disarmed U by that time and pointed his gun at him while Rehann continued smashing him.

“Give me the gun. Take the book and go up the fire exit”, Aarav yelled at Aanya. She did as told. “Rehann leave him and head up with Aanya, I will bring Shayna. Go”.

Rehann looked at both the fallen men and did what Aarav told him to. As soon as they left Shayna entered the room, carrying her book in her hands and

pressing it against her chest. “Come on!” Aarav spoke as he dashed towards her.

K, who by that time managed to get back up on his feet, took out his second pistol and opened fire. Aarav and Shayna had reached close but weren’t able to make it to the fire exit and thus ducked behind a couch to save themselves from the gunfire. U was still down, holding his hands helplessly over his abdomen and rolling madly on the floor.

“I will kill both of you”, K shrieked as he moved ahead while firing. “I will hang your corpses from the tallest floor of this bloody tower.”

Shayna looked at Aarav’s face with concern. He had a nasty cut on his left cheek, multiple bruises on his face and lips that were bleeding.

“Do you trust me?” Aarav asked her only to receive a nervous nod. “Then run for the fire escape when I say.”

K continued trotting ahead and kept firing aimlessly at the couch. “Come out you buggers”, he yelled. “Show me your faces.”

“Let’s give the man what he asks”, Aarav said while holding Shayna’s hand. He waited for a moment as he heard and followed the footsteps of K. “Go”, he finally yelled.

Shayna got up and rushed for the fire exit blindly. K, himself startled, followed her movement and shot on his instincts. A bullet zoomed past her, managing to barely graze the skin of her neck. The distraction proved enough as Aarav stood up from behind the couch, held the gun steadily in both his hands and shot at K. The bullet hit its mark as K crumbled to the ground. Aarav ran hard ahead, following Shayna through the fire exit and out where they finally stopped for a moment and bolted the door.

“Did he get to you? Are you alright?” he asked as he placed his hand on the graze at her neck. Shayna finally let go as tears rolled down her eyes.

“Did you...? He...?” she choked, her cries making her unable to speak.

“It’s okay. It’s over. You are safe now”, Aarav went ahead and hugged her. She had her face dug on his neck as she wept from the trauma.

“I... I killed that man. In the room, I killed him as soon as I took out the

book.”

“That is why I trusted you with the last bullet”, Aarav said tightening his grip around her and comforting her. “It is over Shayna. Let’s leave this place. Quickly.”

Shayna broke the hug and wiped her tears as she nodded in agreement. “You’re right. Let us go”, she spoke as she grabbed his hand and they both dashed upwards towards the helipad.

The rotors of Shayna’s helicopter were picking up pace as they made it. Aarav held her by her waist and lifted her a little. Rehann stretched out his hand from inside as they all boarded the helicopter.

“Are you alright?” Aanya asked Aarav, concerned at seeing his beaten face.

“Been better”, he replied with a little smile and looked at Rehann. “I knew you’d remember that command from primary school.”

“To the mains”, Rehann spoke with a little smile.

“To the mains”, Aarav replied closing his eyes and sinking back in his seat.

Chapter 5

The Trance

They all stayed at Shayna's penthouse that night and didn't speak much after the incident at her office. They went into their respective rooms and freshened up. The police came for questioning sometime later but they weaved some story or the other and avoided leading them to the secret. The two dead men who went by the aliases C and F were identified, both ex-army men with over five years of experience in the Border Security Force. The police also recovered Raksha's body and further shared the news that the remaining assailants had started a fire in Shayna's office before leaving. It didn't do much damage since the water sprinklers were already on from when Shayna had pulled the fire alarm, but still burnt down considerable piece of furniture. The police left in half an hour after questioning.

Aanya was still too moved by the incident, being the first time in her life when she saw people being shot dead. She excused herself and retired to the bedroom without eating anything. Shayna had somehow composed herself. Even she didn't speak much but was constantly engaged with her calls and went to her room after ensuring that Aarav and Rehann were served food and the same was sent to Aanya in her room. She acquainted them with her attendants and asked Aarav to take medical help from one after he was done with his dinner. Aarav nodded silently, his brain engaged at the episode at Renaissance Towers, trying to understand and factor in some new facts now that he had encountered the assassins himself. He sat with Rehann for dinner but didn't speak at all, his mind kept racing with questions about the killers. He was only comforted by the fact that they weren't able to get their hands on any of the secret books. But what worried him more was the revelation that they weren't being chased by a single assassin, but by an entire group and that there were more of them. Rehann tried to start a conversation with him but was just met with his "yes" and "no's", so he gave up asking. Aarav got up in a few minutes, asked one of the attendants for a notepad, first aid kit and a bottle of whisky before leaving to his room. He sat with his lights on for the next hour, abandoning the comfort of the luxurious bed, he sat down on the floor, scribbled a lot in pages, tore them again and again and started

placing them on the ground, trying to figure something out. The more words he wrote, the more patterns he tried to frame, made him angrier and frustrated. His mind was ringing up more questions than he could find answers to, and this was driving him mad. He took a sip or two directly from the bottle in between as he continued scribbling notes. He had grown so focused and the liquor relaxed his senses to such extent that he only gazed at the clock once someone knocked on the door at one in the night.

The door opened slowly and Shayna walked into the room, almost being startled at seeing Aarav on the floor and hundreds of notes sprawling around him. She closed the door behind her and gradually walked towards Aarav with a generous smile. She had washed her face and was devoid of any makeup, yet her flawless skin glowed in the sharp lights of the room. She had pulled her hair up and had carefully made a rolled up double knot. She had abandoned her business formals from before and had changed into an elegant navy blue night gown. She walked ahead slowly, skipping a step here and there so as to not mess up Aarav's notes. His mouth on the other hand was again left open as he saw her walking into the room; her beauty seemed to have amplified a thousand times to his drunken brain. She stood close to him as he also picked himself up, looking around at the mess he had made with fresh eyes.

"I thought I was the only one who couldn't sleep", she spoke. "Didn't realize that you were busy."

"I'm just trying to find some answers", Aarav replied.

"By drowning yourself in Macallan?" she teased him as she picked up his whisky.

"I'm sorry. Needed to calm my nerves after everything that we saw today."

"It's okay. I understand", she spoke while trying to read his notes. "Is that an A or an S?" she teased him in her British accent about his handwriting.

"That's actually an R", he said smiling.

Shayna suddenly darted her blue eyes on his face and felt bad as she saw his injuries. "Something told me that you wouldn't mend your face", she touched a cut on his cheek as she analyzed the damage.

“I was going to wrap myself up. Just got engrossed with these notes and forgot about it”, he defended himself. She raised her left eyebrow, questioning him without saying. “I brought the first aid kit too. Look”, Aarav continued as he pointed towards a table.

“Go and take a shower with warm water. My helpers would have placed your clothes in the washroom itself”, she spoke.

“Look. I’ll do this later. I have some answers to find.”

“And I might know a few of them”, she replied.

Aarav darted his dark brown eyes into her ocean blue ones suspiciously before surrendering and going for the washroom. Shayna looked at his notes in the meantime, analyzing and appreciating his thought process from whatever of his writing she was able to understand. He came out rubbing his hair in about ten minutes and went straight for the bottle before sitting next to Shayna on his bed.

“That’s a costly drink you know”, she spoke as she raised her hand and demanded the bottle from him.

“You are a billionaire. I think you wouldn’t mind”, he said as he passed her the bottle.

“Have you been following me?” she questioned, as she took it to her lips.

“Your net worth is almost five billion dollars according to your Wikipedia page.”

“That was three months ago. Renaissance Bank’s stocks have surged since then.”

“So what is it now? Six billion? Seven?”

“Why are you wearing formals at one in the night? Just because you are a guest at a billionaire’s penthouse doesn’t mean that you have to appear so posh at all times.”

“I forgot to pack my regular clothes in a hurry today”, he said as he folded up the sleeves of his white shirt. “And what’s posh about this. Did you not see your own business suit this evening?”

“I did. It’s all spoiled from being under water sprays for such a long time.”

“I meant before it all happened.”

“I understood”, she smiled. She picked up the long Q-tips and immersed one of the cottoned sides in a liquid as she moved close to Aarav and started gliding it on his forehead slowly. Aarav flinched as the medicine burnt on his wounds.

“Do you stay alone?” he finally spoke in some time as an awkward silence had started lingering, only to realize that his question had made it even more awkward.

“You are quite a curious man, aren’t you?” she dodged the question and turned the side of the cotton swab.

“No I didn’t mean to intrude your privacy or anything. I was just wondering.”

“Intrude my privacy? I’m impressed by your choice of words Mr. Kohrrathi.”

“I didn’t mean to. I mean I meant to ask you but I... never mind”, he gave up as she laughed out loud.

“It is okay. Don’t be nervous. I won’t bite you”, she said while continuing to mend him. “I get asked this a lot. You are not the first one.”

“Oh!”

“Yes. I stay alone. I run one of the biggest banks of the country and protect one of the greatest treasures in the history of mankind. I don’t have time for a husband or a family. So I come back home to Sherlock.”

“Sherlock? Your boyfriend?” he asked, trying to act cool and mask his concerns.

“Yes. Sherlock, my boyfriend. He is my personal trainer. We met at the gym around two years ago and hit it off instantly”, her face gleamed at seeing the disappointment on his face.

“That explains the British accent”, Aarav barely whispered as his shoulders dropped down.

“What did you say?” she lighted up.

“Nothing.”

“God! You are not that bright for a treasure hunter. Sherlock is not my boyfriend. It is the name of my dog. He is at the vet’s else I would have introduced him to you.”

“I’m sorry. I am drunk. I don’t know what I am speaking”, he spoke, his face turning red.

“In my experience, people get wild when they get drunk. You were sweeping me off my feet and saving me from bullets this evening. And now you can barely speak when you are actually drunk.”

“I don’t know... I’m shy.”

“Yes. I can see the blush on your cheeks”, she said as she started treating the cut on his cheek.

“I have had some experience with men trying to kill me before”, he said after a while.

“Never realized how dangerous your job could be.”

“Well that’s a cross I have to bear”, he spoke barely being able to take his eyes off her.

“Let me ask you something? Have you taken training? I mean when I first saw you fire the gun today, it looked like you have fired a lot before.”

“Not a lot. But yes. I have always had the displeasure of people chasing me when I am on a treasure hunt. You have to learn to defend yourself with time or you end up being dead.”

“It was horrifying what we had to witness today. Those men and the firing and the torture”, she tried to forget her day.

“Raksha? Was she your secretary?”

“One of the secretaries. Yes. She had joined barely two months ago. But she was really good with her job. And she was always cheerful and distributing chocolates to everyone in the office. I mean...” Shayna tried to control her tears.

“Hey! It is alright”, Aarav put his hand on her shoulder to comfort her.

“It is not. If I would have listened to you and got the book, when you told me first. If I would have picked up her call and not declined it again and again, maybe she would have been alive right now. Maybe you wouldn’t have to face this much torture. Maybe we all could have flown out before they stomped into my office, Aarav. I... I would never be able to forgive myself.”

“Don’t cry Shayna. It’s not your fault. You could have never known that they were following us all this while. What happened to Raksha is unfortunate. But there is nothing you could have done to protect her.”

“I could have brought the book when he first asked me to.”

“And he would have killed us all after it.”

Shayna put the medicines away as tears started welling up in her eyes. “I shot a man Aarav. I killed a man today”, she choked.

Aarav held her and comforted her as she dug her head on his neck. “You killed a killer. To defend yourself. He would have done the same in a blink of an eye.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that I am a murderer.”

“You cannot look at it this way Shayna. You just can’t”, he pulled her away and placed his hands on her face while he wiped her tears with his thumbs.

“You cannot blame yourself for anything that happened today. In fact, we were the ones who led the killers to your door.”

She darted her moist blue eyes into his comforting brown ones as she stopped crying. “I know about their masks”, she said.

“What about their masks?” Aarav grew excited as he came closer to her.

“It is probably a stuff of legends but my mentor, the one who passed on the Book of Finance to me, taught me about the history of the Ring of the Seven. It is believed that Emperor Ashoka originally created a Ring of nine men to protect the treasure.”

“The legend of the Nine Unknown Men of course”, he said.

“Yes”, she continued. “But soon after he died, two members of the Ring mutinied against the rest. They thought that it was a waste for the treasure to be kept hidden for hundreds of centuries when it had the power to eliminate

poverty and sickness that had started reeking their kingdom after the fall of Ashoka. So they thought that if they could get to the treasure, which would make them the most powerful people in the kingdom, they could easily claim the throne and rule for the betterment of the people. They weren't able to convince the other members of the Ring to follow their plan. So they mutinied. Their followers were called Broods of the Bulls, a band of assassins that served to the wishes of their masters. They actually wore dead bull's heads as an attempt to scare their victims and create their own identity. They killed many, almost started a civil war, before the rest of the masters intervened and created the Ring of the Seven. They finally defeated the Broods and publically assassinated the two masters as a punishment for their crimes."

"The Broods of the Bulls? Never heard their mention in history before", he spoke understanding the significance of the bull masks worn by their assailants. "That is tremendously helpful of you", he thanked her and pulled himself a little away from her as they both realized that they were sitting unusually close.

Shayna tossed her hand towards the table and grabbed the bottle of whisky. She took a long gulp and cringed after guzzling it down before passing it over to Aarav who repeated the suit.

"I haven't drank like this since my college days", she smiled.

"I can bet that you went to one of the finest colleges in the world", Aarav spoke as he passed the bottle to her.

"You'd know it. You were stalking me on Wikipedia", she called his bluff as she took the bottle to her lips.

"That's true."

"What about you", she asked.

"I was in Mumbai itself. But I never completed my college and dropped out after my first treasure hunt."

"I forgot how young you are", she touched his shoulder.

"And I forgot to grab that bottle from you", he spoke as he went closer to her and took the bottle from her hands.

“Can I ask you something? Aanya, is she your... girlfriend? You guys broke up? Is that why you’re not talking?”

“Aanya? Oh no? I am single. I only met her yesterday.”

“Oh! I thought you people went back.”

“No. She came to me for help and I just stuck along on the journey”, he said with a smile.

He looked at her, his drunkenness blurring his vision, but still clear enough for him to appreciate her gorgeous face. She stared into his eyes too, her drunkenness finally kicking in.

“You are so drunk right now”, she spoke with a beautiful smile.

“Not as much as me”, Aarav started fumbling in his speech. Shayna let out a heartfelt laugh as she took her right hand ahead and caressed her thumb over his lower lip. She looked up in his brown eyes and watched them come closer. Aarav’s lips locked with hers and it felt like time had stopped. Total silence enveloped around them as they stood kissing each other, their eyes closed, minds drunk and hearts galloping faster and faster. Aarav finally broke the kiss in what looked to be an eternity and looked into her eyes again.

“I was just saying that there is a cut on your lip too that I missed”, Shayna managed to speak as she grabbed her breath. A faint smile appeared across Aarav’s face as he went ahead and kissed her again, both of them reciprocating equally this time. He grabbed her fuller lower lip between his teeth and pulled it a little before breaking the kiss, grabbing his breath and diving in to repeat it again. She started moving her body back on the bed and Aarav followed the path she created without breaking his kiss. He grabbed her by her waist, lifted her voluptuous body up and made her sit on his lap. He opened her hairpin, letting her long, silky dark brown hair fall down all over him before venturing his hands in other places. He briefly broke the kiss and started kissing her neck slowly as he went down. Shayna was digging her long nails into his back without even realizing that she was hurting him. She started opening the buttons of his shirt and was done with the first two before she paused. Their eyes met once again as they both stopped before pulling each other’s head simultaneously and kissing each other passionately. Aarav again grabbed her by her waist and threw her on the bed gently, before

thrusting his body over hers and started searching for the strings to open her satin gown.

But that is when she stopped. She pushed him away and sat on the edge of the bed. “We can’t. What are we doing?” she said as she started correcting her gown.

Aarav just stared at the white ceiling above him and brought both his hands over his face.

“I have to go. I have a conference call to London early in the morning. I have to grab proper sleep before that”, she spoke.

“Yes... yes...” Aarav uttered awkwardly. “Even I have to go and... probably hang myself.”

“We had a rough day Aarav.”

“Yes, with the killings and the bullets...”

“... and the whisky”, she got up and pulled her hair over her head. “Have a good night, Aarav Kohrrathi”, she muttered as she swiftly headed for the door without even looking back at him.

He still kept staring at the wall over his head long after she had left. “What did I do?” he spoke to himself. “Why did I do it? She was just tending to the wound on my lips. Why did I have to kiss her?”

He turned his gaze a little and his eyes saw the bottle of Macallan placed on the table neatly. He slowly shifted his focus on the ceiling again. “What. The. Fu...” he managed to utter before passing out.

Aarav woke up at around two in the afternoon and decided to head to the washroom to brush his teeth. But as soon as he sat up on the bed, the aching from the previous evening’s beating surfaced with all its might. The pain sensors triggered inside his head all of a sudden as everything from his chest to his head started hurting badly. It took him some time to let the pain subdue before he was finally able to get up. He got out of his room after a few minutes and headed for the dining hall slowly. Rehann and Aanya were already seated next to each other and were browsing through something on his ipad. The attendants were busy putting plates on the table, preparing for

the meal. But there was no sign of Shayna. Aarav slowly waddled down a flight of stairs towards them, still hungover from last night.

“Mornin’ sunshine. Glad that you can finally join us”, Rehann spoke as he got up with a smile and walked ahead to help Aarav down the stairs.

“Somebody got drunk last night.” He walked him up to the table where Aarav finally settled opposite to Aanya.

“Are you okay?” Aanya asked him with concern.

Aarav nodded his head. “You?” he asked.

“Better”, she replied.

Aarav stopped speaking and gazed all around the hall.

“Shayna’s outside. On a call”, Rehann said pointing towards the balcony.

“What? Oh! I was just looking for water”, Aarav defended himself.

“Right before you buddy”, Rehann replied with a smile. “Glass container. Green cap. We call it a bottle.”

“Thank you for your insight”, Aarav snubbed as he reached for the bottle of water.

“How would you gentleman like the lunch to be served in ten minutes?” an attendant came ahead and asked them.

“Yes. That would be great of you”, Aanya replied. The three didn’t utter another word for about five minutes before Aarav finally looked at Aanya and decided to let go.

“I’m sorry Aanya.”

She was taken by surprise.

“That day at the library. My behavior was childish. I crossed a line and I said some things that I shouldn’t have. I know that this is already a tumultuous time for you and if I inflicted on you any more pain, I regret it from my heart.”

“It’s okay Aarav”, she accepted his apology. “What is done is done. Let’s forget it.”

He nodded his head and finally looked to his left from where the glass door of the balcony slid open and Shayna walked into the hall. Her eyes met his and she stopped in her tracks for a moment, before continuing further and walking up towards the three of them. She had pulled on another business suit, a black one and had put her make up on. Her nails were painted scarlet which Aarav remembered wasn't the previous day and her face carried an abnormal glow that afternoon.

"Ma'am should we serve the lunch?" an attendant came ahead and asked her.

"Yes. Of course", she said as she nervously hovered near the table, and since Aanya and Rehann were sitting next to each other, she had to settle on the empty chair towards Aarav's right. Aarav sat attentively, careful not to let his hands accidentally touch Shayna's, who he was certain was thinking the same. They were soon served with a delicious meal. Aanya had turned vegan recently and was careful enough to avoid any animal products. Aarav looked puzzled as he just saw salads and greenery in her plate and a cucumber juice serving as a cherry on top. His eyes soon wandered off to Shayna's plate and he got confused even more.

"It's a Riviera salad with summer garden vegetables in the bowl", the chef who stood and watched them being served food looked at Aarav's curious face and decided to walk him through every item on Shayna's plate. "This is Cavatelli pasta, made in sugar snap, spring peas and fava beans, the herb pistou and ricotta salata serving as a cherry on top. You can further see the Heirloom Tomatoes Appetizer, made with creamy burrata cheese, green onion, taggiasche olives, basil and sea salt. And that dish close to your hand is Panisses Nicoises."

"I shouldn't even ask for the meaning of the last one, should I?" Aarav was stumped.

"It's French for Chickpea Fritters", the chef added with a smile. "Ma'am likes to eat French on Fridays."

Shayna had a very visible blush on her face and exchanged a glance towards Aarav as the chef urged him to try some. The Cavatelli pasta soon shared space alongside chicken wings on Aarav's plate, while the chef stood next to him with pride.

“Shall we?” Rehann finally asked as the awkwardness started increasing before grabbing a hefty bite from his chicken wings and closing his eyes to admire the taste of perfection. Aarav went for the chicken too as he followed Rehann. He had absolutely no sense when it came to dining manners, he had always felt that the strange dining customs of the fancy people made a meal more awkward. But Aarav loved the taste of the chicken in his hands. He was still famished from his struggles of the previous day and hungover from the whisky of the night. His head was throbbing and the lower left ribs aching. Yet the deliciousness of the chicken took him to another land. The chef still stood near him and cleared his throat twice.

“Umm... he won’t leave, till you tell him the taste of the Cavatelli”, Shayna spoke to him slowly.

“Oh! Umm...” Aarav picked his fork and went for the pasta. “Fantastic. Your food is stuffed with magic. Delicieux.”

“Bienvenue”, the chef thanked him in French and left.

“You speak French?” Aanya asked Aarav, surprised.

“Oh no! I know enough to make people think that I actually know it”, he smiled.

“So. Did you both sleep well last night?” Rehann asked Aarav and Shayna.

“What?” they uttered simultaneously.

“I know that he did. He is still hungover. How about you Ms. Shayna? Hope you didn’t have any trouble sleeping after a horrid day?”

“Oh!” they muttered together again.

“No. I... I slept fine”, she managed to speak before taking a sip from her orange juice. “About yesterday. We need to forget about it. All of us need to forget what happened.”

“No. We don’t”, Aarav spoke as he went for another piece of chicken.

“Yes. We do need to forget about everything”, she spoke with firmness in her voice.

“What? I’m not talking about...” he stopped as the visions from his previous

night with Shayna made his heart skip a beat. “I’m saying that all of us have barely spoken about the incident with each other. There are still a lot of unanswered questions. Before we were rushing out through the fire exit, I shot at the man who called himself K. So the police should have found three bodies at the place. Yet they only managed to find two bodies of the assassins F and C, other than Raksha’s. So then what happened to K? Is he alive? Is he dead? Did the other man, U take trouble to drag his injured body out of the place? Why wasn’t there a body?” he continued speaking.

“Maybe you missed your shot?” Rehann questioned him.

“Oh I got him. If I would have missed that shot, you’d both have been attending our funerals right now.”

“If you think people would attend your funeral, your ghost is in for a big surprise”, Rehann mocked him.

Aarav widened his nostrils and stared at Rehann with the intensity of a shark. “Then we have the other facts. When Shayna took F to the other room, K spoke a little about his past. You remember Rehann? He said that he used to wrestle in his village before he joined the military. Then some time later, he said that U was supposed to be the best boxer in the navy.”

“The condition of our faces are a proof of his abilities”, Rehann interrupted.

“And the police identified the two assailants as ex-army men belonging to Border Security Forces”, Shayna joined in.

“Exactly”, Aarav uttered as he reached for some lemonade. “The entire group has a close relation with the army. It can be assumed that they were all recruited from the military after quite some experience. And then there was a symbol.”

“A bull?” Aanya asked.

“Yes. You saw it too?”

“Yes. The man who was holding me in the beginning, U, I think. He had a tattoo of a bull engraved on his wrist.”

“Correct”, Aarav continued. “K had it tattooed towards the left side of his neck. And it wasn’t just a bull. The bull was holding some sort of a rod in his

mouth.”

“Even their masks resembled a bull”, Rehann pointed out.

“Yes”, Aarav matched his opinion. “That symbol must be some sort of a personal brand of their organization. The Broods of the Bulls, indeed.”

“Sorry? The Broods of the Bulls? What is that now?” Rehann asked.

“It was this secret organization of assassins that...”, both Aarav and Shayna started speaking together.

“I’m sorry. You continue”, Aarav asked her, failing to match his gaze with hers.

“Oh no. You were explaining everything perfectly. You continue. Please”, Shayna said with an unusual blush on her face.

“No. You told me about the Broods yourself. Without your input I wouldn’t have had any idea about their existence.”

“But it is fine. You can say it”, she urged him.

“No. I forgot most of it. I was drunk”, Aarav dug the final nail in the coffin. Rehann had narrowed down his eyelids and stared suspiciously at both Aarav and Shayna.

“Fine”, Shayna spoke as she went on to narrate whatever she knew about the history and purpose of the Broods. Aarav slowly took the support of the chair he was sitting on and relaxed his back which was aching badly, while he turned his gaze towards Shayna’s face and admired her beauty. Her long hair were flowing along with the mild breeze entering the room from the balcony door. He focused on her perfect nose, her melodious voice reverberating over his ears; her accent, her actions, her emphasis on particular words making her speech elegant and the movement of her hands amplifying the power in the way she conveyed her thoughts. She was a brilliant woman and something about her was driving Aarav mad. He kept gazing at her from the corner of his eyes as he analyzed what was happening to him. Even though his shyness had prevented him from approaching girls for the better part of his life, he had never been this attracted to a woman before. He has had the pleasure of working with beautiful girls and royals previously, but never had anyone captured his imagination the way Shayna did. For him, the hunt he was on

was paramount and everything else became secondary. He always believed that involving himself in a romantic relationship with someone he was on a hunt with would steal his focus from his end goal and make him lose the right path. Aarav had always managed to attract other women. Even during his school and college days, girls found his shyness mysterious and his brilliance charming. Aarav looked very handsome himself, but he was an extremely poor judge of human emotions and his arrogance drifted any potential partner away. Maybe that was the case that he wasn't able to understand the emotions he was going through when he stared at Shayna as she narrated the legend of the Broods of the Bulls to Rehann and Aanya.

Aanya sometimes looked at him, confirming to herself that Aarav was indeed staring at Shayna continuously. Rehann, on the other hand tried to catch his gaze so as to alert him, only to be disappointed. Shayna herself felt his gaze from the corner of her eyes and only turned towards him when she felt the need for it.

“Would you like to add something to that?” she asked him. “Mr. Kohrrathi?” she spoke formally as Aarav slowly drifted out of his dreams and saw the faces of an astonished Aanya and an exasperated Rehann.

“Sorry?” he spoke.

“Would you like to add anything to what I just said? I think I was comprehensive when narrating the details.”

“Me... umm... no. It was... great. The thing you said... about the Broods. That was umm... perfection.”

Rehann rolled his eyes to hide his embarrassment.

“Very well. I'll be back soon. I have a call to make”, Shayna said as she got up and left for her room while gazing one last time at Aarav.

“Since we are friends again”, Aanya spoke while getting up herself. “You should try to control your staring. Statistically speaking, girls are likely to fall for guys who don't stare at them like a creep”, she passed him a lovely smile before walking away.

Aarav looked at Rehann and knew at once what he would say. “Save it”, he uttered before asking an attendant for another glass of lemonade.

“No, no, no, no, no, no. I was just thinking, that I was with you when we came to this place. Then I was there with you when we had our dinner. Then I was still in hall, working on my pad for more than an hour before I went to sleep. You went to your room at around eleven so I might have gone back to mine at around half past twelve”, Rehann recounted.

“Are you making minutes of a meeting in a company, Rehann?” Aarav said irritably, taking the glass of lemonade from the attendant.

“I woke back up at around eight and checked in on you to see how you were doing, but you were asleep. And you finally woke up at two in the noon after retiring in your room at eleven in the night.”

“This is the most boring conversation of my life, Rehann.”

“So I am wondering, when did Shayna exactly manage to share the story about the Broods of the Bulls with you, if you were asleep the entire time?”

Aarav rolled his eyes as he got up and started climbing up the stairs to his room without replying to Rehann, who curiously followed him.

“Are you following me Rehann? Seriously, grow up.”

“Hmm”, he spoke with an evil smile as they both entered Aarav’s room.

“God what have you done to the floor?” he said as he looked across the abundant hand written notes Aarav had placed on the floor the previous night.

“I was working on something.”

“Is that an R?” he questioned.

“Yes. Thank You”, Aarav replied.

“Looks like an S or an A to me”.

“Why are you here?” he got irritated.

“I had a question. You never answered”, he said as he sat on the bed and darted his dark eyes to meet Aarav’s brown ones.

“Fine. Yes. She came at around one last night”, Aarav gave in to his stares.

Rehann’s face lit up all of a sudden.

“What?” Aarav asked him, a sudden burst of blush flashing across his cheeks.

“My boy has finally grown up”, Rehann spoke with a laugh.

“We just spoke about our day.”

“That’s what couples do buddy.”

“We spoke about the Ring of the Seven and Broods of the Bulls. I didn’t even knew that an ancient league of assassins like that existed. Never heard their mention after the fall of Ashoka.”

“Didn’t you get drunk?” Rehann continued with his deductions since it was more fun for him than Aarav talking about history.

“Yes. But it is irrelevant.”

“But you couldn’t have emptied that bottle of Macallan all by yourself.”

“You have never seen me drink.”

“Oh I have. I offered you your first beer in college, remember? I know your capacity. You couldn’t have possibly emptied that bottle.”

“I did.”

“No you didn’t.”

“Okay, she might have drank a little as a courtesy”, Aarav spoke trying to end Rehann’s line of questioning.

“What else did she do as a courtesy?” Rehann spoke with an evil grin on his face, which was met by a pillow thrown by Aarav.

“Shut up”, he yelled.

A phone placed in the room suddenly rang.

“SHUT UP”, he yelled at it too, only to look at Rehann’s puzzled face.

Rehann picked it up and was met by Shayna’s voice, who called the both of them down in the hall.

They both reached back near the dining table soon, and were greeted by a brown book lying on it, which read ‘Book of Finance’. Aanya stood there along with Shayna, who had dismissed all the attendants for the day.

“The Book of Finance. I’m assuming you won’t allow us to read it”, Aarav

said while stealing a glance at Aanya and chuckling to himself.

“Oh I bet you won’t understand half of it”, Shayna spoke confidently.

“My father is a chartered accountant. Trust me, I would have been excellent at finance, had I applied my mental faculty to it.”

“Says every ignorant man on Earth”, she retorted.

Rehann had a smile on his face and so did Aanya. Shayna went ahead and opened the last page of the book which read:

I solemnly swear to watch over The Healer, who is in possession of The Book of Medicine.

“Harsha Jayaratne”

“Harsha Jayaratne”, Aarav spoke slowly.

“Who?” Rehann asked.

“Is that the...” Aarav tried to speak.

“Director General of the World Health Organization? Yes”, Shayna completed his sentence.

“When I said who earlier that’s what I meant. WHO not who.” Rehann spoke only to receive stares from everybody.

“She has been active in Sri Lankan politics for over two decades; was the Minister of Health and Child Welfare before she took up the big job in Geneva. I have met her thrice. Once when I was there and twice when she came to India a couple of months ago.”

“You can call her then?” Rehann spoke to Shayna.

“I have been one of the biggest donors of their polio eradication campaign in India for years. Unlike the other books, the Book of Medicine is different you see. Most of the masters follow the practice of passing over their secret to the one they choose. This book however remains with the head of WHO, whoever he or she may be and cannot be freely passed.”

“So we are going to Switzerland to meet her?” Aanya asked.

“I spoke with her this morning and gave her a broad understanding of the things that have happened lately. She is currently on a visit to Nigeria, after which luckily, she’ll reach her hometown of Mannar in Sri Lanka tomorrow. We can leave in my jet tonight and meet her there”, Shayna said as she looked at the three of them.

“What if she is the evil master?” Aarav asked, finally getting his mind in the game. “What if she is the one who has been playing us this whole time? What if she is the one who resurrected the Broods of the Bulls? What if we go there tomorrow and instead of her, we are greeted by an army of men in masks, ready to make us bleed fountains of blood?”

“Trust me Aarav, she is not that evil master”, Shayna said.

“Why? Because you met her thrice and became an expert judge of her character?”

“What?” she was stumped as he suddenly raised his voice.

“For all we know she’d welcome us in her home, understand whatever we have learned so far, bury our bodies in her garden and leave with all the books.” He looked intensely at Shayna. “Isn’t that what people do? Leave?” Aarav spoke coldly as he started searching something on his mobile phone.

Shayna wasn’t expecting his outburst and was left with her mouth open. Aanya knew something was up but struggled to figure out what exactly was happening. And Rehann knew that Aarav was trying to be arrogant, so as to push Shayna away and concentrate back on the hunt.

“If that is the case”, Shayna continued. “Then what if I am the evil master? What if I was the one who ordered the Bulls to kill you all?”

“He didn’t mean to offend you”, Rehann jumped in to save Aarav.

“No. I am genuinely asking him”, she raised her voice too.

“Your own hitmen would never shoot a bullet at you”, Aarav uttered coldly.

“But what if they have never seen my face? I am an evil master after all.”

“Every move has a motive. You are already a billionaire, you wouldn’t care about a treasure and murder people. Someone who stole money from the houses she worked at when she was a teen and whose husband has been

accused of homicide just might”, Aarav pulled up Harsha Jayaratne’s Wikipedia bio and showed it to Shayna.

“I’m sure that she is not the evil master”, Shayna spoke while calming herself down.

“How?” Aarav asked her again.

“Because if you would look at the bio that you are shoving in my face more closely, you’ll see that she took charge at WHO only about ten months ago, while the first murder of Indira Chatterjee happened over a year ago.”

Aarav looked at the bio again and realized his mistake. His face was left red as he slowly mustered courage to look up at Shayna again.

“Know your facts first Mr. Kohrrathi before you come out throwing accusations on my judgement”, she spoke blatantly.

“I’m... sorry”, Aarav admitted his fallacy.

“You should be”, she remarked coldly before grabbing her book and taking the Book of Alchemy from Aanya. “I’ll keep them in my safe here. I don’t see a point in taking our books to Sri Lanka.”

“I should probably go. I’ll go to some mall and shop for clothes”, Aarav muttered as he tried to lighten the mood.

“And get yourself killed”, Shayna was quick to reply. “They’ll follow you as soon as you’ll leave this building. My attendants’ numbers are available next to the telephone in your room. Ask one of them to buy clothes for you. They’ll deliver them by the evening.” She gave a hurtful yet emotionless stare to Aarav before walking away to her room.

“My body is aching badly. I should probably get some sleep”, Aarav fumbled out words to hide his embarrassment before climbing up the stairs and locking the door of his room.

“What happened?” Aanya asked Rehann once they were gone.

“I’m sure that I don’t even know half of it”, he said looking back at the stairs.

“Did something happen between the two of them?”

“I don’t know. I have never seen him with a girl before. When it comes to

women, he gets paranoid. He doesn't connect with them. He has this ego and self-obsession that just drives them crazy."

"I mean he is such a humble man most of the times", Aanya continued. "But then he suddenly gets angry and says all these things. He was a perfect gentleman to me until I refused to give him the book. He was more than a perfect gentleman to her but snapped as soon as he had a disagreement with her. I wonder how you handle him."

"He is complicated. Yes. But I have admired him since we first became friends in school. He used to be really shy, probably that is why he has a problem in connecting with people. There was a time in seventh grade when a girl he really liked asked him out and you won't believe what he did."

"He ran?" she guessed.

"Well, you won't believe what he did after that."

"What?"

"He ran to the principal and told her that the girl was trying to seduce him."

"What?" she chuckled as she pulled a chair and sat down.

"Yes. He has these things since childhood. I consider it his superpower. He will probably call it a curse."

"What?" she asked.

"Whenever he sees visuals or hears noises, his brain picks them up without him realizing it. He watches a lot of TV series and could recite their dialogues to you scene by scene. Same things happen when he watches movies. He read an encyclopedia or a book on the history of the world when he was really young, and since then he has been in love with history. When they taught us about the Battles of Independence or French Revolution, most of us would sleep through the lecture; but he would live it. No matter how sad he is, no matter how angry he is, you start throwing in random questions about world history to him and he would behave like a child wanting more and more of trivia. He has memorized the dates of every major event that has ever happened in history and never forgets it."

"Amazing", she remarked. "Does he have like, photographic memory?"

“Oh definitely not”, Rehann chuckled finally grabbing a chair for himself. “He would have failed in his Maths exams if I hadn’t shown him my answers. He has the highest of passion for the subjects of his liking; but pays no heed to the ones he disregard.”

“And which are the subjects he liked?”

“Oh. He is a master with history and languages; taught himself passable French and Korean just by watching movies in those languages. He is fluent in Marwari and Mewari, both native Rajasthani languages, probably because his family has roots from there. He also has a deep knowledge of Sanskrit. These three helped us immensely while finding the treasure in Chittorgarh. He is also fluent in Portuguese, which he learned hardly in a few weeks before we set out to find the sunken Portuguese fleet. He is also a fan of the languages of the south. He developed this crazy fascination with Tamil in high school. He can read and write in both Tamil and Telugu. He also tried to learn Elvish from Lord of the Rings and Dothraki from Game of Thrones. Although I have never heard him speak it. Or maybe that’s what he says when he talks of historical facts. But his knowledge of prominent Indian languages helps him immensely in his work. Other than that, he is excellent at Geography, was really good in Biology till tenth standard. He always scored the highest marks in the subjects he liked without even having to study them. And then I had to save him with Mathematics and Computers.”

“That day when we first met, how did he recognize the cipher in my father’s note?”

“Oh he loves his puzzles and codes. He could solve them an entire day and still ask for more. But you have barely seen him at his best. His mind races faster than a machine when it comes to something he likes; but stops entirely when it comes to computers or finance or...”

“Women”, she laughed. “Enough about him. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“I know that you are a hacker. I know that you are good with computers. But what else?”

“Well I’m a data extractor; I don’t prefer to call myself a hacker, that’s too lame. Yes I am good with computers and mobiles and practically anything

that runs on electricity. I was actually placed with Google and was about to leave for US when one fine day, at two in the night, Mr. Kohrrathi knocked at my door and somehow convinced me to help him get to a treasure I had never even heard about and give up my job.”

“And you did it?”

“I postponed it. Don’t tell him that, I always say that I left a million dollar job for his treasure hunt, so he owes me big time. That hunt required me to hack into government’s systems and extract a lot of data. But it worked and even though we didn’t made much, I realized that I enjoyed being a treasure hunter rather than just a coder. We went on to find the treasure of the sunken Portuguese fleet next. That hunt paid me more than two years’ worth of salary that I would have got at my job. And then the treasure hunt of Chittorgarh happened and it made us millionaires”, he said with a smile.

“That is amazing.”

“What about you?” Rehann asked.

“Well there isn’t anything of interest about me”, she replied.

“Come on.”

“I never really experienced difficulties while growing up you know. Being the heiress to one of the richest man in the country has its own perks. I was a brat, to be honest. I was so used to all the attention and luxuries while growing up that I was spoiled by the time I was in high school. For me, life was all about parties and hanging out with friends and foreign trips every couple of months. I would have ended up being a complete wreck had I not fought with my father.”

“Come on. You fought with him for what you were passionate about. That shows your strength.”

“I was never passionate about fashion”, she confessed. “Passion is what I see in you when you are working on computers, or in Aarav’s eyes when he is chasing history. It is the thing with girls who have rich fathers. We always say that we are passionate about fashion or jewelry designing or event organizing, because we cannot do anything better than that. We shop in a day what many families make in more than a year. No wonder we are good with

brands.”

“You are clearly underestimating yourself”, Rehann spoke.

“Well I did. After I fought with my father, I decided to not take a single Rupee from him. I supported myself in London, organized EDM’s by night and went to college by the day. Soon enough, I started making quite some money.”

“That is fantastic. See I would have never been able to do something like that. If my father cut me off, I would rather declare a hunger strike till he broke”, he chuckled.

“Well that’s all about me. Nothing adventurous like chasing a sunken treasure. I did sky dive once; that was intense.”

“Really?”

“Yes. In Germany. I might even have a video of it. Let me search.”

“It is fine”, Rehann spoke without any expression on his face.

Shayna soon entered the hall and came near the both of them. “My associates have spoken with the Sri Lankan authorities and the Indian Embassy. Flying there will not be a big deal. We’ll have to leave tomorrow morning though if we have to meet Harsha Jayaratne’s schedule”, she said while looking around.

“He has locked himself in the room”, Rehann felt an obligation to say it.

Shayna grew worried and surprised at the same time.

“Don’t worry. He is a drama queen. He’ll be fine”, Rehann continued.

Shayna nodded her head understandably and turned back to exit to her room, leaving a very confused Rehann and a shyly laughing Aanya behind.

Chapter 6

Lanka

They landed at Anuradhapura, the capital of Sri Lanka's North Central province at around eleven in the morning. Anuradhapura, had the closest airport to the city of Mannar, where a delegation sent by Harsha Jayaratne was waiting to escort them. Rehann and Aanya had slept through their journey as they stayed up talking with each other the entire night. Shayna sat opposite to Aarav, yet they never spoke through the entirety of their flight. Shayna had her laptop out and was busy working the entire time, while Aarav had his hands joined and the fingertips of his index fingers placed on the tip of his nose. He paused a couple of times as he drew out some notes, searched something on his phone and resumed his posture to think again. Shayna, glanced at him a couple of times but he remained unbothered by her presence and ignored her entirely. Aarav shook Rehann violently as he woke him up from his deep slumber when they landed. Aanya had managed to get up on her own.

They got out of Shayna's jet and were immediately greeted by the pleasant Sri Lankan weather. The delegates from WHO escorted them out and the four of them sat in a black SUV as they took off with a fleet of five cars. Rehann was again feeling the urge to sleep as they went past the city. Aarav was busy in his own thoughts, Shayna was continuously busy on her mobile and Aanya was finding it awkward as no one was willing to speak.

"It is a beautiful city", she finally spoke to break the silence. "I have never been to Sri Lanka before. Look at the people outside. They all look so happy, so cheerful."

"Probably because they all had a full night's sleep", Rehann provided his input.

"You know what I realized last night Rehann?" Aanya continued. "You could be a good stand-up comic if treasure hunting doesn't work out."

Both Rehann and Shayna chuckled a bit in agreement.

“Wait! Is that a stupa?” Rehann asked, opening his eyes wide.

“Yes”, Aarav replied as they passed by a giant red dome. “That’s Abhayagiri Vihara, one of the most prominent Buddhist stupa in Sri Lanka. It was founded sometime in the second century BC, but had flourished ingeniously in the next hundred years and became a source of attraction for many scholars throughout the world. This city, Anuradhapura, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. It was the ancient capital of Sri Lanka and is also declared a world heritage site. This city is sacred to the Buddhists. There are many monasteries and ancient architectures from the Sri Lankan civilization here. Emperor Ashoka himself is believed to have propagated Buddhism to Sri Lanka, sending his son Mahinda Bhikku when this city was still the capital of the country. It is only fulfilling that we are passing through this ancient place on our own quest to find Ashoka’s secret treasure.”

“A complete circle indeed”, Rehann said, looking at the massive stupa for the last time as they passed by it.

“You are a walking talking encyclopedia, aren’t you?” Aanya spoke to him with a smile.

Shayna glanced at him once before continuing her work and Aarav laughed it off as they soon left the city of Anuradhapura and headed for Mannar.

They arrived at Mannar in about two hours. It was a quiet town located by the sea on Mannar Island, and the capital of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The town was popular for its baobab trees, an ancient Portuguese fort, and was dominated by various Hindu temples and churches. Dark clouds had started enveloping the sky over Mannar and the waves in the sea were increasing their ferocity. Rehann and Aanya had fallen asleep just after they had left Anuradhapura. Shayna, by then, had stopped working, opened the window towards her side, and gazed out of the car at the picturesque beauty of the beaches as a strong sea breeze played with her hair. Aarav was looking out from the other side, admiring a few kids jumping off a cliff into the sea playfully. Their entourage moved towards the direction of that cliff, as they parted from the main road and took a road less travelled up, where a single, ancient structure greeted them. The cars stopped before it and an elderly woman came out to greet them, accompanied by a few men. Shayna

recognized her at once and got out of the car to meet her. Aarav had to wake up Rehann and Aanya before getting out himself.

“Ms. Maheshwari, I hope I didn’t bother you with such a long ride”, she spoke as she greeted Shayna.

“Of course not Mrs. Jayaratne. After observing the beauty of this town, I am glad that you did”, she spoke with a genuine smile. “This is Mr. Aarav Kohrrathi. He has been tremendously resourceful on our quest so far.”

Aarav went ahead and shook Mrs. Jayaratne’s hand, observing her eyes cautiously.

“This is his companion, Mr. Rehann Vrrathiah”, Shayna continued. “And this is Ms. Aanya Vashishtha, the daughter of Mr. Harish Vashishtha.”

“I am so sorry for your loss”, Mrs. Jayaratne spoke slowly in her old gravelly voice as she shook Aanya’s hands. “Come in. Please. All of you”, she invited them into her house and instructed her men to stand out. She was short in her stature, hardly five feet tall and had to walk with the help of a stick. Grey hair played with a few black ones on her head, and wrinkles marred her face, symbolizing her experience. She wore a thick set of glasses and had a hunchback. She let her guests observe her ancient house before she started speaking slowly. “You must be wondering why I live in such a shabby house.”

“No. This house clearly was built around the time of the Dutch occupation here after the Portuguese were routed out. An architecture like this on a cliff overlooking the sea, surrounded by beaches and palm trees, what else could anybody ask?” Aarav replied admiring the history behind her house.

“I really like this one”, she spoke to Shayna and pulled Aarav’s cheek as she erupted in a fit of laughter. “This is my ancestral home. It belonged to my father before it was illegally taken up by a lawyer from Jaffna. Overnight, my family came to living on the road. My parents had to work as laborers in a small mill and I had to wash dishes in many houses in the town. My mother soon got sick and I started stealing money from the houses I worked in to meet her medical expenses. But one day, I was caught. Mr. Jayaratne, a local doctor, found me stealing money from his wallet and scolded me like anything. But once I told him why I was stealing the money, he decided to

treat my mother for free and bore her expenses while he sent me away to Chennai, it was Madras back then, to study law. Once I became a lawyer, I fought the man who took our house and won the case against him. I brought my parents back to this place and watched them live happily till they passed away. I also married Mr. Jayaratne's son, the love of my life", she said with a smile as she lead them to a room where a man was lying on a bed.

"What happened to him?" Aanya asked her, concerned.

"He contracted ALS some time back", she continued speaking as she slowly moved her hands over his head and looked at him with love. "I think I love him even more than I used to do thirty seven years ago when we got married."

Her guests were moved.

She again let them out into the hall where juices and food were placed for them. "I had to ask the attendants to leave considering the matter we are supposed to discuss", Mrs. Jayaratne continued. "Although I have to ask you, are you assured that the other three masters have been murdered?"

"We are positively sure about this fact", Aanya spoke.

"This is bad", she continued. "I was informed about this secret the day I took the office. To be honest, I have to tell you that it took me a month to digest the fact that there actually could be a secret that has survived this long. And now, someone could kill me just because I know about it."

"Don't worry. The Bulls don't know it yet that you are a master. They never laid hands on Ms. Maheshwari's book so they cannot possibly know about you", Aarav replied. Shayna looked at him as he started reciprocating the same cold formality which she was adopting herself towards him.

"Very well then. I think you will need my book too."

"Yes. That would be very helpful", Aarav replied curtly.

Mrs. Jayaratne slowly went to her room and took her time to come back out carrying an emerald color book with 'Book of Medicine' written on its face. This book was comparatively shorter than the other two that they already had. "But if you say that the three of the masters were murdered, and Ms. Vashishtha and Ms. Maheshwari are here, that just leaves the master I am

supposed to watch over as the suspect?” she spoke.

“We think that whoever this seventh master is, is the one behind this conspiracy”, Aarav replied.

“But that is the case”, Mrs. Jayaratne continued. “He cannot be the killer.”

“What?” the four of them uttered in unison.

“Mrs. Jayaratne, look. Three masters have been murdered and Mr. Vashishtha took his own life, leaving his heir Aanya as the master. Now Aanya herself came to me with the hunt, so we can rule out that she is the evil master. Ms. Maheshwari is here too and she herself was attacked by the Bulls, so we can say that she isn’t the evil master either. And since the murders started happening even before you took the office of WHO, we can assume that you are not the evil one. So whoever, the seventh master is, has to be the man who is conspiring to claim the treasure and betray the cause of The Ring of the Seven”, Aarav replied.

“I think you are mistaken”, she replied as she opened the last page of the Book of Medicine. “Look.”

The Healer, who is the bearer of the Book of Medicine, shall fulfill all of his duties upright. The last of which is to keep a watch over The Administrator, who bears the Book of Strategy.

The Prime Minister of India.

None of them were able to move. They found it hard to find their breaths. Aarav and Shayna finally looked at each other, understanding the graveness of the situation. Rehann had his mouth wide open as he read the text again to make sure that his vision wasn’t playing with him. Aanya sat down on her chair and held her head.

“The Book of Strategy, just like the Book of Medicine, is passed on to the head of the institution then?” Shayna spoke.

“Yours isn’t?” Mrs. Jayaratne countered, surprised.

“This is impossible”, Aarav spoke to himself, getting furious and stepping a little back. “This cannot be. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I cannot believe this. The Prime Minister himself?” Aanya spoke.

“Something doesn’t add up”, Aarav continued in denial. “He cannot be the one who is ordering the hits. He cannot be the one who is murdering masters. He cannot be the one who is conspiring to get to the treasure.”

“But the men who attacked us; they were all ex-army men, right?” Shayna spoke.

“I cannot believe this”, Aarav uttered again. “If a man of his stature was doing this. Something would have transpired. Something could have given him away. He is the Prime Minister of our country. He is always in the public eye. He cannot be the one.”

“He has the Book of Strategy. He could have planned this all out”, Shayna spoke again. “The men were hired from navy and the Border Security Forces. He clearly has the power to create a special team of assassins who moonlights as the Broods of the Bulls.”

Aarav wasn’t willing to accept this. Maybe because he truly believed that the Prime Minister of India wasn’t the secret evil master; or maybe because he didn’t want to imagine the efforts it would take to bring down a man who was that powerful. “I need to think. I have to clear my mind”, Aarav said as he turned back and left the house.

Rehann settled on the chair opposite to Aanya and held his head too. “But I voted for him”, he cried.

Shayna started speaking with Mrs. Jayaratne to gain a little more insight about the matter.

Aarav had walked down the cliff and reached a quiet, empty beach which was hardly a ten minutes’ walk away. He settled down in the clear beige sand and watched the sea growing more and more restless from far, only a single fishing boat floating in the distance. The weather by that time had changed drastically. Dark clouds welled up over his head, making the afternoon look like the sky right after sunset. The pleasant sea breeze had grown stronger making the waves rise much more than they normally would.

A storm was coming.

Aarav darted his eyes as far as he could. His mind was in turmoil, a thousand thoughts, a thousand possibilities rippling through it; and he found them hard to control. He soon started taking in deep breaths and closed his eyes, trying to shift his focus to clear his cluttered brain. He felt the breeze against his skin, he heard the rippling of the tall palm trees swaying with it. He also breathed the pleasant fragrance of the sea and the sand, calming him down and helping him meditate. He stood like that for some time. How long? He didn't know, but it was long enough that when he opened his eyes again, he found Shayna sitting next to him.

"I never took you for a man who meditates", she spoke while glancing at the dancing waves.

"I am not the man you think I am", he replied carelessly.

She glanced at him and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She stared at his dark, silky hair, flowing back effortlessly with the wind. She also admired his unwavering focus, as he stared at the sea, his mind asking him a thousand questions. "You know, it has been more than ten years that I have sat at a beach and just looked at the water without a care in the world. When I was young, I enjoyed sitting like this. I relished and admired the nature in its finest form. In fact, I cannot remember the last time when I saw a sight this beautiful."

"Some people admire nature much better when others are not speaking", Aarav uttered coldly.

"What have I done to you?" she asked him, unable to believe his arrogance.

"That is the question I have been asking myself. What have you done to me indeed?"

"I was courteous to you. I welcomed you in my home. I treated you in the best way that I could, perhaps even more. Then why are you so irritable? Why are you so mad?"

Aarav took in a deep breath and then turned towards her. "You know that in my previous hunts, I had faced danger and I had faced bullets. Yet I was never scared of continuing on my journey. Because I was always at the top of my game. I was always a step ahead of everyone else. I could predict the next hurdle coming and I was prepared for it. But I hardly know what has

happened to me now. I'm scared for the first time. I'm afraid of the uncertainty at every step. I don't know what will happen next. My brain is not helping me."

"It is alright Aarav. It only makes you a human if you fear something evil."

"But that is the thing. I don't want to", he spoke furiously. "I have always appreciated this mind of mine. It automatically identifies the facts which are related to my field and saves it subconsciously. The facts that I might have heard in a movie or read in a newspaper article. And then it all comes back like an instinct, like hunch as to what I should do next. My mind automatically links the patterns, it connects the dots and serves me with the end result, so I don't have to waste hours thinking about the same task. I have always been able to trust my intuition. But it has abandoned me now."

"It will be fine Aarav. Everything will get better. We will find a way out of this misery", she said placing her hand over his arms.

"The most powerful man of the country is chasing us. How could it possibly get better? How will we get the Book of Strategy when the strategist himself has been playing with us all this while?"

"We can think of something. It will work out. Trust me", she said moving closer to him.

By that time, the tension that was building up in the sky finally unleashed as the dark clouds grunted heavily and released the downpour.

Aarav looked up irritably as he started getting up. "We should reach back to the house."

"What is the rush?" Shayna held his hand and stopped him from getting up. "I haven't drowned myself in a heavy rain for so long. I want to cherish this moment", she spoke as she closed her blue eyes and turned her face up to enjoy the rainwater showering on her face. Aarav sat back annoyingly, but gazed at Shayna's serene face, which soothed him a little. He turned his gaze back to the sea, the storm making it rage with all its might.

"You know, according to Ramayana, Lord Ram would have landed somewhere around here with the stone bridge he had constructed over the sea to move his army from India to Lanka", Aarav spoke. "If you sail in that

direction, you'll come across Palk Strait. And if you continue further, you'll reach Rameshwaram."

She had a genuine smile on her face as she darted her blue eyes into his brown ones. "You're so different from any man I have met before. You're so different in perceiving the things. You see the history and the myth behind the minutest of moments which someone like me would find normal. I'm glad that I met a person like you Aarav Kohrrathi."

He smiled a little before shaking his head. "The rain is getting stronger now. I think we should move back to the house", Aarav insisted with a shy smile.

"And not see this beautiful sight?" she remarked.

He looked towards the sea again, the rains making it appear even more heavenly.

"That night..." he said after a while. "What was that?"

"That... was a pleasant experience, albeit a drunk one", she replied with a hint of a smile.

"We should never..." Aarav spoke after a while.

"Yes. We should never mention it again", she completed his sentence.

They both became quiet again and just sat there on the beach, gazing at the sea, soaking in the rain, with not a sign of life around. Aarav slowly turned his gaze towards her. Her hair were parted from the middle and fell down equally towards both the sides. Raindrops trickling on her face as she looked at him too. She saw the scars on his face from the time they were attacked in her office. She remembered him jumping in and pulling her to safety as they were pelted by bullets. The moment when he asked her if she was unharmed, she knew that this man deserved her respect. A failed relationship early on in her life had made her stop believing in these feelings, directing her to focus on her career and her ventures. But after so long had a man managed to attract her that she had forgotten about the twelve year age gap which they shared.

"What are you staring at?" Aarav asked her slowly. "The nature is on the other side."

She took in a deep breath. “I don’t feel like looking at it anymore”, she said as she closed her eyes and went for his lips.

They kissed passionately. They kissed ardently. They kissed for a long time. They both had their eyes closed, their lips moving in perfect sync with each other and their hearts beating faster, for each other. They let themselves get lost on that beach, no one ready to break the kiss, no one ready to ruin their moment, no one ready to accept the fact that this little instant was the only thing that could cheer their lives amidst the threats looming over their quest. That moment was perfect. They sat by the calm beach, admiring the lengths of the azure water that sprawled before their eyes. The clouds had almost stopped storming, making it rain quietly over them as they stuck to each other’s faces passionately. It was something surprising for her. It was something startling for him. It was something unexpected for the both of them. The rain had slowly morphed into a drizzle, the clouds had started growing thinner, yet they kissed each other; unbothered and blissful.

And that is when they heard it.

At first it felt like the sound of thunder, coming from the looming clouds overhead. But then came another one, and another one; and that is when they realized that those were sounds of gunshots. They broke the kiss instantly, looked into each other’s eyes with terror and dashed for the clifftop. The seven guards of WHO were lying dead outside the house by the time they arrived, their blood accumulating in the pools of puddles created due to the rain.

“Is it them?” she asked, terrified.

“Get into a car. Now”, Aarav spoke as he grabbed the gun of one of the fallen guards.

“You are not going in there alone”, she said pulling his coat.

“If they get to you, they have all the books Shayna. They cannot find you. At any cost”, he ordered her. “Stay in a car and drive if they walk out of the door and we don’t”. He said before slowly moving to the door and opening it a little.

He was able to see the hall, where Rehann, Aanya and Mrs. Jayaratne were forced to sit on their knees and put their hands behind their heads. Aarav

counted there to be eight assassins, all dressed in a black and red suit and wearing their bull masks. He was barely able to see the man who was parading before the three of his friends and shouting at them angrily. He donned a plaster in one of his hands and carried a gun in the other. Aarav knew who he was.

Aarav slowly opened the door a little more and rolled ahead quietly to hide behind a cupboard. He knew he had no chance to take out the eight of them himself. Not only was he vastly outnumbered, he only had five bullets in the gun he was holding. He sneaked a look from behind the cupboard and saw one of the Bulls standing really close to him. He knew where he had to start. He took in a deep breath and came out from his place of hiding as he fired at the exposed head of the bull with resolute, unwavering hands. The bullet made home inside the assailant's head and Aarav dashed ahead as he managed to grab the gun from the Bull's hands before his lifeless body could even hit the floor. Aarav almost jumped behind the sofa near him as the rest of the Bulls heard his gunshot and fired at him. A bullet went past his ear, as he realized how lucky he was... for the time being. The Bulls came at him from all the sides, Aarav managed to pull his hands out from over the couch and fire in their direction, but his attempts were futile. He soon saw a burly body emerge before him and his reflexes made him fire from both the guns that he was holding at the same time. Both the bullets dug deep into his assailant's chest as the man went down. However, Aarav failed to realize that another man had come from right behind him. He turned his eyes to meet the ones of his killer and he wasn't able to lift his gun. But all of a sudden, a loud bang went from outside and a bullet hit that man in the back, making him fall down. Shayna entered grabbing a gun and fired further towards the Bulls as she crashed behind the couch like Aarav.

Aarav looked at her, his eyes thanking her a million times, yet he wasn't able to bring words to his mouth. Shayna looked up and fired again, her shot missing her mark by a lot of distance.

All of a sudden they heard a loud bang as a familiar voice struck their ears. "Calm down now, or I'll blow their heads to the roof", the Bull with a plaster on his hand spoke. "I have had enough with you rats. If I wanted it to be you'd be dead already..."

Aarav stood up a little and fired towards the man all of a sudden, cutting his

voice midway but sadly missing him by just a whisker.

“Enough!” the man barked as he fired three angry shots in Aarav’s direction. “You want to play games? Huh?” he asked furiously. “Bring me a knife N. Let me show them what I can do.” He went ahead and held the knife on the cheek of Mrs. Jayaratne. “Have you people seen anyone get skinned when alive?” he said impatiently as Mrs. Jayaratne started weeping.

Aarav looked at Shayna and they knew that K had got them.

“Let’s start with the elderly. Their skin is so soft. It’s like passing a hot knife through butter”, K said as he dug his knife in her cheek and peeled out the skin in seconds. Mrs. Jayaratne’s horrific cries echoed through the house as she tossed her body here and there, trying to escape the grip of her assailant. “I think I can see her cheek bone. Both of you should come and see it before the blood starts oozing.”

Aarav looked at Shayna and she nodded.

“Aaaand... it’s gone”, K continued. “Too bad. Let’s cut the other side. I think if I peel her a little more, we could even see her skull.”

“Okay. Stop”, Aarav spoke as he put both his hands behind his head and stood up. Shayna followed him and stood up too.

“Good boy”, K spoke as he handed the knife over to N. “Come ahead now. Throw your weapons away. You know how this works.”

Aarav and Shayna dropped their weapons near the door and started walking ahead slowly.

“Oh! Look at your face”, K spoke to Aarav. “Did U punch you a little too hard the other day? I mean, I instructed him to not touch your face. Or maybe I didn’t. But look at the cut on your cheek. I mean, it is not as good as the one I inflicted on her right now. But it is a scar nonetheless.”

K came near Aarav and touched the cut on his left cheek while Aarav darted his eyes towards the plastered hand of K.

“Oh I forgot, you gave me something too. Something better than a scar. I mean I understand that I had him punch you a lot, and so your friend pulled something of his from a sensitive place. But you sir, shot at me. You put a

bullet, right here, and shattered my collar bone in half. Do you realize how expensive medical treatment is these days? Hmm?” he came ahead and stared hard into Aarav’s eyes.

“I am assured that the Government of India would be bearing your expenses”, Aarav uttered.

K smiled a little from inside his mask before throwing his other hand on Aarav’s face with might. “U, I am sorry I wasn’t able to replace your punching bag the other day. I hope that the treasure hunter will suffice.”

U removed the gloves from his hands and walked ahead towards Aarav.

“Oh and where are my manners”, K continued. “I haven’t introduced you people to my boys. That is N, standing in the corner. He likes to play with knives. You people already know U. I am K. K for knight or king, whichever may suit you. And there is E. And the fat one is S.”

U went ahead and started breaking his fists on Aarav’s ribs.

“Now that we are done with the pleasantries. I have the Book of Medicine with me. If I were to have the Book of Finance and the Book of Alchemy. I would go ahead and find the treasure for you people”, K continued as he took out his mobile phone and dialed a number.

“I don’t have the books with me”, Shayna spoke up.

“Oh I know”, K replied.

“What?” she was surprised.

“I said I know. Your chef told me. You should never trust the French. You never know who they are working for”, he continued speaking. “You’re in the house?” he spoke to the chef on the call. “Good. Now, Ms. Shayna, tell me where the safe is.”

Shayna didn’t speak.

“I have been instructed to not hurt you and your people much unfortunately. So there is only so much creative I can get. Now. Tell me. Where is the safe?”

She didn’t reply again.

“Can you hear me? Don’t make me peel out your skin too. I mean, it would hurt me to carve a face like yours.”

“There is an old man lying in the other room”, E spoke.

“Dead or alive?”

“Alive.”

“Then let us see how long he stays that way. Bring him out”, he instructed them.

“NO. You have what you needed. Just leave us alone”, Mrs. Jayaratne cried.

“I will walk out of that door ma’am if she tells me where the safe is. I promise”, he spoke to her slowly.

E dragged out Mr. Jayaratne on a wheelchair in the meantime.

“Oh! He looks so sick. What happened to him? Do you not feed him?” K continued with his play as the rest of his men laughed. “Is he the husband?” he slowly asked Shayna who refused to speak again. “Oh she will not speak. I will have to make her speak somehow”, he said again as he walked towards Mr. Jayaratne and held his face forcefully.

“Look at the face of your wife”, K continued. “I flayed her skin off you know. Doesn’t she look hideous to you?”

“You’re sick”, Aanya shouted at him.

“I would have beheaded you all right now darling if I hadn’t been instructed to not hurt you people. Despite everything, my master has told me to keep you all alive till the very end. However, the master never said anything about the old man and his wife. So I can get creative with them as much as I want.” He turned to Shayna again. “I’m asking you for one last time. Where. Is. The. Safe?”

Shayna didn’t speak up.

K looked down at his feet with fury before asking for the knife from N.

“Please don’t”, Shayna spoke up.

“It’s too late”, K said as he dug the knife in the middle of Mr. Jayaratne’s

chest forcefully.

“NO!” Mrs. Jayaratne cried, as she tried to rush for her husband and escape the grip of S who was holding her.

K pulled out the knife as Mr. Jayaratne hardly moved his body and grunted in pain. He looked up at Shayna before turning back and sticking the blade right in the poor man’s left eye. Aanya and Rehann looked away with remorse while Mrs. Jayaratne’s wailing got louder and louder.

“He’s still alive”, K laughed along with his men. “The old man had a lot of life left in him after all”, he said before he held Mr. Jayaratne by his hair and pulled his head over his wheelchair to get a clear vision of his throat. He took in a deep breath before placing his knife on his victim’s neck and started moving it up and down as he dug through. Mr. Jayaratne’s veins popped out, trachea got sliced through and K had to only apply more force once he reached the backbone. The blood spurted out in a hundred fountains and sprayed all around the room, even on K himself, but that didn’t deter K from beheading him with just a knife. Mrs. Jayaratne had fallen on the floor, wailing, as K finally pulled out Mr. Jayaratne’s head and held it up for everyone to see. He slowly moved ahead and took it right before Shayna’s face as he asked for the phone again from one of his men and continued. “Are you telling me where the safe is, or should we throw the missus’ head next?”

“It’s in my room. There is a switch under the table lamp which opens a secret compartment in my wardrobe”, she shivered.

“You heard her”, he spoke to the chef over the phone as he tossed the head he was holding, which landed right before where Mrs. Jayaratne was weeping.

“You found it? Good. Check her wardrobe. Yes. Got the safe? Great. Oh don’t tell me that”, K grunted in frustration. “It will need your biometric verification to open?”

Shayna nodded her head.

K rolled his eyes from under his mask as he thought for a moment what he should do next.

“I will have to take you with me then?” he said. “S. E. Take her out to the car. U that is enough. I think that the treasure hunter has learned his lesson, stop

beating him. N tie them all up to that table. And did she faint?” he pointed towards Mrs. Jayaratne. “Do people really do that? Anyway, leave her be. I know we are instructed to not kill them, but when have we followed orders precisely? Tie them up and burn this place down. Let the fire kill them all”, he said as he turned around and started leaving. S and E took Shayna out of the house, while U went ahead to help N tie the others to a table’s leg. Mrs. Jayaratne however snapped out of her unconsciousness and focused on a gun fallen right before her.

“That bastard killed three more of my men today”, K spoke as he walked back towards the gate. “I should hire him instead.”

Rehann saw Mrs. Jayaratne move and reach for the gun from the corner of his eyes. “No”, he muttered to himself slowly as she held the gun and fired a bullet towards K with her shaking hands, obviously missing him by a lot of distance.

K looked back to his men and nodded as both N and U, fired their guns without hesitation, blowing her head to pieces in an instant.

Aarav woke up around ten minutes later, his head swirling and body aching badly after the heavy beating he took at the hands of U. Fire had almost enveloped the entire building and the roof had started crashing from places as Rehann managed to somehow untie himself and went quickly for Aanya. By then, sirens had started going outside the house, signaling that the police and fire brigade had arrived. Rehann went on to untie Aarav soon as Aanya got up and barely managed to look at the face of Mrs. Jayaratne, lying close to the head of her husband. She almost felt nauseated at seeing the sight and Rehann pulled her away as they all stood up.

“Are you okay? Can you walk?” Rehann asked Aarav, concerned.

Aarav nodded his head before seeing the carnage that laid before him. Suddenly two men kicked the door, making way for the Sri Lankan police to enter the house. They were already shocked upon seeing the dead bodies of the seven guards outside. But then they came in and saw Mrs. Jayaratne’s head blown up and her beheaded husband lying on the wheelchair. They froze. They panicked. They pulled out their guns and aimed them at the three men standing near the butchery.

“We are innocent. Help us”, the three of them cried as the rest of the policemen entered the burning building.

“Stay where you are. Don’t move”, the policemen said as they kept aiming their guns at them.

“We’ll get toasted alive if we don’t move”, Rehann shouted.

Suddenly the roof over the entrance door broke and the burning pile of wood and bricks came crashing down before the policemen, blocking their way.

“Window. Behind. Quick”, Aarav shouted as the three of them ran for it. The policemen were barely able to see them getting away through the burning flames. They broke a window and leapt out of the smoke filled room, almost stopping for a moment and rolling in the grass outside to grab the clean air.

“The police is behind us. What do we do now?” Aanya asked, scared.

Aarav looked all around. The only way down the cliff was through the narrow road where the Sri Lankan police would definitely greet them. But then he remembered seeing kids jumping off the cliff when he had arrived at Mannar.

“Anyone afraid of heights?” he asked.

“Yes”, their reply came in unison.

“Good. Then close them and don’t look down when we jump from there”, he said pointing towards the end of the cliff.

Rehann gave out a frantic laugh. “No, no, no, no, no. No. I’m not jumping down from there.”

Suddenly a bullet whizzed past his arm as the police came from the other way towards the back of the house.

“Run. Quick. Now”, Aarav yelled as he sprinted towards the edge of the cliff. Rehann and Aanya followed him nervously and they all ran hard. The police continued firing at them from afar, but they dashed, unbothered. Death was behind them and death was staring at them. They stopped thinking as they approached closer to the edge. Aarav sprinted harder while the other two reduced their speeds as they came on the brink and soon found their feet in the air. Rehann screamed louder than Aanya as they made the jump. Their

bodies felt lighter for a moment before they plunged down and hit the seawater with might. They were instantly sucked inside the deep waters and were surprised to find the aquatic life beneath calm and untouched. They swam ahead and came out of the water in a few moments. Everyone carrying a look of surprise and thrill on their faces. Aarav looked ahead at a small white fishing boat he remembered seeing when he sat at the beach earlier. “We have to swim there”, he said as he started stroking the sea water with his hands and moving forward.

As soon as they approached the small boat, Aarav’s lips curved upwards into a smile as he recognized the writing on the front of the boat. “That’s an Indian ship. The writing is in Tamil” Aarav spoke to them drawing in a deep breath. “Indian fishermen pass into the Sri Lankan waters every now and then.”

They shouted for help as the two fishermen, a father-son duo, caught their glimpse and started moving the boat in their direction. Rehann was about to faint when they were all pulled up by the two men and they immediately crashed on the deck, drawing in long breaths.

“Naangal Maalumigal. Engal Sutrulaavai Maerkondu Irundhom. Kanniyartham paechu pola vetkam niraindha kadal, thideerna raatchasa alaigalaai maari uruveduthadhu. Engal uyirai kaapatriyadharku nanri. Engala Indhiyavil saerthu vida udhavi puriya mudiyuma?” Aarav uttered something in fluent Tamil to the fishermen and both Rehann and Aanya failed to understand a word of it.

“You are not a sailor”, the fisherman laughed. “I hope you found a treasure in Lanka.”

Others stared at him, startled.

“I know you are the treasure hunter”, the fisherman replied as he asked his son to steer the boat back to India.

Chapter 7

The Evil

They arrived back in Mumbai around six hours later. Aarav had not spoken a word throughout the entirety of their journey, and appeared to be more angry than scared. Rehann brought up the topics again and again; about Shayna's capture, about the Bulls getting their hands on all the books, about the deaths of the Jayaratne's and about the Prime Minister of the country being the secret evil master. When Aarav never bothered to respond to his queries, Rehann discussed the issues with Aanya, but their discussions led them towards nothing.

Once at the airport, they decided to take the night off and plan what to do ahead. Aanya was escorted back to her mansion. She further provided a few guards for Rehann and Aarav's security, who accompanied them back to his bungalow.

"Look, I know that the things look grim right now. But it will get better", Rehann comforted Aarav as their car exited the Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport. "Shayna will be fine."

"It is not her well-being that concerns me right now", Aarav replied coldly as he looked at the magnificent ivory colored airport building, its beautiful architecture glowing perfectly in the night lights.

Rehann took in a deep breath before engaging in the conversation with Aarav. "Look I know that you liked her. I know that you..."

"You what?" Aarav asked without shifting his gaze.

"Whatever happened between the two of you that night at her penthouse; I know that you have never... experienced... and I understand your attachment with her."

"Oh shut up Rehann", Aarav rolled his eyes as he looked at his friend.

"Nothing happened that night. Nothing happened between me and Shayna Maheshwari. She was nothing but a distraction and is the least of my worries

right now”, he turned back to look outside the window.

“We have to save her”, Rehann replied after some time. “We have to save her quickly Aarav. We saw what the Bulls did to the Jayaratne’s. As soon as they would get their hands on both the books, nothing would stop that K guy from pulling the trigger.”

“They would have reached Delhi sometime around nine. And even if we take the traffic jams into account, they would have reached her place, opened the safe and got both the books with them by now. So if what you say is true, she might already be dead.”

“How can you say such a thing about a person you love?” Rehann flipped.

Aarav took some time before turning back to Rehann. “The evil master has all the seven books right now. All of them. For all we know, the Bulls are already on their way towards the treasure, somewhere in the Himalayas. We started a step ahead of them and we are now almost a mile behind. This devil might be in possession of the greatest treasure in the world tomorrow, the treasure of gods. Can you imagine the kind of power it can give? So yes Shayna is least of my worries right now.”

“It’s always the case with you. You try to humiliate and belittle the ones you care about just so that your mind doesn’t have to fear the pain of imagining them being hurt.”

Aarav turned towards him and instead of a witty comeback had a little smile on his face.

“What?” Rehann asked, surprised by his reaction.

“Nothing”, Aarav replied.

“What’s that smile about?”

Aarav looked outside of the car again, his eyes doling at the nightlife of Mumbai, admiring the passion of the people of the city that never sleeps.

“She is alive and well”, he spoke turning back towards Rehann.

“How could you possibly know that?” Rehann asked, surprised.

“The other day, at Shayna’s office; the Bulls tried to kill us all but we somehow escaped”, Aarav began with his explanation.

“Correct”, Rehann affirmed.

“But then today in Sri Lanka, why didn’t they? You heard K speak it himself. He wasn’t supposed to kill us. He beheaded Mr. Jayaratne. He had Mrs. Jayaratne killed. He would have shot the three of us without batting an eye. But he couldn’t. Why?”

“Because the evil master didn’t want him to?”

“Exactly. The evil master didn’t want him to. That is the only reason we are alive. Now think, why would he do that? Why would the evil master want us dead one day and give explicit orders against it the next?”

“Because he wants us to witness him claim the treasure himself? Then throw our loss in our faces and have us killed?”

“If you believe that, then I’m sorry to say this my friend... but you are a fool.”

“Oh! Is that so? Then you know why we are alive?” Rehann asked him, a little offended.

“Of course. What do you think I have been brainstorming about throughout our flight back to Mumbai? And trust me you won’t believe me when I tell it to you.” Aarav stopped speaking as their car stopped in front of his bungalow. “Crash at my place tonight.”

“Why? Because you are scared that the Bulls might attack you?”

Aarav looked all around. “Yes”, he whispered slowly.

“Aanya has provided her guards, you know. They’ll keep you safe.”

“And what if they attack you instead?”

“Then they’ll have a very hard time. You know I have a black belt in Karate.”

“Come on”, Aarav said while laughing as he went for the door. Rehann followed him soon.

They were sitting in his study the next morning. Aarav had retracted back to his non-speaking, angry, cold and unbothered mode while Rehann was working on his laptop, following Aarav’s instructions.

“Is it done yet?” he asked Rehann impatiently.

“It takes time”, he replied, his fingers sprinting on the keyboard of his laptop.

“I thought you were a skilled hacker?” Aarav remarked coldly.

“Still am buddy. Still am”, he said as he pounded his index finger on the space bar and exclaimed loudly. “Done.”

Aarav dug his eyes into the laptop screen.

“Is it? That’s insane. How can Shayna’s mobile’s last known location be in Mumbai?” Rehann asked him.

“We are about to find out”, Aarav exhaled a deep breath as his mother knocked at the door of his study and entered inside.

“There is a man waiting for you in the living room. He said to tell you that he knows where... someone called Shayna is.”

“Finally”, Aarav said as he moved towards a drawer to his left and started searching for something.

“What are you boys working on this time?” she asked Rehann, concerned.

“It is nothing”, he replied.

“Look at the scars on his face. Did he get in a fight?”

“It’s nothing Mrs. Kohrrathi. We are on a hunt. It will all be over soon.”

She looked at Aarav with worry. “I’m getting him married when this one is over”, she said while leaving.

Rehann had a smile on his face as he turned back towards Aarav. “A man who says that he knows where Shayna is?”

“Clearly”, Aarav responded.

“Is that a gun? I never knew you carried one?” Rehann asked as he saw Aarav taking out a gun from the drawer and putting it towards his back.

“I have a license, don’t worry.”

“What is going on Aarav?” he asked.

“Everything is happening according to the plan. Let us just move with it”, he replied as he grabbed his coat and headed for the door.

They saw a gentleman sitting in the living room, drinking water out of a glass and admiring the historical makeover Aarav had given to the place. He was probably in his late forties, his head was balding with a little growth of gray hair towards the sides. He was lean and tall, had a scruffy beard and a few wrinkles on his face. He was dressed in formals, had to open his shoes outside the house due to a rule initiated by Aarav’s mother long ago and had kept his left hand resting on his leg. He bowed his head a little as he saw the two of them enter and didn’t care to rise up to shake hands.

“You know where Shayna is?” Rehann asked.

“Yes”, the man nodded his head.

“Who are you?” he continued.

“It doesn’t matter who I am, what matters is what I can tell.”

“And what can you tell?”

“I know where Shayna Maheshwari is. I know everything about the secret books. I know everything about what happened in Sri Lanka. And I know everything about the secret treasure of the Himalayas”, he spoke with a straight face.

Rehann was dumbfounded. “How?”

“Because he was there in Sri Lanka yesterday”, Aarav completed the sentence for the stranger who had a smile on his face.

“What?” Rehann asked.

“The man has barely moved his left hand ever since we came here. Must be hard since I put a bullet in your shoulder, right?”

Rehann looked back at the stranger and realized who he was.

“Must be hard to remember a face you have never seen. I bet you’ll recognize the mask I brought with me in my car”, K spoke to Rehann.

“I knew someone would come. Didn’t expect it would be you though”, Aarav continued.

“I loved this city back in the nineties. I lived here once. I was feeling a little nostalgic so I thought to get a ride and meet you on the way.”

“Aarav, I’m calling the police”, Rehann said reaching for his phone.

“And all they’ll find out about me is that I’m a software salesman who was here to make a sale.”

Aarav looked at Rehann and shook his head in disapproval.

“Good choice”, K uttered as he again went for the glass of water.

“And what if I do this?” Aarav took out his gun and pointed it at K.

“Then you will spoil the bright walls of your house with my bloody red blood. But then again you’ll have to do a lot of explaining to the police as to why you killed an innocent salesman.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Also you’ll never find out where Shayna is.”

“I already know.”

“You do? Really?” K spoke as he looked hard into Aarav’s eyes. “Oh my god. You figured it all out, didn’t you? I heard that you were quick. But that is commendable.”

Aarav continued pointing the gun towards him.

“Then they’ll be really happy to see you?”

“They?” Aarav asked.

“Oh! Didn’t you receive the message? Aanya Vashishtha left the airport all right, but she never arrived at her father’s mansion.”

“I will kill you right now.”

“And they’ll kill her if I don’t return”, K replied coolly. “But enough with the guns and the fighting and the... I’m sorry for what my guys did to you. But now that you know the truth, you’ll have to admit that even I didn’t have any clue about it.”

“What truth?” Rehann asked, puzzled.

“When did you come to know?” Aarav asked K. “Was it before or after Sri Lanka?”

“After”, K replied.

“And if you had known it before, would you still have done what you did to the Jayaratne’s?”

“Oh that one was cruel”, K continued. “That was brutal... with the neck and the blood and everything. But it isn’t the first time someone has been beheaded like that you know.”

Aarav lowered his gun and kept it back.

“Hmm. Now. Shall we?” K asked while getting up.

“Where are we going?” Rehann asked Aarav.

“On a little joyride”, K replied for Aarav as he led them away into his car outside.

They drove out to the Fort area of Mumbai and stopped before a building overlooking the Arabian Sea. K led Aarav and Rehann above on the fifth floor. The building was built sometime in the early twentieth century. It was seven story tall and had narrow hallways leading to the stairs above. They soon entered a room that somehow seemed giant in comparison to the architecture of the building. Its walls were painted with a mild ochre color, with the portraits of a few men adorning the walls. The floor was laden with a thick brown carpet and they had to turn on the lights in the middle of the day since the narrow windows of the room prevented most of the sunlight from entering inside. Around ten Bulls stood in the room, clothed in the same black and red suits that Aarav and Rehann had witnessed them in twice, but they weren’t wearing their masks. In the middle of the room, they saw a familiar face. Aanya Vashishtha was tied to a chair, her mouth gagged, her makeup ruined due to crying and her bloodshot eyes looking at them and grieving for help.

“Dear god”, Rehann uttered as he rushed ahead towards her, only to stop as two Bulls walked ahead and blocked his way. “Aanya, are you all right?”

She continued crying and looked down.

“I will kill you”, Rehann yelled at K.

“I have been asked to not hurt you. Please do not tempt me”, K replied coldly.

“Let me guess, exact instructions by your master?” Aarav said.

“Yes”, came a woman’s voice from behind him. Aarav closed his eyes and took in a deep breath while Rehann stood shocked in his tracks as he saw a very amiable Shayna Maheshwari walking into the room.

“Shayna? What? Wha...” Rehann looked at Aarav and understood why he wasn’t worried about Shayna’s well-being the previous day. “Oh. My. God”, he exclaimed as he held his head.

She came ahead slowly and stood before them.

Aarav finally opened his eyes and cursed himself to again fall for her beauty. Shayna looked different. Her hair appeared to be darker, the blonde highlights towards the bottom were gone. She had her makeup on, a scarlet lipstick enhanced the exquisiteness of her lips. She wore a mascara, accentuating her deep blue eyes further. Unlike her usual demeanor though, she appeared to be far more powerful, far more dominating and charismatic. For the first time she had abandoned her business formals and was instead draped in a revealing red saree which emphasized her voluptuous figure even further.

“Ms. Maheshwari”, Aarav greeted her coldly, unbothered by her appearance and stared straight into her eyes.

“Mr. Kohrrathi”, she replied with a victorious smile. “I must say, it’s not the reaction I was expecting”, she continued in her British accent.

“What were you expecting then?”

“That”, she said pointing towards Rehann, who had his mouth open and creases adorning his forehead.

“It was you? All this time?” Rehann spoke slowly.

Shayna smiled at him before turning back towards Aarav. “How long have you known?”

“I had a lot of time to kill on my way back from Sri Lanka”, he replied while glancing towards Aanya. “Gagging her? Seriously? I thought you were friends?”

Shayna smiled and signaled a Bull to ungag Aanya. “She was screaming a lot and I didn’t want to hurt her.”

“Is that so? I don’t see anyone rushing up this building to save her from your Bulls. Is this it then? Your Bullpen?” he asked her again as he looked all around, subconsciously counting the number of men. “I imagined it to be much better considering the resources you have at your disposal. I must admit, I’m a little disappointed.”

“I’m sorry for that”, she replied, enjoying every bit of it. “I guess I didn’t spend enough time with you to realize your tastes.”

“Oh what can I say? I was sleeping in a billionaire’s penthouse and flying in her private jet yesterday. I think she spoiled me.”

She smiled again. “I never expected you to react like this when I imagined your face once you knew the truth. I mean I changed my appearance. Went to a parlor last night and picked up a new look just to make an impression on you. You spoiled my efforts.”

“How?” Rehann spoke angrily. “How could you do this to us? We trusted you.”

She didn’t reply but just carried a confident smile. She turned back towards Aarav. “How did you know? How did you figure it out?”

Aarav slowly started walking around, staring at the faces of the Bulls present in the room. “In Sri Lanka, when he said that the master didn’t want to hurt us”, Aarav spoke pointing towards K. “I started having my doubts after that. Why would a master want us dead one day and not, on the other? The only possibility was that the evil master had met us in the meantime. Yet K started a fire at the place and left us all for dead, that means he ignored the explicit orders that were given to him, add that to the fact that he almost killed you when they attacked at your office. It meant that even he didn’t know who his master was. He must have been receiving instructions anonymously. Then after coming to India, when we were waiting at the Chennai Airport, what you said the previous day struck me hard.”

“What?”

“Remember when we had a fight at your home? When I tried to convince everyone that Mrs. Jayaratne could be the evil master? You said that what if you were the evil master? What if the Bulls shot at you because they didn’t know who they were taking orders from? And that was the first time that I doubted it”, he said as he went near Aanya and started to untie the rope which bounded her hands.

“But it doesn’t make sense”, Rehann interrupted. “If each master watched over only a single master, and if she was watching over Mrs. Jayaratne, it means that the administrator was supposed to keep a watch on the artist, right? So if the Prime Minister was the only one who knew that Indira Chatterjee had the Book of Arts, how come she knew about her identity?”

“That was the only thing which kept me believing that the Prime Minister of the country was behind all of this. Because whoever watched over the first master, had to have murdered her. It was the only logical thing to follow.”

“Then how did you know it was me?” Shayna spoke getting curious.

“Internet is an open book my dear”, Aarav replied as he pulled up a photo in his mobile phone. “And I had to only search a couple of links before I found your graduation photograph.”

“What does it mean?” Rehann asked.

“It means that they went to college together, Indira and Shayna. I will guess that you were good friends?”

“Great friends”, she replied. “We lost contact after college and only met around fifteen years later. By that time of course, I was who I am and she was a popular actress. It hardly took me any efforts to know her secret. Once she got drunk, she spilled all the beans in an instant. But I was a good master you see. I wanted to protect our secret at the time. And when she told me all about it after only a few drinks, I wondered what she might have already told to others and what she might tell under the influence. She was a habitual drug abuser. So I took my time. Recruited these fine gentlemen through my contacts and unleashed them on her.”

“The Broods of the Bulls? Fancy name I must say”, Aarav said as he

analyzed Shayna and started circling around her slowly.

“Wait! So the whole story about the Bulls being a secret group of assassins during the time of the first mutiny in the Ring was made up?” Rehann asked.

“Of course”, Aarav replied. “I was right when I said that I had never heard about their presence in Indian history. How could I hear about them when they didn’t exist? I should have known that something was amiss at the time.”

“I had to have weaved a story when I came to check in on you that night at my penthouse. I wanted to know the extent to which you were involved in with the secret of our society. Few drinks and a kiss later, I knew everything”, she said while winking at Aarav.

“So what now, you’re going to kill us?” Rehann spoke to her angrily.

“Oh no. If I wanted you dead, I could have killed you all the very first night at my penthouse. I had ordered my men to kill you all and retrieve the book first but I didn’t know that they followed you to my office. Now of course, I couldn’t have given away my reality before you all, so I played along. I observed you all that night. Probably a little more than I should have and decided that it would be a waste to kill you.”

Aarav smiled as he stood before her. “It’s not happening.”

“What?” Shayna asked.

“You know what”, he replied coldly.

“You have to do it. You don’t have an option.”

“Do what?” Rehann asked, confused.

“Get the Book of Strategy.”

Rehann accompanied Aarav in his laughter. “You want us to kill the Prime Minister and bring the Book of Strategy to you?”

“Kill. Kidnap. Beg. Whatever it takes”, she replied calmly.

“It is not a bloody movie”, Rehann shouted. “You cannot just simply show up before the head of a country and kill him or kidnap him or ask him to give away the biggest secret he has been keeping from people like us.”

“This quest is over”, Aarav said. “All that violence. All those deaths. They were all for nothing Shayna. It is impossible to get the book from the Prime Minister. This hunt is officially over.”

“I beg to differ”, Shayna replied. “You know the day before yesterday, Aanya told me about everything. About how you deciphered the code in her father’s letter and how you helped her in discovering the Book of Alchemy. And then, you yourself murmured to me about your intellect and your abilities when we sat on that beach in Sri Lanka. I think that if given correct motivation, you can do it.”

“I know your plan. I know what you intend to do. And it is absurd to even imagine that something like this can work.”

“You know what I plan to do?” she asked, surprised and impressed by his wits at the same time.

“Obviously.”

She walked towards him and took her right hand up. She touched the scar on his face and then darted her blue eyes into his. “Well why don’t you surprise me then?”

He continued staring at her with anger, cursing himself every second for trusting her beautiful smile. “You are not dressed like that just to make an impression on me”, Aarav continued. “You have to go somewhere. Maybe for a wedding, right?”

“You never cease to amaze me”, she continued.

“A wedding?” Rehann asked, confused.

“The daughter of the Chief Minister of the state is getting married tonight at the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel. He is in the top brass of the national party. The Prime Minister of the country will definitely be there to bless the couple. It’s all over in the newspapers today if you skip the part about the mysterious murders of the Director General of the World Health Organization and her husband.”

“Still bitter about that?” she asked him mischievously.

“Those people were murdered”, Rehann shouted at her. “You had them

killed. How can you live with yourself after everything that you have done?”

“I have to see the bigger goal. I cannot let petty emotions distract me from focusing on the treasure.”

“And what will you do once you have the treasure?” Rehann continued.

“Can you imagine the kind of power I will have if I have the treasure of the gods?” she spoke to him.

“You are already a bloody billionaire. How much power and money could you possibly crave?”

“That is the sad thing about you ordinary people. You think that becoming a billionaire is comfortable in itself. You think that once you have enough money you’ll live happily ever after. But it is only when you come to my level that you understand that the game has just begun.”

“You are mad”, Rehann continued.

“People always call others mad when they can’t grasp what great men are doing.”

“Or maybe they call others mad because the others indeed are... mad”, Aarav joined the talk again.

“Oh honey. I thought you will understand. But you are like them after all.”

“I am indeed.”

“Alright then”, she spoke while taking in a deep breath. “Play time is over Aarav. We have to find a book.”

“And how do you say we do it? By gate crashing a wedding?”

“I’m the CEO of one of the biggest banks of Asia and have also donated a lot in the state’s drought relief campaign. I was invited to the wedding Aarav. And you, will be my date.”

“And you plan to murder the Prime Minister at this wedding?” Rehann shouted again.

“God no. We’ll do things as we have done so far. We were able to convince Harsha Jayaratne to hand over her book. We’ll do the same with the Prime

Minister.”

“And what if he doesn’t?”

“Then we will improvise.”

“Not a great plan”, Aarav interrupted.

“Oh you always underestimate the charm of a woman like me.”

“Charm doesn’t get you what you want. It wouldn’t work.”

“Worked on you.”

Aarav looked away, trying to gaze at the sea from outside the narrow windows. “What if I say no?”

“I’ll blow her brains off”, Shayna said, pointing towards Aanya.

“You’ll kill us anyway once you get your hands on what you want. Better do it now.”

“I don’t want to hurt her just to convince you. Don’t force me to, Aarav.”

Aarav looked intently into her eyes, unwilling to budge and stood his ground. She too looked at him, hoping that he would agree. But when after some time he didn’t, she decided that she had to take an action.

“K”, she said. “Start skinning her the way you did with Mrs. Jayaratne.”

K, himself surprised by the order asked N for a knife and slowly started walking towards Aanya.

“NO!” she screamed as two Bulls went ahead and held her tightly while K trotted in her direction.

“Have you lost it Shayna?” Rehann screamed at her.

“U. Punch him with every word that comes out of his mouth.”

U went ahead and grabbed Rehann.

“You are mad Shayna. Aarav do something...” he managed to speak before U started landing punches on his face.

K walked further and passed a smile as he placed his blade on Aanya’s crying

face and looked towards Shayna for a final order.

“Do it”, she said after glancing at Aarav’s face.

“NO!” Aanya cried.

“Okay stop”, Aarav finally broke only to watch K retreat the knife.

Shayna walked ahead slowly and leaned towards his right ear as she seductively whispered, “Never underestimate the charm and the power of a woman. It is the deadliest weapon created by the gods themselves. Get ready for the party honey. I will spoil you tonight.” She kissed him on his cheek before moving back to the room where she came from.

Chapter 8

Burnt Hopes

Aarav and Shayna arrived at the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel at around eight in the night to the iconic site in a black Jaguar XJ. Splendid, was a small word to describe the grandiose of the Taj Hotel. They arrived before the iconic building, its famous red dome lit up by bright lights and adorning the skyline of Mumbai. The hotel was opened in 1903 and became the first building in India to get a trademark. The main building stood seven story tall and was accompanied by comparatively newer twenty two story Taj Towers.

“I’m always amazed by its beauty”, Shayna spoke as a valet opened the door for her. “The dome always draws me back to cherish India’s rich history. I’m sure that you’ll appreciate it Aarav.”

“Why?” he got out from the other side. “It’s Indo-Saracenic revival architecture. It was a favorite style of the British architects at the time of their occupation in India. They combined their understanding of the Indo-Islamic and Indian architecture and pooled it with Gothic revival and Neo classical styles. The dome you seem to be appreciating so much is Florentine Gothic in nature. So what reminds you of India’s rich history is actually symbolic of one of the darkest times of India, when the British occupation and their oppression of Indians was at its peak.”

She walked closer to him and corrected his bow. “You are pulling off this tuxedo I must say. I can hardly listen to what you’re speaking when I am busy admiring you.”

“Then you should’ve listened to me when I said that this won’t work.”

“You like the cameras, don’t you?” she said as she pulled him closer and stopped before the paparazzi who were gathered outside the hotel to click the photographs of the dignitaries.

“Not when I am walking around with a bruised face”, he replied as they entered the hotel.

They were soon guided away to the massive banquet hall, where many famous politicians, businessmen, cricketers and Bollywood stars were gathered. They were being served delicious foods and impeccable wines and were enjoying the lavish wedding to the fullest. Aarav darted his eyes all around, his problems with his shyness emerging every now and then as he would see a famous personality walking ahead and greeting Shayna, while he limited himself to carrying a forceful smile and turn his eyes somewhere else. He was terribly self-conscious and would try to imagine what the other person was thinking of him as they would glance at his beaten face and imagine all sorts of things.

“The Prime Minister isn’t here”, he spoke to her as he dragged her to a corner, away from the people gathered in the hall.

“I believe he’ll drop by in some time. His plane left for Mumbai more than two hours ago.”

“Keeping tabs, are you?”

“I cannot become careless, at least not now when you and your friends know my identity and are still not on my side.”

“You’re a fool if you think that we’ll ever be on your side.”

“I am not evil, Aarav. I am just seeing the bigger picture here.”

“Wait! Does murdering people not make you evil anymore? Have they changed the rules?”

“Ashoka and his army killed hundreds and thousands of people to find this treasure. Still you praise him as the greatest emperor of India? I’d say that your personal judgement is blinding you to put your opinions against me.”

Aarav didn’t speak. He grabbed a wineglass instead and started gulping it down hurriedly.

“Slow down honey, we have all night”, she spoke to him seductively.

“There is still time”, he spoke getting all serious.

“Time? For what?”

“For you to stop this. You don’t have to do any of it. I know you. I was with

you. You are better than this.”

“I know I am better than this. That’s why I am chasing the treasure.”

“By killing people? By hurting innocent men? By the turning on the very society to which you swore an allegiance to?”

“I’m not in a mood for debates Aarav. Look. Is that the captain of the Indian Cricket team? I think I haven’t met him before. Let me go around and work my charm a bit”, she said as she tried to walk ahead.

Aarav held her hand and pulled her towards him.

“Stop it. Enough with your pretentiousness. End this now and come with me”, he tightened his grip on her hand. “You don’t have to do this. Please.”

“Oh no!” she uttered. “You didn’t fall in love with me, did you?”

He kept staring at her with his moist eyes. “What if I say that I did?” he said with a heavy voice, admitting his love for someone for the very first time in his life.

Shayna stood shocked. She hadn’t expected this. She had a moment with him and she enjoyed it. But little could she have imagined that Aarav Kohrrathi was in love with her.

“You’re in love with me?” she questioned him, still surprised.

He didn’t say anything but kept staring into her eyes.

“You can’t be serious?” she said as she tried pulling her hand away from him.

“That day in Sri Lanka, when we sat on the beach, soaking in the rain and admiring the beauty of nature. That was the real you. You didn’t care about money or power. You didn’t care about anything material at all. You cared about the rain which was showering upon your skin. You cared about the sea whose waves were storming before you. You cared about the moment we were living. You cared about me.”

“I didn’t”, she tried looking away.

“Yes you did”, he held her again. “And I... I cared for you. For the first time we weren’t thinking of the treasure, or the ancient secret, or the fact that killers were chasing us. We were just thinking about each other, with each

other. And that was one of the most beautiful moment of my life.”

She didn't have the courage to look into his eyes.

“Shayna”, he said as he held her face with both his hands. “I love you.”

She wanted to say something. She wanted to say a thousand words. But she wasn't able to muster the courage to open her mouth. She looked away suddenly as she saw the crowd going silent and accumulating near the door. “Here he comes”, she spoke while composing herself as they both watched a very lively Prime Minister enter in the hall. She pulled herself away leaving Aarav standing behind and staring at his feet. He wiped away a hint of a tear from his eye and picked up two glasses of wine, passing one over to Shayna as they gazed at the Prime Minister.

Mr. Amit Jain, the son of a cobbler from Ajmer who went on to become the fifteenth Prime Minister of India, carried an aura of brilliance around him. He was completely bald, kept a light French beard and dressed himself in the best of Indian attires. His friends said that he was the most talkative person alive on the planet. His enemies said that he was the shrewdest person who walked the Earth. But they all said that he deserved every bit of respect that he had garnered from his people. He was an extremely humble man, maybe because he tackled poverty in the early days of his life. But the way he had risen up the ranks of his party spoke loads about his dedication and his ethics. He was a beloved figure, across all sections of the society; a riveting task for a politician of his stature.

He met as many people as he could in the hall. He blessed the couple and spoke with them for some time while everyone gathered around. All of a sudden, he became the center of attention.

“And to think that you almost had me believing that he was the evil master”, Aarav spoke as he pushed his emotional self away and brought out his logical side.

“There is no evil master, Aarav. Others are just blind”, Shayna spoke looking back at him.

Mr. Amit Jain, slowly went away from the crowd and was greeted by a group of five men, the top brass of his political party, and was led away to another room from the hall.

“Follow me! Now!” she spoke to Aarav and walked ahead. They soon exited the hall and walked down the corridor towards a sea facing room at the end which was being guarded by at least ten men.

“You cannot go in”, one of them announced as they stopped them both.

“It is necessary that we speak with the Prime Minister at this very moment. Show him this and he’ll understand”, Shayna said as she passed on a piece of paper to the guard. The guard looked at them again suspiciously before himself going in the room. Sometime later, the door of the room opened and all the men barring the Prime Minister walked out with a puzzled face. The guard came ahead and ordered two men to search both Aarav and Shayna, before leading them inside.

The Prime Minister sat with a grim face on a chair before a round table, with cards and some chips placed on it. He asked the guard to leave the room and only looked at them both once he was gone. “What is the meaning of this?” he asked with a grave face as he opened the paper and placed it on the table with a sturdy hand, *The Ring of the Seven* inscribed on it.

“It means that it is a matter of grave importance”, Shayna spoke as she moved forwards and shook the Prime Minister’s hand.

“We met when you were awarded the Padma Shree, didn’t we?” the Prime Minister spoke up. “I understand that a treasure hunter would be on a trail for a secret like this, but you?”

“You know Aarav?” she spoke, surprised.

“Yes”, the Prime Minister said as he shook Aarav’s hand. “The treasure he found in Chittorgarh financed three of my major schemes directly. This man has helped in filling our coffers to a great extent.”

“Perhaps you can excuse me from paying taxes for a lifetime then, sir?” he said with a smile.

The Prime Minister laughed a little. “You are an inspiration to me.”

“Him?” Shayna asked again, surprised.

“Yes. Him”, the Prime Minister responded as Aarav looked at Shayna and smirked. “He is a treasure hunter. Who doesn’t want to be a treasure hunter?”

Who doesn't want to go to exotic adventures and end up with a pot of gold in the end? This man has the best job in the world."

They all laughed and agreed.

"Now. The Ring of the Seven", the Prime Minister continued. "Ever since Harish Vashishtha passed away, we are being bombarded by queries about this secret group. When I assumed power, I thought that these were just rumors; a secret society guarding an ancient secret, sounds too good to be true. But alas, as it turns out, Harish was a member of this secret group."

"Wait. But you became the Prime Minister around three years ago", Aarav spoke.

"Yes. But all I knew about this society was just a rumor. It all became true after Harish committed suicide."

"So, you're telling us that you knew about the Ring of the Seven only when the rest of the world came to know of it?" Aarav grew concerned.

"Precisely", the Prime Minister spoke calmly.

"But it can't be true", Shayna interrupted. "You are one of the masters."

"What?" the Prime Minister lifted his eyebrows in amazement and smiled. "I wish that I was."

"You can tell us, sir", she continued in a low voice. "I am one of the masters too."

"You are a member of the Ring of the Seven?" the Prime Minister moved ahead and placed both his arms on the table. "Unbelievable."

"Yes", Shayna continued. "And so are you."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you child, but I am not", the Prime Minister spoke. "I don't understand. If you are a master yourself, why did you come to me? How could I possibly help you?"

"Mr. Prime Minister. I'm afraid but the secret is out. All the other masters are dead and only we survive", she continued, growing more anxious.

"But I cannot possibly help you. You must have me confused with someone else."

“I don’t have time for this. Someone is out there, killing the other masters. Our only chance of survival depends on your book. Help us, please.”

“My book?” the Prime Minister grew suspicious.

“The Book of Strategy”, Aarav asked.

“The Book of...”, the Prime Minister’s eyes widened all of a sudden. “Do you mean the Book of Nehru?”

“The Book of Nehru?” Both Aarav and Shayna asked him together.

“Yes. It’s a legend, a myth that gets passed along to every Prime Minister among other secrets. From all that I know about it, the story says that in his early days Robert Clive, Commander-in-chief of British India, laid his hands on a secret book, a book which held tactics of military and administrative strategies during the Second Carnatic War and helped him defend the fort of Arcot against the combined forces of the French and the Nawab for fifty six days, eventually garnering him immense recognition in Europe. He further employed those tactics in recapturing the city of Calcutta and winning the Battle of Plassey with hardly a few men. He was praised as a tactical genius and eventually went on to become the Commander-in-chief of British India. Clive passed on that book however upon his deathbed, and it kept on changing hands from one governor general to another as the British looted our country. However, someone burgled the home of Fredric Thesiger, who was the Viceroy of India for about five years, and found himself in possession of that book. He gave that book to a popular face around that time who had successfully led an agitation in Bihar.”

“Mahatma Gandhi”, Aarav spoke as he grabbed his head.

“Yes. Gandhi had grown his image as an Indian nationalist ever since he came back from South Africa. And he won many hearts when he successfully led the Champaran movement in Bihar and won the war for the peasants without the use of a single weapon. I have heard that he combined his ideology of fighting wars with peace with the strategies in that book and he went on to become the Father of the Nation. He won India its independence from the colonial rule and once Pakistan was segregated from the country, he passed on the book to Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India.”

“What happened then? Where is the book?” Shayna asked the Prime

Minister.

“I don’t know”, he continued. “He never passed on the book. He burned it instead.”

“What?” Aarav and Shayna uttered as they weren’t able to bear what they heard.

“Yes. He burned the book.”

“He burned the Book of Strategy? Why?” Shayna asked, aghast.

“No one knows. But this is all that I know about the Book of Nehru. I never could have guessed that it is somehow related to the Ring of the Seven.”

Shayna had held her head as she stared at Aarav with horror in her eyes. He looked at her and verified each aspect about the story which he heard with the history that he knew. But there was nothing wrong with the timelines or the successions.

“The British ruled over us for so long”, Aarav spoke. “They killed hundreds and thousands of Indians, looted our resources, created artificial famines and let us suffer while they filled their own bellies. They destroyed our culture, pitted kingdoms against each other, pitted religions against each other, lied and forced their way to let our countrymen fight their wars for them. They even broke the country into two. And you’re saying that all of this happened just because they had the Book of Strategy?” Aarav uttered, completely forgetting about his treasure hunt and instead grieving from inside as he thought of the possibility that the darkest time of India might have occurred due to an ancient book. The Prime Minister wasn’t able to find words to match Aarav’s argument. “The story you told. That much detail. It is impossible to pass all of this from one Prime Minister to other”, Aarav tried to prove him wrong.

“Each Prime Minister receives a document passed on by his precursors. It contained this matter among a lot of others that are of importance to this nation”, the Prime Minister replied.

“Can I have a look at it?” Aarav asked.

“Of course”, he replied with a smile. “Once you get elected to the office, you surely can. But don’t stand against me in the next elections please. I plan to

serve this country for another term.”

“This is impossible”, Aarav said. He knew that the hunt was now officially over. He was comforted that there wouldn’t be any more deaths. Yet he didn’t feel complete as he wanted to reach at the end of the rainbow.

“Is she alright?” the Prime Minister asked Aarav as Shayna took support of the wall behind her.

“Shayna”, Aarav rushed towards her and held her. “Are you alright?”

She shook her head as she found it hard to grab her breath.

“It’s probably the wine”, Aarav spoke to the Prime Minister. “I should take her to her room. It was a pleasure to meet you Mr. Prime Minister. Thank you for your time.” Aarav led her out and asked a helper to guide them towards the room allotted to her. He held her by her shoulders and walked with her towards the elevator.

“Shayna. Are you okay?” he asked, moving away the hair falling on her face as she grew more and more restless.

“I’m having trouble... breathing. Aarav. I... I don’t know what is happening to me.” By the time they reached in their room, Shayna had started sweating and grew more and more restless. Aarav made her sit on the bed and handed her a glass of water before going back and locking the door of the room. By the time he turned and came back, the glass had slipped from Shayna’s hand and spoiled the floor while she lied on the bed, her body motionless.

Aarav went ahead and placed his fingers towards the side of her neck to feel her pulse. He further moved his hands up and grazed her face, admiring her beauty before reaching out to the phone in his pocket.

The drug he slipped into her drink while passing her the wineglass had taken effect much quicker than he had anticipated. He assumed that she would wake back up in six to eight hours, and by that time he hoped that his plan would work just the way it had been working all this while.

Back at the bullpen, Rehann and Aanya were made to sit in the center of the hall, while three Bulls stood around watching them. The rest were guarding the floors below. Aarav and Shayna had been gone for almost three hours.

The Bulls had gagged Rehann as he had started raising his voice to abuse them. And after yelling frantically for over an hour he finally broke down and held his head low. The Bulls were highly disciplined. Their leader K had given them express orders to not touch them both and had left with two Bulls, following Shayna to the Taj hotel. The Bulls in the hall didn't speak with each other, they didn't even move from their positions and kept standing in attention as they carefully watched every single movement of Rehann and Aanya. Aanya was anxiously looking at the wall opposite to her, staring at a single line of crack that ran through it. She wasn't gagged or cuffed like Rehann, courtesy of Aarav Kohrrathi, but she had been forced to sit on the chair for almost a day and it was making her mad. She hadn't come to terms with the fact that Shayna was behind the conspiracy the entire time. She had trusted her. They all had. But she betrayed them and revealed her true self.

Once, when the Bulls faced the other way, Aanya looked below towards her hands, where Aarav had placed a small scroll when he had come ahead and untied her. *'Wait for the men in black. Serve them water from the water cooler once the action stops'*, it said. She rolled back the scroll with a confused face and again looked at the crack on the wall.

"Who are the men in black?" she wondered to herself. *"What action was Aarav talking about?"*

She gazed towards Rehann, who had his eyes open and was staring at his feet grumpily in the dim light of the room. She again kept wondering the same questions, about the men in black and the action which would stop. She stared at the wall opposite to her, lit by the moonlight coming from the window behind her. Her sleep deprived eyes almost hallucinating the crack crawling on the wall. She closed her eyes slowly and opened them again to see the crack, only this time it was lit brighter than before.

And that is when she heard the noise.

Four men simultaneously barged into the hall through the narrow windows. They were all clad in black, wore bullet proof vests and masks, shooting red lasers from the front of the guns that they were holding. The Bulls in the hall hardly found time to react as their bodies were penetrated by the bullets that those men in black fired, killing the three of them almost instantly. Aanya and Rehann woke up as the loud noises of gunfire startled them, and saw the

walls of the rooms bleeding red by the time they realized what had happened. Two of the four men rushed ahead to cover the entrance of the room while two more men entered through the windows and went to help both Rehann and Aanya.

‘Three targets down. I repeat three targets down. Hostages are secure.’ A voice rang through their ears. *‘Seven hostiles on the floors below. Alpha team request immediate order to engage.’*

‘Affirmative’, they heard a female voice ring through the radios of the men in black.

The four men who had entered first went ahead down the stairs. Rehann and Aanya heard in horror as sounds of gunfire blared through the building. They heard men shouting amidst sounds of gunshots, they heard them crying amidst the rounds of firings, they could almost smell the blood being spilled on the floors below.

And then the noise stopped.

One of the two men who had entered afterwards stood at the gate of the hall with his gun pointing out. The other man cut the ropes bounding Rehann and ungagged him before asking him if he was okay.

‘All hostiles terminated’, a voice rang through hall. *‘Hostages are secure. Operation Strakh concluded.’*

The four men entered back into the hall above as they opened their gears and faced Rehann and Aanya, one of them again asking if they were all right.

Both Aanya and Rehann sat stunned with their mouths open and their hands shaking, unable to make sense of what had happened. They soon heard footsteps rushing up the stairs as around four more men entered, not dressed in their military gear but black suits. Two of them pulled ahead a table and placed it before Rehann, while the other two opened the backpacks that they were carrying and took out three laptops, placing them on the table and turning them on.

Soon, a woman entered the hall and looked at all the carnage and blood that adorned the place. She took out her handkerchief and covered her mouth with it before she ordered her men to pull the bodies away. She then looked at a

terrified Rehann, who was even more stupefied at seeing her than he was when he had heard the gunfire. She trotted ahead in her heels as she opened her mobile phone, dialed a number and handed it over to Rehann. He took the phone from her while still gazing at her face, startled.

“Hello?” he uttered, barely getting his voice back.

“Did they connect the laptops with the internet?” Aarav’s confident voice struck his ears from the other end.

“They. Did”, he managed to speak, still fazed. “What exactly is happening right now?”

“I don’t have the time to explain it. Is Aanya okay?”

“Yes. She is”, he said turning towards her.

“Good”, Aarav’s voice grew excited. “Tell her to do what I asked her to. Slowly.”

Rehann conveyed the same to Aanya who stood up sluggishly and proceeded towards the water cooler.

“What is happening Aarav?” Rehann asked again.

“Nothing. Can you hack into the hotel’s servers for me please?” Aarav uttered again.

“The hotel’s servers. Yes. But what is happening?”

“Dear god Rehann. Stop asking so many questions and do as I say.”

Aanya carried a tray with many glasses filled with water and started offering them to all the men present around.

“Don’t drink the water which Aanya offers you”, Aarav ordered as Aanya brought the tray towards Rehann. He refused her politely still thinking what was happening.

“The internet is down”, he spoke over the phone.

“Ask the men to fix it as soon as they can”, Aarav barked.

The men went ahead and started fixing the connections while Aanya kept the tray away after offering water to everybody and came back to stand near

Rehann.

“Who are you people? What is happening?” Aanya asked them.

“We are your well-wishers”, the lady in the suit spoke before looking back at Rehann.

“This doesn’t change anything”, Rehann replied grimly to her.

“You are online now”, she spoke to him while blinking her eyes.

Rehann continued looking towards her before turning to face the laptops. “I am online”, he spoke slowly. “What do you want me to do?”

“Whatever happens, don’t let them know what I am asking you to do”, Aarav replied hurriedly.

“I won’t...” Rehann suddenly stopped speaking. “God! Rehya are you okay?” he got up and tried holding the woman in suit but she collapsed on the floor; just like all of the other men present in the room. “What is happening?” he held his head and looked towards a very worried Aanya.

“What happened?” Aarav barked again over the call.

“They all just... fainted”, Rehann spoke growing more concerned.

“They did?” Aarav tried sounding surprised.

“You did it. Didn’t you?”

“Injected a drug in the water cooler before I left for Taj. I perhaps increased the dosage. Didn’t expect it to work this quickly. But this just bought us more time. It’s what we needed. Now put me on the speaker phone.”

“Alright”, Rehann said doing what he was asked.

“Can you hear me?” Aarav’s voice blasted through the speaker phone.

“Very clearly”, Rehann replied as he opened the hotel’s website on one of the laptops.

“Good. Now do as I say. Quickly. Hack into their servers. Tell me where the Prime Minister is staying?”

“Alright. But what happened there?”

“It’s not the right time. Do as I say, first.”

“Fine!”

“Aanya, can you hear me?” Aarav continued.

“Yes”, she said, walking closer to the phone.

“Great. Go to Shayna Maheshwari’s room. You’ll find a trunk suitcase probably beneath her bed. Pull it out.”

Aanya looked at Rehann before exiting towards the room.

“I’m in”, Rehann announced. “The guest list says that the Prime Minister is staying in the sea facing executive suite on the fifth floor.”

“I’m on the third”, Aarav spoke as he hurried out of the room. “I have to get inside somehow.”

“There will be guards guarding his suite. He is the Prime Minister, they’ll not just let you walk into the room.”

“I know. And I am counting on it.” Aarav replied as he arrived on the fifth floor and headed towards the executive suite. There were around five guards protecting it, and one of them walked out promptly to stop Aarav in his tracks.

“Where do you think you are going sir? The wedding is the other way.”

“The Prime Minister has sent me to retrieve something for him. I’d rather say that you watch yourself”, Aarav spoke with authority.

“Who are you?”

“Call your head of security? Ask him if he just saw me leave after speaking with the Prime Minister in the card room.”

“I’d say that you turn back and leave sir. Civilians aren’t allowed in this area.”

“And I’ll tell the Prime Minister that I wasn’t able to bring him his favorite bottle of wine because an imprudent guard like you was too afraid to call his superior.”

The man looked at him for a moment before reaching out to his superior, the

Head of Security of the Prime Minister.

“Sir! There is a man here who says that he has been sent by the Prime Minister to retrieve a package from the suite. Yes. Yes. What’s your name?”

“Aarav Kohrrathi”, he uttered magnanimously.

“The name is Aarav Kohrrathi. He says that he was with the Prime Minister in the card room and then came up on his orders. Yes. Absolutely. I understand that the Prime Minister is busy with his game and you cannot disturb him twice. Yes. Yes.”

“Tell him that I have to join the game. I just defeated the Prime Minister in poker. Won’t let him get away with the seven thousand bucks that he owes me.”

“Yes. Yes. Yes sir. I understand. Sure. Two men will accompany him inside”, the guard disconnected with his superior and pointed towards two more guards who led Aarav inside the suite of the Prime Minister of India.

Aarav was focused on his task and thus barely paid any heed to one of finest hotel rooms of the country. He slowly walked ahead, analyzing the corner of the room and seeing where the Prime Minister’s luggage had been placed.

He moved past the king sized bed and gave a brief glance to the view of the Arabian Sea before moving ahead towards the wardrobe and opening it.

“His wine collection is on the other side”, one of the guards spoke.

“He doesn’t want the usual ones. He is looking for something special”, Aarav uttered under his breath and almost smiled as he moved his hands towards a petite silver trunk placed carefully at the bottom of the wardrobe. He looked at the face of it, a five digit lock-code protecting the trunk met his gaze and he was assured of the contents that the case carried.

He pulled it out and looked at the puzzled faces of both the guards.

“Sir, are you sure that the Prime Minister asked you to bring that case?” the same guard asked him again putting his finger on the gun tucked at his belt.

“Do you think that I came all the way up here to bring the Prime Minister a bottle of wine?” Aarav spoke with authority as he went near the guard. “This is the case that the Prime Minister carries with himself wherever he goes. It is

protected by a lock-code. I think that even your feeble mind can comprehend that whatever the contents of this case are, are paramount to the PM himself”, he bluffed with total confidence.

Both the guards looked at each other nervously before looking back at him.

“Do you know who I am?” Aarav finally asked as he thought of a way to avoid their questioning.

“You... you are that treasure hunter, aren’t you?” one of the guards spoke.

Aarav smiled assertively. “Then you know that whatever the matter is between me and the Prime Minister, doesn’t concern you at all. Now, let me leave or answer the Prime Minister and his secret council as to why I delayed to bring him his case.” He could see the terror in both their eyes. They moved aside and let Aarav walk out with the case.

He took a deep breath as he turned down the hallway and waited for the elevator. As soon as he got in, he called up Rehann again.

“Can you control the cameras?” he said.

“Of course. I hacked in just as you have asked. What do you want me to do?”

“I have left the Prime Minister’s suite and am arriving in the room allotted to Shayna. Tune into the hallway on the third floor.”

“Yes. I can see you”, Rehann said.

Aarav waved at a camera before getting inside his room. “Now, I need to escape this place like a ghost. Can you ensure that I am not caught on any camera?”

“I can. It’ll take some time though.”

“How long?”

“Five minutes. I have started recording the footage. I’ll put it on loop later. How long do you need?”

“Five minutes is good”, Aarav said as he pulled an unconscious Shayna and placed her head over the pillows. He carefully covered her with a blanket and picked up another one before he started tying towels towards one end.

“Aanya? Did she bring out the trunk?”

“Yes. Does it contain all the books?”

“Obviously.”

“And do you have the seventh one?”

“Obviously.”

“And all of this was your plan from the start?”

“Obviously”, Aarav’s smile grew bigger as he opened a window and threw out a rope which he made from the blankets and towels.

“And involving my sister in this was part of the plan?” Rehann asked with a stern voice.

“Obviously”, he started irritating Rehann. “Now look at the case of Shayna. Does it have a code or her finger scans?”

“There is a fingerprint scanner”, Aanya spoke, joining the conversation.

“Just what I had expected”, Aarav uttered as he took out a pad which he had slipped into Shayna’s purse and took her fingerprints as she lied there, unconscious.

“What is happening Aarav?” Rehann asked him again.

“Oh the mission is almost complete my friend”, Aarav spoke and sat on the bed next to Shayna. “Once you put the camera feed on a loop, take Aanya and head for her mansion. We’ll take her helicopter. Reaching the airport will consume lot of time, so we can’t take her jet.”

“What about you?”

“I am heading out of Taj right now”, he said while heading for the door.

“Play the loop. Now.”

“Done”, Rehann affirmed.

Aarav came out of the room and took the fire exit rather than going for the elevator. He had opened the top button of his shirt and lost the bow as he went on his way to leave the hotel, flaunting his perfect tuxedo carelessly.

“Leave with Aanya now. Take the trunk with you. I’ll meet you there.”

“What about my sister?”

“She’ll sleep for a few more hours I am afraid. And it is just what we need right now. Because once they all wake up. The Prime Minister and all his men will be chasing us for real this time.”

“What did you do?”

“Stole something that the Prime Minister swore to protect with his life. Leave your phones there only. I am afraid we cannot carry any more gadgets with us on this quest.”

He himself closed his eyes and stopped for a moment as he cut the call, before moving ahead and dumping his phone in the nearest dustbin and walking out of the hotel.

Chapter 9

Wanderlust

“So?” Rehann spoke. “Can you tell us now?”

Aarav turned to his side and looked at the scenic beauty of the river Ganges, flowing with its might and surrounded by scenic mountains on both the sides. They had flown from Mumbai in Aanya’s helicopter and landed at Delhi a few hours later. Then they carefully ditched their plans, bought new mobile devices and hired a rental SUV without submitting their ID’s and paying a hefty amount to the owners to keep their mouths shut. They had progressed from Delhi and six hours later found themselves crossing the city of Rishikesh on the foothills of Himalayas.

Aanya was driving the car while Rehann sat next to her, who himself has been driving for almost five hours through the night and only switched seats with Aanya as she completed her sleep. Aarav hadn’t slept the entire night, neither had he replied to the volley of questions being thrown at him by Rehann and Aanya. He kept on guessing the code of the Prime Minister’s case but gave up after a while when the sun came up the horizon and Aarav found himself lost in the beauty of the place he was in.

Rishikesh, had an air of calmness around it, a welcome change to the trio as they left the bustle of Mumbai. Surrounded by green mountains, while the river Ganges danced in between, the city was a major attraction for tourists as well as pilgrims. It held an aesthetic value to the Hindus and also bore adventure to the water sports aficionados; river rafting being the prominent attraction. Aarav had his friends drive them up from Delhi, and he was sure that they had lost the track and wouldn’t be found easily by the Prime Minister’s men. They pulled up outside a lodge, which stood on the outskirts of the city and Aarav got out excitedly, only to be followed by a drained Rehann and Aanya.

A man of short stature came out and greeted them, but Aarav went ahead and hugged him heartily. “Ah! It has been so long”, he spoke before turning towards Rehann. “Rehann, you remember him.”

“Sen Pa”, Rehann’s face lit up as he rushed ahead and hugged the man heartily. “What are you doing here? I thought you would still be in Lakshadweep.”

“Mr. Kohrrathi helped me out. After we found the sunken ships, he gave me enough money to help me get back to my city and set up this lodge”, Sen Pa praised Aarav.

“Oh! After what you did for me. It is the least that I can do”, Aarav spoke jovially. “Sen Pa, here was our guide in Lakshadweep. Circumstances led him to be involved with us on our hunt for the sunken Portuguese fleet. There came a time when someone shot at my back and this great man whom you see before us, threw himself in between; taking a hit on his stomach and definitely saving my life”, Aarav explained to Aanya. “If it wasn’t for the courage of this great man, I would have been long dead.”

Aanya smiled and went ahead to shake his hands.

“I’m blessed Mr. Kohrrathi that I can be of help to you”, he said.

“Oh! Just treat us with the amazing paneer tikka that you make. I’m dying for it”, Aarav spoke as they all entered the lodge.

After having been served breakfast they all managed to grab a good four hour sleep before collecting in Aarav’s room and brainstorming about what needed to be done.

“It’s a five letter code”, Aarav spoke while glancing at the Prime Minister’s case. “It could be anything.”

“Five letters? Hmm? That means that there are eleven million eight hundred and eighty one thousand three hundred aaaaand... seventy six possibilities for the code”, Rehann spoke.

Aarav looked at him angrily and Aanya astonishingly.

“What? He is good with facts, I’m good with numbers.”

“What could the code possibly be?” Aarav grunted.

“How about seven?” Rehann suggested. “Ring of the Seven. So seven?”

“I tried that last night. It didn’t work.”

“How about Broods?”

“That society never even existed, Rehann.”

“How about Ajmer? He belongs to that city”, Rehann suggested further.

Aarav rolled the dials on the case excitedly, only to be disappointed. “I cannot believe this”, Aarav spoke as he left the case and fell back on his bed. “We have the seven books in this very room and yet we can’t find the map because of this stupid code.”

“How did you open Shayna’s trunk without her fingerprints?” Aanya asked him.

“Oh I took her prints before I left the hotel.”

“And she gave it you? Just like that?”

“She wasn’t exactly in a position to not give it to me.”

Rehann lifted both his eyebrows devilishly and widened his eyes. “What did you do to her in the hotel room?”

“Oh shut up Rehann. The hell with your dirty brain.”

Aanya looked at him annoyingly.

“What? I didn’t say anything”, he defended himself.

“What exactly happened Aarav? What did you do?” she asked him.

Aarav took in a deep breath before he started explaining to them. “When I laid my hands on Shayna’s graduation photograph, I almost had an outburst. I wasn’t able to believe the thought that she was behind all the schemes and all the attacks this entire time. I wasn’t convinced of the fact that a mutiny of this scale was the brainchild of a wonderful woman like hers. And that was the moment that I realized that I was a fool who was being played by her all this while. My emotions for her had got the better of me, my instincts on which I relied had abandoned me. The anger and betrayal which I felt at the moment was enough to open my eyes and get my head back in the game. So far she had progressed and succeeded on her quest for the treasure based on the sheer factor of surprise. None of the masters could see her coming and then she

sent her assassins, her Bulls to do her tasks for her. But I knew that now she was stuck. There is no way on Earth that her killers could hunt the Prime Minister of this nation. So it became obvious that she would come to me for help. That is all I needed. All this while she had been a step ahead of us. But now, she was at par. And I only had to make a phone call to turn the tables.”

“Rehya”, Rehann uttered as he rolled his eyes.

“Yes. Rehya. Your sister. I know that you have had your differences with her, but she was just the person I needed. She has been in the Prime Minister’s office for over four years now and is an important consultant to the National Security Advisor. I contacted her and told her everything and she communicated it all to the Prime Minister, who was very eager to end the evil once and for all.”

“Wait! End the evil? Did they kill Shayna?” Aanya asked, a bit terrified.

“No. I never got the time to tell them who the evil master was. I just spoke about their organization, about the Broods of the Bulls and that was that.”

“You never got time to tell them? Or were you trying to save your girlfriend?” Rehann asked, dissatisfied.

“I never got time to tell them.”

“Goddammit Aarav”, Rehann yelled.

“What?”

“She is responsible for the deaths of five masters. She is responsible for the death of her father. She is responsible for all the attacks on us. She is... pure evil Aarav. Don’t let her charm blind you.”

“I’m not letting anything blind me.”

“Oh really! Then stop saving her.”

“I’m not saving her. If I’d have mentioned that she is the evil master, they would have assassinated her by now.”

“And made our lives easier.”

“Perhaps. But we wouldn’t have ever gotten a chance to find the treasure. The Prime Minister conveyed it to your sister that he would never share his

book. His intention was to find the rest of the books, stop the Bulls and keep the secret alive. Don't you see? The only reason why we have the seven books with us is because the Prime Minister feared that an unknown organization is infiltrating their society."

"So what exactly did you tell them?"

"Rehya informed me that the Prime Minister would be in Mumbai for the wedding. I planned to go there and meet him alone. But in the morning, when you hacked Shayna's phone, I knew that Shayna herself was in Mumbai. That meant only one thing. She was here to make a move. Since Rehya was tracking the three of us, she informed me that morning that the Bulls had kidnapped Aanya and were keeping her holed up in a building in the Fort area. They would have entered and rescued you in the morning itself, but I suspected that Shayna would be there too and if she was caught or killed, we would have never possessed any of the books. Rehya would have simply taken them all away for the Prime Minister. So I told them to wait till the night. I knew that we will be taken there by the Bulls, because if Shayna had revealed her true self to Aanya, it was only a matter of time before she would crave to see me. And that is what I wanted. I identified that eventually when the operation would be over, we would need to do something to stop your sister and her men from taking away all the six secret books in possession of Shayna. So we came to the Bullpen. Whatever drama had to happen, happened. Rehann got beaten up, again. And I injected a drug in the water cooler when I got time. You of course, were brilliant Aanya and you obeyed the instructions which I gave to you splendidly."

"What instructions?" Rehann asked.

"He slipped a note in my hands when he came to untie me", she replied, amazed as to how Aarav's plan had worked out fantastically.

"And what happened at the Taj?" Rehann asked again.

"That was a terrible job indeed. I mean, I was there at the wedding and all those prominent people and celebrities were just coming up and greeting her, and I had to make pep talk. Gosh! I hate pep talks", he spoke rolling his eyes.

"I mean, what happened with the hunt? Did you meet the Prime Minister? What happened with Shayna?"

“Oh!” he continued. “Nothing that wasn’t planned. I conveyed it to the Prime Minister that we would meet him there, with the help of your sister of course. I also mentioned the fact that Shayna Maheshwari was a master herself and suggested to him that he should comfort her by mentioning that the Book of Strategy was already gone, so there was no way that the assassins would get their hands on the treasure.”

“Killing two birds with a single stone?” Aanya laughed.

“Indeed”, Aarav smirked. “The Prime Minister thought that he was helping a damsel in distress and Shayna thought that now she can never lay her hands on the treasure of the gods because the Book of Strategy was long gone. The Prime Minister I must say, is a great storyteller. He even had me convinced for a moment that the book was burnt. Shayna led me through to the Prime Minister thinking all this while that her shrewdness and charm were working magic; while in reality, whatever was happening was just an elaborate ruse set up by me.”

“What happened to her?” Aanya asked.

“I slipped the drug in her drink before we met the Prime Minister. By the time I took her to her room, she fell unconscious.”

“That’s why girls stay away from you at the bar”, Rehann spoke, cheering up a bit.

Aarav smiled. “Then once she was drugged, I called Rehya and she sent her commandos to take out the Bulls and rescue both of you. And of course on my special request, she provided you with laptops while you were surrounded by blood and bodies, to make you both stay there and not be taken away. Once they all drank the water from the water cooler, they all fell unconscious as well, enabling you to hack into the hotel’s servers and helping me to steal the Prime Minister’s own book. Easy.”

“Fantastic”, Rehann spoke.

“Unbelievable”, Aanya cried.

“Elementary”, said he.

“And now we are stuck with this code”, Aanya said as she took the case in her own hands and gave it a try.

“Didn’t work?” Aarav asked only to receive a negative response from Aanya. He took in a deep breath and gazed out of the window towards the beautiful scenery outside.

“We don’t have much time either, do we?” she asked Aarav.

“They would have known that we flew to Delhi for sure. But I’d say that we have some time before they get wind about our whereabouts. And that is why it is paramount that we decipher this code.”

“But it could be anything.”

“Not anything. This is the biggest secret that he has been tasked to secure. Whatever the password is, it has to be personal, it has to be something that he loves more than anything, it has to be something that is the dearest to him.”

“Then we can walk over his life’s history and see where the dots connect. At least we know that it is a five letter code”, Aanya said.

Aarav and Rehann both looked at each other. “Wikipedia”, they said in unison.

Aanya pulled out her new phone and opened the bio of the Prime Minister. “Mr. Amit Sushantkumar Jain was born in...”

“Wait!” she was interrupted by Rehann, who took the case in his hands and waddled with the dials to arrive at ‘A M I T J’ and ‘A J A I N’ only to see nothing happen.

“Continue”, he spoke to her dissatisfied. Aarav narrowed his brows and looked at him before turning back to Aanya and listening to her.

“He was born in 1955 to Sushantkumar Jain, a grain trader who sacrificed his flourishing business with the British and instead participated in Gandhi’s Dandi March, to join the fight against the colonists.”

“Stop”, Rehann yelled as he dialed ‘D A N D I ’ before asking her to continue.

“He volunteered in various rallies and agitations, and was imprisoned for two years, only to be released before the independence of the nation in 1947. He tried to set up the grain trading business again but was met by losses and debts which forced him to sell his house and work as a cobbler. His wife,

Dishabai Jain, was forced to work as a maid and wash dishes in other homes.”

“Stop”, Rehann yelled again as he pulled his fingers to arrange the dials on the case to ‘D I S H A’ only to be dissatisfied again.

“How long are you going to do this?” Aarav asked.

“As many five letter words I can grab from his bio.”

“Thank gods that the case isn’t a digital one. Else it would have probably had a limited number of turns before it got sealed. Since this one has the dials and its appearance seems to be a little old, I’d say that it probably belongs to the time of the first Indian Prime Minister.”

“It means that the case I am holding right now has probably been touched by every Indian Prime Minister?”

“And the book that it contains was held by British viceroys and Governor Generals too. Probably a few prominent Indian emperors before them and perhaps Ashoka himself would have touched it at some point in time.”

“I think I have started liking history after being around you.”

“About time, old friend”, Aarav replied before turning back towards Aanya.

“Mr. Jain had a knack for politics ever since he was young. He took inspiration from his father’s fight for freedom and shared the same love for his country which his father did. He joined the youth brigade of the leading political party at the time and soon rose up the ranks only to be tasked with consolidating and growing the members for his party in the state of Rajasthan. His brilliant people skills and extraordinary oratory abilities, caught the attention of the top leaders of his party and he was soon lifted to the role of deputy Chief Minister of Rajasthan. He contested and won the elections to gain the seat of the Chief Minister of the state when he turned thirty nine, making him one of the youngest chief minister of the country. He served the state well for three terms and won majority when he contested for the seat of the Prime Minister of India.”

“P R I M E”, Rehann rolled the dials only to be disappointed again.

“There is no way that we can get the code like this”, Aanya spoke up.

“But this is the only logical possibility as to how it can be achieved”, Aarav continued grunting in frustration. “I could ask Rehann to create a software to throw us probable five letter words by referencing them with three or four dictionaries, but that will take time and we don’t have laptops with us. Nor is there a clue or a riddle as to how we can possibly progress through on this task and arrive at a conclusion. It just appears impossible.”

“Umm... guys”, Rehann spoke with a childish smile as he proudly held a red colored book in his hands; ‘The Book of Strategy’ written on its face. Aarav and Aanya almost jumped up together before Aarav went ahead and reached for the book.

“What? How?” he was dumbfounded.

“As it turns out”, Rehann continued with his victorious smile. “My method wasn’t that flawless after all. Throughout the bio, only one thing became clear. He loves his country over anything else. His father fought for the country’s freedom and he strives for its betterment as he is now the most powerful man of the country. All through the journey of his life, it is evident that the code has to be this.” He turned the face of the case towards the duo, ‘I N D I A’ adorning the dials.

“Unbelievable”, Aanya uttered.

“You’re not the only smart one among us, buddy”, he spoke to Aarav, mocking him playfully.

“Really?” Aarav joined in while admiring the book he had in his hands. “You had tried ‘Prime’ already. About time you tried the next five letter word in the title Prime Minister of India. You didn’t decipher it. You just got lucky”, he said before ignoring Rehann and reaching for the other books.

“He is just jealous that I stole his thunder”, Rehann explained to Aanya, who laughed playfully. Aarav placed all the seven books carefully on a table which was blessed by ample sunlight from outside as both Rehann and Aanya went ahead and stood behind him. He carefully analyzed the titles.

The Book of Arts, The Book of Weaponry, The Book of Sight, The Book of Alchemy, The Book of Finance, The Book of Medicine and The Book of Strategy.

“The seven books are finally united after almost two thousand years”, Aarav had tears in his eyes. “Thank you, Aanya. Thank you so very much for bringing me this hunt.”

“Now find the treasure for me”, she said with a lovely smile.

“Now how do we find the map?” Rehann asked, observing the next hurdle. “We have seen two books and there wasn’t any illustration on them.”

Aarav instead started going through the Book of Strategy and gazed at a few translated chapters that it held. *How to force them to bend the knee? How to build the next empire? How to gain from the future of trade wars? How to win wars without weapons? The destructive force of diplomacy.* Aarav had a little smile on his face.

“There were a few illustrations in the Book of Alchemy but they all revolved around the apparatus and machines that were required to be built for the conversion of metals into gold. I didn’t see any map either”, Aanya spoke getting worried.

“Your father said that when the books would come together, they would reveal a map. So ideally, we should have been staring at a map right now”, Rehann provided his input.

“Her father was correct”, Aarav spoke. “But you need to think outside the box if you want to appear smarter than me, Rehann.”

“What now?” Rehann asked him grumpily.

“Her father mentioned that the map will be revealed when the books would come together. Correct. But how can you find it if you’re not seeing the original covers? These titles are all in English, updated with time and translated to language prevalent in this era, as what would have been the policy of the Ring to keep their secret alive. But if I do this”, he went ahead and carefully unfolded the cover of the Book of Strategy with his hands, as a more rigid, dark brown material greeted his sight. “Unbelievable”, he remarked as his eyes wandered off to the Sanskrit title of the book which read, ‘Arthshastr’.

“Arthshastr?” Rehann repeated the title. “Is that the famous book?”

“I cannot believe this”, Aarav smiled in astonishment. “I am holding the book

authored by Chanakya himself.”

“How is this possible?”

“Chanakya was the brains behind Chandragupta Maurya’s unimaginable rise to power. Chandragupta Maurya, born as a commoner became the most influential emperor of his time and created one of the biggest empire of ancient India. And Chanakya, the master strategist himself guided him all along. He wrote the book, he wrote the original Book of Strategy. It is a treatise on statecraft, administration, economics and military strategy. It contained all the principals and ethics and skills one needed to become a great king. He must have passed this book to his heirs, one of whom must have been among the nine men elected by Ashoka to guard his treasure. Ashoka was the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, and that is how this book became an integral part of this society.”

“But wasn’t Arthshastr already discovered?”

“Technically yes, but those were just Sanskrit scripts. This book was actually considered lost till the early twentieth century, but then a Tamil Brahmin, who was in possession of an ancient manuscript written on palm leaves presented it to the Mysore Library. The librarian of Oriental Research Institute of Mysore translated it and upon reading the contents, would have assumed that the script was the fabled lost book of Arthshastr. Turns out, whatever we know of Arthshastr is just the tip of the iceberg, while the original book comfortably changed hands from one ruler to another, which probably makes it the most powerful book in the history of our country. This book alone can garner you unequivocal brilliance in your field. Couple that with the knowledge of the other books, and you don’t even need the treasure to rule the world.”

“You have to blow up everything at such a scale, don’t you?” Rehann uttered. “Why can’t a book be just a book?”

Aarav smiled a little before turning the book towards its side, and slowly grazed his hand on a Sanskrit inscription engraved on its spine. “Brilliant”, he remarked. He quickly went on to uncover the rest of the books too and looked at the inscriptions to their sides. He started moving his lips as he read them and tried to rearrange the seven books over each other. He shuffled their order and rearranged them again and again as he interpreted their meaning

and tried to make the most sense of it. “It’s a riddle”, he finally exclaimed as he took a pen and paper and translated the verses to English once he grew satisfied of the order. Rehann and Aanya looked at the new order of the books; *The Administrator, The Commander, The Alchemist, The Capitalist, The Healer, The Guru, The Performer.*

“Those are ranks?” Aanya asked.

“Looks like it”, Aarav replied as he continued scribbling on a paper.

“But it’s not a map?” Rehann uttered.

“Yes, I don’t think that they would have created a map because in the end the location of the treasure would have been visible on one of the books and it would have been too obvious. But if you read this. This solves everything”, he spoke while jumping up excitedly, seeing another puzzle before him. He completed the translation and pulled up the paper before Rehann and Aanya.

Hidden amongst the highest of mountains, it lies;

Shielded by the holy waters, it rests.

The greatest blessing of the Gods, the greatest secret of mankind;

Shall never be found, shall never see light.

Yet the worthy who seeks the secret, shall find the way on a hill;

Abode to the gods themselves, manifested on its own self.

The supreme treasure a man will see with his eyes.

“Huh!” Rehann uttered.

“What?” Aarav asked.

“Nothing.”

“What?”

“It’s just that. It doesn’t rhyme. I mean one would have expected the riddle to the greatest treasure to rhyme at least.”

“It is a translation Rehann. Of course it doesn’t rhyme”, Aarav almost barked.

“Does this mean that the treasure lies on a hill?” Aanya asked.

“No. It lies amidst tall mountains, somewhere around a water body. But the way that leads to the treasure starts on a hill. A hill manifested on its own, a hill that is abode to the gods themselves.”

“But it could be anything. To the people of the time, any hill that housed a temple was considered holy and was believed to have sprung up on its own. How do we know which hill they were speaking of?” Aanya asked.

“No. If this place leads the way to the treasure, then it has to be a prime spot. An ancient site that was famous and considered sacred even at the time” Aarav replied.

“I think I know the answer”, Rehann spoke.

“Aren’t you on fire today?” Aanya asked him with a lovely smile.

“You know the answer?” Aarav asked, still skeptical.

“Your thunder is long gone buddy”, Rehann mocked him before providing an explanation. “It has to be Mount Kailash.”

“Mount Kailash?” Aarav wondered.

“Of course. The mountain of gods. Hindu mythology does say that Lord Shiva resides there in a perpetual state of meditation. And you also have the lake Mansarovar there. Hidden by the highest of mountains and shielded by holy waters indeed.”

“It could be”, Aanya wondered.

“Maybe. But it is the treasure that is hidden amidst tall mountains and holy waters. The way to it starts from the hill where the god resides. Kailash is a mountain, one of the tallest peaks and not a hill. The treasure could have been hidden there considering its religious significance, but I don’t really think that Kailash will lead us to the treasure.”

“Hmm?” they all wondered.

“Yet the worthy who seeks the secret, shall find the way on a hill; abode to the gods themselves, manifested on its own self.” Aarav uttered the lines in

his head. “The way is on a hill. The hill is abode to the gods themselves. It is believed to have sprung up on its own.”

“I still think it is Mount Kailash”, Rehann spoke, adamant about his opinion.

“But it is a mountain, one of the tallest at that; not a hill”, Aanya reminded him.

“I will just search it on the internet then”, Rehann spoke as he took out his mobile phone and searched ‘Holy hills in India’.

“What does it say?” Aarav asked him as he closed his eyes and meditated.

“Well there are indeed a lot of hills and mountains in India that are considered sacred, I can tell you that”, he replied. “We have the Mount Govardhan in Vrindavan, revered for its association with Lord Krishna. We have Arunachala Mountain in Thiruvannamalai, celebrated as a place to attain enlightenment. Then of course we have Mt. Amarnath, revered for its association with Lord Shiva.”

“Just tell me the ones that are in the Himalayas”, Aarav spoke.

“Alright. Then you have Prospect Hill, Hari Parbat, Shillong peak, Gangtok, Kanchenjunga, Chandrashila, Gangotri, Nag Tibba, Nanda Devi, Kedarnath and of course Mt. Kailash among hundreds of others.”

“Technically Mount Kailash is in Tibet”, Aarav spoke up.

And then something happened.

“Oh! Oh! Oh this is ingenious”, Aarav’s face lit up and he pumped his fist in the air. “This is marvelous. This is spectacular. This is so simple. It was right before our eyes and we failed to notice it just because we didn’t look outside the box.”

“What?” Rehann and Aanya asked.

“We are looking for the holy hills in India, while at the time the treasure was hidden and these books were written, the concept of India didn’t even exist.”

Rehann and Aanya wondered the same.

“The internet, while is amazing in its form, is also limited in its reach. What if the place these books speak of isn’t in India? What if it is somewhere else?”

Somewhere like Nepal?”

“Nepal?” Aanya and Rehann uttered in unison.

“Nepal. Yes”, he continued while jumping up and grabbing Rehann’s phone.
“It’s Swayambhu.”

“Swayambhu?” Aanya asked.

“Yes. Swayambhu. It’s a religious architecture in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. One of the most revered pilgrimage site of the Buddhists. It houses an ancient stupa on a hill overlooking the city. It is a sacred site for Hindus and Buddhists alike, and is one of the oldest surviving religious site in Nepal. According to the legends, the Swayambhu hill housed a sacred temple which was built sometime in the third century BCE by Emperor Ashoka himself when he visited the place, but that temple was believed to be destroyed. A king built the Swayambhu stupa around fifth century CE when Buddhism had flourished across south and south-east Asia. And then the kings after him, created more temples and monasteries around the site to create one of the most iconic place of pilgrimage in Nepal.”

Rehann and Aanya looked at him with a humble smile.

“Swayambhu is the Sanskrit word for ‘self-manifested’ or ‘something created by its own accord’ or...”

“A site manifested on its own self”, Aanya continued the line from the translation.

“That means that the way to the treasure starts from Swayambhu in Nepal”, Rehann uttered. “It also means that I should start packing my bag.”

“It will take us almost a day to drive to Kathmandu from here”, Aarav continued. “It will be a long ride indeed. Let’s leave as quickly as we can then. We will take turns driving the car and try to make it there without stopping.”

“I was lazy enough to get out of my bed last week”, Rehann spoke. “Then I flew to Delhi, then to Sri Lanka, swam my way back to India, flew back to Mumbai, helicoptered again to Delhi, drove up till Rishikesh and now I will be on my way to Nepal. I think it is about time that I add ‘globetrotter’ and ‘wanderlust’ on my Tinder bio.”

“Keep on swiping right. You might find your soul mate in Nepal”, Aanya spoke while laughing splendidly before getting up and making her way to her room.

Chapter 10

Nepal

They arrived at the Nepalese capital in the afternoon the next day. Having stopped just once to have dinner, they were famished and drained by the time they reached Kathmandu. Yet something about the city moved them. Cotton white clouds had encompassed the entire valley, a light wind sending chills down their spine. Broad ancient temples with tall triangular arches stood amidst the narrow streets in the bustling city, pigeons sitting atop their roofs and scattering occasionally due to the loud honking of rickshaws. The beautiful atmosphere carried an aura of calmness as the trio drove past the streets of Kathmandu, yet the energy of the people of Nepal filled a new liveliness to the marketplaces. They could see the jovial faces passing by, playful children running around, cheerful vendors selling their days' supplies and tranquil saints praying to their gods. Kathmandu was the largest metropolitan city based in the Himalayas, and rightfully so. Over the course of hundreds of years, the ancient city marked by its temples and monasteries had developed into a modern marvel amidst the mountains, while keeping its glorious culture and heritage intact.

Aanya drove past the Indian embassy and soon made her way up the hill towards the Swayambhu stupa. Rehann was seated beside her, carefully looking out for the sight of the dome, while Aarav sat at the back, enjoying the pleasant nature outside and was lost in his thoughts. As soon as they arrived at the hilltop, they were greeted by the magnificent site of the dome. The Swayambhu stupa was a structure which couldn't miss one's eye; perhaps because of its unusual architecture. Like all the Buddhist stupas, a giant white dome rose up from the ground and stood high with perfection, almost flattening out towards the top. From the center of the roof of the dome rose a cubical edifice ending in an arch towards the top, marked by thirteen pinnacles, each representing a stage of the Buddhist philosophy which one has to go through to attain enlightenment. The structure was entirely plated with gold and had huge eyes drawn over to mark the sight of Lord Buddha himself. It was surrounded by many smaller temples and monasteries where the commoners flocked in high numbers, creating quite a rush.

“This is marvelous”, Aanya spoke as she saw the site while getting out of the car. Aarav admired the structure before carefully placing all the books in a trunk and hiding it beneath his seat. “Those eyes are so beautiful”, Aanya almost forgot her exhaustion.

“There are four eyes, pointing towards each cardinal direction”, Rehann spoke while shedding some light. “It symbolizes the sight of Lord Buddha himself. The nose you see in between, is actually drawn in such a way that it signifies the number ‘one’ written in Devanagari script.”

Aarav looked at him enviously before continuing to dart his eyes all around the Swayambhu complex. “Wikipedia is finally benefitting you my friend”, he said before going ahead and approaching an elderly guide who was standing in a corner.

“You can feel him burning right from here”, Rehann spoke to Aanya jovially.

“I never imagined this city to be this beautiful. The air is so fresh, the commotion is surprisingly lovely. I can live here forever”, Aanya continued gazing all around.

“About time you started swiping on Tinder and got your ideal groom in Nepal”, Rehann laughed as he saw a concerned Aarav coming back.

“So, shall we go?” Rehann asked.

“Where?” Aarav spoke barely losing his focus.

“The stupa”, Rehann pointed towards the giant white dome.

“Why? The stupa was built in fifth century, around seven hundred years after Ashoka would have visited this place. The legend is that Ashoka built a temple here, on this hill, which was destroyed later. Now even if we assume that whatever ‘way to the treasure’ has been mentioned in the books lied at that very site; by the time the temple would have been destroyed, the Ring of the Seven was already formed and hence it would have been impossible for any of the masters of the time to know of the temple since the books were separated. So my concern is that the way to the treasure probably would have already been destroyed, while the Ring of the Seven had itself lost the location of the treasure.”

“So if it is not here, where is it?” Aanya asked.

“It is hard to tell”, Aarav continued looking around. “All the monasteries and temples that we can see along with the stupa were probably built after its construction. The ones that has survived from before would be hard to find.”

“Then what do we do now?”

“Spread out. Ask the guides, ask the priests and monks about the temples or structures that predates the stupa in this premises. The older the better.”

They all agreed and spread out to ask others about the ancient temple. But even after half an hour of lingering around, they were unable to find anything substantial. Aarav kept looking around, his gaze shifting from one temple arch to another.

“I didn’t find anything”, Aanya said. “Although two men spoke of an ancient Shiva temple that used to exist in the premises but was believed to be destroyed.”

“And?” Aarav asked, his hopes lighting up.

“But they say that it is impossible to find.”

“How?” Rehann asked.

“Of course”, Aarav continued. “Few of the temples and monasteries at this site had to have been restored and reconstructed. The tiles adorning those structures would be newer. It would be hard to tell that they predated the stupa since there are no written records.”

“Wait!” Rehann spoke. “One of the guards did mention that a small monastery was built on the ruins of a temple towards the eastern end of the premises.”

“Brilliant! We can start by looking there”, Aarav spoke as he followed Rehann towards the guard.

The guard led them to the very far end of the premises, one where hardly a few visitors came and it was unusually quiet. He came and stopped before a small monastery, which was carved out of black marble and pointed towards it, refusing to move any further. “If you are wise, you will not go there”, he spoke to the trio.

“Why?” Rehann asked him.

“It is believed to be haunted by demons. Nobody goes in there.”

“Thank you for your help. We will take it from here”, Aarav remarked coldly as he walked ahead and entered the insignificant monastery. He opened the wooden door slowly with his hands and took a moment to let his eyes adjust to the dim lights inside. The place was surprisingly vacant and hardly showed any signs of being looked after. The roof towards the rear end of the monastery had collapsed ages ago, allowing whatever little sunlight to enter inside. A little foliage had grown down below, further signifying Aarav’s assumption that the place hasn’t been visited for quite a few years. “This is odd. This is really, really odd”, he said.

“What?” Aanya asked.

“I have never visited a black colored monastery before. This site is quite unusual. Both Hindu and Buddhist mythologies consider black color to be inauspicious. There are no monasteries to my knowledge that are black in color. The followers of both these religions prefer bright colors for their temples. Colors like white, or golden, or red, or saffron are considered fortunate. So why to build a black colored monastery? Maybe because the creators knew that it would keep the people away as it has. Myths and legends about witches and demons residing here would have just done the trick. Look at the engravings. There is no mention of Buddha or his life story. Those circles have covered the roof while only a few flowers have been engraved on the pillars, that too rather hurriedly. This place is abnormal, an anomaly amongst the monasteries I know of.”

“The floor is tiled too. So even if an ancient temple existed at this place, its ruins have been long sealed and replaced by this structure”, Rehann provided his input.

“And there is no deity”, Aarav continued. “Neither Buddha, nor Shiva. So then this place is dedicated to which god?”

“Maybe someone had started building this site but never completed it?” Aanya suggested.

“Oh but it is complete. Other than the missing roof and the invisible deity, this monastery has everything”, Aarav continued. “Even though the surface is small, the pillars are massive and strong for a site like this. And the roof is in

consistency with the kind of architecture which would have been prevalent three to four centuries ago. Maybe this is not the site we were looking for, but it's curious to me nonetheless."

Aarav turned back and looked at the triumphant stupa through the gate which was partially visible to him.

"Yes. Maybe it is some other site", Aanya conveyed.

"Or maybe you misinterpreted the inscriptions from the books. Maybe it did speak of Mount Kailash", Rehann uttered.

"Oh I have misinterpreted nothing. The way this works is that I decipher something and it helps us in solving our hunts. It's like a complete circle you see. It's almost like..." he suddenly stopped speaking. "Circle", he spoke out loud. "Circle. Of course it had to be. Oh this is unbelievable"

"What now?"

"Look at the roof Rehann. Those circles engraved on the ceiling, they aren't just any other circles my friend. They all have twenty four spokes."

"I'll be damned", Rehann gazed above his head and started counting the spokes on one of the circles.

"These. All of these. They are Ashoka Chakras. We are at the right place my friend. Whatever the way to the treasure is, it lies here, under this roof."

Aarav looked down at the tiled floor beneath his feet. "We'll have to go back to the city and get some equipment to dig up this place."

They came out of the black monastery and rushed towards their car.

"Are you sure about the Ashoka Chakras?" Aanya asked him.

"Of course", he replied with obviousness. "It is derived from the Buddhist dharmachakra. Each wheel had twenty four spokes. So does the ones in the monastery. According to the Buddhist mythology, the first twelve spokes represents twelve stages of human suffering which were dictated by Buddha himself. But the next twelve represent nothing, based on the concept that the earlier stages of sufferings conditions the human minds and makes them aware, thus making them immune to the worldly woes. The complete circle stops the process of birth and death. It frees the human souls from the process

of reincarnation and finally helps them attain moksha. Ashoka took this concept and created his own chakra, and had it mark his various edicts, the most prominent being the Lion Capital of Ashoka, from where India adopted its emblem. The Ashoka Chakra also adorns the center of our national flag. Its influence is everywhere in India, from the clothes that you wear to the currency bills that you carry. This is amazing.”

They all reached the car and jumped inside, growing excited as they wondered what lied beneath the roof of the monastery.

But something shook the daylights out of them.

“The books. They are gone”, Aarav muttered in horror as he jumped around to search for the case only to be unable to find it. Rehann and Aanya looked at his horrified face, terror very visible in their eyes.

“Looking for this”, Rehya spoke as she pointed towards a case held by one of her men outside. Four others, dressed in a black suit and dark glasses came ahead and stood surrounding the car. Aarav took in a deep breath and rolled his eyes before slowly lifting himself up and getting out of the car.

“Rehya look. I can explain...” he was interrupted as his face met a quick slap from Rehann’s elder sister.

“I trusted you”, she spilled venom. “The government of the country trusted you. And this is how you repay their trust?”

“Circumstances changed. I had to improvise.”

“So you’re telling me that drugging me and leaving me unconscious in that hell hole was improvisation? You’re telling me that using Shayna Maheshwari to reach the hotel rooms and stealing the Prime Minister’s book wasn’t planned? You have committed a grave sin Aarav. Do you know the consequences of lying to the government?”

“I didn’t lie. I just didn’t expressly state what I was planning to do.”

“No”, she barked. “You lied to us. You used the government machinery to remove your hurdles. And you betrayed our trust. If it was up to me, I’d throw you behind bars for stealing the biggest secret of the country. But fortunately for you, the Prime Minister had a change of heart.”

“He wants me to find the treasure now?” Aarav asked, almost cheering up.

“He wants to speak with you. Now”, she said as she dialed a number on her phone. “This is Rehya Vraithiah. Tell the Prime Minister that we found Buddha. Transfer him the call.”

“Buddha? Is that a code word for me?” Aarav asked as he eased up, only to receive no response from Rehya.

“Yes sir. We found them. He is here with me. I thought that you’d want to speak to him yourself. Sure sir”, she briefed the Prime Minister before passing over the phone to Aarav, who took it apprehensively and moved to a side.

“How did you find us?” Aanya asked.

“Protecting that case is one of the most pivotal job of the Prime Minister. Didn’t you think that we’d have had it tagged with a GPS chip?”

Aanya and Rehann glanced at each other.

“We kept an eye on your movements. We knew that sooner or later Aarav would figure out the code and lead us to the treasure.”

“Actually Aarav didn’t figure it out. Rehann did.”

“Really”, she looked at him, surprised. But Rehann kept looking towards Aarav, without paying heed to what his sister was saying. “Well, when we saw you crossing the border and enter Nepal, we knew that things could go south if the treasure of Ashoka was found in a foreign land. So the Prime Minister of the country sent me to look into the matter.”

“She means to say that she wants to take over the matter in her own hands”, Rehann spewed venom.

“Still not speaking to me? Not even a thank you?”

“For what?”

“For saving your life, little brother.”

“Oh really? Then I’d rather thank Aarav.”

“Well he wasn’t that happy”, Aarav came back as he handed over the phone

to Rehya.

“What did he say?” Aanya asked.

“He said that he was angry that I broke his faith and stole his box. But he has agreed to forgive my theft and seek the help from Rehya and her men, if I agree to certain terms.”

“What terms?” Rehann asked.

“One that, we will be discreet about the hunt. We’re in another country after all. Two that, every bit of treasure will be taken by the government, and we’ll get no share, not even a coin. Three that, he has agreed to give us credit for the hunt and promised that the treasure money will only be used for public welfare.”

“And what did you say?” Aanya asked him.

“I agreed instantly of course. The treasure money will be used for public benefit just like your father wanted. And I asked him to let me in on the committee that will conduct analysis and research on any artifacts that we might find, including the books. It is a win-win”, he said with a smile.

“And you’re okay for not getting any share of the treasure?” Rehya asked.

“Of course. It’s not the money that I am after. It’s the history which draws me.”

“Good”, Rehya continued. “Then what are you doing here in Nepal? Found your treasure yet?”

“We might have found something”, he spoke. “And I think we just might need the strength of your men to know what it is.” Aarav smiled devilishly and looked all around. “Oh and they will have to do some shopping.”

Within half an hour four of Rehya’s men had abandoned their coats and picked up hammers as they proceeded to break the tiled flooring of the black monastery. Aarav and Aanya stood outside with Rehya while Rehann had excused himself and went ahead to visit the Swayambhu stupa. The sun was already hidden behind the mountains and it had started getting darker. The crowd had reduced as the chilling cold had gripped the atmosphere.

“So how did you do it? How did you escape the Taj Hotel? The guards found sheets which went out from the window”, Rehya asked Aarav.

“But?”

“But even if you jumped from its end, you’d have definitely broken your legs.”

Aarav smiled. “I never jumped out of the window. That was just a ruse to confuse the guards and buy me more time in case things went south. I simply went down through the fire exit.”

“But they never saw you leave the room.”

“Rehann hacked the cameras. It was easy”, Aarav spoke as he saw her expressions change. “You know he might appear cold, but deep down he is happy to see you.”

“If you don’t mind me asking”, Aanya interrupted. “What happened between the two of you?”

Rehya didn’t speak and tried to evade her eyes.

“Ah it’s nothing. Childish sibling quarrels, nothing more”, Aarav saved the conversation from getting awkward. “You should see me fight with my brother.”

“You have a brother?” Aanya was surprised to find this revelation.

“Yes. Two years younger to me. I’m glad that he is still in college.”

“Why?”

“Because once he graduates, he will be the greatest devil this world will see. I hate him so much. He always got everything good; new bicycles before me, new cricket bats, girlfriends, you name it. Once he is back, he’ll try to bend me to his wishes.” He looked towards the tall snowcapped mountains in the distance. “He is evil in its purest form.”

“I have met him. He is adorable”, Rehya spoke with a smile.

“And a pretender”, Aarav ended his rant. They all looked towards the gate of the monastery as one of the men came out and informed them that the tiles are broken and they would start with the digging. Rehann came back too after

his visit to the monastery.

“Found your peace of mind?” Rehya asked.

Rehann gestured with his eyebrows and carried a fake smile as he went past them and stood on the other side, his sarcastic and positive demeanor affected by the presence of his elder sister. Aanya excused herself and followed him. As soon as they were both gone, Aarav asked Rehya about something that had been bothering him for quite some time.

“Shayna Maheshwari. Where is she?”

“She woke up even after us. She had a splitting headache and was confused as to what had happened. But once we assured her that the Bulls were all killed, she was happy that the treasure would be safe. And of course we informed her about your plan. Trust me, she was definitely pissed about the fact that you used her to make your way to the hotel room, so that you could steal the Prime Minister’s book.”

“Where is she now?”

“She left back for Delhi. We promised her to keep her informed about the treasure once we find it.”

“Does she know that we are in Nepal?”

“No. Why?”

“Nothing”, he looked away, memory of Shayna Maheshwari flinching him.

All of a sudden the men came out, four of them carrying something heavy which was covered in a cloth. “Ma’am, we found something”, one of them spoke as they placed the artifact on the ground and unwrapped the cloth surrounding it.

“Unbelievable”, Aarav uttered as he laid his eyes on the artifact, others gathering all around him. It was the sculpture of a lion, settled comfortably on his hind legs and opening his mouth wide as if ready to roar. Dust and time had withered its appearance but it unmistakably resembled the figures of one of the four lions of the Lion Capital of Ashoka, which was adopted as the national emblem of India after its independence.

“Ashoka’s lion”, Rehann uttered.

Aarav looked at the carvings all around the three foot tall figure. He almost had a visible smile on his face as he saw a circular line running across the neck of the lion. "It's a lid", he spoke as he asked one of the men to help him unravel it. They put their hands on the lion's glorious face and applied force towards their right. After about thirty seconds, the lion's head turned. They unscrewed it and kept it rolling as the face of the lion lifted up from his body and ultimately came off completely only to reveal a hollow opening inside. Aarav put his hands down and brought out a cylindrical, metallic object with the face of a lion adorning one of its ends. The cylinder was sleek and about twenty centimeters long, but its purpose confused everyone who stood around.

"That's not it", Rehya spoke as her eyes met something else. She put her hands down the lid that Aarav had just pulled up and pulled out a fiber roll stuck inside the head of the lion before handing it to Aarav.

Aarav unrolled the ancient cloth and his eyes cheered up as he looked at the contents it held. "And here lies the way to the treasure, the way that Aanya's father spoke about", he said with a smile. "Behold the treasure map."

Chapter 11

The Final Problem

They were back in India the next day, driving the narrow mountain roads in the state of Uttarakhand. Aarav sat in the back seat trying to figure out the exact location of the treasure. The scroll was vivid and carried an illustrated map of the Himalayas, the location of the treasure being marked with the face of a lion. However due to the absence of the present day borders and the unskilled cartography of the time, the map had got various things wrong. The rivers were shown taking unnatural bends and few mountains didn't even exist. However Aarav was able to narrow down the location of the treasure of the gods to the state of Uttarakhand judging the maneuvers of the rivers near the Lionhead and the height of the mountains depicted in the map. It further carried a hint to the location; another riddle which Aarav had translated:

*Hidden amongst the highest of mountains, it lies;
Shielded by the holy waters, it rests.
The greatest blessing of the Gods, the greatest secret of mankind;
Shall never be found, shall never see light.
Yet the worthy who seeks the secret,
Shall cross the treacherous waters adorned by the dead,
Cross the three guards of gods, who stand straight and proud.
And once they see the sisters, the little one holding onto the eldest;
Their ears will hear the noise,
To the supreme treasure a man will see with his eyes.*

Aarav was puzzled again. He wasn't able to understand what the riddle was trying to speak to him. He kept gazing at the illustration and the writings

again and again, but hadn't been able to crack it throughout their journey.

"Still no clue?" Rehya, who sat next to him, asked.

"Why can't they just tell it to me already?" Aarav barked in frustration.

"They had to put in these puzzles, hoping that someone will understand their lame directions written in another language after more than two thousand years. I solved the Swayambhu mystery. It said that the worthy shall find the way, well guess what, I found it. I proved my worthiness to the souls of the dead people who wrote these riddles, and just when you think that they would actually point out the way, they decide to make your day worse by giving another puzzle."

"I thought you liked puzzles", Rehann who sat on the front seat next to Aanya, spoke up.

"Not the ones I'm unable to solve."

"Not everyone is as patient as you, little brother", Rehya passed a smile and uttered to Rehann only to receive no response from him. She shifted her gaze to the black SUV behind them, her guards following their car.

"The first five lines are borrowed from the inscriptions that we found on the books. Just these four lines stand between us and the treasure."

"Shall cross the treacherous waters adorned by the dead, cross the three guards of gods, who stand straight and proud. And once they see the sisters, the little one holding onto the eldest; their ears will hear the noise", Rehann narrated the lines.

"Treacherous waters adorned by the dead", Aarav closed his eyes as if trying to locate the place. "Cross the three guards of gods, who stands straight and proud. Once they see the sisters, the little one holding onto the eldest, their ears will hear the noise."

"Treacherous waters could be a river", Rehya provided her input. "But what about the three guards and the two sisters?"

"That is the riddle", Rehann spoke to her rudely without looking back.

"I'm trying to help Aarav", she said.

"Oh he thinks well when others are not barking in his ears."

“Is that what I am doing?”

“Yup! Still barking.”

She sighed with fury. “You always were the jealous little brat, weren’t you?”

“Oh I have been jealous of many people in my life. But trust me, you aren’t one of them. Actually, why are you even here?”

“To help you find the treasure.”

“Oh I can see how big of a help you’re being, but that’s not what I’m asking. Why are you sitting here? Why don’t you travel with your pooches in that fancy car behind us?”

“That’s enough Rehann”, Aarav opened his eyes and tried to calm his friend down.

“Really? That is enough? After everything that she did, that is enough?”

“Rehann don’t”, Aarav spoke hinting towards Aanya, who was doing her best to not let the talks distract her from her driving.

“Oh let her know”, Rehann howled, getting furious than ever. “Let Aanya know. Let Rehya’s guards know. Let the entire valley know. I don’t care.”

“Rehann stop overreacting”, Rehya uttered, trying to overpower his voice.

“Overreacting?” he yelled as he turned his head back to glare into her eyes. “You murdered your own daughter and you expect me turn a blind eye towards that?”

“Rehann c’mon. That is not what happened”, Aarav tried calming him down.

“I did not murder my child”, Rehya shrieked. “She was the only person in my life. She was the only one in my life who kept me alive. How can you even say something like that?”

“I warned you that they would come for you”, he shrieked harder. “We all warned you that you weren’t safe. You promised us to leave everything. If you’d have backed down at the time; if only you’d have listened to us. My niece would still be alive.”

“You don’t even know what I did, and why I had to do it. You sit there

comfortably in your armchair, dropping advices and judging other people's actions when you don't even know how the real world works." Tears welled up in her eyes. "You think I didn't want my family to be safe? You think I didn't want to see my daughter grow up? You don't think that I wanted her to have a normal life, and drop her to school every morning? You cannot even comprehend the magnitude of sacrifices that I had to make so that the people of this country can carry the smile that they do."

"Stop the car Aanya. I have had enough of her", Rehann yelled.

"Yes. Stop the car indeed", Rehya reiterated.

Aanya pulled up the car towards a side on the narrow road. Rehann was the first one to rush out and he stood angrily towards the other end of the road, overshadowed by a cliff. Rehya moved towards her left, stopping by the railings on the end that overlooked a chasm; a deep steep sided opening facing a river below. Aanya slowly gazed back towards Aarav, who rolled his eyes and dug his head back in frustration.

"She murdered her own daughter?" Aanya asked Aarav, terrified.

"Only in Rehann's mind. It's not what you think."

"What happened?"

Aarav took in a deep breath, his mind was still racing, trying to decipher the riddle. "Look. I knew Rehya from the time when I used to go to Rehann's house back in our school days. She was brilliant, a scholar herself. She was working with the Indian Foreign Services at the time and soon married the love of her life, someone she met at her office. Theirs was a happy family, they had a beautiful daughter together. It was a good life."

"Then?"

"Then one day, her husband went missing. Rehya's parents panicked and they urged her to lodge a complaint with the police but she never did it. Few days later a disk arrived in the mail, showing a video of her husband caught by terrorists."

"What?" her eyes widened.

"As it turns out, Rehya and her husband were spies. They were working with

the government, trying to dismantle the Mumbai mafia. They had evidence that the mafia was receiving funds from terror cells in Pakistan. He tried to follow the lead and was caught unfortunately.”

“What happened to him?”

“We never got to know. The government wasn’t able to make it public. And so she had to follow the protocols and live her life like nothing had happened. Few days later, she received a threat from the mafia to stop her investigations. Rehann and his parents, made her promise that she would end it all and leave her job. She agreed to, but secretly kept on working to uncover the terror plots. Turns out that the mafia were planning to conduct multiple bombings in Mumbai, and she single handedly managed to foil their plan. The evidences which she gathered helped the police put the mafia heads behind bars and dismantled the Mumbai underworld network. She saved the city and countless lives which would have been lost had she not done that. But all of it came at a cost. Some rogue goon, who was upset that his leader was put behind bars, decided to take the matter in his own hands. He paid her a visit. Fortunately, Rehya wasn’t at her home. However, her three year old daughter and the caretaker was.”

Aanya was silent, tears almost welling up in her eyes.

“Rehann never forgave her”, Aarav continued speaking sadly. “He thinks that if she would have stopped pursuing the case further, her daughter would have been alive today. Her parents eventually understood, but Rehann completely cut her off from his life. She was soon called up on higher orders and is currently serving in the Prime Minister’s Office while also assisting the National Security Adviser.”

“I cannot imagine what she had to go through”, Aanya uttered.

“She is the bravest woman I know”, Aarav replied slowly before opening the door and getting out of the car. Aanya watched him go ahead and speak to Rehya first, as he soon led her back inside the car. He then went to Rehann and spoke to him for some time, and soon enough, Rehann broke. Aanya could see him crying vehemently. He cried and wept and Aarav had to put his arms around to comfort him and bring him back inside the car.

“You can drive now”, Aarav spoke to Aanya as they all settled inside.

An uncomfortable silence ensued as none of them spoke for the next few minutes. Their car kept trotting on the narrow road, only the car of Rehya's guards following them behind.

"I'm sorry", Rehann spoke slowly after a while to his sister.

"It's okay", she took some time to reply before lifting her hand ahead and placing it on Rehann's shoulder, bringing a little smile to his face.

"Now", Aarav finally spoke after some time. "If all the weeping and shouting is done, you people would like to know the fact that our little puzzle has been cracked."

"What?" the three almost said simultaneously.

"Stopping the car actually came as a blessing in disguise", Aarav spoke calmly. "When I got out of the car and saw the chasm down from this height, my mind was still processing the fact that what would I have done if I was the one who hid the treasure. I'd make a map of course, but how would I identify it? What would be my markers?"

"What?" Rehann asked.

"Nature itself. The rivers and the mountains. What Rehya said about the 'treacherous waters', was right."

"It's a river then?" she said.

"Well almost right", Aarav continued. "See if I had drawn this map, I would have placed the most significant markers that my eyes could see, in the riddle. So what about the three guards and the two sisters?"

"They are markers?"

"Yes. Look at the lines. *Cross the three guards of gods, who stand straight and proud.* What do you think stands straight and proud in a place like this?"

"The mountains", Aanya said lighting up.

"Exactly. Those are three mountains that the riddle is talking about. And once I thought of mountains, the third part of the riddle became crystal clear. *And once they see the sisters, the little one holding onto the eldest.* It had to be a huge mountain with another, shorter one adjoining it."

“And you know the mountain?” Rehann asked.

“Of course. It’s Nanda Devi.”

“Nanda Devi?” they asked.

“Yes. Nanda Devi is the second highest mountain in India. It was actually considered the highest mountain in the world up until the nineteenth century and it lies right here in Uttarakhand. It’s a two peaked massif, one of the peaks considerably taller than the one adjoining it. It means that it has two heads. The taller one is called Nanda, while the shorter one adjoining it is called Sunanda. Both the goddesses Nanda and Sunanda are believed to be sisters, the elder one and the younger one according to the Hindu mythology. Hence the name. The little sister Sunanda, holding onto the elder one, Nanda. It is Nanda Devi.”

“Wow”, Rehann uttered. “But what about the treacherous waters and the three guards?”

“*Shall cross the treacherous waters adorned by the dead*”, Aarav read the line again. “There is a lake near Nanda Devi Mountain called Roop Kund. I actually like its other name; the Skeleton Lake.”

“The Skeleton Lake?”

“Yes. The Skeleton Lake. To the hikers it is just another calm and serene glacial lake. It remains frozen for the better part of the year and actually appears quite beautiful barring the fact that hundreds of human skeletons and bones have been found in and around the lake.”

“What?”

“Yes. National Geographic even did a documentary on it. The lake is hardly two meters deep and as I said, it remains frozen, but once the ice melts, you can actually see human skeletons lying inside its blue waters. It was a curious mystery; kept the best of geneticists scratching their heads. The British originally thought that they were remains of a hidden Japanese force during World War 2, but the bones were far too old. Research indicated that the skeletons dated back to eighth or ninth century AD, but if this map marks its location as the treacherous waters adorned by the dead, it means that the skeletons were in existence even at the time when this treasure was moved

here. That would push their date back to more than a thousand years than what is currently thought of. This is remarkable.”

“Are you sure that Roop Kund is the ‘treacherous water’ that the map talks about?” Rehya asked.

“Of course. The three guards prove this fact. Here. Look.” Aarav pulled up the map on his mobile and pointed to the location of Roop Kund. “That’s our skeleton lake. Now if I zoom out further, you’ll see that these three mountains almost stand in a straight line. That’s Mt. Nanda Ghunti, Mt. Trishul, and Mt. Mrigthuni. They all align in a straight line. *The three guards of gods, who stand straight and proud.*”

Rehya and Rehann looked at each other in amazement, while Aanya kept on driving with an excited face.

“And if I zoom out further”, Aarav continued. “There you have the Nanda Devi peak; the two sisters.”

“Marvelous”, Rehya spoke.

“So we have to cross the treacherous lake, then cross the three mountains and then we will see the Nanda Devi peak?” Aanya added.

“And in between the three mountains and Nanda Devi, our *ears will hear the noise to the supreme treasure a man will see with his eyes*”, Rehya added.

“We are on the right path. We’ll just have to take a detour and align ourselves with this road here, and then we might cross the three mountains by tomorrow afternoon if we start our trek in the morning”, Aarav added.

“Thank the gods that we bought those fur coats on our way from Nepal. Because things are about to get really cold.”

Suddenly, they heard loud screeching of tires behind them. The car carrying Rehya’s guards applied sudden brakes to prevent collision with a car which came from behind them and tried to overtake. But by then it was too late. The other car hammered head first into them with might, making them hit the railings on the other side and turn. Rehya and her three companions watched in horror as the other car broke the railings and rolled over to the side.

And then there was nothing.

The car which carried the guards fell down the chasm, crashing multiple times on the hard rocks on the way and still tumbling down with might, only to get lost in the darkness. The sound of an explosion was heard a few seconds later, waking up the quiet valley under the dusky sky. The other car which had pushed it off the cliff, reversed back and soon faced the car which Aanya was driving. That is when the four of them saw the faces of the driver and his companions.

They wore the bull masks.

A terrifying jolt gripped the four of them. Aanya stomped her foot hard on the accelerator and the car gained momentum. She drove hard, maneuvering through the narrow roads of the cliffs like a professional while moving at a great pace. The other car followed them hurriedly, trying to bridge the gap between as soon as possible.

“How is it possible? I thought you killed everyone”, Aarav yelled.

“We did terminate everyone who were there in the building”, Rehya defended herself.

“K had left with two of his men soon after you went to the hotel”, Rehann came to the aid of her sister.

“And you are telling this to me now?” Aarav barked at the top of his voice before he had to jump down as a bullet hit the hind glass of the car, cracking it magnificently. “Hide”, he shrieked as he pulled Rehya down alongside him in time, as another bullet hit glass and it gave away, shattering into a million pieces.

“Move. Faster. Now”, Rehann yelled as he ducked too.

“I’m trying”, Aanya replied as she pumped up the speed of the car further, driving dangerously close to the end of the cliff. A volley of bullets were being showered upon them, breaking the remaining glasses and bouncing off of the metal body of the car, endangering their lives with each passing second.

“Keep driving. This path will lead us to the main road above”, Aarav said as a bullet bounced just past his neck. “Faster”, he yelled before pulling out his own gun and firing it at the car which trailed them, only to be unsuccessful.

The bombardment of bullets however only seemed to increase with time. Soon, a bullet found its way on one of the rear tires of the car that Aanya was driving, and that is when she lost control. The tire burst with a loud bang and the car tilted towards its left, the four of them could feel their bodies lifting up in the air because of the momentum when the car almost turned. It hit the railing overlooking the cliff and slid on it for some time, creating sparks and an unholy screeching sound along with it. Aanya pulled the brakes and turned the steering hard towards her right, their car managing to get back on the road on all its fours and not falling down the chasm somehow. The car trotted further ahead, its speed slowing down tremendously due to the burst tire. And by the time Aanya made it abandon the narrow path and join on the intersecting main road above, the Bulls had covered the distance. They ran their car parallel to Aanya's and soon bashed into them, making her pull the hand brake and crashing into a tree to the side. The Bulls pulled up their car too and K, who had abandoned his mask rushed out with fury along with another Bull. He hurried towards Aanya first, who had a cut on her head as her face had slammed into the steering wheel when the car crashed. He opened the gates with his unbroken hand, grabbed her neck and pulled her out furiously, throwing her on the ground. He then went towards Aarav and did the same to him, throwing him down on the ground and starting to hit him with his legs as his man pulled out the other two.

"I will kill you", he yelled as he kept on digging his shoes hard into Aarav's abdomen. "I will rip your guts out and feed them to the dogs."

"Stop", a female voice spoke as another car pulled up next to them and she got out.

"I will kill him right now", K yelled as he pulled out his gun and placed it on Aarav's head.

"I said stop", she spoke with a firm voice.

"He killed my boys", K cried. "He betrayed you", he said as he landed a powerful blow to Aarav's face. "He made me suffer." K lost it. He punched Aarav again and again on his face, opening the scar on his cheek again.

"I said that it's enough", she stared hard into K's eyes, finally making him stop.

Aarav rolled on the ground, his body aching in agony, while the two other Bulls brought out the other three passengers and made them sit on their knees with their hands held to their backs. Aarav finally gazed at her, his heart still surprisingly skipping a beat. She looked radiant as ever, her deep blue eyes standing out in the twilight sky behind her. Yet there was something serious about her appearance. Aarav knew that whatever she had felt for him was gone the very moment he had betrayed her.

“Pick him up”, she ordered K as he obliged frustratingly, making Aarav sit on his knees like everyone else. The roads around were unusually calm, hardly any vehicle passing by. And it gave her enough time to get what she wanted. She pulled out a gun and placed it on the temple of Aarav’s head, slowly sliding it down as she gazed hard into his brown eyes, only to stop at his bleeding lips.

“Shayna... please don’t...” Aarav managed to speak before being greeted by her slap.

“You have done enough talking. You have pulled enough antics. You won’t say a word unless I ask you to. You won’t drink a single drop unless I tell you to. You so much as try to do anything stupid this time and I swear to god, I will shoot all your friends myself before throwing you off a cliff.”

He stared at her face intensely, wondering if he should have revealed her identity to the Prime Minister when he still had time.

“You don’t know what you have done. You will face the highest level of punishment for your acts”, Rehya uttered.

“Who is this one now?” Shayna spoke asserting her power with calmness.

“She works for the Prime Minister”, K provided the input.

“Oh! I don’t need her then”, she pointed her gun towards Rehya.

“Hey! Shayna! Don’t please, I beg you”, Rehann defended her.

Shayna made an irritated face. “Don’t tell me that you have fallen for a woman older than you too? I thought your friend and I had something special?”

“She is not my...” Rehann continued. “She is my sister.”

“Oh! Then her death will hurt you even more I bet.”

“Shayna please. It is over”, Aarav added looking at her with his unapologetic eyes. “The Prime Minister knows about the treasure. It is the government’s property now. No one needs to die for it.”

She looked at him patiently while one of her men found all the books and other treasure related paraphernalia in the trunk of the car.

“You can still save yourself”, Aarav continued. “There is still time.”

She thought for a moment. “I know that you’d have found the map now that you have all the seven books. But you won’t lead me to the treasure until I force it on you. I’ll kill them all if that is what it takes now Aarav. You’re a clever man and I’ve learned it the hard way to not trust you. I don’t intend to be fooled again or go easier on you.”

“Shayna I did what I had to do because I was right.”

“You lied to me”, she yelled all of a sudden, shocking everyone else who stood around. “You broke my trust. You broke my love. You... you broke my heart.” She had tears welling up in her eyes. “I learned it hard to never trust a man the first time and I faced it all again with you. You all betray in the end.”

Aarav didn’t know what to say.

“I loved you Aarav Kohrrathi. I even dreamt that we would be together when I would have the treasure in my hands and all of this was over. I chose to forgive you, I chose to not kill you and your friends and I chose to trust you. But you proved it in the end. When the chips are down, love is always murdered.” She pointed her gun hard towards Rehann. “This time it won’t be the only thing.”

“No!” Aanya and Rehya yelled together. Rehann was left with his mouth open and just waited for the bullet to strike him at any moment before everything turned dark. Shayna had tears in her eyes as her hands almost shivered, waiting to see something in Aarav’s eyes before she would pull the trigger.

“Fine!” Aarav finally said as he looked trustingly into her eyes. “You win. I will tell you everything. I will tell you where the treasure is. But know it for

sure that I wasn't the one who betrayed you."

Shayna removed her finger from the trigger of the gun.

"You betrayed yourself Shayna. You are the reason your own fall."

He then told her everything. Everything about translating the inscriptions from the seven books, to finding the way to the treasure beneath the floor of a small monastery in Nepal, to decoding the final problem in the treasure map, to pointing out the location of the treasure, somewhere after crossing the Skeleton Lake and the three mountains and before Nanda Devi.

She closed her eyes and hid the turmoil she was going through in her head; torn between her love and her ambitions. She looked again at all their faces. The face of an angry Aanya, who considered Shayna to be her friend, only to find out that she was responsible for her father's death. The face of a shocked Rehya, who was surprised by the fact that Shayna Maheshwari was the evil master all along. The face of a scared Rehann, who was imagining the worse of what she would do to them now that Aarav had told her everything. And the face of her love, himself upset for what she had become, and still trusting her with everything that he had, hoping that she would understand. The emotional turmoil was proving to be too much for Shayna. For a better part of her life she had suppressed her emotions and became the ruthless and charming business tycoon that she was. And then all her emotions and all the feelings that she had suppressed for years suddenly came rushing back, making her powerless.

That is when she broke.

She looked away and averted her gaze from meeting Aarav's. She had given him much more of herself than she was ready to acknowledge. Aarav himself took in a deep breath as he saw tears dripping down her eyes, knowing that the Shayna he had fallen for, the Shayna he had seen on the serene beach in Sri Lanka, was still there. She slowly wiped away her tears, her emotions making her cry profusely. Nobody was speaking a thing. Nobody was able to comprehend the kind of upheaval she was going through. Nobody... but Aarav. He stood up slowly and gained his balance as he darted his warm eyes into her grieving ones, assuring himself that she would understand now that he had told her everything.

“What have you done to me?” Shayna cried.

“I have loved you”, he replied affectionately.

“No. No you haven’t”, she denied. “You have just used me. You have just used my affection for you as a means to achieve your wishes.”

“You know that it’s not true.”

“Really? I have lost my pride, I have lost my goals, I have been embarrassed and I have been used. I failed to protect the secret I swore to and I failed to give my heart to you. What have you lost, Aarav Kohrrathi? You are on your way towards the greatest treasure in the history of mankind without having any claim to it. You are indeed the shrewdest man I have met after all. Your love for me was just a trick, an elaborate ruse to weaken my strengths and tricking me when you had the time. Who knows that if it wasn’t for you, I’d have claimed the treasure by now?”

“So then kill me”, he barked. “If this is all just a ruse, then save us the drama and kill me, like you have murdered all those people.”

“I just might”, she pulled up her gun and again placed it on Aarav’s head. All the men present around stood shocked, even the Bulls.

“Do it”, Aarav had tears in his eyes too. “You were the most powerful women I have met in my life and now look at you, crying like a teenaged girl because her crush didn’t like her back. Do it. Look what I have made you. A pathetic woman who is so deep in turmoil just because she developed feelings for someone like me.” He walked a step closer and touched his head to the face of the gun. “Do it Shayna Maheshwari. End all your pains, all your sufferings once and for all and just kill me. You don’t need me for the treasure hunt anymore. You know where it is.”

“Stop it”, she begged him, trying to control her tears.

“I caused you pain. I am the reason for all your sufferings. It was my idea that ruined your glorious plan. It was me all along who had gained your trust and made you weak, so that one day, I’ll be staring down a gun that you’d be holding in your hand and know that you won’t even have the courage to pull the trigger.”

“Don’t make me”, she begged him, her finger playing near the trigger.

Aarav looked straight into her eyes with his moist and disappointed ones as he finally spoke again. "Do it."

But she did something else.

She pulled her gun down and held onto Aarav's face as she bit his bleeding lips hard, all her emotions, all her anger brought out as she kissed him like she never had before.

And then she pulled back, lifted up her gun and pulled the trigger.

The bullet entered Rehya's stomach in the blink of an eye. None of the men around were able to bring their minds to what had transpired. Rehya looked into her brother's eyes for a second before her body fell back. Her head smashed onto the cold ground as darkness started welling up around her eyes and she submitted to the shock.

"NO!" Rehann and Aanya yelled together as they went for her. The Bulls stood stunned around, themselves coming to terms with what had happened. While Aarav and Shayna kept staring into each other's eyes, his losing faith on himself and hers finding her power back.

"What have you done?" Rehann shrieked at the top of his voice. "Call an ambulance."

Shayna continued looking hard at Aarav for a few more seconds. "Tie them and put them in your car", she ordered the Bulls. "Tie him and put him in mine. Let her bleed, the dogs will soon find her body." She walked back slowly towards her car, wiping away her tears and rooting instead for the treasure ahead.

Her ambitions had trumped her heart.

Chapter 12

The Treasure Of The Gods

They trekked past Roop Kund the next morning, the small and beautiful glacial lake that had housed hundreds of ancient skeletons, and were well past the three mountains by the afternoon, as they trotted ahead slowly on the snow laden paths. Rehann's eyes were red as he had cried the entire night before passing out in the car in which he was being held. Aanya had to rub her eyes again and again as the lack of sleep and the whiteness all around her was making her delusional. Shayna walked next to Aarav, asking him a few questions here and there only to receive no reply from him. The three of them had their hands tied and a Bull following them as they moved along the untrodden path. To a tourist that place would have been heaven on earth itself. Huge snow-clad mountains had sprung up all around them, and bright sunshine from above bounced off the sheet of snow beneath their feet. But they knew that the things have changed. Both Aarav and Shayna knew that they wouldn't be able to ever go back to the way they were. But Shayna's disappointment with Aarav was only matched by her desire to claim the treasure of the gods.

*Hidden amongst the highest of mountains, it lies;
Shielded by the holy waters, it rests.
The greatest blessing of the Gods, the greatest secret of mankind;
Shall never be found, shall never see light.
Yet the worthy who seeks the secret,
Shall cross the treacherous waters adorned by the dead,
Cross the three guards of gods, who stand straight and proud.
And once they see the sisters, the little one holding onto the eldest;*

*Their ears will hear the noise,
To the supreme treasure a man will see with his eyes.*

Shayna read out the final riddle again. “I cannot believe that you deciphered this so easily. Maybe it was a blessing in disguise to meet you after all, Aarav Kohrrathi.”

He kept staring ahead as his eyes met the Nanda Devi peak.

“There you have your sisters”, she continued. “The little one holding onto the eldest.”

Aarav stopped in his tracks and closed his eyes.

“Where is my treasure Aarav?”

“Shut up”, he brooded.

“If we had gotten married, we’d have had so many fights.”

“Shut up and listen.”

That is when they all became quiet and heard something.

“Is that a waterfall?” K asked as he went to his left to hear the sound more clearly. Aanya snapped out of her delusions and looked for the source of sound too, while Rehann kept staring at Shayna with murderous rage in his eyes.

“There is a bloody waterfall below the crevice over there”, K came back to report to Shayna.

“Their ears will hear the noise to the supreme treasure a man will see with his eyes”, she narrated. “Poetic justice, don’t you think my love?”

Aarav looked the other way and slowly walked ahead towards the crevice, a few hundred meters away from where they stood. The fracture in the land was deep, the green ice towards the top vanishing into darkness as it went down. The gap was narrow, hardly twenty five feet in between the two ends and the walls closed in further as it went deeper. Aarav picked up a big stone lying nearby and dropped it into the crevice.

“That is almost seven hundred meters deep. Perhaps even more”, he said.

“How’d you know?” K asked.

“Distance is the product of speed and time. Maybe you’d have learnt that if you’d have rather been to a school instead of a slaughterhouse”, Rehann buffeted.

“Can I hit him?” K asked Shayna before moving towards Rehann.

“No”, she denied his request and went further ahead as she gazed down the darkness of the crevice. Aarav, who stood next to her wondered what would happen if she fell down it, his sleeplessness and fatigue from the hike, almost making him lose control of his logical faculty. All she needed was a little push, after all. But he averted her gaze as he controlled himself, focusing his mind to hear the sound of a waterfall he was unable to see.

“There is a narrow path down from there”, one of the Bulls who had went ahead to inspect the crevice, spoke as he came back.

Shayna looked towards Aarav with a smile. “After you”, she said as she put her hand around his arms and started walking with him. They went ahead slowly, one of the bulls leading the party down the narrow path, the others following him cautiously.

“I, watch your step”, K said to the bull walking in the front.

“How did they carry the treasure through here?” I asked as he carefully placed his next step.

“It is the same as the pyramids in Egypt. Aliens helped them”, M, the other bull spoke up.

Aarav rolled his eyes really hard as he continued down the path, Shayna walking with a smile alongside him.

“It’s a beautiful day isn’t it, my love?” She asked him, only to be met by his haughty stare. “Say something Aarav, you can cheer up too. In a few hours we will finally have our treasure.”

“Not ours. Yours”, he replied coldly only to receive a shy smile from her.

“I like you even more when you act like this. All brooding and angry and irritated. Your left eyebrow goes up a bit while you clench your teeth and stick your cheeks in. You suddenly appear so charismatic.”

“Then take my head with you when you are done.”

“Don’t talk like that”, she teased him. “When I’ll have the treasure and the ultimate power that comes along with it, I’ll be a generous ruler you know. I’ll even forgive your sins if you please me.”

“We both know what is going to happen once we find the treasure”, he added. “You’ll point your gun at me again and shoot me this time without even thinking for a second.”

“Then I’d say that you know me better than you give yourself credit for.”

“No matter how powerful you think you may become”, he continued. “You’ll be the one who’ll fall in the end.”

“And I’ll ensure that I prove you wrong.”

“I can see the waterfall”, I yelled from ahead as Shayna and Aarav stopped and looked into each other’s eyes.

“Hidden amongst the highest of mountains, it lies; shielded by the holy waters, it rests”, Aarav recited the lines from the riddle.

“I want to kiss you so bad right now”, she said staring into his eyes.

“I want to kill you so bad right now”, he retorted. “Too bad though. We are both not getting what we want”, he said as he walked ahead past her and looked at the waterfall himself.

He wasn’t able to believe his eyes, the beauty of the falls making him forget his worries for a moment. The waterfall seemed to emerge out of nowhere, its narrow head expanding into a massive body as it progressed deeper into the crevice. Its ice blue waters stood out against the green rocks they seemed to be surrounded by, the temperature only appeared to fall as they walked closer to it.

“The structure of the crevice overhead must prevent sunlight from falling to these parts”, Shayna said. *“The greatest blessing of the Gods, the greatest secret of mankind; shall never be found, shall never see light.”*

They walked close to the waterfalls until it passed from right over their heads. The droplets of the cold water sprayed on them as their eyes found it difficult to adjust in the low lights, forcing the Bulls to take out their torches.

“There’s a cave over here”, I yelled again as he excitedly called out to the rest of his party. They all soon approached the wide opening to the cave, still being sprayed on by the icy water and trying to move carefully as the ground beneath their feet became slippery. And soon their torchlights fell on a single idol that stood stout before them. Four golden lions stood on their hind legs, each facing a cardinal direction, atop a tall fifteen feet high pillar, with several Sanskrit markings engraved all over and the Ashoka Chakra in the center.

“This is it”, Aanya spoke looking at the Lion Capital of Ashoka, the historic sigil which the great emperor had erected at various places across India and which also served as India’s national emblem. It was justice that all the history Aarav had advanced on from the start of his quest had come full circle.

“What does it say?” Shayna asked Aarav who carefully doled his eyes over the Sanskrit inscriptions.

*“If you stand here, you are worthy;
For behind rests Gods own treasure,
You have become a part of history;
For here ends your journey.
Let the Lion’s head mark the way;
As you attain the glory you deserve,
Be wise, Be just, Be noble, and Be kind;
For the greatest treasure awaits you behind.”*

Aarav recited it again in his head as he figured out what to do. “*Let the Lion’s head mark the way*”, he narrated as he placed his fingers on a small circular hole just beneath where the inscription had ended and knew what he had to do. “Bring me the key we found in Nepal”, he ordered without even looking back. Shayna nodded towards M, who proceeded to bring out the artifact from a bag that he was carrying. He presented Aarav with the cylindrical,

metallic object that they had found in Nepal. Aarav looked at the Lionhead towards one of its end. “Here goes the Lion’s head”, he said as he inserted the key in the hole and twisted it in a full circle.

All of a sudden they felt vibrations beneath their feet as the end of the cave before them suddenly started opening up. The rock hard surface turned out to be a giant door, which took its own time to open up. “Behold the greatest treasure in the history of mankind”, Aarav said as bright lights hit his face, forgetting all of its troubles and just reacted to his craving for solving a hunt. As soon as the doors opened, hundreds of torches lit up inside the cave automatically, which was bigger than anyone could have imagined, and greeting them before their eyes, was the treasure.

The torchlights bounced off the plethora of precious metals as their eyes adjusted to the bling before them. They saw chests numbering in thousands, filled with precious jewels and coins to the brim. They saw mountains of gold coins, scattered all around carelessly. They doled their eyes upon the tall golden statues of warriors and gods, the garlands of pearls and swords made from silver, precious gems seemed to have been thrown all around like cherries on top. And they only saw the depth of the cave getting deeper and deeper, with there being no end in sight. There were golden chalices and crowns and thrones and banners. There were golden statues of Hindu gods, thrice the size of a human being. The men weren’t even able to see the color of the floor as there wasn’t a single spot where gold wasn’t present. They took their first steps inside the cave and were struck by the magnanimity of the sight so much that they had to remind themselves constantly that they weren’t dreaming. Shayna walked a little further as she came across a massive twenty five foot tall gilded statue of Lord Vishnu, the preserver of life as per the Hindu mythology. Aanya and Rehann moved to the other side, as they gazed at the artifacts that were carefully placed on stands. There were elegant robes studded with rubies and sapphires. There were hundreds of scrolls that lay frozen. There were golden weapons and daggers forged from rare metals. And of course lots of gold bars.

Aarav stood at back at the entrance of the cave and took support of the wall, his eyes moist at seeing the greatest treasure in the history of mankind. The journey that started out by decoding a farewell note from a father to his daughter had made him uncover the treasure of the gods themselves.

None of the men spoke a word. They didn't jump in the air excitedly, nor did they yell at the top of their voices. They just gazed at the sight calmly, realizing that their treasure hunt had officially come to an end. There was a brief moment when they all looked at each other, a moment of understanding when they forgot whether they were the good or the evil, but instead came to a quiet conclusion that in some way or the other, everyone had contributed something to the hunt, without which it probably would have been impossible to discover the secret treasure of the Himalayas.

And then K pulled out his gun and pointed it at Aarav.

"You know what is going to happen now", K spoke in a grim voice. "I'm going to make you all pay for the trouble you have caused me."

Aarav simply looked at the treasure cave for the last time before turning back and putting his hands behind his head.

"Out now, all of you", K continued as he instructed I and M to pull Rehann and Aanya out of the cave. They were all brought outside and were again pelted with the slow showers from the waterfall raging behind them. By the time K had started swinging his unbroken hand on Aarav, who had stopped resisting, Shayna came out.

"Stop it", Shayna ordered K only to make him mad.

"Oh don't you dare take his side now", he barked as he continued stomping his feet into Aarav. "You... promised me his head... once we found the treasure. And I am not letting him walk out of here alive."

"I said stop", Shayna spoke with firmness as she pointed a gun at him.

K stared at her in disbelief. "Oh I don't believe you."

She kept marking her gun at him without moving.

"Oh I don't believe you", K uttered again. "After everything that he did. After he betrayed you. After he had all my men killed. You're still taking his side?"

"I am not taking his side."

"Then why are you pointing a gun at me?" he yelled as he pulled out his own gun and pointed it at her.

“Because...” she shifted her gun towards Aarav. “Because I have to be the one who’d kill him.”

“Shayna you don’t have to”, Aanya interrupted. “You found the treasure. It is yours. You don’t have to kill him. He trusted you. He loved you. He found the bloody treasure for you. You cannot do it.”

“Shayna let us go”, Rehann uttered with the same coldness, still unable to overcome the fact that Shayna had shot his sister. “You have your treasure now. Rule the world as you want to, nobody will be able to stop you. You don’t have to do this.”

“Why don’t you ask him that?” she spoke, still pointing her gun at Aarav. “He knew it that I would kill him and he helped me find the treasure anyway. He won’t cry. He won’t beg. He knew that his end was near and he has accepted it.”

“Just don’t go for my face”, Aarav added. “I would never want to spoil its memory for you.”

“Oh you don’t have to ask that.”

“Let both of them go”, he spoke after thinking for a while.

“You cannot ask me that.”

“I was the one who wronged you, right? They didn’t. Aanya was forced into the hunt because her father was a master and Rehann was... well he just tagged along with me.”

“Aarav stop it”, Rehann grew angrier. “How come any of us wronged her when she was the evil master all this while?”

“I was never evil Rehann. I just saw things as they were”, Shayna retorted.

“Oh really! You murdered four masters, led her father to kill himself, and then had the librarian killed. Then there was Mrs. Jayaratne’s husband. And now my sister. Not to mention the fact that these are just the ones I know of. You were never evil you say? You’re the very definition of evil to me.”

She kept pointing her gun at Aarav, her anxious eyes looking into his.

“The chill of the waters is killing me Shayna. I’d appreciate it if you’d do it

fast”, he said with a blank face. “What happened? You’ve found the treasure. All the men you killed, and all the troubles that you caused; but something doesn’t feel right, does it?”

“Stop speaking”, her hands shook.

“You committed these atrocities. You ordered those slaughters. You ended up creating so much chaos. All this while you had justified your acts by saying that it will all be over once you find the treasure. Well guess what, you found it. Then what is wrong?”

“Stop speaking Aarav, or I’ll shoot you.”

“Sometimes you yourself get sucked into the pit of chaos that you help create. And no matter how much you try to reassure yourself that you’re right; when it all ends, you lose even though you have won.”

She looked away at the magnificent falls as tears welled up in her eyes.

“Fine. If you won’t do it... I will”, K spoke as he turned his gun towards Aarav’s head.

All of a sudden, a loud bang echoed across the place, the gunshot reverberating far and deep through the crevice, even overshadowing the sound of the waterfall for a moment. Rehann and Aanya stood shocked as the sudden noise shook the daylights out of them. They saw the bullet entering his skull, and squashing it into pieces as thick blood and pieces of bones crumbled to the wet rocks below where he was standing; his tall, lean body, slowly moving to a side and falling down with a gentle thud.

And then there was silence for a moment.

Aarav saw the disfigured body of K lying at his feet and he slowly looked up towards Shayna who was holding the gun; smoke still coming out of it. And then Rehann seized the opportunity as he grabbed the gun of I, who was holding him and kicked him hard in the chest, only to make him lose his balance and fall down the crevice along with the waterfall. Shayna looked at M and pulled the trigger without hesitating, effectively bringing an end to the Broods of the Bulls. In a matter of seconds, it was all over.

Rehann pointed his gun at Shayna as he watched her breaking down. Aarav and Aanya got up slowly and wrapped their heads around what had

happened.

“I’m sorry”, Shayna cried. “I failed you. I failed all of you.”

Rehann kept pointing his gun at her and stole a glance at Aarav.

“I’m a horrible, horrible person”, she continued weeping. “Just do it. Kill me already.”

Rehann looked at Aarav again, his finger quivering around the trigger of the gun, just waiting for a nod from him to end her.

“Rehann”, Aarav shook his head. “Please don’t.”

“What are you going to do? You’re going to let her walk away from this?”

“Rehann...”

“I respect your feelings Aarav”, he raised his voice. “I do. I really do. I always have. It is about time that you respected mine.”

Aarav looked into Shayna’s moist eyes through the showers being sprayed on them by the waterfall. Her blue eyes dug into his brown ones, her emotions taking over her cold side, her love conquering her materialistic ambitions.

“She killed my sister. She killed Rehya, Aarav. You saw it with your own eyes. And you cannot expect me to not kill her when I have the opportunity.”

“She saved us Rehann.”

“After being the one who got us here in the first place”, he yelled.

“Rehann. Don’t. Please I beg you. You’re not thinking straight right now.”

“And you are? If you weren’t blinded by your love for her in the first place, you’d have seen who she really was.”

“Rehann look...”

“Don’t Aarav. You have a brother. Tell me what would have happened if she had shot him dead in the middle of a deserted road and walked about like nothing had happened? Would you think even for a second before pulling the trigger?”

Aarav grew quiet and looked at Shayna again, his emotions clouding his

logical self. Aanya stood quietly in the back, unable to think of what to say to them. Shayna was down on her knees, crying to herself and staring at the waterfall. None of them spoke anything for some time, only the sound of the waterfall echoing across the icy terrain.

“Then let me do it”, Aarav said as he extended his hand and asked for the gun from Rehann. “Let me be the one who ends her life.”

Rehann looked back at Shayna and turned again to face Aarav. He took in a deep breath and closed his eyes as he looked above, before handing over the gun to Aarav and walking the narrow path back up to the surface.

“We can hand her over to the authorities, Aarav”, Aanya spoke. “You don’t have to do this.”

“And they’ll kill her anyway”, he had tears in his eyes. Aanya looked at him with concern as he started shivering. “Go”, he said. “Stay with him. I will have to do what is necessary.”

Aanya looked at Shayna for the last time before leaving.

Both Aarav and Shayna gazed at the waterfall falling from behind them, hearing its thundering sound, as its ice blue water sprayed on them, chilling them to their bones. But it wasn’t the cold that bothered them, it was her end that did. She had to go and they both knew it. Maybe they wanted to enjoy their last moments together, cherish the good memories they shared however little they were. Hence they both didn’t utter a word to each other but kept staring at the falls instead with tears rolling down their eyes.

“These falls were yet undiscovered”, she finally spoke. “I’d die in peace knowing that it was named after me, knowing that I would leave something behind when I’m gone.”

Aarav cried even harder.

“It is funny if you look at this Aarav. All these days, throughout our journey, we were just focused on the treasure. Whatever actions we took, whatever things we did, it was all just so that we could reach to the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. You chased it for your love of history and I did it for the unimaginable power it could give me, it was all black and white. But now that we are finally here, none of us cares about the treasure anymore.”

“It is the journey that matters Shayna. Not the pot at the end of the rainbow.”

He finally pointed his gun at her.

“You were the only woman in my life Shayna”, he continued. “Meeting you has changed me in ways I couldn’t have ever imagined. I remember how struck I was by your beauty when I met you for the first time. And even though I was focused on the hunt, even though I was excited about the adventure; my mind had lost all thoughts when my eyes met yours. Your beauty captivated me, your demeanor made me lose my senses. And that night when we... when I...” he choked. “I have never said this to a woman before and I probably never will. Shayna Maheshwari, you completed me. You gave my life a purpose, a direction, something that my emotionless heart can feel and gladly get lost into. What you did was wrong, yes; but I really don’t care about it right now Shayna. I know I never went along with women but there was something about you that made me be who I really am.”

Shayna was crying.

“You know I had this dream, that somewhere down the line I’d be happily celebrating my wife’s hundredth birthday, in our home, where we would have seen our children and grandchildren grow up. We would be surrounded by our family and friends, my wife and I; and I would hold her hand as she would cut the cake and then look into her amazingly exquisite eyes as I would tell her that we made it. We made it through all the ups and downs of our lives, we had the best of times and we had a few hiccups. I knew deep in my heart that I would meet that person one day and spend the rest of my life with her.”

She continued crying.

“You were supposed to be the one Shayna.”

“I love you Aarav”, she controlled her tears as she stood back up and walked ahead to face his gun. “I wish I was the one who’d have accompanied you to fulfill your dream. I wish I’d have met you sooner before it all had started. Maybe I never would have done what I did. But we both know that you’d have to kill me now. So just do it.”

“I don’t want to”, he cried. “I don’t want to end this... to end us. I want to be with you Shayna. There is nothing left for me out there if you’re gone.”

“I’m glad to know that, I really am Aarav. But we both know that it cannot happen. They will never let me get away with my crimes. So promise me that once this is all over, you won’t do anything stupid. You’ll meet someone far beautiful than me. Someone who has the purest of heart like yourself. We were never meant to be together Aarav. After all that I did, it is only a surprise that we both still love each other.”

“I cannot kill you Shayna.”

“Then I’ll have to take the leap. Go down with that waterfall. It will be a poetic justice indeed if you end up naming it after me”, she smiled.

Aarav looked towards the falls, his mind filling with dread as he imagined what would happen to a person who would go down under its might.

“No”, he spoke, his hands shivering. “It has to be me.”

“Then do it Aarav Kohrrathi. Let’s end this once and for all.”

He took in a deep breath, his fingers wavering around the trigger of the gun, his body shaking, his eyes pouring out tears and his heart wanting his brain to not commit that act of horror.

“I love you”, he cried.

“I worship you”, she replied as she closed her eyes and waited for her end.

As soon as Rehann and Aanya got back to the surface above and left the narrow path of the crevice, their eyes were instantly greeted by many men in black, hardly a few meters away from them. As soon as the men saw them both, they came rushing ahead, announcing on their radios that the two were alive and walking.

“Who’re you?” Rehann asked one of the men as they came to check if they were unhurt.

“We work for the Prime Minister’s Office. We tracked your location from the GPS that Ms. Rehya placed inside your coat. Are you okay sir?”

“My sister?”

“Yes sir. She had an unfortunate accident but she contacted us to find you.”

“She is alive?” Rehann’s expressions changed all of a sudden.

“Yes sir. She did lose quite some blood, but she was given the best of treatment. She is alive sir. She was airlifted back to New Delhi late last night.”

Rehann looked at Aanya with a smile, and then towards the narrow path that led to the waterfalls with dread. “Aarav”, he spoke worriedly and started to head back down the crevice, but that is when they heard it.

A gunshot echoed around the place, low and subdued, but enough to make Rehann and Aanya look into each other’s eyes and know that it had happened.

Aarav himself walked out through the narrow path some minutes later and knew what had transpired as soon as he laid his eyes on the men in black. He turned his bloodshot eyes towards Rehann once and disgustingly looked up over the sun that was shining ahead of him. He didn’t speak, he didn’t cry. He just kept walking ahead slowly; the walk of a man who had just lost everything. The rest of the officers went down the path and started their yearlong job of retrieving the treasure out from the cave. Aanya held Rehann’s hand as he sat down there itself, only to watch his broken friend walk alone into the vast spread of snow, surrounded by the gloomy mountains and overlooked by a wretched sun. He walked as far his strength would allow him to on the ice beneath his feet and fell on his knees as he broke. He cried his heart out, closed his eyes and remembered seeing the blue ones of Shayna for the last time before he had pulled the trigger.

He uncovered the secret of the Himalayan Treasure. And just when he found the biggest secret that the world has ever seen, he lost his everything.

EPILOGUE

260 BCE

Somewhere in the Himalayas

Fifty men stood stout as they braved a furious blizzard somewhere in the Himalayas. The multiple dark woollen sheets that they fancied barely managed to stop the cold from reaching to their bones and it was only a miracle that they were somehow able to stand on their feet. They had marched almost a year ago on the command of their king, and after scouting the forests, the lowlands, river banks and cold deserts, they had finally managed to find the perfect place which matched the description given by him. “It should be a place where the gods shall lie, and they should lie undisturbed till the end of time”, he had spoken to them. After conveying the location to his minister, they were surprised to learn that the king himself was to visit the place and they waited for almost a month when the day finally arrived.

They saw a few dark figures walking up the treacherous path leading up to the place. They were barely able to keep their eyes open as the cold wind hurried to burn them. Yet the caravan seemed to progress rather quickly along the gentle manoeuvres. In a few moments they came close and the fifty men soon saw a party of some twenty others before them. They recognised the commander of their royal army at once. His burly body unmoved by the blizzard. His proud moustache frozen to look at its best. Two more guards came behind him followed by the king himself, his minister and a few of the most prominent men of their kingdom. The workhands coming after them carried a huge palanquin on their shoulders, one of the grandest that the fifty men had seen in their entire lives, yet they wondered who could possibly be in it, since the king was himself walking. The king seemed to whisper something to his commander, who nodded at once and dragged his burly body to guide the palanquin bearers inside the place that was discovered by those fifty men. The king on the other hand came to stand face to face with them, his short stature masking his fighting prowess, his calm face hiding years of bloodshed.

“It is an honour to stand before you fifty gentlemen”, he spoke as his wide eyes rolled all around, examining the white expanse, an area where no other man has been before. “I trusted this party to search for a place so magnificent that my eyes shall cry seeing its beauty. Yet so deep that no other man could ever walk into it. And I am proud to admit that you, all my fine men, have done a great service for your king. I am pleased with the result that I see before my eyes and I most certainly will honour this hard work of yours”, he spoke as he stared into each of their eyes. His face glowed with a different aura. His composure was unbothered by the frigid conditions around him. He was dead calm. Not showing any sign of uneasiness or shivering. He was at as much ease as he was three years ago, when he had fought the greatest battle in the history of mankind. The battle had changed him in ways he couldn’t have imagined. It had also cemented his position as the greatest of the emperors in the history.

The commander soon came out of the entrance of the cave and nodded upon seeing the king, who smiled subliminally and slowly proceeded to move forwards. His entourage and the fifty men soon followed him, relieved that the battering cold winds would trouble them no more. The cave was vast and profound, almost as if the nature had carved it intricately and presented it for the king. Proceeding through the narrow doorways carved by the fifty men and continuing through a couple of bends, their eyes were again stuck at the great palanquin, which sat comfortably in the centre of a massive ice chamber big enough to accommodate a few thousand men.

“Ecstatic”, the king smiled upon seeing the sight. The palanquin bearers were already on their knees and prayed before it with their eyes closed. The fifty men wondered who could possibly be in that magnificent litter and the king sensed it just by the look on their faces. “This great palanquin bears a treasure blessed by the gods themselves. Kneel before it, pray with your heart and the most impossible of your wishes will come true”, he uttered coldly and moved back a little to let the fifty men come ahead and cherish the blessings by the treasure of the gods. Soon they were all on their knees, their eyes closed and their prayers raising- from wishing for hot summers to castles atop the hills. They all wanted the freezing misery to end and return back to their homes to the comfort of their family and friends. Luckily for them, their misery was

indeed about to conclude as they had succeeded in accomplishing their mission.

Unluckily for them, the end wasn't what they would have possibly thought of.

Soon the sounds of swords being dragged out of their scabbards echoed through the chamber of ice as the kneeling men opened up their eyes abruptly. But it was all too late by the time they realized what had happened. The few men of the king's royal army swiftly went to business as the cries of those praying resounded off the walls of ice. The sword bearers were as cold and ruthless as their surroundings. And the men in the back were the first ones to face their fury. Most of them had their entire heads cleanly swiped off. The sword bearers moved ahead and took to the ones who desperately tried to protect themselves. Their limbs soon fell down on the cold uneven floor before their hearts were pierced, guts ripped out and lungs punctured by the iron swords of the attackers. The occasional ones who managed to run past them and plead before the king for their lives were met by the mighty warhammer of the commander himself, its single swing enough to bash in their heads, cave in their skulls and scramble their brains. By the time the army men were done, the calm ice chamber which had stood the same way for thousands of years was marred by blood and gore. Bones and dead bodies were spread all around the floor. Blood and flesh coloured its walls red and the voices of the dead still echoed across it, haunting and cursing the wretched place for all of eternity before it got lost into nothingness again.

The king took in a deep breath and closed his eyes as he himself prayed to the palanquin to forgive him for this heinous act. He had craved blood and death throughout his youth, so much so that he had murdered many of his half-brothers to get the throne, built the greatest torture house for his enemies and fought the greatest of battles, killing almost two hundred thousand men to teach his neighbouring kingdom a lesson. Yet after having everything at his disposal and being the greatest emperor of his time, he had lost his appetite for blood.

"Build monuments in the name of these great men", he narrated to his minister. "Celebrate them as war heroes. Shower their families with so much gold that it could last for ten generations. And let their bodies remain at this sacred site, overlooked by the treasure of the gods itself. Move the rest, seal

this place and initiate the proposal we spoke of. Let no man here speak of this place ever again”, he uttered as he walked out leaving the other esteemed men dart their eyes around the gore one more time before nine of them followed the king and walked out.

“This event marks the end of violence under Emperor Ashoka’s reign. A new era of peace is about to begin. Let it be known that this place hides the greatest of treasures in the history of mankind. A treasure greater than entire kingdoms, a treasure blessed by the gods themselves, a treasure hidden so deep that the one who finds it could become the most powerful man in the world”, the minister spoke to an inexpressive commander as they both looked at the great palanquin for last time.

A Little Mystery For The Readers

Let this mystery conclude the journey you've been on. Let this end mark an end to the Secret of the Himalayan Treasure. The author hopes that you've enjoyed the codes, the chases, the thrills, and the riddles. However, he has something else in store for you. In this book, the author has kept a secret code, a puzzle, to ignite the Aarav Kohrrathi in yourself. Are you willing to find it?

*Hidden among the words it lies, lost among the letters it rests,
The greatest secret of the story, the true puzzle that may bring one glory;
Could be found, could be said.
The author is the laziest of the highest order, for naming characters he
dislikes,
But he had you fear the horns, he had you fear their lies;
They came for the twins the first time, came for the sand the next,
And when they showed up before the frigid waters, the code was layed at the
author's behest.
Has the reader been observant, has he been awake all this while?
The true question will be answered hence, or it'll make him rile.*

The author hopes that the reader would be able to solve this little mystery. He/she would find a *three word message* if he/she has been observing the story closely. Those who're able to decipher this challenge can email at the below mentioned id. If the solution is correct, the reader will get a personalised message from the author and a chance to get a character named after themselves in the sequel to this book.

So Hurry!

The author appreciates glorious reviews on Amazon/Goodreads, so he hopes that if the reader has enjoyed the book, he/she would dedicate five minutes of their time to this pivotal task.

Email: divyansh.mundra@gmail.com

Instagram/Twitter: [isherlockd](#)

Follow the Facebook page: [Divyansh Mundra- Author](#) to stay tuned for the updates about the sequel.

*"It's not the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow that matters, it's the journey
behind reaching there that does."
~ Aarav Kohrrathi*