

CHAPTER 7

MISSION

In the morning, Yash was wide awake and shook Prathamesh gently. “Hey, come on, get up fast, Prathamesh.”

Prathamesh, still groggy, blinked at Yash in surprise. “How did you wake up so early?”

With a determined look, Yash grinned. “The plan is ready. It’s time for Mission Srushti.”

Excited, Prathamesh sat up quickly. “Ready to hear, sir. Start barking,” he joked with a laugh.

Yash’s forehead veins twitched with mock irritation, but he quickly calmed himself. “Listen carefully. I have one more lecture with her today. Since we know no one else likes her, the only thing left to find out is her feelings for you. During the lecture, I’ll start a normal conversation and steer it towards you to see what she thinks. You’ll wait below my classroom for us to finish. When we come out, pretend you were just passing by and join us. I’ll give you a signal if her thoughts are positive about you. Then, I’ll make up an excuse to leave, and you’ll be alone with her. That’s when you can ask her out indirectly—maybe suggest going to the cafeteria west of the library. What do you think?”

Prathamesh’s face lit up. “It’s a great plan! But what will you say to her in the lecture?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll handle everything. You just focus on impressing her, my boy,” Yash said with a reassuring smile.

“Sounds good to me,” Prathamesh agreed.

Both of them started getting ready for school, excitement buzzing between them as they prepared for the day ahead.

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The time for the lecture arrived. Srushti waited below the PB building, knowing she and Yash had the same Power Theory class today.

"Srushti!" Yash called out, approaching her with a smile. They walked together to the lecture hall.

During the lecture, the teacher droned on about complex theories, but Yash's mind was elsewhere. He was preoccupied with how to start the conversation and was visibly anxious. Srushti noticed his worried, sweating face.

"I don't think I'm looking too hot today," Srushti whispered with a playful grin. "So why do you look so scared and sweaty?"

Yash perked up at her teasing. "Oh, it's nothing," he began, then seized the opportunity. "Look over there, at that girl on the first bench. What do you think about her?" He pointed subtly.

Srushti glanced over. "Her? You have terrible taste. She's neither hot nor cute."

"Yeah, you're right," Yash replied with a smile, though he was mentally groaning, "If you weren't Prathamesh's crush, I'd show you my real taste."

"By the way, who do you think is the coolest in our group? I mean, I know I'm the coolest, but after me?" Yash asked with a chuckle.

"You? Cool? In your dreams!" Srushti teased. "But seriously, I think Kaustubh. He's charming, cute, and sweet. But he once told me he likes someone from his senior batch around his hostel."

"Oh, so Kaustubh is off-limits. You can't date him," Yash said, trying to hide his relief.

"I wasn't even thinking of dating him," Srushti replied, rolling her eyes.

"But who would you consider dating in our group?" Yash pressed on. "Let me narrow it down: Kaustubh has someone, Sunny is least interested in girls, Vedant and Utkarsh are seniors, and don't consider me. So, that leaves Ram, Levi, Gojo, and Prathamesh."

Srushti thought for a moment. "Ram and I have a brother-sister bond. Levi is not my type either. Gojo is too girly. And Prathamesh..."

"Yes, say yes," Yash urged silently, his heart pounding.

"...is too shy. I barely remember him talking to me. So, I guess none of them."

"Huh? No way, you have to pick one!" Yash insisted, feeling a wave of anxiety.

"Sorry, I won't," Srushti laughed, sticking her tongue out playfully.

Yash smiled, masking his frustration. "Okay, okay. Just curious," he said, mentally plotting his next move.

After a moment, Srushti turned to him with a curious look. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, go ahead," Yash replied, trying to sound casual despite his racing thoughts.

"Was all this to figure out what I think about Prathamesh?" she whispered gently.

Yash's heart skipped a beat. "Huh? No! No, no, no," he stammered, feeling cornered. "It's not like that. I was just asking random questions, no big deal."

"Okay!" she said, smiling knowingly.

Yash's mind was a whirlwind. "Did I mess up? Should I just ask her directly?" he wondered. Gathering his courage, he decided to go for it. "Ahh..."

Before he could speak, Srushti interrupted in a soft, shy voice, "I know you were trying to find out my feeling for Prathamesh. And the answer is yes."

"Umm, what?" Yash blinked, completely taken aback.

Srushti looked down, avoiding eye contact. "I like the way he looks at me with those shy eyes. I know he's a good and kind-hearted person, and I'd like to get to know him better. So, you can tell your friend that I'd be happy to go on a date with him."

"Umm... yeah... okay... thanks" Yash stammered, still processing her words. In his mind, he thought, "Srushti seems like a playful, mischievous girl, but she's really quick-witted too. Lucky you, Prathamesh. You've got a good one." He smiled to himself.

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After the lecture, Yash and Srushti walked down the building together. Prathamesh, seeing them approach, pretended to be casually walking by.

"Hi Yash, hi Srushti," Prathamesh greeted them, trying to sound natural.

Srushti immediately caught on to Prathamesh's presence and what was likely to happen next.

“Hey, Prathamesh,” both Yash and Srushti responded.

Yash subtly gave Prathamesh the agreed-upon signal, indicating everything was set. Prathamesh noticed the signal and felt a surge of excitement. According to the plan, Yash was supposed to make an excuse to leave them alone. “So guys, I must...”

But before Yash could finish his sentence, a heavy hand landed on his shoulder. “Hey, you guys finished with the lecture? Let’s hit the canteen!” It was Ram along with Misa and Kaustubh, and he started dragging Yash towards the canteen, his giant arm wrapped around Yash’s shoulders. Kaustubh and Misa too walked along with them. Srushti and Prathamesh followed behind.

“So, how were the lectures today?” Srushti asked, attempting to start a conversation with Prathamesh as they walked. They exchanged a few light comments and shared some laughs on their way to the canteen. Misa noticed something was up between Prathamesh and srushti.

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After lunch, everyone was cheerful, enjoying the lively chatter. Vedant, Utkarsh, and Mikasa soon left for their lectures, and it was almost time for the first-year classes to begin.

“Ahh... does anyone have a free slot now? I need to visit the school office for some admission-related stuff. Can someone come with me?” Srushti asked, looking around.

“Sorry, I have a lecture now,” Ram replied. “Me too,” Levi added.

“Oh, I guess Prathamesh has a free slot now. He can go with you,” Yash said quickly, seizing the opportunity.

Misa’s eyes twinkled with realization. “I knew something was up,” she thought.

"Or I can go too. I'm free," Sunny offered.

"No, he's not," Yash interjected with a loud, fake laugh. "Sunny, you're coming with me. I have something to show you."

Kaustubh chimed in, "I can go with you, Srushti."

Misa's brow furrowed as she said with feigned irritation, "Kaustubh, you promised to help me with my homework now." She shot a knowing wink at Yash, signaling she was in on the plan.

"So, looks like it's just you and me. Sorry for the trouble, Prathamesh," Srushti said, turning to him.

Prathamesh smiled, feeling a surge of happiness. "It's no trouble at all. Let's go."

As they walked away, Yash shot a telepathic glance at Prathamesh, silently urging, "Ask her out."

Prathamesh gave a subtle nod in response, "I will."

With that, everyone dispersed to their respective tasks. Srushti and Prathamesh headed toward the school office, located just west of the library.

As they walked together, Srushti glanced at Prathamesh and smiled. "Thanks for coming with me."

"No problem," Prathamesh replied, his heart racing. "I'm happy to help."

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"So, where exactly are we going?" Sunny asked Yash as they walked.

"Ahh..." Yash hesitated, a sheepish smile creeping across his face as he tried to think of something.

"You said you were going to show me something, right?" Sunny leaned in, his eyebrows knitted together and veins popping on his forehead. "Come on, tell me the truth. What's really going on?"

Yash's body tensed up under Sunny's intense gaze. "Umm... okay, okay, let me explain." Scratching his forehead nervously, Yash confessed, "Prathamesh likes Srushti, and it was all a plan to set them up for a date."

"What? You mean Prathamesh and Srushti are on a date right now?" Sunny asked, his eyes widening in shock.

"Yeah, I think so," Yash admitted, his voice dropping as he looked away.

"And you dared to make such plans without including me?" Sunny shouted, clearly upset.

"Sorry, sorry!" Yash replied quickly, his voice full of remorse. "I promise to include you in my love plans from now on. Definitely!"

"Ok", Sunny said, instantly calming down, "I forgive you", as they continued walking.

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As they walked, Srushti suddenly paused. "Oops! I forgot, the office is closed today," she said.

Both of them stopped, looking at each other. "Sorry about that," Srushti added.

"Oh, no, it's fine," Prathamesh replied. Summoning his courage, he asked, "By the way, there's a cafeteria just ahead. We could check it out if you don't mind."

Within the school campus, west of the central library, was a quaint cafeteria where students often grabbed coffee during lecture breaks or while skipping classes. Besides coffee, it offered an array of refreshing beverages and drinks like butterbeer and smooth sodas. These drinks, though non-alcoholic, were mood enhancers that students enjoyed.

"Ahh! Good idea. Let's head there," Srushti said, smiling, happy at the prospect of spending more time with Prathamesh.

Prathamesh felt a surge of joy and started thinking about how he could impress her on their first date. With emotions bubbling, they both headed to the café, eager to enjoy each other's company over coffee.