

Badminton Kid 5

Sorrow of Huge Trade Deficit

Vani Venkatesan

Badminton Kid 5

Sorrow of Huge Trade Deficit

Copyright @ October, 2022 by Vani Venkatesan

All rights reserved.

CreateSpace, a DBA of On-Demand Publishing, LLC.

ISBN: 9798357977144

2nd Edition

This book is a work of fiction. All events and characters described are fictitious.

Contents

	About the Author	v
1	<i>Arizona Deadly Chase</i>	1
2	<i>A Gamble of Honor</i>	27
3	<i>An Epic Chase</i>	37
4	<i>Mysterious Change of a Lawmaker</i>	55
5	<i>Rumour of a Great Peril</i>	63
6	<i>Horror in a Mountain</i>	83
7	<i>The Conclusions</i>	103

About the Author

Vani Venkatesan, a computer consultant, is a freelance writer who has published a few books under other pen names. Vani is also the author of *Badminton Kid 1*, *Badminton Kid 2*, *Badminton Kid 3*, and *Badminton Kid 4*.

Chapter 1

Arizona Deadly Chase

Breathe in! Breathe out!

Isaac repeated his breathing pattern 100 times, then held his breath for 5 minutes. When he released his hold on his breath, he smelled the fragrance of wildflowers swaying in air breezes. He felt refreshed and resumed his running.

The sky overhead wore a somber hue, mirroring Isaac's ten-day journey that commenced from the Grand Canyon and meandered through mountains, forests, farmlands, rivers, and countless small towns. Throughout his expedition, he sought shelter in various convenient locations, be it a mountain nook, beneath a sturdy bridge, within a serene city park, or on the outskirts of expansive farmland. He was not just running. He had been working hard to set up more escape routes in the paths he trespassed often.

One fateful day, as he sprinted across a grassy field, an object unexpectedly tripped him. Isaac stooped down to pick up a lightweight plastic ball from the ground. The ball, approximately a foot in diameter, featured a cylindrical hollow running from one pole to the other, with a slender plastic rod passing through it. Two rings were affixed to the ends, preventing the rod from slipping out. Intrigued by its potential usefulness, Isaac grasped one of the rings and set the ball into a swift rota-

tion. It was likely a toy abandoned by children but held promise in Isaac's eyes, prompting him to keep it as he continued his journey.

He looked around. The field was empty and quiet but Isaac couldn't shake off the restlessness plaguing his mind.

They had come before and they would come again. He was sure. However, their relentless pursuit and intimidation would not deter him from his mission. He would never let them know of his destinations.

A particular promise lingered in his mind – he had pledged to teach Helen a single badminton stroke. He must fulfill his promises, he assured himself. Then doubts surfaced in his mind. Was that the real reason for the trip or was teaching Helen merely an excuse he fabricated to see her?

“What does a promise truly mean?” he pondered, shaking his head in an attempt to clear his thoughts. For him, breaking a promise equated to lying and deceiving others.

But how many promises have they broken without the slightest compunction? How many lies have they told? How many new lies have they created to cover up old lies? How many times have they cheated people and covered up their evil deeds? As the questions came up, he answered them himself in his mind: *uncountable!* It was in that moment that he understood the depth of his anger and resentment towards them.

“Never shall I break a promise,” he told himself again.

A few days later, he finally arrived at the Arizona Countryside Table Tennis Club, which had recently relocated. Prior to visiting the club, he had been secretly running in its vicinity for a couple of days. Upon entering, he found the place bustling with a lively atmosphere, filled with players enthusiastically yelling and cheering.

The club now boasted a small bar, where George, the club owner, was diligently serving drinks. With genuine excitement, George warmly greeted Isaac and promptly poured him a refreshing glass of beer. While Isaac indulged in his drink, George reached into a drawer and took out a sealed envelope, which he handed to Isaac across the counter.

“Here’s a letter addressed to you. I actually received it over a week ago!” George exclaimed. Grateful, Isaac accepted the letter and expressed his gratitude. Meanwhile, George leaned in closer, resting his elbows on the table, and whispered, “In the past couple of weeks, we’ve had a wave of new players coming in. They claimed to be avid fans of yours and were eager to know when you would visit the club. I informed them that you arrive at random times, perhaps showing up today or maybe not for months, even a year! Since you don’t have a contact address, they seemed disappointed. Consequently, they’ve been coming here every day, arriving early in the morning and staying late into the evening!”

Isaac nodded and thanked George for the information. He excused himself to use the restroom. Eager to uncover the contents of the envelope, he carefully tore it open. To his surprise, instead of a written message, he discovered a compelling drawing. The sketch depicted a sizable jade stone with a central hole, through which a slender chain was threaded, suspending a man who bore a striking resemblance to Isaac. As he gazed at the illustration, a sense of unease crept over him, accompanied by a tingling sensation of danger and imminent peril.

Reacting swiftly, Isaac tore the letter and envelope into shreds, discarding them by flushing them down the toilet. It became clear to him that the message was a warning, sent by Jade who expressed concern for his safety.

An undercurrent of anger surged within him, fueling his vigilance and caution. Taking measured breaths, he focused on regaining his composure.

Now, Isaac felt a renewed sense of preparedness. He had deliberately chosen the specific date and time for his visit to the club, ensuring that if any untoward incident occurred, he would be ready to defend himself and offend as well.

As usual, he played a couple of exhibition matches. George, always supportive, took videos of his games and promptly shared them on the Internet. This could help him hide his Tatesl games and reduce the risk of being censored. While platforms like YouTube were not directly controlled by Strong Nation, their

formidable online army posed a significant threat. When they discovered a video that hurts their Motherland, they would overwhelm the company with requests for its removal.

After concluding his matches, Isaac leaned against the counter, engaging in casual conversation with George. He remarked, "It's quite hot today, isn't it?"

George nodded, a smile adorning his face. "The weather forecast mentioned a mere 5% chance of a thunderstorm this afternoon."

Isaac responded with a discerning gaze. "Through my observations, I would say there's a 95% likelihood of a thunderstorm."

As they chatted and savored their beers, Isaac scrutinized all the players present, eventually identifying seven individuals who seemed suspicious and potentially affiliated with Strong Nation as spies. He remained at the club for another hour before finally deciding to leave, wary of the potential dangers that lurked in the shadows.

After Isaac exited the club and made his way across the street, eight men emerged from the club's entrance. Their piercing gazes fixed upon Isaac from the other side of the highway. One of the men took charge, barking orders, "Fei, pin him down!"

"Yes, Leader!" responded Fei, a man who appeared frail and timid. His thin frame, pale complexion, and anxious eyes betrayed an aura of fear and uncertainty – a stark contrast to one associated with violence and bloodshed. Isaac had failed to identify him as a spy within the club.

Despite his fragile appearance, Fei swiftly crossed the highway, clutching a baseball bat. Isaac, sensing imminent danger, wasted no time and decisively turned on his heels, breaking into a sprint. He passed a nearby cattle farm until he reached a faint and scarcely traveled trail leading southward through a vast, infertile plain.

The morning sun shone brightly, casting not a single cloud across the summer sky. Yet, an indescribable weight seemed to hang in the air, causing the once vibrant grass to pale. He

hardly saw any tall plantations, only thickets, and brambles scattered around. To him, a tinge of melancholy lay upon the land that bore his fugitive life. The trail would soon split, veering southeast towards a river lined with high banks. Further east, green mountains stood proudly, their peaks cloaked in dense forests.

As Isaac ventured further, the main trail led him south to a vast expanse of barren land, sparsely inhabited and desolate. For two days, he diligently explored the area, meticulously studying its environment. With a keen eye, he scanned the sky, observing the scant clouds on the horizon. Despite the impending heat of yet another day, a small, dark cloud emerged in the eastern sky. Drawing upon the wisdom passed down by Native Indians and his companions in the Grand Canyon, he possessed the skill to predict weather patterns based on environmental cues and shifts.

Mastering the field, he had honed his expertise in deciphering the shapes and distribution of clouds, detecting subtle changes in animal behavior, and noting the delicate transformations in flowers and tree leaves. Through these observations, he could accurately forecast the approach of storms. When he foretold rain, rain arrived, and when he predicted sunshine, the radiant sun graced the sky. However, he was well aware that weather predictions were never infallible.

There were moments when the heavens seemed to taunt him, defying his predictions and leaving him deceived and betrayed. If his forecast proved wrong this time, he would have to rely on his riskier plan B. In the depths of his mind, he silently offered a prayer, seeking guidance and protection.

Without hesitation, he raced along the trail, and to his relief, six agents, including Fei, followed in pursuit. Two of them returned to the club. They would kill him when no one else could see the scene.

Isaac sped up and ran a lot faster than normal. The agents were agitated and chased after. Gradually, one by one, they fell behind, unable to match his incredible speed. However, to Isaac's astonishment, Fei proved to be a worthy adversary,

trailing closely behind, merely twenty paces away. Feeling the pressure mounting, Isaac's discomfort grew, his breath coming in labored gasps. Sensing an opportune moment, he made a sudden decision. With a burst of determination, he abruptly halted his sprint and pivoted, facing his relentless pursuer.

Fei, mirroring Isaac's actions, swiftly came to a stop, assuming a defensive posture. He squatted down, clutching an object tightly within his fist, while positioning the bat menacingly over his shoulder. Isaac, undeterred by the potential threat, charged forward, intent on seizing control of the situation.

In a split second, Fei relinquished his grip on the bat, his body arching backward like a seasoned pitcher. As his body propelled forward, he unleashed the object he held, hurtling it towards Isaac with uncanny precision. Reacting with swift reflexes, Isaac instinctively dropped to a low crouch, narrowly evading the projectile. The rogue stone whizzed past him, creating a sharp cracking sound as it sliced through the air, even managing to ruffle his hair with its forceful passage.

Amazement washed over Isaac, recognizing the remarkable power exhibited by his slender pursuer. With utmost caution, he straightened himself, aware of the dangers that still surrounded him. To his surprise, Fei had seized the opportunity to snatch up the bat, swiftly turning on his heels, and making his escape.

It became apparent that Fei had no intention of engaging Isaac in solitary combat. His primary objective lay in disrupting and slowing Isaac's progress, allowing his cohorts to converge and ensnare him in their clutches.

Isaac chuckled as he resumed his frantic sprint, yet Fei persisted in his pursuit. Concern gnawed at Isaac's mind, fearing that Fei might unleash a barrage of stones aimed at his vulnerable back, further impeding his progress. The unsettling thought of encountering one or two additional agents, triggering a potential altercation, loomed ominously. Fully aware of their formidable nature – dangerous, highly trained, and possessing a sinister level of cunning – Isaac understood the grave

peril that awaited him. Their malicious intent could result in rendering him unconscious, disposing of his body in a river to mask the evidence of their treacherous act, should it ever be discovered.

While Isaac maintained confidence in his ability to overcome any one of them in a one-on-one duel, the odds became less favorable when facing two adversaries simultaneously. Even so, he believed he could still retain an advantage, at the very least managing to elude their clutches. However, the prospect of three assailants launching a coordinated assault threatened to test the limits of his defensive capabilities. If fate thrust him into the midst of eight encircling agents, his chances of escape would dwindle to naught. He grasped the urgency of foiling their scheme before undertaking any other course of action.

Pressing onward, Isaac surged ahead, veering onto an obscured, meandering trail that lay to the east. Before long, he diverged once more, venturing onto a faint, crooked path. Towering weeds, reaching waist-high, lined both sides, a testament to its neglect. Undeterred, Isaac quickened his pace, propelling himself forward with an unparalleled speed, determined to create as much distance as possible.

As Fei persistently chased behind, Isaac's heart pounded in his chest. The sun ascended, casting its gentle morning glow upon the land, while an eerie stillness permeated the air.

Suddenly, amidst the intense pursuit, Fei vanished from sight. A piercing scream, fraught with terror, sliced through the air, causing all the agents to shudder in momentary hesitation. As Fei reemerged from the midst of the overgrown weeds, his face contorted in pain, his hands and visage marked by bleeding wounds. Though the injury inflicted agony, it was not life-threatening. In his desperate chase, Fei had stumbled into a shallow trench, inadvertently pressing against the prickly embrace of cacti. Grateful to have avoided encounters with sharp blades or venomous serpents, Fei's relief mingled with his physical distress.

Isaac had discovered this trench during his earlier reconnaissance of the landscape before approaching the clandestine

club. Strategically, he had inserted a dried tree branch into the ground near the trail, resembling a withered tree. This makeshift marker served as his guiding beacon, aiding him in effortlessly vaulting over the treacherous trench. Furthermore, he had carefully uprooted several cacti from another region and planted them within the trench. Although not lethal, these spiky sentinels would compromise the hunting prowess of any predator. His fight against them had become a perpetual battle of wits.

As Fei staggered out of the trench, tormented by pain, Isaac had distanced himself significantly, leaving Fei behind both physically and mentally. His injuries had weakened his capacity to pose any further threat. Isaac surmised that even without the wounds, Fei's speed could only be sustained for a short distance, lacking endurance. With this newfound knowledge of their capabilities, Isaac felt a surge of confidence, realizing he could easily outpace them and evade capture.

Maintaining composure, Isaac directed his gaze toward the eastern horizon, where the dark cloud he had anticipated had swelled in size, aligning with his expectations. Satisfied with this confirmation, he then shifted his attention back to the approaching swarm of relentless pursuers, a merciless force relentlessly closing in on him.

A cold, bitter smile curled on Isaac's lips, his brows furrowing as he delved into deep contemplation. His face grew somber, reflecting the gravity of the situation. The kidnappings, murders, and constant threats unleashed by this ruthless group had cast a pall of sorrow, instilling fear among countless dissidents. Fury at their menace, he was deeply agitated and his eyes flickered with a glint of killing. However, he would afford them a choice: if they renounced their mission, they would be granted life, but if they persisted, the depths of hell would be their inevitable destination.

Isaac came to a halt, standing his ground as he quenched his thirst and replenished his energy, patiently awaiting the imminent arrival of his pursuers. The tables were about to turn. The prey would become the predator, and the predators, the helpless

prey.

A chilling gust of wind swept through the surroundings, adding an eerie atmosphere to the unfolding scene.

The agents closed in, drawing nearer, now only a mere hundred paces away. Fei, along with a few others, mirrored the fear – stricken demeanor of scared animals, their eyes wide with terror and dread. Approaching with caution, they dared not venture too far ahead of their companions. Isaac resumed his sprint, expertly maintaining a consistent distance between them.

After another grueling hour of relentless running, they reached an area adorned with verdant hues, marked by the emergence of towering, lush trees. Isaac pressed on, steadfast in his pace, delving deeper into the heart of the mountain. Patiently biding his time, he gradually slowed down, allowing his pursuers to narrow the gap until they trailed merely twenty paces behind him.

At that critical moment, a burbling sound reached their ears, accompanied by the sight of Isaac descending into a river that instilled a sense of foreboding. The river cascaded into a formidable shaft – a colossal chasm, its walls glistening with hues of brown, as swift currents surged through its course. However, the water proved to be deceptively shallow.

Isaac navigated downstream clumsily, feigning difficulty in maintaining his balance within the water's embrace. Progressing at a languid pace, he purposefully gave the impression of vulnerability, using it as a strategic maneuver to deceive his pursuers.

As no one wanted to appear timid, the agents acted swiftly, without pausing to consider the consequences, and plunged into the river, converging upon Isaac, who appeared tantalizingly close and within their grasp. The riverbed, strewn with a mixture of small and large stones, forced them to navigate the water at a level ranging from knee to waist height.

As they continued treading downstream, the river's banks gradually rose, comprised of solid rocks intricately carved by the relentless flow of water, forming imposing walls along its

course. With no alternative route available, Isaac seemed destined to succumb to their nefarious intentions within this treacherous environment – a perfect setting to orchestrate the demise of a dissident, disguising his fate as an unfortunate accident due to drowning.

Isaac maintained a precarious lead of only about ten paces ahead of them, while the agents were overcome with a feral instinct, intoxicated by their anticipation of the imminent victory. Little did they know that their jubilation was misplaced, for they were completely deceived.

Unbeknownst to them, Isaac had concealed his true prowess in traversing such terrain, cunningly leading them onto the path of their own demise – a pathway to hell they unknowingly embarked upon.

The agents, lacking proper training in the art of treading, remained oblivious to the intricacies of navigating a stony riverbed effectively and efficiently. Little did they realize that expert treading was akin to a state of the art skill. It demanded a keen understanding of when to exert greater pressure or apply a gentle touch to each stone, contingent upon its size and shape. The ability to maintain balance with precision was paramount, much like the delicate act of juggling. Just as a trained individual could seamlessly juggle multiple balls, an untrained person would inevitably fumble and drop them.

Isaac, on the other hand, was meticulously prepared for this moment. He had dedicated ample time to practicing his treading skills, unearthing hidden secrets concealed within the waterbed itself.

From a young age, Isaac had been captivated by the enigmatic wonders of nature. He recognized that amidst its mysteries, an underlying order prevailed – a creative process governed by the revered Fibonacci sequence. This sequence entailed adding the preceding number to the one before it, commencing with 0 and 1, to derive the subsequent number in the sequence. Remarkably, this sequence governed the growth patterns of all living plants. From the arrangement of leaves along a stem to the spiraling of branches around it, nature adhered

to the Fibonacci sequence, ensuring optimal access to sunlight and rain. When observed from above, the leaves or branches emanating from the stem spiraled in such a manner that the number of leaves between any two directly above one another and the number of spirals formed around the stem were both Fibonacci numbers. This fascinating sequence also manifested in the formation of pine cones, sunflowers, pineapples, cacti, and even the rings within a tree trunk.

Through his astute observations, Isaac made a fortuitous discovery. The sizes and spacing of the stones within this particular riverbed roughly adhered to the Fibonacci sequence. Leveraging this knowledge, he devised a step pattern he aptly named Fibonacci Steps to navigate the river. Employing this calculated approach, he cleaved through the water with minimal effort, akin to the graceful sway of a leaf in the wind.

Initially, Isaac adopted a deliberate pace, ensuring that the agents could keep up with him. He skillfully feigned moments of imbalance, causing himself to fall into the water. This ruse elicited sharp cries of alarm, prompting a couple of agents to lunge forward in an attempt to catch him. Yet, their desperate efforts consistently fell short, resulting in their own loss of balance and subsequent immersion in the water.

The chase seemed unending, an incessant cycle of pursuit and evasion.

Consumed by their fixation on capturing Isaac, the agents remained oblivious to the potential consequences of their actions – consequences that could prove both deplorable and irreparable. Lost in their relentless pursuit, they failed to acknowledge their own limitations, their strength gradually waning without their awareness. As an hour of arduous treading elapsed, some of the pursuers began to awaken to the harsh reality of their own exhaustion.

Seizing the opportune moment, Isaac abruptly turned around to face the agents, treading backward and discovering that they were now situated in the heart of a river gorge. The closest pursuer was a mere few paces away, while the rearmost agent trailed behind at a distance of approximately 20 paces. Their

wariness had intensified, acutely aware that any misstep could plunge them into dire peril, teetering on the brink of calamity.

The gap between the prey and the predators grew increasingly narrow, each step bringing them closer to their quarry. Then, in a sudden burst of audacity, the foremost pursuer lunged forward, seizing Isaac by the shoulder.

Isaac stood there motionless, a twisted smile curling on his lips.

A cry of triumph erupted from the agents, their confidence momentarily restored. Yet, their triumph was short-lived. As the two nearest pursuers lunged forward to join their comrade, they lost their footing on the treacherous riverbed, plunging into the water with startled yelps.

The grabber, recognizing the futility of attacking Isaac alone, swiftly released his grip, relinquishing his hold on the elusive dissident. The agents realized that their only chance of subduing him was through a coordinated assault, ensnaring him and striking simultaneously.

But their precautions were superfluous. There would be no fighting, nor any affray. Instead, they would meet their own demise, descending into the depths of their self-created hell.

Before long, their pace slowed even further.

When Isaac turned back to tread forward, a faint glimmer caught his eye – a tiny object drifting downstream in the river. Instinctively, he reached for his binoculars, retrieving them from his backpack and peering through the lenses to observe the unfolding scene.

Through the magnified view, he discerned two figures laboriously treading against the current in the distant reaches of the gorge. Recognition sparked within him – they were the same men he had seen at the club before his escape. They had likely been called and driven to a point where they could enter the river, following in pursuit.

As Isaac continued his observation, he noticed remnants of dirt and dried branches being carried downstream by the rushing waters. Glancing skyward, his eyes met the sight of a brooding dark cloud looming over the upstream region. Rain

must have already showered that area for some time, contributing to the increased flow of the river.

Quickly, he secured the binoculars around his neck and retrieved a pair of diving glasses from his backpack. With swift efficiency, he enveloped the backpack in a protective plastic cover, safeguarding its contents from the elements.

Now equipped and guided by the wisdom of the Fibonacci Steps, Isaac leaped from one stone to another within the riverbed, exhibiting remarkable agility and speed. With each bound, he distanced himself further from the trailing agents, leaving them in his wake as he surged ahead towards his ultimate escape.

The agents were suddenly thrilled as they watched in awe of his mobility and rapid advancement. One agent cried out, "Cunning fiend!"

Isaac skillfully clung onto two clefts on the riverbank, effortlessly hoisting himself onto a large rock. With a swift motion, he tossed his backpack onto a protruding ledge before putting on his glasses and returning to the water. He listened intently, catching faint rumblings of thunder. The once-blue sky had turned a somber shade of gray.

The agents drew closer once again.

Isaac quickened his pace, determined to forge ahead. After approximately another 20 minutes of relentless treading, dark clouds gathered in the sky, accompanied by increasingly loud peals of thunder. The sun vanished, leaving behind an overcast and gloomy atmosphere, engulfing the entire surroundings in shades of gray.

The pursuers engaged in a heated debate regarding the possibility of abandoning their mission. Meanwhile, Isaac skillfully orchestrated another staged fall, allowing them to draw closer. He feigned injury, enticing them to persist, but his unease grew, not because he feared the agents, but because he understood the immense power of nature.

Before long, the sky darkened, and a sharp wind swept through the riverbank, sending dried leaves and twigs swirling into the air. Suddenly, a brilliant white flash illuminated the entire sky, casting a crimson hue upon the lower clouds before striking

the forest below. Flares of red flames erupted from the hills, accompanied by an earth-shattering thunderous roar that reverberated through the sky and echoed across the mountains. In a matter of moments, the sky erupted with flickering lightning bolts, striking the distant mountain trees. Roaring thunders reverberated from all directions as thick dark clouds split asunder and drifted across the entire expanse of the sky. The wind whistled sharply down the river, causing birds along the banks to take flight in alarm. The sudden shift in weather sent tremors through all who pursued him. Isaac had anticipated this moment and proceeded cautiously, his steps measured.

Soon, a deluge of heavy rain cascaded down like a mighty waterfall. It was at this point that Isaac realized he no longer needed to feign unskillful treading. He attempted to quicken his pace, but the howling wind and relentless rain impeded his movements, assaulting his face and body. A moment later, an immense amount of water surged into the river, carrying with it dry branches and debris. The river swelled and thundered, its waters rising above Isaac's waist. The once gentle ripple had transformed into an unstoppable torrent, obliterating anything in its path. From behind, an agent shouted urgently, "Retreat! Retreat immediately, or face dire consequences!" However, it might have been too late. The overpowering force made it nearly impossible for anyone to swim against the current. Another cry echoed, "Lock arms! Lock arms!"

Curiosity compelled Isaac to steal a glimpse at the source of the commotion. To his surprise, he saw a group of individuals forming a curved chain in the midst of the raging river, their arms locked together while their feet braced against submerged rocks. The river raged on, somber and terrifying, its currents frothing and roaring like a fiery serpent, hungry to consume anything in its path, carrying with it an air of sorrow and hatred.

The relentless current grew increasingly turbulent, catching him off guard as chaotic waves crashed upon him, forcefully knocking him down. Reacting swiftly, he plunged into the water, finding solace in the diminished force pressing against his body. Equipped with his diving goggles, he bravely forged

ahead, acutely aware of the violent current that threatened to hurl him into treacherous rocks at any moment.

He continued swimming for what felt like an eternity before finally surfacing to replenish his lungs with a much-needed breath. To his dismay, the water level had risen, now reaching his chest, and the relentless pressure bore down upon him like never before. The river banks seemed to tremble under the unyielding onslaught of the torrent, which ceaselessly swelled higher and higher, as if poised to engulf everything in its path.

A sudden, chilling cry pierced through the howling wind and rain. The human chain formed by the agents had shattered, and one of their own was plunging helplessly into the water, desperately flailing his arms in a futile attempt to cling to safety. It was a haunting spectacle, unlike anything Isaac had ever witnessed. Despite the struggle, the unfortunate pursuer could not avert his impending fate. With a sickening thud, his head collided with a jutting rock, dizziness consuming him before the raging water swallowed him whole. Such was a dreadful end to a relentless pursuer who did not have a chance to confess what he did! The remaining agents, still valiantly fighting against the powerful current, would inevitably meet the same fate. Their faces turned deathly pale, their expressions etched with a chilling blend of horror and revulsion.

Undeterred, Isaac dove beneath the tumultuous surface, propelling himself forward with determined strokes. Emerging once more to draw breath, he beheld a scene of profound reckoning – every pursuer had succumbed to the water’s grasp, their frantic struggles silenced by the merciless currents. Soon, they would be swallowed by the depths.

The two agents positioned downstream were destined to meet the same dire fate, a fitting conclusion to their nefarious deeds. In his heart, he yearned for their souls to find eternal peace, for their demise would alleviate the burden pressing upon the dissenters of Strong Nation in this land. Lives, a substantial number at that, would be spared from the clutches of oppression. And so, he prayed.

Yet, the tempest erupted with unabated fury, unveiling a

formidable new adversary. His relentless pursuers were no more, but now he faced an even greater foe - the violent storm itself. Fear gripped him tightly, his worries festering as doubts gnawed at his resolve. Uncertainty loomed, threatening to derail his journey to the elusive destination that beckoned him onward.

He had to harness his strength and prepare for the impending challenge, as the threat of drowning loomed ominously over him.

Without warning, an unseen current yanked him downward, plunging him into the swirling waters. Despite his profound respect for the might of nature, the forceful surge of the flood caught him off guard, jolting him with its relentless power. Steadying himself, he proceeded cautiously, navigating the treacherous currents. Vigilant to avoid being propelled into unforgiving rocks that could knock him unconscious or inflict grave injuries, he adapted his swimming technique, at times resorting to a reverse butterfly stroke, flapping his arms to counteract the forceful thrust of the current.

Determined, he pressed onward, alternating between submerging himself beneath the surface and emerging to replenish his oxygen supply. After countless arduous cycles, he arrived at a waterfall cascading from a jutting boulder atop the riverbank. Exhaustion consumed him, his realization dawning that continuing further would be a formidable challenge. Seeking respite, he found himself perched precariously upon a grotesque cluster of rocks on the riverbed, his struggle to maintain balance a testament to his weary state. Legs trembling, he confronted the constant threat of being swept away by the violent current. With each heavy and precarious step, he inched closer to the daunting waterfall, his balance teetering perilously, nearly succumbing to its powerful pull several times.

He braved the formidable challenge of crossing the now towering and intensified waterfall, driven by his determination to reach the rocks beyond. However, the cascading water mercilessly pounded him with its violent force, sending him crashing down. Helpless against the unyielding current, it swiftly

swept him downstream, away from the roaring waterfall.

Summoning the last reserves of his strength, he mustered a dive and swam against the relentless current, but progress was agonizingly slow, akin to a snail's pace. Exhaustion permeated his being, leaving him unable to push forward. Just as hope seemed to wane, a glimmer of salvation appeared before his eyes. A dark line etched on the riverbed. Holding his breath, he submerged and reached out, seizing the line, a vine securely fastened to an underwater rock. Emerging for a breath, he clung to the vine, allowing it to guide him closer to the roaring waterfall.

With determined dives and meticulous searches, he uncovered yet another hidden vine concealed beneath the waterfall's torrent. This second vine, affixed to a rock at the apex of the cascade, became his lifeline. Pulling himself along the vine, he emerged from the water's depths behind the curtain of the waterfall, gasping for air, his body yearning to restore its vigor.

The vines served as but a couple of the many escape tools he had strategically prepared. Fortunate indeed, for without them, he would have succumbed to the watery depths. After regaining some semblance of strength, he exerted his might, pulling the vine while leveraging his feet against the cliff face. He propelled himself upward and sideways in a convulsive leap, his hand still firmly clutching the lifeline. With an arduous ascent, he reached a protruding rock, where he crouched, temporarily shielded from the ceaseless bombardment of water droplets.

Though uncomfortable and chilled by the piercing winds, his relief at surviving the flood overwhelmed any discomfort. Remarkably, he had even managed to retain his binoculars, which dangled around his neck throughout the perilous ordeal. He waited, patient yet anxious, gripping the vine with unwavering determination.

As the downpour gradually subsided in intensity, he cautiously raised his gaze, scanning the surroundings. His eyes fixated on a narrow crevice nestled between two towering rock formations above him. Within that crevice lay a small rocky grotto, a hidden sanctuary partially shaped by natural erosion

and partially crafted by his own hand, weeks prior. Its entrance concealed by a carefully placed stone, it safeguarded a small backpack sealed within a protective plastic bag, two sturdy staffs, and a few coils of vines, items meticulously prepared for emergent situations. The backpack contained precious supplies, a handful of water bottles and several small bags of nourishing nuts.

The tempest had proven to be a mixed blessing, sparing him the laborious effort of executing Plan B, an elaborate scheme to lure his pursuers to exhaustion before methodically drowning them, one by one. Having nourished himself and allowed for a brief respite, he felt rejuvenated. Utilizing the vines as his aid, he resumed his ascent, scaling the sheer cliff face with calculated caution until he reached the summit, where a normally gentle stream now surged into a rapid torrent. Skillfully navigating from one stone to another, he reached the safety of the shore, standing tall upon a sturdy boulder.

From his elevated vantage point, he surveyed the once tumultuous riverbed through his trusty binoculars, only to find a disheartening absence – all pursuers had vanished. The water had considerably calmed, its turbulence subdued. As he was about to set aside the binoculars, a sight caught Isaac's attention. A man, mere steps away on the opposite side of the river, tightly clutched a timber ensnared between two jutting rocks. Zooming in, he was astounded to discover that the man was none other than Fei, his visage drained of color, etched with terror and exhaustion.

Isaac was merciful.

Guided by his parents' teachings, he understood that true courage lay not in taking a life but in sparing one. Although the desire to save Fei swelled within him, he recognized his own exhaustion. Entering the river, traversing the treacherous current, and rescuing Fei would be a formidable feat, even with the rain having ceased, as the river's rage remained undiminished.

Grasping a stone firmly, he hurled it forcefully toward Fei, intending to find out how far away Fei was. However, the stone

fell far from its target, plunging into the middle of the river.

Isaac shook his head, witnessing Fei's despair intensify, his pallid face contorting with despair. He knew that Fei's energy was rapidly waning, and at any moment, he could be swept away by the relentless current. Isaac stood there, lost in thought, searching for a solution to this desperate predicament.

Then, a leaf caught his eye as it gracefully drifted through the air, eventually settling upon the ground. In that moment, a spark ignited within Isaac's mind. He recalled the Magnus effect his father had taught him – an understanding that a spinning object would drift when in motion. This principle had often served him well in sports games, deceiving his opponents.

Without hesitation, he sprinted toward a towering tree, retrieving a ball he had found in the grass field days before and concealed beneath the tree's trunk for emergencies. Returning to the rock where he stood, he fastened two rings to the ends of the long vines he had earlier concealed beneath the same tree trunk. Holding one ring with his left hand, he deftly spun the ball backward with his right hand, creating a rapid rotation before releasing it over the cliff's edge. As the ball descended, the turbulence generated by its swift spin propelled it across the river's expanse, resembling a falling leaf carried away by the autumn wind. Finally, it landed perilously close to Fei.

Isaac's voice thundered across the river, "Seize the ball!" Fei seemed to comprehend the urgency of the situation. Despite his weakened state, he maneuvered through the water, unsteady yet determined, until he managed to grasp the ball. Clutching it tightly, he pressed his body against the rock, seeking stability. Meanwhile, Isaac secured the remaining lengths of vine around a sturdy tree, carefully gathering the vines as he descended toward the river. As Isaac continued his descent, Fei, half-floating and half-wading, was gradually drawn toward him.

When Fei was within reach, Isaac seized his shoulder, summoning immense effort to anxiously pull him closer, still gripping the ball. Together, they made their way to a cluster of protruding rocks, offering a temporary sanctuary.

Fei teetered on the verge of losing consciousness.

Unlocking Fei's arms from the ball, Isaac carefully positioned him, his head dangling downward on the jagged stone pinnacles. Fei gasped for breath, his airways choked with water and particles of dirt.

Isaac tenderly rubbed Fei's vulnerable nape and struck his back repeatedly, applying pressure until water and dirt were expelled, accompanied by violent coughing. When the coughing subsided, consciousness returned to Fei. Slowly turning his body around, he met Isaac's gaze and comprehended the gravity of the situation. Kneeling on the rocks, his knees and hands pressed against their uneven surface, Fei bowed down before Isaac, gratitude pouring from his lips. "Good heart! Good heart! A thousand thanks, millions of thanks, billions of thanks for not ending my life but saving it!"

Isaac gestured for Fei to sit upon the rocks. "Take these," he said, tossing a staff, a bottle of water, and a few bags of nuts that he had kept hidden within the crevice. Fei caught the items skillfully, his gaze filled with bewilderment as he observed Isaac.

"I will remember all of this," Fei declared, unscrewing the cap of the water bottle and taking a grateful sip.

Isaac's voice turned cold as ice. "Tell me, without reservation, everything you know about this mission. Tell me the truth, the whole truth, and I will keep our meeting a secret. But beware, if you hold anything back, I have a thousand ways to send you to hell. We have spies within your organization."

Fei trembled, his fear evident as he nodded in agreement. "The failure of our last attempt to kidnap you created chaos within our unit. We rarely encounter such setbacks. Usually, one or two agents are enough to capture the targets, coercing them to return to the Motherland or commit suicide, and most victims comply. However, your case was unique. In the previous operation, we deployed a highly active team under the command of Donald, an exceptionally capable specialist. Unfortunately, they failed miserably."

Isaac interjected, "Did all the agents, except for Donald,

who climbed the cliff, fall to their deaths?”

Fei shook his head. “No, although Donald was rough and arrogant, he was also cautious and scared of you. He remained inactive for a while, waiting for the opportune moment. Eventually, he resolved to eliminate you once and for all. He even requested permission to carry a gun, promising that he would only use it as a threat and never directly shoot you. However, his request was unequivocally denied. If any evidence were found linking us to the assassination of a dissident on American soil, the consequences would sever our ties with the United States. Such a risk, even with our influential contacts on Wall Street, is not worth disposing of a single dissident. His supervisor rejected his request, berating him as a useless agent but assuring him of additional operatives for the mission.”

Fei mused. Amidst a hushed atmosphere, Fei contemplated for a moment before resuming his account. “There is a chilling rumor that haunts the corridors of our organization,” he began. “Whispers of a clandestine warning delivered to our supervisor by an enigmatic organization, shrouded in mystery and operating in the shadows.”

He continued, his voice tinged with unease. “Our supervisor, known for his opulent lifestyle, possesses a state-of-the-art, customized high-tech car. This remarkable vehicle boasts an array of advanced features, including autonomous capabilities. On one occasion, as he and his comrades jovially conversed, mocking the perceived foolishness of Americans, the unimaginable occurred. The car suddenly veered off its intended path, careening into an unfamiliar cross street. In a horrifying realization, it became clear that the vehicle had fallen victim to a malicious hack, manipulated by an unknown perpetrator who seized remote control.”

A sense of terror filled the air as Fei described the harrowing experience. “Inside the car, panic ensued. Frantically, someone struck the windows, desperate to shatter the glass and escape the encroaching danger. But their efforts were in vain. With an abrupt surge of acceleration that sent chills down their spines, the car thwarted any possibility of escape. Eventually, it came

to a halt near a precipice, perched perilously atop a cliff, its edge plunging hundreds of feet below.”

Fei paused, the weight of the situation palpable. “It was at this moment of dread that a haunting image materialized on the car’s digital panel – an ominous depiction of firearms concealed beneath a prominent cross, surrounded by thumbnail images of the terrified passengers within. A collective realization dawned upon them, instilling a bone-chilling understanding of their predicament.

The images persisted for a fleeting moment, etching themselves into the minds of those trapped within the vehicle, before dissipating into the digital abyss. With their emotions teetering between relief and lingering apprehension, they slowly regained control of the car, but the experience left an indelible mark on their souls.”

Fei took a breath, his voice laden with the gravity of the situation. “Ever since that fateful day, our supervisor has exercised caution, refraining from pushing dissidents too forcefully and implementing strict measures to prohibit the use of firearms within our borders. It is a chilling reminder of the power that exists beyond our comprehension, a force capable of infiltrating the very fabric of our existence.”

Isaac asked, “Who hacked the car?”

Fei’s response carried a tinge of uncertainty. “To this day, the identity of the hacker remains an enigma, shrouded in a veil of secrecy. We have ventured into the realm of speculation, but the truth eludes us, leaving us with nothing but conjecture. Some suggest that the act was perpetrated by hidden opposition forces lurking within our own party, a notion that reveals the depths of our fierce and clandestine internal struggle, a battle veiled from the prying eyes of outsiders.”

He paused, allowing the weight of their predicament to settle. “Another theory, though met with skepticism by many, implicates the American Government. Yet, doubts cloud this claim, casting shadows of uncertainty upon its credibility.”

Fei’s voice lowered, his words taking on a hint of intrigue. “The third theory, the most exhilarating and yet the most un-

settling, speaks of an invisible organization, an elusive entity that has been silently observing our every move. It resides in the shadows, concealing its existence with such expertise that even our most seasoned agents cannot ascertain its reality. Its motive and purpose remain hidden, casting a chilling aura over our operations.”

Isaac frowned, his contemplative silence speaking volumes. After a moment, he gestured for Fei to continue, his desire for more information evident in his eyes.

“Donald took special precautions in the plan to kidnap you,” Fei said. “A select group of agents set up a concealed safety net while others embarked on the treacherous ascent of the cliff. From your vantage point, you might not have been aware of their presence, as they never anticipated needing to employ such measures. However, it proved to be a lifesaving arrangement for some agents who found themselves in freefall. Regrettably, about half of them perished, and a few suffered severe injuries.”

Fei’s voice carried a hint of skepticism as he continued. “During a briefing, Donald reported that you unleashed a sudden barrage of pipe bombs upon the agents as they closed in on your position, leading to their chaotic retreat. While such a tale strains credulity among our ranks, everyone maintains the pretense that it is the truth, perpetuating the narrative to others. Additionally, Donald had a contingency plan – Plan B. It involved Jade feigning betrayal in order to gain proximity to you. According to Jade’s account, she fearlessly scaled the beetle rock and skillfully befriended you, gradually earning your trust.”

As the scene unfolded in Fei’s mind, he hesitated for a moment. “Nightfall arrived, and there came a moment when you stood together, gazing at the horizon. Jade, seizing what seemed like the opportune moment, prepared to push you off the rock. However, in that very instant, a helicopter materialized in the sky, causing her to hesitate. Drawing closer, the helicopter revealed its affiliation. Jade claimed it was dispatched by the CIA. It descended, dropping two ropes that whisked both of

you away to a grassy expanse within a pine forest, the dim glow of the full moon providing ethereal illumination. Once the helicopter departed, Jade described how you embraced her, but...”

Fei’s words trailed off, his voice hesitant as he continued. “And then, unexpectedly, you seized her. She broke into sobs, appearing utterly pitiable, and professed that she had sacrificed everything for the Motherland. Our leader consoled her, assuring her that she would be duly compensated for her sacrifice.”

A pause filled the air, and Fei couldn’t help but interject, “It was indeed a bizarre story, one that stretches the limits of plausibility.”

Fei leaned in closer, his voice barely above a whisper. “I must confide in you that a survivor, a close friend of mine who witnessed the incident, revealed a different version of events involving Jade. According to him, it was you who extended a lifeline, a rope, when Jade found herself perilously falling off the cliff’s edge. He steadfastly refused to believe anything she said, firmly asserting that you would never take advantage of a vulnerable situation to harm a woman.”

He paused for a moment, contemplating the delicate nature of their situation. “Much like others in our unit, I chose not to challenge Jade’s story, knowing all too well that there may come a time when I, too, must weave tales to conceal my own failures.”

Isaac chuckled, breaking the tension. “Ah, Jade, always the consummate actress,” he remarked with a touch of amusement. His expression turned somber as he continued, his tone growing more serious. “I have come to believe that your countrymen possess a remarkable skill for fabricating lies in order to shield themselves from the repercussions of engineering mishaps. No engineer involved in such projects would willingly expose the faults, as doing so might lay bare their own errors in the future. And someday, a seemingly insignificant natural anomaly, like a heavy rain, could be the catalyst for a devastating disaster.”

With a sigh, Isaac shook his head, as if attempting to dislodge the haunting images of potential calamities that swirled

within his mind.

He frowned, his curiosity piqued, and he sought a deeper understanding of their mindsets.

“How did you know that I would come to the club?” he inquired, hoping to unravel the mystery.

Fei’s response was candid and straightforward. “To be honest, we didn’t know for certain. We visited the town several times, spending a few days at the club each visit. Our hope was that eventually, you would make an appearance, and fortunately, you did.”

Isaac’s next question delved into the realm of concern and potential danger. “During the pursuit, were you worried that I might throw bombs at you?”

A bitter laugh escaped Fei’s lips as he contemplated the question. “I must admit that the chances of you carrying bombs seemed highly unlikely. However, even so, I couldn’t help but worry, and the same went for my comrades. Everyone desires the glory of a successful mission but is reluctant to face the risk of death. They pushed me to the forefront, praising my agility and speed. I couldn’t refuse their expectations, but I felt shackled by an impending threat. In my previous encounters with dissidents, they never dared to resist. However, as I closed in on you during the chase, fear began to consume me. When you turned to confront me, sheer terror gripped my being.”

Fei paused, reflecting on the events that transpired. “Ironically, your trap inadvertently aided me. Though it caused me great discomfort, it provided an excuse for falling behind. In truth, I sustained only minor injuries, managing to shield myself with my baseball bat against the prickly cacti. The wretched cry I let out was more an act than a reflection of actual harm inflicted upon me.”

Isaac laughed coldly. “You acted wisely; otherwise, I would have led you into a second trap, one that could have proven fatal.”

Fei’s smile held a bitter tinge. “Ever since that incident, we were on high alert for other traps while pursuing you. Nothing brought us more excitement and joy than seeing you enter the

river, as it would compromise any bombs you might have had. We never anticipated that you would be ‘foolish’ enough to choose the river. Our assumption was that you would take the southern route, crossing a highway, where our partners waiting at the club could ensnare you. Alternatively, we planned to take turns resting in the truck and wear you down through sheer endurance. All of us are exceptional long-distance runners!”

Fei let out a bitter laugh before continuing. “We believed you must have been desperate, under pressure, and gripped by fear to select such a treacherous path from which there was seemingly no escape. Our previous failure on the cliffs had made us excessively cautious. We brought specialized tools and enlisted experts in rock and cliff climbing. While two of our agents excelled in swimming, none of us were adept at treading water. I may have fared slightly better than the others due to my childhood experiences of wading through streams in my village, although those riverbeds were mostly muddy, unlike the stony terrain of this river.”

“Before entering the river, we contacted the two agents who remained at the club,” Fei continued. “They drove downstream to intercept you. They might meet their demise in the flooding as well!”

Silence settled between Isaac and Fei, with Isaac lost in thought and staring into the distance.

Fei spoke, his voice carrying the weight of a promise. “Isaac, I come from a humble peasant family. I give you my word that I will be a passive spy, refraining from killing or harming any more dissidents. Please ensure that no one learns of what I’ve shared with you, although I don’t mind if you spread it as mere rumors.”

Isaac nodded solemnly. “As long as you speak the truth, I will keep your messages in utmost confidence.”

With those words, Isaac walked away, but just before he disappeared behind the rocks, he turned his head, fixing a piercing gaze upon Fei. “Keep your promise,” he declared, his eyes conveying a fierce determination, before vanishing from sight.

Chapter 2

A Gamble of Honor

A warm sunny day, the air fresh.

Varshi Surangi sat on the rocking armchair in her office, staring at the flowerbed through a glass window. As she meditated upon the news Jacobs brought, she fell into a state of melancholy. Then the bell rang and broke her thoughts.

Before Varshi could utter a word, Edward confidently entered the room. With a sense of purpose, he poured himself a cup of coffee and took a seat across from her. Meeting her gaze, he greeted her with a cheerful “Good morning!”

Breaking the silence, he continued, “I’ve just registered Shivam for the World Junior Badminton Open, scheduled to take place in Las Vegas next winter. And guess what? I’ve even hired Coach Grigori to serve as his personal coach throughout the tournament!”

Varshi’s face brightened with a smile. “Well done! Does Shivam stand a chance at winning the Junior championship?”

Edward paused for a moment, considering his response. “The chance is slim. The players from Strong Nation are formidable opponents. However, with Grigori’s guidance and support, Shivam might just have a shot at reaching the final!”

Varshi nodded. “Indeed, it would be a remarkable achievement if Shivam manages to reach the final!”

Edward added excitedly, "I've also asked our gardener, Diego, to join us at the tournament. I even requested him to extend an invitation to Isaac!"

Varshi chuckled. "It would be wonderful if Isaac could make it, but he's quite elusive. We've never met him before, and he doesn't have a known contact address."

Edward sighed, acknowledging the challenge. "I understand. I thought it was worth a try, but I'm not keeping my hopes up. At least Diego will be there!"

Varshi's smile widened. "By the way, did you know that Diego's real name is Jesus?"

Edward raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Really?"

Varshi nodded, recounting a memorable encounter. "A few months ago, as I was leaving for work, I heard a cell phone ringing near the entrance gate of the garden. Someone answered, saying, 'Jesus hablando...' I was taken aback and turned to see Diego sitting at a stone table, engaged in a Spanish conversation on his phone. When he noticed me, he ended the call and greeted me with a cheerful 'Good morning, Madam!' Naturally, I responded in kind and approached him."

Curious, Edward leaned in. "So, you asked him if he was also called Jesus?"

Varshi nodded. "Exactly. He stood up and confirmed that it was his original name, but people often mispronounced it here, so he opted to go by Diego instead."

Edward found it intriguing. "That's quite interesting, to think that Diego is, in fact, the *Jesus* Jacobs described."

Varshi agreed, her tone filled with fascination. "Indeed! But let me tell you about something that happened a month ago. Jacobs paid me a visit, and I disclosed the truth about Isaac and shared some of the adventures Diego had told me. Intrigued, Jacobs traveled to Arizona to investigate further and spoke with George, the owner of the table tennis club."

Edward leaned in closer, eager for updates. "And did he uncover anything new?"

A mischievous gleam danced in Varshi's eyes as she answered, "Yes, he did! The club has a live streaming camera

that captures all the activities there. Jacobs managed to obtain some footage showing Jade in various outfits and makeup styles. It was quite revealing!”

Edward inquired eagerly, “Did Jacobs return again? He must have discovered new mysteries involving Strong Nation!”

Varshi nodded in response, her expression filled with intrigue. “Yes, he came back and shared a video with me. It showcased an academic conference that took place in Las Vegas some time ago. The conference focused on the opportunities and risks associated with Southeast Asia. One of the keynote speakers was Krugman, a respected House representative. During his passionate speech, he condemned the malicious actions of Strong Nation. Krugman, in his early fifties, possessed a handsome and well-built physique, though slightly overweight. He was known for his strong anti-Strong Nation stance and his unwavering advocacy for addressing the substantial trade deficit with them. He never hesitated to criticize Strong Nation’s infiltration into democratic societies and its oppressive treatment of its own people.”

Edward added his thoughts, acknowledging Krugman’s popularity. “Krugman is quite renowned, and his vehement opposition to authoritarian regimes is well-known. Although at times, his speeches can be rather extreme.”

Varshi concurred, her eyes focused on recounting the events further. “After Krugman’s presentation, there was a coffee break with delightful desserts and beverages provided by the organizers. Participants mingled in the hall, engaging in conversations with one another. At that moment, an attractive and athletic Asian girl approached Krugman with a smile. She remarked, ‘What a fervent speech! You clearly don’t like my Motherland!’

Krugman responded, unaware of her seductive intentions, ‘I hold deep admiration for your people! My opposition lies solely with your government’s suppressive and deceitful practices, perpetuating endless lies.’

The girl’s smile turned seductive as she playfully countered, ‘It seems you have appointed yourself as the defender of justice

and human rights.’

Krugman, committed to his mission, responded, ‘That is indeed my calling. No matter the circumstances, I will always fight for justice and righteousness, opposing any authoritarian regime.’

With a sweet laugh, the girl continued, ‘Human minds can be easily corrupted! There’s always a dark side to each human mind! Even the ring bearer Frodo, honest and plain was corrupted at the end! Americans often overestimate themselves. They reside in their glass houses, ignorant of the world’s realities, and have yet to face true tests. In reality, they are most vulnerable and easily corrupted.’

With a determined tone, he declared, ‘Time will tell, and you will see! I’ll never bend to devils!’ his voice filled with fervor.

She smiled, her expression filled with a hint of amusement. ‘Like most Americans, you overestimate yourself! Not only will you fall into devil’s traps carelessly, but you will knowingly and willingly be captured by devils!’

Offended by her words, he responded defensively, ‘You are a professional insulter!’

She maintained her smile, dismissing his reaction. ‘There’s no need for you to get angry or upset. I am just speaking the truth!’

He laughed, shrugging his shoulders. ‘You have the freedom of speech in this country!’

‘I challenge you for a bet!’ she said, a glint of mischief in her eyes.

‘What bet?’ he inquired.

‘In a year or so, you will fall to devils, in your own words. Not only that, you will not be hostile to my Motherland, but you will also speak favorably for it!’

He laughed. ‘That’s not any challenge. Absolutely you will lose!’

‘Do you dare to accept the bet?’ she asked.

‘Why not? What if I win?’

She smiled. ‘Then you own me. I’ll do whatever you ask me to do, including spying for you!’

‘What if you win?’

‘I am honored!’

Krugman laughed. ‘Seriously?’

‘Absolutely!’

‘Then they are our witnesses,’ Krugman said, pointing to a few attendees and his assistant who overheard their conversation.

The girl nodded, pointing to a nearby man taking videos with a cell phone. ‘Better, he has recorded a video of our conversation. If you don’t mind, he would post it on the Internet, and it would serve as our witness.’

‘Good idea! Go ahead!’”

Edward remarked, “I don’t closely follow Krugman, but I do recall that he is exceptionally outspoken against authoritative regimes and is known for his unwavering honesty. He has nerves of steel. I highly doubt he would yield to Strong Nation’s influence. The girl in the video might simply be seeking attention by generating views.”

Varshi responded, “The video itself is singular. A group of loafers immediately propagate it on the Internet, and it has gone viral on social media. Nevertheless, nobody truly believed that Krugman would undergo such a transformation.”

Varshi’s strained her eyebrows as she contemplated the situation. “Very weird and absurd things unfolded a year later! Against all expectations, Krugman’s attitude towards Strong Nation took a sudden turn. Not only did he cease criticizing Strong Nation, but he also subtly voiced support for it. There are several incidents that are difficult to reconcile with the wishes of his supporters.

Time and again, Krugman emphasized that the enormous trade deficit would spell destruction for America, resulting in job losses and Strong Nation funneling money back into this country to corrupt the government and infiltrate it. For many years, he advocated for a policy of imposing high tariffs on goods from Strong Nation and utilizing the tariff revenue to

facilitate the relocation of manufacturing back to America or other regions of the world.

However, now he asserts that free trade with Strong Nation is beneficial and suggests that any tariffs would harm American consumers! Previously, he called for disengagement from Strong Nation, but now he champions cooperation, echoing the sentiments expressed by the Harvard President.”

Edward remarked, “Harvard has received a significant amount of money from Strong Nation!”

Varshi nodded in agreement. “Absolutely! The theory that suggests we need not worry about the trade deficit because the floating exchange rate will automatically adjust and lead to a trade balance is merely a naive academic notion. The money recycled from the trade deficit serves as a primary source of income for many major social media companies in our country! We purchase their products, and they purchase our censorship. The larger our trade deficit with them, the greater their power of infiltration becomes.

Spending money is always easy. The government proudly discusses providing free money to citizens or embarking on massive infrastructure projects that don’t truly contribute to the production of goods. Instead, they only serve to further increase the trade deficit and invite foreign infiltration. Such speeches are splendid, attractive, and deceiving. Nobody likes to address the need for bringing manufacturing industries back to our country, which would reduce the trade deficit. It is a challenging task that no politician wants to undertake. It is much easier and more appealing to speak eloquently and distribute others’ money!”

Edward let out a sigh. “Krugman has become a victim of this infiltration!”

Varshi said, “Krugman’s sudden attitude change has plagued his fans sorely ever since. The FBI was stunned! If Strong Nation could openly influence and corrupt someone as resilient as Krugman, who possesses an unyielding spirit, then it suggests that they have the potential to corrupt anyone. It is possible that they have already clandestinely infiltrated the FBI and co-

erced several employees to act as spies on their behalf. Jacobs believes that there is an invisible diabolic force within the department, corrupting the minds of everyone involved!”

Edward questioned, “Are you suggesting that there is some supernatural element influencing Krugman?”

Varshi clarified, “No, Jacobs was simply using figurative language to describe their sense of helplessness and disbelief.”

Edward inquired further, “Why did they publicize the video of the bet?”

Varshi explained, “It is a blatant attempt to undermine the American people, to intimidate and humiliate our government, and to showcase their power. Jacobs explains that the leader of Strong Nation, known by the moniker Pig Head due to his background as a pig farmer, a genius in growing and governing pigs, adopts a war-wolf foreign policy. He takes pleasure in openly bullying others and revels in his ability to corrupt our elected representatives.”

Edward shook his head in disbelief. “How foolish! In any case, the bet holds no meaning. We don’t cheat but they mean to cheat all the time!”

Varshi smiled. “Indeed! Jacobs suggests that we might need to thank Pig Head, as his actions have inadvertently served as a wake-up call for Americans. If Strong Nation had a more cunning and strategic leader, they could have silently infiltrated and conquered America before the world even realized it. With their significant trade surplus, if executed skilfully, they could have corrupted our government beyond repair. However, their aggressive and confrontational behavior has roused many Americans, making it increasingly challenging for the Wall Street elites to advocate for them. Of course, it is always disheartening to witness the suffering and loss caused by Pig Head’s actions.”

Edward inquired, “Do they have any information about the girl? Who is she?”

Varshi replied, “Yes, her name is Jade. Jacobs was able to identify her after watching the videos from George’s TT club. He showed me both the TT videos and the one involving Krug-

man.”

Edward exclaimed, “This case is singular and critical! How much did Jacobs actually know about the bet?”

“He knew no more than what I told you. It’s urgent for us to identify the force behind the changes in Krugman’s behavior. The FBI enlisted Jacobs and paid him to conduct a confidential investigation. The top officials of the FBI are concerned that Strong Nation may have compromised their organization. Therefore, these investigations must be carried out independently of the government. Jacobs has been conducting the investigations covertly, mostly on his own. I have been assisting Jacobs in this case, not for monetary gain, but out of a sense of duty towards our country and our family. No one in the FBI is aware of my involvement. Interestingly and ironically, the insights provided by Diego about the experiences of Isaac, a homeless wanderer, have proven to be invaluable. It was through these hints that Jacobs managed to contact the Arizona TT club and discovered Jade.”

Edward inquired, “Has Jacobs uncovered the method they used to corrupt Krugman?”

Varshi shook her head and replied, “No, he hasn’t. All he could ascertain is that it’s unlikely they used money or women. The influence generated by these means, though significant, is not potent enough to completely sway Krugman towards the dark side. Regardless, Krugman has been thriving financially and remains steadfastly loyal to his content family. His honor and inherent integrity are so strong that no one would suspect him of being susceptible to corruption by money.”

She mused, searching for an explanation. “Human minds are manifold and too complicated to comprehend! Particularly, the allure of power can be intoxicating. Once an individual experiences the exhilaration of exerting control over others, the thirst for more power becomes insatiable.

All Strong Nation leaders thirst for more power and they seem to have an unwholesome power that set to work on their targets!”

Edward interjected, “You should remind Jacobs to meticu-

lously trace Krugman's life records, starting from the moment he was born!"

"I didn't delve too much into it, as I'm confident that Jacobs has been discreetly conducting thorough investigations into Krugman's background. However, I did suggest examining whether Krugman's personal records have been compromised or hacked," she replied.

"That's a valuable suggestion! Everyone has his own Achilles heel! Since Jade is connected to Isaac, who in turn is linked to Diego, it would be wise to gather more information from Diego about his experiences. Perhaps that could illuminate this perplexing enigma," Edward suggested.

Varshi beamed. "Diego takes Isaac's adventures very seriously. He meticulously analyzes the details Isaac shares with him, searching for any hidden connections. He carefully contemplates his interpretations, ensuring their accuracy before relaying the story to me. Sometimes, he seeks my input and comments after narrating an adventure. He is hesitant to share anything until he believes his composition is fully developed.

I'm uncertain if Isaac has divulged any new adventures to Diego. In our last conversation, Diego mentioned that Isaac might be relatively safe now. It appears Strong Nation's surveillance unit realizes that terminating him would be costly, and they prefer not to expend excessive resources on a solitary dissenter."

Rising from his seat, Edward declared, "I'll closely monitor the progression of the bet between them and inform you if I uncover any new information!"

After Edward departed, Varshi contemplated Krugman's inexplicable behavior. Despite her efforts, she couldn't discern any clues that would explain his sudden shift in political attitudes.

Chapter 3

An Epic Chase

The sun was setting. Varshi sat at a stone table in the garden, engaged in a relaxed conversation with Diego.

Addressing him, she said, “Diego, you shared with me the enthralling account of Isaac’s survival in the river, thwarting the spies attempting to take his life. After that thrilling chase, did he happen to meet Helen and teach her a badminton stroke?”

Diego understood her intent behind the question and eagerly nodded. “Yes, he went to the museum and spent time meditating beneath a tree until sunset. It was during that captivating moment that Helen emerged and discovered him. She appeared lively and competent, completely captivated by his presence. They joyfully greeted one another, and Isaac inquired if there was any news from Martin.”

Helen briefly informed him that everything was progressing smoothly according to plan. Martin had established a factory in the area, receiving orders from Hong Kong for toy production. He had befriended local officials, often entertaining them at nightclubs and high-end restaurants. However, as Helen was uninterested in discussing Martin further, Isaac briefly recounted his recent adventures, particularly highlighting his water-treading feat. Helen was thoroughly engrossed in his stories.

“Subsequently, she took Isaac to Badminton Elite, a converted warehouse that had been transformed into a single-story building with one-way windows. This unique design allowed those inside to see outside while maintaining privacy from the opposite direction,” Diego continued, painting a vivid picture.

“The interior was clean, spacious, and kept at a comfortable temperature. Sunlight streamed through the large translucent windows on the roof, casting a soft, cozy glow in the hallways. Rooms lined the two sides, their doors closed. Each room housed a badminton court, and the partition separating any two rooms could be folded to accommodate larger gatherings.

As Isaac strolled along the hallway, faint laughter, conversations, and the rhythmic sound of shuttlecocks striking against rackets, creating a “Pok! Pok!” resonance, filled the air. Suddenly, he halted, fixating his gaze at the far end of the corridor, his brows furrowing in a puzzled expression.

Helen followed Isaac’s gaze but failed to perceive anything noteworthy. ‘What are you staring at?’ she inquired, puzzled.

Shaking his head, Isaac resumed walking. ‘Nothing! I had a thought that consumed my attention. My apologies for my absent-mindedness!’ he smiled.

Helen playfully pouted. ‘You’re such a thinker!’

Approaching a room at the far end, Helen entered a code on the keypad. The lock buzzed, and the door swung open inward. As they stepped inside, the door closed automatically, accompanied by the illumination of lights. A net was set up, and the court appeared clean, with clearly painted boundary lines.

From her bag, Helen retrieved two rackets, handing one to Isaac while keeping one for herself. Isaac began explaining, ‘I have developed three primary strokes in my game: *Earth Hope*, *River Sorrow*, and *Ocean Rages*. They are loosely connected, and I’ll teach you the *Ocean Rages* stroke since you already possess a solid foundation in the game.’

As he spoke, Isaac demonstrated the stroke, swinging the racket in a fluid motion around his body before leaping into the

air and striking it forcefully from above, producing a resonant boom.

‘This stroke consists of three sub-strokes, each comprised of six variations, totaling eighteen. Furthermore, there are variations within those variations,’ Isaac elaborated. ‘I have created a poem that encapsulates the movements and essence of all the strokes. You must memorize the poem and practice the variations accordingly. Additionally, you should seek manifestations from the realm of fuzziness, the gateway to victory. Defense and offense are impartial, and all movements are unbiased.’

As he conveyed his instructions, Isaac slowly lifted his racket, elegantly maneuvering it before him. ‘The unique aspect of my strokes lies in their continuous flow, with no pauses or breaks between two consecutive strokes. The conclusion of one stroke seamlessly transitions into the initiation of the next.’

Helen was fully engaged, her attention fixed on Isaac as he patiently taught her the strokes throughout the entire morning. However, their lesson came to an end, as Isaac had to depart in order to prepare for an upcoming trip.

Curiosity sparked within Helen, prompting her to inquire about Isaac’s destination. ‘Where will you be going?’ she asked eagerly.

With a hint of excitement, Isaac replied, ‘Mexico!’

Delighted by the prospect, Helen couldn’t help but ask, ‘Can I come along?’

Isaac’s expression turned serious as he explained, ‘No, it’s too risky for you. My journey involves traversing barren lands, valleys, and rivers. A single misstep could prove fatal for both humans and beasts.’

Determined not to be deterred, Helen offered a solution, ‘What if I drive you there?’

Isaac chuckled, shaking his head. ‘I’m not going on a vacation. This is a mission, and taking any vehicle is not part of my plan. I’ll be sleeping in the mountains and public areas, just as I always do.’

Despite her curiosity and longing to accompany Isaac, He-

len displayed her intelligence by refraining from making further requests or seeking additional details.

Politely, she inquired, 'When will you be leaving?'

'Right after I return to the Canyon,' Isaac responded.'

Varshi interjected, seeking clarification, "So, he went back to the Canyon first and then headed to Mexico?"

Diego shook his head, indicating a change of events. "That was his initial plan, but something unexpected occurred. On his way back to the Grand Canyon, he made a detour to visit the Arizona Countryside Table Tennis Club and played a few exhibition matches. Isaac felt at ease and relaxed, confident that Donald would not dare to launch another attack on him anytime soon, especially after the failure of their previous mission that resulted in the loss of several agents.

Leaving the club, Isaac found solace in the peaceful atmosphere. As he crossed the highway and passed a cattle farm, he stepped onto a faint, less-traveled trail leading southward through a vast barren plain. It was a clear autumn morning with a few clouds drifting lazily in the sky, foreshadowing another hot and dry day. Isaac intended to establish additional escape routes before venturing eastward.

Determined to outwit any potential predators, Isaac donned a baseball cap equipped with a neck shade, preparing himself for the grueling run ahead. As he dashed forward, his sharp eyes scanned the landscape, searching for any features he could utilize to deceive future threats.

For approximately thirty minutes, Isaac maintained an astonishing speed, silently and resolutely treading along the faint trail. The scorching sun and relentless heat took his toll, causing him considerable discomfort. Slowing down to preserve his energy, he suddenly felt a presence trailing behind him. Without stopping, he flung a look back along the way he had come. He saw a person, presumably a man, about a quarter of a mile away, running toward him at the same pace.

"Encountering another runner on the trail at this time was uncommon but not entirely unheard of. Isaac initially disregarded the stranger but remained vigilant, his senses on high

alert. Accelerating once more, he continued along the trail. Ten minutes later, he glanced over his shoulder and discovered that the stranger still maintained the same quarter-mile distance. Decelerating significantly, Isaac observed as the stranger also slowed down, ensuring the separation between them remained constant. It was a cat-and-mouse game.

Isaac decided to put the stranger to the test. He halted momentarily, retrieving a water bottle from his bag to quench his thirst. Surprisingly, the stranger also stopped, mimicking Isaac's actions. It became evident to Isaac that this person was not merely a fellow runner but a spy agent sent by Strong Nation. He was astonished by the audacity of their pursuit, coming again so soon.

'Again?' He felt nausea. Pulling out his binoculars, Isaac swept his gaze across the vast expanse of the plain. There, he spotted a man dressed similarly to him – a T-shirt, long pants, and a baseball cap, but notably lacking the protective shades. No other figures appeared in his line of sight. It dawned on Isaac that this stranger's purpose was to pin him while other agents would come through vehicles when he got to a location, where it was appropriate for them to terminate him discreetly, making the murder look like a mere accident.

Isaac chuckled. 'You haven't learned your lesson!'

Aware that he had enough food to run for a couple of days and enough water to run for hours before refilling, Isaac devised a plan. Instead of proceeding eastward as originally intended, he decided to continue running south without taking a break. Under the scorching heat, he anticipated his pursuer would succumb within a couple of hours. A cold, triumphant laugh escaped his lips.

With each passing moment, the temperature rose alongside the relentless sun. There was no shelter from its brazen rays, and the land seemed desolate and barren, stretching into vast, empty territories. A surreal sensation permeated the air, as if plants and objects existed in a distorted reality. Distant pinacles appeared mysterious, their shapes altered by the hot air rising from the ground and creating mirages. Isaac ensured he

consumed enough water to stave off dehydration, knowing it could lead to hallucinations.

“After another thirty minutes of running, Isaac cast a glance backward. To his dismay, his pursuer still trailed behind, maintaining a quarter-mile distance. The sight of the man reminded Isaac of the atrocities committed by Strong Nation, particularly their leader Pig Head, who suppressed the people and cold-bloodedly perpetrated genocide against minorities in the Western region. The incarceration of over a million innocent individuals in concentration camps ignited a burning anger within any conscious person. Rage surged through Isaac’s veins.

Go to hell! Anger suddenly flared in his heart like a fiery pang, which affected him like something coming from the unknown. He trembled.

‘Come on! Bastard!’ he yelled as he sped up, running like a sprinter. Speed running had become Isaac’s way of dissipating anger, a method he found effective in regaining control.

As Isaac continued his intense run, his anger matured into a profound introspection. He pondered why he was so angry and ran so swiftly and sternly. What power, had made him undertake such tremendous effort and risk to carry on his mission? What force had compelled him to embark on such a perilous mission, risking everything in the process? What had kindled his rage, driving him to engage in this seemingly insane pursuit?

“Since the untimely death of his parents, Isaac had been exposed to the darkest aspects of humanity, and a simmering anger had taken root within his mind. He endeavored to forgive and move forward, yet each time he learned of the continued acts of suppression carried out by those in power, his anger was reignited, growing even deeper. Amidst the turmoil, he often felt a sense of sadness and helplessness. Who else would step up to stop the atrocities if he did not? If nobody cared, the world would descend into a dystopian nightmare, a wretched existence of suffering and despair.

Putting an end to their malevolent deeds had become his primary objective, his ultimate mission. However, buried within

the depths of his heart, a flicker of compassion persisted. Despite his doubts regarding their worthiness of salvation, a part of him yearned to rescue even those who seemed irredeemable.

Despite facing immense danger, Isaac maintained a steadfast commitment to preserve life. He held onto the belief that even in the face of adversity, no one should be deprived of their existence.

“Recalling his past actions, Isaac vividly remembered the occasions when he had saved Jade’s physical body three times and Fei’s once. The weight of their transgressions weighed heavily on his mind, stirring a sense of melancholy. In his heart, he yearned for them to find redemption, to salvage their souls from the darkness they had succumbed to.

Now, once again, Isaac presented his relentless pursuer with a choice – a decisive moment between life and death. Should the predator persist in chasing him, he would succumb to exhaustion and perish in the desolate expanse. Yet, if the predator halted his pursuit and retraced his steps back to the safety of the town, he would be granted the chance to continue living.

Lost in deep contemplation, Isaac felt the fatigue seep into his bones, compelling him to slow down. With confidence, he held the belief that his pursuer would be left far behind, becoming nothing more than a distant memory. The stranger might have succumbed to the unforgiving wilderness, meeting a lonely demise, an echo of the karmic consequences of his wicked actions. However, life or death ultimately rested upon his own choice. If he relinquished the pursuit and returned to the town, he could undoubtedly find a path to survival.

“The realization dawned upon Isaac that it was not merely a choice but his solemn duty to persist in his mission, regardless of the arduous challenges that lay before him. He existed on the precipice, teetering between life and death, understanding that failure might be his ultimate fate.

If you swam in the stream of life and struggled against the wave, you were destined to suffer. You had made your choice. All sufferings came about of their own accord and were fated.

Even the divine beings, whose tales his parents had recounted,

did not reside in eternal serenity. They too endured the cycles of fear, struggle, and risk in their pursuit of paradise. With this understanding, Isaac pressed on, traversing the desolate lands in solitude, his mind growing increasingly serene and tranquil.

“When he emerged from his meditative state, the scorching heat and inhospitable surroundings once again engulfed his consciousness. Nearly an hour had slipped away unnoticed. Instinctively, he turned his head to assess the situation, only to be gripped by a chilling sensation that sent shivers down his spine. His predator, whom he had presumed would have succumbed or abandoned the pursuit, remained resolute, trailing him at almost exactly a quarter-mile distance, matching his pace. Confusion and disturbance seized Isaac’s mind, for he had never encountered such a peculiar sensation before. How could a spy agent not only survive but also keep pace under these punishing conditions? Even their group leader, Donald could not come close to doing that.

Isaac resolved to put his predator to the test. Instead of continuing his straight southward trajectory, he deliberately veered off course, tracing large S-shaped paths through the desolate expanse. He aimed to immerse himself in the forsaken land, devoid of any human presence or the reach of Wi-Fi signals.

As the sun soared higher in the sky, intensifying the heat, Isaac adapted his pace, alternating between different speeds during various phases of his run. Yet, regardless of his efforts – whether he sprinted or slowed his pace – the stranger remained steadfast, maintaining a constant distance of about a quarter of a mile between them. Annoyance and frustration welled up within Isaac. After an extended period of running, he abruptly changed direction, charging toward his pursuer. To his astonishment, the stranger mirrored his movements, fleeing at the same pace, as if the roles had suddenly reversed – Isaac becoming the predator and the stranger the prey. Adding to the terror, no matter how swiftly Isaac propelled himself forward, the gap between them refused to diminish.

‘You are testing me!’ Isaac muttered, a mix of confusion and puzzlement clouding his thoughts.

“Baffled by this perplexing turn of events, Isaac reluctantly abandoned his pursuit and reverted to his original southward course. As expected, the stranger dutifully followed suit. The realization gradually settled in that escaping from his predator within a day or two was an unattainable feat, and the adversary he faced was unlike any he had encountered before. A shiver ran down Isaac’s spine, unsettling his composure. He had believed he was thoroughly prepared, but evidently, he had underestimated the might of Strong Nation and the resourcefulness of Donald.

When he finally escaped the desolate land and arrived at a small town, the sun had already past its zenith. On one side of the road, there stood a cluster of modest shelters, each offering an array of fresh local farm products, predominantly fruits like grapes, and berries, but also melons, beans, nuts, and leafy greens. Isaac replenished his water bottles and purchased an ample supply of raw food that was fit for consumption.

Continuing his journey through the town, he proceeded to run along the shoulder of a narrow highway, which led southward and intersected with various smaller roads. The highway was flanked by stretches of farmland. However, Isaac remained vigilant, not daring to run solely on the highway. Whenever possible, he veered into the farmland and followed narrow trails, wary of the relentless pursuer potentially employing accomplices driving along the highway. By making his running route unpredictable, he made it arduous for them to ensnare him without arousing suspicion among ordinary passersby. He forged ahead with caution, acutely aware of the imminent danger.

Togehter, they traversed a miniature desert and a largely forsaken farmland, far away from any bustling highway. The sun began to set behind the mountains, which appeared against the sky, showing their distinct rugged features. They cast long shadows on the plain. Little by little the shadows grew longer and seemed to chase after and swallow them. At last, the sun dropped below the mountains, and gloom gradually covered the summit as it had covered the plain. The environment grew

cooler.

“As Isaac pressed on, his attention was abruptly drawn to a distant glow, accompanied by wisps of white smoke curling into the air. Intrigued, he hastened his pace towards the luminosity, all the while being serenaded by a growing cacophony that transformed into resounding cheers as he arrived at a small town illuminated by the powerful lights mounted on trucks. It dawned on Isaac that, by sheer coincidence, the town was hosting a county fair. The main road teemed with a bustling crowd, adorned in vibrant attire, and carts brimming with delectable delights – giant turkey legs, Greek gyros, chili fries, deep-fried beef, and skewered seafood. Women and young girls gracefully balanced plates of food as they strolled, while the clean-shaven young men clutched glasses of beer in one hand and skewers of fried meat in the other. On the northern side of the road, a sizable audience gathered to witness animal races featuring pigs and cows. On the southern side, thrilling county fair rides, including a Ferris wheel, carousel, rollercoaster, and bumper cars, delighted visitors. Joyful cheers reverberated through the sky, permeating the atmosphere. Isaac sensed that an opportunity had presented itself.

Swiftly, he made his way into a clothing store and quickly altered his attire to blend in with the local county fair fashion, acquiring the necessary garments from the shop. Concealing his backpack within a tree trunk by the store’s side, he retrieved his binoculars. Merging with the bustling crowd, he indulged in a ride on the Ferris wheel. As he reached its zenith, he discreetly retrieved his binoculars, scanning the landscape. He observed his pursuer arriving in the town, visibly disoriented amidst the thronging masses, having lost track of his quarry.

Filled with confidence, Isaac believed his pursuer would be unable to locate him in this vast and chaotic setting. Both he and the pursuer wandered about, eventually losing sight of each other amidst the swelling crowd, the roars of revelry growing louder as more people emerged after their evening meals.

Isaac knew that the fair would persist until late into the night, as the crowd would gradually disperse. Assuming his

pursuer had departed, he retrieved his backpack and quietly slipped away from the town, consciously avoiding the main road. Instead, he opted for a narrow side street that led him through an orchard of fruit trees. Concealed by the foliage, he stealthily traversed the farmland until he discovered a hidden trail. Gradually distancing himself from the town, the mountains faded into the obscurity of the night, while a faint glimmer emanated from the new moon, casting a delicate glow upon the misty sky.

Resuming his arduous run, Isaac pressed forward as he determined to put as much distance between himself and his pursuer as possible.

“As twilight descended, the haunting cry of a hound pierced the air. Roughly half an hour later, Isaac arrived at a desolate moor, the trail growing faint. The melancholic cries of various creatures echoed in the distance, as stars emerged and cast a gentle shimmer high above. Isaac affixed a flashlight to his head, illuminating his path as he continued his run, now in a more relaxed state of mind. Lost in contemplation, he pondered the safest route to make his way back home.

Suddenly, a disquieting sensation enveloped him, accompanied by a chilling gust of wind that sent shivers down his spine. Glancing back, he discovered someone with a flashlight mounted on his head, roughly a quarter of a mile behind, steadily advancing towards him. A wave of apprehension coursed through his body – his pursuer had not relented, and the relentless chase persisted! Frustration welled within Isaac as he realized he had no option but to keep running.

Their headlights remained the sole sources of illumination within the vast moor, unwaveringly traversing the landscape. Isaac forced his way through thick bushes, inadvertently colliding with boulders, and ascended and descended small hills in his path. As the mist dissipated, the twinkling stars overhead imbued the air with freshness, lending an aura of tranquility and order to the surroundings. If it weren't for the pursuit that shadowed his every move, it would have been a serene and enjoyable run for Isaac. The night embodied both peace and

exasperation, evoking profound emotions within him.

Isaac found it perplexing that his pursuer's cohorts had yet to make an appearance. Perhaps his cunning choice of running routes had successfully thwarted their plans to ensnare him. However, despite his strategic maneuvers, he remained unable to shake off the relentless pursuit, as his adversary evidently lacked the courage to face him alone.

'When will this insane chase come to an end?' weariness seeped into Isaac's thoughts.

Inevitably, both Isaac and his pursuer would reach their limits, and agents would close in unless he managed to outpace his relentless follower, who seemed determined to keep him within sight. Isaac had always been confident in his ability to outrun any spies from Strong Nation, but this pursuer had shattered his self-assurance. The situation was distressing and frustrating. At this juncture, he had no other choice but to run on!"

Varshi interjected, "It had transformed into a life-or-death pursuit, testing Isaac's physical and mental endurance. If his pursuer didn't collapse first, Isaac would be in grave peril!"

Diego affirmed, "Absolutely! If he failed to win this race, death would be the penalty he'd pay!"

Varshi remarked, "Then Isaac will emerge victorious. There's a saying that when a lion chases a rabbit, the rabbit outruns the lion. The lion runs for a meal, but the rabbit runs for its life!"

Diego nodded in agreement. "The pursuit forced him to alter his plans. He decided to head directly to Mexico before returning to the Grand Canyon. Running relentlessly southward, the chase persisted. They ran through the night until dawn, from dawn until dusk, and from dusk until noon. The relentless pursuit seemed interminable, transforming into an epic chase of historic proportions. They traversed barren lands, as well as moors, hills, valleys, and even crossed rivers. Once, while Isaac was sprinting across a moor, he was pursued by a hound, but he managed to evade its bite. His pursuer experienced a similar fate. Occasionally, they passed through small towns to acquire raw food and water.

On and on they ran! In the third evening, Isaac reached the

border. He halted before a shallow river, carefully reevaluating his plan. A wrong decision could exact a dreadful price. Once he crossed the river, he would lose the protection of America and become vulnerable to any means of assassination, even in plain sight, as seen in various parts of the world. However, not far from the river lay a wild forest, teeming with wild animals and venomous snakes – obstacles that Isaac knew how to handle. The forest lacked any accessible highways, making it an ideal refuge to evade or elude his enemy. It could potentially become their graveyard. Isaac estimated that he could reach the forest within three hours. After a moment of hesitation, he courageously waded across the river and resumed his relentless run. Soon enough, his pursuer also arrived at the riverbank but hesitated, observing Isaac from a distance. Meanwhile, Isaac watched from the other side, waiting for his pursuer to make his move. His intention was to lead his pursuer straight into the treacherous forest. He wished for all his pursuer and his partners would converge upon him, so that he could finally put an end to them once and for all.

To his surprise, the pursuer stood by the river's edge, hesitating for a while, but he never mustered the courage to cross the river. Instead, he abruptly turned back, retracing the trail from which they had come. Isaac seized the opportunity to observe him intently through his binoculars as he fled."

Varshi chimed in, expressing caution, "It could potentially be a trap to lure Isaac back!"

Diego responded, "We don't know for certain whether it was a trap or not. If it was, it failed because Isaac didn't return for days and he didn't retrace his steps on his way back!"

Varshi, feeling a sense of relief, remarked, "So now Isaac can finally catch his breath!"

Diego nodded in agreement. "Yes, instead of heading straight towards the daunting forest, he ran for a few more hours until he arrived at a farmhouse where he sought shelter for the night."

"A farmhouse?" Varshi responded with surprise.

"Yes, he didn't share the specific details of how he managed to stay there, and I didn't inquire further. Regardless, after

three days of continuous running without any rest, he desperately needed a good night's sleep before he could continue his mission. He woke up late in the morning, refreshed and ready to go. The hospitable host even provided him with a sturdy steel hat, ensuring his protection. In the afternoon, he resumed his run, pushing forward. Two days later, he reached a sparsely populated mountain.

Dusk enveloped the surroundings as Isaac ascended into the embrace of a mighty oak tree, nestled comfortably within the cradle of its crossing branches, forming a natural bed. Drifting off to sleep, he found solace in the tranquility of nature. The next morning, he embarked on his journey once again, venturing deeper into the mountain, where he found shelter amidst the towering trees that provided ample cover.”

“He came across a dense forest that beckoned him,” Diego continued. “The forest exuded a cool and serene atmosphere, with sunlight filtering through the towering trees. It felt oddly familiar, like home, yet simultaneously, he couldn't shake the unsettling sensation of being watched. To prepare for potential danger, he donned his trusty steel hat, offering protection against any forceful impact.

Suddenly, a low, sizzling sound emanated from a nearby knoll, capturing Isaac's attention. His eyes sharpened, his expression focused and alert. After a moment, he caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure swiftly moving among the shrubs, blending seamlessly with the green surroundings. It vanished amidst the trees and ferns, only to reappear elsewhere. Eventually, it disappeared behind a colossal tree adorned with cascading lichen and surrounded by dense, emerald ferns. Silence enveloped the forest, and Isaac sensed its imminent approach, a strange and chilling feeling settling over him, as if the air had dropped a few degrees. His gaze fixed on the verdant shrubbery, but no animal was visible. Time stood still as the forest held its breath. Suddenly, a cool breeze brushed against his neck, and in a flash, a shape darted toward him with peculiar speed.

With lightning reflexes, Isaac leaped aside and instinctively raised his elbows and right knee, adopting a trained defensive

stance to ward off any attack. But before he could make a move, the shape swiftly coiled around him, revealing its true form – a mythical giant snake, thick and long, with a greenish hue unlike that of an anaconda or python. The creature moved with a speed that greatly surpassed what Uncle Sean had described. The constriction tightened, ensnaring Isaac with a powerful grip that coiled up to his shoulder. Had he not raised his forearms and knee to increase the coil's radius, he would have succumbed to suffocation within moments.

Feeling the relentless pressure mounting, sweat trickling down his brow, Isaac's energy rapidly dwindled. He needed to act swiftly. With a slight extension of his left arm, he directed all the pressure towards it, freeing his right arm. Raising his hand above his head, fingers extended to form a knife-like shape, his years of training had fortified his fingers to the point where they could break or penetrate wood with precision. Drawing an extraordinary deep breath, he prepared to strike with lightning speed, intending to sever the snake's skin, tear through its flesh, and escape the constrictor's grip. It seemed as though hell itself beckoned the serpent, and death appeared to be its imminent fate.

“Yet, in a fleeting moment, a thought flashed across Isaac's mind, halting his hand abruptly above the serpent's skin. Killing should be a last resort, to be employed only after exhausting all other means. If it came to that, it would be retribution for the serpent's karmic debts from killing others. Isaac slipped his arm back into the coil, bolstering his resistance against the constriction. Unaware of its proximity to the gates of death, the serpent continued to tighten its grip, oblivious to the benevolence shown by its prey, Isaac.

Observing a sturdy tree branch lying beneath a nearby tree, Isaac's mind devised a plan. He recalled the song Jade sang during their peril at the cliff, reminiscing about the peace it brought him. Softly, he began to sing the song, gradually releasing the pressure he exerted on the serpent while it appeared to drift into a slumber, releasing its grip in tandem. His right arm regained freedom, allowing him to gently touch the snake's

body. Soon, his left arm followed suit, and both his hands pressed against the top of the coil. Without hesitation, he thrust against the serpent's body and propelled himself out of the coil. In an instant, he sprinted a few steps towards the branch, launching himself into the air like a tiger, landing with agile grace. Rolling and coiling on the ground, Isaac swiftly rose, grasping the branch firmly in his hands. The awakened serpent gave chase, but Isaac pressed his back against the tree, firmly planting the branch on the ground. His hands clung tightly to one end, while his right foot braced against the other. Before he could adjust his position, the snake coiled around the tree and the branch, with Isaac trapped in between. He pushed the branch outward, resisting the constriction. Now, the coil's radius was significantly larger, diminishing the pressure the serpent could exert on its prey. Leaning against the tree trunk, Isaac stood there with unwavering resolve, holding the branch without worry. He knew the serpent would soon tire. The branch, with its small, sharp bumps, would inflict pain upon the creature as it pressed against it, intensifying with every futile attempt.

After a moment of tense silence, Isaac addressed the serpent, his voice filled with authority. 'You should understand who the master is! I could have ended your life! It's in your best interest to release me and leave me be.'

Yet, the serpent remained unyielding, refusing to release its grip. Isaac's patience waned, giving way to anger. With a powerful roar, he summoned all his strength and forcefully pushed the branch outward using both hands and a foot. The snake attempted to resist, but the coil gradually expanded, inch by inch.

Suddenly, with a resounding crack, the coil broke apart, and the serpent foundered on the ground, utterly exhausted, its eyes fixated on Isaac. He let go of the branch and lowered himself onto a lawn covered in short grass, one knee touching the ground. With a triumphant tone, he shouted, 'Watch!' Raising his hand high above his head, he brought it down with force. A deep, resonating boom echoed through the air as his fingers

penetrated the surface of the grass, disappearing into the soil. The snake seemed to comprehend its defeat, retreating backward like a guardian demon relinquishing its hold on a treasure. It coiled itself along, vanishing into the darkened shrubs.”

Varshi, captivated by the story, was thrilled and left with her mouth half-open. “Fabulous!”

Diego chimed in, “Isaac carefully made his way through the dimly lit forest, persisting for almost an hour. Suddenly, his eyes were greeted by a brilliant burst of light. He had traversed the forest and arrived at an open clearing adorned with lush green grass, where goats grazed peacefully. On the hillside stood a cluster of a dozen houses – a small village inhabited by a tribe of native Indian herdsmen. He approached the house next to a magnificent tree, where he was received by a man named Dakota.”

Diego paused momentarily, then continued, “Once again, Isaac did not divulge the specific details to me – neither the identity of the man named Dakota nor the content of their conversation. As they engaged in discussion, an unsettling sizzling sound caught Isaac’s attention. However, Dakota remained composed, his countenance impassive.”

Without warning, they emerged from the house, and a chill ran down Isaac’s spine as he laid eyes upon the serpent he had encountered just an hour ago, now scaling the towering tree.

Pointing towards the serpent, Dakota explained, ‘It is one of our own, nurtured and regarded as the guardian of our village. It safeguards us, assists in herding the goats, and protects us from potential beastly invasions.’

Isaac proceeded to recount the recent encounter and his struggle against the serpent.

With grace and appreciation, Dakota responded, ‘Your benevolence in refraining from taking its life is a tremendous blessing for all of us, including yourself!’ The serpent and Isaac formed an unexpected friendship, with Dakota teaching him a few signs to communicate with the creature.

Thereupon they left the village and ran for a couple of days to reach a small town.”

Varshi, intrigued by the unfolding events, inquired, “Is the town situated within an Indian Reservation area?”

Diego admitted, “I’m uncertain. Isaac provided me with limited information regarding the subsequent events, and I have yet to organize the materials. Once I have a clearer understanding of the events, I will share the details with you.”

Varshi smiled appreciatively, remarking, “Absolutely! Thank you so much for sharing thus far!”

Chapter 4

Mysterious Change of a Lawmaker

Varshi sat rocking in her chair, lost in deep contemplation. The realization dawned upon her that Jade was far more treacherous and dangerous than she had initially believed.

“Why did Krugman undergo such a sudden transformation?” she wondered. “What perilous method did Jade employ to consume his soul? He was under her control, devoid of his own free will. How could this have happened?”

The answers to these pressing questions held the key to understanding the path this country would take – a matter of great concern to Varshi. Even in the morning light, she sensed the looming shadow of Strong Nation eroding America and the principles of the free world. People were gradually losing their freedoms, unknowingly and often supporting policies masked in deceptive reasoning.

“The pinnacle of conquest lies in subjugating the enemy without shedding blood, without the enemy even realizing they have been conquered,” she contemplated. “They have perfected this art.”

Yearning for news, Varshi hoped for the arrival of Jacobs. He typically visited unexpectedly, once a month, seeking her

insight on various technical matters. He would attentively listen to her views on different issues. Although many of her perspectives proved irrelevant or even incorrect, occasionally her unique and opposing viewpoints held value. Her opinions had influenced his decisions in the past, leading to significant discoveries.

Jacobs kept his visits clandestine, wary that the FBI, with whom he secretly cooperated, might have been compromised by Strong Nation. His organization remained oblivious to Varshi's existence, as they avoided communication through phones or electronic devices. Except for a few instances, Jacobs would simply appear unannounced on a chosen day each month. However, abruptly, his visits ceased. Six months had passed since he last shared the story of Krugman.

Then, on one somber evening, just as Varshi was about to depart, Jacobs reappeared. He greeted her with a polite smile, yet his countenance revealed restrained internal emotions.

"They are far more dangerous and powerful than I ever thought! There's a rumor saying that our Vice President has been compromised!" Jacobs said with weariness, sitting opposite Varshi across her table.

Taken aback, Varshi asked, "How did they manage to do it?"

Jacobs replied, "They've corrupted him through his drug-addicted son. When he brought his son to Strong Nation during an official visit, I sensed something dark and deadly at work. For the past few months, I've been secretly digging to uncover the truth."

He paused, gathering his thoughts. "They formed an investment company with his son, allowing him to freely spend money. And they supplied him with countless young, beautiful women, who were tragically his victims. But beyond that, he has lost his very soul. It's as if demons have taken complete control of him. The damage is irreversible."

Anxiously, Varshi asked, "Do they corrupt Krugman in the same manner?"

Jacobs frowned. "Krugman's son is still a child."

"I meant Krugman himself," clarified Varshi. "He's much

younger than the Vice President. They could directly provide him with women.”

Jacobs nodded, his expression troubled. “That’s a possibility. It’s deeply disturbing. What I discovered kept me awake for countless nights. After placing a bet, Jade started working as an intern in Krugman’s office, and I managed to obtain some videos of their activities. I used your AI program to analyze their body language and interactions in the footage, hoping it could offer insights into their intentions. However, the results were inconsistent across different instances. I could see malevolence in her eyes, but it’s a subjective interpretation.”

Varshi responded, “The program isn’t always accurate. It serves as a starting point for further investigation. Humans are incredibly complex beings. My program learns from a vast database consisting mostly of average people. Jade is certainly not average, and her appearances could simply be an act. It’s incredibly challenging to discern her true thoughts and motives.”

Jacobs nodded. “I might have made a crucial mistake, of course not the first time. I concentrated on following the path of the assumption that Krugman was corrupted by money and women. After a lengthy investigation, I began to realize that he is not any drug-addicted young man but a seasoned politician in his fifties driven by an insatiable hunger for power. When I mentioned ‘women,’ I was referring to ordinary beautiful women, similar to those favored by the Vice President’s son.”

Varshi interjected, “Jade is certainly far from ordinary. Moreover, hiring Jade as an intern would not enhance Krugman’s popularity; it would, in fact, diminish his power.”

Jacobs conceded, “You’re right. Perhaps he is not susceptible to corruption through an abundance of women. However, with the right individual, even one person can sway a man of unwavering resolve. Jade possesses a unique allure. On one occasion, she attended a fundraising party for Krugman. Their interaction seemed intimate, and at Krugman’s request, Jade performed a dance celebrating an autumn harvest. Her perfor-

mance was breathtaking. Not only did she possess stunning features and long, graceful legs, but her body moved with the fluidity and flexibility of a snake. Her dance surpassed that of an amateur dancer, displaying economy of motion and seamless agility. It was evident that she had practiced her postures countless times, honing them to a remarkable level of dexterity. The audience was captivated by her sublime poses and seamless transitions. She concluded the performance with a mesmerizing horizontal split, pressing her legs firmly against the floor, all while beaming with a radiant smile that exuded innocence and naivety, much like that of a newborn baby. Any man would be overwhelmed with the desire to embrace and hold her.”

Varshi countered, “But Krugman has a close-knit family with two children, and it is widely known that his relationship with his wife is exemplary. They are regarded as a model couple in the political arena.”

“Yes, that’s a riddle I have yet to unravel,” Jacobs admitted. “Despite Jade working as an intern for Krugman, she only visits his office occasionally, perhaps once or twice every two weeks. It’s another enigma that I need to unravel. It appears she is preoccupied with secret projects of her own. With such infrequent contact, it would be challenging for her to develop a close relationship under these circumstances. However, Jade made a grave mistake by openly corrupting Krugman through the publication of the video.”

Varshi chimed in, “I believe they compelled her to release the video out of arrogance and their desire to humiliate America. Their arrogance stems from their national leader’s ignorance. Self-pity and arrogance often go hand in hand. It’s possible that they have fallen into a strategic trap set by our government, which fuels their arrogance.”

Jacobs nodded and smiled. “The video immediately grabbed the attention of the FBI. Jade was subsequently placed under close surveillance, and her communications were monitored extensively. However, due to Krugman’s status as a house representative, the FBI is not authorized to conduct surveillance

on him. Nevertheless, most of his activities are already known to the public.”

Varshi added, “Krugman himself maintains an active presence on social media. He not only shares comments and criticism but also documents his own activities, including family trips. Even if Jade had not posted the video, Krugman would likely have mentioned the bet on his own social platform, inevitably triggering an FBI investigation into Jade.”

Jacobs agreed, “That’s also true. However, the video expedited the investigation, prompting the FBI to focus more closely on Jade.”

Varshi inquired, “Did the FBI manage to obtain any relevant information about Jade regarding the bet?”

Jacobs shook his head, disappointment evident on his face. “No, not at all. It appears that she avoids using electronic devices for critical communications.”

“I am inclined to believe that Krugman is having an affair with Jade, and she has bewitched him,” Jacobs continued.

He then recounted a particular incident they had discovered. Both Jade and Krugman had traveled to Arizona, but not on the same date and not to the same hotel.

“Our collected information is quite incomplete. We must exercise extreme caution to ensure that Krugman remains unaware of our surveillance. This constraint has made our task exceedingly difficult,” Jacobs explained.

“However, we were astonished to find out that one day they went horseback riding on a trail spanning hills, pastures, and forests across multiple ranches. To conceal their meeting, they separately rented horses from different ranches. However, they rendezvoused on the trail, riding side by side on their own horses. It seems that Jade is an expert rider who was teaching Krugman some horse control techniques. Later, Jade tied her horse to a tree and rode with Krugman on his horse. Krugman took the lead while Jade sat behind, occasionally embracing him with her alluring arms and hands wrapped around his waist,” Jacobs disclosed. “Amidst the thundering hoofbeats, Jade tied her hair with a violet cloth band as they galloped

across a pasture.”

Curious, Varshi asked, “Did you employ drones to discreetly capture videos?”

“We did not dare to use conventional drones for surveillance. Jade is an exceptional secret agent and could easily detect such electronic devices. Instead, we equipped two trained eagles with state-of-the-art micro cameras attached to their legs. These eagles soar high in the sky, serving as our ingenious method of surveillance,” Jacobs revealed.

Varshi nodded. “That’s indeed an ingenious approach!”

Jacobs smiled as he recounted the events. “They later ventured deep into the forest on horseback, leaving our eagles unable to track their movements. They remained inside for an extended period, and we were left in the dark about their activities. However, upon emerging from the dense foliage, Jade’s lustrous hair was miraculously untangled and radiated with newfound freshness, cascading down her shoulders! A thorough examination of the video footage revealed that both Krugman and Jade had minute specks of dirt on their clothes, which were absent when they entered the forest.”

Varshi frowned, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. “That is singular!”

Jacobs continued, his tone filled with uncertainty. “They rode back together to retrieve Jade’s horse, and then they went their separate ways. I can’t say for certain if Krugman is having an affair with Jade. I’m still searching for a theory that can reconcile all the facts.”

Varshi contemplated the situation, her gaze focused and intense. “Sometimes, certain plants flourish initially but later develop eccentricities. We often witness such sudden changes, both good and evil, in human behavior as well. It’s possible that the emergence of an extreme character could trigger this transformation, reaching a point beyond which they cannot progress. An external disturbance could then push them out of their usual orbit of behavior.”

Jacobs nodded thoughtfully but remained silent, withholding further comments. He broke the silence, suggesting their

next meeting place. “Next time, let’s meet in the park.”

Varshi responded, revealing a bit about her routine. “While I usually walk to my office, I do occasionally drive.”

Jacobs smiled, accepting her preference. “That’s perfectly alright! I enjoy conversing with people in a park. I can always come the following day. I must take my leave now.”

As Jacobs departed, Isaac’s image resurfaced in Varshi’s mind, captivating her thoughts.

Chapter 5

Rumour of a Great Peril

In the garden, Varshi inquired about stories of Isaac again.

Diego was well aware of Varshi's passion for tales of Isaac's adventures. He meticulously recorded every word Isaac uttered, ensuring that no gaps in the narrative went unnoticed.

Seated on chairs encircling a stone table, Diego began his account.

"One day, Isaac suddenly appeared. He was en route to Santa Barba to meet Helen and gather any updates on Pearl's rescue. Along the way, he dropped by to see me and made a peculiar request."

Diego paused, reflecting on the memory, before continuing.

"He asked, 'Could I borrow your computer for an hour?'"

Taken aback by the unexpected inquiry, I readily agreed," Diego recounted. "I left him in my room and continued with my work. While entering and exiting the room to retrieve or exchange tools, I caught glimpses of the videos he was engrossed in."

Varshi's smile hinted at her curiosity. "Was he searching for real estate or stock prices? It seems he takes precautionary measures to safeguard himself during his missions!"

Diego shook his head. "No, each time I entered the room, I found him watching videos of table tennis matches. Intrigued,

I sometimes lingered longer than necessary. On one occasion, he was particularly absorbed in a video featuring a girl competing against a robot – a ball-feeding machine. Towards the end of the match, he paused the video and reclined in his chair, his eyebrows furrowing. It seemed that the video had stirred a whirlwind of thoughts in his mind, prompting him to make a decision. Then he noticed my presence and warmly smiled. Not wanting him to suspect any ulterior motive, I gestured toward the screen and remarked, ‘What a talented young lady!’”

Diego took a moment to recall Isaac’s response before recounting it. “He smiled faintly and said, ‘I had to abandon my trip to Santa Barba. I must return to Arizona.’”

The garden air carried a sense of intrigue as the stories of Isaac continued to unfold.

“I stood there in astonishment, my mind grappling to comprehend what Isaac had just revealed.

‘I am going to see her,’ he declared, his finger pointing towards the screen.

In a playful manner, I jestingly remarked, ‘So, you’re abandoning your trip to visit Helen just because you want to see another beautiful girl? Who is she?’

Isaac’s smile was barely perceptible as he responded, ‘She is Jade.’

My shock was palpable. Jade was undeniably captivating and possessed remarkable athletic abilities. The fact that Isaac suddenly desired to see her left me astounded. I was well aware of Jade’s dangerous nature, and any encounter with her had the potential to be a treacherous trap. I felt deeply unsettled that she could have such an influence on Isaac, causing him to change his plans and turn back to see her.

Concern etched on my face, I voiced my worries. ‘You could see her after your trip to Santa Barba!’

Isaac turned to face me, his gaze typically firm and piercing, now filled with uncertainty and restlessness. His eyes betrayed a sense of anxiety, as if he feared making a difficult and possibly wrong decision. He explained, ‘It was an encoded Tates game. Jade had something urgent that she needed to tell me,

and she insisted we meet at the Arizona TT Club. Since she didn't know when I would view her message, she proposed multiple dates for our meeting. Several of those dates have already passed, and now there's only one remaining. I must rush back today to make it on time.'

With that, he abruptly left, disregarding my hospitable offer to share lunch together."

Curiosity piqued, Varshi inquired, "Did he eventually return?"

Diego nodded, recalling the events. "Yes, after about a week, he came to see me and apologized for his sudden departure. Over a meal of the pizzas I had baked, he shared his meeting with Jade, narrating a lengthy tale."

Varshi's agitation was evident, yet she patiently awaited further details, her curiosity unabated.

As was his habit, Diego fell silent, allowing the memories to resurface, his brows contracted with concentration. After a considerable pause, he finally spoke. "I believe Isaac disclosed most of the story to me, but I suspect there were certain parts he intentionally withheld and critical details that he omitted."

Varshi nodded and smiled.

Diego took a sip of his coffee. Placing the cup back on the table, he spoke with a somber tone, recounting the events of that fateful day. "The atmosphere was dreary when he arrived at the club. Around a dozen novice players were scattered across different tables, playing haphazardly. At the far end of the bar, a woman with shoulder-length hair sat perched on a tall stool, fixated on her half-filled glass of beer.

Isaac immediately recognized her as Jade, feeling an inexplicable connection between them. He believed she had sensed his presence through the reflections in her glass. Yet, he chose to ignore her, as if they had never met. Isaac poured himself a cup of draft beer and settled at the opposite end of the bar, away from her gaze. She made no effort to acknowledge him or even glance in his direction. Her obliviousness to Isaac's presence was striking.

After some time, Jade walked over to a corner of the club

where a ball-feeding robot was set up. She began playing against it, her focus unwavering. Isaac subtly turned his head, his eyes locked on her intense gameplay. While she played, a random player approached her, attempting to offer unsolicited advice on her strokes, which appeared unorthodox. He remarked, 'In a looping stroke, you should retract your paddle instead of swinging it all the way to the other side of your shoulder!' Jade responded with a seductive smile but paid no attention to his criticism, continuing her game with repetitive stroke patterns. Soon enough, she abruptly ended her game and left the club without sparing a single glance at Isaac."

"I believe," Varshi interjected, her voice filled with intrigue, "she was playing a Tatesl game, giving instructions to Isaac!"

Diego nodded in agreement. "Indeed she was. Approximately thirty minutes later, Isaac also departed from the club. He embarked on a faint trail that led up to a mountain. After an hour of running, he spotted a horse galloping in the distance, carrying Jade. Ignoring the sun's relentless descent, Isaac pressed on. Following a gently sloping path, she led him deep into a lush green forest. Upon entering the forest, he immediately felt a drop in temperature. The trees stood enveloped in mountain mist, casting a blurred appearance. The wildflowers and willows swayed pale and lackluster beneath the meager sunlight that filtered through the leaves, their colors appearing distorted and jarring.

Venturing further into the forest, Isaac's vision became limited to objects in close proximity. The air grew heavy, and the surroundings took on an eerie quality. Lost to sight, Jade remained elusive, and he proceeded with caution. The weight in the air intensified, and suddenly, a chill passed through his body, causing him to hold his breath. If this were a trap, he would have fallen into it, his predicament dire with little chance of escaping unscathed. The fragility of life hung by a thread.

He hesitated momentarily, his hand pausing in midair before he reached for the steel hat and donned the specialized jacket designed to withstand knife attacks. Peering out into the dimly lit surroundings, he meticulously surveyed the environ-

ment, employing his senses of sight, sound, and deep contemplation. His gaze penetrated the misty depths, scanning left and right. The air remained still, devoid of any indication of concealed humans or the unsettling feeling of being watched. With caution as his guiding principle, he resolved to proceed, every step taken with utmost care. Each movement was shrouded in an enigmatic aura, evoking a sense of thrilling mystery.

“As he turned a corner, his vision blurred by the mist, he caught a glimpse of a woman walking alongside a formidable creature. Although their forms were indistinct, he managed to keep them in his sight, tracking their movements.

Finally, they arrived at the bank of a river.

The woman motioned for Isaac to settle on a large boulder jutting out from the water’s surface. With a swift vanishing act, she and the horse disappeared into the surrounding woods.

Isaac placed his backpack on the ground and leaped onto the boulder, removing his hat and setting it aside. Seated there, he contemplated the mysterious actions of Jade. The mist hung heavily in the air, cloaking the environment in tranquil silence.

Suddenly, a loud splashing sound shattered the stillness. Isaac’s senses heightened, his eyes straining as he looked upstream. Through the fog, he discerned a floating object in the river. Gradually, he realized that it was Jade, swimming towards him. She stopped in front of the boulder, standing with the water reaching her shoulders, gripping the edges of the rock to steady herself.

“Though submerged in the water, Isaac could still make out her face, her hair dipping into the river’s current. She gazed at him intently, a cozy familiarity emanating from her. She spoke something with a suppressed voice, low and secret. Isaac could hardly hear her! He laid down in a lateral recumbent facing her so that his ears were close to her mouth. They were so close that he could feel the warmth of her breath.

‘Good afternoon, Isaac. It’s lovely to see you again,’ she whispered in a soft voice.

Isaac, suppressing his own voice, responded, ‘Good evening, Jade! I’m thrilled to see you too! Your unique way of greet-

ing an old friend never fails to amaze me. You truly are a fan of swimming! Just be cautious, though. The water is bitterly cold, and we mustn't forget about mountain lions and river crocodiles!

Jade pursed her lips, a hint of concern in her eyes. 'I wish I had a choice. While it's unlikely that they've bugged me with a tiny electronic device, I couldn't take any chances. By submerging myself in the water with minimal clothing, I can ensure that no one can eavesdrop on our conversation,' she explained in a hushed voice, almost a mere whisper.

Isaac experienced a wave of mixed emotions – anger, fervor, and a captivating intrigue that defied description. He matched her low voice, speaking in hushed tones. 'Now we can speak freely. I received your letter, the one with the drawing depicting me being hanged. Did you conspire with your comrades to bring about my demise?'

Jade shook her head, her expression resolute. 'No, otherwise I wouldn't have sent you the warning letter. I genuinely worry about you,' she declared."

Varshi interjected, "In their language, 'hanging' is a figurative expression for expressing concern."

Diego chimed in, intrigued. "That's fascinating! I wasn't aware of that. So, Isaac's heart softened. 'Thank you for your warning letter,' he expressed gratefully.

'Speaking honestly, I don't want to be eliminated. I managed to volunteer for another project, one that offers significantly greater safety – a venture aimed at exposing the incompetence of the US government,' Jade stated grimly. 'As I anticipated, they failed miserably once again in their attempt to capture you. I discovered that all the agents, except Fei, never returned. They vanished during the mission. Fei mentioned that they were all drowned.'

Isaac revealed, 'In truth, I rescued Fei! The others have perished.'

Curiosity gleaming in her eyes, Jade inquired, 'Why did you save him?'

Isaac replied, a profound sincerity in his voice, 'My parents

taught me that true courage lies not in taking a life, but in sparing one.'

Jade expressed in admiration, 'You possess such kindness! There might be other agents who managed to survive the tempest, but sorrow and fear had befallen them. They might feel that the tides of fate have turned against them, so they chose to disappear, hiding and taking refuge in this country!'

Isaac responded, 'In that case, I'm uncertain. Surviving the tempest would be an immense challenge for anyone. I warned Fei about the presence of a spy within his unit, and he subsequently shared the details of their mission with me.'

A smile graced Jade's face. 'So, you have a spy working for you in his unit?'

'Yes,' Isaac confirmed.

'Surprise me! Who is it?' Jade inquired, curiosity twinkling in her eyes.

'You are my spy,' Isaac revealed.

Jade burst into laughter. 'That's a bold assumption!'

A brief silence settled between them before Jade resumed the conversation.

'Whether or not they survive the tempest is of no concern to me. Isaac, I know that you were involved in the kidnapping of Folk.'

Isaac shuddered, his voice trembling. 'No, I have never kidnapped anyone in my life.'

'You were the shadow runner who outwitted the police. Very few individuals on this planet possess such endurance, and I know that no one else would undertake such actions but you,' Jade asserted. 'But there's no need to worry. Within our unit, anyone entertaining thoughts about the shadow runner and the kidnappers would feign complete ignorance. Many are afraid of you. Moreover, the use of firearms is prohibited in this country, and you always find sanctuary in the mountains. The chances of successfully kidnapping you are slim, and the cost of subduing you would be exorbitant.'

Isaac forced a bitter smile, attempting to steer the conversation away from the kidnapping topic. 'Thank you for your kind

words, but you underestimate this world. Your unit contains at least one agent whose endurance matches mine.'

Jade smiled skeptically, clearly unconvinced. 'That's not relevant here, and my purpose for coming here is not to verify whether or not you are the shadow runner. I will never disclose my suspicions to anyone. The reason for this meeting is to deliver a critical top-secret message to you, and it concerns Folk.'

As she spoke, a momentary pallor washed over her tender face. A flicker of fear seemed to cloud her features, rendering her momentarily silent, resembling a frightened little cat. Isaac was taken aback by the sudden change.

'Our leader, whom we refer to as Pig Head in private, is conspiring to become the dominant force in the world. He has initiated a secret project that is beyond my bottom line conscience. Nothing you heard would make you that despair,' she finally expressed with a tone of melancholy.

Isaac was shocked. He exclaimed in disbelief, 'You are betraying your country!'

Jade shook her head, a mixture of fear and sadness reflected in her eyes. 'No, I am betraying Pig Head, not my Motherland,' she clarified. 'Since he assumed leadership, dark thoughts have consumed him, and his ambition knows no bounds. He aspires to become an emperor, ruling with an iron fist for life. Malice and hatred fill his heart. To him, the sight of Americans bowing down and kneeling in submission brings him greater pleasure than seeing them happy and free.'

'He pours all his malice into the project, which is far more vicious and dangerous than I ever could imagine. It is destructive beyond reckoning,' Jade continued. 'It would ravage America and bring devastation to the entire world. Yet, I am not the least bit worried. It's not that I lack compassion for others, but I firmly believe that he will ultimately fail. In every aspect, he is a person of limited intelligence, with scant formal education and a lack of knowledge necessary for achieving anything significant. He revels in initiating grand projects, attempting to prove his superiority, but they all end in colossal failures, drain-

ing vast amounts of blood-and-sweat money from the people. His plans are always premature when he rushes into these ambitious endeavors. Even the brightest minds cannot foresee every outcome, but he foolishly believes he can. Consequently, the actual outcomes of his grand projects never align with his expectations. Sadly and regrettably, his failures only fuel the darker aspects of his character, intensifying his extreme actions and heightening his insatiable hunger for power. He is utterly wretched. His addiction to amassing more power has devoured his soul, leaving him a hollow shell. The resulting suffering inflicted upon the people under his rule is nearly unbearable. I am certain that his delusional dream of enslaving the world will undoubtedly crumble in miserable defeat.'

"Curious, Isaac asked, 'If his failure is inevitable, why do you still worry?'

Jade's expression turned grave as she replied, 'Unfortunately, even if he fails in his goal of world domination, millions of lives would still be lost as a consequence of his project. It would be an immense tragedy for the world. What's even more horrific is that if he fails to obliterate the West this time, he might view it as an opportunity to experiment with imprisoning his own people. He could repeat this cycle of suffering in the future.'

A chill ran down Isaac's spine, causing him to shudder. 'This is even more appalling than I had imagined. That's why you are urgently trying to raise the alarm, to mitigate the devastation his actions would cause,' he remarked.

Jade nodded in agreement. 'Exactly. And I need to disseminate this information in a highly confidential and secure manner. Many individuals oppose his ideas, but Pig Head has been leveraging his power to coerce comrades into supporting his plans. No one truly knows who is part of the opposing factions. He constantly has loyalists pretend to oppose him, all in an effort to uncover the true dissidents. Any high-ranking officials deemed disloyal to him can be swiftly imprisoned under the guise of anti-corruption campaigns. However, sooner or later, everyone grows weary of his foolishness and cruelty. Multiple factions stand against his schemes, attempting to leak

his secrets to the outside world. For the sake of my own people and the world at large, I have chosen to align myself with the opposition factions and leak his plans.'

The gravity of the situation weighed heavily on Isaac, causing yet another chill to run down his spine.

Jade fell into contemplative silence, gathering her thoughts. 'They have engineered a highly contagious virus within a military laboratory,' she finally disclosed. 'This virus is ten times deadlier than the flu, and Folk was involved in this project. They plan to deliberately create evidence that the virus has escaped from the lab, but in reality, they will purposely infect the population of a major city and then impose a strict lockdown, preventing people from traveling to other parts of the country. However, they will allow infected individuals to fly all over the world. As a result, a global pandemic would rapidly unfold, overwhelming hospitals and plunging the world into chaos. They believe that this pandemic would bring the rest of the world to a standstill, while they, with their iron-fist policies, would swiftly recover and ultimately dominate the world.'

Jade's voice wavered with sadness as she continued, 'Millions of people would succumb to the virus. Anyone with an ounce of conscience would be compelled to help put an end to this madness.'

Once again, Isaac shuddered, feeling a wave of confusion washing over him. 'Then they should hide any evidence that the virus is created in the lab!'

Jade solemnly shook her head. 'They firmly believe that Americans, and the West in general, are both naive and corrupt,' she explained. 'They are convinced that the West will easily succumb to their carefully crafted narrative and arguments. As they unleash the virus, they will actively promote the theory that the virus is of natural origin, having made a cross-species jump from animals to humans at some point.'

She continued, 'The lab-leak theory serves as nothing more than a smokescreen. They have invested a significant amount of their trade surplus to corrupt the scientific community. Their calculations lead them to believe that when they push the nar-

rative of a naturally occurring virus, the corrupted portion of the scientific community would rally behind them, vehemently advocating for this theory. Numerous compromised scientists, including those within world health organizations, will lend their voices to support their agenda, discrediting the lab-leak argument as a mere conspiracy theory. Their infiltration is so pervasive that even the free world would willingly censor any discussions related to a lab-leak.'

Jade paused, her expression one of solemn realization. 'However, science is science. Sooner or later, more and more scientists would discover that the natural-born theory cannot withstand rigorous trials and tests. Over the course of approximately a year, the censorship would gradually be lifted, and more people would lean towards the belief that the virus originated in the lab. Yet, no one would be absolutely certain, as many compromised scientists would vehemently insist on the natural-born theory. While the scientific community debates between the natural-born and lab-leak theories, the true scenario of the virus being deliberately unleashed would be forgotten. The scientific community would consider it a victory if they can successfully win the debate and confirm the lab-leak scenario.'

Isaac was quivering with silent anger. He said, 'This is truly horrifying, Jade! I trust you, and I will certainly do everything I can to help spread your message. However, I have very few friends. Since your last mission, some of your comrades may not fully trust you, and they might suspect a connection between us. To ensure your safety, I cannot disclose how I plan to propagate the message or who will be involved in spreading it.'

Jade nodded, tears streaming down her face. 'You are the only person I can trust. If we can alert the world in time to mitigate this catastrophe, I will have accomplished something truly significant in my life.'

Isaac let out a heavy sigh. 'All we can do now is pray and leave the outcome in God's hands. The annual trade deficit of the US, amounting to four hundred billion dollars, has the

power to corrupt countless souls. Many officials working in the government and the media have fallen victim to corruption. No matter what we do, your message, which is already difficult for an ordinary person to believe, will face significant hurdles in reaching a wider audience. Nevertheless, we must do our best.'

Jade nodded resolutely. 'At least, I have risked my life to do what is right and played my part. I can have peace in my heart.'

Isaac agreed, his expression grave. 'If he succeeds, he will indeed take over the world. Previous failures do not guarantee failure in the future.'

Jade shook her head with certainty. 'I know him better than anyone, as do my comrades. The West would approach this problem using scientific methods, allowing various parties to propose and test different solutions. Eventually, the most effective method would emerge and become universally adopted. However, our leader handles it purely through political means, driven by his own wishful thinking. This approach is destined to fail.'

Isaac let out a weary sigh. 'This is a heavy burden to bear. I wish I could help you sever ties with your organization, as you requested back on the cliff.'

Jade responded, 'It's actually a blessing that I am still connected to them. Otherwise, I would have never discovered the existence of this horrific project and would not have been able to leak it to the world.'

She fell silent, the weight of the situation pressing upon her."

Varshi interjected, "Isaac spreads the message by telling you the story."

"Yes," Diego said. "I have shared the message with my close friends, without revealing its origin. Unfortunately, no one believes it."

Varshi chimed in, "I will inform relevant individuals, but I am uncertain if anyone will take it seriously."

The first person Varshi thought of sharing the information with was Jacobs.

Varshi asked, "Did they discuss any other matters?"

Diego nodded. “Yes, as Jade was about to leave, Isaac suddenly asked her, ‘Jade, I heard that you had a close relationship with Krugman.’

Jade smiled sweetly in response. ‘I am delighted that you are keeping tabs on my activities! This is the project I volunteered to work on in order to escape from the mission of targeting you!’

Isaac frowned as he spoke, ‘I have come across numerous messages on the Internet regarding your supposed bet to conquer him. Many even claim that you had an affair with him.’

Jade pursed her lips in displeasure. ‘I am not that cheap. Our relationship was purely for business purposes. He is a complete hypocrite. In the workplace and in public, he maintains a polite and gentle facade, leading his colleagues to believe he is a true gentleman.’

She continued, a sense of frustration in her voice, ‘Once, we rode on horseback to a remote forest to avoid potential surveillance. It was there that he revealed his true nature, far from prying eyes and cameras. He disgusted me, showering me with compliments about my beauty and regal manner. He claimed to have fallen in love with me at first sight and professed that he would go to great lengths for me. He suddenly tried to embrace me, but I resisted his advances. Despite my efforts to push him away, he displayed unexpected strength. Remaining steadfast, I did not blench. I grabbed his upper arms and my feet pushed hard against the ground. As he instinctively pushed back to counter my force, I released the pressure suddenly and arched my body backward. As I fell onto the ground on my back, I hurled his whole body over my head. His back hit the grass-land while I flowed with the momentum, as I rolled backward and quickly regained my footing.’

Jade recounted the encounter, a defiant glint in her eyes. ‘Disregarding the pain, he picked himself up and faced me. I stared at him, unwavering. He emitted a venomous giggle and, in a sudden burst of aggression, discarded his jacket, assuming the demeanor of a wild animal pursuing its prey. He extended his arms and leapt high, attempting to capture and embrace me

once more. Swiftly, I sidestepped, bending my body to the left, and executed a powerful kick to his legs. He crashed heavily onto the grass, his face meeting the soil as he tasted a mouthful of dirt and grass. Remarkably, he sustained no injuries, but lay on the ground like a defeated child, spitting out the earth. I admonished him, stating that my mission did not involve entertaining any man, and that he should direct his love towards his wife and family, not a foreign spy. The last thing a man should lose is his dignity.'

Taking a deep breath, Jade continued her account. 'Calm-ing himself, he stood up and wiped the dirt from his face with his hands. He smiled brightly, bowing and apologizing to me, assuming the role of a gentleman once more, as if the entire attack had never occurred. Since then, he has maintained a proper demeanor in his interactions with me.'

"Isaac listened in astonishment, his disbelief evident. 'It is truly shocking that he would resort to attacking you! I held great respect for him, considering him a champion of freedom and justice, a remarkably courageous politician. I am saddened to learn that you were able to make him yield and publicly alter his political views. It would be a tremendous humiliation for any ordinary person. I never expected him to be such a hypocrite.'

Jade responded calmly, 'We do not target individuals without thorough understanding. We extensively research our targets before taking any action.'

Isaac let out a sigh. 'I am aware of the methods you employed to conquer him and manipulate his political stance.'

Jade acknowledged his knowledge. 'I am not surprised that you are aware, and I, too, feel sorry for him.'

Isaac expressed his determination, 'I am sorry, Jade, but I have to expose these wicked dealings.'

Jade responded firmly, 'That is not my concern. I wish you success. I can provide you with a hint.'"

Diego paused in his storytelling, deep in thought about the details of the story. After a moment, he resumed, "Madam, is Krugman truly as bad as described, or did Jade fabricate the

story to justify her actions?”

Varshi pondered the question before responding, “I cannot say for certain, though I am inclined to believe that it is true. By the way, what hints did she provide to Isaac?”

Diego answered, “Isaac did not disclose the hints to me. It appears to be something secretive and critical that he did not wish to share with anyone.”

Varshi inquired, “I see. Did Jade leave immediately after providing the hint?”

Diego shook his head. “No, they ended up in an argument.

Isaac voiced his concerns, his tone filled with worry. ‘It is perilous for any ordinary person to engage in such activities. Don’t you see that this is evil? Why do you assist them?’

Jade responded, her voice softening. ‘I am simply fulfilling my mission. Isaac, you have spent most of your time hiding in the mountains, consumed by a single-minded desire for revenge against those you despise. But you don’t truly understand the reality.’

Isaac defended his actions. ‘It is not about personal vengeance. Otherwise, I would not have saved you and Fei. It is about justice and protecting humanity from potential disaster.’

Jade appeared crestfallen, contemplating Isaac’s condemnation. After a moment, she attempted to divert the conversation away from herself. Speaking in a gentler tone, she said, ‘Isaac, though your actions may seem wild, I do not see violence within you. You are benevolent and seek to save humanity. However, humans cannot save humans. Only God can. I have devoted a significant portion of my life to serving my Motherland. Our leaders have taught us that our party is the bringer of light, fortune, and auspiciousness. The days of suffering and bitterness are long gone. Our Great Leader, the Great Teacher, possesses such serenity that he radiates like the red sun, spreading benevolence, enlightenment, and a zest for life to all. Under his guidance, our Motherland is a paradise for everyone, except the counter-revolutionaries who must be dealt with mercilessly. We assist anyone who confesses to achieve this joyful serenity, working towards the transformation of our

Motherland into a paradise. The Great Teacher instructs us to heal the sick, save lives, and promote cheerfulness, always offering a chance for reform. Only a small number of hopelessly stubborn individuals who refuse to confess face execution.'

Jade continued her heartfelt confession. 'For a long time, I believed in these teachings and admired our Great Leader, viewing all dissidents as harmful elements. I wholeheartedly participated in pursuing, capturing, and sometimes kidnapping them, employing cunning methods without showing mercy. Each time I subdued a dissident, I felt a sense of triumph in my heart, believing that I was assisting my people in attaining cheerful serenity. That was my worldview and my conviction until I imprisoned and ultimately executed a young, honest religious believer who deeply trusted and loved me. His death was a miserable one. As I witnessed his innocence, naivety, truthfulness, kindness, and tolerance, guilt and despair began to consume me. I started to question and reflect upon the righteousness of my actions. This transformation began before our second encounter, when you rescued me. Meeting you only further accelerated my journey of self-discovery.'

Jade's voice filled with disillusionment as she continued her reflection. 'I woke up one day to realize that all those teachings were nothing but garbage, and the Great Leader was nothing more than a foolish imbecile. I'm astounded by how long I believed in such stupid nonsense.'

She paused, the weight of her realization sinking in. 'I now understand that, with the exception of a few, the fugitives I pursued were helpless, harmless, innocent, and terrified. They lacked the courage to resist, as we held their families and loved ones hostage. They simply complied with our orders. Even the billionaire who constantly surrounded himself with a dozen bodyguards offered no resistance when we approached him in Hong Kong. He meekly followed our instructions and returned to the Motherland.'

Jade's tone grew somber. 'Except in your case, my missions were often won without much struggle, and I foolishly took pride in it. How childish I was! The entire narrative of my

work, which I once believed to be a holy task, has now become a tangled web of confusion, deception, and despair.’

“As she awakened to the true nature of her leaders, Jade delved even deeper into her introspection. ‘While I’ve come to see the real faces of my leaders, I don’t stop there. I continue to delve further into the examination of this world. I have to tell you, Isaac, that human nature is universal. Greed, the love of power, and the pursuit of excessive sensational pleasure consume us all. At times, I find myself questioning whether Creation is the work of God or the Devil.’

Her voice carried a heavy sense of resignation. ‘We are all sinners, whether inside or outside this country. The world, whether within or around us, is never one-sided. No person is a complete saint or a total devil. We are complex beings, with both light and darkness within us.’

Jade’s voice carried a sense of clarity and revelation. ‘Since meeting you, Isaac, I have begun to see the true nature of the world, the ugliness and dark side that exists not only within my leaders but also in other nations. It is not a singular phenomenon limited to my Motherland. I have come to view the world with an open mind, understanding that the people here in America are just as sinful as we are. They simply conceal their sins behind beautiful words and under the guise of protecting democracy and freedom. My encounters with Krugman have only reaffirmed this perspective.’

She continued, her voice tinged with a mix of observation and cynicism. ‘Nature itself serves as a guide, distinguishing what is sinful and what is not. When individuals engage in sinful acts, even they feel guilt and remorse. To alleviate their guilty conscience, they try to justify their actions and entice others to partake in their sins. And when the devil has successfully enticed enough people to engage in these sinful acts, those acts suddenly become lawful and the inherently sinful appears unsinful.’

Jade’s tone grew more solemn as she turned her attention to the country she now found herself in. ‘A dark cloud is looming over this country, mirroring the path we have taken. In the

name of protecting democracy and freedom of speech, they selectively censor certain voices and ban those they dislike or disagree with. The path they tread is a treacherous one, their actions revealing the contradictions between their professed values and their actual behavior. The cloud of hypocrisy hangs heavy over this land. That's the reality of this country.'

Isaac said, 'Your words hold a certain truth. However, in this realm, we possess the freedom to make choices. Amidst chaos, I choose the righteous path.'

Jade responded tactfully, 'I won't argue with you on that point. Unlike my companions, I recognize your thoughtfulness, making you someone I'd gladly engage in a debate with. Nevertheless, our argument would seem never-ending.'

Letting out a sigh, Isaac acknowledged, 'You possess great intelligence, regardless of anything else. I don't believe I can persuade you to change your perspective, but I sincerely hope that you make the right choices.'

There was a moment of silence before Jade spoke again, 'I wish someday I could chat with you about life and the purpose of life at the club's bar, away from the cold depths of this moment.'

Diego paused and continued, "Jade gave a warning, saying, 'I must emphasize once more that they are still pursuing you. After their failed attempt, they have devised another plan to eliminate you!'

Isaac calmly replied, 'I'm not surprised, and I am always prepared.'

Jade cautioned, 'Isaac, promise me that you will never go near any water source again, be it an ocean, lake, or river. Drowning has been their preferred method of eliminating dissidents, and they rarely fail.'

With a hint of laughter in his voice, Isaac reassured her, 'It won't be easy to drown me.'

Jade explained further, 'Their plan is to swim you to death.'

Isaac chuckled, 'They haven't learned their lesson! They would collapse before I succumb to drowning!'

Jade's expression turned serious. 'No, they have anticipated

it! An agent will wear a mini-propeller fueled by gasoline. With that propeller, they can swim a distance five times greater than usual. There's no way you could out-swim such an agent!

Isaac frowned and fell into silence. Finally, he responded, 'Thank you for the warning, Jade.'

Jade nodded, aware of the passing time. 'The day is fading. I must leave. The danger grows with each passing moment. Goodbye for now. Do not leave this forest until at least half an hour after I have departed, and avoid heading East, the direction I am taking. If someone discovers that we have met, I will be in great peril.'

Isaac nodded and gently kissed her forehead before bidding her farewell.

With a strong thrust against the boulder using her feet, she propelled herself backward in the water. She gazed at Isaac, her eyes welling up with tears once again. Isaac watched as she disappeared into the river amidst the thick mist. He sat on the boulder, lost in thought, overcome by sadness and a heavy heart. He had no idea when he would see her again, or if they would ever cross paths in the future. Eventually, he left the forest, burdened by sorrow, long after Jade had already departed."

Varshi inquired, "Where did he go?"

Diego shared, "He hinted that he was going to meet Helen, but he didn't provide any details, so I'm unaware of what transpired afterward. It seems he is engaged in an important and risky mission that he needs to complete!"

Varshi commented, "He always finds himself involved in perilous missions that are challenging to undertake, let alone successfully accomplish."

After Diego had left, Varshi subsided into deep thinking. She was startled out of her thought when Edward came in.

Before taking a seat, he exclaimed excitedly, "Krugman has resigned from his position!"

Varshi was taken aback. "Really? What were the reasons?" she inquired.

Edward pulled up a chair, sat down, and replied, "He cited health problems as the cause, stating that he is no longer able

to fulfill his duties.”

Varshi expressed her confusion, saying, “He didn’t appear ill and even participated in a fundraising rally just a week ago.”

Edward nodded in agreement. “I agree. Many analysts doubt the reasons behind his resignation. Instead, they believe that his career suffered greatly due to Jade’s humiliation, resulting in the loss of his core supporters.”

Varshi frowned and commented, “ Americans care about internal national problems a lot more than international problems. His change in stance toward Strong Nation may have caused him to lose some longtime supporters, but it’s possible that he could gain new ones. Nevertheless, that should only constitute a small portion of his support base.”

Edward concurred, “That’s also a valid point. Perhaps his resignation truly is due to health problems!”

Chapter 6

Horror in a Mountain

It was a pleasant evening as Varshi made her way home, strolling along a picturesque trail in a densely populated park adorned with beautiful trees. The golden rays of sunlight filtered through the leaves and branches, casting a gentle glow over the miniature forest. The harmonious melodies of birdsong, the rustling of treetops, and the soothing gurgle of a nearby stream blended together into a captivating symphony. Unable to resist the allure of the enchanting surroundings, she decided to prolong her stay. Settling onto an empty bench, she immersed herself in the melodious chorus of birds while reflecting on the interconnected stories of Isaac, Jade, and Krugman, all intertwined in her mind. Gradually, she became lost in her thoughts, motionless on the bench.

Lost in contemplation, Varshi's gaze fixated on the abstract patterns, when suddenly, she noticed the presence of someone else beside her on the bench, jolting her out of her reverie.

To her surprise, an old man with white hair and a beard sat there, gazing at her with a smile. Dressed in a yellow T-shirt, blue shorts, and white tennis shoes, he appeared rather unconventional. Notably, he was without a watch or pen.

Feeling a hint of discomfort, Varshi contemplated getting up and leaving.

“Good evening, Varshi! Apologies for interrupting your thoughts,” the man unexpectedly addressed her. It dawned on her that he was Jacobs, though he seemed entirely different.

Varshi settled back onto the bench and greeted him, saying, “Good evening, Jacobs. It’s nice to see you.”

Engaging in conversation without direct eye contact, both Varshi and Jacobs spoke their minds.

As Varshi gazed at a nearby tree, she expressed, “There is nothing more captivating than listening to your stories! Any updates on Krugman and Jade?”

Jacobs crossed his legs, reclining against the bench while directing his gaze towards the distant sky. He responded, “Yes, and we have acquired the information from the most unexpected sources. But before we delve into that, do you have something to share with me?”

Varshi maintained her composure, providing no overt response to his question. Instead, she proceeded to share the “rumor” she had heard, carefully omitting any mention of its source, avoiding references to Jade, Isaac, or Diego.

Jacobs frowned, descending into a prolonged silence. After a while, he spoke, “I find it hard to believe such a plot. It appears to be a clash between different factions attempting to undermine each other by spreading damaging rumors. The whole scheme seems far-fetched and ultimately futile. There is an abundance of outlandish stories circulating on the internet,” he concluded.

Varshi agreed, “Indeed, I share your doubts. I also learned about Krugman’s resignation from his post. I assume you are already aware of it.”

Jacobs refrained from making any comments, instead opting to rise from the bench, pacing around for a moment before returning to his previous seat. He stated, “Over the past few months, I’ve gathered a web of information from various unrelated sources, some obtained incidentally. Curiously enough, these fragments of information seem to form a coherent jigsaw puzzle, painting a complete picture when assembled.”

Varshi commented, “You are referring to the Krugman puz-

zle!”

Jacobs nodded and continued, “First, I discovered that approximately a year ago, a health insurance company’s database was hacked, resulting in the theft of sensitive information belonging to all its clients.”

Varshi interjected, “How does this relate to the Krugman puzzle?”

Jacobs responded, “As it turns out, the Krugman family has been a client of this company for several years.”

Varshi nonchalantly replied, “That doesn’t come as a surprise.”

Jacobs said, “Some of the hacked data was leaked and subsequently posted on the Dark Web. It was from there that I discovered both Krugman and his wife have kidney cancer.”

Varshi was taken aback by this revelation. “It’s truly unimaginable,” she expressed in shock.

Jacobs continued, “While it may be uncommon in other parts of the world, it is not unusual for an American to develop the disease in their fifties.”

Curiosity getting the better of her, Varshi inquired, “Did they seek any treatment in this country?”

Jacobs responded, “I don’t have that information. However, I discovered that Krugman vanished from the public eye for a few weeks a couple of months ago. Several of his scheduled activities were abruptly canceled.”

Varshi deduced, “So, it is true that his resignation was due to health problems!”

Once again, Jacobs evaded her question and redirected the conversation. He said, “About a month ago, Helen’s parents reached out to me. They decided to make amends and reconcile with their daughter. Fearful of the liberal movements in the country, they now accept anyone Helen chooses to marry, as long as he is a man and law-abiding. They have pledged to respect him, even if he happens to be homeless.”

Varshi appeared bewildered by the news, but she chose to remain silent, keeping her emotions in check.

Jacobs continued, “Helen opened up to her parents and re-

counted her mysterious adventures with Isaac, including her trip to Mexico, conveying the wonder and passion she experienced. Though concerned for her safety, her parents refrained from criticizing her and instead showed great interest in her stories. They were anxious, retelling the details of Helen's journey to me, seeking advice and assistance."

Reflecting on the situation, Jacobs shared his perspective, "I assured them that Isaac is a man of integrity, bravery, and kindness. He will always protect Helen. This seemed to help them feel more at ease."

Varshi listened intently, her gaze fixed on a tree, fully engrossed in Jacobs' narrative.

Jacobs continued, "What they recounted to me was truly bewildering. Isaac embarked on a mission to a mysterious location in Mexico, a place Helen had long yearned to visit.

Helen said to Isaac, 'It would mean the world to me if you allowed me to accompany you.'

Initially, Isaac hesitated, reluctant to bring her along. However, Helen explained that her dream was to conduct research on the indigenous tribes in that enigmatic area, but she felt uneasy about going alone. She needed assistance. On the other hand, she offered to capture photos and videos for Isaac during his mission.

Concerned for Helen's safety and aware of the potential challenges and hardships of the trip, Isaac weighed his options. Ultimately, he was convinced that they could support each other during the journey, and he relented.

Isaac advised, 'It would be greatly appreciated if you could enhance your endurance in running before the trip.'

Helen eagerly accepted the challenge. Over the course of two months, she underwent rigorous training to improve her running abilities. Finally, on a morning at a valley near the border, where a river flowed, Isaac and Helen met. It was possible that Isaac had run there while Helen drove to a nearby town. Together, they crossed the river, entering Mexico. They traversed a steep hill and spent the entire day running. After passing through a vast forest, they found themselves beneath a

reddish evening sky, illuminated by the remnants of sunlight. Crossing a grassland, they arrived at a small Indian village, where a group of herders guided their cows and goats up a hill, where the grass was plentiful and a stream flowed.

Isaac introduced Helen to his friend, Dakota, a middle-aged native Indian with discerning eyes. Dakota graciously accommodated them in a modest hut.

Helen was captivated and filled with excitement upon encountering this community of herders. She reached for her camera, ready to capture videos of the village, but Dakota halted her. He forbade her from taking any pictures or videos of the village. However, he agreed to allow Helen to conduct an interview with him.

“The following morning, Isaac and Helen bid farewell to the village and embarked on their journey. They ran with determination, delving deeper into the vast mountains, traversing forests, canyons, rivers, and valleys. The region they ventured into was characterized by its mountainous terrain and sparse population, predominantly inhabited by native Indian tribes who primarily communicated through running.

Curiosity piqued, Varshi inquired, “Are these tribes the Tarahumara? They are renowned for their long-distance running.”

Jacobs clarified, “No, the Tarahumara tribes are concentrated in the highlands of the Sierra Madre Occidental, or reside in las barrancas – the gorges of the Sierra Madre, which are located more towards the central regions of Mexico. However, the areas Isaac and Helen visited are closer to the Northern border. The Indian tribes residing there are not as well-known, but many of them possess impressive running abilities. Helen didn’t disclose the precise location to her parents, so they couldn’t provide exact details.”

Eager for more information, Varshi inquired, “How long did they run? Where did they sleep at night?”

Jacobs responded, “They ran for three days. On the first day, they reached a canyon and endured several grueling hours in the scorching heat before finding respite in a shaded area. Helen had never encountered such hardships in her life, but she

didn't utter a single complaint or request a break. She quietly followed Isaac, running from one mountain to another. She was well aware that Isaac had considerably slowed his pace to accommodate her. At night, they sought refuge in a forest with towering trees. Isaac set up two nets, attaching each corner to branches, creating makeshift beds for them to sleep on."

Curiosity sparked, Varshi asked, resembling an intrigued child inquiring about a fairy tale, "Did any animals bother them?"

Jacobs replied, "For the first two nights, nothing out of the ordinary occurred. However, on the third night, when they had ventured deep into the mountains and found themselves encircled by magnificent trees, Isaac sensed potential danger. They decided to halt their journey for the night. As was their routine, Isaac set up the nets between the trees for them to sleep on. Helen, exhausted from the day's exertions, climbed onto her net and began to drift off to sleep, her eyes growing heavy. Though she briefly noticed Isaac gathering dried leaves, bundles of twigs, and broken wood, she was too fatigued to ask any questions. Soon, she succumbed to a deep slumber. In the middle of the night, she had a vivid dream, permeated with the scent of aromatic herbs, the distant howl of a wolf, and the flickering glow of a fire. Startled awake, she sat up, realizing that her dream wasn't merely a figment of her imagination.

Isaac skillfully kindled a fire using the dried wood at the center of the tree circle, and the enchanting aroma that Helen had detected actually emanated from the burning wood.

Now fully awake, Helen began to discern the distant howls of wolves, gradually growing clearer and seemingly drawing nearer with each passing moment. While she felt a slight nervousness, fear did not consume her.

Descending from her net, she joined Isaac in tending to the fire, adding more wood to its crackling flames.

'Are the wolves approaching?' she inquired, seeking reassurance.

"Isaac shook his head, replying, 'A pack of wolves had been roaming in the vicinity. They may have been lured by the scent and were heading our way. However, now that we have lit a

fire, which they fear, they will likely keep their distance.'

Though the howls persisted, Helen's anxiety subsided. As the fire grew larger, she found herself growing increasingly relaxed and warmed by its comforting glow. She settled down, gathering slender branches from the ground, effortlessly breaking them into shorter segments, and casually tossing them into the flames.

Isaac collected more wood, placing them near the fire, and settled down beside Helen to admire the flickering spectacle.

'A fire created by burning wood has a soothing effect that aids sleep,' Isaac remarked.

Helen smiled, her eyes sparkling. 'It's also the perfect time for you to share your stories!' she suggested, eager to hear his tales.

"Isaac shared, his voice tinged with nostalgia, 'Dakota told me about the previous inhabitants of this forest. They dwelled here in constant fear, engaged in perpetual battles against wild animals and invaders. The forest was their everything – their home, cradle, sanctuary, fortress, and burial ground. They believed the forest encompassed the entire world, with emptiness and a terrifying inferno lying beyond its borders. However, by chance, two dwellers managed to venture beyond the forest while hunting or escaping from beasts. There, they discovered the radiant sun, the vast grassland, and the wonders of a different world. It was hot but not horrifying, unfamiliar yet not terrifying. The tales they had heard about the outside world were nothing but lies and deception. They witnessed the blue sky, the verdant mountains, and the vibrant, swaying flowers that filled them with fleeting moments of happiness. These brave dwellers returned to inform the others of the fantastical world awaiting them and encouraged them to migrate. Although most were gripped by fear of the unknown, a few chose to follow them, ultimately becoming prosperous herdsman in the grasslands, leading joyful lives.'

Helen's smile widened as she remarked, 'How fascinating! Perhaps you should share this tale with your family. You too could enjoy a prosperous and content life in this wonderland.'

Isaac nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders, replying, 'I don't have a family, not yet.'

Curiously, Helen asked, 'Isn't Pearl your wife?'

Isaac corrected her, stating, 'No, she is my fiance. We are engaged, but we have not yet married.'

Varshi interjected, observing, "It seems Isaac prefers not to discuss his past."

Jacobs agreed, adding, "Indeed, but he went on to confide in Helen that he is waiting for Pearl."

Helen inquired, her voice filled with curiosity, 'You are still deeply in love with her?'

Isaac let out a sigh, his words carrying a hint of melancholy, 'In the beginning, she constantly occupied my thoughts and dreams, as if she was a confidante close to my heart, someone for whom my love and protection held immeasurable significance. I shed tears for her. However, as time passes, those intense emotions gradually wane. It has been a long time, and now my love for her feels more like an obligation. Before we parted ways, we made a commitment to wait for each other for ten years. If we cannot reunite within that time frame, we will part ways. After my escape, she was apprehended and imprisoned. Since then, we lost all contact with each other. You mentioned that Martin was able to get in touch with her. That is indeed good news!'

Curiosity brimming in her eyes, Helen asked, 'Do you have confidence that both of you will honor the agreement and won't change your minds within the ten-year period?'

Isaac's voice resonated with firmness and a touch of sadness as he responded, 'Yes, I have never doubted it. I am certain that she is waiting for me as well.'

His gaze fixated on the crackling flames, Isaac fell into a contemplative silence. With a subdued tone, almost as if speaking to himself, he mused, 'What truly defines an obligation? How many obligations do people often neglect without a hint of remorse? How many promises have they made and broken? What is the profound significance of this obligation of love, one that I must fulfill and steadfastly uphold?'

Isaac posed these questions, finding solace in answering them within his own thoughts. ‘That is the fundamental difference between them and me. Though I have encountered trials and temptations, I refuse to bend and succumb to their ways. If I were to do so, my life would be squandered, and I would no longer be deserving of carrying out my pursuit of justice. Even if I were to fail in every aspect, at the very least, I would have upheld my integrity and lived a purposeful life – a life befitting a human being.’

Once again, silence enveloped the space, leaving room for contemplation.

Helen, captivated by Isaac’s unwavering determination, expressed her awe, ‘It would truly be extraordinary and magical if an engaged couple could endure a ten-year separation without seeing each other or wavering in their commitment.’

Isaac gently shook his head, dismissing the notion of magic or miracles. ‘I don’t believe it to be a matter of magic or miracles. During my time in Hong Kong, someone showed me an old newspaper that detailed the release of a dissident named Lau, a Hong Kong resident who had been sentenced to ten years in jail in the Mainland. His crime? Spreading democratic ideals during a visit to the Mainland. For a decade, he endured loneliness and helplessness, perceiving everything around him as bleak and devoid of reason. The days grew dimmer and his cell darker. However, within his mind, a flicker of light persisted – the flame of love.’

Isaac continued, recounting the story with conviction. ‘From the train’s windows that carried him homeward, Lau witnessed new buildings adorned with glistening windows and verdant gardens, glimpsing the brighter aspects of humanity. As he stepped out of the railway station, weakened and pale, among the crowd stood his fiancée. They had not seen each other or communicated for a decade, yet she had silently waited. In that moment, jubilation overwhelmed him, and she stood there, radiant. A few days later, they celebrated their marriage – a tale that deserves to be sung, glorified, and remembered. It is people like the Lau couple who shape history, not the so-called

‘Great Leader’ – a mere embodiment of deceit and shameless lies.’

With unwavering admiration, Helen responded, ‘It is truly marvelous, a song worth singing! I wholeheartedly wish you success in your own journey and a swift reunion with Pearl.’

They proceeded to enjoy some snacks while engaging in casual conversation for the remainder of the evening. Helen dominated the discussion, expressing surprise at Isaac’s lack of familiarity with common American concepts such as the Super Bowl and the Congressional structure comprising the House and Senate. Nevertheless, Isaac displayed keen interest in the trivia Helen shared.

As dawn approached, they extinguished the fire, packed their belongings, and resumed running. Upon reaching the heart of the forest, they once again heard the chilling howls of wolves echoing through the surroundings.

Observing the persistent presence of the wolves, Isaac remarked, ‘It seems they haven’t departed but are merely wandering about. We should increase our pace.’

Helen made a valiant effort to run faster, but over time, the howling grew increasingly distinct and louder.

Coming to the realization that they couldn’t outrun the wolves, Isaac steered them into an area dense with trees. They stopped beneath a magnificent specimen.

Issuing three cloth debris balls to Helen, Isaac urged her to ascend the tree. In response, Helen pleaded with him to climb alongside her.

Isaac firmly stated, ‘No, I will confront them directly, or else we’ll be trapped on this tree without sustenance. If you witness me in peril, you can ignite one of the balls and hurl it at the wolves. However, I anticipate managing the situation capably on my own!’

“Reluctantly, Helen agreed. As she scaled the tree, Isaac unburdened himself of his backpack and retrieved a specially crafted frustum made of robust plastic. It featured rubber cushions at both ends, allowing him to insert his left hand into and through it, enveloping his forearm securely.

The wolves drew nearer, their menacing presence felt in the vicinity.

Perched upon a sturdy tree branch, Helen rested against the towering trunk, her eyes fixed on agile shapes darting through the forest. Before long, a group of ten wolves approached Isaac cautiously, their wild howls filling the air.

Fixing his gaze upon the foremost wolf, distinguished by its imposing size and commanding presence, Isaac advanced, prompting the creature to instinctively step back. Fear and irritation filled the wolf's eyes as it leaped into the air, propelled by an inexplicable burst of energy, hurtling toward Isaac with jaws wide open, exposing its razor-sharp teeth. In response, Isaac raised his left arm and boldly surged forward, bracing himself for the impending attack.

With a fierce bite, the wolf clamped down on the frustum.

Isaac emitted a mighty roar, surpassing the combined howls of the entire pack. Utilizing the wolf's momentum, he swiftly swung his body, the wolf clinging tenaciously to the frustum. At approximately three-quarters of a rotation, Isaac abruptly opened his palm and delivered a lightning-fast strike with his left arm.

The wolf lost its grip on the frustum and was forcefully hurled away. Two of its teeth shattered, inadvertently colliding with two other wolves before crashing upon a mound of desiccated tree leaves. There it lay motionless, emitting low, mournful howls.

The remaining wolves, daunted by the display of power, instinctively retreated several paces, their fear palpable.

Helen's heart raced with fear. In her nervousness, she ignited a cloth ball and hurled it at the wolves, but her accuracy faltered. The fireball veered off its intended trajectory, landing perilously close to the injured wolf, igniting the dry leaves.

Isaac urgently shouted, 'No more fireballs!'

The flames spread rapidly, engulfing the injured wolf, which was not able to move. The remaining wolves, gripped by fear, hastily sought refuge behind the protective cover of nearby trees.

“In a flurry of urgency, Isaac swiftly donned a pair of gloves and retrieved a compact first-aid box from his backpack. Darting towards the injured wolf, he rapidly slapped out the flames on its body. Simultaneously, he stomped on the ground, effectively suppressing the majority of the fire’s spread. Recognizing the wolf’s broken leg, he seized a small sprayer containing healing medicine and gently administered it to the wounded areas, carefully wrapping them in bandages. Assisting the wolf in standing up, he tenderly caressed its head.

Pointing towards the forest, Isaac commanded, ‘Go back!’

The injured wolf staggered slowly towards the trees, rejoining its pack. It emitted a long, mournful howl before disappearing into the depths of the forest. Isaac replied with a long loud roar.

The residual fire on the ground grew bigger but Isaac managed to stamp out all of it just in time for Helen to descend from the tree.

They resumed their journey, encountering no further encounters with the wolves.

By noon, they arrived at another forest, its dense foliage concealing their surroundings. Isaac halted their progress and carefully surveyed the environment.

Helen felt an overwhelming sense of awe as she found herself encircled by majestic mountains. Below them flowed a narrow river, its vibrant green waters cascading with a deafening roar. On the opposite bank stood a small village comprising roughly two dozen predominantly primitive mud houses.

What intrigued Helen the most, however, was a large, modern structure nestled within the village.

Curiosity piqued, Helen pointed towards the building and inquired, ‘What is that?’

Isaac pressed a finger to his lips, signaling for silence. ‘A hospital,’ he whispered. ‘Though there may be no one present, we must exercise caution and ensure there are no imminent threats. Keep your voice low.’

He crouched down and motioned for Helen to follow suit. They proceeded to crawl stealthily through the underbrush, inch-

ing closer to the riverbank until finally finding refuge behind a towering tree.

“Helen’s view of the building became clearer, revealing armed guards patrolling its perimeter.

She was astonished. ‘A hospital? It’s strange to see such a large and modern facility in such a remote area, with guards,’ she murmured in a hushed tone.

Isaac responded, ‘It’s controlled by a mafia gang. They were bribed by a foreign government that secretly funded the construction of this hospital.’

Confusion clouded Helen’s expression. ‘But why keep it a secret and entrust its control to a gang? Building a hospital is usually seen as an honorable act of charity.’

‘Unfortunately, that’s not the case with this one,’ Isaac explained. He raised his hands, forming a square shape with his index fingers and thumbs, indicating the need to take photos and remain hidden from the guards. ‘Don’t let them spot us.’

Understanding his warning, Helen retrieved her camera, equipped with a powerful zoom lens. She discreetly scanned the surroundings, capturing both videos and photos of the building and its environment, while Isaac meticulously observed the structure through his binoculars. Once they finished documenting their findings, Isaac instructed Helen to stay behind the tree and wait, enveloped in a mix of unease and weariness.

Suddenly, the sound of a motor reached Helen’s ears. She spotted a speedboat swiftly navigating the river, rapidly approaching the village. It gradually decelerated and halted near the hospital’s riverbank.

She focused her camera, zooming in on the scene unfolding before her.

Four young Asian men rose from the boat, stepping onto the concrete pavement. Helen’s heart skipped a beat as she was both thrilled and horrified by the appearance of two of the men, who resembled prisoners. Their deathly pale and emaciated frames exuded an air of indignation, their eyes fixed in a penetrating glare directed at the other two men, who appeared to be robust guards. As the guards escorted the prisoners, their hands

firmly gripping their arms, a mixture of fear and awe overcame Helen, causing her to cower down, setting her camera aside, unable to bear witnessing the scene directly.

‘Capture it on video,’ Isaac whispered softly, urging her to continue recording.

Filled with dread, Helen’s legs shook as she squatted down, pressing one knee against the ground, and continued to capture videos.

The faint words spoken by one of the prisoners barely reached Helen’s ears. The guards responded with shouts in an unfamiliar language, causing the prisoners to tremble and stare at them in dismay.

Curiosity consumed Helen as she asked, ‘What did they say?’

Isaac translated, ‘Shut up! Get into the hospital!’

He said, ‘They were loathed by one of the prisoners!’

Helen inquired, ‘Why are the two men so terrified?’

Once they had entered the hospital, Isaac shared a foreboding revelation, saying, ‘You will witness something shocking, but we must wait until evening.’

As Helen scrutinized the building more intensely, the two guards emerged, boarded the speedboat, and drove away, leaving the surroundings engulfed in silence.

Despite her numerous questions, Helen refrained from voicing them, maintaining silence alongside Isaac as they sat behind the protection of a towering tree, patiently awaiting developments without engaging in conversation.

As the sun gradually descended, casting a gentle glow upon the land, the sound of a motor reached Helen’s ears once again. The speedboat returned and docked at the hospital. Peering through her camera lens, she witnessed the same two guards disembarking and entering the facility. When they reemerged, each carried a white bag, seemingly containing a human body, hoisted upon their shoulders. They placed the bags in the boat and set off upstream, navigating their way into the mountains.

‘We must reach there before darkness falls. Follow me,’ Isaac declared.

“Retreating into the forest, they ran along the river, heading upstream. After approximately an hour of running, Helen heard the sound of a speedboat traveling downstream. They continued onward, following faint trails through the forest, never straying far from the river. With the sun now sinking low in the sky, they arrived at a densely wooded knoll nestled amidst the towering mountains. Pausing their pursuit, Isaac cast searching glances in every direction, scrutinizing each tree, ensuring that no mysterious signs were overlooked. He walked from tree to tree, his brow often furrowed with concern. Weariness etched across his face was evident to Helen. As they reached an area where residual sunlight filtered through the tree leaves, Isaac slowed their pace.

Abruptly, Isaac came to a halt, his gaze fixed upon a cluster of dense, towering ferns nestled amidst the surrounding trees. His keen eyes discerned a faint, narrow footpath leading into the foliage. Silently and cautiously, he navigated through the ferns, beckoning Helen to follow closely behind. Despite her confusion and weariness, she trailed him silently, her steps filled with a sense of anticipation.

Descending along a steep and winding path, they eventually reached a withered tree, where Isaac paused. The golden rays of the setting sun permeated through the leaves and branches, casting a gentle glow upon the surrounding bushes. A ray of light fell upon Helen, illuminating her hair in a brilliant display. The forest enveloped her in a symphony of fragrances, ranging from wildflowers and diverse trees to leaves, moss, and fruits. In that moment, the forest exuded an undeniable beauty and tranquility.

Isaac remained motionless, his gaze fixed upon a particular bush, his face consumed by a profound sadness and melancholy, his eyes welling up with tears.

Curiosity compelled Helen to take a few steps forward, and to her astonishment, she discovered two white bags bound with strings tucked away within the bush. Isaac looked at her and pressed a finger to his lips, signaling for silence. Donning gloves, he bent down, untied one of the bags, and carefully

removed it.

“A mixture of horror, dizziness, and nausea overwhelmed Helen. She instinctively covered her mouth with a trembling hand, her senses reeling. Isaac’s timely gesture had prevented her from releasing a piercing scream that threatened to escape her lips.

The bag was stained with blood and contained a human body. It sent a chilling shock through Helen’s mind. The image of the battered and bruised face of a prisoner she had seen on the speedboat flashed before her eyes. His upper body had been grievously wounded, bearing the marks of a fierce struggle within the confines of the hospital. Helen could only imagine the desperate resistance he had put up, met with brutal force from those seeking to subdue him.

With a horrified gaze fixed upon the lifeless body on the ground, a tingling sense of fear gripped Helen. Her voice quivered as she asked, ‘Is he... is he dead?’

Isaac nodded solemnly. ‘Yes,’ he confirmed.

Pity welled up within Helen, tears streaming down her pale cheeks.

Isaac mustered a semblance of strength and composure as he began to examine the sliced body. Helen recoiled in shock, a silent scream reverberating within her. The atmosphere seemed to grow colder, as if the temperature had dropped a few degrees.

Every organ of the man had been ruthlessly harvested, leaving Helen trembling with a mixture of fear and revulsion. The toll of the cold and fatigue she had endured was evident in her grim and pallid countenance.

Removing his gloves, Isaac embraced Helen, gently patting her back. ‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered, his voice attempting to sound cheerful, although his heart ached with pity and sorrow. ‘We’ll be leaving soon.’

In that moment, Helen felt a surge of warmth and intimacy enveloping her. A soft current coursed through her entire being, soothing and comforting, washing away her fear. It infused her with a newfound strength of heart and a renewed sense of vigor.

As her fear subsided, Isaac released her and motioned for

her to continue recording.

‘Please don’t include me in the video,’ he whispered urgently.

Helen nodded in agreement.

‘Isaac rummaged through his backpack and retrieved a small first aid kit. After putting on a pair of gloves, he carefully collected blood samples using two cotton swabs. He also plucked a few strands of hair from the deceased body and placed them in a small test tube.

Next, he untied another bag that was attached to the body. The face of this man remained intact, allowing Helen to easily recognize him as the other prisoner.

Isaac repeated the same procedures for this second body, storing the samples in a separate test tube.

While Helen continued capturing footage of the scene, she suddenly heard a faint galloping sound in the distance.

Isaac’s senses sharpened, and he whispered urgently, ‘That’s enough! We have to leave now!’ He swiftly closed the bodies, returned them to their bags, and securely tied them.

Placing the gloves and the kit back in his backpack, he grabbed Helen’s hand.

She felt the warmth and strength in his grip as she followed him without question. They crawled towards a bush and eventually reached the shelter of a large tree. There, they crouched by its side, anxiously awaiting what would unfold next.

In the fading light of the setting sun, a stout, dark-skinned herdsman rode atop a donkey, his figure casting a long shadow. Behind him, another donkey trailed closely, tethered to the first by a belt. Approaching the withered tree beneath which the two bodies lay, he came to a halt.

With purposeful movements, he hoisted the two bags containing the corpses onto the donkeys, one bag secured to each animal’s back. Leading the donkeys, he began descending the slope, his actions shrouded in secrecy.

Meanwhile, Helen diligently filmed the scene, and together, she and Isaac stealthily trailed the donkeys downhill, their progress veiled by ferns. Sometimes they moved with caution, barely

touching the ground, and other times they resorted to crawling amidst the undergrowth. Eventually, they reached a hillock, where the forest they had left behind was consumed by twilight. However, they could still see the herdsman and his donkeys. The man paused at a wide, dusty clearing scattered with rocks of various sizes. In the center of the clearing stood a substantial stone structure, its height commanding attention. A flight of stone steps led to the top from one of its walls.

Taking cover behind a tree surrounded by ferns, Isaac whispered, pointing at the structure, 'That's a furnace constructed by the villagers!'

Curiosity piqued, Helen inquired, 'What is it used for?'

Isaac explained, 'The villagers use it to cremate deceased animals, both domestic and wild, in order to prevent the spread of disease and mitigate viral infections. A few years ago, there was an outbreak of bird flu in this area. They had to cull a significant number of chickens and incinerate them here. The villagers often come to collect the ashes, which can be used as fertilizer.'

As Isaac continued his explanation, the herdsman crouched down and inserted a long screwdriver into a slit on one of the walls. With a forceful thrust, he dislodged a large stone, revealing a hole. He repeated the process on another side of the structure.

Gathering dry leaves and branches, the herdsman fed them into the furnace through one of the openings. Helen watched in awe as the man then gathered larger, dried pieces of wood, hoisted them onto his shoulders, ascended the stone steps, and hurled them into the fiery depths of the furnace. Once a sufficient amount of wood had been added, he unloaded and discarded the lifeless bodies.

Extracting a lighter from his pocket, he ignited a flame through one of the openings. In an instant, a fierce fire erupted within the furnace, its crackling intensity engulfing the two corpses.

Retreating to the grassland outside the platform with the donkeys, the herdsman retrieved provisions from a bag mounted on one of the animals' backs. As he sat down to enjoy his meal,

the flames roared unabated within the furnace, clearly destined to reduce the two bodies to ash.

“Helen was consumed by profound fear, her body trembling uncontrollably. Despite Isaac’s prior warning of encountering something distressing or catastrophic, she had insisted on accompanying him.

Stunned by the horrifying scene before her, Helen remained frozen in place, trying to collect herself. The sheer horror and surreal nature of what she witnessed left her questioning her own wakefulness.

As the man finished his meal, the flames in the furnace gradually subsided. He carefully replaced the two stones in the openings and tidied the platform, sweeping away traces of dirt. Mounting one of the donkeys, he led the other down the hill.

To Helen’s astonishment, with each unfolding moment of this macabre drama, she began to grasp the underlying horrors, yet her fear waned slightly. A clearer picture formed in her mind, and she realized the significance of her presence in this situation. Once the man disappeared from view, Isaac stated, ‘Now we must hurry back to the hill where the hospital village is.’

Helen nodded, her thoughts still clouded, and followed Isaac obediently.

As they returned to the hill, night had blanketed the surroundings. Stars twinkled in the clear sky, casting a faint glow upon the hospital’s vicinity through the lampposts scattered nearby. Once again, they crouched beside a tree, seeking concealment.

Suddenly, the sound of a speedboat reached their ears. Their attention fixated on the river, where a boat approached and docked near the hospital. This time, however, the two guards and a man stood together, disembarking from the boat. Strikingly different from before, the guards did not seize the man in a forceful manner. It seemed as though they were escorting him into the hospital instead.

Helen adjusted the zoom on her camera, capturing a closer view of the scene. The sight before her nearly elicited a cry of

surprise.

‘Krugman! The lawmaker!’ she whispered, suppressing her voice.

‘As expected,’ Isaac acknowledged, nodding as he observed the men through his binoculars. ‘His wife was here a week ago.’

Helen’s astonishment grew. ‘Expected? How did you know he would be here?’

Isaac responded cryptically, ‘Someone gave me a hint.’

This revelation left Helen even more taken aback. ‘A hint? Who gave it to you?’

Isaac smiled but chose not to answer her questions directly. He said, ‘He had been here more than once before!’”

Varshi interjected, “Krugman and his wife went to a hospital in Mexico? It’s beyond imagination!”

Jacobs chimed in, agreeing, “Indeed, it is! This information would remain unknown if it weren’t for Helen and Isaac witnessing it.”

Continuing with the narrative, Jacobs said, “Isaac inquired, ‘Have you captured photos of him entering the hospital?’

‘Of course, and videos too!’ Helen responded, crouching down.

‘Thank you so much,’ Isaac expressed his gratitude.

They carefully crawled back up the knoll, maintaining their stealth.

From there, they embarked on a slower journey back to the mountains. Along the way, Helen documented numerous photographs depicting Indian tribes. Just as before, they slept in suspended tree nets at night and moved swiftly during the day. Their return journey remained uneventful, devoid of any encountered dangers.

A week later, they safely arrived back in America.”

After Jacobs finished recounting the story, Varshi sat in a state of shock. She remained silent for an extended period, lost in deep contemplation. When she finally returned to reality and wanted to pose some questions, she discovered that Jacobs had already departed.

Chapter 7

The Conclusions

The days of autumn slipped by swiftly, as vibrant green leaves transformed into a kaleidoscope of red and yellow hues, creating an enchanting and whimsical atmosphere.

On a radiant autumn day, Varshi strolled through the park and unexpectedly encountered Jacobs once more. He was attired similarly to their previous meeting, except this time he wore long black pants. Unencumbered by any belongings, he joined Varshi on a bench.

Resting his fingertips together and leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, Jacobs began recounting the story. “With a heavy heart, I share with you the revelations surrounding the Krugman puzzle.

For many months, the FBI had kept an eye on Krugman, yet they remained clueless about his sudden change in behavior. However, last month, they received an anonymous letter that pierced through the veil of secrecy. Accompanying the letter were blood samples, a few strands of hair, and some photographs.”

Jacobs paused, allowing the weight of his words to sink in. Then he continued, “The letter provided a chilling account of the sinister hospital Krugman visited. Its contents sent shockwaves through everyone who read it.

The letter disclosed a shocking revelation: the hospital is clandestinely controlled by a foreign government that invested a substantial amount of money to bribe local officials for its construction. This foreign entity fully funds the hospital's operations and collaborates with a mafia gang to ensure its secrecy from the local population."

Jacobs continued, his voice tinged with urgency, "These individuals are nothing short of villains. Every day, they smuggle prisoners from their home country to this hospital, where they mercilessly harvest their organs to meet the demand. The victims are predominantly political dissidents or religious followers. Once the organs are extracted, their lifeless bodies are callously dumped and incinerated in a remote furnace."

"The primary objective behind establishing this hospital," Jacobs went on, "is to corrupt influential and powerful Americans who urgently require organ transplants due to serious health issues. Organ transplants in the United States often entail lengthy waiting periods, and the organs received may not be in optimal condition. This hospital offers expedited procedures with fresh, healthy organs, providing patients with a range of choices."

Varshi's mind spun with horror as she processed the disturbing information. "I am utterly horrified, but if Krugman's disease has been cured, why did he resign?" she asked, seeking clarification.

Jacobs responded, "Examinations by experts leave little doubt that Krugman has been compromised. Despite the accusations, Krugman vehemently denied any wrongdoing and refused to undergo DNA tests. He was well aware that he couldn't thwart further investigations into his illicit dealings with a foreign adversary. Eventually, his visit to the hospital would be exposed, leading to his resignation."

He continued, "The FBI remains oblivious to the adventures of Helen and Isaac, having no inkling of who sent them the letter and samples. Apart from Helen's family, you, and me, no one else on this planet is aware of their journey and the vital information they possess."

Varshi spoke with profound sadness, “This level of evil is truly shocking! They are murdering their own innocent countrymen each day to serve their control over some Americans.”

Jacobs let out a weary sigh. “Unfortunately, this is the grim reality of the current political world. It’s a sorrowful state of affairs. Isaac has been trying to put a stop to it, but his efforts have been met with limited success. The fact that this operation takes place in Mexico makes it even more challenging for us to take effective action. We cannot convict them in our own courts of law.”

He continued, his voice tinged with frustration, “There have been testimonies in Congress regarding the organ harvesting from conscious prisoners, but they always deny these allegations. No one wants to push too hard on the issue, fearing the complications it would create on an international level. We must remember that some of our own government departments have been compromised. Our hands are tied by the influence of lobbyists and organizations that have received direct or indirect financial support from them.”

Varshi remarked, her tone reflecting a mix of disbelief and concern, “Their annual trade surplus of five hundred billion dollars is more than enough to corrupt many souls.”

Jacobs nodded in agreement, and Varshi managed a faint smile, though she avoided looking directly at him.

With a silent resolve, Jacobs quietly departed, disappearing into the miniature forest.

Varshi remained on the bench for a long while, her gaze fixed upon the drifting clouds on the horizon. In a hushed voice, she whispered to herself, “I have a moral obligation to assist Isaac. I cannot enjoy peaceful walks in gardens while turning a blind eye to these villains who are ruthlessly harvesting human organs.”