

# **Badminton Kid 2**

The Weird City

Vani Venkatesan

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

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## **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*.



# Chapter 1

## *The Weird City*

Upon awakening, Varshi found that the plane had touched down at Hong Kong International Airport, located in a remote island and renowned as one of the world's busiest aviation hubs. The passenger terminal, boasting the title of perhaps the world's largest enclosed space, showcased impressive architecture. Notably, the airport stood out for its energy efficiency, with refracted sunlight, a soaring arched roof, and unobtrusive air-conditioning collectively crafting a comfortable and natural ambience throughout the year. Adjacent to the terminal stood the ground transportation center, facilitating swift transfers to urban Hong Kong through various means, including the Airport Express, public buses, and taxis.

Varshi had visited Hong Kong on numerous occasions, but those trips were always hurried. This trip was special that she would stay much longer. In a deliberate decision, she had informed Joyce not to pick her up from the airport, intending to familiarize herself with the local transportation system, an experience she deemed valuable, especially with her son Shivam joining her two weeks later.

Opting to store all her luggage at the airport, Varshi carried only her purse and a compact notebook computer. Boarding the Airport Express, a high-speed train clocking speeds over a hun-

dred miles per hour, she relished the spacious seating, cleanliness, and tranquility of the compartment, even as the train raced across suspended bridges. Through the large clear windows, she watched the boats, the islands and little hills beyond the blue sea, looked like rocks tinged with green, chain upon chain, all the way to the horizon, where islands and sky merged in bluish uncertainty and could no longer be told apart. A large portion of the sky was gray except for a few small restless clouds, which floated over distant island mountains, absorbing the dazzling light of the rising sun for changing shapes and transformations. Varshi watched this enigmatic scene heartily, and slowly her thought drifted back to her trip to an airport in the late afternoon a day ago.

Under a flawless crystal blue sky radiating with fresh brightness, Varshi's husband, Edward, navigated through the streets. Their journey paused at a red light along a bustling thoroughfare when a youngster with dark skin, akin to her son's age, approached the car. In one hand, he held a bag containing six large, freshly picked oranges, while the other gripped a black girdle.

Wearing an expression of fatigue tinged with a hint of timidity and longing in his large brown eyes, the kid stood by her window. Varshi couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for the young one, enduring such a laborious job under the proud sun, hour after hour, day after day. She rolled down the window.

"Dos?" she inquired, intending to offer him two dollars.

"Uno," the boy responded, prompting her to hand over a single dollar as he presented the bag of oranges.

"Gracias," he exclaimed with a broad smile, his eyes sparkling with a glint of joy reminiscent of someone who had just won an Oscar.

"De nada!" Varshi uttered with a nod, rolling up the window just before the traffic light turned green. Through the glass, she fixated on the slight silhouette of the kid, deftly securing the dollar bill in his girdle. Without missing a beat, he retrieved another bag of oranges from a roadside box, lifting it high once



more under the unrelenting sky.

*What a tough job!* she sighed, recognizing the arduousness of his task. However, she couldn't help but acknowledge that he, too, harbored a dream, much like the one that had brought her to Hong Kong. Her own dream had been a long-standing enigma, a personal intrigue she held close.

As the train came to a stop, Varshi reacquainted herself with reality. Disembarking, she switched to another train and made a couple more transitions, often traversing beneath spacious, air-conditioned terminals. Exiting the underground complex, she followed a seaside corridor for approximately 30 minutes, eventually arriving at the Science Park of Hong Kong. This industrial park, implicitly modeled after the Silicon Valley in the U.S., was founded by Kun Gao, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist.

Joyce awaited Varshi at the park's entrance, extending a warm and courteous greeting. Dressed in a resplendent white shirt and crimson skirt, Joyce, like Varshi, chose not to wear glasses, a shared detail that reflected their similar sense of style.

In some way, she was uncanny but with special qualities, young in feelings and youthful in strength, with maturity that made one feel warm, rewarded and stimulated. More than just a manager, she proved to be a dynamic force, shaping and propelling initiatives. Her adeptness convinced most, leaving them feeling deeply honored to be part of her projects. However, Varshi herself harbored a distinct sentiment towards Joyce, a blend of caution and admiration, even she found challenging to precisely articulate.

Varshi chatted with Joyce as she followed her, passing beneath an egg-shaped building situated alongside a 30-foot wide stream brimming with crystal-clear water. They reached a sizable structure with pristine glass doors, emanating a sense of cleanliness and coolness. Boarding a spacious, unoccupied elevator, which required a passenger's identity card issued by the Park, they ascended to the sixth floor. Entering the company premises through a glass door unlocked by an electronic code, they encountered a workplace adorned with thoughtful

and bright decor, providing a spacious and comfortable ambience for less than 10 employees. Varshi followed Joyce to her office, where she could glimpse the ocean just a few hundred yards away through a window. Joyce graciously served tea before settling into a meticulously carved blackwood chair behind an uncluttered desk. The sole adornment on the desk was a small framed photo featuring a kind middle-aged man with a radiant smile.

“You’ll primarily collaborate with our engineers in Deep Terrain,” Joyce initiated the conversation. “I’ve assisted in securing an apartment for you there and will coordinate the transportation of your luggage.”

Varshi was aware that Deep Terrain was a Mainland city across the border of Hong Kong. It was the fast growing city that had become a brazen and appealing work of wonder. In thirty years, the city had risen from a small fishing and farming village to a metro center, a sprawling region that overshadowed neighboring cities in Strong Nation. Solemn and splendid administrative buildings and banks, hotels and shopping malls arose on the wide and cheerful streets, where farmers used to grow rice. For the past three decades, the city was venerable, a favorite destination for young talents in Strong Nation, glorified by the government, and visited by dreamers.

“Thank you so much, Joyce,” Varshi expressed her gratitude, gently placing her tea cup down.

“I’ll accompany you to your apartment and then to my company this afternoon. I have to warn you that Deep Terrain is the weirdest city in the world!” Joyce cautioned.

*You haven’t been to Bombay! I grew up in the weirdest environment.* Varshi didn’t heed.

“That would be exciting! Shivam likes weird stuff,” she said nonchalantly.

Joyce smiled. “Hope you could cope with its strangeness. All major US portal sites, such as Google, Gmail, and Yahoo, are blocked in Deep Terrain!”

“Oh no, I could not read my kids’ emails,” Varshi said in consternation, straining her eyebrows.

Joyce smiled once again. “Don’t worry! You may occasionally be able to access those sites with your American mobile phone and account. However, for the sake of communication convenience with our employees, I recommend using our company’s mobile phones and a local account. Each phone comes with some special functions, and you can install any software you need. Although it can’t directly access the blocked sites, I’ve purchased for you a covert channel, more commonly known as a secret channel. Take these,” she said, handing Varshi an Android phone and a card. “The card contains all the information about using the phone and the channel to connect with the world. The covert channel can be used on any computer. Through it, you can access any of those blocked sites. But please note, it only works about 50% of the time in a day.”

Varshi felt relieved. “That’s not bad,” she said, reading the instructions on the card. “So they make it work only 50% of the time to evade the government?”

Joyce laughed. “No, not at all! They just pretend to evade the government. The local government is aware of the secret channels, and at the moment they are smart enough to keep a blind eye to them. Without this tacit understanding, conducting businesses in Deep Terrain will be very difficult,” she said, her smile fading away. “But as political fight in this nation escalates, they may be ludicrous enough to kill all those secret channels, and if this persists, Strong Nation will certainly spiral downward!”

Varshi immersed herself in the phone, installing her Language Translator through her notebook computer. She tucked the phone into her pocket but left her notebook PC in Joyce’s office before heading to lunch.

After their meal, they crossed the border and boarded a subway train.

“We’ll be getting off in about 30 minutes and then taking a 20-minute walk to your apartment,” Joyce explained. “Now, you can try the mobile phone with the secret channel!”

Varshi retrieved the Android mobile phone and began ex-

ploring its features. Her eyes glistened. "It works great!" she exclaimed with excitement. She left her phone on, glancing around, with Joyce seated on her right.

In each compartment, two rows of seats were arranged on either side, facing each other. All the seats were occupied, and some passengers stood in the spacious area between the seats, gripping a ring hanging from a perch. Some engaged in lively conversations with friends, while others stared at their phones, held in their free hands.

On Varshi's left, two middle-aged men were engaged in animated conversation. Since Varshi had limited proficiency in their language, she activated the mobile phone's Language Translator, which she had installed earlier. The translator could accurately convert the language to English in real-time when connected to the Internet. The two men spoke loudly enough for the phone to capture their conversation and relay it in English.

It became apparent that they were businessmen expressing discontent with the government's anti-corruption campaign, which had adversely affected their businesses. The conversation then shifted to the topic of prostitution.

One plump man remarked, "All this anti-corruption talk is dog-farting. If I had the money or power of a government official, I'd be heading to East Willow, a small town near Deep Terrain, every night. They provide the best prostitution services, and their standards are unmatched by competitors in other cities. The government never pays attention to the needs of migrant workers, but East Willow does."

The other man chimed in, "If I had the wealth or influence, I'd prefer having a concubine. I'd buy her a flat. Every high-ranking government official maintains multiple concubines. Look at our so-called Great Helmsman; he had a harem of concubines, some as young as fourteen. What a life!"

The plump man countered, "You idiot, be careful with your words! Nowadays, if your concubine betrays you, she could land you in jail." The leaner man retorted, "Well, my friend, that's only if you don't pay her well."

After a while, they stood up, making way for a young couple who occupied their seats. The couple engaged in a lively discussion about the stock market, real estate, and various other topics, clearly content with the fortunes they had amassed through their investments.

Joyce, impressed by Varshi's Language Translator, remarked, "Wow, your Translator works exceptionally well, translating even better than I!"

Varshi proudly explained, "I assembled it by combining some open-source software that leverages the latest advancements in artificial intelligence and data mining. But, in no way does it translate better than you!"

Joyce smiled. "We'll see."

The train arrived at a station, and the couple left. Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, looked like college students, rushed in and took their seats. They sat close to each other intimately, and began to chat, ignoring the passengers around.

The boy said, "...I will get off at Big Prostitute Den, and go to the big prostitute den with a couple of friends! It's great fun and joy to be there! A lot of beautiful girls..."

Varshi's eyes widened and she missed some of their conversation. The boy might not be even 19, and he talked about going to a whore house shamelessly. She shook her head as if trying to shake off her disgust.

The girl did not feel offended nor did she get angry. She smiled sweetly. "...I just lost my child. I need to get out in the next stop and go back to look for my child otherwise I might lose it forever..." the girl said, looked embarrassed. The boy exclaimed, "OMG! You lost your child!"

Varshi was shocked. The girl looked even younger and she had a child already. Varshi used to think this would only happen in America but now Strong Nation had caught up. No wonder Joyce said this was the weirdest city in the world.

Before arriving, she had envisioned the city with a lot of fantasies, but reality appeared starkly different. A sense of sadness and disorientation overwhelmed her. "This is the real world," she thought with a tinge of melancholy. Satiated with this new

reality, she turned off her cell phone.

Joyce, seated right next to Varshi, caught wind of both the translation and the original conversation, bursting into hearty laughter.

“These people are Southerners. They spoke, these teenagers, the official national language Mandarin that your phone understands, but with a distinct accent, which skewed the translation,” she explained. “The boy mispronounced ‘Da Ju Yuan,’ meaning ‘Grand Theater,’ the place he intended to go, as ‘Da Ji Yuan,’ which could be translated as ‘Big Prostitute Den.’ The girl was even more amusing. She lost a shoe, which is ‘Hie Zi,’ but she pronounced it in the Cantonese way, ‘Hai Zi,’ which means ‘a child’ in Mandarin.”

Varshi joined in the laughter, her mood brightened. “Joyce, you truly are the ultimate translator!”

After disembarking from the subway train and emerging from the underground complex, they leisurely strolled along the sidewalk of a broad, cheerful street. The area wasn’t overly bustling, allowing them to window-shop as they walked. Varshi turned on her cell phone to check if the secret channel still functioned properly.

Engrossed in her phone, she was abruptly jolted by a loud, frightened cry. Glancing up, she witnessed a man attempting to snatch Joyce’s purse. Despite the assailant’s forceful pull, Joyce tenaciously clung to the purse belt. The robber feigned a release before making a sudden jerk. Another cry escaped Joyce’s lips, and the tug was forceful enough to pull her forward, almost causing a fall. However, Joyce swiftly reacted, stepping forward to nullify the momentum while still maintaining a tight grip on the belt. In desperation, the robber let go and promptly fled. Joyce took a deep breath, shaking her head. A police officer emerged from behind a nearby store, responding promptly to the incident.

Varshi was impressed. *Wow! The police here are incredibly efficient.*

The policeman inquired of Joyce, “What was happening?”

Joyce swiftly replied, “Nothing! Nothing!”

“Is everything okay?” the policeman pressed.

“Everything is fine!” Joyce answered impatiently.

“Then have a good day, Miss.”

“Thank you! Wish you good luck!” Joyce said calmly, and the policeman departed.

Varshi was confused. *Did the Translator interpret the conversation accurately?*

She looked at Joyce. “The police here are so efficient, responding promptly to the robbery.”

“Private entrepreneurs are always efficient,” Joyce said, still taking deep breaths.

Varshi was not sure if she heard everything right. “I thought the police are controlled by the state!”

“Yes, the police belong to the state, but the partnership between the policeman and the robber is private!” Joyce explained, breathing normally now.

“You mean the policeman paired up with the robber? That’s weird!” Varshi asked in bewilderment.

“Yes, he serves as the guardian of the robber. The policeman hides behind, carefully observing when his partner conducts a robbery. If his partner gets caught by the crowd, he will come out to claim him, pretend to take him to a police station, but release him at an appropriate location along the way. Without protection, a robber once caught might be beaten badly or even killed by the mob.”

“I see,” Varshi responded, refraining from further comments. The enigma lurking beneath this opulent city appeared to exceed her wildest imagination.

As they conversed and leisurely strolled down the expansive sidewalk, they reached a bustling cross-street, a crooked street crowded with people purchasing potatoes, carrots and leafy greens with flies buzzing around. Varshi nearly collided with a young beggar who seemed to be seeking money from her. Appearing pitiful, he muttered words she couldn’t comprehend. She randomly retrieved a local dollar bill from her pocket, unfamiliar with its value, and handed it to him. The beggar mumbled some words and vanished into the crowd.

Joyce gleefully remarked, “You’re generous, Varshi. You just gave the little kid one hundred dollars. That will send a shockwave across their community.”

Varshi smiled, nonchalantly shrugging her shoulders. “Consider it a gift to the host country; the interest lies in the impact on society.”

They continued along the crooked street, taking a shortcut to another wide street on their way. As they navigated through the crowd, several mischievous beggars suddenly emerged from nowhere and began trailing Varshi, persistently asking for money. Ignoring them proved futile, as they continued importuning and following closely. Growing bolder, one of the kids even touched her clothes with filthy hands. Annoyed, Varshi raised her voice, “Go away! Stop following us, little beggars! Shame on you and your country for not going to school!”

Varshi felt a sudden tug on her sleeve and noticed her purse being pushed, triggering her frustration. Prepared to shout, she turned around, only to find that it was Joyce pulling her sleeve.

“Varshi, when you speak in public,” Joyce whispered, “make sure your words are politically correct. A year ago, a man buying items from a street vendor grew impatient with the slow calculations and exclaimed, ‘You are just as stupid as our new President!’ Little did he know, a secret police officer overheard it, leading to his arrest. In court, the judge sentenced him to 20 years in jail, a punishment he vehemently protested. The judge calmly explained, ‘You’ve been convicted on two counts. First, your speech insulted a national leader. Second, more seriously,’ the judge continued, ‘you leaked state secrets in public!’”

Varshi burst into laughter. “That’s hilarious!”

“Of course, it’s a joke, but like it or not, we need to be careful. Let me scare them away,” Joyce said, turning to face the little beggars.

Varshi activated her Language Translator.

“A heart, good lady, a kind heart, beautiful lady, a good deed for your life in heaven!” The kids pleaded pitifully at Joyce.

“Are you sure you want to follow us?” Joyce spoke sharply with a taut expression. “Do you know who we are and what



path we are taking?”

An older kid stepped forward, speaking with a little timidity: “Very beautiful and kind lady, you are the boss, who has a good heart. You are on the road to big fortune, prosperity, and great honor because of your virtues!” Obviously, someone had coached him to say so.

Joyce looked more solemn. “Nonsense! We are loyal, dedicated party members! We are traveling on the correct, bright, gorgeous, and happy path of socialism,” Joyce said, raising her voice. “Do you still want to follow us?”

The little beggars were all confused and scared. They looked at each other, shook their heads, and ran away.

“That’s weird!” Varshi whispered to herself.

“Joyce, how do I know if what I say is politically correct?” she asked.

“Whenever you are not sure, say the opposite of the truth,” Joyce replied jokingly. “Well, watch the news and follow what the leaders say. The landlord has installed a TV set in your apartment. I’ll tell you more later in my office.”

“Thanks, I’ll start watching today and seek the truth!” Varshi also replied jokingly.

Before long, they arrived at the apartment Joyce had found for her. It was on the twelfth floor of a building, which had a garden at the front and faced a quiet street at the back side. Situated on the twelfth floor of a bJoyce introduced her to the landlord, Lee, and the manager, Hua – an amiable middle-aged lady who spoke a little English. The apartment, spanning about 800 square feet, came partially furnished, featuring two bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom, and a kitchen. After completing the paperwork, settling the fees, and obtaining all the keys, they leisurely strolled down another cheerful street for about 20 minutes, arriving at a great building.

They entered an elevator and alighted on the eighteenth floor. Varshi noticed a prominent sign with foreign characters she didn’t comprehend and English characters identifying it as “Law Rule Technology Incorporation,” Joyce’s registered company in Deep Terrain. As they approached the company entrance,

two men stood by the glass doors, peering inside to observe the company's activities. Upon hearing footsteps, the shorter man turned around, offering a warm smile. "Boss, good morning!"

"Good morning, Peng. How long have you been here?" Joyce inquired, displaying a hint of annoyance.

"Half an hour!" Peng replied, speaking softly to Joyce. He was dressed in a finely tailored suit, complete with a scarlet tie and a pair of gold-framed spectacles that added a touch of elegance to his appearance. The glasses were clean and bright, showcasing a stylish design. When he spoke, his voice was gentle and patient. He had the tone of a professor, a doctor, even a priest, anxious to persuade and reason rather than to threaten.

At a certain point, Peng slightly raised his voice. His accomplice, much taller, taut and solid, wearing a T-shirt that exposed his bulging muscles, abruptly turned around, staring at Joyce. The appearance of his face generated a momentary chill through Varshi. He might be a commonplace, mean-looking jobless labour worker. What was startling was the deep-cut scar on the left-side of his face, extending from the lower eyelid to the chin. Because of the scar, the eyes and mouth looked distorted, and the eyes seemed filled with an implacable murderous hatred of everyone.

Joyce let out a sigh. "Peng, please wait here for a moment. I'll prepare the check," she said, punching a code into the digital pad to unlock the door.

Peng's eyes glistened. "Thanks a lot, Boss," he expressed with a courteous bow.

Varshi and Joyce stepped into a large rectangular hall, briefly partitioned into around twenty cubicles, each designated for an employee. The partitions were about four feet tall. Following Joyce, Varshi entered her office, constructed with translucent glass at one end of the hall. She took a seat in the visitor's chair, contemplating the unfolding situation.

Varshi felt an irresistible urge to inquire about the two mysterious men. However, exercising great self-control, she refrained from doing so, understanding that she was not in a po-

sition to delve into such matters.

Joyce seemed to anticipate Varshi's curiosity. "They are debt collectors representing a manufacturer that produced the circuit boards for some smart watches we dealt with. Unfortunately, the manufacturer, unbeknownst to me, used substandard capacitors, a violation of our contract. A very small portion, perhaps 0.2 percent, of their capacitors had a charge-leakage problem. Consequently, a small fraction of the watches experienced functionality issues. This led to significant losses for my client, who sold the watches, and I had to compensate for part of his loss. The situation could have been much worse. The manufacturer's unethical practices baffled us all, and I lodged a complaint against them."

Their president came here personally to settle the issue. Though I had strong antipathy toward him, I asked politely for compensation but he demurred, asserting that if their product is 99.8% good, they have done a good job. Not only did he decline compensation, he insisted that I had to cover the balance of the manufacturing cost.

The polite and friendly debate became a bitter strife when he lost patience, making a vehement argument. He declared, 'Look, even our National Food Minister, responding to critics of widespread food poisoning, proudly proclaimed that our country's food is 99% safe. Our capacitors are only 0.2% defective, and they won't even pose a threat. It's nothing significant!'

I shot back: 'If you poison 1% citizens inside this country and have good connections, you might escape any repercussions, but if you poison 0.2% American dogs, not to mention humans, you would stir an uproar regardless of your status.'

His eyes narrowed, clearly irritated. He slammed his hand on the table. 'Come on! Don't make any inflammatory accusations against our country. In Rome, do as the Romans do,' he shouted. 'You are within our borders, so you must abide by our rules.'

It was pointless to argue with him further, so I simply shouted, 'No, I won't pay you even one dime!' He shot me an angry

gaze and blustered with uncompromising gruffness, ‘You will pay in full!’ Then he stared at me in dreadful silence before leaving without another word.

“A couple of days later, these two thugs arrived to collect money on his behalf. Peng, the one sporting glasses, engaged me in a polite and patient conversation, never losing his temper. However, I steadfastly refused to pay. As they departed, Peng bid farewell with a warm smile. In contrast, his partner, who remained silent throughout, cast a wistful look my way and stared at me with a murderous gaze. He let out a mournful wail before stepping into the elevator, and the sound reverberated throughout the entire company, leaving everyone in a state of trepidation.

A few days later, they returned. Peng handed me some pictures, claiming he had taken them by chance – a blatant lie. The photos depicted my daughter and me playing in a public garden. He further unsettled me by describing the violent tendencies of his partner. Now, he asserted, his partner sought redemption and a chance for a normal life. Peng implored me to pay the money, preventing his partner from resorting to violence and jeopardizing his job. The mounting pressure made it clear that ignoring this threat indefinitely would be too stressful. I reluctantly agreed to discuss the matter with the president of our company, hoping he might secure a loan from friends to settle the issue.”

*Of course, you’re the president!* Varshi smiled, fully grasping the situation.

Joyce sighed and motioned for her secretary, Wendy, to come in through the glass window with Peng.

Varshi retrieved her Android phone from her pocket and activated the Language Translator.

Peng stood in front of Joyce, seemingly oblivious to Varshi. Joyce wrote a check for Peng, who received it with a respectful bow and both hands. “Thank you so much for your kindness, Boss,” Peng expressed warmly. Placing the check in the inner pocket of his suit, he retrieved a business card, presenting it to Joyce with the same courtesy. “Boss, here’s my business card.

If you ever need assistance in debt collection, please feel free to contact us. I'll offer you a 10% discount!"

Varshi struggled to contain her laughter.

"Nice of you to offer a discount," Joyce replied, accepting the card with a wry smile. "But I'm concerned that if your partner loses control, things might take a violent turn. I prefer resolving issues peacefully."

Peng grinned reassuringly. "No need to worry, Boss. The scar on his face is makeup, and his intimidating appearance is an act. He used to be a bodybuilder and is genuinely a kind gentleman. We always opt for peaceful solutions, backed by a high-ranking military official. Even the most notorious gangs in town wouldn't dare challenge us!"

Joyce didn't know what to believe. "Seriously? I'll call you if I need your service."

Peng departed and Varshi felt this whole thing was so hilarious, unfolding like a drama yet it was real.

After some more enjoyable conversation, Joyce then guided her to the conference room situated at the other end of the hall, where she met with the engineers. Joyce patiently delineated each individual's tasks within the project, named **Freedom**, an abbreviation for **F**ast **R**endering in **E**mbodied **E**mulation **D**omain. Varshi's primary responsibility was to devise efficient algorithms to bring the project's ideas and concepts to life.

In the realm of practical computing problems, finding algorithms to address them is usually straightforward. However, the real challenge lies in discovering optimal algorithms, a task that demands a profound understanding of various mathematical techniques and theorems – expertise in which Varshi excelled. A superior algorithm can operate thousands or even millions of times faster than an average one.

When this was all done, Wandy, who hardly spoke any English, escorted her back to her apartment. To her delight, Varshi discovered that her luggage had arrived, bringing a sense of relief and gratitude for Joyce's thoughtful arrangements.

Following Joyce's earlier instructions, she turned on the TV, tuning in to channel 7, expecting news to be broadcast at that

time. However, her attempt to use the Language Translator on her Android phone failed, as the secret channel was not currently connected. Trying to retrieve her American mobile phone from her purse, Varshi was shocked to find that it was missing. Upon reflection, she realized it had been stolen when she felt someone pushing her purse while dealing with the persistent little beggars.

Without translation, Varshi was compelled to watch the news in its original language. The scene unfolding on the screen startled her. Several police cars were in pursuit of a BMW on a highway and then through a busy street. The aggressive BMW forcefully cleared its path, audibly slamming into obstructing cars, creating a series of loud clunks with each impact. The chase eventually came to an end when the BMW collided with multiple cars, leading to a fiery explosion.

As the young man emerged from the car, he hastily ran into a nearby side street, leaving the vehicle to burn. Pursuing police officers chased him on foot, and the man sought refuge in a video-game store. Simultaneously, a swarm of customers fled the store. The man locked the door from the inside, leaving the police blocked outside. The news coverage focused on the small window of the store, and it was unclear whether the man was armed or if there were hostages inside. Negotiations commenced through a loudspeaker, but the man remained unresponsive, engrossed in playing video games.

*Is this real?* Varshi muttered to herself.

After a prolonged standoff, the man inside the video-game store concluded his gaming session and voluntarily unlocked the door. Surrendering himself, he placed his hands on his head, allowing two policemen to swiftly handcuff him and lead him away.

The television broadcast then transitioned to an entirely different and unsettling scene. An open store door attracted a curious crowd of around thirty people, forming a rough line on either side. Through the door, the alarming sight revealed a solid middle-aged man cradling a baby in his left arm, while his right hand gripped a sharp knife poised to harm the infant.

The man appeared emotionally charged, vocalizing loudly. A policeman positioned a few yards from the door attempted to communicate with him, gesturing for calm. The crowd's reactions varied, with occasional outcries.

Contrary to the policeman's efforts, the man seemed to grow more agitated over time. As tensions escalated, a couple within the crowd appeared increasingly distressed, eventually breaking down into tears. They attempted to rush into the store but were restrained by two policemen, highlighting the gravity of the prolonged and distressing standoff.

In this critical moment, a middle-aged lady, well-dressed, squeezed her way to the front of the door, standing next to the policeman. She sported a pair of stylish low-heel black shoes, black trousers extending gracefully down her legs, and an elegant dark blue jacket. Her demeanor exuded refinement, resembling either a university art professor or a lawyer.

Despite a policeman's apparent displeasure, expressed through angry shouts and gestures urging her to step back, the woman seized the opportunity. In a split second, she surged into the room, simultaneously contorting her right arm backward. From a pocket concealed under her jacket and within easy reach of her trousers, she produced a gun, swiftly swinging it to the front and firing a bullet directly into the man's forehead before he could react to her abrupt movement. As the baby slipped from the man's grasp, the woman adeptly stowed the gun back into her pocket. In perfect synchronization, she freed her hands just in time to catch the falling infant before it reached the ground.

Evidently, the woman was a specialized police agent, her actions met with a resounding roar from the crowd, who erupted into applause.

Varshi felt a chill run down her spine. "Oh, my goodness!" she muttered. "None of this is making any sense." Now she found herself questioning whether she was tuned in to a TV news broadcast or an elaborate drama. To clear up her confusion, she decided to call Joyce to confirm the channel schedule.

"Hi, Joyce. Are you sure Channel 7 is airing the news? It seems more like a scripted drama," Varshi inquired over the

phone.

“Let me go to the other room and double-check,” Joyce responded. “By the way, did what you just witnessed make any sense to you?”

“It absolutely made no sense!” Varshi exclaimed. *Otherwise, I wouldn't be calling you!*

Joyce chuckled. “Then you must be watching the news!”

“Seriously?” Varshi questioned, caught between the uncertainty of her perception and the surreal events unfolding on the screen. *Am I insane or the world around me is?*

Joyce paused for a moment before confirming, “Yes, Varshi, the channel is indeed broadcasting news.”

“Thanks, Joyce. Your explanation makes sense now,” Varshi said, processing the peculiar nature of this city. Neither laughter nor tears could capture the complexity of her emotions. She continued watching the news channel, now reporting on the disastrous flooding in a province due to recent heavy rain. The TV anchor visited victim families in a village, interviewing parents surrounded by excited children. Suddenly, Varshi noticed something amiss on the screen, but she couldn't quite pinpoint the issue.

Then came a commercial break. Suddenly, she heard a very loud short speech, louder than any speech she had ever heard, from the ceiling-mounted speaker. She was shocked and was bounced up from her couch by the frightening loud sound.

*My God! Was it an earthquake or some ominous rehearsal message?* she pondered. Opening the door, she peered through the gate into the hallway. It was eerily empty and silent. No one was running or shouting. Despite the lingering fear, she was convinced that something in her apartment must be seriously amiss; otherwise, they wouldn't send an alarm message with such intensity.

Her first concern was a potential gas leak, followed by a thorough examination of all possible disaster sources, but she found nothing abnormal. Restless, she sat on the couch, and then suddenly, the loud message resounded again. Growing anxious that the noise might disturb her neighbors, though no



one had complained thus far, she decided to address the issue.

Varshi plugged her Android phone into a power source and ran an application capable of capturing any sound it detected. She waited but the sound did not seem to occur at a regular interval. After a prolonged wait, thinking the problem had subsided, the loud message erupted once more. She stopped the sound-capture application and trimmed the file containing the captured sound. With the attached file, she sent an email to Joyce, explaining the situation via a local email account that didn't rely on the secret channel.

Within a couple of minutes, she received a reply from Joyce, which read:

Dear Varshi,

The loud message conveyed: 'Dear resident, your TV volume is too high and will disturb your neighbors. Please turn it down. Your neighbors would appreciate your courtesy.'

It seems your TV volume was only slightly below the alarm threshold and occasionally fluctuated above it, triggering this loud message.

Simply lower the TV volume, and the random, annoying loud sound will cease.

Best regards,

Joyce

Varshi laughed and shook her head in disbelief. How could she have figured out that someone would use such a loud sound, so loud that it could disturb all the residents in the level, to inform her to turn down her TV volume, which was almost silent as compared to the loud message, to avoid disturbing her neighbours? Nothing made sense. Everything here seemed to be quixotic. Regardless, she complied by lowering the TV volume, and true to Joyce's advice, the jarring loud message

never interrupted her evening again. She retired to bed early that night and enjoyed a peaceful sleep, in spite of the scary events.

The next morning greeted her with the tranquility of her room. She rose, adhered to her usual makeup routine, and strolled to Law Rule, where she engaged in discussions and collaborative work with the engineers until the late hours of the evening. Returning in the dusk, she picked up groceries on her way, prepared and enjoyed dinner, followed by some TV time. Her work persisted until dawn, allowing her just an hour of sleep before embarking on another day. This rhythm continued for two weeks until Shivam, her son, arrived. From that day forward, she shifted the center of her life to revolve around him – the primary reason she ventured into this peculiar city. Her thoughts and constant concerns circled his existence. Shivam became her solace and source of rejuvenation, and she envisioned him ascending to greatness in a distinctive manner, a path tailored exclusively for him. Her love for her son was profound enough to forsake other dreams, focusing solely on this singular aspiration. She imparted to him a work ethic as unyielding as her own. Her son's destiny intertwined with her own, shaping the course of their shared journey.

Shivam enjoyed a peaceful night's sleep in the apartment upon his arrival. Early the next morning, mother and son headed to Law Rule, not for engineering work, but to meet Joyce. She had tasked Wandy with preparing a list of five badminton coaches. Although Shivam had taken two semesters of the foreign language in school, his proficiency wasn't sufficient for comfortable communication in the language. Hence, Joyce joined them on visits to the coaches' clubs one by one.

The first four coaches they encountered spoke minimal English but conveyed their passion with great courtesy. The fifth coach, yet to be visited, was a returned overseas national from Indonesia and was fluent in English. Wandy had forewarned them that despite possessing supreme skills, this coach exhibited peculiar behavior. Alongside charging the highest tuition fees, he was known to reject students he didn't like. Moreover,

individuals seeking private lessons had to pass an oral exam unrelated to badminton.

Joyce, who must now leave for a meeting, called the club, notifying them the arrival of Varshi and her son. Afterward, she arranged for a taxi, paid the fees, and informed the driver, who happened to be her friend, about the destination.

As the taxi entered a toll highway, the driver halted to pay the 3-dollar toll to a fee collector, a young fair girl dressed neatly. With a warm smile, she greeted Varshi as if meeting an old friend, expressing, "Hi, so happy to see you again! Wish you a happy and pleasant trip!" Varshi felt a bit embarrassed. It was evident that the girl knew her, given the intimate expression and joyful demeanor. However, Varshi struggled to recall where they had met before.

Frustrated, she mumbled to herself, "Where did I meet her? She greeted me like a close friend!"

The driver, who understood some English and was Joyce's friend, overheard Varshi's question. He chuckled and explained, "You probably don't know her. Every fee collector on this highway smiles at everyone like that," he said, laughing, and continued driving.

"Everything here goes against my intuition," Varshi muttered.

The taxi cruised at a steady speed of 60 mph for about 15 minutes, only to gradually decelerate to about 5 mph over the next five minutes before coming to a complete stop approximately 200 yards away from a red traffic light. A line of cars waited ahead.

"Look, Mom," Shivam suddenly exclaimed, pointing towards the pedestrian traffic light. Varshi observed another kid, around Shivam's age, passing a bag of goods through the rolled-down window to a lady inside a car in the front row. In return, the lady handed him some cash. As the light turned green, the cars began to move forward row by row. However, as the taxi approached the front, the light turned red once again.

Now in close proximity, they could see the kid more clearly. A basket with a lid rested against the light pole. Next to it, a

bucket of water secured some grocery plastic bags. A wooden board was partially submerged in the water. Similar to the Hispanic kid, he was selling items to car passengers during a red light session.

“Shivam, what do you think the kid is selling?” Varshi asked with a warm smile.

“In the previous transaction, I couldn’t see clearly, but they weren’t oranges or apples from the color. Could it be toys?” Shivam answered, scratching his head.

“Very unlikely, because the deal is completed so quickly; the value of the goods must be standard or well-known.”

“Some seeds or nuts?”

“Not likely either, as you would need to weigh them to determine a price.”

“Watermelons?”

“The basket isn’t big enough. It can only hold a few watermelons.”

“Mom, then what’s inside the basket?”

“I guess they might be some flowers like orchids. They are small in volume, light to carry, and the price is well-known, ideal items to sell in such a short duration.”

As they played the guessing game, the kid removed the lid from the basket with his left hand and stared inside. Suddenly, he stretched out his right hand to grab something from the basket.

Shivam cried out with a trembling voice, “A snake!”

The kid put the lid back and was now holding the neck of a large snake, raising it high in the air. With its jaws wide open and its tail swiftly wagging, the snake struggled to free itself. The passenger in the car at the second row rolled down the window, signaling the kid to come over. Still holding the snake, the kid negotiated with the passenger, who agreed on a price. Then the kid rushed back to retrieve the wooden board and a knife from the water bucket. He cut off the snake’s head, sliced open its body, washed it, cut it into pieces, wrapped them in a plastic bag, and handed it over to the passenger, who gave him some cash. He then wrapped the remnants in a smaller

plastic bag and disposed of it in a nearby public garbage bin before the light turned green.

Varshi sighed. *It's a blessing to sell oranges on the road-side!* Her contemplation of the kid's situation was interrupted as the taxi reached its destination.

The club, situated on the eighth floor of an aged building, came into view. Through the glass doors, Varshi observed players of various ages – kids and adults – engaged in games and practices on numerous courts. Spectators, young and old, occupied the sidelines, watching the action unfold. Pressing the doorbell, Varshi was greeted by a slender and attractive girl who welcomed them inside.

Varshi was taken aback by the girl's appearance – blond hair, blue eyes, and tanned skin. Her short, soft, and densely golden hair framed her face. Adorned with a pair of medium-sized, brown, plastic-rimmed glasses, she exuded an air of scholarly elegance.

Varshi couldn't help but think, *Looks like she's from the Mediterranean!*

The girl led them into an air-conditioned reception room adorned with a table and a few chairs. As they entered, she extended her hand for a handshake while holding a smartphone in the other.

"Welcome to Badminton Prime! I am Aikaterina, the secretary of Coach Raditya, who runs this club," she introduced herself, delivering her words in near-perfect English. "Raditya is the head coach and the founder of this club."

Varshi smiled warmly. "Hi, Aikaterina. I'm Varshi, and this is my son, Shivam. Where are you from?"

"I am from Greece, but I went to school in Oxford, England, majoring in Asian Studies," Aikaterina shared with a pleasant smile.

"Yassas, hari-ka pou sas gnori-ssa," Varshi greeted, showcasing the bit of Greek she had picked up from the Internet.

"Hari-ka..." Aikaterina began her response, but her cell phone interrupted with a ring. Answering in the local language, she engaged in a conversation with another potential customer in-

quiring about the club.

After concluding the call, Aikaterina returned with a warm smile. “Pleased to meet you too! I am grateful to work here, and I’ve been in this country for two years. There are so many job opportunities in town. On the contrary, the economic situation in my home country is deteriorating.”

As they conversed, a tall, lively man with slightly graying hair and discerning eyes entered. Aikaterina greeted him with a smile and said, “Coach Raditya, this is Varshi and her son, Shivam.” Following the introduction, the amiable secretary excused herself and headed to another room.

Varshi succinctly outlined their objective: Shivam aimed to qualify for the National Junior Team of America within the next couple of years.

“To take lessons from me, one must exhibit great respect not only towards me but also towards the environment, and should possess a basic understanding of this country. I might consider accepting Shivam as my student if you pass my oral exam on the local environment,” Coach Raditya explained.

Curious, Varshi inquired, “How does it work?”

“I will pose 4 or 5 questions. Either you or your son can respond. To pass, you need to answer all of them correctly. However, if needed, I may continue asking up to 10 questions, but you are not permitted to answer more than 2 questions incorrectly. You can choose to take it now, but I must caution you that most candidates do not succeed. If you fail, there is a one-month waiting period before a retake is allowed.”

“That’s fair and challenging! Shivam, are you ready?”

Shivam nodded and Varshi stared at Raditya. “Go ahead, Coach.”

“Name the current President of the most populous country in the world,” Raditya asked seriously.

“She .. Sin..no,..Jean.. Pink!” said Varshi.

“Yes, Xi is the current President,” Raditya said, nodding. “Name Mr. Xi’s predecessor.”

“Who was the president before She?” Varshi mumbled to herself, attempting to recall the name.

“Yes, Hu was the President. Good!” Raditya said. “Now name the Prime Minister consoling the big Sichuan Earthquake victims.”

“When did [the earthquake happen?] ” Varshi tried to ask.

“Yes, Wen did! Very Good!” Raditya interjected before she could finish her sentence.

“Which is the largest communication hardware company we have?” He asked another question.

“Who are we?” Varshi asked to clarify the question.

“Yes, *Hu-a-wei* is our largest company that built communication devices, except that *Huawei* is pronounced as *Wa-wai*, so I need to ask you one more question.

“What’s the name of the author of the novel *Good Earth* about Asian peasants?”

“I read the novel before, but [I forgot the author’s name].”

Once again, Raditya interjected, saying, “Yes, Buck is the author. Excellent! Congratulations, you pass the examination, one of the very few who make it in the first trial!”

Varshi sensed that her correct answers were a result of miscommunication, akin to Bilbo Baggins winning riddles against Gollum in the novel *The Hobbit* relying on luck.

“Your son seems qualified for my lessons. Allow me to give him a tour and have a private conversation. You can wait in this room,” Raditya declared imperiously.

Inwardly, Varshi contemplated, *I have numerous choices; I may not choose you!*

Shivam accompanied Raditya for a tour of the courts and returned alone after 30 minutes. When Varshi inquired about his experience, he replied, “The coach played a game with me, praising my docile playing style. After discussing my school work, he dubbed me ‘Professor Shivam’ and elaborated on his coaching methods. At other times, he cracked jokes, mostly American jokes, bad jokes.”

Varshi felt absurd. “Tell me a couple of them.”

“He said, ‘When the father of George Washington saw his son chopping his beloved cherry trees with an ax, he did not scold him but smiled. Why?’ I said, ‘Because the father for-

gave the son.’ He said, ‘No, its because the son was holding a sharp ax in his hand.’”

“A rather poor joke,” Varshi remarked, frowning.

“Here’s another,” Shivam continued. “He asked, ‘Why do senior Americans call their spouses ‘honey’? I answered, ‘Because their relationships are intimate.’ He countered, ‘No, it’s because they have Alzheimer’s and have forgotten their spouses’ names.’”

Varshi couldn’t help but feel uneasy. “That one was even worse,” she said, shaking her head.

This club had an aura of unreality and mystery about it, she thought. She did not like this coach either, in particular his unfriendly and arrogant manners, behaving as if everyone would beg him to be his coach. Moreover, his penchant for telling jokes that seemed to belittle potential clients further soured Varshi’s impression of him. Turning to her son with a warm smile, she remarked, “Given this coach’s apparent disdain for America, there’s no reason for us to consider his club.”

Shivam remained silent.

As they returned home, a mix of exhaustion and excitement enveloping them, they settled onto opposite couches. Varshi tried to convince Shivam to opt the club of the first coach, whose coaching fee was less than half of that of Raditya, but she deliberately omitted any mention of fees. She highlighted the coach’s impressive resume, emphasizing the qualities of courtesy, patience, and passion that had shone through during their visit. Shivam nodded and agreed to take private lessons from him. Yet she discerned something held back, the yearning her son would not say. So she asked, “Shivam, who is your favorite coach?”

“Raditya!”

Varshi frowned. “Why?”

“I don’t know. He is good,” Shivam answered, shrugging his shoulders.

With a slow rise, Varshi ambled toward her son, extending her hand to gently caress his head. “Alright then, let’s join his club, starting tomorrow,” she uttered warmly but with a hint of



reluctance.

“That’s fine with me too,” Shivam responded, his expression revealing little emotion.

From that day forward, Varshi made it a routine to drop off her son at Badminton Prime after breakfast, heading to Law Rule before returning to pick him up in the late afternoon. In the evenings, she guided him through math problems and reading sessions.

Each morning, Aikaterina emerged from her office, extending warm greetings and engaging in a brief chat with Varshi. However, in the afternoons, she remained secluded behind the closed door, often heard conversing busily with potential customers over the phone. The entrance to her office bore a sign in English, imploring, “Please Don’t Disturb!”

After a couple of weeks, Varshi found herself developing a fondness for Badminton Prime as she witnessed her son’s daily improvement.

Raditya had grown more amiable, frequently expressing positive sentiments about America, and astonishing Varshi with his profound knowledge of the U.S. Aikaterina consistently exhibited an affable demeanor and a wealth of knowledge about the world, often speaking in a mellow voice that was both graceful and delightful to engage with.

Simultaneously, Varshi also achieved big progress in **Freedom** at Law Rule. Now adept at cleanly delineating tasks for each engineer, she could often accomplish the majority of her work from the comfort of her home.

One morning, upon returning to the apartment after dropping her son off at Badminton Prime, Varshi found the room steeped in stillness, interrupted only by the distant murmurs of the bustling streets. She took a nap on a couch, hearing a faint sound approaching from afar, vanishing and reappearing. As she drifted into slumber, a faint sound began to weave its way into her consciousness. It approached from a distance, weaving in and out of audibility. This subtle auditory backdrop set the stage for a dream that unfolded before her closed eyes.

In the dream, Varshi found herself peering down into an

abyssal well, its depths plunging into an inferno shrouded in darkness. From these profound depths emanated a low-pitched beat, a rhythmic *Dong* rolling up from the unfathomable recesses. In the blackened abyss, *dong, dong* it rolled, akin to the rhythmic cadence of a drum, accompanied by faint groans of torment echoing from the obscure depths below.

Within the dimly illuminated zone at the well's bottom, a trembling hand emerged, stretching out from the shadows to the faintly lit area. It opened and closed its fingers, as if reaching out for assistance. Each beat of the *dong* coincided with the hand slapping against the well's wall. The hand navigated the wall, grasping a stone and laboriously pulling its body upward. Slowly, a humanoid figure materialized, emerging from the depths of the well.

*Dong, dong* echoed through the depths as the creature ascended, its mournful whispers permeating the air: "no...more... torture ...no... more... torture..." The fugitive, with palpable desperation, drew closer to the well's summit, voice trembling as it implored, "Help me! Help me!" and protruded a hand to grab her.

Startled from her nap, Varshi's eyes widened as she glimpsed a shadowy figure. Her gaze focused on the balcony, visible through the barred gate. A person, clad in sleek black attire with a matching girdle slung across its shoulder, was scaling the balcony using the water pipe. The intruder's face and head were concealed by a black cloth, revealing only its upper nose and large, enigmatic eyes.

Frightened, Varshi let out a piercing cry, "Thief! Thief!" The startled intruder hastily retreated, descending the water pipe and vanishing from her sight. With a sigh of relief, Varshi paced the living room, contemplating her next move. No sooner had she decided to call Joyce than she heard a clunking sound from the pipe, seizing her attention once more.

The thief reappeared, climbing up the water pipe. Varshi let out another cry, less loud than the first one. The thief jumped onto the balcony and waved its trembling tender hands, gesturing her not to cry any more. Swiftly, the woman removed her

black mask, revealing a surprising sight – a woman in her thirties, with a gentle face framed by soft, flowing hair that reached her shoulders. She appeared deeply frightened, tears streaming down her pale cheeks, and her hands trembled uncontrollably.

Touched by empathy, Varshi's initial fear gave way to compassion, prompting her to stifle further screams. The woman spoke in her native language, lips quivering with emotion, yet Varshi struggled to comprehend the meaning behind her words. Turning to the Language Translator, the secret channel was not through. Placing the device on a table amid various items, Varshi shook her head, expressing, "Sorry, I don't know your language!"

The woman seemed to understand Varshi's meaning, and stopped talking. She frowned, searching the appropriate English words within her mind. After a brief moment, she pleaded, her lips quivering, "...people... no... police..." as she gazed at Varshi through the gate.

Varshi observed the woman's desperate expression, sensing her plea not to involve the police. Driven by compassion, Varshi, with a gentle tone, reassured, "Okay, I won't call the police. You can climb back down and leave! Never attempt this again!"

However, the woman appeared to misunderstand Varshi's words. Frantically shaking her trembling hands, she stammered, "No...no... police...police..."

Varshi simplified her message, enunciating each word slowly and distinctly, "I will not call the police! Go!" She gestured for the woman to leave the balcony.

However, the woman remained visibly frightened and continued to stammer, "No...no...police...police..." Yet, she hesitated to climb down. It was apparent that her fear of the police was profound, and she wanted to ensure Varshi wouldn't summon them before she departed. Varshi, aware of the harrowing tales of police brutality and harsh punishments in this country, understood that the prospect of imprisonment might have deeply traumatized the woman.

Varshi frowned and pointed emphatically upward, saying, "I

promise and vow I will **not** call the police! You are free to go!” She articulated her words slowly and clearly.

However, the woman persisted, waving her hands and repeating the same plea, “No...no...police...police...”

Perplexed and frustrated, Varshi wondered, “What else do you want from me? I have shown great mercy by not calling the police!” Feeling increasingly confused, she grabbed her mobile phone from the table and dialed Joyce. In a concise explanation, Varshi detailed the situation. She then activated the speaker, positioning the phone toward the thief, who conversed with Joyce in her native language.

After a while, Joyce spoke urgently in English, “Varshi, she actually wants you to call the police! The situation is grave and could be fatal. Let me call the police for you. Go to the next room, look down at the street, and you’ll understand.” She hung up without waiting for a reply.

Varshi was more confused. A thief broke into a residence only to ask the host to call the police? How could that be? She contemplated the unusual scenario, placing the mobile phone back on the table, and then went to another room. Opening a window, she peered down at the street.

A gathering crowd at the building’s base caught her attention. Two men, each armed with a wooden rod resembling a baseball bat, were climbing up the water pipe. Suddenly, Varshi understood what had happened. Her loud cry had alerted someone, leading to the discovery of the thief. News of the incident spread, and an angry mob assembled. The first man now was nearing her balcony. In this precarious situation, the only potential saviors for the thief were the police.

It dawned on Varshi that the woman had misspoken *police* as *people* initially and then corrected herself. This explained her plea, *People...no...police!* Later, she simply intended to convey, *Oh, no, you have misunderstood. Please call the police!*

She returned to the living room just in time to witness the first man leaping onto the balcony. As he landed, he advanced with purpose, raising the punishing rod menacingly, poised to

strike the woman's head. Defenseless and with no means of escape, she instinctively raised her right arm to shield herself. Varshi shrieked, "No!". She trembled as she feared that the rod would break the woman's arm. However, in a split second, the woman executed a graceful backward bend, synchronizing her forearm's descent with the trajectory of the rod, effectively absorbing most of its momentum and avoiding injury.

The rod made contact with her forearm, and in a deft move, she pivoted her forearm around it, securing the rod with her hand and pulling it towards her. The man, gripping the rod with both hands, attempted to regain control. Seizing the opportunity, the woman swiftly raised her free hand, giving the rod a forceful jerk forward, while simultaneously releasing her grip. The rod, now propelled by both the man's own force and the woman's push, struck his chest with impact. He tumbled to the floor, emitting a resounding cry, his hands still tightly clutching the rod. Despite his attempts to rise, a combination of fear and pain held him down. Lying on the floor, he bawled at the woman who was waving her hands, offering apologies in the aftermath of the intense confrontation.

The woman, now facing Varshi, pleaded desperately through expressive hand gestures, urging her to open the gate. Varshi hesitated as she could not fathom who this woman was. In an attempt to protect herself from any unexpected accusations and to document the unfolding situation, she quickly captured a couple of videos, saving them to the Internet for future reference.

The second man emerged, poised to jump onto the balcony. The woman found herself in an increasingly perilous situation, one that could prove fatal. Sensing the urgency and anticipating the imminent arrival of the police, Varshi decided to open the gate and allow the woman to seek refuge.

Varshi was tingled with fear as she unlocked the gate and slid it open to let her in. But it was too late. Amid the chaos, the two men, fueled by anger, also forced into the living room. As the intruders brandished their rods, Varshi couldn't help but notice the absurdity of the situation. The woman, in a

desperate attempt to defend herself, swiftly grabbed a badminton racket from the table. Varshi observed with a mix of amazement and confusion as the woman skillfully maneuvered around the furniture, using the racket as an improvised weapon. The two intruders, strangely cautious not to damage any furniture, cornered the woman against a wall. With both men raising their rods menacingly, the tension in the room escalated. The woman, sheltered behind a chair, held the racket horizontally, ready to defend against the impending strikes.

The intruders, suddenly concerned about damaging the racket, hesitated in delivering their blows. Seizing the opportunity, they dropped their rods. However, the situation took a darker turn as the first man lunged forward, abandoning the rods in favor of a powerful punch aimed at the woman's face. The woman suffered a severe blow, blood spilling from the impact, yet she clung tightly to the racket with both hands.

Varshi felt a wave of horror sweep over her. How could she assist the injured woman? A desperate determination took hold – she needed to shield the woman from further harm until the police arrived.

Shouting, “Stop!” she charged toward the TV, cranking up the volume to its maximum. The sudden surge triggered the sound detector, unleashing an explosive, deafening noise. All three intruders recoiled in shock, frozen in their tracks, fixated on the blaring speaker. Seizing the moment, Varshi hurried to her bedroom. The two intruders hesitated briefly, their actions momentarily suspended. Yet, their laughter soon mixed with the piercing announcement from the speaker to form a strange dramatic speech. They nonchalantly redirected their attention toward the woman, who, despite her bleeding face, defiantly wielded the racket as a shield. The men calculated how to proceed without damaging the precious racket.

When Varshi returned to the living room and turned off the TV, an eerie silence engulfed the space. One of the assailants poised for another punch, fixating on the woman's vulnerable position. At that critical juncture, the distant wail of a police siren pierced the air, growing louder with each passing second,

signaling the imminent arrival of law enforcement.

The two men exchanged glances, shaking their heads in resignation. Swiftly retrieving their rods, they scrambled to the balcony and descended along the water pipe, disappearing into the crowd.

Varshi retrieved the first-aid box, and amidst the hushed atmosphere, she suddenly heard a voice speaking in English: “You are my Guan Yin Goddess, who brings sinners forgiveness. You had saved my life...” Looking around, she found that the English voice was emanated from her mobile phone while the woman was speaking, her voice, ashen and shaken, expressing profound gratitude.

Coincidentally, the secret channel had been established, and the Translator seamlessly translated her words. Varshi handed the first-aid box to the woman, who, gathering her composure, emerged from behind the chair, crushed and crestfallen.

While she wiped away her blood and taped her wound, Varshi deftly pushed a sequence of buttons on the mobile phone and the police siren suddenly went away. The woman stared at her bewildered.

Varshi smiled. “The siren was generated by an application running on my PC in my bedroom. It was preprogrammed to generate specific sounds with varied intensities and durations. I just turned it off remotely using this mobile phone,” Varshi explained through the Translator.

The woman spoke in a trembling voice, “I am so sorry. I am so stupid and sinful to steal things from this neighborhood...” Tears welled up in her eyes.

Varshi, moved by compassion, gently inquired, “What’s your name? Why did you do that?”

“My name is Lan. I am a single mom, taking care of my son,” the woman sobbed. “He was infected with a disease and is seriously sick, requiring urgent hospitalization. All of a sudden, I need a substantial amount of money, which I do not have, to send him to the hospital. For a few days, I was weary, very weary, immersed in pessimism. Then I was overwhelmed by a deluge of dark thoughts, which drove me to madness and made

me take this route of stealing, not aware of the great peril of such deeds. How stupid I was..." She was choking, tears flooding her sad face.

Varshi listened to her story sadly. The woman was unfortunate, but her misstep had made all pain more poignant, all sorrow sadder.

"Write down your son's name and address," Varshi said, handing her a piece of paper and a pen. "I will take him to the hospital."

The woman's eyes widened, flashing a glint of hope, and she did as Varshi said.

Afterward, she borrowed Varshi's mobile phone to call her son, engaging in a heartfelt conversation until a knock on the door interrupted them. Varshi opened the door to find two policemen standing outside. The woman stepped forward and spoke to them. She was handcuffed and led away. As she walked away, she stole a glance back, her eyes full of tears. Varshi nodded in understanding, and the woman seemed to have released a great burden, her face turning peaceful.

With Wandy's assistance, Varshi reached the given address and discovered a very sick boy, smaller than Shivam, lying on a bed. They promptly called a taxi and transported him to the hospital. Varshi covered all the necessary medical expenses, and the boy was admitted. Despite a challenging start, he made a full recovery within two weeks. Unfortunately, his mother faced legal consequences, receiving a three-year jail sentence for attempted robbery and intrusion of privacy.

In an effort to save the boy from the harsh realities of his mother's actions, Varshi brought him to Badminton Prime. Raditya generously offered food and shelter, allowing him to stay at the club overnight. In return, after school, the boy contributed by helping with various tasks such as cleaning the floor and collecting shuttlecocks into baskets.

After the arrangement, the boy bowed and stared at her, his eyes glistening and dreamy, showing sincerity and gratitude along with something questing and scenting. Varshi touched his head. A strange emotion passed through her, an intimation



of many links and fate. She felt poised both as a passenger and a participant in this alien land, having a rendezvous with destiny in this club. She left the court in high spirit.

As the summer slowly gave way to autumn, three months passed, marking the successful completion of all Varshi's design and development tasks for **Freedom**. She had handed off the remaining tasks to the engineers and the project would move to the phase of testing and production. Varshi, pleased with the outcome, shared her satisfaction with Joyce.

A week before her return to the US, Varshi visited Joyce in her Hong Kong office to finalize the details of **Freedom**. During the meeting, her eyes were drawn to a photo on Joyce's desk. "Who is the gentleman?" Varshi inquired, pointing at the picture.

"He was my father, sentenced to life in jail," Joyce replied, gazing pensively at the photograph.

"What had happened?" Varshi asked, amazed.

Joyce sighed but answered apathetically, "I was the one who put him in prison. He died soon after he was jailed."

Varshi was taken aback. She had heard unsettling tales of the Political Revolution, where families were torn apart, and even children turned against their parents, condemning them to jail for abstract political differences. The realization that her business partner was a part of such tumultuous times sent a shiver down her spine. To mask her emotions, she swiftly changed the subject, updating Joyce on the successful accomplishment of all the goals for **Freedom**. Joyce, pleased with the news, accompanied her back to Deep Terrain and suggested a shopping trip to an affluent district.

As Joyce left for a meeting, Varshi wandered alone along a lively boulevard. The historic district, adorned with charming hotels, exuded genuine quaintness. The vibrant stores seemed even more colorful, and the expansive sidewalks felt more inviting. In this moment, Varshi allowed herself to unwind, letting go of the stress and unease that had accumulated over the past three months.

The excruciating summer heat died down but it was scarcely

noon, still uncomfortably hot and humid to walk on a street. Varshi sought refuge in a stunning multi-level shopping mall, an extension of a great hotel. Upon entering the expansive ground-level hall, she settled onto a sofa near an artificial mini-forest named *Ocean Terrace*. The air within was cool and invigorating. The large circular translucent glass ceiling, high above, diffused the intense sunlight into a gentle radiance, creating an ambiance reminiscent of a tranquil San Diego park on an autumn evening.

Immersed in the pleasure of sitting in a pristine, spacious, and quiet hall, Varshi enjoyed the music broadcast that simulated sea breezes, rustling trees, and other natural sounds. With her eyes closed, she relished the luxury of leisure. As her mind wandered to contemplate future plans, various ideas floated through her thoughts, leaving her restless. Momentarily losing focus, she opened her eyes to chance upon a slender fair-skinned girl. The girl's straight nose, large brown eyes, and smooth, shiny black hair cascading down her shoulders created an elegant image. Climbing a curved staircase to the second level, the girl held a mobile phone in her left hand and a purse in her right. A sudden impulse stirred within Varshi, prompting her to rise.

What made this girl stand out among the crowd of attractive young women in the city? Varshi mused over this question, considering that she was just one among many who hailed from diverse regions of this country. Her curiosity about this particular girl puzzled her.

Driven by an impulse, Varshi decided to follow the girl to the second floor, where the atmosphere was notably more bustling. The central focal point was a spacious food court, intricately connected to other areas with vibrant entrances. On one end, elegant restaurants were visible, while colorful shops and commercial centers extended along the sides, reaching towards the opposite side. Some rooms, leased by third-party companies from the hotel, served as exhibition spaces for products or makeshift offices.

The girl vanished into one of the larger fashion exhibition

rooms, bustling with international visitors. Upon her reappearance, she had undergone a wardrobe change, now donning stylish attire, exuding charm and sophistication. Engaging with visitors through warm smiles and articulate gestures, it became evident that the girl was employed in the fashion industry, introducing and showcasing designs to overseas customers.

In the ferment of Varshi's mind, her thought whirling around girls she had met in town, she could only conclude she never met this girl. Despite her intention to focus on her shopping, Varshi found herself distracted by the vivid images of the girl – her captivating smiles, expressive brown eyes, and graceful movements. The enigmatic allure of the girl occupied her thoughts.

Lost in contemplation, Varshi navigated the plaza like a maze, and an hour effortlessly slipped away without her making a single purchase. She suddenly found that her roaming led her back to the exhibition center, and she heard a voice, faint but familiar, speaking in English. Pausing, as if emerging from a trance, Varshi noticed the girl stepping out of the center, having reverted to her original attire. The sight of the mobile phone and the girl's gait triggered a recognition in Varshi.

In a sudden surge of determination, Varshi hastened towards the girl and called out, "Aikaterina!"

The girl glanced back, registering Varshi's presence with a peculiar expression on her face. Ignoring Varshi, she continued walking as though the woman were a stranger. Determined, Varshi quickened her pace and caught up with her.

"I know you're Aikaterina. Can you share your real identity with me?" Varshi asked, walking alongside her.

"I'm sorry. I don't have time to talk," the girl replied coldly, avoiding eye contact.

As they entered the food court hallway, walking side by side, Varshi maintained a warm smile, gazing at the girl. "I'm interested in learning some local culture. Can you spare some time to teach me? Consider this your tuition fee," she said, placing two one-hundred US dollar bills into an envelope and gesturing toward an Italian restaurant. "I'll treat you to a fancy Mediter-

ranean lunch.”

Handing the envelope to the girl, Varshi watched as she paused, then nodded and smiled, accepting the gesture. “Promise me you won’t tell anyone what I’m about to share,” the girl said earnestly.

Varshi nodded affirmatively. “Absolutely, I won’t.”

Seated in the Italian restaurant, after placing their orders, Varshi cut straight to the point. “I am so confused! Since the first day I arrived here, nothing makes sense. You’re not Greek, are you?”

“Certainly not!” Aikaterina answered, smiling.

“Then who are you?”

“I am a high-paid independent time-sharing secretary, or a secretary-for-rent!”

“Time-sharing secretary?” Varshi repeated, intrigued by the term.

“I am from Western Region, an autonomous region with a very large population in the northwest of this country. We look more like Westerners than normal local people. I went to college in the capital, majoring in Western languages.”

“So at work, you wear a blonde wig and blue contact lenses. With some makeup, you look like a perfect Greek,” Varshi remarked, smiling wryly.

Aikaterina nodded. “Yes, I am a Greek at Badminton Prime, but I might be an American or a Briton in other companies. I have wigs and lenses of various colors and work as a secretary for 20 companies simultaneously!”

“Twenty independent companies?”

“Yes. For some companies, I only work one or two hours a week. For Badminton Prime, I work one to two hours a day, seven days a week.”

Varshi was perplexed. “I thought you worked full time there. I always see you or hear you talking.”

Aikaterina smiled. “I go there only in the morning for one hour, greeting parents who send their kids to lessons. The talking you hear at other times is from a recording. The club has a video camera mounted on the ceiling, sending images to a

video server. I can monitor the activities there in real time from my cell phone. If necessary, I will play a recorded file remotely and ask the Coach to put the sign ‘Do Not Disturb’ on my door.”

“That’s tricky! Why Greek?” Varshi asked, pretending to be puzzled.

“Because English is the only Western language I can speak fluently. If I were to declare, let’s say, that I am German, and a real German mom comes, she would instantly know I am lying. The chance of meeting someone who can speak fluent Greek here is much smaller than meeting someone who speaks French or German. Still, on the day I met you, when you greeted me in Greek, I was scared. So I pushed a button on my cell phone to make it ring, and I pretended to talk to a client in the local language.”

“Everything is well-planned!” Varshi said with a somewhat bitter smile.

“It is serious business!”

“But your boss at Badminton Prime, Raditya, is not. He sets up barriers to reject customers!” Varshi said naively on purpose, as she had many doubts in her mind requiring clarifications.

Aikaterina laughed. “He just rejects inquirers whom he feels not really interested in joining the club. This way, he saves time and makes the club look more prestigious!”

“Are you sure? I answered his exam questions right by total luck; otherwise, I would have been rejected!”

Aikaterina grinned. “It’s not luck. It’s the way he sets up the questions. If he wants you to come, you can mostly answer them right. Even if you answer them wrong, he still has plans B and C to recruit you. If he wants to reject you, you’ll always answer them wrong!”

Varshi shrugged her shoulders. “His way of conducting business is deceiving if not dishonest!” she said deliberately.

“I don’t agree! He does not cheat. Every penny he earns is through sweating. But he does have a lot of pressure to make enough money to cover his living expenses,” Aikaterina de-

murred.

“He lives a luxury life?” Varshi asked with curiosity.

“No, it’s only because most of the money he earns is spent on supporting his daughter’s overseas college study in America. Very few people know about his difficult situation. After all, he is not any corrupted official, but a kind and chivalrous man who lives a simple life.”

“He told bad jokes about America to kids from the US. Doesn’t he worry that the kids or the parents may be offended, not joining his club?”

“The kids won’t mind. They are excited about new things, and they won’t hear bad jokes about America inside America. For parents, yes, they may be upset, but they always let their kids make the final choice of the coach.”

“Why is he so confident that the kids will choose him?”

“That’s simple. He’s the only respectable coach who speaks fluent English in town. Every kid wants to communicate with a coach in their own native language.”

Varshi sighed. “Everything is deceiving here, from appearance to speech.”

Aikaterina did not heed. “Do you know the difference in lying between this country and America?”

Amazed by her question, Varshi shook her head. “No!”

“In America, the government and the elite lie but no one knows they lie. Americans often revere liars as geniuses, innovators, pioneers, and inventors, not unlike North Koreans worshiping their leaders. Here, everyone lies, but everyone is aware that everyone lies. They cheat one another and expect to be cheated themselves. It’s like every day is April Fool’s Day.

For instance, when applying for a mortgage, if you put 50% down and you’re not too old, you can fabricate your career and other details as needed, and get instant approval. The banker knows that you lie and you know that the banker knows you lie,” Aikaterina said, emphasizing her point with a raised eyebrow.

Varshi smiled wryly, attempting to process the unconventional perspective.

Aikaterina continued: “All this, the way we are ruled and react, seems quixotic. You can laugh at it, examine it, despise it, or angry at it, but you cannot change it, not yet. For me, it is only important to flow along with it and temporarily accept it. It is not perfect, actually, not even good, but it might be better than the worst scenario, the Big Brother state described in the novel *1984*.”

Varshi maintained a silent smile, neither expressing agreement nor disagreement. She had no intention of delving into an endless debate with Aikaterina.

As they lapsed into silence, their food arrived – soup, salad, and fish for Aikaterina, and a vegetarian plate for Varshi. They indulged in the hearty meal, savoring the palatable and nutritious dishes without exchanging many words.

Aikaterina finished her plate first, her gaze wandering to the far end of the restaurant. “Excuse me. I need to use the restroom and will be back in a while,” she announced, rising from her seat.

“Sure, take your time,” Varshi replied. *You are going to check the activities of Badminton Prime*, she mused. She sighed, sitting still and lost in thought, her eyes fixed on the food before her, yet unseeing. Aikaterina had imparted valuable knowledge, introducing new concepts and correcting misconceptions. Varshi considered the money spent on Aikaterina’s insights well worth it.

Upon Aikaterina’s return, Varshi maintained her contemplative demeanor. A warm smile graced Aikaterina’s face as she resumed her seat. “It was a nice chat with you, Varshi. You are my friend,” she expressed, handing the envelope back to Varshi, who was taken aback by this gesture. “I cannot accept this from you.”

“No, you’ve earned it. It’s well-deserved payment,” Varshi insisted, shaking her head and refusing to reclaim the money.

Aikaterina rose from her seat, wearing a bright smile, and approached Varshi, thrusting the envelope into her hands. “Please regard me as your friend!”

Varshi accepted it reluctantly. “Okay, let me pay for the

lunch,” she suggested, signaling a waitress for the bill.

“Don’t worry. I’ve already taken care of it on my way to the restroom!” Aikaterina revealed, smiling once more.

Varshi felt a mix of embarrassment and honor. “Oh, no. I am supposed to pay for this!”

“I wish someday I could come to America to visit you. Then you can treat me to dinner in America,” Aikaterina proposed, flashing a smile.

Thus Varshi left the restaurant in deep thinking, the world suddenly unfolding before her in different light. Her mind wandered to the images of the flooded village on the TV, and suddenly, clarity struck. Each family depicted on screen had four or five children, revealing the harsh reality that the one-child policy, despite its cruelty, was failing miserably in the countryside. The government, aware of this failure, chose to turn a blind eye.

“The demographic problem regarding labor shortage might be far more serious than it appears, and they conveniently ignore families with multiple children. No wonder Western analyses of this country are often misguided due to a lack of accurate information,” Varshi mused.

“If I were an activist advocating for the abolition of the cruel one-child policy, I wouldn’t emphasize its brutality and failure. Instead, I’d exaggerate its success, highlighting the looming labor crunch and serious demographic issues, ultimately lobbying for its abolishment. The government would then pretend that I am right and make changes. Ah, this is how the game is played here, even though it is a stupid game!”

Varshi felt delighted with contempt for walking out of the maze.

The following morning, upon encountering Aikaterina at Badminton Prime, they engaged in casual conversation, seamlessly resuming their previous interactions as if Varshi were oblivious to the unveiled secret.

As Varshi was about to depart, she noticed a woman standing up from a spectator’s seat, gesturing towards her. A wave of astonishment washed over her as she identified the woman



as Lan, the thief who had been sentenced to three years in jail. Closing the distance between them, Lan extended a painting rolled into a cylinder with both hands. Varshi promptly activated her translator.

Lan expressed with sincerity, “This is a modest souvenir I purchased to convey my immense gratitude. Your actions will forever be etched in our hearts!”

Varshi graciously accepted the gift, her confusion evident as she inquired, “I thought you were sentenced to three years in jail.”

Lan affirmed, “Yes, my friend arranged for someone to serve the jail term on my behalf for a month.” She blushed slightly. “I have to return to jail next week.”

Perplexed, Varshi questioned, “Hired someone to serve your jail term?”

Lan nodded, explaining, “Yes, she is a peasant from a remote, impoverished village. I assure you that I’ll never engage in wrongdoing again. I’ll use my time in jail to study diligently, acquiring knowledge for my future. I hope that one day, both my son and I can repay your kindness.”

Varshi smiled cozily as did Lan.

A few days later, as Varshi prepared to check out of her apartment in the morning, her son still engaged at Badminton Prime, Lee, the landlord, arrived to inspect the rooms. Varshi handed back the keys, anticipating the return of her deposit. However, Lee asserted that a piece of gold, allegedly left in a cabinet when she initially moved in, was now missing. Consequently, he insisted that she compensate him for the value of the lost gold. There was only one solution to the problem, she thought. She did not call the police. She called Joyce, who jokingly said she would send ‘lawyers’ to her to negotiate with Lee.

A few hours later, Varshi found herself seated at a round table in a spacious restaurant. Although Lee was conspicuously absent, his representative, a burly individual named Gong who bore the semblance of a tough character, occupied the seat opposite her. Hua, the manager acting as the mediator, positioned

himself midway between them. Restlessly awaiting the arrival of her appointed 'lawyers,' Varshi couldn't help but feel a mixture of curiosity and anticipation regarding how they would handle the encounter with this seemingly formidable negotiator.

In due course, she spotted two men entering the restaurant, walking towards her table in single file. It became evident that these were her designated 'lawyers.' As they drew nearer, Varshi struggled to suppress a burst of laughter, realizing that her legal representation comprised none other than Peng and his assistant.

Peng did not wear any glasses, nor any suit. He wore jeans and a T-shirt, looked a lot more muscular and tough, more like a street fighter than a professional worker. Taking a seat beside Varshi, he discreetly handed her a note written in English: *Do not say anything. I will settle the case for you!* and he blinked an eye at her. His partner, appeared as a villain with a cruel hard gash on his face, looked inexorable and terrible as before, sat next to him with a chilling murderous gaze at the group. Varshi slightly trembled upon his appearance but no one else heeded.

After a while, Varshi could not further suppress her curiosity. She turned on the Language Translator, just in time to catch the crucial part of the conversation.

Gong said, his voice flat, "... Lee had a piece of gold worth forty-thousand dollars missing in the apartment. He recognized that a couple of intruders broke into the apartment a month ago, and that is not the tenant's fault. Lee is being reasonable and is willing to resolve the matter if Varshi pays half the value, which amounts to twenty thousand."

He continued, staring at Peng, "Peng, I advice you to draw off and let her pay the twenty thousand. If you persist on representing her and not paying, you will raise up a swarm of enemies who will never leave you alone until you find Deep Terrain too hot and humid to stay."

Peng broke into a gentle chuckle. "No, to be fair and justifiable, she must pay the full amount, forty thousand!" he said

assertively.

Varshi frowned. *No, stupid! I don't want to pay even one dime!* She yelled in her mind.

"You uphold fairness and righteousness," Gong responded, maintaining his flat tone without revealing any hint of joy.

"Yes, I always am! I don't play a hand without a card. I am sure you know my background. Listen carefully!" Peng declared imperiously. "When she moved out of the apartment, she forgot a piece of gold worth 1 million dollars inside her room. It has been missing after Lee inspected the apartment, and Colleague Yip, the great retired military general, was her witness. So Lee has to pay her 1 million dollars, but she is willing to accept partial payment to show her gratitude."

Gong's expression grew grave as Peng mentioned General Yip, and a fleeting look of something akin to fear flashed in his eyes. However, in a short moment, he returned to his calm appearance as if nothing was a big deal. "Both of them are victims of theft. To assuage their bad feelings, I propose they do not pay each other. I will return the deposit to her here and pay for this lunch," he said flatly.

"Deal!" Peng said bluntly.

Varshi was amazed, but at that moment, the secret channel broke, and she couldn't understand their subsequent conversations.

Gong retrieved a pile of bills from the inside pocket of his jacket and handed it to Peng, who then gave it to his taut assistant.

The man took the cash, his gaze no longer murderous, and handed it to Varshi. He looked friendly and spoke to her in English with a cozy tone, as if talking to an old friend, "Varshi, this is your deposit. Check that the amount is right. Then you can leave. We wish you a nice trip back home and good fortune!"

Varshi took the cash, counted it briefly, and put it in her purse. She stood up, smiled, and nodded. "Thank you, everyone! Wish you great fortune!" she said, swiftly walking away.

Thus Varshi and her son returned to the US safe and sound

with a captivating story to tell.

## Chapter 2

### *The Secret Agent*

After learning that Joyce was responsible for sending her father, apparently a kind gentleman to jail, Varshi decided to gradually disengage from her collaboration with Joyce. She embarked on a new venture by establishing a consulting company that focuses on the latest advancements in computing technologies – an area she had been involved in for many years. With the assistance of Edward, she secured an office at the ground level of a business plaza, investing considerable effort in its decoration.

The office's front windows provided a pleasant view of the commercial plaza, while the back windows offered glimpses of trees and flowers. Varshi meticulously organized the office following a harmonious ritual pattern, considering factors such as orientation by the points of the compass, the arrangement of doors, the spirit wall, the coordination of desks and shelves, their alignment with the constellations, the calendar, family life, and the symbolism and stylistic principles of the building.

After running her consulting firm for a month, on one fine day, early in the morning, Varshi, accompanied by Edward, meticulously reorganized the shelves and desks to resemble a portion of tree branches. Although clients entering her office might not consciously recognize the tree structure, their sub-

conscious minds would effortlessly extend the branches to envision a complete tree, fostering a sense of entering a serene tree garden and invoking feelings of cosmic harmony and mysterious freshness.

To enhance the ambiance further, Varshi introduced a small plant to neutralize any unpleasant odors and an ionizer to purify the air. Once these elements were in place, Edward stood beside her table, observing the organized objects with a sense of satisfaction.

Edward strolled toward the door, offering warm words on Varshi's return, "I'm glad you're back and working here. Best of luck!" Varshi was aware that he was running late for a party. She nodded appreciatively, smiling as she watched him hastily leave the office. Remaining seated, she absentmindedly left the door ajar, feeling content with her new venture and with herself.

As she contemplated reaching out to her son to share the excitement about her fantastic office, an unanticipated visitor walked in without prior notice. The man, of average height but robust build and devoid of any excess weight, possessed a swarthy complexion, large brown languid eyes, and graying black hair.

Introducing himself as Jonathan Jacobs, the founder and director of a small technology consulting firm, he took a seat in front of Varshi's desk as she prepared some coffee.

"I've heard from a source that you're the most intelligent woman in town, with remarkable analytical prowess," Jacobs said chivalrously.

The comment brought a subtle blush to Varshi's cheeks. "That's absolutely not true!" she replied, leaning back in her chair and laughing. "You know Edward, my husband?"

"Very indirectly. A friend's friend went to the same church as he," he said, smiling.

"I ask him to advertise my company to his friends but never ask him to boast about me like that," she added, shifting slightly in her seat.

"I trust my friends. I believe you can help me," Jacobs

said, savoring two long sips of coffee before placing his cup on Varshi's table and handing her a USB drive.

Varshi had a sense that she had entered into a discreet dialogue with this man, who appeared to be withholding some truths. She plugged the drive into her laptop and powered it on.

As the computer powered up, Jacobs began narrating with the flair of a captivating storyteller, "Before I ventured into establishing my technology consulting firm, I spent my earlier years working with the FBI. I held the position of leading a small team responsible for monitoring technological advancements in Strong Nation."

He continued, "Our team was taken completely off guard when Strong Nation successfully launched its inaugural satellite in the 1960s. Interestingly, it wasn't the remarkable progress in rocket development that left us astounded; rather, it was the sheer leap in computer technology that caught us by surprise."

"Computer technology?" Varshi echoed, her expression betraying a hint of confusion.

"Yes, orchestrating the trajectory of a satellite into a specific orbit demands intricate real-time calculations, a task only achievable with cutting-edge computers at that time. We were unequivocally convinced that Strong Nation lacked the capability and resources to construct even less advanced computing machines. It seemed evident that they had acquired the most sophisticated computers through theft, most likely pilfered from the US, or perhaps intricate components had been illicitly transported there for final assembly.

Collaborating with our European allies, we launched extensive investigations, meticulously tracing the final destinations of numerous suspicious shipments from American and European computer firms. Our efforts were exhaustive, leading us through a maze of legal procedures as we pursued the investigation with unwavering intensity. Despite our thorough search, we reached no conclusive findings, unable to uncover any leads on the smuggling channels.

Frustrated by the lack of progress, we covertly reached out to the Soviet Union Bloc at the time, exploring the possibil-

ity of their involvement in supplying Strong Nation with the advanced technology.

To our astonishment, they shared our bewilderment, grappling with the same elusive question: *Where did Strong Nation pilfer the computers used for satellite guidance?* The query lingered unanswered for years, leaving me feeling akin to a man confined in total darkness, unable to discern even a glimmer of light in the surrounding obscurity.”

Varshi acknowledged the narrative with a nod and a subtle smile, choosing to remain silent. As her laptop PC completed its booting process, the screen output mirrored on a sleek, oversized monitor positioned beside her table, ensuring both she and Jacobs had a clear view of the displays. While searching through a USB drive, she stumbled upon a video file, only to discover it was in an incompatible format for her open-source PC, rendering it unplayable.

As she ran an application to convert the file into a standard format, Jacobs seamlessly resumed his narrative: “In the 1980s, I had an opportunity to converse with a professor who had previously worked at the Space Institute of Strong Nation before immigrating to our country. I directly posed the question in his office, but he responded with a frown, offering no reply. Instead, he stood and peered thoughtfully through a glass window. Suddenly, his countenance lit up with a sense of joy, and he briskly moved to his bookshelf, extracting a book that he promptly handed to me, urging me to read it attentively.

“The book turned out to be the autobiography of Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman. Known for his distinctive problem-solving approaches, Feynman laid the foundation for nanotechnology in his 1959 lecture, ‘There’s Plenty of Room at the Bottom,’ delivered at Caltech. That evening, I delved into the book, relishing its contents until the midnight hour, completing half of it. However, it only deepened the mystery: Why had the professor directed me to read something seemingly unrelated to my initial question?

Next morning, I flipped through the remaining pages with tired body and mind, ready to return the book. Then I came



across a few lines that gripped my attention. I read those lines repeatedly, and suddenly, the answer to the question that had haunted me for two decades unfurled in my mind. It was as if the door to a dark cell had swung open, flooding the entire room with bright light. We had suffered from a plethora of surmise and conjectures, only to realize that the solution was remarkably simple and glaringly obvious yet, we had remained oblivious to it for two decades.”

Jacobs paused and smiled at her.

Varshi realized he was challenging her analyzing power, waiting for her to make comments.

*Where did Strong Nation steal the computers?* she pondered, admitting to herself that she had no immediate answer. The question perplexed her, especially considering that Jacobs found the solution after perusing the same book on Feynman that she had read before. Gazing at the computer screen, she felt a mounting pressure to contribute something meaningful to the conversation, fearing embarrassment if she couldn't.

Just as the stress was reaching its peak, the video file came to her rescue. The conversion was done so she immediately clicked on it to play the video.

The scene unfolded in a casino, featuring a blackjack table with three players and a dealer. The camera zoomed in on an Asian man, clad in a white long-sleeve shirt, his thick black hair framing his ears. Despite his robust physique reminiscent of an Olympic sprinter, he played the game with the nonchalant ease of a seasoned gambler.

An intriguing detail caught her attention – contrary to the norm, the dealer, a young girl, allowed the players to shuffle and cut the cards themselves instead of taking on the task.

Pointing at the computer screen, Jacobs explained, “This is a recently established small casino, our client, situated in an Indian reservation area approximately 100 miles east of Los Angeles. The owner, relatively new to the casino business, was navigating unfamiliar territories in terms of operations. In a bid to attract patrons, they introduced a novel variation of the blackjack game. Their approach utilized a single deck and per-

mitted players to personally shuffle and cut the cards. Despite being in a trial phase, it had already piqued the interest of numerous gamblers. Things were progressing well, and they were on the verge of making it a regular feature.

“Then, one day, the individual featured in the video visited. Despite consistently betting no more than the allotted maximum of 5 dollars each time, on that particular day, he managed to win a substantial sum, totaling a few thousand dollars.

The casino was left in disbelief. While the monetary loss wasn't staggering, the mystery lay in how he had managed to win and what tactics he employed. Determined to unravel the enigma, they planned to closely observe and scrutinize him during his next visit. Regrettably, the man never returned, leaving only this fortuitously recorded video from the day of his notable win. Tasked with uncovering his potential cheating methods, we watched the video meticulously countless times, but the elusive truth remained elusive. Consequently, the casino had to discontinue the innovative gaming style.

This is the primary reason I sought your assistance. There's a possibility that you might spot something we've overlooked. If you could shed some light on it, we'll be delightfully obliged to you.”

Varshi responded with a smile, “Indeed, it's quite intriguing, and I would be keen to conduct a thorough analysis of this phenomenon. However, gambling isn't my expertise. Why didn't you reach out to specialized companies in this field?”

“That's why I shared the Strong Nation story with you. We need an outsider's perspective on this matter. There's a greater chance that they might notice something we've overlooked,” Jacobs explained, slipping his hands into his pockets and fixing his gaze on the door. “I have to leave now and would like to return tomorrow morning.”

Once Jacobs departed, Varshi sank into contemplation. Jacobs appeared to have concealed his true purpose for visiting her. He had woven a narrative around satellite launches in Strong Nation, a tale that, upon reflection, seemed deceptive and superficial, perhaps intended to veil his genuine intentions.

On the other hand, she considered herself an ordinary person and couldn't fathom any reason why a former FBI agent would take an interest in her.

The perplexing visit had left Varshi feeling drained. She decided to leave her office early, taking the USB drive with her. Once home, she entered a room housing a cluster machine she had assembled using open-source software and low-cost laptops. This unified cluster operated as a single entity, boasting formidable computing power. Activating the cluster, she connected it to the Internet and inserted the USB drive, extracting a few frames of the mysterious man. These frames served as input parameters for an application that deployed a swarm of mobile agents. Their mission: to traverse the vast expanse of the Internet in search of any matching images of the man. To narrow the searching scope, she entered a few more parameters:

Gender: Male  
Ethnics: Asian  
Age: 20 - 30  
Height: 5' 10" - 6' 4"  
Weight: 140 - 220 pounds

Returning to her home office, she ran an application on her laptop to showcase any identified links discovered by the cluster before heading out to pick up Shivam from school.

The following morning, her excitement soared as she discovered a displayed link upon her return. Clicking on it led her to a website featuring an image of a man, a computer science professor at a university. While there was a resemblance to the mysterious man, upon closer scrutiny, she discerned that they were not the same individual.

She dismissed the link and focused her attention on the video itself. Delving into a thorough analysis, she watched it intently, frequently pausing for meticulous examination. The man assumed most of the shuffling duties, as the other two players showed minimal interest in the task. His shuffle technique was remarkably graceful – dividing the deck into two equal halves,

he held each portion in one hand. As he expertly merged the two piles, cards fluttered, seamlessly alternating between the halves with economical motions and quiet agility. The entire process resembled an acrobatic display performed with serene dexterity.

She remained captivated by the video, replaying it for over an hour. However, the only notable observation was that, during the game, the man frequently rotated a ring on his left hand's little finger. Despite her meticulous scrutiny, she couldn't unearth anything suspicious, nor could she formulate any conclusive findings.

She leaned back on her chair wearily, only to be confronted by another elusive question that clamored for attention.

How had someone managed to smuggle computers into Strong Nation, evading detection for two decades. Why couldn't Jacobs find any clues in twenty years? The queries lingered, refusing to dissipate from her thoughts.

*When the impossible is eliminated, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.*

In a revelation that shattered a 20-year illusion, she realized that the notion of computers being clandestinely shipped to Strong Nation through a smuggling channel was a persistent delusion. In reality, such a channel had never existed.

Undeterred, she pushed forward, systematically discarding all other suppositions. In the realm of the improbable, the truth emerged – Strong Nation had indeed developed its own computing machines to guide the satellite.

She refreshed her memory about the book on *Feynman*. Suddenly, like Jacobs, the explanation crystallized in her mind, dispelling the confusion and unveiling a clear and obvious truth.

With a heart full of delight, she returned to her office at the business plaza. After brewing a pot of coffee, Jacobs arrived.

"I bet you've made a discovery!" Jacobs exclaimed, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

Varshi smiled. "You'll never find out where Strong Nation stole the computer."

"Why is that?"

“Because they didn’t steal. They constructed their own computing machine, possibly the most powerful computer on the planet at that time.”

Jacobs nodded in agreement, smiling.

Varshi continued, “Except that the computer wasn’t built with IC circuits but constructed with human brains. Feynman once out-calculated a military computer by a large margin using mental calculations to find the trajectory of a missile. This high-speed mental calculation skill isn’t any special talent but can be trained. Strong Nation had trained a cluster of scientists to work as a single computer, coordinating their minds to move the satellite to the proper orbit.”

Jacobs nodded enthusiastically. “Excellent! That’s precisely what we found and confirmed!”

Varshi felt relaxed and took a sip of her coffee. “Regarding the mysterious gambler, I couldn’t help but notice he wore a ring and frequently touched it during the game. Could it be a Wi-Fi device that he used to communicate with an outsider for assistance?”

Jacobs shook his head. “We noticed that too, but the casino strictly prohibits all Wi-Fi devices in the gambling area. They monitor for any suspicious signals 24/7. The data from that day were thoroughly scrutinized, and nothing special was observed.”

Varshi stood up. “I couldn’t draw any conclusions at the moment. The man’s shuffle action displays grace and fluidity. He coordinates his two hands and fingers with extraordinary dexterity. He might excel in a sport that involves two-handed skills, such as juggling or martial arts,” she said, pouring another cup of coffee.

Jacobs nodded. “I wholeheartedly agree! It’s peculiar that he never appears in any casino except for this one occasion! I’m very intrigued by this mystery. Winning such a substantial sum couldn’t be solely attributed to luck!”

Jacobs stood up and extended his hand. “I’ll be out of town for a week but will come to see you again when I’m back. Thanks so much for your help!”

Varshi exchanged smiles and handshakes with Jacobs as he exited the office. She then gazed out of her office window, recognizing that the answer couldn't be hurried. The solution needed time to mature in her mind; she decided to play with the problem during breaks, trusting that the answer would emerge if there was one.

In the following days, she stuck to her routine. Each morning, before heading to her office, she checked if the cluster had yielded any results. Typically, it displayed one or two links that resembled the mysterious gambler, but closer scrutiny dismissed them as false positives. One morning, after a week of searching, a promising link appeared with a brief text description: "Prodigy kid from San Diego beats the unbeatable in table tennis..." An uneasy sensation swept over her. She clicked on the link, revealing a video that thrilled and surprised her simultaneously.

The footage showed her son in action, engaged in a table tennis match against Caballo Oscuro. Shivam had previously recounted the exciting match in detail, but the memory had slipped her mind amidst her intensive project collaboration with Joyce. Now, the video served as a vivid reminder of that memorable event.

Shivam was on the verge of losing the table tennis match when a homeless stranger, seeking her gardener Diego, unexpectedly coached him to victory. A devoted table tennis enthusiast recorded this remarkable event and shared it on the Internet. Despite the stranger's disheveled appearance and long hair, Varshi easily recognized him as the same person from the casino video. After a week of searching, the pieces finally fell into place, and she comprehended the true motive behind Jacobs' visit.

It became apparent that Jacobs might have also uncovered the match. His primary goal was to investigate the mystery man, and he was uncertain whether her family had any connection to him. Indirectly, he sought to investigate Varshi as well.

Grateful for her hobbyist creation of a powerful computing

cluster, Varshi acknowledged that, without it, she might never have discovered the match or learned about Jacobs' covert intentions. She resolved to keep her discovery to herself until she could uncover more details.

A grim thought crossed her mind. If the casino man was a villain and her gardener had befriended such a criminal, it would have dire implications for her family's safety. She brooded over the consequences and became restless, fidgeting uneasily on her chair. Unable to contain her restlessness, she rose, pacing the room. Gazing through a window, she stared at the garden, where the darkening sky and howling wind hinted at an impending rainstorm.

She called Diego.





## Chapter 3

### *The Enigmatic Gardener*

Amidst the droning of the wind and the steady drip of the rain, Diego came in, the robust gardener with keen eyes, curled hair and a rich complexion. Varshi greeted him with a warm smile, gesturing for him to take a seat as she poured a cup of coffee. Seated opposite her desk, Diego had a clear view of the computer screen to her left.

“Is he a close friend of yours?” Varshi inquired, pointing at the stranger in the table tennis video.

Diego stared at the video in amazement and exclaimed, “Isaac Newman! I don’t know him well, but he’s a great friend of mine, and I’ve been keeping a journal on him.”

“You’ve been journaling about him?” Varshi asked, visibly surprised.

“Yes, I write well! I was an outstanding student in high school, particularly fond of Eastern literature,” Diego shared, “but I couldn’t afford to go to college as I had to work to support my younger siblings.” He paused, stealing a glance at Varshi before sipping his coffee.

“I’m amazed that he coached Shivam to beat Caballo Oscuro, the unbeatable! Could you tell me how you met him and about his life?” Varshi asked sincerely.

Diego’s eyes widened. “Do you want a short story or a long

one?”

Varshi smiled. “I’m most interested in the long story. If you don’t mind, please tell me everything you know about him, as I have plenty of time.”

Diego’s eyes flashed a glint of excitement. “I’ll start from the very beginning, the evening I met him!” he said, looking steadfastly at her.

He fell silent, staring out of the window as he delved into his memories before speaking in a solemn voice: “It was three years ago, when I was a bouncer, working in the Gentry Night-Club in Santa Barbara, a well-paid job that I had worked for three years, rarely encountering serious trouble makers. I felt complacent about my situation, not preparing for the cruel reality of life.

Autumn seemed to arrive suddenly that year. On a week-end evening, the sky was clear and serene, the sunset casting a warm glow over the streets, radiant with glory. In high spirits, I jogged to my office, a routine I followed often. When I arrived at the corner of two cross streets, where a museum was located, I slowed and paused. I was not sure why I stopped. I might be sensing a portent of things to come or the beauty of the museum’s environment, plentiful flowers and trees, drew me to it.

The museum stood closed, its parking lot empty. Near the center, I noticed a peculiar sight – a few large rectangles drawn with white chalk. As I traversed the lot, my attention shifted to a homeless man, wrapped in a blanket, nestled under a tree at a corner. His demeanor seemed less like someone asleep and more like one engaged in meditation. He appeared Asian, with a medium-sized backpack by his side.

A gentle breeze stirred the air, causing a few leaves to slowly descend from a tree, fluttering and settling on the ground. It dawned on me that the Santa Ana winds were making their presence felt.

“Suddenly, I heard a loud clunking sound. Turning my head, I saw behind me, a van parked about 30 feet to my left, its back facing me. The engine had been turned off, and for a pro-

longed moment, absolute silence prevailed. Then, in a sudden motion, the two front doors swung open. Three men, robustly built with brawny arms, leaped out. One of them resembled a giant, weighing over 200 pounds, with a rugged physique resembling a solid tree trunk, both arms adorned with devilish tattoos. The doors were forcefully slammed shut, producing a resonant thrumming sound, and they fixed their gaze on me with sly, knowing smiles.

“I promptly recognized one of them, shorter than the others. He was Frazier, a KKK member who had visited our club days earlier, drinking heavily. He caught my attention when he started rambling about politics and state policies, revealing much of his private life. His speech was odious, and he callously disregarded the feelings of other customers. Despite my disdain for him, I initially left him be.

It was only when he began walking around and hurling insults at some minority customers that I took action. Concerned that he might cause a disturbance, I politely asked him to leave immediately. He resisted, shouting offensive words, insisting he had every right to stay and berating me. While I’m generally a calm person, that night Frazier pushed me to the edge. My temper was nearly beyond control, so I told him he was like cat’s dung in a shrine, vexing even gods and ghosts. To prevent further trouble, I had to enforce his immediate and final departure from the club. As he loudly declared he wouldn’t leave, I promptly dragged him out with the help of a colleague before my temper reached its boiling point.

Evidently, he had come to take revenge on me.

“I scrutinized the men as they approached me slowly. I was not stirred. Their movements revealed as gaits of nonprofessional fighters. Even the tattooed giant would not withstand my kicks and punches for long. I turned my gaze to the homeless man, who was staring at me, hands still gripping the blanket. His face was taut but when our eyes met, a chill ran down my spine.

His eyes were penetrating, flashing with the glint of steel, yet they held a softness, pure as a full moon, soft enough to ab-

sorb any hostile emotion. Such emotional depth in one's eyes could only be achieved through supreme training in martial arts. If he were part of the gang, waiting there to join the others and corner me, I would be in serious trouble. Now, the stranger slowly rose to his feet, obstructing my path with a commanding presence.

"I sensed imminent danger, and panic set in, my heart palpitating. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead, yet I hesitated to flee. However, as I cast another look at him, I perceived grief and sorrow masked behind his piercing eyes. A pitiful feeling welled up within me, understanding his plight, having experienced significant grief in my own life and once being homeless for a brief period. Before I could decide, the stranger picked up his backpack, stuffed his blanket into it, swung it onto his back, turned around, and began walking away. I breathed a sigh of relief in an instant.

"The gentle breeze had transformed into a gusty wind, sweeping across the park. It restlessly swirled the fallen leaves upward, scattering them all over the parking lot. I turned to observe the three thugs, singing and cackling with sinister laughs, a prelude to the heinous crimes gangs commit. They continued their raucous laughter for some time without taking any action.

I grasped that fleeing was not the solution.

*If you witness violence, condemn it; if you encounter a bully, stand up to it!* These were the first teachings of my martial arts master, and they remain etched in my memory.

I stood resolute, ready for any potential attack. When their laughter finally subsided, they glared at me with intense anger. Frazier, in a fit of rage, spat on the floor and hurled insults.

Unyielding, I stood still like a boulder in a mountain, a look of disdain etched on my face.

Suddenly, all movement ceased, and Frazier hopped backward, yanking open the van's rear door. He laughed with a predatory excitement, his face contorted in a cold-blooded sneer of contempt. While his behavior disgusted me, what I witnessed inside the van left me traumatized."

Diego paused, his face briefly flashing a frightened expres-

sion.

“What did you see?” Varshi inquired.

“Inside the van were three enormous, unchained dogs – one brown, one yellow, and one white – emitting menacing barks. All my martial arts training was geared toward humans; I had no experience dealing with hostile dogs.

Frazier snapped his thumb and middle-finger toward the dogs, and the brown one immediately jumped out of the van, dashing at me. It was all happening too fast that I had no time to compose a fighting plan.

In a split second, I slid my left arm out of my jacket, swiftly swinging it around my right arm just in time to block the airborne assault from the brown dog, which had sprung into the air and was flying toward me. It sunk its teeth into the thick fabric, causing me pain. Without the protection of the jacket, I shuddered to think what might have happened to my forearm. The force threw me backward, and I stumbled on the ground. As the dog continued biting my right arm above me, I threw my left arm to the side to regain balance.

“Then a sharp whistle pierced the air. Lifting my head, I noticed the white dog poised to leap onto the ground. It became evident that I needed to quickly extricate myself from the tenacious hold of the brown dog to avert a potential disaster. I took a deep breath and unleashed thunderous punches at its body. However, the dog clung to my arm as tenaciously as before, so I punched again and again. The dog was not only stupid, but very stubborn, more stubborn than anything I had ever experienced. It was half-dying, only that it did not free me.

Glancing upward once more, I witnessed the white dog hurtling toward me. Dread consumed me, and my entire body was drenched in sweat.

“The wind intensified, rustling the leaves and kicking up dust that forced me to momentarily close my eyes. When I reopened them, the white dog’s horrifying, pointed teeth were just a few paces away. Trembling, an icy chill swept through my entire body, and my mind went blank. *I am going to die*, I thought, succumbing to a wave of sadness. In my most desper-

ate and helpless moment, a corner inside the museum suddenly lit up, as if God were sending me signals of hope and brightness. ‘Help me, God!’ I prayed.”

Diego fell into a moment of silence, his hands bound together in a praying pose. Varshi listened in astonishment, realizing she had never known about Diego’s dramatic life experiences.

After a short pause, Diego resumed, “Sorry, Madam. Whenever I recall that incident, I can’t help but thank God. At the most perilous moment, I saw a small black object, resembling a bead, hurtling toward the white dog and striking its nose. The bead was smashed into some fine black powder. The creature immediately convulsed and collapsed on the ground, struggling to rise before emitting a series of low, tremulous yelps and lurching away heavily.

“Turning to follow the direction of the commotion, I saw the stranger had returned, placing his backpack beneath the tree. In his left hand, he held an object and was swiftly advancing toward the thugs.

A quick double whistle blow prompted the yellow dog, the last one, to leap onto the ground. Larger than it appeared inside the van, it seemed to be the biggest and strongest. It charged at the stranger with remarkable speed. The stranger, undeterred, continued walking. As the menacing dog sprang toward him with a loud growl, he displayed remarkable agility, executing a deft half-turn to evade the attack. Not only did the formidable dog miss its target, but it found itself embraced by the stranger’s arms before hitting the ground. With swift, precise movements I couldn’t clearly discern, the stranger swiftly subdued the dog, instructing it to retreat.

Frazier stood frozen, a peculiar expression etched onto his enraged face. Suddenly snapping his fingers, he signaled the tattooed giant to step forward. The stranger and the thug approached each other until they were just a pace apart, facing off completely. The gangster glared furiously at the homeless man and unleashed a sudden bellow. With a powerful, crooked punch from the side, he aimed for his adversary’s head. How-

ever, the stranger adeptly blocked it with his left forearm, still holding onto the mysterious object.

“Without hesitation, the tattooed giant raised his left arm for a straight punch to the man’s chest. Astonishingly, the man didn’t evade the blow. As the fist neared his chest, his bosom suddenly curved inward, narrowly avoiding the impact. The giant’s arm extended in full, falling just a tenth of an inch short of its intended target. Seizing the moment, the stranger charged forward like a ghost, effortlessly as the wind, and raised his right hand. With outstretched fingers, he pressed against the giant’s solid chest, shaking his head to signal a halt to further attacks.

Despite the warning, the gangster hesitated briefly before deciding to ignore it. With another bellow, he threw another punch. However, before the gangster’s fist was halfway to its target, the stranger curled his fingers into a fist and thrust it forward a couple of inches. To my shock, the entire body of the giant gangster was thrown backward as if an explosion had occurred, stumbling on the floor with a sharp pang as he hit the solid ground, lying there screaming.

Frazier’s face turned ashen, and he snapped his fingers once more. The other gang member immediately followed suit, running toward the van. At first, I thought they were retreating, but to my surprise, each of them retrieved a steel bar, approximately four feet long, from the van and charged towards the stranger.

“As they closed in, almost synchronized, they swung the bars at the stranger’s body. However, the stranger gracefully stepped back, effortlessly evading the strikes. Seizing the moment before they could strike again, the stranger charged forward. An object was shot straight up into the air and the thugs were hit by two punches with lightning speed. Though the punches were theoretically sequential, one following the other, they seemed to hit simultaneously, causing the men to fall in unison, crying out in pain.

As the men writhed on the floor, the stranger deftly caught and grabbed with one hand the falling object, which had been

thrown into the air by him. Just then, the distant wail of police sirens became audible. It appeared that someone had witnessed our altercation and promptly summoned the police.

Though the immediate threat had passed, the brown dog continued to clamp down on my forearm, dragging me along. The stranger stepped forward and hurled an object in my direction, which I managed to catch with my left hand. Expressing my gratitude loudly, I exclaimed, "Thank you so much, my friend!"

"The object turned out to be a large plastic bottle of water, about two-thirds full, with a band wrapped around it. Despite the dog's relentless pulling, I struggled to open the bottle with just one hand and my mouth. Pouring the entire contents onto the dog's head, especially its nose, caused a visible reaction – the stubbornness in its demeanor seemed to dissolve. Consequently, I succeeded in freeing my forearm from its clutches.

Rising to my feet, overwhelmed and drained, I kicked the shrinking dog away. Despite the thick layers of fabric providing some protection, my forearm was now bleeding. Ignoring the damage and the pain, I surveyed my surroundings. The parking lot had once again become deserted. The gang had made a swift escape with the white and yellow dogs, and the stranger vanished, taking his backpack with him. The police siren grew louder, prompting me to swiftly bind my injured arm with the band before fleeing the scene.

Upon reaching the Gentry Night Club, I realized that continuing as a bouncer was too perilous. The attack had been entirely unexpected, and the risk of facing harm at the hands of Frazier was too great. Grateful for my survival, I decided that my life was worth more than the job. After careful consideration that night, I handed in my resignation a few days later."

"They might not have intended to murder you, but if, by accident, you were killed and they got arrested, they could play a lot of tricks to defend themselves, claiming you were attacked by dogs, not by any human," Varshi remarked thoughtfully. "Did the stranger say anything?"

"No, not even one word!" Diego responded. "The next day,



early in the morning, I embarked on an intense search for the stranger. I had to find him to express my profound gratitude for saving me, and I hoped I could help him in return. I'm well aware of the dangers of being homeless, especially staying in a public area overnight; any life-threatening accident could occur at any time. I retraced my steps to the museum and other public places where homeless people often stayed, including parks and river banks, and asked people around. However, no one had seen him or had any information about the stranger I described. Undeterred, I persisted in the intense search over the next few days."

"And you hadn't been able to find him or obtain any leads on him! He might not be homeless," Varshi commented, clearly intrigued.

Diego faintly shook his head. "The stranger was nowhere to be seen. In the subsequent weeks, alongside looking for a new job, I continued the search relentlessly. I even bought a pair of powerful binoculars so that I could stay away from some dangerous locations while searching. Every day was an epic effort, but my search often ended in a circle or a spiral at best – starting with hope and excitement and concluding with disappointment and a heavy heart. After weeks of endeavor, I hadn't found any new clues about him. It felt as if he had suddenly vanished from the planet. I even spoke to a museum employee and left my phone number with her, asking her to call me if she spotted the stranger.

A homeless person could not go far, I thought. His disappearance remained a mystery, and I was on the brink of giving up my search."

Varshi sighed. "Life is guided by fate, not just my determination."

"Very true! But fate can be changed, through hard work and kindness," Diego nodded. "Then came Thanksgiving, the optimal time to search as the streets were empty, and I decided it would be the last day of my quest. On Thanksgiving, I took my backpack and set out before dawn, running on sidewalks that were still gleaming with dew. The crescent moon was de-

scending, its soft rays mingling with the light from lampposts to form a gentle illumination that shone down into the mist. Engulfed in solitude and the thin mist, I had a premonition that I would find him.

While running, I focused on spotting any homeless person sleeping around, but the streets were eerily empty, resembling a ghost town. By late afternoon, I had visited all relevant locations, including a few food centers where free meals were served to the poor on significant holidays. It was a total disappointment, and before sunset, I abruptly abandoned my search mission with dreadful despair.

Instead of heading home, I ran on a boardwalk that meandered downward, leading to a beach.”

“Was it a popular beach?” Varshi inquired.

“No, not at all! The beach was scattered with rocks, large and small, often bombarded by amazing waves. When I got there, it was empty, resembling a deserted area, except for some seagulls flocking around and a few brown pelicans gliding above the wave tops. However, the waves were exceptionally high, crashing against some towering rocks, generating great sounds, akin to the clashing of two armies in a battle.

I settled at the bottom of a precipice, perched on a large boulder that was shielded from the waves by a few rows of rocks. As I laid my backpack aside, I immersed myself in the mesmerizing view of the gorgeous sunset in the boundless ocean, adorned with billowing wreaths of clouds. Far away, the water took on a serene blue hue, gently undulating. Near the shore, the waves grew and rolled, cleaving asunder and coalescing to form larger waves. Some triple overhead waves relentlessly crashed onto the beach, producing a thunderous sound.

“Incidentally, I spotted a black object in the distance, vibrating in sync with the wave motion, piquing my curiosity. I retrieved my binoculars and scanned the ocean, discovering a lone surfer, presumably a man, navigating the vast expanse. Clad in a black wet suit that covered his entire body, including his head and face – exposing only his eyes, nostrils, and

mouth – the wet suit served not only to keep the surfer warm but also to protect him from jellyfish stings in the water. Despite the incredibly high waves, the surfer demonstrated impeccable balance, skillfully riding along with the waves toward the shore. Before long, he approached the crest of a massive wave, leaping high into the air and executing three backward somersaults. While the wave carried the surfer's board onto the shore, sticking it into the sand, the surfer gracefully splashed into the ocean, momentarily disappearing from my view. Despite searching for him with my binoculars, I couldn't detect any trace for quite some time. Eventually, he emerged from the water at a spot where the water level was below his chest. It appeared as though he firmly planted his feet on the ocean bed in a horse pose, facing the vast expanse, with his arms executing stylistic movements – punching at the relentless waves.

“Empowered by an incredible force, wave after wave, the tumultuous sea crashed upon him with the fury of a tornado, swallowing him in a fraction of a second, only to recede and achieve nothing. Undeterred by the arrogance of the waves, he confronted them with unwavering pride, persistently punching and cutting through each onslaught. With each wave's retreat, he maintained his position, not budging an inch. It was an extraordinary display of strength, unlike anything I had witnessed before.

I surmised that he was engaged in some form of martial arts practice. However, his technique was peculiar, distinct from any martial arts style I had encountered.

At times, he lowered his fist below waist level, executing a sweeping stroke across his chest; other times, he raised his fist over his shoulder, striking upward. The intricacies of his form left my sight and mind in bewilderment. Completely absorbed in deciphering his enigmatic style, I contemplated the significance of each stroke. It wasn't until the sun was on the verge of setting that he finally ceased his movements. With a resounding cry – an echoing sound reminiscent less of Tarzan's howls in a movie and more of a wolf's lament in a snowy mountain – long and full, filled with complex emotions, sounding both

wistful and helpless, a cry that might carry for miles. Such a howl is a skill possessed by only a select few with extensive training in martial arts.

“He then walked towards a nearby rock, revealing a backpack hidden beneath it. Retrieving a bottle of water from the backpack, he continued to captivate my attention with the mysterious aura surrounding his every move.

He relished the water, savoring each drop for an extended period, before proceeding to cleanse himself under the public shower. Afterward, he changed into regular clothing.

Standing still on the beach with arms folded across his chest, he gazed into the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean, captivated by the roaring sea for an extended period. It wasn't until the evening sky had turned pale, adorned with a few early stars, and the beach lamps flickered to life that he finally turned around. Hoisting the backpack onto his back, he walked away, gradually disappearing into a curved alley flanked by towering, unfamiliar trees, adorned with flowers embracing it on either side.

*What a solitary figure!* I murmured to myself. A sudden thought gripped me, and I swiftly jogged in his direction, attempting to catch up with him. About half a mile into the park, I reached him under the subdued lighting.

Speaking loudly a few paces behind him, I said, ‘Excuse me, sir! You left your surfboard on the beach!’

He halted but didn't turn around. ‘It wasn't mine. Left behind. Broken!’, he replied in flawless English, bearing a distinct California accent. In that moment, I speculated that he must have grown up in this region.

Impressed, I responded, ‘I see. Apologies for the interruption!’

He turned to face me, his expression betraying confusion. ‘You see me? I not see you!’

‘I observed you with binoculars, not intentionally, though!’ I explained.

‘Binocular? What it is?’ he inquired.

As we conversed, I started to notice that, despite his impeccable pronunciation, his vocabulary was somewhat limited.

However, despite his limited vocabulary, he could articulate his thoughts quite clearly.

With great respect and genuine admiration, I elucidated the concept of binoculars to him. I also confessed to having observed his martial arts practice in the tumultuous waves. Sharing tales of my own martial arts training and adventures, which could captivate anyone, I noticed he wasn't overly friendly but displayed a keen interest in my stories.

Driven by curiosity, I inquired, 'Why did you watch the Pacific Ocean so intently for such a long time?'

'I was thinking about my friend on the other side of the ocean,' he replied.'

"Did he actually say that?" Varshi interjected.

Diego shook his head. "No. To simplify my description, I'm paraphrasing his words. Some details may even be slightly out of order."

"He didn't seem to hide anything from you," Varshi smiled.

"Yes, the answer surprised me! As I passed through the trees, he became clearer in my view. When our eyes met, I trembled, and a wave of grace coursed through my veins. In that instant, I recognized him as the stranger I had been fervently searching for days and weeks.

I exclaimed, 'My friend! I have been looking for you tirelessly!'

He looked at me with bewilderment. 'You are the one who was attacked by thugs near the museum?'

'Yes, thank you so much for saving me from great disaster!' I expressed with immense gratitude, reveling in a blissful state of comfort. I thanked him profusely. Finding him brought solace to my heart, not only because it eased my worries but also because I now had the chance to help him escape life on the streets.

'Where have you been?' I inquired.

'I went to Sacramento!' he replied flatly.'

'Did you take Greyhound?' I asked.

'Greyhound? What is that?'

I explained to him about Greyhound and said, ‘You wouldn’t fly there! You must be taking a train!’

‘Train?’ He stared at me with eyebrows frowned, trying to recall the meaning of the word. After a while, he smiled, stretching out his hands sideways in opposite directions. ‘Train: long! Firewagon!’

I nodded. Then he shook his head and said, ‘No!’ I was genuinely puzzled at that moment.”

Varshi was now deeply interested in Diego’s description of the stranger.

She interrupted, “Evidently, no one would give him a ride to Sacramento.”

Diego nodded. “Very true!” He smiled and stared at Varshi.

Varshi smiled warmly. “He might have gotten there by bicycle!”

“No!”

“By car?”

“No!”

“By truck?”

“No,” Diego said, smiling, “he got there on foot! Round trip!”

“On foot? He went to Sacramento and came back to Santa Barbara on foot in about a month?” Varshi was most amazed.

“Yes, actually, from San Diego to Sacramento. Santa Barbara was just one of the few places on his route where he stayed for a few days. As we talked, he became more friendly and explained to me what he did.

He was a gardener. In fact, he was the inspiration for my own journey into gardening. Each day, he jogged along the dirt paths near Highway 1 or sometimes on the highway shoulders, traveling from house to house and farm to farm. His routine involved offering assistance with heavy gardening tasks like tree-cutting, soil transport, or log clearing. Interestingly, he turned down jobs he deemed too light, such as dishwashing or floor cleaning.

Some families hired him for just a couple of hours, while others engaged him for a day or two. He often found sleep-

ing spots in convenient, quiet locations like riverbanks, forests, or beaches. Occasionally, farming families would invite him to stay for a couple of days, combining work with rest. His routine took him all the way to Sacramento, where he rested for a few days before embarking on the return journey, often working for previous customers.

What surprised me most was that, while running, he engaged in intellectual and mental exercises. He turned out to be a profound thinker.

To simplify his work and running, he rented self-storage cabinets in several small towns along his route, where he stored the cash he earned and personal items such as shoes and blankets.”

“He is indeed fascinating,” Varshi commented.

“That night, he was searching for a place to stay, and I genuinely offered various forms of assistance, including renting an apartment for him. However, he declined all my offers, which left me disappointed. In the end, he sensed my sincerity, and his eyes became moist and reddened.”

“So, did he accept your offer then?” Varshi asked curiously.

Diego shook his head. “No, he didn’t desire a regular apartment. Instead, he retrieved a robust plastic bottle from his bag. Inside it, there was an orchid with a few vibrant purple petals and a couple of green leaves but without any roots. He stared at the flower and asked somewhat dejectedly, ‘Do you know Si Sau, a renowned artist specializing in drawing orchids?’ I said, ‘No!’ His face displayed a hint of disappointment, a glimmer of recollection, and a struggle to articulate his thoughts. He uttered a few words, attempting to explain something, but the words seemed caught in his throat. He simply placed the bottle back into his bag without saying another word.”

“Frankly, I couldn’t grasp his unusual behavior, wondering whether he was grappling with some form of depression or mental issues, his actions perhaps stemming from delirium. Madam, perhaps you can shed light on what he was trying to convey!”

Varshi nodded. “Si Sau was a renowned artist about 1000

years ago in Asia. He was famous for portraying orchids in a peculiar style, with all parts of the flowers – petals, leaves, and roots – seemingly floating in the air. When questioned about why he depicted the flowers in such an unconventional manner, he exclaimed, ‘My Motherland is governed by an evil force, and my land does not exist. What could I use to plant the root?’ I believe your friend might be in exile, forced to be apart from his loved ones. He could be burdened by a tragic fate, enduring unspeakable pain, filled with indignation, growing disinclined towards society, and estranged from people. He may not desire a home in this land.”

Diego’s eyes lit up. “Madam, what you said makes sense. He later muttered that when the suppressive became more suppressive and the courageous became more courageous, things would change. He might be in self-imposed exile. Despite declining any help I offered, he bid farewell. Before he departed, I shared my mobile phone number and address, urging him to contact me whenever he had the chance.”

“Did he explain what the black beads that struck the dog were?” Varshi inquired.

“Yes, he later informed me that it’s a compound primarily made from tiger dung. Dogs fear tigers just as mice fear cats or snakes recoil from sulfur – it’s intrinsic. When a dog catches a whiff of tiger scent, it trembles. During the peak of the refugee exodus in Southern Strong Nation in the 1960s, tiger dung was more valuable than gold. Isaac obtained the black beads from his uncle, a zoo manager with over 30 years of animal studies. He added a few chemical elements to tiger dung, creating a compound that enhances its effect.”

“It’s fascinating! Did he come to see you often afterward?” Varshi inquired.

“No, only very occasionally. A few months later, he landed a temporary job at a zoo in San Diego. His task was to transport a large number of heavy logs across delicate landscapes where trucks and cars weren’t allowed.”

Varshi wanted to inquire further about the stranger, but Diego received a call from Edward, who needed assistance fixing a



leak in the roof. She let Diego go, viewing him with more gratitude than weariness.

She made a quick review of the casino video before switching the browser to a music channel, selecting an ancient Indian meditation melody. Leaning back in her chair, she immersed herself in the captivating music, allowing it to intertwine with her thoughts and the rhythmic fall of rain outside. The incessant interchanging melodies woven in harmony that passed into great heights and depths foundered in a sea of turbulent sound before a new theme was formed amid the storm and the melodies became soft and sweet and delicate again. Lost in her contemplation, she found herself staring at the door entrance without registering anything. Only when she sensed a presence on the couch did her eyes refocus, revealing her husband seated beside her.

Startled out of her deep reverie, she smiled warmly and inquired, "Edward, how long have you been here?"

Edward rose with a smile. "Forty-five minutes. You were lost in deep thought, and I didn't want to disturb you."

Outside, the dripping rain had transformed into a deluge of flying water.

Varshi's eyes glistened as she leaned forward, clicking on the browser. "I was solving a puzzle," she explained to Edward, replaying the casino video and detailing Jacobs' unsuccessful attempt to uncover the mysterious man's cheating method.

Edward attentively watched the video. "You are scintillating, looked as if you have reached some sort of freakish epiphany. So you have solved the riddle?"

Varshi nodded, grinning warmly. "I just got it!"

"Why couldn't Jacobs find out the cheating method for such a long time?" Edward inquired.

Varshi smiled. "It's because the man did not cheat!"

Edward was astounded and at a loss. "Then how could the man win such an amount of money in one day?"

Varshi, aware of her husband's limited mathematical prowess, began, "To explain, let me share a true story that unfolded two thousand years ago in an Asian nation," as she settled back into

her chair.

“It was a chaotic period, warlords engaged in constant conflict. A peasant named Lau found an ever-victorious general named Hon, who helped him defeat all the warlords and ascend to the throne. After becoming the emperor, Lau grew concerned that Hon might become too powerful to control. So, he devised a plan to eliminate Hon, inviting him to his palace along with loyal officials and arranging several hundred trusted soldiers to hide within. The signal to capture the general would be the smashing of a bowl during dinner.

Hon arrived with his guards, who were required to remain outside the palace. As Hon entered, he couldn’t spot any soldiers, but he felt the pervasive aura of impending danger throughout the palace.

“Lau knew well how fierce and dangerous his general was. Hon had emerged victorious in hundreds of battles, never suffering defeat, and his personal guards were elite fighters. Lau needed to ensure that his hidden soldiers could overpower them; otherwise, the tables might turn, and the predator could become the prey. So, he inquired, ‘My esteemed and loyal general, how many of your comrades have accompanied you?’

Hon perceived the emperor’s intentions. If he lied, it would be a crime punishable by death, and Lau could openly arrest and execute him afterward. If he revealed the true number, known only to him, he was certain to be arrested during the dinner and secretly executed. Death loomed over him in either scenario. Despite the fear, Hon concealed his emotions, and his proficiency in mathematics proved to be his salvation.

The ever-victorious general grinned casually. ‘Noble Lord, the exact count eludes me, as I have a unique method of tallying my soldiers in every battle. I only know that when they are arranged in groups of 3, two remain; when grouped in fives, three remain, and when organized in sevens, two remain.’

The emperor whispered to his loyal officials, ‘What is the exact number?’ No one could answer. Faced with the collective ignorance of his advisors, the emperor was compelled to abandon his scheme and free *Hon* after dinner, only to find out

later that *Hon* had brought merely 23 guards.

This incident marked the inception of the renowned Chinese Remainder Theorem and the advent of modern modulo arithmetic.”

Edward was tantalized. “You have kindled me with this story, but how does it tie in with the mysterious man in the casino video?”

Varshi stood up, gesturing towards the video. “The man leveraged an extension of the theorem and his adept coordination of both hands to secure his victory and amass all that money.”

Edward appeared more bewildered, his gaze fixed on her.

Varshi retrieved a deck of cards from the drawer. “The shuffle operation is intended to randomize the cards. When a deck is evenly split into two halves of 26 cards each and perfectly interwoven, it’s known as a perfect shuffle. If the original top card remains at the top and the original bottom card stays at the bottom after the shuffle, it’s called an ‘out-shuffle’; otherwise, it’s termed an ‘in-shuffle.’

On the surface, a perfect shuffle might seem to thoroughly randomize a deck, but in reality, it’s a controlled technique that doesn’t introduce true randomness. The precise position of each card can be calculated and predicted using modulo arithmetic. Additionally, a perfect shuffle has a short period – after eight consecutive perfect out-shuffles, the 52 cards return to their original positions before the shuffle. This technique has found applications in the study of interconnection networks.

The man adeptly executed perfect shuffles throughout the game. By memorizing the positions of a few cards before collecting them, he could anticipate their locations after shuffling. This knowledge provided him with a significant advantage, ensuring his success over the long term.”

Edward was astounded. “I see. But how does one consistently split a deck into two perfectly equal piles and interweave the cards flawlessly? Is this man a trained professional gambler or a magician?” he asked sheepishly.

“No, I don’t think so! He is most likely a professional ath-

lete. To effortlessly perform a perfect shuffle, one needs super delicate finger movements,” Varshi said, skillfully shuffling the deck.

“Even a top professional athlete does not need delicate finger movements!” Edward commented.

Varshi admonished, “Not really. For most sports such as running and swimming, where power and speed rule, fine-grained motions are not crucial. However, for some racket games such as table tennis, it’s a different story. At the highest level, its the fine-grained finger motion that orients the paddle to direct a ball to the proper position that determine the outcome of a table tennis game. I won’t be surprised that some players use card shuffling to train their finger movements, and this man is one of them.”

Edward nodded satisfactorily. “Your problem-solving skills are an intangible asset to the company!”

She smiled and continued to recount Diego’s story.

“Tomorrow, I’ll present the findings of the man’s shuffling trick to Jacobs, but I’ll conceal his connection with Diego,” Varshi said.

“I would do the same thing. Actually, the less you disclose, the better,” Edward said, smiling warmly, before heading to dinner with his wife.

## Chapter 4

### *The Great Match*

Jacobs nodded gratefully. “Excellent! You have solved the riddle that bothered us for weeks. Our consulting fee is well-spent,” he said, attentively listening to Varshi’s conclusions. This marked his third visit to her office.

“Is that all the service you need from my company?” Varshi inquired, lifting her cup of coffee.

Jacobs smiled candidly. “Frankly, there is something more mysterious about this man, and we need your help. Let me honestly tell you the whole story,” he said sincerely, placing his cup of coffee back on Varshi’s table.

“Our company possesses a powerful computing machine, which we used to search the Internet for information about the mystery man. After an extensive search, we found a personal website that contains some information about him.”

Varshi felt the unease of an impending revelation, having kept her discovery of the table tennis video hidden and anticipating that Jacobs was about to describe it. However, his explanation took her by surprise.

“The website contains a few photos of the man and some information about the owner’s friends, from which we discovered something quite surprising,” Jacobs revealed.

Concern crept into Varshi’s voice as her gardener had claimed

the man to be a great friend. “Was the man a criminal?”

Jacobs stood, poured another cup of coffee, paused, and gazed out of the office window, collecting his thoughts.

“It’s a complex story,” Jacobs began. “It involves a girl named Helen, who had a happy upbringing in an affluent family. Her mother is a dentist, and her father co-owns a successful medical clinic. Helen has blonde hair, eyes as blue and clear as the ocean, a well-shaped mouth, a delicate face, a sweet voice, and an athletic body with flawless skin. Her mother, with plaintive grace, once mentioned that Helen’s beauty rivals any Miss America, if not Helen of Troy. She had a close relationship with her family until she fell in love with a homeless man. Actually, that’s the family’s concern, even though it might not be true that Helen genuinely loves the man.”

“A homeless man? I certainly would not let my daughter marry a homeless man!” Varshi said, amazed.

“Neither do Helen’s parents,” Jacobs said, shaking his head. “Worse, the man is illiterate and might be a criminal or a dangerous person. That created a storm in her family. Her parents, new immigrants to this country, wouldn’t mind their daughter marrying a man of any race, as long as he is good. Still, they cannot accept such a homeless person. So, they are trying to intervene before the situation deteriorates.”

Jacobs fell silent for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

“I am going to describe the story from Helen’s point of view. It does not mean I agree or disagree with her,” Jacobs said thoughtfully.

The brief description stirred a disturbed feeling in Varshi, even though she had yet to learn the details. She nodded with mounting stress as Jacobs mentioned that the man could be a dangerous person and a criminal. “I understand.”

“Helen has a very unique character, not going with the crowd or easily influenced by her peers. Whatever her peers do, she will never follow blindly. All her choices are calculatedly sober. While most of her peers are like autumn leaves, detaching from the tree when the wind blows, drifting in the air, fluttering, and settling on the ground, she has her own destination, like a lone

condor – high and aloof, flying a fixed path that no wind could bother. She despises this sinful world and the shallow views of her schoolmates. Her liberal peers hate her like the devil, but she pays no heed to their daring or teasing.

Even the sport she chose to specialize in is rarely known to the public in this nation.”

“What sport was she interested in?” Varshi interrupted.

“Badminton,” Jacobs said, “and she was very good at it.”

A strange thrill struck Varshi. All this seemed to be tangled with her family. She hid her emotions.

Jacobs continued, “She graduated from UC Berkeley at the age of 20 and went on to the Graduate School of Harvard to obtain a Master’s degree in History and Arts.

When she first attended Berkeley, she was shocked by the new environment that she found in turmoil. Many of her peers went to parties, where they got drunk, took drugs, or even had sex. One by one, her peers were conquered by the Devil and fell into the sinful abyss. She likes to refer to the Devil as Mephistopheles, who was winning the battle and laughing. But she would not let it triumph over her and determined to stand up against it, refusing to live her peers’ lustful life. Even if all her schoolmates fell, she figured, as long as she stands against it, Mephistopheles has not totally won, and humans have not lost the war against sin. She vowed that not only would she repulse Mephistopheles, but she would marry a man only if he meets her code, having lived a clean life that follows the old code.

“After graduating from Harvard, she worked as an artwork supervisor in a large hi-tech company in Silicon Valley. Many successful young engineers and entrepreneurs in the area heard about and admired her, treating her as the Goddess of Silicon Valley. Who wouldn’t want to marry a fair girl who is beautiful, deft, clean, and dedicated to her husband? Among her admirers, one named Martin Weinberg, a handsome young man in his late twenties, stood out the most. He founded a hi-tech company with a net worth close to one billion and served as the CEO. Martin lived a clean life, avoiding drugs and heavy

drinking. However, he confessed to Helen that he did take a few puffs of marijuana when he was a student, violating her code. As Martin did not meet her code, she always kept a distance from him.

Despite Martin's assiduous pursuit and genuine love for Helen, she remained unmoved. Martin vowed to make any sacrifice for her and promised not to marry anyone except her. The love was one-sided, and despite his great wealth and virtues, Helen was not swayed. Martin, feeling depressed, resigned from his CEO position and traveled to Nepal, a remote country under the Himalayas, to undergo training in hiking. His intention was to climb Mount Everest as a way to conquer his sorrow.

"Helen did not appreciate the life in Silicon Valley, disturbed by its clamorous environment. After Martin left, she relocated to Southern California and secured a job in a museum in a quiet town funded by a non-profit organization. The story could have concluded there, as she might easily meet and marry someone in such a peaceful and beautiful environment. However, Mephistopheles had not retreated; it continued to confront her and plagued her by smuggling into her soul temptations, desires, sensual pleasures, the allure of wealth, and sinful thoughts, but was eventually beaten back. The Devil retreated and hid on the side, waiting for a chance to attack. In my view, through twists of fate, Helen fell into a dark abyss that she was not aware of."

"Was the museum located in Santa Barbara?" Varshi interrupted suddenly.

"Yes, how do you know?" Jacobs was bewildered.

She smiled wryly. "I just guessed, as the area is a beautiful place to settle down. How did you come by all the details about Helen?"

"We obtained most of the information from her daily journal, saved on a USB drive her parents provided. The files were password-protected with the passcode 'goodminton,' which was not difficult to break; we cracked it in a couple of minutes. Additionally, we interviewed some relevant people to construct a



complete picture. The descriptions of Helen mostly come from her friends,” Jacobs replied.

Varshi nodded. “Her parents must have been deeply concerned.”

Jacobs sighed. “Indeed. The museum typically closes to the public at 4:00 pm, and employees work until 5:00 pm. After work, Helen would stay to play badminton with a few young female colleagues in the museum’s parking lot for 1 to 2 hours. They created the court by marking the border lines with white chalk. The net was set up on two sets of extensible poles, with each base pole mounted on a heavy metallic circular disc. All these, including the rackets and shuttlecocks, were stored in a storage room at the museum when not in use.

Helen excelled in the game, an uncommon sport in America, having secured the championship in the national junior tournament. Naturally, she held the title of the best player in the museum. However, Sophia, hailing from Indonesia, was a close competitor, with a skill level not far behind Helen’s. Despite being younger and a student intern at the museum, Sophia displayed remarkable maturity, handling conflicts with discretion.

“After each day’s game, Helen would return to her office on the second floor. She had recently secured a government grant for a project, committing herself to work until around 11 pm. Even on weekends when the museum was closed to the public, she dedicated her time to her work.

One evening, as Helen was returning to work after the badminton game, she noticed a homeless man meditating under a tree in the backside car park. Intriguingly, he remained there even after she left for home.

The next evening, fueled by curiosity, Helen observed him from the hallway window of her office. To her surprise, the man had some stored food in his backpack and was disposing of the residuals in a nearby garbage bin. His gaze lingered as he discovered something interesting.

After a moment, he retrieved an orchid flower that Helen had discarded from her office earlier that afternoon. Using a pair of scissors, he carefully shaped it and placed it inside an

empty plastic jar, likely used for storing his food. He stared at it for some time before securing the jar in his backpack. It became apparent that the homeless man had a fondness for orchids, much like Helen, who always adorned her desk with one, replacing it with a new blossom before it withered. From that day on, whenever he visited, he would diligently search the garbage bin for any discarded orchids.

“Typically, the homeless man would visit for three consecutive days and then vanish, only to reappear a month later. In the fourth month since his initial visit, Helen, diligently working in her office, was startled by a loud clunking sound outside. Curious, she rushed to the hallway and peered through the window, where she witnessed a bearded man facing off against three menacing thugs. Before long, the gang commanded a brown dog to attack the bearded man.

Reacting swiftly, Helen returned to her office to call the police and then came back, capturing the intense altercation on her mobile phone.”

Varshi suddenly realized that the bearded man in question was her gardener, Diego, a fact she had concealed from Jacobs. As Jacobs continued describing the events witnessed by Helen, Varshi learned that it was Helen who had made the crucial call to the police.

The formidable homeless man, who effortlessly defeated the thugs with superhuman strength and speed, left an indelible impression on Helen’s mind. True to his pattern, he disappeared the next day, adding an air of mystery to his character.

A few weeks later, an athletic man named Sangha passed by the car park and noticed the girls engrossed in their badminton game. Introducing himself as a badminton coach, Sangha attempted to recruit the girls to join his nearby badminton club, where he coached players of all skill levels. The girls, including Helen, challenged Sangha to prove his skills by beating Helen three times in a row, playing 2-out-of-3 11-point games. Adding a charitable twist, they stipulated that each time Sangha lost, he had to donate \$50 to the museum.

“Without hesitation, Sangha agreed to the challenge. How-

ever, Helen's competitive spirit shone through as she bested him twice that evening, each time securing a narrow 2-1 victory.

He returned to challenge Helen again the next day, experiencing another set of losses by a narrow margin. The same pattern persisted on the third day, and by the fourth day, Sangha, determined to break the streak, intensified his efforts in the first match. Despite fighting hard for every point, he suffered a bit of bad luck and ended up losing once more. Frustration set in, not only because he failed to recruit any of the girls despite his persistent efforts, but also because he had lost a few hundred dollars in the process.

On the fourth day, as the second match commenced, the homeless man reappeared, settling under a tree to quietly observe the game, just as he had done the day before. In this match, Sangha managed to secure a victory in the first game, but Helen leveled the playing field by winning the second. In the decisive third game, Sangha found himself trailing 7-9 and on the verge of losing his serve, prompting him to sigh, anticipating another defeat.

It was at this critical juncture that the homeless man rose from his spot, signaling Sangha to call a timeout. The two engaged in a conversation, with the homeless man providing strategic advice. Upon returning to the court, Sangha's eyes gleamed with newfound determination as he miraculously turned the game around, ultimately securing a 12-10 victory.

Since that game, Helen found herself unable to defeat Sangha anymore, and true to the agreement, the girls later joined his club."

Curious, Varshi inquired, "What advice did the homeless man give to Sangha?"

"He told the coach that he was the superior player and was only losing because he overlooked two crucial factors. Firstly, he was placing excessive pressure on himself to win, being a coach and reluctant to accept defeat to a girl. The weight of this expectation increased with each successive loss. The homeless man gestured towards a distant mountain and said, 'Observe

and learn from the mountain, which stands unwaveringly in silence, unaffected by any wind, whether strong or gentle, blowing from north to south or east to west.’ The coach nodded, absorbing the wisdom of the message.

Secondly, and more importantly, Sangha was unaware of a subtle breeze in the surroundings, a factor that Helen had grown accustomed to.

Sangha had been deeply engrossed in the game, oblivious to these pivotal factors. The stranger now highlighted these aspects, and Sangha, suddenly awakened, transitioned from a state of helpless dismay to active observation.

Closing his eyes to sense the breeze, Sangha mentally adjusted his game. With newfound confidence, he played up to his true potential and easily defeated Helen,” Jacobs explained, chuckling heartily.

Varshi was impressed. “The homeless man is quite perceptive.”

“Yes! At that moment, Helen was perturbed that the homeless man, seeking refuge on the museum’s property, which she helped manage, was coaching a stranger to beat her. She saw it as if he had eaten the rice and smashed the cooker,” Jacobs added.

Sophia, the only other girl remained, was intrigued to find out the stranger’s skill level. She approached Helen, clutching a racket, and together they walked toward the man, who looked angry, apparently not angry at them but at something he was thinking of.

In front of him, Sophia brandished the racket. ‘Si Fu... Coach, would you mind playing a game with me? I have an extra racket that I can lend you,’ she asked in a sweet, childlike voice.

He opened his eyes and looked up languidly at the girls. ‘I am not interested in playing with women. Their shots are too soft,’ he said nonchalantly.

Sophia didn’t feel offended by his peevish reply, but Helen pouted, her face elongated.

Sophia saw his soft heart masked behind his anger. ‘Come

on! You are valiant, righteous and generous. Wouldn't you give me a chance to learn a little more of the secret of this game? I am Sophia. What's your name?" she said warmly with a gesture expressing sincere tenderness.

The stranger appeared to be moved by her courtesy, and his earlier angry expression melted away.

'I haven't touched a racket in more than two years. Okay, Sophia, let's play one!' said the stranger, sidestepping her question about his name.

'Great! Let's play an 11-point game, best 2 out of 3.' She handed the racket to him, and the stranger took a moment to examine it before standing up and strolling toward the court.

Suddenly, Helen interjected, 'If you lose, you better not sleep in this parking lot anymore.'

The stranger turned to look at her, wearing a puzzled expression. 'Why?' he asked, his face reflecting confusion.

'That is the price to pay for disrespecting women. This lot is the museum's private property, and no one is allowed to sleep here overnight. We have been merciful and haven't called the police,' said Helen coldly, 'yet!'

The stranger gazed at her, his eyes flashing a glint of anger. He turned and continued walking toward the court. 'I never create any trouble for the museum,' he said with a hint of emotion.

"As the match began, the stranger allowed Sophia to serve first. Standing near the center of the receiving quadrant, he held the racket with his left hand slightly raised above his head, poised for attack. Sophia served short, and he rushed to return, but the shuttle landed on the net, costing him a point.

As the match progressed, the stranger exerted great effort on every point, covering the court extensively to retrieve the shuttle. However, Sophia's superior control and strategic placement created challenges for him. In response, he initiated aggressive attacks, pushing Sophia into a defensive stance and resulting in a thrilling game with shuttles landing precariously close to the boundaries and net.

The intense rally continued, with the score remaining neck-

and-neck. The outcome seemed uncertain, dependent on a stroke of luck. Sophia claimed the first game at 11-8, but the stranger secured the next two games, 14-12 and 11-9, primarily through fortuitous moments.

As the game concluded, both Sophia and Helen approached the stranger. With a smile, Sophia extended her hand, saying, 'Congratulations! You won!' Rather than shaking hands, the stranger, appearing relaxed, dropped his racket, clasped his hands in front of his chest, and bowed. 'Thank you!' he expressed, offering a genuine smile, a rare sight for them.

'You play quite well,' Helen remarked.

'Not really. Just barely beat a girl,' he responded humbly, stooping to pick up the racket and returning it to Sophia.

Sophia, however, refused to accept it. 'No, you must play a game with Helen! She's a superior player to me,' she insisted, pointing at Helen, whose expression remained cool.

'I believe she could be an excellent model, but she's too soft to defeat any man,' the stranger commented, his gaze scrutinizing Helen.

'Tough enough to beat you!' Helen retorted, her already cold expression growing even colder.

The stranger chuckled. 'You think so? Then you don't know yourself. I can beat you with one leg.'

'What do you mean?' asked Helen, her cold face now flushing red.

'That is, I play and run with only one leg touching the ground. If I alternate my leg touching the ground before a point ends, I lose the point. This way, I can beat you handily.' "

Varshi listened intently to Jacobs, who vividly described the story, altering his tone to capture the essence of different characters. He held a cup of coffee in his hand, occasionally standing or walking around, sometimes gazing outside through a window as he spoke.

He took a pause, sipping his coffee to recollect the details. Pouring himself another cup, he resumed: "Helen was angered and puzzled by his boast, contemplating why a homeless man could harbor such a significant ego, questioning whether he

might be grappling with mental health issues. Despite his contemptuous views on women, his overall demeanor and speech were not far from those of an ordinary person. She concluded that he simply perceived the world from an androcentric perspective, assuming men were inherently superior to women. It wasn't the first time in her life that the notion of universal mutual respect among people proved to be an illusion.

A year ago, at Martin's birthday party in Silicon Valley, Helen found herself entangled in a disdainful conversation with a group of brash young Asian men who flaunted their egos and displayed disrespect towards women. Among them was Sam, a proficient player who had achieved success as a prime senior engineer in a large high-tech company on an H1 visa. When Helen mentioned her proficiency in the game, Sam laughed dismissively.

“‘Good’ doesn't mean much in this country; I've beaten ladies who claimed to be good 21-0. This game, like engineering, is not for girls,’ he said, smiling contemptuously. Helen responded calmly, ‘Then you don't understand this game.’

As tensions simmered in the group, someone suggested that Helen and Sam settle their differences with a charity match – 2 out of 3, 11-point games. If Helen won, Sam would donate one thousand dollars to a non-profit anti-drug organization that Helen supported. If she lost, Sam would receive a passionate hug from the Goddess of Silicon Valley, a gracious acknowledgment of her defeat. Both parties accepted the challenge without a second thought.

As the group made the announcement, the 300-plus guests erupted in cheers. Instantaneously, they transformed a tennis playground into a badminton court using white tapes, lamp posts, and a tennis net. The host, Martin, assumed the role of referee. The match evolved into the party's climax, with the crowd predominantly betting that Helen would suffer a resounding defeat, fueled by the assumption that Asians excel in the sport.

It was an intense start to the game, with serves volleyed between them numerous times without a single point scored.

Similar to the homeless man, Sam showcased remarkable speed, darting across the court, but Helen exhibited superior control over the shuttle. On her thirteenth serve, she secured a point as Sam narrowly missed catching the shuttle at the baseline. From that moment, Sam's morale crumbled, leading to a swift 11-0 loss in the first game. Although he attempted a comeback in the second, fatigue hindered his ability to reach the shuttles, resulting in another 11-0 defeat, concluding the match.

Helen stood in the court, basking in the glow of victory, waving her hands triumphantly. She graciously bowed to the audience three times, eliciting a thunderous roar of applause, stomping, and a standing ovation.

Meanwhile, Sam, exhausted and utterly humiliated, hung his head low. Helen, reveling in the ecstasy of triumph, took pleasure in the humiliation of her opponent, who had displayed arrogance and a sense of superiority over females.

"This destitute pumpkin, in great poverty, displayed an inflated ego, demonstrating complete disrespect for women. His manner of speaking ignited her indignation. The audacity with which he asserted he could defeat her with one leg, solely because she was a woman, struck a nerve. Throughout history, women have endured oppression, and even in the present day, many men exhibit little respect and dignity toward them. With a scornful gaze, she confronted him.

'How ignorant and arrogant you are,' she rebuked, her disdain evident. 'Cloaked in these filthy clothes, aimlessly wandering without a home. Even a world champion would stand no chance against me in a one-legged match; in fact, I would be astonished if I didn't secure victory by a substantial margin.'

The stranger nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders. 'You overestimate yourself! A fact is a fact. Emotions won't change it,' he replied with a smile.

Helen pursed her lips virtuously. 'Do you genuinely believe what you're saying? No one, except perhaps those with mental disorders, would buy into your rhetorical claim.'

'Let's settle it on the court then.'

'Seriously?'



‘If I lose, I’ll leave this area immediately and never return. But what if I win?’ The stranger smiled, a derisive scorn evident in his expression.

She was so incensed by his words that she suddenly laughed. ‘If someone can beat me this way, I’ll marry him,’ declared Helen irrationally, her face frozen as if covered by frost. ‘If he meets my code,’ she added after a brief pause.

‘That’s fair. What’s the code?’ the stranger said playfully, joy evident in his laughter.

‘Her code is simple,’ interjected Sophia, tantalized by their conversation. ‘It’s the old code, akin to basic Christian values – no drugs, no alcohol, no pre-marriage sexual behavior, and be honest and responsible. Actually, she is not...’

‘That I meet. You don’t regret marrying an illiterate?’ he asked with a child-like smile.

‘That’s none of your business,’ Helen answered coldly. ‘Why should I? Anyone who could beat me this way would be my superhero, but I assure you that this person never exists on this planet.’

‘Then you don’t know how big this planet is. What’s the format?’

Helen laughed coldly. ‘Best 2 out of 3. Fifteen points game. Sophia will be our referee.’

‘Then we just need to play two games,’ the man said.

Confused, Sophia interrupted. ‘How do you determine the winner if each of you wins a game with identical scores?’

‘If in any one game, she could gain 5 or more points from me, she wins, and I will bounce immediately,’ the stranger said, his tone more solemn now. ‘But if she loses, I hope she can keep her promise.’

‘Dream on, if you must,’ Helen retorted and walked away to get her racket before her anger exploded. Never before had she met a person who was so arrogant and ignorant. He thought that women are stupid and weak, but he was actually the fool to think so.

“Helen is always a resolute competitor. She was confident that she could beat him handily even if he played with both

legs. She was zealous to beat this pumpkin 15-0 and 15-0 as a way to teach him a lesson so that he would respect women more.

But as she strolled along, her anger was fading away. Strong and unyielding as she appears, and wild and rough as she is in the court, Helen actually is merciful and has a tender heart. Besides being arrogant and vulgar, an imperious man who is exceptionally ignorant about the world, this homeless man does not seem to be a bad person, she thought. His behavior might be insolent, but he risked his life to save a stranger, an exceptional feat, and then walked away without asking for any reward or return of favor. He loves orchids, as does she. Unlike Sam, he lives a harsh life, destitute and desolate, sleeping on the streets. Passers-by would look at him with contempt or treat him like a beggar. Every day he receives these contemptuous looks as a prisoner receives whips from a warden, and he quietly endures all the pain. At the other end, bad acquaintances might pander to him, exalting his arrogant behavior as courageous and inspirational, guiding him downward, playing upon his loneliness and weaknesses. Such a twisted life would make him ignorant, self-pitying, and arrogant. Ignorance and arrogance are always twins.

*Be merciful just as your Father is merciful!* How could she be so hard on such a pitiable homeless man, putting him in a position to be forced out of this area, which gives him temporary shelter and warmth, providing him a safe haven from violent gangs! She began to forgive his extreme arrogance and regretted that she had reacted too strongly to his insolent comments. A sense of guilt crept into her mind, making her reconsider her decision. Certainly, she would not let the homeless win, as she had offered an irrational prize, but she did not need to beat him 15-0. She would play easy and concede some points or even a game so that he would retain some self-esteem, even if it's the minimum. Then she would offer him a favor, telling him that he is allowed to stay there undisturbed as he wishes. At least he would then feel some warmth from the world, which is not always cold and cruel, as he might have

experienced. After all, this was just a game!

As she reflected, she felt a sense of contentment, pleased with herself for once again warding off the demon in her mind. A smile graced her face, portraying a calm and relaxed demeanor.

“The stranger let her serve first, and she stood straight in her court, executing an overhead serve without even bending her knees.

The stranger leaped backward, intercepting the shuttle. While airborne, he swung the racket swiftly, as if delivering a powerful blow. Helen, anticipating a smash, stepped backward, but he abruptly halted near the contact point and delicately dropped the shuttle to her front right quadrant. Like a snowflake gracefully descending from the sky, the shuttle landed softly just across the net, eluding her reach. The seemingly skillful drop caught her completely by surprise.

Now it was the man’s turn to serve, and he, being left-handed, executed an overhead serve. Helen instinctively directed the shuttle to his right side and deep into the backcourt. Surprisingly, the man performed a stylish hop, shifting one leg back for a small step. Immediately after, he leaped backward, soaring high into the air. Despite the awkward posture, he prepared to strike the shuttle with finesse. Positioned at the center of her court, Helen geared up to attack the expected soft return, aiming to deliver a decisive blow. To her astonishment, the man, mid-air, executed a remarkable and seamless transition of the racket from left to right, placing himself in the optimal position to strike the shuttle with his right hand.

As Helen observed in sheer amazement, the stranger effortlessly struck the shuttle, creating a resonant, low-pitched boom, and propelled it vigorously towards her baseline. Struggling to regain her balance, Helen could barely reach the incoming shuttle, which descended rapidly. In a swift motion, she folded her legs, adopting a crouched position, and managed to return the shuttle, though with limited power. Springing back up, she witnessed the shuttle flying back towards the opponent’s central region, where the man patiently awaited.

“Executing a controlled smash to her right, the man swiftly switched hands, anticipating another weak return to his left. Helen, still recovering from her awkward posture, had to sprint rapidly to reach the shuttle, repeating this sequence multiple times until the shuttle delicately dropped right in front of the net. Darting forward, she bent over and, like a tender yet resilient orchid flower, crumpled to the ground. Her outstretched racket intercepted the shuttle, propelling it just over the net. In response, the stranger hopped forward, flicking the shuttle back to her baseline.

With a powerful thrust from her left hand against the floor, Helen propelled herself upward, tracking the shuttle as it descended. In a great leap backward, she swung her racket sideways, aiming to strike the shuttle, only to witness it catch the net. Panting and bewildered, she stood there in consternation, gazing at the stranger, who calmly walked toward the net to retrieve the shuttle. It was a shocking new experience for her as she never panted this serious even in the midst of a challenging match at any national tournament, let alone during her opponent’s first serve.

Then she perceived suddenly out of her astonishment that this stranger was actually right-handed and he was dumping points while playing Sophia with his left hand and he had such great control that even playing with his less dominant hand, he still could skillfully direct the shuttle to land precisely inside or outside a border line.

“With newfound insight, she silently walked toward her receiving quadrant, radiating a sense of loftiness and dignity. In the enchanting twilight, her flawless skin gleamed, and as she raised her racket, she gracefully bent her body and knees, assuming a poised posture. A gentle breeze carried the fragrance of orchids and roses from the small flower bed in front of the museum, permeating the air. Inhaling the sweet aroma, she felt invigorated, her blood infused with freshness as she contemplated her game plan.

Acknowledging that strategy could be her ultimate ally if skill, power, and speed faltered, she resolved to exploit the lim-

itations imposed by the stranger's one-legged movement. Convinced that he couldn't consistently reach optimal positions, especially along the front-back axis, she devised a prudent plan. Her approach involved sending shuttles toward the baseline, high enough to elude his jump, followed by a drop shot to sap his energy and induce exhaustion. Revitalized and ready for a fresh start, she embraced the rejuvenating feeling that permeated her being.

"She stood there with grace, her luscious hair billowing in the breeze, resembling a model poised to capture the youth and beauty of a woman. Sophia, captivated by the scene, snapped a series of photos with her mobile phone.

The man shifted to his left serving quadrant, positioning himself with his left leg and gripping the racket with his right hand. As his gaze traversed the court, it landed on Helen's face – smooth as a newborn baby and rosy as a peach blossom. Her beauty left him stunned, his expression revealing childlike surprise, and a glint of grace flickered in his eyes. Entranced by her allure, he stood immobile, appreciating her like one admiring a masterpiece. Lost in his thoughts, he momentarily forgot about the ongoing match and his serve, only snapping back to reality when Sophia called out for him to serve, shaking his head to reorient himself.

"Anticipating Helen's strategy as if he had read her mind, he executed a high serve, sending the shuttle soaring into the air, reaching a considerable height towards the far end of the court.

Reacting swiftly, Helen hurriedly retreated.

With the shuttle descending almost vertically to the floor, she found herself positioned beyond the baseline, compelled to strike it back. From there, she executed a high return aimed at her opponent's distant end of the court.

The man displayed a composed demeanor, moving in a rhythmic hop as if engaged in a leisurely dance. It dawned on Helen only then that a shuttle, when struck at such a high trajectory, takes at least twice as long to reach its destination, affording her opponent ample time to position himself. With unwavering composure, the man gracefully returned the shuttle, directing it

deep into her left, descending vertically.

Once again, Helen sprinted beyond the baseline to retrieve the shuttle, taking a calculated risk with a quick flip towards his baseline. The shot was deliberately executed to soar high, aiming to prevent her opponent from leaping to intercept. The man, moving with the same unhurried pace, reached the baseline just as the shuttle descended below waist level.

“A surge of grace coursed through Helen as she witnessed the shuttle delicately descending towards the ground. However, any chance to celebrate was swiftly extinguished. Mere inches above the floor, Helen was left bewildered as the man executed a striking blow from below, the impact generating a resounding boom. The shuttle retaliated with ferocity, hurtling towards her right corner, compelling her to rush.

As the game unfolded, Helen found herself frequently rushing, struggling to reach the optimal positions for effective returns. Meanwhile, the man maintained a relaxed pace, gracefully hopping except when a low shot demanded a jump. Every strategic move she attempted was met with a calculated response from the man. Before long, Helen trailed 13-0, realizing that the previous matches against the coach had drained much of her energy. Exhausted and on the brink of collapse, she was overcome with desperation.

Unexpectedly, tears welled up uncontrollably, offering an unexpected release and refreshment. With a stroke of luck, she won the next two shots, winning a point that brought the score to 13-1. At 14-1, she was fortunate to score two more points before ultimately conceding the game at 15-3.

“They switched courts, and Helen scrutinized her opponent closely. He exuded an air of relaxation, appearing calm and remarkably fresh. There was no arrogance or unrealistic boasting; instead, his skill level loomed ominously, so high that it seemed untouchable and unknown. Helen knew she couldn’t succumb to fear or be daunted, recognizing that the consequences of losing this match would be grave.

Despite her fatigue and exhaustion, she summoned a mental resolve, determined to find a way to win. The reality of the sit-

uation forced her to set aside pride. As per the man's promise, securing 5 points in any game would grant her victory. Five points – that was the threshold she needed to reach. Taking risks, she aimed every shuttle at the borderlines, attempting powerful smashes to kill it in every shot. However, her exhaustion hampered her ability to strike the shuttle with precision and force. She managed to gain a point at 13-0 and two more at 14-1. At 14-3, with her serving, she told herself, 'Two more points!' Tightening her will further, she gathered her residual energy to move her body.

Just as autumn flares with the residual heat of summer before receding into winter, Helen ignited a rejuvenated effort. Despite her renewed determination, the second game concluded almost identically to the first, with Helen losing 15-3.

"She stood there, drenched from head to toe, her entire body soaked in sweat as though she had just emerged from a plunge into a swimming pool. This defeat not only humiliated her but also sent shockwaves through her, leaving her trembling. Her mind went blank, devoid of any coherent thoughts, and when she finally emerged from the trauma, her eyes met the sight of the stranger walking towards Sophia, the referee.

Frozen in place, her face turned as red as the inner flesh of watermelons, wearing a helpless and wistful expression. The harsh reality hit her: the real score might be 15-0, and 15-0, with the six points she earned possibly being mercifully dumped by her opponent. Her mind remained blank as she gazed at the stranger, finding it nearly impossible to believe that such a humiliating outcome could unfold. Accustomed to admiration and applause throughout her youth, she had never experienced such profound humiliation.

With a respectful gesture, the stranger handed his racket to Sophia, bound his hands, and offered a bow. Together, they walked toward her.

'Redeem your promise!' A silent voice echoed in her mind, the air growing heavier with each step he took. What ought she do? Invalidate her promise by uttering, 'I was kidding'? However, resorting to such an excuse would mean she could

break any promise with a similar statement, betraying her own principles and compromising her commitment to integrity and keeping promises.

“But he had deceived her. Desperately, she sought an excuse. Wasn’t it true that he hadn’t played his best at the beginning? Hadn’t he set up a cunning trap for her to fall into? What an unscrupulous man he was! Now, it seemed she had found a way out, a reason to be furious. Anger bubbled within her, a volcanic eruption fueled by a mind possessed by the Devil once again. A torrent of emotions overwhelmed her, causing her entire body to tremble with rage. She longed to unleash a torrent of scolding words, but the words remained trapped within her.

As the anger began to subside, she realized that she was the one who initiated this conflict, and the man hadn’t cheated or lied. He had simply made accurate statements. Indeed, as he had pointed out, she didn’t truly know herself, nor did she comprehend the vastness of the planet. What ought she do? She pondered the question again. Should she immediately break the promise or use the excuse of investigating whether he had fulfilled the code to exit? The latter option seemed too perilous – if he had genuinely adhered to her code, breaking the promise would weigh even heavier on her conscience.

“Sophia saw her chaotic mind and said, ‘Si Fu, you are not an honest man!’

The stranger met her gaze, and she continued, ‘You claimed you haven’t played for two years. Clearly, that’s not true, given how flawlessly you just played.’

The man, neither a rascal nor unintelligent, offered a faint smile while shaking his head. ‘You may be right. I am not an honest person, sometimes,’ he admitted with a hint of wistfulness.

Sophia couldn’t help but notice that his acknowledgment had positioned him as dishonest. If the statement was true, it meant he wasn’t honest. If it was false, it implied that he had lied. Helen, growing more perplexed, not by the statement’s meaning, but by the homeless man’s deftness in crafting a statement that could guarantee an exit route for her.



Sophia smiled warmly. 'I am glad you have the courage to acknowledge it and that you do not meet Helen's code,' she remarked. 'Let me store the net and other equipment away.'

As Sophia began untying the net from the poles, Helen observed her actions in silence, the weight of the still air hanging heavily. The homeless man once again bound his hands and bowed. As they faced each other, he gazed at her without displaying any triumphant pride or arrogant gestures, a stark contrast to her emotional demeanor and behavior when she defeated Sam 15-0 twice.

"The deftness that once sparkled in his eyes now gave way to sincerity. He smiled gently and spoke with decorum, 'Little Sister, may I express my gratitude to you and Sophia for dedicating your time to play with me! The game has spoken, and I have listened and learned from it, finding tranquility in the environment and a sense of peace. I also appreciate your kindness and mercy in allowing me to stay in this area, providing me with sanctuary. Your games have truly enchanted and delighted me, dissipating the anger that often lingers in my mind due to my troubling experiences.

Destiny brought us together through the game, and I chose to stay in this proximity after being drawn to the layout of a badminton court marked in white chalk. I took refuge here during my wanderings, seeking a place to rest. If I have caused any trouble or inconvenience to you or the museum, I sincerely apologize. I must confess that I was initially attracted by your beauty, and at times, I was tempted to say things for the joy of provoking you. Please forgive me for any sinful behavior, and I apologize for any peevish speech or words that may have offended or hurt you.

It was never my intention to disrespect any woman, and I hope you can find it in your hearts to forgive me. I may be a homeless individual without formal education, lacking the refined language and polished expressions, but deep within my heart, I hold firm to the belief that men and women are equal in every aspect. My solitary life may paint me as an outlier, but I cherish the freedom, justice, and opportunities that this nation

generously offers. It must be lovely to live your life that I envy very much, working and playing in this cozy environment, and living with full dignity and respect from everyone.”

Varshi interjected, “It seems that the stranger is not an illiterate. His words do hold merit!”

“Actually, the stranger had a tendency to stammer in his speech. Helen wrote down what he said in her own words,” Jacobs replied, casually shrugging his shoulders. After a momentary pause, he continued, “Helen looked at him with a mixture of amazement and confusion. She was still in shock that all this could happen. Though she wanted to offer him a rueful smile and an apology, the words seemed to elude her.

The homeless man turned away before she could gather her thoughts to say something. Her gaze followed him as he walked toward his backpack, sheltered under a tree. Retrieving it, he slung it onto his back. With each step, he faded into the dusk and the quiet streets, swiftly disappearing from her sight.”

“Did he come back?” Varshi inquired.

“No, he never returned,” Jacobs responded, his gaze fixed on the door entrance. “In truth, the story should have concluded there. However, a blend of fate and Helen’s character conspired to bring them together once more.”

Jacobs took a moment to gather his thoughts before continuing: “She stood there in profound silence and a primitive instinct took possession of her. For a moment, a storm of voluptuous delight roared through her senses. The match imbued her with a new prospect of the world and unexpectedly, a new aspiration of art. Everything in her mind was shifted and entangled, and everything was sharply refreshed. She was grateful and somewhat astonished at herself and at this new unwonted, rapturous state of mind that this homeless engendered. A deep-seated conviction urged her to seek him out, if only to extend a heartfelt apology.”

“How did you find out that Helen was connected to the man in the casino video?” Varshi asked, genuinely concerned.

Jacobs responded, “You might have already deduced it. The homeless man is the same stranger from the casino video. Sophia

had captured a few moments of the match and shared them on her personal website, which includes details about her circle of friends. Our computer found the match between those images and the casino video. Following Sophia's website led us to Helen's personal site, and from there, we navigated to her parents' website. Upon contacting them, they expressed concern about their daughter's well-being and requested an investigation into the homeless man. What's more surprising is that another confidential client also urged us to look into this same homeless man."

Varshi, now eager for more details, asked, "Did Helen later find the homeless man?"

Jacobs grinned. "Indeed, she did!"

Varshi, puzzled, queried, "How? He never returned!"

With a nod, Jacobs continued, "She located him through another stranger. I'll share the rest of the story next time I visit. Now, I need to return to my firm and discuss what you've uncovered with my colleagues."

After Jacobs departed, Varshi fixed her gaze on the table, sinking into contemplation. The other stranger Jacobs alluded to was unequivocally her gardener, she surmised, and the museum employee referenced in Diego's account had to be Helen, who might have shared the story with Sophia, praising the homeless stranger during their initial encounter. The enigmatic white rectangles that baffled Diego turned out to be the badminton court outlined with white chalk by the girls.

There was an intimate link between this mysterious man and her, and their fate seemed strangely coalesced, she thought and felt. Could this be entirely random? It was a possibility, but the chances were that something in common bound them, leading to their rendezvous. She could see from his eyes, piercing and dreamy, the quest, yearning and mercy, something she often heard her inner voice speaking thus and felt about it. Guided by a trace of benevolent sympathy and a hint of compassion and courage, his roaming would bring him a destination he longed.