

Badminton Kid 3

What Is Art

Vani Venkatesan

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ISBN: 9781708464615

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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* and *Badminton Kid 2*.

Chapter 1

A Lone Runner

It was a normal weekday evening in autumn. The thin layer of snow covering a trail of the Grand Canyon in the morning had long melted. A lone young man, his eyes keen and bright, with thick dense hair covering both ears, shouldering a heavy backpack was running on the desolate trail, mounting forward through rifted rocks and passing through gullies, ravines, a miniature desert, and a long crevice. The soft rays of the setting autumn sun shining in a cool pale sky had made his run easier. The mountain looked desolate but beautiful, colorful tree leaves whispering in the soft wind. He came to a steel spandrel arch bridge crossing the Colorado River. It was gorgeous and beautiful just as many modern architectures are beautiful.

Humans are great creators but also great destroyers, he thought.

His pace became faster as the bridge was flat and wide, a sharp contrast to the narrow stony trail which was rough and stern. This was his third time crossing the River today. Had he been a hunter, he might be shouldering a bag of goods home, celebrating a fruitful day. He was not a hunter, however, nor any ordinary hiker. He was running for a mission, harsh and risky. To be permitted to sleep when tired and to be allowed to

shed a burden too heavy to bear is precious and wonderful. To him, these were luxury wishes, and to accomplish his mission he had to give them all up. The mission had given him the meaning of life and he determined to succeed.

Halfway up on the bridge, however, he found himself melancholy and disturbed, the world seemed ephemeral. The swift-flowing water beneath reminded him of the past. The very thought renewed his consternation, flying back a few years when he was still called John and was running in a green mountain along with an enigmatic elegant girl and they were running for their destinies. He was lucky enough to slip into Hong Kong, rescued by a secret organization. But, his trouble was far from over.

He vividly remembered that it was a late summer morning. He was on his way back to his temporary residence, after a meeting with the organization which was planning to move him to the US. He sensed he was followed by someone, a man and a woman in their twenties, athletic, taller than the local average, and very fit. He guessed they were Northerners as they were light-skinned. The girl often appeared far in front of him to evade their following behavior. He became nervous and dared not to head back to his residence directly. He kept walking forward and pondering how to escape from their surveillance. He thought of many ways such as getting into a big crowd and slipping away, or taking a subway train and suddenly jumping out while the doors were closing. None of them was promising. The couple would have many coworkers, working together to accomplish a mission. Once they had targeted a person, it was almost impossible for the prey to get away, as they had unlimited resources to achieve a mission. Their activities were pervasive and relentless. It made big news in town when all employees of a well-known bookstore, including the owner, a citizen of a European country, suddenly vanished overnight, only to resurface in Mainland, confessing in front of the state TV their 'crimes'. It was also reported that even a billionaire with a dozen bodyguards could not escape the fate of abduction after he had been located by the security agents. He was

escorted by a number of agents back to Mainland and issued a public statement that he came back voluntarily. Then he disappeared forever, most likely imprisoned in an unknown place and would die there.

John knew that if he vanished, hardly anyone would know and care as he himself was an illegal resident. He shuddered when he thought about the frequent tortures in custody. He took a deep breath and determined: either he died there or escaped from the abduction. He was resolute and his eyes flared with anger.

He kept walking forward and just came up with a plan, when he turned a corner, arriving at a quiet segment of the street, where a Seven-Eleven store was located. He entered the store briefly and when he got out, the girl coincidentally passed the store. She walked right in front of him, talking and smiling at her cell phone, not paying attention to the environment. She looked more beautiful at close distance. Her hair — pure black, hanging down to her shoulders — was fresh, shiny, smooth and neatly combed. She wore a white shirt, short blue jeans and a pair of white tennis shoes, on her left hand a gold watch, an expensive watch that could easily attract robbery and she carried a leather handbag. She looked particularly sweet when she smiled.

Suddenly, the man, her partner, rushed from behind, trying to snap her handbag. She cried vehemently, 'robbery,' but grabbed the handbag tight. The robber, a stalwart, pulled forward but failed to seize the handbag from her. He swiftly ran away, vanishing into another narrow cross street. The strong pull caused the girl to lose balance. She tripped and fell in front of John, dropping her cell phone on the sidewalk. John almost stumbled over her. She lied on the floor, face down and hands stretching out. She turned her head and caught the eyesight of John. Her eyes and face showed a somewhat pale terrified expression, partially covered by her long smooth hair, a felicitous combination of pity, tenderness and beauty. John was positive that the attempted robbery was staged, and the way she fell, natural, fluid, and injury-free leaked her well-trained martial-

art talent. But, still, he bent down and offered her a hand.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked.

Pulling John’s hand, she stood up. She nodded and looked scared. ‘It was so scary but I am fine! Thank you so much!’ she answered, her voice slightly trembling. John felt the warmth and softness of her tender hand. The feeling soothed him but he let go of her, stepped forward, picked up her cell phone and handed it to her. She looked calmer now. She thanked John another couple of times and commenced a conversation as they walked forward. She complained about the safety of the city and the extremely hot weather, hinting that it would be much better to ride in a car.

After a brief chat, she asked, ‘I am Jade. What’s your name?’

‘John!’ the young man replied.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked with a lovely sweet smile.

John became nervous, his hands sweating.

‘I am going to a temple,’ he said, trying to keep himself calm. He certainly did not want Jade to discover that he knew her real identity.

‘Were you scared by the robbery?’ she asked with a pleasant voice sounded like a naive high school girl. ‘You look a little nervous!’

He felt uneasy, forcing a smile. ‘No, Jade, I am always nervous when talking with beautiful girls.’

The girl laughed heartily. ‘Actually, I plan to go to a temple too! What a coincidence! Would you mind if I go with you?’

John shuddered. He faked a happy smile and lied. ‘Of course not! My honor to go with you! Actually, I am in a rush, however, I would be very happy to walk with you for a while.’

The girl’s eyes flashed a delightful excitement. Smiling and pointing at a cross street, she said, ‘Great, it’s a good chance for me to return your favor. My car, a luxury SUV is parked nearby. John, let me give you a ride!’ She stared at him with an eye-ful of sweetness and a seductive smile.

Normally, no one would reject such an offer but a chill swept through John’s body. To him, the car was mayhem. Once he

got into her car, her mission was accomplished and he could never escape again.

While they were chatting, John frequently looked at the traffic lights ahead as if he wanted to cross the street. In reality, he was watching the rear mirrors of the cars stopping in front of the red light. To his surprise, he spotted Jade's partner, the robber, appeared behind again, following them at a distance. Apparently, he was very familiar with the district and had moved very swiftly. He had put on a pair of sunglasses, looked like a charming athlete and was talking to his cell phone. John was convinced that the young man had elite training in martial arts.

He promptly made up an excuse. 'It is very difficult to find parking near the temple. Let's take a subway train and then a walk.'

The girl looked a little disappointed. She nodded and smiled warmly. 'Yes, you are right!'

Thanks to his special skills, he was able to evade all the predators and escaped clean from their ensnare. It was a miracle that he made it and it was the first time their predators failed their mission after they had located their target. It sent a shock wave across the community of the predators, percolating up to the very top level, who were very angry at the failure as they believed in power and absolute control of their people.

Now, lonely, he was running again, running for a mission, a mission impossible! He slightly shoved his backpack as if he was trying to shake off his anger.

After crossing the River, the trail led him east and a few more miles he arrived at a flat area, the very bottom of the valley, that had patches of grass fields with some yellow flowers swaying in the breeze. At the east end, there was a stylistic house labeled Phantom Motel. He stopped running and walked into its spacious lobby, which appeared to be filled with extraordinary stillness, only that a girl with blonde hair hanging down to shoulders was sitting behind the reception counter. She stood up and greeted him with a fresh smile.

"Thank you! You came a little late today," she said.

She stooped down, as she spoke, a peculiar movement. When

she stood up again, she had grabbed a small backpack. She put it on the counter while the man laid his large backpack on a bench. He stared at the girl, nodded and smiled warmly.

“It was heavy! Sorry for keeping you waiting,” he said.

He then walked toward the counter, picked up the small backpack, shoved it on his back, bowed to the girl, turned and walked out of the motel.

The sun was falling behind the misty mountains, painting the sky shades of red and pink, and casting great shadows on the valley. A thin fog began to form, shrouding distant mountains. The man wasted no time, walking swiftly to the backside of the motel. Brushing his way through bush and yellow flowers, he found a hidden narrow trail climbing up a mountain. He renewed his running, still firm and fast. As he ran, two eagles were circulating and screeching in the sky for some time. He waved to them before they descended into the mountains.

Under the faint residual brightness of the sunset rays, he ran with confidence toward his destination. He was first running between ferns along a trickling stream, arriving at the chaos of rocks and he was blocked by some large boulders. With both hands and legs, he climbed over boulders after boulders and turned around a sharp ridge. He then climbed down towards a miniature valley within the great valley. The miniature valley was fully wooded, green vines and creepers twisting around tree boughs and the stream winding around it. The air was fresh and the leaves were clean and virginal. As he entered the forest, the sun had set and darkness fell upon the mountain. He felt a shudder run through him as he never liked darkness. He walked slowly, feeling his way forward. Passing many large banyan trees, he saw light again. At the far end of the forest were a few huts lit by oil lamps, the light confined within the forest. The huts were fully concealed by the thick woods, but the man seemed to be familiar with the environment as he quickened his pace on the trail that was dimly lit by the lamps. He ran toward the central hut, the largest shelter, which had lanterns hanging at the four corners of the roof. The man drew aside the curtain of the entrance, entering the hut, and passing a guard

who searched his bag briefly.

About two dozen people forming a few rows were sitting on the ground with legs folded, facing a small stage, where a girl dressed in native Indian customs was standing and a musical instrument, which looked like a lyre was placed behind her. The girl looked like a seventeen-year-old, her figure almost graceful. She had a feather clipped at the right side of her dense black hair, which hung down to her shoulders and she wore a buckskin dress and mocassins. She was amiable, greeting the audience with smiles, warm and kind like a gleam of sunshine. The audience felt the gaieties of a festival. Some chanted, "Katchina! Katchina! Katchina!"

The man found a space at the back. Slowly descending, he sat on the ground like others, his eyes roving over everyone and settling on Katchina's childlike face. When he met her eyes, he felt a grace, but also a thread of sadness masked behind her smile, and this reminded him of the enigmatic girl he ran along in the desolate mountain some years ago.

She stepped back, sat on the floor with legs folded and covered by her dress. She played the lyre and sang a song, a warm passionate song glorifying life.

When she finished, she stood up, stepped forward and bowed. The audience clapped their hands as she stepped back and sat down behind the lyre.

"Welcome! Thank you for coming. Today, I'll continue the story related to my own tribe," the girl said with a warm smile, her voice sounded like a melody. As she spoke and smiled, the man saw a sadness flash on her tender face.

She struck a string of the lyre, the sound echoing through the hut. The whole audience fell silent and she began to tell the story.

The young man's mind was in chaos and he missed the first part of the story. When he was awake, he heard her saying: "... We are descendants of the tribe Chinula, who had resided in this Grand Canyon for thousands of years. The tribesmen are wise, courageous and resilient. They were mighty hunters and fought bravely battles after battles and had repelled invaders

and enemies. They believed no enemies on this planet could destroy them.” She paused, glancing at the audience with her large bright eyes and struck the lyre for a few tones. “But they forgot one enemy, the greatest enemy of all, which would annihilate them.”

A man in the audience interrupted. “The white people?”

She slowly shook her head with a sad facial expression. “No, this happened a few hundred years ago before the Whites came,” she said, softly striking the lyre, which generated some low soft tones echoing in the air.

“The greatest enemy was himself. They chose a leader, nicknamed Dry Feather the Evil, who was super ambitious. He conquered the whole Canyon and wanted to make his tribe the greatest. He was cruel, ruthless and had an evil mind, labeling one percent of his own tribesmen as enemies and tortured them mercilessly when necessary. He was in general ignorant and stupid but was particularly good at manipulating the dark side of humans. All he cared about was gripping power. His slogan was to annihilate his imaginary enemies and he demanded absolute loyalty from his tribesmen. Everyone was coerced to align its thought with him. Many people suffered heavily, scared and lost hope. Gradually, many of his tribesmen lost their souls and aligned their thoughts with Dry Feather. They did not have their own thinking or justice. No longer could they distinguish between right and wrong, lies and real facts, good and evil. People referred to them as Orcs. But, not everyone had become an Orc. Dry Feather had a very capable assistant, Great Plain the Indestructible. He was also ruthless and helped Dry Feather rise to power, but there was a distinction between them. When he saw Dry Feather go beyond the bottom line, killing his own tribesmen mercilessly, he stood up against him. He gathered some veteran generals to rebel against Dry Feather and was able to contain him. After Dry Feather died, his evil deeds were partially exposed and many of his brutal policies were erased.

“The Orcs were given a new life and some gradually recovered from the horrible memory and returned to normal life

but many remained maniac. Unfortunately, after Great Plain died, his successors fought each other to acquire more power. Instead of rehabilitating the Orcs, to restore their souls, they made use of them to seize power. The Orcs remained soulless and the leaders did not want them to have any soul so that they could control them with absolute certainty. Gradually, more and more tribesmen became Orcs and the whole tribe became miserable and poor. Those who did not want to become Orcs escaped the Canyons. Worse, they elicited a fight with a strong external tribe. One by one, the remaining were killed by invaders. Only until recently did the scattered tribesmen begin to return to the Canyon.”

Kachina paused and some artificial mist appeared on the stage. She struck the lyre and sang another song, a sad song. When she finished singing, the mist faded away and a middle-aged woman, eyes closed, dressed in native Indian customs appeared on the stage. The audience clamored with surprise. Kachina stared at a bundle of sticks piled at a corner of the hut and said, “The dancing performance by our deaf dancer has been canceled today but we have arranged some special adventures for you.”

She turned her head to introduce the woman, “She is Calfuray. She had been blind when she was three years old. She is your tour guide of a trip exploring a deep wide cave, where there is no light, not even stars, only utter darkness. You have to feel the things and use a stick to navigate. You will experience the feelings of submerging in a dark world!”

Another clamour broke out.

As Calfuray walked towards the hut entrance, everyone grabbed a stick from the pile and followed her out of the hut and walked on a trail that could hardly be seen in darkness. After about half an hour, they arrived at a narrow cave entrance, shaded by large trees. One by one, led by Calfury, the audience squeezed through the entrance to enter a world filled with complete darkness!

Chapter 2

A Mysterious Video

It was an early spring morning. Varshi Surangi, sitting on a rocking chair in her office, watched through the window warm rays of sunshine, partially blocked by drifting clouds, beaming through flowers and trees. As she gazed at the soft shadows on the green lawn, enjoying the freshness of spring, she meditated upon her son's future. Her thought was broken by an unexpected loud knock at the door.

When she opened the door, a postman delivered her a small package. She was surprised that the envelope did not state its origin.

Opening the package at her working desk, she found a USB drive and a note, which said:

Dear Varshi,

Enclosed please find a USB drive containing a few videos of the homeless stranger. My other client accused him as a terrorist. When we looked deeper into the case, we just found mysteries tangled with mysteries. The more information we have gathered, the more confusion we encounter. Just when we were able to draw some tentative conclusions, new evidence would totally contrast them. Our client is just as mysterious. He pays us ex-

traordinarily well but we always maintain our goal of doing no evil and that our work won't be utilized by any person or organization to conduct evil or to do harm to any innocent person. Please watch the videos and see if you could shed some light on the case.

Best Regards,

Jacobs

She realized that the package was from Jacobs even though there's no signature on the letter.

She plugged the USB drive into her computer and found five video files. As she clicked on the first one, the display caught her by surprise. Isaac, the homeless stranger who was Diego's friend and hero was playing a table tennis match and he seemed to be very good at the game. The scene instigated her. She watched it briefly and rushed to click on the other files, which showed similar scenes. *He has become a table tennis coach..* She made a surmise.

A weird feeling, melancholy and passionate, passed through Varshi. She could not contemplate why Jacobs sent her these videos, which just showed that Isaac loved this game and was good at it. Jacobs could have told her in one sentence. Might be Jacobs's client was mysterious but ironically, Jacobs was just as mysterious, Varshi thought.

She watched through the window the rising sun. The clouds, now almost transparent, revealing the serene blue sky, lively and active. She laid back on her chair in a relaxing pose, re-thinking her surmise on the matter. She tried hard to keep a grip on sanity. Unveiling Isaac was not just a business deal with Jacobs. More importantly, Isaac had close connections with Diego, her gardener, who often was also the mentor of her son, Shivam, whose safety was more important than anything else to her.

Impelled by curiosity and worrisome, she replayed all the videos and watched intently each match in full.

The first four matches were played in two different clubs and Isaac played a different player in each match, 3 men and a woman. There were always an audience of about three dozens, mostly Asians, who clapped hands with excitement. The players were good but Isaac beat them with ease, winning all the matches 3-0 except the one against the woman, whom he beat 3-2. Isaac was a pen-holder with a long pips rubber at the back-hand side, which gave him a lot of variations in playing a game.

The last video was most entertaining and surprised her most. It was shot in a room, which was not spacious, barely large enough to play a match. There was no audience nor was there any furniture or any artifacts of modern living. The room had no lamps and the table was illuminated by sunlight through two windows on the sides and she could only see green trees outside the window, not any buildings. It looked like the table was hand-made and was not painted. Some inscriptions were carved on one of the walls but Varshi could not recognize any of the characters. Just as surprising, Isaac played against a young girl and the match was tight. It seemed that the place was not humid as neither of the players was sweating heavily.

Isaac fought against the girl with all means, smashing the balls exceptionally hard; the girl countered it with exquisite chop blocks! No matter how hard Isaac tried, he could not gain an upper hand, their scores almost advancing in sync. The game was so exciting to watch that Varshi almost stopped breathing but she did not know whom she should cheer for. She appreciated not only the players but also the skills and spirits they showed in the games. Now they were tied at 2-2, each having won two games. The last game was the most interesting. The girl became more offensive, attacking from both sides that made Isaac looked powerless. But Isaac compensated many of his faults by his extraordinary running speed, saving many points from normally impossible situations. They again played an extremely tight game, composed of many risky and scary shots that gave the girl a slight edge. Now the girl led Isaac 10-9. Should Isaac lose another point, he would lose the whole match. Starting the next point, the girl served a strong under-

spin short push, a dexterous serve. Isaac pushed it back short and the girl countered with another short push. So it became a competition of short pushes which require extraordinary skill to do. The ball was confined bouncing in the vicinity of the net with a tremendous amount of spin. It bounced back and forth, generating the rhyme ‘Dang! Dang! Dang!’ as if it were yearning for freedom, trying to get out of the small area. But with superior ball control skills from both players, the bouncing area was contracting and the speed getting faster. Varshi knew that there could not be a backoff from either player and the margin of error was razer-thin. It was like the competition of generating rapid high pitches from two fiddles that the sound would stop only when a string of one of the fiddles broke.

Seconds passed and the pushes were getting shorter and shorter.

‘Dang! Dang’, the ball continued to yell and struggle and it seemed to know its fate – everything would come to an end; the push would stop; the spin would end. Varshi was induced into a sense of frightening emotion and when she felt she could not endure the fright anymore, Isaac barely dumped the ball onto the net, ending the game and thus the match.

It was followed by an unexpected moment of silence. There was no cheering nor any congratulations. Isaac stood still, not moving forward to shake hands with his opponent. It seemed that the loss was heavy to him. He sadly stared at the ball which was still spinning rapidly, as if yearning to him as well as laughing at him.

Isaac simply could not accept the loss, looked like one who had suffered a miserable defeat, Varshi thought. She understood how Isaac felt. He was too proud of himself to the point that he behaved arrogantly and laughed at the world. He challenged Helen that he could beat her by playing with one-leg and he did. Now, how could he accept loss to a young girl by a small margin! Varshi was so much into the game that a sense of lightness and emptiness filled her and felt sad for Isaac but the feeling just lasted for a short moment and her conscious mind came back. It was just a game, she thought. It was foolish for

one to take the win and loss so seriously.

As she continued to watch the video, she found Isaac stand there numb, still submerged in the sadness for many seconds. He was startled out of his thought only when the girl came over slowly. In spite of the win, the girl showed no joyful expression. She simply bowed to him and stared at him with an expression showing benevolent sympathy.

Isaac smiled bitterly, sighed and bowed. The video ended there.

Varshi felt relaxed. She enjoyed watching very much the matches which were played so well and so dramatic. She was always a fan of the game. She felt good about Isaac that he had become a coach, a lot better than doing odd jobs. He might not be homeless anymore, she thought.

Varshi sank into deep thinking and heard a sound. Before she got up, the door was thrown open and Shivam had run into her office, waving to her.

Shivam was fast growing into a strong energetic teenager who excelled in both academics and sports. He threw himself with zest into the badminton game and he made running his habit. Each morning he ran alone from home to school, and often dropped by her office on the way to greet her. After school, he ran to SICC to combat and learn in the badminton game. Then he ran home; he would sometimes take long routes to run along beaches on the way home and he solved many maths problems his Mom assigned while running. He had won the Cadet and Junior National Badminton Championships. The next goal would be the World Junior Championship but the training path of getting there would be rough, very rough.

Varshi smiled and Shivam squatted down at the side of her chair. She caressed his head, touching his hair gently.

“Anything new?” she asked.

“We have a new coach!” Shivam said.

“From where?”

“Russia. He is rather eccentric but friendly and humorous. He was also a magician before!”

“Interesting!”

“He said that his government supports an adjacent country’s government, which he calls Dark Power, for the same reason they support his government!”

“What reason?”

“So that the adversary country is ruled by an authoritative strongman and won’t be developed, thus causing any threat to his country!”

Varshi laughed.

“I have to run now, Mom,” Shivam said, standing up.

“Have a great day!” Varshi said, smiling warmly.

After Shivam had left Varshi resumed her analysis of the videos. But as she went deeper, the mist in her mind thickened. Where were the videos taken? How did Jacobs obtain them? Was there any secret hidden in the videos? She replayed all the videos again. The style Isaac played was unique. She never met or saw any player play like him. Besides using both the pips and the normal rubber to attack and defend at his backhand side, he sometimes switched hand to save a point, which would otherwise be lost.

She wanted to ask Diego but he was on vacation and wouldn’t be back until next week. The puzzle lingered in her mind in the morning. In the afternoon, while she was pacing her office, she heard another loud knock at the door.

“People don’t like to use the doorbell!” Varshi complained to herself.

This time, it was Jacobs himself visiting her. Varshi brewed some coffee for him and let him sit opposite to her desk. His manner was not effusive but appeared kind and warm in seeing Varshi. He stood up to receive the coffee but instead of sitting back, he walked towards the window and stared outside, appreciating the elegant scenes.

Smiling, he said, “A beautiful day! Have you watched the videos?”

Varshi nodded. “Yes, interesting games! Where did you get them?”

“We collected them from the public domain. The games are very interesting and popular in the sports community. If you

search the Internet, you might find more,” Jacobs said.

“Isaac might have become a table tennis coach! He is a great player!” Varshi said.

“That’s what we thought until Helen’s parents supplied us more of her journals,” Jacobs said.

Varshi stared at him with a face of surprise.

“We learned a lot about Isaac from the journals. He is very different from the descriptionis of our other client, who claims that Isaac is very dangerous, a terrorist. All evidence so far leads us to believe he is kind and courteous!”

Varshi frowned.

Jacobs continued: “A billionaire of Awesome Nation contacted us on behalf of its National Security Office.”

”Awesome Nation?” she asked incredulously.

Jacobs did not answer. After a moment, Varshi smiled and nodded, understanding what Jacobs meant.

Smiling, she asked, “Is your client, the billionaire, an agent of the security office?”

“No, Miles, our billionaire client is not! In Awesome Nation, they always have different political factions fighting each other secretly though openly they always claim they are united. For sensitive issues that they are not certain about the outcome, they use outsiders to carry out the tasks so that if something goes wrong, the department can openly deny its involvement. Or, you can argue that their agents are disguised as merchants. It’s a weird system,” Jacobs explained.

Jacobs sat back on the chair, putting his cup on the table. He laid back in a relaxed pose and thought for some time before saying, “For two months, every evening Helen watched the parking lot through her office window, but the homeless stranger never showed up again. Each day a little guilty emotion crept into her mind. She decided to make a search, a zealous search. For now and again she would call various city organizations to ask if they spotted such a homeless man and she would wander around the city to search for him. Another month passed but she could not obtain any hint of him. She felt exhausted and decided to give up. She once again con-

centrated on her research work on Indian lives. One morning, when she fetched a book about Native Indians in America from the bookshelf in her office, a name tag which she had used as a bookmark, dropped off from the book. As it was falling, she caught a glimpse of a stranger's name. She picked up the tag but had no idea who the stranger was and could not remember where she got the name tag. However, for some unknown reasons she had an inner urge of calling this stranger."

"Another stranger? What's his name?" Varshi asked, feigning a surprise expression.

Jacobs nodded. "Yes, Helen dialed the number on the tag and said, 'This is Helen of Santa Barba Museum ...' Before she finished her sentence, a coarse voice speaking with an accent answered with delight, 'Hi, Helen. I found him!' For a moment, Helen was confused but then she remembered the stranger. As I told you before, one evening, while the homeless man hovered around the museum, a bearded man was attacked by a gang in the carpark. At the most dangerous moment, the man was saved by the homeless stranger. Helen was in the museum, witnessing the attack. She called the police but everyone had fled when the police arrived. Next day, the bearded man came and asked information about the homeless stranger and left her a name tag that contained his contact information, and very politely, he requested Helen to call him if she spotted the stranger. Helen was already much annoyed by the homeless stranger, who used her museum's carpark as a haven. She randomly inserted the tag into the book she was reading, using it as a bookmark and totally forgot the request and the man.

But now this stranger became the point-man for her to find the homeless stranger. She had a long conversation with him, finding out that his name is .." Jacobs somewhat muttered, "...is J-e-s-u-s, pronounced as Her-su, and the homeless stranger is named Isaac Newman."

Varshi was not happy but she tried to hide it. He knew Jacobs had made up the name Jesus. The bearded man was Diego, her gardener, she thought. Why did Jacobs hide the information from her? She could not understand.

Jacobs continued: “Though Jesus is very friendly toward Isaac, Isaac seems to keep a distance from everyone. He rarely contacts Jesus and does not have any fixed location or phone for anyone to find him. But unexpectedly, one day, he showed up in a sports club where Jesus went often, asking him for help!”

Varshi frowned. “Isaac asked for help? Very unusual!”

Jacobs smiled. “He bought a small broken house in San Diego!”

Varshi said, “Finally, he is not homeless anymore!”

Jacobs shrugged his shoulders. “He spent a couple of months fixing the house but he did not intend to live there. He came to ask Jesus to rent it out and to manage the property. Isaac would work on a landscape renovation project in a zoo in San Diego and would go to Grand Canyon afterward. Jesus immediately promised and Isaac insisted on paying him 10% of the rental income.”

“Fascinating!” Varshi said.

Jacobs continued: “So Helen phoned the zoo only to find that its landscape renovation was complete and Isaac had been transferred to another zoo in Arizona, doing similar work of moving heavy logs across delicate landscapes.

Disappointed, Helen decided to take a trip to Arizona. All she wanted was to make a sincere apology to him in person and she would never see him again. But fate played upon her.

When she flew to Arizona, arriving at the zoo, Isaac was fired. His coworkers described him as a quiet man strong as steel, often listening intently but hardly speaking any word. No one knew exactly where he had gone. All they knew for sure was that something mysterious happened the day before Isaac left and he had a clash with some protesters at the entrance of the zoo.”

“Isaac seemed to have some secrets, so he did not talk often,” Varshi commented.

Jacobs fell silent, not responding to Varshi’s comment.

Chapter 3

Mountain Adventures

It was a long silence as Jacobs laid back on the chair, half-closing his eyes. Varshi knew that he was composing a story, so she quietly poured him another cup of coffee.

As if awakening from a dream and recalling the past, he softly said with a solemn tone, "It was a chilly evening, sleet falling, and the zoo had very few visitors. The workers ended their work early and most were on their way home, walking to a remote bus stop. Suddenly, they heard a cry far away, sounded like a wolf howling, originated from the north hill of the zoo. Out of curiosity, a few workers went back and entered the zoo through the gate at the south side. They traced all the way to a tiger den and saw splashes of blood on the ground. A tiger was crouching down with its neck bleeding. It looked like that it was cut by a sharp knife and was seriously injured. They immediately reported to the zookeeper, a capable administrator who already knew about the incident and had called the veterinary physician. Everyone was curious about how a tiger could be hurt so seriously and what weapon the attacker had used. Upon examination, the animal doctor found no foreign object residuals in the wound but he did find the saliva of another tiger. So they concluded that the tiger must be bitten by another cub. More mysteriously, the doctor found some healing powder on

the wound. While people were whispering about the mystery, the zookeeper claimed that the powder was sprayed by him before the doctor came. Things were so abnormal that rumors began to circulate the next day. Some speculated Isaac was the attacker who hurt the tiger except that no one could explain the motives and how he could break a tiger's neck without using any weapon. Some even believed the tiger was attacked by Aliens.

“That was what Helen found out. Very disappointed, she returned home and continued her work on the government-funded project. After a few peaceful days, a sense of loss began to creep into her mind and she became restless again. She slightly modified her project theme, adding the research of native Indian activities in Grand Canyon in the past thousand years, including the research of Havasupai, whose reservation area has magnificent streams and falls that attract numerous people visiting annually. She drove all the way to the Canyon and stayed in a motel inside the park. Her main goal was to gather information about native Indian history but she might have a vague hope of running into Isaac.”

Varshi interrupted. “Helen was guided by an inner voice in her soul. She would find Isaac!”

Jacobs smiled, not showing any emotion of agreeing or disagreeing. He continued: “One morning, Helen got up at dawn, trying to get to the Canyon bottom as she planned to interview some Indian tribes who might still reside there. She started her journey walking down a desolate trail which zigzagged around boulders and rocky ruins. The grade was steep and unrelenting. It was a bewildering route even for an experienced hiker. On one side, a great crag towered up a few hundred feet, reddish-yellow, stern, and menacing with deeply-carved columns upon its rough surface like the ribs of some big animals. On the other side was a cliff with green trees sticking out from its rugged surface. She pushed forward cautiously and in an hour of descending, she had not seen any human beings or animals but the journey was felicitous. She proceeded with a moderate pace, sometimes touching boulders on the side to prevent potential

slipping. After making a sharp right turn down a rocky ledge, she heard some footsteps, rapidly approaching the curving corner. Helen naturally kept right and slowed her pace. A man carrying a large backpack passed her. She did not see his face as she never looked back. Watching the man running down the hill, she was amazed by his speed. *How could one, carrying a large backpack, run so fast on such a steep twisting trail?* She pondered upon the hiker. When the stranger was turning around another corner, a sudden emotion seized her. She darted forward, trying to catch up with the stranger, who had vanished. She almost tripped over a stone but she ignored the danger and rushed forward.

“The trail twisted down the cliffs and as it started to get even steeper, a quick switchback veered off to the north. Shortly thereafter, it curved to the east around the end of a ridge. Reaching the ridge, she still saw no one, only hearing her own footsteps echoing in the empty Canyon. She realized that the stranger had gone and had run too fast for her to follow.

She slowed her pace and ran steadily onward, planning to reach before noon Phantom Village, a campground rumored to have Indians living nearby. She is always a lone explorer, forms her own opinion, travels her own path, and never bothered by the views of her peers. She is resolute and always has within her a destination, clear and unique. From time to time, devils torture her with temptations and mockery, but she repels them with resolution and her fearlessness. She travels her own path, towards her chosen destiny. Now as she ran in this unrelenting trail, strangely, for the first time she was not as confident and not as bold as before. The devil of fear seemed to find its way into her mind, winding her in all directions. She was not so sure she could find her destination. She might lose the battle with the devils. This was new to her. There were times that she felt her destiny was within reach only to find that it was still remote and fuzzy, and she experienced a feeling of lightness and despair, such as sometimes occurs in a seashore, where a pelican glides above water to target a prey, and when it rushes down to catch it only to find that the target is a shadow and is

swiftly repelled again. She experienced this gain and loss in emotion like a mystery within herself and suffered from it.

“As this strange emotion procured her, she came to another ridge which beheld such a vast panorama that she could see the trail far away, zigzagging through a rocky flat land, treeless and wide. She saw in the distance between the plain and the mountain a tiny figure, obviously, a hiker. The scene elicited her hope and she sped up running down the trail toward the hiker.

When she came close, she found that the hiker looked like a native Indian with white hair and prudent eyes, about 70 years old, carrying a basket that contained some plants with various colors. He might be a native Indian medical doctor, collecting herb samples.

‘Good morning, did you see a young hiker with black hair carrying a large backpack running down the trail?’ Helen asked.

The old man nodded, turned and pointed along the trail he came from. ‘Yes! A hiker, running as smooth as a swift stream, has gone in that direction some time ago. Actually, I see him quite often though we never talk as he is always running,’ he answered kindly.

‘Do you know where the trail lead?’

‘Yes, the trail leads to a bridge crossing the Colorado River and continues along a stream. Eventually, it leads to a campground and a motel.’

“Helen thanked him and moved on. She began to take some photos of the landscape, for her research project and eventually came to a stream flowing around a cliff. She had not booked any lot in a formal campground of the Canyon as her exploration trip had no fixed schedule nor any fixed location. She decided to camp under a beetling crag, where the rocks provided some protection from the chill wind and it was near the stream and the trail. She set up a tent and rested there. She knew that wherever there was a stream, there would be civilization. Her camping site could be once the residence of a few Indian families as the beetling crag could be a great shelter for them. She examined the soil, searching for any possible residuals that

could be left by ancient residents. She worked until sunset when the temperature dropped near zero. She went inside the tent, laid a sleeping bag, and unwrapped an air-activated thermal pad. She wrapped the pad, which could maintain warmth for 10 hours, around her body and slid herself into the bag to enjoy a few hours of sleep.

The next morning, when she got out of the tent, the environment was grey. The trail was as empty as it could be.

The sun slowly rose above the eastern mountain plateau, lighting up the caps of other great mountains one after the other. As it rose further, it illuminated the land with warmth and freshness. The air smelt sweet. She was cheered by this magnificent spectacle so she went to the river bank to search for any items left over by ancient inhabitants. Most of the time, she kept herself in locations where the trail was visible, and from time to time, she would watch any person hiking on the trails. She saw more hikers today, but from dawn to sunset, the stranger did not appear. It was a disappointing day for her, though she had collected a couple of small items, a piece of a broken porcelain plate and a metallic ring. She would take the items back to her museum lab for further analysis. She once again slept after sunset and rose before dawn. The third day was another disappointed day. On the other hand, it was a fruitful day as she found more valuable items. Her scanty provisions began to run out. That night she used up her last thermal pad. She must go up back to the Canyon top next day as it would be too cold to sleep there without any thermal pad.

When morning broke, she found a scene of marvelous beauty unfold around her. The night sprinkle yesterday had cleansed the air. Everything was fresh and new and the whole Canyon was ruddy and glowing, faultlessly beautiful.

“Instead of searching for items, she took pictures of the Canyon from all prospects with deliberate thinking and skills, sometimes examining the features using a pair of binoculars. She climbed on a large boulder, which gave her a good prospect of the landscape. As the morning wore on, she saw a weird scene – a stranger wearing sunglasses was running down the

trail in a backward pose. He had a band wrapped around his head and carried a backpack. She stared at him and realized that he was the same stranger she saw a couple of days ago. But, why did he run backward? She could not understand. As the stranger ran nearer, her heart began to palpitate. Eventually, with the help of the binoculars, she was convinced that the stranger was indeed Isaac as she had speculated.

After the man had passed her, she waved at him and cried, 'Hey, Isaac!'

The man was startled out of thinking. He slowed down, paused, took off his glasses and band and found a girl sitting on a boulder. He gaped at her, not sure if she was the one he had in mind.

As he stared at her, she smiled warmly and commenced the conversion: 'Do you remember me, the awfully lousy badminton player who could be beaten by a player playing one-leg?'

The man's eyes lit. 'Helen, you are here,' he yelled, walking towards her. 'The great champion of the museum!'

Helen was happy about his remembering her. She smiled. 'After playing you, every match else I played is a pale shadow in comparison,' Helen cried. 'It seems that you are always on the run.'

The man looked serious momentarily then a smile appeared upon his face, the same impish smile she remembered when he proposed the insane match at the museum carpark.

'It's because I have a strong huge awesome Motherland behind me,' he said. 'I always need to run and run fast! Why are you here?'

Helen spoke solemnly, 'I have been conducting a research project related to Grand Canyon, but sincerely, I want to come here to apologize to you, for my ignorance, rudeness and forcing you out of the shelter. I feel really sorry for everything I did to you, and thank for your kindness in forgiving me. In particular, I appreciate so much your not taking advantage of the loss of my arrogant and ignorant bet on our games.'

With a blunt smile, Isaac said, 'Helen, don't confuse me!

You were so kind and nice. I owe you so much! I always remember and thank you for letting me stay in the park over a period of time. You are such a graceful girl!

‘Thanks for your nice words, Isaac. Sorry to interrupt your run!’ Helen said, getting down from the boulder. ‘I wish you a great day! Goodbye!’ She waved to him again.

She did not tell him how she knew he was in the Canyons. She was then turning and walking back to her tent.

Pointing at the tent, Isaac cried out, ‘Is that your new residence?’

Smiling, Helen yelled, ‘Yes, my temporary home!’

‘Could I visit your home 5 hours later when I am done with my business?’

‘Sure, nothing to treat you though!’

‘Thanks, see you in 5 hours!’ Isaac yelled and resumed his run but he ran forward this time.”

Vershi interrupted. “Why did Isaac run backward?”

Jacobs smiled. “You will know. Helen went back to her tent to eat an early lunch. When she came out again, Isaac had vanished. A thought suddenly seized her. She had promised to meet Isaac in 5 hours but by then the sun would be setting. As her provisions had run out, she must go back to the Canyon top, which would take a few hours. She would have great difficulties to hike back if she did not start the journey soon.

I have apologized. I am not obliged to meet him anymore! She wanted to pack and leave right away.

But you had promised!

Why should I risk my safety to keep the promise with an acquaintance? I do not owe him anything more!

Never break a promise. That is your rule and you know it by heart!

She struggled for a while and decided to wait.”

Varshi interrupted again. “Actually, deep in her heart, she might simply want to see Isaac again.”

Jacobs nodded and smiled. “It was a risky decision. She was anxious about the trip to the top. She disassembled the tent, put everything to her backpack and hid it under the boulder. She

then walked away from the trail through one ravine after another to arrive at the edge of a precipice, which dropped a few hundred feet to a narrow valley filled with scattered rocks. Before the edge was a flat area of perhaps 50 to 60 feet across. Helen was a very serious researcher. She examined carefully all landscapes to determine whether the nearby areas were appropriate for habitation in ancient times. She recognized that the area could be an ideal hunting ground for ancient Indian hunters. A group of hunters would chase and ensnare animals to the edge and scared them to fall off the precipice, an easy way to kill and capture them. If her conjecture was correct, she could find traces of animal bones down the valley. In her eagerness, she climbed down the precipice to check. She was only halfway, however, before she incarnated the difficulty of descending the cliff and the evening was drawing in. She gave up the mission and climbed back up to the edge. Wasting no time, she hastened to retrace her steps, heading back to the campsite. She did not want to miss the appointment. Every now and again she sped on down the hill.

She had now crossed the stream and came full in sight of the boulder where she hid her backpack. There was a man sitting on the boulder, his back facing her and a large backpack laid against the boulder. He watched intensely at the trail and was not aware that she had come back from the other side.

‘Isaac, hopefully, I am not late!’ Helen said.

Isaac turned his head and was amazed to find Helen standing below out of breath.

‘Hi, Helen. You arrived punctually. Happy to see you again!’ he said joyfully and jumped down from the boulder.

‘Why did you disassemble your tent?’ he asked with a face of confusion.

‘I must head back to the Canyon top promptly as I had used up my provisions,’ Helen said, picking up her backpack.

Isaac almost couldn’t believe what he heard. He said with concern, ‘Oh, no, that would take at least 3 to 4 hours. At this time, all hikers have either gone up to the top or down to the valley bottom. If something happens, no one can help you!’

Your safety is paramount. There is a motel at the bottom, which is a lot easier to reach. You can come with me and I'll lead you there!

Convinced that she could handle the tough hike, she answered firmly, 'Isaac, thank you so much for your kindness, but I am sure I can make it. Bye!'

'Bye! Just be careful!' Isaac said, knowing well that Helen would not change her mind.

Helen nodded, smiled warmly and shoved the backpack on her back. She walked toward the trail, leaving behind Isaac, who had fallen silent.

"Stepping onto the trail, she began to run again. After a couple of strides, she suddenly felt tired. The precipice exploration had taken her toll and she was not aware of it until now. She took a deep breath, tightened her will, and ran on. The night was coming on rapidly and a mist was forming. It was almost dark before she came close to any drinking fountain. Soon she arrived at a steep ledge that she had to proceed more cautiously. She drew a small flashlight from her breast-pocket, turned it on and charged upward steadily. The Canyon bottom was filled with a thin mist, temperature dropping quickly. She was too tired to run with the heavy backpack, so she walked in a leaning position, her shoulders forward, eyes fixed upon the ground.

At the end of the ledge, she made a sharp turn onto another trail segment, which she examined with the flashlight before moving. The trail was much wider and the slope gentler, long and straight. But it was windy, and the road surface appeared shiny. When she walked on it, she slipped and nearly fell. She stretched a hand forward, seeking support against the air and uttering a sharp cry of fear. After she had recovered her footing and steadied herself, she stared at the ground. She now realized that it was covered by a thin layer of ice, slippery and difficult to walk on. Occasionally, a chill wind would blow from a random direction, swirling up the loose soil and snow. She put on a long thick coat to keep herself warm and with the help of the flashlight, she walked step by step, slowly and patiently. Her

pace was slow and almost an hour had passed before she came close to the end of the segment.

“As she felt a little exhausted and thirsty, she unloaded the backpack on the ground and retrieved from it a bottle of water. Her actions were clumsy as both of her hands wore gloves which reduced the sense of gripping objects and the effect was exacerbated by the cold weather and her tiredness. When she finished drinking and put the bottle back to the bag, trying to draw the zipper close, she accidentally dropped her flashlight. It rolled downhill for a long distance and then fell off the mountain, vanishing into the darkness. She felt bad about it as the flashlight was a special gift from her parents with her name ‘HELEN’ engraved on it and was designed for long-distance travel. She was saddened and now she could only rely on the dim light from the waxing moon to move on. For the first time, she became seriously worried. She stooped down, trying to pick up her backpack, but suddenly, a chill wind blew, causing her to slip backward. She grasped the air but lost balance, dropping the backpack and falling. Bewildered and stunned by the fall, she screamed but no one would hear her in the howling wind. When her back struck the ground, she was disoriented. She hastily stood up but she slipped again. By instinct, she stepped backward, one step after another, trying to regain her balance but she failed and her back struck the icy ground heavily. She would have been injured if it were not the thick coat that had absorbed much of the shock. This time she totally lost control of her movement, her whole body sliding down the icy slope swiftly. She dared not to roll as that might jeopardize her smooth downward sliding and she might fall off the mountain. The sliding was accelerating but she could not think of a way to stop it. She helplessly let herself sliding downhill, slightly adjusting her head from time to time to save her from veering off the middle of the trail.

“As the sliding was accelerating, she helplessly pressed her hands against the icy road but it was so slippery that she could not grip anything. She was terrified and prayed, ‘Help me, God!’. She recited the pledge for a few times, and to her sur-

prise, she became calmer. However, bad luck did not end there. Her shoulder hit a small ice bump which was struck into many small pieces and sprinkled into the air. Her face was showered by the tiny icy pieces and a piece struck one of her eyes. She felt a sharp pain and let out another cry while closing her eyes. Meanwhile her head knocked another bump of ice and she momentarily lost consciousness which might only last for one second except that time seemed dilated. She felt as if she were traveling in heaven and floating in the cloud and many events resurfaced. When she regained consciousness about the environment as if waking up from a dream, through her eyelids, she felt seeing some light through her closed eyelids and her shoulders hitting two springs, which absorbed much of her great downward momentum. However, the springs exertion vanished momentarily and instantly she felt hitting another object, which produced an upward jerk on her shoulders, and her upper body fell on top of a soft carpet, sliding down the slope as one. Almost at the same time, she felt the light dimmed and vanished, leaving her in darkness again. The wind was howling and the slide was bumpy but she could easily feel the sliding decelerating rapidly and soon coming to a full stop. She lied there motionless, not daring to make any movement. All this occurred in a sudden that she could not contemplate what was happening. She did not know how long had past when she slowly opened her eyes. A veil of fog had formed around her and she found she was lying on the ice at the center of the road almost in total darkness. There was no light or promise of light. She could see nothing else and could only hear the wind blowing. She was both joyful and confused, joyful that she was alive and well.

“ She slowly turned and felt a sharp pain in her left ankle. Only then did she realize that her ankle had been sprained. She trembled slightly and struggled to roll over, facing the ground. She laid still and looked around. Slowly, she was becoming more awake and more used to the dark environment; she found she had slid back near the sharp turn of the ledge. She could hear the wind howling and when she looked at her left, she

could see nothing but vast darkness covered by the mist that brought fear to her. She fought with her fear and momentarily enduring the ankle pain, she crawled trembling downward a few yards. She proceeded, cautiously and slowly, in pain, to make a sharp turn back to the ledge where there were little wind and no ice. She laid there in the darkness miserably like a wounded sheep, pondering upon the accident. Was it a reality or a hallucination? It could not be a total hallucination as she felt the pain of her ankle but if it were real, was she saved by an angel who used magic springs and carpets to stop her sliding? The angel left no trace of her ever existing. Slowly, slowly, she tried to regain a sense of sanity in the empty trail. She must have hit a pile of snow newly formed on the trail, which blocked her sliding, she thought. She was really lucky that the snow fell on time and on the right location. She prayed and thanked God again.”

Varshi said, “That’s weird!”

Jacobs nodded. “True. But she had no mood and time to make further analysis of the issue as she faced another dilemma. What ought she to do? Should she wait there until morning, when pass-by hikers could rescue her or should she crawl her way up in the night?

“As she was pondering upon her plans, she rolled again so that her back was on the ground. Her core was strong and she sat up without moving her legs. She unbuttoned the lower part of her coat, slowly bent her legs, pulled her knees to the chest, buried her head between them, hugged her legs and closed her eyes. The pose minimized her exposure to the cold air and could keep her warmer. Now and then, she heard cries of some unknown animals far away.

“Fear persisted. She could not decide on a plan. She had never faced danger like this before and it was the first time she felt life is so vulnerable. All this happened because she wanted to keep her integrity. Life is precious but there’s always something more valuable. She had no regret except on rejecting Isaac’s advice of going to the valley bottom.

As the night wore on, she felt colder and more nervous. The

world was dark and icy cold. She trembled with fright and was enveloped by weariness.”

Varshi interrupted. “Helen must be hungry and thirsty!”

Jacobs nodded. “Indeed, she decided to at least crawl back to her backpack, getting some food and drink before deciding on what to do next. She crawled with her hands and knees, putting more weight on her right knee. Slowly, she proceeded. Half of an hour had passed and her backpack would soon be within reach. The crawling journey had been smooth; she was celebrating. Suddenly, she felt a sharp pain on her right knee which had pressed upon a small piece of sharp rock. It pierced her jeans and her skin. She turned, sitting on the ground, to remove the rock. She felt wet at the knee and she realized that it was bleeding. She could not do much but continued to crawl forward, now putting more weight on her left knee. Finally, she reached her backpack and retrieved her cell phone, hoping to get some illumination from it but it had been dead. She groped some medicine to treat her injured knee and then some food and water. After a brief meal, she sat against the backpack.”

Varshi said, “With her heavy backpack and injured knee, she certainly could not crawl back to the top.”

Jacobs nodded. “Very true! With great difficulties, she crawled further up, carrying her backpack. She made another sharp turn onto a segment that’s less windy and saw a large rock near the trail. She carefully crawled to the other side of the rock, unloaded her backpack and sheltered under the rock, which blocked the wind. It was at this time she felt hearing someone calling her name. She stuck her head out, stared at the trail and looked around but all she could see was vast darkness submerged in the mist. That must be a hallucination, she thought. She wrapped herself with the sleeping bag and rested behind the rock. She was so tired that she fastly fell asleep. She dreamed of animals and a stranger coming to attack her but she bravely fought them off. In the middle of the night, she vaguely heard some footsteps and woke up. She was naturally frightened as she was injured and was in a fatigued state. Unlike what she dreamed, she was vulnerable to any attack from

an animal or a stranger.

“She slipped her head out of the bag and stared at the trail. She felt seeing a spangle of light against the utter darkness. She raised her eyes and saw a shape hover in the mist, fading away and moving up the mountain quickly.

A ghost? She asked herself. A chill passed through her whole body.

Of course not, it must be a hiker!

Yell for help?

She was hesitating. For safety reasons, she decided to keep quiet, waiting until dawn.

She slipped back into the bag and fell asleep again. She had another dream; she heard Isaac calling her name and she replied. Then Isaac said, ‘You kicked me out of the museum park and you ignored my advice of going to a motel. I’ll not see you anymore!’. As he ran away, Helen screamed, ‘No, no, Isaac, I am sorry! Please don’t go!’. She woke up sweating and could hear the echo of her scream from the mountains. How strange that she had such a dream!

“She curled up in the sleeping bag and laid against the rock, staring at the misty trail that led to darkness. The mountains were as empty as before. She sat there lost in thought and a long-time seemed to have past. Suddenly, she heard a tone that both delighted and shocked her and brought her back to reality. She was not sure whether that was a dream or real. She sat straight in consternation, staring at the misty trail. He heard footsteps and saw a spangle of light, and faintly a shape in the mist quickly approaching. Before she could decide on what to do, she was partially blinded by a flashlight pointing at her face. The shape came nearer and called coaxingly, ‘Helen!’ Her heart shivered with fright and pleasure. Now she was convinced that it was Isaac, the flashlight carrier who suddenly appeared in this empty darkness without any sign of coming.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked.

Helen could fuzzily see him standing in front of her, holding a flashlight. Incredulously, Helen gaped, turning her head to avoid the direct lighting.

Isaac pointed the flashlight sideway.

He asked, 'Why are you here?'

She said, 'By accident. Isaac, why are you here?'

Isaac said, 'I had become anxious about your safety, and after I had finished my job, I hastily ran back to catch up with you. I ran past you and faintly heard your voice, so I came back!'

His words warmed her. She was so grateful for this that she almost cried. She said, 'You are so kind! Your speed of hiking is beyond my comprehension.' She suddenly had an emotion of hugging Isaac to embrace him, but she could not even stand.

Smiling, Isaac said, 'I came with deliberate haste.'

He squatted with one knee pressing against the ground and examined her.

Both of them fell silent for some time when Helen slid out of the sleeping bag and put it back into her backpack after folding it artfully.

Isaac asked again, 'Are you all right?'

Helen wept uncontrollably though she tried hard to control herself. 'I sprained my left ankle and couldn't walk now!' she said.

Isaac picked up her backpack and shoved it on his back. He extended his hand which wore a broken glove, 'May I escort you home?'

Helen stared at him in the dark, not knowing exactly what to do.

Isaac said, 'Your hand could press against my shoulder.'

Helen extended her hand. Isaac pulled her up and handed her the flashlight. Still wearing gloves, she held it with her right hand and put her left hand on his shoulder. She tramped with her right foot a step and Isaac moved along with her. In this way, slowly, they moved up the trail, which was covered by ice. After tramping for some time, they had only covered a very short distance.

Isaac said blushing, 'Helen, would you mind wrapping your arm around my neck? I can then drag you up a lot faster!'

Helen hesitated but complied as he suggested, wrapping her

left arm around his neck and gripping his left shoulder tight. He held her waist like a dancing partner and shouldered half of her weight. Helen walked with one leg a few paces.

Isaac yelled, 'The inner side of the trail has no or little ice and I can easily walk or run on it. You just need to lean most of your weight on my shoulder and ski with your right foot on the ice. I'll drag you all the way up the mountain.'

As soon as he finished talking, he walked swiftly on the roadside, dragging along Helen, who felt like skiing smoothly on ice with one leg. She once again was amazed by his strength and she had never met someone who was as strong. Now she began to understand why she lost to him badly in the match.

Soon they turned onto another trail segment which had no wind but the road was icier as it was at a higher altitude. Despite the colder weather, Helen felt herself growing warmer and less anxious every moment.

Isaac slowed down when Helen commenced a conversation. 'Isaac, I am sorry!'

'For what?'

'For you being caught up in all this. You could have gone to rest!'

'Don't be! I love running!'

'Why did you run backward?'

'Just to train different muscle groups of my body. I had a tiny camera mounted at the back of my head with a band, and the images are rendered on my sunglasses. A friend built this system for me.'

'Interesting! Is your crazy running devoted to penance in the Canyon?' she asked, smiling.

'It is not for penance. It is for earning a living.'

'Where do you work?'

'Self-employed!'

She was much surprised by the answer. 'What do you do?'

'A postman!'

She was further confused. 'A running postman?'

'There used to be only one way to send mail from the Canyon bottom – by mules,' Isaac replied.

'I know.'

'Now there is an alternative way!'

'By email?'

'No, by a human!'

'A herdsman guiding the mules?'

'No, my job is very simple. I contacted some motels here, both at the top and the bottom and cooperate with them. There are always some hikers who want to stay overnight in the bottom but don't want to carry the luggage. They could put all the luggage in my backpack and I transport for them, charging a fee lower than a mule's.'

'That's one of the most difficult ways to make money in the world! There's not much of life for a young man like you!'

'I have made my job enjoyable!'

'You call running in the Canyon carrying a heavy bag hours after hours enjoyable?'

'It is my physical training!'

'Your duty?'

'No, for my destiny!'

'I see. It makes you so strong! You could be the world badminton champion!'

'Not in this life!' He replied with a melancholy tone.

'Are you content with your life?' she asked quietly.

'I have my mission!'

'What mission?'

'I want to be an artist!'

'By running?'

'Any task that is done with all heart and great efforts to bring the movements to dexterity is an artwork! Badminton is an art of honestly expressing yourself!'

'You are enigmatic!'

'Just as your life is admirable!'

'You are so kind. I could help you to change your job!'
Helen said friendly.

'Thanks. I love my job.'

'You could be a great badminton coach! I am sure I can get you a formal coaching job!'

‘That would bore me to death!’

‘You can’t run forever!’

‘I don’t intend to but I would sing my song!’

Helen felt disappointed but the brief conversation elicited her curiosity.

‘Did you ever run into trouble?’ she asked jokingly.

‘I did and I ran away!’

‘When and how? Tell me!’ she spoke with girlish enthusiasm.

Isaac fell silent and did not say anything.

“Helen chatted on other topics and she did most of the talking while Isaac was dragging her. After more than two hours of climbing, they arrived at an arched rock, which was less than a mile from the top. Helen was considerable. She suggested rest and Isaac agreed.

They sat under the rock, facing each other in a misty environment faintly illuminated by the waxing moon as Helen had turned off the flashlight and dropped it into the backpack. Helen offered him some nuts and water.

While eating, Isaac said, ‘I once ran into big trouble and I was lucky to run away that summer.’

Helen was excited and smiled. ‘Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here!’

Isaac stared into the mist as he recalled his past drama. ‘It was a late summer morning. I was in Hong Kong, on my way back to my shelter, after a meeting with the organization which helped me come here. I sensed I was followed by someone, a man and a woman in their twenties, athletic and somewhat taller than the local average. One of them often appeared far in front of me to evade their following behavior. I believed they tried to abduct me. I was pondering upon how I could escape from their surveillance. Then I remembered the coal bearers who carried heavy bags of coal to the mountain in my childhood village. I entered a Seven-Eleven store to buy a few large bottles of water and when I got out, the couple staged a robbery so that the woman could get acquainted with me.’ Isaac paused.

‘A great story! I would report to the police!’ Helen said, showing great interest in his story.

‘Police couldn’t do much, not to mention that I was an illegal resident,’ Isaac said. ‘Her name was Jade and she tried but failed to trick me to get into her car. Instead of heading home, I made her take a subway train with me to Lantau Island, where Big Budha, a huge Budha statue was located on a tall mountain for followers to make pilgrimages and could be reached by trams or special trails.

Getting off the Lantau train station, Jade and I started walking. I kept my eyes on her as we walked. She was a person both pleasant and heavy to chat with. She talked about life and the meaning of life. She loved the lifestyle of Hong Kong people and the colorful city and she was fond of many local movie stars. Her speech was gripping, full of sentiment and strength. But, life had become dark, she said when the strong tried to dominate and yearned for power and control. There was so little that one could do to change her fate and destiny. Despite her wealthy and beautiful appearance, she was pessimistic, feeling that life was helpless.

We passed through long pedestrian bridges and pleasant pavements fully shaded by green trees until we reached the entrance of a remote steep trail in the countryside. The trail blazes through a large forest. Under the excruciating heat, hiking activities were absent and the trail was obliterated. It was an ideal location to abduct a normal person, and I could see some excitement in Jade’s eyes. I was positive that her stalwart partner had great training in martial arts and was following behind.’

‘Did they carry any weapons?’ Helen asked.

‘It’s illegal to carry any weapon in Hong Kong, even if it is for defense like a pepper sprayer. I guess they might secretly possess some tiny secret weapons such as ball pens with sharp points coated with poisonous materials that could paralyze a victim momentarily. Actually, they could easily tame any normal man empty-handed.’

Helen commented, ‘Then you should have gone to places with big crowds.’

Isaac shook his head. 'Any crowd would eventually dissolve when night comes. They have patience and are experts of abduction.'

Helen protested: 'Still it is not wise to lead your pursuers to an environment with no people around when you know that they are going to kidnap you.'

Isaac smiled with some pride. 'Indeed, under such an environment, they could easily accomplish their mission for almost anyone on this planet. But, they made a mistake. I am not a normal person. Back in my days in the national team, I'd routinely knock out 20-km runs hauling loads that weighed as much as the luggage I carried in this Canyon.'

'I told Jade that I was in a rush and had to run by myself. I bade farewell to her. The girl was annoyed, but she tried to hide her emotion.'

'Please wait,' she requested sincerely. 'I am scared to walk alone in this quiet trail!' When I ignored her and started to run, she leaned forward, trying to grasp my arm. But, she could only barely touch my elbow. Missing the grasp, she lost balance, slipped, fell and cried. The fall was so natural that hardly anyone would doubt she fell purposely. She laid on the ground sobbing and stared at me pitifully with some specks of dirt on her face. A strong emotion seized me to pull her up though I was fully aware that she feigned the pitiful look.'

While I was hesitating, I saw her partner running toward us at a distance. Pointing at him, I said, 'he would help you!'. I immediately turned and ran on the trail, which was fully shaded by large trees. I was certain that they would follow me. I sped up the trail which passed through the forest but before long I slowed down to ensure that they were able to keep up with my pace.'

Helen interrupted, 'I thought you wanted to get away from them!'

Smiling, Isaac continued, 'They were duped into thinking they could catch up with me. If they were too far behind, they might call someone for help to get me at the other end. Of course, that would be a big embarrassment to them. The false

hope enticed them to follow me incessantly; no robber would give up in such an ideal abduction environment. On the other hand, I never let them get too close as they might possess tiny lethal weapons.

The obliterated trail got steeper as I ran and in an hour of running, we did not encounter any other hikers. Then we reached the myriad wooden stairs which wind around the woods along a stream. I quickened my pace, climbing with deliberate strides up the stairs, deeper and deeper into the mountain, never far away from the unceasing stream. My rhythmic foot-falls on the wood echoed in the mountain – *bong, bong, bong*, sounded like a monster climbing out from the hell that I tried to run away but never could.

The couple fell behind and followed at a distance. Now it was too late for them to call for help. We were deep in the mountain and I could veer into the forest at any time.'

Helen smiled. 'You are never merciful to girls!'

Issac shrugged his shoulders and continued: 'I would be as my Dad taught me. The climb was punishing and it seemed endless, like the winding stairs described in *The Lord Of The Rings*. The number of steps we had covered was staggering. From time to time, when I slowed down to wait for them and drank a few gulps of water, I could vainly hear them argue crossly. The girl worried about dehydration and suggested returning but the boy insisted they could make it to the mountain plaza where they could get water. The man blamed the girl for her stupid plan of trapping me but the girl scolded him that her plan was spoiled only because he hastily ran toward us when she faked the falling on the ground.

I was surprised by their magnificent endurance, better than what I anticipated earlier. No one in the city could match their strength, I believed. However, I did not give them a chance to get any water.

At the end of the stairs laid a stony trail exposed under the sun, which led to a tram operating room.

As I jumped out from the last step of the stairs, the echo disappeared. I immediately cut into the forest and led my pursuers

to another trail to avoid passing by the operating room, where they could ask for water. I pushed further up the mountain, running over one summit after another to arrive at a long steep slope. As I ran steadily up the steep slope, I suddenly heard a dull splashing sound behind. Turning my head, I found the young man had collapsed on the dirt and the girl was fainting. Running back, I was just in time to catch her from hitting the ground. Squatting down, I laid her head on my knee and fed her a few gulps of water. She barely opened her eyes, her hands trembling. She stretched her hand into her shorts pocket, trying to retrieve an object but was too weak to do so. I helped her and found a cell phone which she handed to me. I used it to call the mountain keepers who would come in a short while to rescue them. When I returned the phone to her, she stared at me, eyes red, a bead of tear flowing down her face. With a very weak voice and a faint smile, she whispered, 'John, I could never thank you enough! I'll forever remember your kindness and the intimation of redeeming grace. I wish you good luck!' I nodded. A peaceful smile appeared on her pale face before she closed her eyes. I laid both of them under a huge tree so that they were fully under the shade. Had I not called the mountain keepers, they might have died there as they were severely dehydrated.'

'You stole her heart!' Helen teased him.

'I wish not! I'd rather she has a heart!' Isaac said, 'Before resuming running I entered the forest to scour all my clothes and my backpack to ensure they had not put any tracking device on me.'

Helen teased him again, 'You don't seem to trust girls!'

Isaac's face turned serious and sighed. He said, 'Before my Mom died, she told me to follow the Party's instructions. She stressed, however, you can trust anything, but never ever trust the Party. They lied so often that they could no longer distinguish between lies and real facts. They thought that by shouting loud, they could change lies to facts.'

There was a moment of silence before Isaac continued: 'Instead of going to any public transportation stops, I meandered

around the temples and climbed to the other side of the mountain. I managed to descend to a fjord, where I befriended a fisherman, working for him for a couple of hours. He then ferried me to a distant jetty where I could walk back to the city. It was late at night when I arrived at the haven my helpers provided and I escaped clean from the tracing of an unknown organization.'

"Helen was amazed by his adventure and said with an eye-full of admiration, 'Impressive kindness and valor. Why did the couple follow you?' 'No idea! I have been a fugitive, one wanted by the Awesome Nation police.' Helen was chilled when hearing about his status but she was convinced that he was not a bad person.

In a relaxing mood, she said, 'You've been so kind to tell me your adventures. In return, let me sing you a song adapted from a couple of pops.'

In the darkness, she sang a song, her voice sweet:

*Won't somebody tell me,
Where the creepers destine,
Never alone,
Soft and tender,
Winding the great banyan,*

.....

When she finished singing, Isaac said, 'The song is soothing. I wish I could hear such songs often as they could calm one. I am an angry person, sometimes violent, often feeling anger boiling within myself that I could not bear it anymore.'

'What would you do then?' Helen asked softly.

'I'll put on a white-hair wig and a beard and makeup as an old man.'

'You like playing drama?'

'No, looking for a fight!'

'Doing boxing in the gym?'

'No, real fights in the street! I am not any kind gentleman!'

Helen was scared upon hearing what he said.

'Fight with the homeless?'

‘No, never do I fight with any homeless. Even in a couple of cases when I was bullied, I let them have their way to avoid any confrontation. Once, a man exploited my infatuation to do labor work for him but I did not hate him. Rather, I was thankful to him as unexpectedly I also learned a lot from him. They are miserable people!’

‘Peace can always be achieved with an open mind, and when you have learned and understood the art of forgiveness, your anger will dissolve and peace in your mind will flourish,’ Helen said with a tender encouraging voice.

Isaac laughed, a laugh filled with bitterness. ‘I don’t have peace in my mind even when I am in pious solitude. I only feel sorrow and anger. I grieve for myself, for the lost peace of my days.’

‘Let’s climb again!’ Helen said, feeling a little uncomfortable.”

Varshi interrupted, “I could imagine that Helen’s parents must be very concerned when they learned that Isaac is a fugitive and behaves so weirdly!”

“Indeed, they are very concerned. They also blame Isaac for causing Helen almost suffering a disaster. Isaac seems to have a twisted personality,” Jacobs said, sighing. “Before they resumed their climb, Helen took off her glove and groped the flashlight from the bag. When she turned on the flashlight, a strange surprise expression appeared on her face. She moved her fingers slowly across the handle of the flashlight and spelled a word: ‘H-E-L-E-N’. She exclaimed, ‘That’s my flashlight!’ She stared at Isaac.

Isaac nodded. ‘That’s what I speculated!’

She was much surprised. She asked, ‘How could this happen? Did you stop my sliding?’

Isaac nodded. ‘In chasing you, when I got to the ledge, I faintly heard you scream. Immediately, I made a sharp turn onto the icy segment shone by my flashlight, and sped up by running on the trail shoulders, which did not have any ice. I was just in time to catch you!’

Helen was still puzzled as to what had happened. ‘I felt

hitting two springs and falling onto a carpet.'

'I saw you sliding down with tremendous speed. When you came close, I sat on the ground and straightened my legs. When your shoulders touched my feet, I exquisitely folded my legs to absorb your momentum. Almost instantly I split them sideways and slightly jerked your shoulders upward with my hands so that you fell into my arms and we slid down together. The great downward momentum trembled me. Fortunately, I wore strong gloves. I laid your head on my bosom to free my hands and I clawed the soil at the sides with great strength to stop our sliding.'

Helen stared at him. 'When I stopped sliding, I found myself lying on the ground and saw no one.'

Isaac looked a little embarrassed. 'I accidentally dropped my flashlight when I jerked you upward. Near the end of our sliding, you might have lost consciousness momentarily and I slid out under your back skillfully. I saw the flashlight rolling down rapidly, so I immediately ran back, trying to catch it but I was just a little bit late. It fell off the trail, down the mountain that there was no way I could retrieve it. Disappointed, I was about to come back to see you. Then I saw a spangle of light near the end of the icy trail. I ran up there and saw a flashlight that fell off the mountain but got caught by a tree branch. I guessed it might be yours so I climbed down the mountain to get it but the area was steep and dark. When I got to the tree branch, the light within my reach, I extended my hand to grab it, but the branch was shaken and the light fell further down, getting caught by another tree. I, therefore, had to climb further down. It took me tremendous effort and a much longer time to get it. When I climbed back up to the trail, with the illumination of the flashlight, I immediately ran down to look for you only to find that you had vanished. So I walked up the trail again and searched for you with the light in the mist.'

'Inconceivable!' Helen said."

Varshi asked, "Did she get back to her hotel safely?"

Nodding, Jacobs said, "When they finally got to the top where Helen parked her car, she made one more request: 'My

hotel is 2 miles from here. Could you drive me back as it might be unsafe for me to drive with a sprained ankle.'

Isaac hesitated a little. 'Sure, I am most happy to oblige!' he said, grinning impishly.

He helped Helen get into the car and he took the driver seat.

Starting the engine, he said, 'I am not only a fugitive but also an illegal driver!'

Helen suddenly felt uneasy. 'You know how to drive, don't you?'

'I think so! You see, I have started the engine!'

'How many times have you driven?'

'Including this time?'

'Yes!'

'One.'

'OMG! Good luck .. to both of us!'

'Don't worry! I watched many times how people drive!'

'I am so lucky today. Drive slowly, please!'

Amazingly, Isaac drove safely to the hotel without any trouble. Helen felt relaxed and much less painful of her sprained ankle.

Leaving the heavy backpack in her car, she walked to the hotel lobby with a little help from Isaac, her left hand pressing against his right shoulder. At the entrance, she grabbed a hiking stick provided by the hotel and told Isaac to wait for her in the lobby. When she was entering the elevator, she stole an eye on Isaac who stood behind a couch, his eyes staring vaguely at the reception counter. His face bore a melancholy emotion but also an expression of courage and energy, which was as formidable as his physical strength.

"She tramped to her room with the stick and took a quick shower and changed to clean clothes. She seized from her drawer a tiny box. She opened it and saw a shiny crystal ball about the size of a baseball with fine scriptures on it. It was a valuable piece of artwork from Martin as a birthday gift. Now, in a hurry, she wanted to give this to Isaac just to thank him for saving her. When she came back down to the lobby, wearing nice clean clothes, Isaac was nowhere to be seen. The man on

duty at the counter waved to her and gave her a sealed envelope left by Isaac.

When she tore off the envelope, a small object dropped off to the ground and she found a short note:

To Helen:

Important task tomorrow.

Must rush back down now.

Sorry for causing all the trouble.

Attached is a USB drive containing some valuable data.

I would appreciate it very much if you could keep this copy for me.

Friendly,

Isaac

She was totally bewildered. She picked up the drive and rushed to the outside, almost forgetting her pain in the ankle, but Isaac had vanished.

She was anxious about his safety. This would be his fourth trip hiking a Canyon trail in full on the day. It was so late and dark and he had lost his flashlight. A sad emotion flooded her.

I am indebted to him again! She said to herself.”

Varshi said, “Isaac must have some urgent things to handle!”

Jacobs said, “I don’t know. That’s almost the end of the journal we have obtained so far. In the remaining part of the journal, she mostly described her research project. She did mention she did not see Isaac again in the rest of her Canyon trip though she went down to the trail a few more times.

“I am sure Helen has written more. Her Mom is extremely careful when searching and copying her files as she needs to be a hundred percent certain that Helen won’t be aware of it.

Helen did, however, chat with her parents now and then. She mentioned to them about Isaac, claiming that he was kind

and nice, but she did not tell them the details, in particular the homelessness of Isaac.”

Varshi said, “So, we need to wait! Did she talk more about the USB drive?”

Jacobs shook his head. “No, but her Mom found the drive in Helen’s drawer. She made a copy of the file and sent it to us. The data are encrypted and it took us moderate effort and time to crack its passcode.”

Jacobs took out a USB drive from his pocket and handed it to Varshi. “This is another extra copy we made and you can have it. It consists of a video. Please read it. The passcode, different from the original one, is the first 20 digits of pi to the power 1000.

“I’ll contact you again when I obtain more information. If you learn anything new, please inform me promptly but don’t tell the details until I meet you. We have been working hard to piece the mysteries together.”

After Jacobs had left, Varshi wanted to read the file but she had to first develop a program to calculate the passcode, which was not easy though manageable. She was fidgetting on her chair for a while before lying back and falling into deep thinking.

Isaac was more than a mystery, she thought. He certainly could make a good living by coaching badminton or table tennis. But, instead, he chose such a harsh life, carrying luggage for hikers in the Canyons. It was all mysterious and magnificent and also a little ridiculous, or he was hiding something from the world. Was he a terrorist or a kind brave young man? She believed and hoped he’s the later. As she was pondering upon Isaac, she suddenly saw a shadow appearing on a chair opposite to her. Startled out of her thought, she found Edward sitting there and smiling at her.

“I am on the way to a party and dropped by to see you! Are you bothered by something?” Edward said.

Varshi smiled warmly and told the story of Isaac.

Edward frowned. “Why didn’t Jacobs simply send the information via emails. Isn’t it time-consuming to come here

personally to tell you the story?”

“I believe he wants to keep his contact with me secret so that if there’s any spy in his organization, he won’t lose everything.

Actually, Helen’s story about Isaac is not a single piece of article. She writes many other things in her journal. The story is embedded in many of the events she describes, so Jacobs has to reconstruct the story from the pieces.

Also, I think he is investigating us, making intuitive evaluations on me,” Varshi answered thoughtfully. “Moreover, at this moment, he does not totally trust me and he does not want to leave many stolen files to me in writing or in a computer. He can always say what he wants to say and if something goes wrong and is necessary, he can deny it. I am not even sure if everything he says is real or he has made up parts of the story. But, at least so far the story is consistent with what Diego has been telling me.”

Chapter 4

Dark Power

The task of unfolding the mysteries for Jacobs was a case very difficult to work out and the process was sometimes disturbing. Varshi had pored over the data, but she could not find any direction. She decided to put it aside for some time while she let her computing system to search for more information about Isaac. For a week or so, she rarely went to the office but instead working at home. She concentrated on developing a machine-learning application for a client, who wanted to classify and recognize patterns from his huge image database of sports games. There were open-source codes and libraries for creating the application but Varshi had developed her own libraries over many years as a way to learn the topic. Consequently, she was a well-respected developer in the field.

Over time, her computing system found more videos about Isaac, most of which were about playing table tennis games. She felt sorry that Isaac didn't become a sports coach and she was puzzled by Isaac's choice of making a living by doing such demanding and harsh work. One morning, she got up early and went to her home office. She saw a link displayed, saying "Empty Hands versus Heavy Rod and Stick". She knew that it's a link related to Isaac found by her mobile agents.

She clicked on the link which played a video showing a

large park. There was a small crowd holding banners and chanting slogans. They were protesting something and all dressed in black. The video showed that more and more protesters were arriving. A dozen feet opposite was a bigger crowd, all dressed in white, some holding heavy rods and sticks. They looked angry and shouted at the protesters. When they waved their rods and sticks, the chanting of the protesters changed to angry shouting. Either because it was too noisy or because they spoke another language, Varshi could not understand the slogans and the shouting words.

As the anti-protesters moved closer to the protesters, an old man with full white hair and white beard stepped forward from the protesters' crowd. He wore a pair of sunglasses, his white hair partially veiled his face, and his back slightly bent. He chanted some slogans and the anti-protesters were irritated, shouting louder with fiery anger. As he continued to chant, two white-shirt men charged forward, attacking the old man with a heavy rod and a heavy stick from the left and the right. They coordinated well; the left man struck first with the rod followed by the right man's stick strike so that if the victim jumped to the right, he would be hit by the stick. But the old man swiftly jumped backward to escape both the strokes. The pattern repeated three times and the old man became very angry; hatred and anger flared in his eyes. Suddenly, a stone was shot out from the anti-protesting crowd, directing at the old man. The old man promptly ducked and the stone flew well above his head. The main purpose of the stone was to distract his attention as simultaneously, the left attacker raised his rod and struck down. The whole protesting crowd yelled with a frightening voice. Unexpectedly, the old man darted forward with lightning speed and punched the attacker's face before the rod came close. The man fell and bled on the ground. Almost instantly, the stick from the right was arriving; the old man raised his right forearm to block it and it moved back at almost the same speed as the stick to absorb much of its power. Instantly, he made a lightning-fast side-kick at the attacker's stomach that propelled him to fly back a few feet, knocking

down several anti-protesters. The crowd was scared and fell silent for a moment, then they shouted again at the old man who stood still, looked calm as if he had extinguished his fire of anger and discharged his hatred into the abyss of annihilation, content to die if he could annihilate his hated foes before him. No one dared to approach him. An applause broke out in the protesters. He then walked slowly sideways. As more protesters were arriving, the anti-protesters were outnumbered. They shouted some words and fled. In the chaos, the old man also disappeared.

Varshi was scared by the scene of the video but she stopped the video at various places to examine the old man more seriously. She was convinced that the old man was actually Isaac though he tried to deceive others with heavy make-up.

“Isaac is very dangerous. No wonder Jacobs’s client calls him a terrorist!” she thought.

As she was pondering upon Isaac’s behavior, her computer screen popped up a 20-digit number. She knew that her program had calculated the first 20 digits of pi to the power 1000 that she would use to decrypt the video left by Jacobs a week ago.

As she had so many unanswered questions about Isaac, she rushed to play the video.

The video first showed the outside of a building which looked like a hospital. The scenes displayed were unstable, unpleasant to watch. Evidently, Varshi thought, someone was carrying a mini video camera to capture the scene; the carrier tried not to elicit the attention of people around it. In a short while, it showed the interior of the hospital — the registration lobby and a hallway to various patient rooms. The people there spoke a language that Varshi could not understand, but there were subtitles on the video. Soon, the video showed the entrance to a room and then its interior, where a patient was lying on a bed unconsciously. The rendered scenes suddenly became stable and Varshi heard a slight door cracking sound in the video. The carrier might have fixated the camera at a hidden location and left from a door not shown in the camera’s field of view. Watch-

ing the scene more carefully, Varshi concluded that it was an operating room in the hospital but she was confused. The patient was tightly strapped to the bed with belts circumventing his body, legs and arms and a cloth was tied across his mouth. The patient slowly woke up and clumsily bent his forearms to rip the belts. He struggled, kicking, flailing and grunting but could not free himself from the confinement.

Before long, there was a loud door cracking sound. A man and a woman, both clad in white had entered the room. Varshi assumed that the man, around 40 was a doctor and the woman, around 20 was a nurse. The doctor walked in first and the nurse followed behind, pushing a cart containing some medical equipment. The doctor was overweight, having a wide face and a semi-bald forehead. The nurse had large brown eyes and her graceful looking face was framed with short smooth black hair. However, she looked nervous while pushing the cart.

When the patient saw the doctor, he trembled with fright and shook his head incessantly, his eyes filled with terror.

The nurse's hands were slightly shaking but the doctor was impassive. At one point, when the doctor was not facing her, she rolled her eyes with a frosty nose, looking at his back with disdain.

The doctor turned his head. "Girl, be calm. You will get used to it!" he said, his voice sounded rough and crack, unusual for a typical medical doctor. He stepped forward and removed the clog from the patient's mouth. The patient screamed in agony.

The doctor said sternly, "Stop! You earned this operation! Be cooperative, otherwise, your family members will be in trouble!" He made an indecent gesture, raising his fist.

The patient began to cry, begging, "Merciful doctor, my family is in trouble already. I did not do anything wrong! Please spare me!"

"This is a consequence of joining an evil religious cult!" the doctor answered coldly.

"They are not evil. All they advocate are to be kind, be patient, and speaking the the truth," the patient said somberly.

“If the Party says that they are evil, they are evil!” the doctor laughed coldly.

“Even if they were evil, I have not committed any other crime. I should not be punished by this cruel treatment. Please don’t kill me. I have an aging Mom, a young wife and a 3-year old daughter. They all need my support for living. A heart, good heart! Please spare me, merciful doctor!”

Varshi watched the video with increasing astonishment and felt more and more uncomfortable. She had never watched anything so weird and disturbing. She paused the video and paced the room a few rounds before resumed playing it.

Now, the doctor said scornfully, “One’s death could weigh as little as a feather, or as much as Mount Tai. You are fortunate that your death will weigh more than Mount Tai. Two of our elite leaders got tumors, one in his kidney and the other in the liver. Without a replacement, they will die very soon! We have made scans of many prisoners and you have the best kidney and liver, healthy and clean, not having a trace of contamination. Your organs will save at least the lives of two great leaders. You won’t die in vain.”

The patient cried, “No, it’s my life and my organs. They have used up theirs and will die a natural death. That is nature. They should not take mine!”

The doctor sneered, “Your life is just like a firefly under the sun as compared to theirs. If it were not our great leaders, our nation would have been in chaos or conquered by foreigners and you would not even exist. Only because of their leadership could you live to this age. You should be satisfied for the happy life they gave you!”

The patient was pale and trembling. He screamed. “What a nonsense you are reciting! I rather be governed by foreigners than live a short life, leaving my miserable Mom, wife, and kid behind.”

The doctor replied with a cruel voice, “You forgot the Party’s teaching that we should always be ready to sacrifice for our party and our nation. You are the kind of people who don’t let others extract a thread of hair even if it could benefit the whole

world!”

“It’s my hair and my organ! They don’t have any right to take it,” he said, quietly, angrily.

The patient cried, closing his eyes, pitiable and dreadful. His crying faded and the room fell silent. The nurse looked astonished and frightened, staring vaguely at the equipment in the cart. Now the patient opened his eyes and fixed his gaze upon the doctor’s face, a piercing, unbearably firm and composed gaze. His mouth twisted into a laugh, then an outburst. “Doctor, you guys don’t argue with facts but simply coerce and bully! You not only lie and cheat to others but also to yourself. There is in every man both good and evil. You chose evil and nourish evil. You worship devils and lost the sense of righteousness and justice.”

The doctor yelled in anger, “Shut up!”

The patient stared steadfastly at the doctor. “In God, I condemn your atrocious behavior and your evil belief,” he said. “You are cursed and your evil deed will come back to haunt you, your children, your children’s children. I would become a ghost, and never would the specter cease taking revenge on you, on this bunch of SOBs ...”

Irritation flared. Ignoring the patient, the doctor turned to speak to the nurse sharply, his voice cold and hard, “Give him a shot now!” As he spoke, he pushed down the forearm of the patient. The nurse hesitated. He stared at her with an icy gaze, his eyes commanding her to follow his order.

He said icily, “Don’t be stupid! There are two roads you can choose, one leading to darkness, the other to brightness. Following the Party’s teaching is the only way to avoid falling into darkness. You have to choose!”

The doctor made it clear that she could not refuse. The nurse picked up a medical injection gun from the cart, her hand shaking and gave a shot to the patient’s upper arm. His feverish screams continued for a few more moments but soon he fell unconscious.

What followed made Varshi sick. The doctor cut the body and harvested organs from it. Varshi closed the video with

fright and fell back on her chair with shock, her face turning pale.

When she recovered from the shock, she thought over the whole chain of events.

It took great courage and risks to shoot the video and to smuggle it out of the nation, she thought. It might involve a secret organization and many people to make this successful. Their purpose was obvious — to expose the brutal organs harvest activities so that they could be stopped.

Then why didn't they make the videos public, publishing the video on the Internet? She asked herself. It would immediately draw attention of the public and put pressure on the government to stop the activities.

After some thinking she came up with some explanations.

Making it public could risk exposing the identities of the people involved in the task in the nation. If they get arrested, they would be tortured or even executed. The organization must make sure their members were in a safe state before publishing the video. During this period, it was wise for them to make copies of the video and distribute them to many locations that were difficult to trace so that even if their chain of operation was broken by the spies of the nation, they still could retain some copies. Isaac might be a member of the organization and helped distribute the copies. On the other hand, the security department of the nation might obtain some hints that the secret brutal organ harvest activities might have been compromised. They sent Miles to investigate the issue.

Varshi thought about her surmises back and forth and felt disturbing. She sensed that she might be accidentally sucked into a storm and great perils lie before her. Might be it's a huge storm that no one could duck. She had her role and mission in the storm and the mission was assigned to her by God, she thought. She had nightmares that night.

Next morning, she was in a heavy mood, so she decided to take a day off, visiting museums and parks in town, her favorite activities.

Chapter 5

What is Art?

Varshi joined a crowd standing at the entrance of a flat wide building behind a green garden. A girl with blonde and large blue eyes stood in front of the crowd.

“Welcome to San Diego Fine Art Museum! My name is Lana and I specialize in renaissance artworks. I will be your tour guide!” she said.

Some in the crowd yelled and clapped their hands.

Lana smiled warmly. “Before we start, let me ask you a simple question: what is art?”

Immediately, some hands shot up.

“Art is a piece of work that soothes one’s soul!” a small girl in the front first answered, a little nervous.

Lana nodded and smiled, thumbs up. “Cool!”

“Art is sentiments of life!” a boy in the second row cried.

“Art is a mean to express unspeakable joy and unbearable pain!” another boy at the back yelled.

“Art is an alternative world we create, expressing our imaginations, emotions and ideals!” a middle-aged woman in the center of the group answered thoughtfully.

“Art is a subtle form of communication!” a young man, looked like an athlete at the back yelled.

Lana always smiled and nodded whenever a visitor gave an

answer.

As the group continued to offer different views, a series of thoughts suddenly flooded Varshi. Art is the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, she began to give an answer herself. In all souls dwells a yearning for freedom and fairness and art could express this yearning, guarding us and helping us to live. It will last forever just as the yearning is eternal. It exists in many forms, beyond the familiar paintings and sculptures. That's what Isaac is pursuing, freedom and fairness and why he wanted to be an artist, she reasoned. That's something that is supposed to possess at birth but it seems remote and unreal for him. Instigated by the guide's question, she suddenly could feel his yearning, urges and anger.

The thoughts about Isaac came incessantly, like a wave upon wave, one eliciting another. It seemed they all related to the simple question raised by Lana. The thoughts coupled and divided and then coalesced in swarms, only that she could not comprehend them. Why were they related? She was puzzled by herself.

She was vainly aware that the crowd was moving and she followed them. She saw a lot of paintings and heard Lana explaining, yet she saw nothing and heard nothing. She thought many times of Isaac's ping pong games, his fluid movement, stylist motion, and astonishing speed and strength. It was delightful and entertaining to watch his games, each of which was played like a piece of singular artwork, bringing the audience to a state that dwells magic sentiments with beautiful and emotional power garnering acclaim and praise. Isn't that another form of art? She felt strange about this peculiar emotion.

After walking through a long hallway, they arrived at a spacious room with large drawings hanging on the walls. Varshi's waves of thoughts began to recede, and she was more aware of the environment.

Lana pointed at a painting, which Varshi recognized it as the *The Last Super* by Leonardo Da Vinci, commissioned for the refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan. It was Da Vinci's most famous painting, describing the last

meal shared by Jesus with his disciples before his capture and death. Varshi was allured by the fine features of the drawing, which shows vividly the rich emotions and consternation of the disciples at the moment when Jesus had just announced “one of you will betray me”. Varshi felt impelled to gaze at it in a state of bliss. She could see so great was its beauty that Jesus’s enchanting countenance was radiating from his face and figure and the reactions of the disciples were benevolent or mocking, and comforting as well as condemning. Lana said, “... This painting conveys an abundant of messages. The light, the shades, the shadows all have special meanings and there is a controversial message hidden in it. Some argued that the space at the right of Jesus was supposed to seat his wife but was left empty in the drawing...” A clamor broke out in the crowd followed by whispers of discussions. Varshi felt a shock in her mind. She again was submerged in her flood of thoughts and now she saw some light. Not knowing how long had past, she followed the crowd back to the main entrance and Lana announced the end of the tour. Varshi smiled — she might have solved Isaac’s riddle.

She went home and fed all the videos of table tennis games she had gathered over years into her neural network.

Another week went by. One evening, when she felt exhausted from her work, she heard the faint sound of a guitar song, which sounded peaceful and tranquil. She knew Diego was back.

She stepped out to the garden. The air was fresh and sweet. She could smell the trees, the flowers and the smooth green grass of the lawn. Diego was playing guitar, sitting on a grounded stone placed beside a wooden table. Waving to Varshi, he stopped playing.

Varshi came over and sat on another piece of stone across the table. They greeted each other and had a long friendly chat. At the end, Varshi asked about Isaac.

Diego said, “Yes, I have been managing a small property for Isaac. He does not have any contact address and he rarely comes to see me. He likes to talk about his odd jobs but I could

sense there's something he tries to hide.”

He then talked about Isaac's jobs in the zoos that Varshi had mostly learned about from Jacobs. She was excited. “What happened on the day Isaac resigned?” she asked.

Diego smiled and took a deep breath. He loved telling stories of Isaac. “It was a cloudy day. At sunset, the clouds gathered and it began to rain. A chill wind was blowing in random directions. After a while, sleet began to softly fall from the darkened sky and many areas were covered with a thin layer of ice.

Isaac was shouldering a log to the other side of the park, where a tiny Asian garden was being renovated. As usual, he walked up a small hill, passing by a large animal residence which was below the ground level, wide and deep, with an artificial cave at one end and some miniature terrace at the center, a garden pleasant to watch.

“He never knew what animals were kept in there as they seemed to live obscurely, always sleeping inside the cave. He thought they might be some nocturnal animals.

In that evening, as he passed the garden, he suddenly heard a cry. A small boy had climbed over the fence and lost grip, falling along the steep wall onto the ground. The boy was profoundly scared and forgot the pain of any injury, crying miserably. An impulse of retrieving the boy from the den seized him. So he released the log with impetuous haste and climbed over the fence, hanging himself on the edge of the wall. He dropped himself into the garden and rolled forward a couple of rounds to absorb the shock. He did not know then he was in grievous danger.

Isaac picked up the boy, moved back a few paces and ran toward the wall with great speed. He was able to run a few steps up the wall and at the acme of his climb, he flung the boy over the fence, who fell onto the soft grassland outside. In throwing the boy, Isaac was propelled downward and fell back onto the den. As he moved back and prepared for another run, he heard a loud roar, a devastating sound that trembled him. A tiger, very big, its claws like spears, was walking out of its lair

and a smaller one following it. As it roared again, it exposed its scary white teeth, which looked like sharp knives. He regretted getting into the den in a rush, without finding out what animals were there.

“The tiger advanced cautiously, walking slowly toward him. As it stared at him, its eyes showed excitement with vicious light. Whenever its vicious eyes blinked, his heartbeat accelerated and a strong desire seized hold of him to turn and run. But, that would mean instant death. He was sweating heavily and could hear his heart palpitating. He squatted still like a statue, watching its movements with great concentration. He had to endure the frightful situation with fortitude and patience.

Scared he was, he analyzed the possible movements of the tiger and his own responses.

“The tiger paused a few paces in front of a boulder standing between them and stayed motionless. It was poised to pounce.

His Uncle Sean had told him many stories about tigers and the wild which has impeccable patience — tireless, implacable, persistent as life itself — that holds motionless for endless hours the predator stalking its prey. This patience is life when it hunts for its living food. Tigers have difficulties seeing stationary objects and they have binocular visions, meaning that to see objects at the side, they must turn their heads.

“As the beast and the man faced off, sleet was falling more heavily, the sun darkened, and the world dim and mute. Isaac slowly bent and picked up a large egg-shaped stone, smooth and shiny, weighing about 20 pounds. He touched it gently and felt its smoothness and beauty as if it had a soul. He asked it for help and felt the echos of its soul before grabbing it with both hands and bending his legs like compressed springs.

Instigated by Isaac’s motion, the tiger crouched, in a pose ready to pounce.

Lightning struck in the sky, which incited the tiger dashing forward. Its roar merging with the thunderbolt in the sky shook the whole zoo. In a fraction of a second, it leaped onto the boulder. From there it made another great leap, flying toward Isaac with marvelous strength and shocking agility. Fast enough,

Isaac jumped aside, high into the air, raising the stone with his hands like a basketball player jumping to the hoop. The tiger missed its target. While he was still in the air Isaac threw the stone with all his strength, pitching it at the tiger's head.

"Before the tiger firmly landed, the stone sped straight from Isaac's hand, straight onto its forehead above its eyes, striking the tiger squarely and generating a dull sound. The tiger did not collapse immediately but its head was quivering. Isaac fully realized that the power stroke could only make the tiger faint for a few seconds and it would then resume its attack. He raced to pick another stone, one that he could wield. But, he had no time to select. He grabbed a smaller one and was to throw it again. Then he saw a large long icicle hanging off the boulder near him; the upper part of it had a concave shape, forming a natural handle. A thought flashed in his mind.

Dropping the stone, he snatched the icicle and knocked off its tip. A sharp shiny edge was exposed at the end. Meanwhile, the tiger was turning and bending its legs, crouching into a hunting position. It had recovered inconceivably rapid.

"It was life or death for Isaac, and his opportunity would vanish in a fraction of a second. He must move first. Hurling aside, he made a strong side jump onto the tiger's back. As he rode on the tiger, before his legs could clamp its body firmly, the tiger roared and jumped with fury and anger. Isaac almost fell off from its back only that his left hand was gripping its neck tight. But, its third jump, which was more powerful than any shock he had ever experienced, threw his body into the air. He was almost in a vertical upside-down posture, his hand still gripping its neck. As they were falling down, still in the air, he thrust the icicle into a side of its neck, which penetrated deep into its nerves. When the tiger clashed onto the ground, the icicle was broken by the violent motion, and Isaac lost the grip of its neck, falling off from its back. He immediately rolled away, his right hand still gripping tight the remaining half of the icicle. The tiger stood up and let out another thunderous roar, its blood streaming into the air. But, it had been paralyzed. It continued to bleed heavily for a few moments, its great body

wobbling and finally collapsed onto the ground.

“Isaac hesitated. Before long he dropped the icicle and sprayed some black healing powder on its wound, which would mitigate its pain and bleeding. The tiger let out some low-tone yelps to thank him. The other tiger, which now appeared to Isaac much smaller was petrified and dared not to confront him, stopping at a distance watching.

Wasting no time, Isaac dashed to the wall, walking a few steps on it just high enough to grip the edge of the wall. With a strong pull and a kick, he slung his body horizontally on the ground, still inside the fence. Standing up, with a hand pressing against a pole, he easily jumped over the fence and escaped from the den. When he looked back, he saw the small tiger licking the neck of the injured tiger.”

Varshi asked, “Amazing! Why did he resign from working in the zoo suddenly?”

“He didn’t say and didn’t tell the adventures after his escape! He only mentioned that he would go to Grand Canyon!” Diego said.

Varshi was deeply absorbed in Isaac’s story. “He seems to be a natural fighter! How could he be so good at fighting!”

“He is a fighter. When he feels his anger boils over, he looks for fights, real physical fights!”

Varshi frowned, staring at Diego, who continued: “He picks his fight! According to him, there’s a big nation which governs using thuggish and bullying policies. They lie, cheat, frame dissidents and distort all real facts. Not only do they suppress their people, but they also extend their long arm overseas. They use their huge trade surplus to bribe and manipulate the news media. Whenever there’s a protest against their authoritative policies here, they send or pay a group of people to counter-protest, shouting insulting and salvage slogans. Worse, they often attack with rods and sticks the protesters who have arrived early before the big crowd comes. When his anger boils, he will participate in such a protest and arrive early on purpose. He’ll provoke them by shouting loud slogans about freedom and humanity for the ethnic groups and the downfall of

their lifetime dictator leader, while his protesting fellows take videos as the conflict unfolds. Some of the thugs will shout louder, eyes blazing. In the delirium of action, they charge forward and raise their sticks to beat him, hurling forth their great anger at him. Issac has a rule. For an attacker, he gives him three chances. He just steps aside swiftly to escape the first three strokes. If the attacker stops then, nothing would happen. If he continues, Isaac's anger will flare in his heart like a fiery pang, which creates a shocking force that propels him to strike. His anger is discharged as he launches two quick punches which make the thug bleed and fall."

"His adventures are fascinating! Hope we could hear more from him soon. Invite him to our house to have a cup of coffee next time you see him!" Varshi said.

Diego nodded. "Thanks, Madam. I will!"

Chapter 6

Tatesl

Four more months passed and Jacobs did not come. Each month Varshi found more videos of table tennis games played by Isaac and she made progress on decoding them. She and Jacobs had agreed not to discuss any details of the project via any communication channels besides personal meetings. Sometimes, they sent emails, which are mostly greeting messages.

One morning, Varshi made some breakthroughs in reading Isaac's game and she was longing to tell her discoveries. She finished writing a report she started a couple of months ago, filling in the gaps she didn't understand before. It was at this time that Jacobs showed up in her office. Varshi welcomed him with surprise and delight. Jacobs looked solemn and in a heavy mood, contrasting to what she felt in previous meetings.

"All well?" Varshi asked with a warm smile. "You looked a little heavy!"

"So do you," Jacobs replied, picking up the coffee Varshi had prepared for him.

He sat opposite to Varshi and said, "Thanks to the clues of Helen's journal, we learned more about Isaac. Since I talked to you last time, I sent a capable specialist, Dryden, to Grand Canyon. He is a great manhunt. He used two eagles with micro video cameras tied to their legs to track Isaac. The expenses are

funded by Miles but we haven't mentioned anything about our Canyon activities to him."

Varshi asked, "Why?"

Jacobs paused and frowned. He did not answer her question. Some thought obviously annoyed him. He stood up and paced her office with the coffee when he continued: "Armed with advanced tracking equipment, Dryden stayed in a motel in the valley bottom for a month. By the time he arrived at the Canyon, Helen had left and two days later Isaac also disappeared. But in the two days, he discovered something that surprised everyone. After Isaac has delivered a luggage in an evening, he does not sleep in any motel."

Varshi smiled. "He loves homeless life!"

Jacobs shook his head. "He goes to an Indian reservation area where the Indian tribe Chinula resides. The village is in a miniature valley hidden in a thickly wooded forest at the Canyon bottom. Without a tour guide, no one would discover the village."

Varshi interrupted, "If Isaac had disappeared in two days, why did your man stay on the valley bottom for a month?"

"To study the Canyons," Jacobs said jokingly. "Actually, we need to gather any information that might be relevant. The Chinula Indians have lived in the Canyon for thousands of years. They were mighty hunters and superior fighters, once a very powerful tribe that dominated the whole Grand Canyon. Their downfall started a few hundred years ago when it was ruled by a super-aggressive brutal leader. Since then it had become weak and reduced to an irrelevant tribe, retreating to this valley. Since the 1990s, for some unknown reasons, many of their young people began to migrate out of the Canyon and found jobs in casinos in some other Indian reservation areas. It is interesting that many of the people remain in the village are multi-lingual!

"The remaining tribesmen's main financial income is tourism. They do not do any formal advertisement and their business is through word of mouth. Very few people know about this Indian tribe and you cannot find any information of it on the

Internet.

They have some simple huts built for hosting tourists, charging a pretty low fee per night. They provide little service and all guests have to sleep on the floor or in their own sleeping bag if they have brought one. However, in the evenings they may have some Indian performance — singing, dancing or telling stories. In particular a girl named Kachina often sings a song then tells the history of her tribe, from its rise to its fall. Visitors are very fond of her singing and stories.

Kachina looks like a seventeen year old, but it's rumoured that she is close to 30. There's a lot of gossip about her. Some said she obtained from the Far East a book titled 'Book of Women Youth', written by a secret sect in the region. The book claims that to retain youth, a girl must practice Seven Littles: little meals, little worrying, little yearning, little greed, little emotion, little thinking, and little sex. She started practicing the principles since she was a teenager and does not age in ten years."

Varshi asked, "Do you have any photo of her?"

Jacobs shook his head. "No one is allowed to take any videos or photos there. But based on the descriptions of Dryden, we created an image of her."

As he spoke, Jacobs took out a cell phone from his pocket and operated on it using one hand. He passed it to Varshi. She saw on the screen an image of a young girl dressed in Indian customs. She stared at it for some time and felt that the girl looked familiar but she was sure she had never met her anywhere before.

"You have seen the video that Isaac left for Helen, right?" Jacobs asked.

Varshi said, "It is very disturbing!"

"Something dark and vicious is at work, it seemed," Jacobs muttered, then he asked, "Do you find out something interesting?"

Varshi nodded. "Isacc said he wants to become an artist. Now I know what he means. He indeed treats his game as an art."

Jacobs looked at Varshi with a face of confusion and surprise.

“With the help from my machine learning programs, I sort out from the chaos important patterns. A majority of his table tennis games found on the Internet are like those played by other good players, mainly for fun. However, some, which look the same as a normal game have special meanings. The strokes convey specific meanings as a sign language does. Those games are encoded in a special language, referred to as Tatesl, short for Table Tennis Sign Language.”

Jacobs listened with great attention. “Tatesl?”

Varshi nodded. “Tatesl inherits many characteristics of sign languages. It is mostly conveyed through strokes and motions joined with ball speeds and spins. For example, the orientations of the paddle handle indicate directions. When a player smashes the ball, it conveys the emotion of anger, the harder the smash, the greater anger it indicates. The spins indicate the situation of an event; topspin indicates the development has been positive and underspin means going downward; sidespin indicates something unexpected has happened. Tatesl goes beyond a traditional sign language. It is easy to pick up but advanced Tatesl should be able to express complex matters dynamically or graphically, without excluding individual imaginations and innovations, in such a way as to be understandable to all those who have a substantial understanding of the table tennis game. More than the language itself, what struck me was its origin and development. After I had learned the basics of this language, I wrote a program that could search Tatesl videos and I found some documents written in Tatesl that tells its history.

“In Awesome Nation, Dark Power, the government party, is extraordinary repressive; people are sent to jail and are tortured because of telling the truth or protesting for justice. The party censors information, twists real facts and brainwashes its people. Almost everyone’s brain is filled with lies. Tatesl is born under this twisted world, developed by an unknown group of dissidents who fled Awesome Nation and hid in various parts of the free world. They coordinated via the Internet to develop

this language. As more sophisticated players may join the development, the language will be slowly enriched. It may be able to describe even music and mathematics. At the least, it offers an alternative way to penetrate the nation's firewall as the government tightens its control. In Awesome Nation, table tennis is very popular, a game everyone plays and watches. A Tatesl game just looks like a real table tennis game and can easily escape censorship.

Many dissidents inside Awesome Nation use this language to communicate and to learn about news of the real world."

Jacobs asked, "Does their government know about this?"

Varshi said, "No, the language is still confined to a small community, consisting mostly of dissidents. Some local officials who are fans of the game may know a little about it but they would pretend they know nothing as they don't want to add trouble to their work. The less they do, the fewer mistakes they make!"

"So Isaac knows this language?"

"Yes, he speaks it fluently! In the five games of the video file you sent me, the two when Isaac played with a girl are Tatesl games. The first game tells that over 100 lawyers who have defended for victims protesting against the illegal taking over of their land by local governments have been arrested and jailed; they were forced to confess their 'crimes' in front of the state TV. It also reports that victims with children harmed by substandard vaccines protested against the company were arrested and jailed.

The second game tells that over one million people in the western part of the country are jailed in concentration camps and many tortured, some with organs harvested.

Before, I thought Isaac looked so heavy and sad in the video at the end because he lost the games. Now I understand that the games were actually staged and he looked sad because of the tragic events he described, not because of the loss!"

Varshi took out from her drawer a report and handed it to Jacobs. "This report explains in detail how the system works."

Jacobs sat on a chair and fell silent, reading it intensely.

A long time had passed before Jacobs looked up and laid the report on the desk. "Amazing! Varshi, you've done a great job! This is precious to us."

He laid back on the chair to clear his thought, not saying anything. Varshi felt the air heavy.

"I can see," Jacobs said at last, sitting up and straightening his back as if he had solved a puzzle, "a clearer picture now. For years we welcome corrupt officials who fled Dark Power and the children of their high ranking officials as they bring in a large amount of capital. We welcome their scholars, investments, students, and talents. But we were all deceived!

In reality, Dark Power is far more dangerous than we thought. It has a thorough plan of conquering America in a time frame of about 30 years. Australia might have partially fallen. If America falls, Dark Power will rule all!"

A thrill passed through Varshi. She frowned and asked, "How did you learn about this?"

"It's by accident. At the moment, I can't tell you the details," Jacobs said grimly. "Most Americans absolutely have no idea about the deep infiltration by Dark Power. They assume that the US will exist forever. If you tell people America could be conquered by a foreign power in 30 years, they would think you are 100% insane.

Strange as it may seem, Dark Power's infiltration activities are funded by the most unlikely source, the Americans, via the huge annual trade deficit. They give us crispy goods and we give them money. They don't use the money to purchase foreign goods for their people but bring the money back here to support the infiltration. Human hearts are easily corrupted. The huge trade deficit could be sustained only because they have used the money to corrupt Wall Street, luring renown economists to convince the government that trade deficits do not harm. Though unfair trade has devastated many of our industrial states, globalism, and free trade, fair or not retain their charm and allure beyond America as well as within it.

"Every year, Dark Power uses the money to immigrate a large number of highly trained spies to this country and have

gained much control of our news media. They fabricate fake news and secretly create conflicts in the government from low to high levels. Some spies have occupied crucial government positions, and might even be in the congress and the senate. They come in many forms but a majority of the spies are camouflaged as corrupt officials fleeing Dark Power or as the children of high ranking officials. No one could sort out the fake corrupt officials from the real ones. Some spies were born in America and brought back to Awesome Nation for training while they were babies. Some spies might have married to congressmen, senators or government officials and exert influence on their spouses. Most Americans are sleepy, worrying most about whether they need to spend 10 dollars more to purchase a piece of junk goods from Dark Power. They hate their peers who have different political views more than they hate tyrants. Our government is consumed by internal fighting, a large part created secretly and skillfully by the immigrated spies! The spies are so powerful that they almost control our government. We are educated to speak according to their narrative — you are allowed to speak their crimes privately but never publicly if you want to solve the problem and not to get into trouble. We fight intensely on climate change and environment protection policies but no one cares if America would be conquered. Much damage has been done and it will take many years to undo the damage even if it is possible. We are at the most dangerous moment in our history. It's the task of the awakened to stop the devastation of this country by Dark Power!"

"This is terrible!" she said. "Worse than anything I could imagine!"

Jacobs stared at Varshi. "We need your help!"

Varshi laid back and sighed. "I am such an ordinary person, like a drop of water in the ocean! The Enemy is so wicked and terrible! There's not much I can do to stop the trend or change history!"

"Don't judge yourself. You are one of the chosen so is Isaac! Let God judge you. Everyone has his or her position! It is fate that you get involved in the mission of cracking the conspir-

acy. When the storm comes, no one can escape until it's gone. Self-exile is a flight from danger to greater danger. Help us change the future. Their network is complex. The awakened only know a little, and the others know nothing. If we don't make it, we risk being conquered by Dark Power! The Enemy is moving. We must take action, now."

"What's your plan?" Varshi asked quietly.

"Gather evidence to expose the conspiracy and convince our government to plug the trade deficit. Once the trade is balanced, large scale spies immigration will be stopped automatically."

Varshi said with a timid voice, "I am frightened. I don't want to get involved in politics and I worry about my family! But I have the obligation to defend democracy and freedom. Indeed, it's fate that takes me into this storm. I could help you only if I could do it anonymously, not letting anyone else know I am involved with any of your work!"

Jacobs smiled and nodded. "No one in my organization knows I have contact with you and the origin of the valuable hints offered by you! Spies are everywhere watching and have many channels hearing. No one knows if his organization has been compromised. You will be the last resort to keeping some crucial links and secrets. I assure you that besides me, no one knows about the help offered by you! Though small, my organization is multi-layer and has a number of branches. Besides me, no one thoroughly knows it's exact structure!"

Varshi nodded, lying back on the chair. "God bless America!"

Jacobs smiled. "Indeed, God bless America. It seems that there's an unknown secret force helping America. Without its help, Dark Power might have past the critical point of being successful in their plan!"

Varshi was much surprised. "What is this secret force?"

"No one knows. I could only feel it; one after another critical events have happened against all odds. It is hard to believe those could happen if there is not a secret force manipulating at the background. However, all efforts to trace this force are in

vain. Dark Power might also be aware of this force. Of course, they describe it in different perspectives, calling it dark force. Miles also mentioned to me that there is a dark force, which wants to stir troubles in his motherland. After years of tracing it, intercepting an abundant of Wi Fi signals, they still get absolutely no hints about the force. This force exists like a ghost. No one can verify its existence. Maybe it does not exist just as the invisible hand of the free market is not a real hand.”

Another chill passed through Varshi but she kept herself calm and had long discussions with Jacobs on future work. When all this was done, Jacobs stood up, took the *Tatesl* report, wrote a check and bowed to her. Before stepping out of the door, he said, “Varshi, you are courageous and intelligent. Here’s the payment for your work. The significance of your discovery is beyond your imagination! Thank you so much! I’ll come again soon!”

After seeing Jacobs off, Varshi sat down and fidgeted on her chair. She had been awakened. She had learned the reality and was frightened but her conscious mind would not allow her to keep a blind eye to the erosion or eventual destruction of justice and freedom. She reflected intensely and now she seemed to have been fully awakened. She was a chosen one. She must set out for the long journey whether she liked it or not. That was her fate and destiny.

