

Miss Anira and the Forest

**-Avani Jain
(A.J. Sapiens)**

Chapter 1

Bird

Miss Anira sat comfortably in a white sculptural outdoor chair NOT reclining over the cushions, multitasking her way through a wintry morning. A hand holding a white cup of tea brewed in extra ginger, ears reverberating to the chirping of birds and hatching of grass, while her mind wandered through the lengths and breadths of the universe. The fluttering pages of BizBuzz, her favourite business newspaper, whooshed a headline that read—

'The results of the new presidential elections say yes to economists' relief.'

Scoffing, she muttered under a satirical breath- 'A new president. Hah! All that changes is the person you are going to buy, a new puppet, not new money.'

Then she turned through a section that spoke of how Mr. Rachet Colt, the CEO of *Plingle*, an ecommerce firm, was fired from the board of directors because of holding an intrigue with one of the new marketers of the firm.

'Gay CEO sacked after selling off his share,' read the headline. She knew Mr. Rachet personally, and was aware that he was in fact, not sacked, but had chosen to resign the company himself, as he wished to spend his fortune on building a school in his hometown island, and settling there with his then boyfriend, Stuart, who wanted to establish a tourist hotel spot by the Tautomese sea.

Her final pause of the day was a section that featured a photograph of her own, ten by five inches. The headline read- ***'Richest woman in the world has a few life lessons to share on her thirty-fifth birthday.'*** Rather than putting a smile on her face, as would be the expectation, the sight turned her expression grave and dull. The picture was taken four days ago, when the interviewer, Roger Trampton had insisted on "one last picture". She disliked posing for photographs and had hoped this indeed was a last click, unlike five others that arose along the same line of request. In a crimson pantsuit and black boots, with crossed arms and a painful smile, her face appeared as vibrant on paper as it was peevish inside. Her big green eyes peered at herself thoughtfully, analysing every detail. She looked so young and so old. No wrinkles yet, perfectly fitting clothes accentuating the figure but not too much, just right shoulder-length hair, or maybe a little longer, should get a haircut soon. Maybe

she could go bald once and for all... She read the title again and sighed, putting the paper and the half-sipped cup of tea away on the mahogany table.

'How many more years!' she thought. Even though well rationalised in her mind was the idea that she had half her life left ahead of her, she felt like she had lived it all in futurity, and the days had begun to pass for her too slow. In a crude factual sea of her financial apotheosis, eclectic personal accomplishments, for this forever-curious soul, somehow, there was not much to look forward to, and her anxiety sourced at the helplessness of not being able to explain it. Not even her beautiful family, with the biggest house in the city, a loving husband and a brilliant daughter, Mishka, who would often come running to her in her little yellow frock to narrate stories about her contrastingly adventurous childhood, could make her feel deceptively complacent about her situation. Like how her spade went missing in the garden, and the gardener, Mr. Tending, fetched her a new one, but not immediately, so she looked and looked for it everywhere for hours, and found it later in her bedroom, where it lay clearly visible under the many toys she hadn't touched for a week! Or how she had spilled chocolate milk on her favourite red dress the other day, destroying its laces and because she craved for the exact same dress, she cut up her red gown in the shape of a dress, only to find it shredded into long pieces! The stories made Miss Anira laugh heartedly; Maybe if she was a normal human being, she could believe in such deceptions and falsities that take a person's pain away at the expense of the truth, but Miss Anira was so unlike such people.

Everything she believed in happened in front of her so often, that there was nothing more needed to believe in, but to just think, and how tiring was this thinking, for nothing. She rose up to her feet and treaded around in her blue woollen sweater and pyjamas that embraced her nothingness with vibrancy and belonging. The grass felt colder now and the tips stung at her ankles. The garden she plodded along was huge. Hundreds of trees and plants swept across a large field in straight lines, circles, as well as clumped into irregular clusters. Fountains with stone-fenced seating areas, gazebos and pergolas appeared randomly at little distances. If a child was lost in this garden, he could be lost for at least a few hours before someone could find him. A variety of vegetables and fruit bearings, including Okra, tomatoes, capsicum, spinach, strawberries, cherries, and parsley, along with thirty other species, were also

sectioned at the boundaries. Flocks of pigeons, crows, sparrows, parrots, hummingbirds, and canaries trudged around individually over the grass, rocks, pavements near the only swimming pool, and even on the cemented road beside the garden, which was a leading way to the house. As many as fifty birds chirped out of the birdhouses that hung around a straight line over the trees boughs bordering the garden at the north. Miss Anira twinkled at the setting as a ritual of each morning. She puffed in the essence of lavender and blossoming roses and felt a little proud and a little happy. To build this garden big was her idea. Even though she could not waver enough time to attend to it personally, she managed to draw a design and monitored its progress from afar most days for the last ten years. The garden was now tended by three gardeners, who had only five years ago planted six mango trees in the front lane on her request, which in the coming summers were expected to bear raw mangoes for especially textured sauces and drinks. She had even built two of the many birdhouses, through which now came the chirrups and songs soothing to soul.

On an old tamarind tree, she noticed, perched a bird that peered at her steadily. 'Must be a migrant,' she thought walking closer, noticing the blue, red, and yellow patches of her plumage from a distance. The closer she went, the more awestruck she was. Her Cornell red beak stretched out like that of an albatross, multi-coloured feathers ruffled like an owl's, talons held the ground firmly like an eagle's and black beady eyes stared curiously as if a pigeon's, fiery and intense even if not red and misty.

The bird leaned her head forward to get a closer look to Miss Anira. At first, it imitated the timely eye blinks of the lady. Later, she twitched her beak a little upwards when Miss Anira smiled at her. Then she fluffed up her feathers to show herself a bigger creature not willing to risk any danger, for the final test to ensure that the company meant no harm. Miss Anira simply smiled and the glint in her eyes pierced through the bird slowly.

'Hello,' she said, and floated her left arm in the air, where the bird perched herself flying across the distance of a few feet and stared at her wide-eyed. 'You are new here,' said Miss Anira in an arbitrarily pleasant voice. 'Scales so majestic! Where do you come from?'

The bird continued staring at her, blinking rarely, but with subtlety now.

‘I hope you like it here,’ grinned Miss Anira. The bird wrapped itself cosily in the tiny space of her arm and now snooped sideways rather than directly at the lady whose presence didn’t bother her anymore. Miss Anira signalled one of the gardeners, Mr. Tending who stood only a few feet away, to bring in the food. He wore loose pale yellow T-shirt, maroon pyjamas, and ruffled hair. He was lean, untidy, and poor in appearance, as one could expect from a field worker. Mud stains covered the front and back of his T-shirt. The skin on his elongated face was probably fairer, but the mud deposits made it appear dark. He scuttled towards the duo, holding a china bowl with polka dots on its surface clasped in both his hands. Sensing the arrival of a stranger, the bird rose into a posture flapping her wings. Miss Anira gently handled the bowl, placing it in mid-air, informing the bird with excitement—

‘That’s a special kind of bird food some of our finest researchers have prepared. It is nutritious and most birds here love it. Give it a peck?’

The bird studied and smelled a few colourful balls. She could see more colours and smell more smells than the humans who prepared it. She held three balls in her long beak and flew onto the nearest empty wooden birdhouse to feast. Miss Anira placed the bowl at its entrance. The bird, now uninterested to watch over any human, for they possessed no danger, continued to savour more beans from the polka dots bowl. Miss Anira spread her infectious smile at the sight again, paring down her anxieties for a while.

‘Ma’am, the water is ready for your bath,’ approached a voice from behind. It was Reva, the head of all staff, dressed in her usual skirt and blouse, not forgetting in the least to put on the staff coat, a non-compulsory black blazer, with her name printed on the right. When she was promoted to head of staff, she had been released of her duties to assist Miss Anira as a personal caretaker, but the old maid, after twenty years being spent in her service, would still not spare any chance where she could do something for her Madam. Whether it was preparing her favourite breakfast, sometimes turning the heater on, or simply asking her whether she needed anything, she was rapid in the undertakings. Miss Anira quickly put on her blue slippers and gaily walked into her house building. It was known to be the biggest house in Seasonwood, the town of all seasons. In Seasonwood, it flooded during rains, burned whilst summers, froze when wintered, and roared every time autumn knocked, and their house bore resistance to it all. Now, as it was the month of

January, the town was witnessing a subtle transformation from wintry cold to a spring bloom. Chilly winds moved about the grounds but also a new variety of flowers popped in the garden every week that pleased watchers to heart's content.

Sighing and thinking about her birthday party that evening, she walked so dreamily into the three storey home that she was suddenly brewing in bubbles in her bathtub. She didn't remember the entry through the front door, climbing of the stairs, or rights and lefts leading to the bedroom. The water was the perfect level of warm. Effervescence of natural candles soothed her nostrils. Closing her eyes, unsurprised, she seemed to have fallen asleep, drowning in a sea of thoughts only she could think and not understand. A language she didn't know but was sure existed. Like a deep sleep into another universe or beyond.

Chapter 2

A year older, a life younger

By early evening, the kitchen, bombarding with variegated whiffs of delicious meals was set working by six chefs, similar to elves tacking Christmas toys for the children of the entire world. It was a huge space. Almost like a giant food store crammed up with eateries, and the equipment required to jam-pack it with more! Meals were being taken out into the garden by waiters and waitresses dressed in navy blue coats hired for the occasion.

Even though the house building itself could accommodate more than three hundred people in comfort, the front garden was set as the primary venue for the party. The guests anyway moved in and out of the house inquiring about Miss Anira who wasn't scheduled to arrive before seven. Every new face joined the gathering either grinning from ear to ear, or laughing at their unusual welcoming at the gate. It was Mishka, who suggested that the guests could ride bicycles from the parking far away on an elongated footpath, into the house. A few chariots were also arranged for guests too old to walk or cycle, although most of them chose to cycle, taking more joy in the whimsy, than the act itself. The enthusiasm was accompanied by a menu of Pizzas, salads, jams, fruits (Exactly twenty kinds including Kiwi, strawberries, melons, apples, bananas, and even dragonfruit!), Pav Bhaji, Chapatis, Shahi Paneer, Daal Chawal, Bhindi Masala, Gulab Jamun, Chocolate Fudge, Rabdi, Pasta, Cheela, Noodles, and flavoured Mocktails (Strawberry, Coconut, Mint, Grapes, and Paan). Additionally, the waiters also carried around corn cheese balls with ketchup, water, and other thin-crust appetizers that children lulled over brightly. There was something for everyone. While the chatter spawned louder in the outdoor area, dampening the music in the background, Miss Anira cherished her time getting dressed.

**

The master bedroom was lit up in lights red, white, and yellow. A wooden bed stood in the right covered in dark blue floral sheets, beside which, beyond the curtains, was built a sliding glass door leading to the terrace garden through

which one could cite the whole property. From under the bed spilled a brown velvet mattress, contrasting the cream shaded furniture. The two side tables were the most randomly maintained elements in the room. The right one contained a charging wire waved across a pair of spectacles, medicine bottles, a business magazine, and some empty space for an object as small as a wallet. The left side carried a copy of *"Strays in the Attic by Lionel Bishop"*, a notepad, a pencil, a glass of water layered by a coaster covered in golden strips outlining a painting of sunflowers. Opposite the bed was an entertainment unit, and then began the streak of little sofas and tables and decorations, which further led onto the dressing area separated through a sliding wall door; containing two huge mirrors, poufy chairs and as many as sixteen cabinets for storage. Beyond the dressing spot were doors to the wardrobe and the bathroom, which again bore many separate divisions and holdings. Miss Anira deemed it all so unnecessary, but her husband had insisted on building the biggest bedroom possible, so that when he exhibited people the house, he need not flaunt at all, they would resort to it themselves. Today, when she stood brightened up in the dressing room, she perceived some point in the huge and organised capacity, when she could change a thousand bracelets to find the right one, or walk a farther distance to test her heels.

'How long does this life seem though!' she confessed to Reva, who zipped her dress at the back. Miss Anira was always intrigued with Reva's ordinary and irrelevant responses to her insightful meditations, and thus chose to speak her mind out to her sometimes. The maid had the permission to be frank and blunt, and even she mused at these rare discussions that her employer would bring forth during the most unexpected occasions.

'Rich don't have long lives but the poor,' replied Reva, who pulled out makeup from the drawers.

'And why do you say that?' asked Miss Anira

'It's just a small thought, Madam.'

'Yes yes. Tell me.'

'The rich can entertain themselves to forget their sadness. They travel to far-off countries, even Europe, drink expensive beer, take sauna baths, read and buy heavy books, play in huge courts, eat lots and all kinds of food, and not worry for the money. Rich don't get very sick either. They have means to live healthy lives. There is less insecurity, whilst the poor wait for the sufferings to

end, and they never end. Such long disgraceful lives of the poor! Little food in their stomach and more worry in their heads! Didn't I often talk to you about the destitute Kriya, the single mother of two children who was forsaken by their father because of his bad habits? She died a month ago of a deadly disease that required expensive treatment, and because the children had nowhere to go, they stayed in the house under the eye of the neighbours. They were fed for a few days but then even the stomachs of those neighbours would be at risk if the children took away everything. Eventually, they both died of starving and ill health themselves. They kept burning with fever but nobody dared an attempt to see why they hadn't come out for so long in the fear that they might be asked for food again, and the neglect led to the deaths.'

'Oh Reva! Had you told me this before, we could have arranged something for those unfortunate children,' browsed Miss Anira. 'Were they a close relation to you?'

'Oh no, Madam, they were in the neighbourhood of my mother's old cousin's son-in-law. I found out about the incident only yesterday. You know how men do not speak to women about such affairs in detail. My mother's cousin found only a couple of days ago from her daughter who had returned to her in-law's house after a month and read the specifics from the neighbourhood, and so before the news reached me, it was too late.'

'I understand, hope they find peace in death.'

'I wish you not bore any anxiety to this. However, you see, they died because they were poor. Rich may get richer or not, but the poor keep getting poorer. '

'You put your points across so nicely, it is ironic and funny sometimes,' amused Miss Anira. 'Rich have it easy, I must agree, but that might possibly be a problem in itself. Oh, no powder for me today, I think I could do without it. Do bring in the eyelash curler. You see, the rich who have always been rich are more insecure than the poor who have always been poor. They fear losing the privileges, comfort, and ease of life, as they cannot do without it, they don't know how, as their world is shaped in finances. Therefore, they strive further to maintain not just their materialistic lifestyles, but also the sea of opportunities. They have more responsibility, and must also learn to manage money so that it is not all drained as it is easier to spend more money when you are rich, without being aware of doing so. They train themselves to not let

worry come in between their work efficacies, and become strong minded. The poor on the other hand mostly give in to least responsibility, have the least at stake, and they are free. They can risk all their fortune and it still won't cost them much and can always start afresh. Most poor are reckless too. They drink, gamble, have broken families, and meet with more accidents, like this Kriya you spoke about. She also had a broken family, did she not? Moreover, who is to say she was careless with her health too. Most fatalities are not so fatal if tended to earlier. It is complicated then if you consider her education and dispositions in a poor society. There are several facets to this though. Ultimately, they are all individuals and everyone handles a circumstance differently. Some poor strive for better lives, and wish to create and bring change to the world; they are at a loss of privilege. Neither rich nor poor are worth a charity, if they could go on living like fools who provide nothing.'

'Right, Madam,' said Reva, excitedly. 'I couldn't see this way as I have never been rich, but you talk like you understand the poor so well.' One could surmise there existed a satire in the maid's statement, but there really was none, for she would never rebuke Miss Anira, who had managed to uplift her from poverty to give her a new life. From the education of her three children, a girl and two boys, to teaching her literature and sciences, so that her Sh's didn't sound like S's, and her 'bowl' didn't sound like 'Baul', Miss Anira arranged it all. She even paid her the best fee over any other servant in the house. Most servants of the time might take such gestures lightly, and forget this goodness, thinking they are by default deserving of such a treatment and owe no obligation, but Reva never belonged with those servants, and she loved her employer truly.

'That's what we do as businessmen, Reva,' continued Miss Anira 'We either get to understand people, or make them believe we understand them better than they do themselves, and change them. It's an evil thing sometimes, but mostly, it is creative, rewarding, and best for the world.'

'It is indeed so. It is so!' said Reva, brushing the hair and putting on a white clip into her curly strands. 'And yet, I do not understand your sadness. You have everything in the world, and fear nothing. The world knows your name and sets examples of your success too. What should bother you then?'

'I am aware I have THINGS. Those petty features of life. It's boredom, not sadness. Why, I do not know. If I possessed an answer, it could be so easy.'

However, it is the questions I seek, not answers. I do not have the right questions anymore. There is so much work pending still at the office, Reva. The self-driving car programs are to be bettered for the next dumb human generation. So many new chemical alternatives have emerged in our labs that we have to make use of, and I find myself lost on purpose. Look at me gabbling again. It makes no sense. It's all just useless.'

Miss Anira picked out a lipstick and put on the final shade of burgundy. She was restless and had to use the cotton swab twice to get the shape right on her lips. Reva watched her talk of important matters of work in surprise.

'You could go to the rainforests to spend a week like every year, Madam.' suggested Reva, without giving in.

'Yeah,' muttered Miss Anira, suddenly not remotely interested in the conversation. Getting up, fixing the dress, she gave a twirl, satisfied with the demeanour contrasting her usual self. Anay Pourwall knocked at the door.

'Thank you, Reva,' said Miss Anira dismissing her, and she curtsied out of the door, inviting him in.

Anay Pourwall was a dreadfully handsome man. He wore a blue suit, the shade resembling her wife's, a white tie that he carried with performance, black shoes that made the most classic sound when heard in the hallway, a watch, a wallet, and black stylish hair that one feels an urge to touch and play with. His fair face showed a permanent expression of dexterity and humility combined into a beautiful smile that caused a slight dent on his cheeks, making him appear more attractive. He was a little less than six feet tall, with a perfect body build for a man that height.

He saw her reflection in the mirror. Her blue halter-necked gown extended in a flowery pattern up to the bottom of her shoulders, revealing some white skin, most of which was covered with the curls of her shining black-brown hair. The gown glimmered under the light like a galaxy of condensed yet fervent stars. A shiny white belt embraced her a little above the waist. He examined her in all her accessories, not missing out the earrings that dangled like white streaks of light set out of a crucifix. Her green eyes, penetrating through him a beautiful melody, while her lips curved into a smile.

'You look so beautiful!' he exclaimed and planted a long kiss on her cheek.

'Happy Birthday, Annie.'

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘You too appear to be a knight in shining armour! I don’t see a sword though.’

‘The sword, for me, my lady, is your smile, that I oath to carry with myself always.’

‘Oh wow! I really would’ve preferred a bladed sword though.’

‘Let’s say I mixed it up with the presents, waiting for you to guess and find it out?’

‘Ah, I hope we soon get better at this play acting thing. We are so pathetic!’

They both chuckled and she put her arm in his for the entrance to her party. As they descended the curved staircase, conversations halted, children stopped running about, chewing of the food slowed down, and the old ladies slumping on couches and chairs let their hands out to stand straight up.

‘There she is!’ gasped a bald man with a thick black beard.

‘She is so beautiful!’ yelled a little boy dropping some of his vanilla ice cream.

‘They both look perfect.’

‘How much do you think the dress is worth?’

‘Are those real diamonds in the earrings?’

‘Of course they are. From the country of elves I bet.’

‘And did you see...’

Before she put her feet on the last tread, she was shaking hands fervently, returning ‘Thank Yous’ to many birthday wishes and smiling ceremoniously. *Mr. Ickleganger*, the Mayor of Seasonwood, an old man with grey hair, puckered fair face that appeared muddy somehow, and shrunken eyes, wearing a waistcoat that was two sizes bigger than what was ideal for his physique, was the first person to offer her a bouquet. It smelled of Lilies, Roses, and Sunflowers. Miss Anira never approved of bouquets. She discerned it a barbaric sin to endow flowers to people. ‘If you want the smell to persist longer, DON’T chop the flowers off!’ she would say. ‘If you don’t buy them, the florists won’t sell them, and the choppers won’t chop them.’ she would reply later in the argument. Parties were different though. She wouldn’t want to reject a gift and make her guests feel impertinent. One could always try and grow them again, she told herself, when a torrent of hundreds of bouquets rushed her way. Next meeting was with *Mrs. Roselittle*, the wife of the *Chief Marketing Officer* of *Revolve*, the company of which Miss Anira was the chairperson. Mrs. Roselittle was so lean, that her entire body would tremble

at a slight handshake, and veins would pop out further making her skin appear to have streaks of tattooed blue and green lines. Miss Anira was shaking hands at the rate of about forty times per minute, and Mrs. Roselittle was saved from embarrassment.

All people who were deemed important in the town were present. Friends and relatives from nearby cities, and even other countries had flown and drove to attend the celebration. Miss Anira acquainted herself with everyone individually, especially the kids, each of whose names she remembered well.

At last, she lightly embraced into her arms her five-year-old daughter, *Mishka*, who was brought home by her grandmother, *Mira Pourwall*. Mishka's eyes twinkled the same green as her mother's. The cheeks were just as full, the nose stretched just as short. Rest everything resembled her father. She wore a white frock with blue laces that made her look very pretty. She was a little girl most spoiled by the whole town. Whenever she would journey to school, run her bike on roads, or join birthday parties of other imperative children of the town, everyone she knew, or even whom she didn't know made a big fuss on her arrival. They overflowed her tiny hands with chocolates and toys, force fed her favourite food, and dropped her off personally to her BIG house when she felt tired. And those who had close relations with her kissed her cheeks red, and made her back ride through their gardens. Even though she enjoyed all the love and returned it with sweet laughter and kindness now and then, she knew that it so happened because her parents were the richest people. She was astutely aware that were they ever to go poor, most people wouldn't love her anymore the way they do now. They will forget that her mother paid their children's school fees, or put solar generators in their houses, or returned their kids with more expensive gifts. This she had learned from her grandmother, and also that the love of her parents was the most real kind of love.

Miss Anira pecked a kiss on her cheek, whispering a 'Thank you, darling' to her wishes and let her run and disappear into a crowd of children. After all guests had been greeted, she gathered time and strength to look for HIM. 'It has been more than three years, there's no possibility of him making an appearance today,' she tried to prompt herself. Her eyes scoured through every corner, but no sign of him, Mr. Kamal Pourwall. She yearned to quiz him on something, but the question remained oblivious to her. It had been a custom for years between them. Before any creative thought, any new adventure, or even a

sorrow that pricked her heart, she would visit her father in his armchair. All remained unclear in her wobbly head, but once she made acquaintance with him, she would suddenly ask him the most pressing questions and would find a purpose to step on to. It was either something he would say that only he could say, or something she felt she could feel only around him. Today, she longed for him more than ever, to put forth the puzzle that might set everything right again, but it was impossible. 'Oh Papa,' she muttered under her trembling breath. Her entrails lurched and she could feel the heat rise in her stomach. It was the first time after his death that a party was hosted in her house. Mr. Kamal Pourwall, the most celebrated businessman for three consecutive decades. It was he, who funded her first business venture for a greenhouse energy converter. Whilst everyone deemed it preposterous, he simply nudged her to work over it further. Every month she approached him with a different design, and left rejected, but hopeful under his kind and wise words, for she could always find the next element to work on in her questions. It so happened that after a year of relentless efforts, she finally convinced him to kick-start his millions of units of funding. 'You seem ready now,' he had said. 'Not because your designs are perfect, or I see a guarantee of success in your endeavours, but because you have spent enough time and dedication in building something to know that perfection in an illusion, despite the objections from the world. You are ready for the business world now, my love, as long as you never recoil from learning, disciplining yourself, and innovating.'

'Why him?' she memorialised the night of the heart attack indignantly.

'Honey,' called Anay. 'We must cut the cake now.' In an instant, she lurched out of her grief and solitude. The impossibility seemed further impossible, and she focussed herself on her birthday cake.

It was a six layered cake (chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, butterscotch, chocochips, and chocolate again). The topmost layer carried exactly thirty-five candles, as her age.

'Make a wish!' roared the crowd. Miss Anira stooped over the table levelling herself with the cake, to notice the bird she had met in the morning flinging its wings through the window. She leered to get a glimpse. First, her view was blocked by a middle-aged football man (his name was Blob) who was stuffing chocolate pudding in his mouth in the most abominable fashion. When she pressed her neck towards the back, a woman spewed her dishevelled hair in

the air, preventing her from seeing just that one tamarind tree on which the bird was perched. And then, in that one shiny moment, the air was cleared, and she saw the magnificent creature, staring into her eyes, piercing, without a single feather in its body shifting. Its eyes now looked a shiny white rather than black and seemed to be drowning in a glimmer. Miss Anira couldn't help but feel a rush of excitement. An invisible and non-existential blow of wind slapped her on the face, soothing and refreshing it. Meanwhile, all the people had begun calling out- 'C'mon now!', 'Is she alright?', 'What does she keep looking at?'

Miss Anira veered towards the thirty five blazing candles, closed her eyes, and muttered to herself, as loudly as only she could hear, but imagined it like a prophecy—

'An adventure! Anything, God, Anything I do not understand. Anything I not know I do not understand. Something new, different, Beautiful, like that bird maybe.'

She blew at the candles. Once, Twice, Thrice, until the last one stopped flickering.

'Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you!

Happy Birthday dear miss Anira, Happy Birthday to you!' sang the crowd.

Dancing resumed and the lawn grass was flooded with frenzy feet. Even more food was brought in, and laughter echoed through every corner of the modern castle.

Chapter 3

The new, new world!

‘The one with the Truffula trees, mum, please!’ chirped Mishka.

‘Again? Well, Alright then,’ said Miss Anira picking out *‘The Lorax’* from a stack of many books.

The skies had spun dark and only two stars chose visibility beside the crescent moon. It looked a silent painting-in-making through the silky red curtains that swayed and ruffled with the night wind. Mishka’s room was coloured in more colours than she recognized. The walls were painted with characters from her favourite books and cartoon shows—Geronimo Stilton in his work uniform, Curious George flying a kite, Pingu baking a cake, and she herself riding a bike in the backyard. A little library with different coloured shelves rested on the right corner, abreast which was a toy station. Four huge cupboards carried her clothes, guitar, Hula-hoops, Laptop, and all other paraphernalia normal five-year olds only imagined to possess in their little games. On her huge bed, which could carry eight children like herself, she lay wrapped up in a purple quilt beside her mother who sat reading to her. The house that had bristled with noise and laughter in the evening was now dead silent, and the stridulating of crickets could be heard sharply.

*‘At the far end of town where the Grickle Grass grows,
And the wind smells slow and sour when it blows—’*

Miss Anira commenced narrating Dr. Seuss in a cadence that Mishka particularly doted. Listening to her voice, their Labrador, Simba pounced over the bed and Miss Anira regaled the symphony to the audience of two.

‘I am hungry,’ spoke a hoarse voice and Miss Anira halted.

‘Say Mamma say!’ whooped Mishka.

‘I thought I heard something.’

‘I didn’t say anything.’

*‘Okay—I felt a great leaping of joy in my heart,
I knew just what to do, I unloaded my—’*

‘Sun shied away, party’s over, it’s almost bedtime, and the world seems to have forgotten me. Why can’t a boy have his bones?’ spoke the voice again.

Miss Anira stopped.

‘It is just Simba barking, Mamma,’ prompted Mishka, now irked with her mother’s unusual resort of stopping the stories midway. She would always tell a story as if it was the most important thing in the world.

‘Barking, you say?’ wondered Miss Anira and Simba licked her hand vigorously.

‘It’s late, I could do with just milk, but that means I get to play fetch twice tomorrow, right? Otherwise it’s just unfair,’ he spoke.

Miss Anira stared at him wide-eyed. ‘Milk?’ she asked.

‘Yes, milk. Maybe mix some pedigree in that though. C’mon now, I have been a good dog. Don’t be a tightwad.’

Flummoxed, she gawked louder at him. Was it—? Really—? How could it be?

‘Simba,’ she started. The dog fixed at her with sparkly eyes. ‘Why don’t you go downstairs and wait in your doghouse? I will ask someone to fetch you something delicious to eat.’

Simba performed an unnecessary sniff and quietly, bounced out of the room.

‘What are you doing talking so strangely, mamma?’ asked Mishka.

‘I was just asking him to vamoose to the doghouse. Was I speaking strangely?

Really?’ said Miss Anira, a frown emerging on her forehead.

Mishka examined her for a moment. ‘That’s the first time he went into the doghouse when asked to go into the doghouse,’ she remarked.

‘That’s probably the first time he has been told in a language he understands,’ said Miss Anira, absentmindedly.

‘What Mamma—You mean non-English?’ asked Mishka, puzzled.

‘Oh my God!’ screamed Miss Anira in a delirium. She jumped out of the bed and pranced briskly about the room. ‘It’s true then, isn’t it?’ she wondered aloud. It was indeed a miracle, a wish come true. Nothing was to be the same anymore. She could speak to her dog? Maybe all animals? Maybe Aliens? Maybe it was a gift for twenty four hours... or...a lifetime? Oh the things she could learn! The bird! That huge bird! She leapt out of the window and examined every tree in sight. It was not to be seen anywhere.

‘Never mind, must have flown away,’ she thought.

She wrung her hands and danced the most embarrassing dance.

‘Mummy?’ questioned Mishka, baffled with the unexpectedly queer behaviour of her otherwise sane and disciplined, yet fun mother.

‘Oh my little darling,’ she burst into a rapture. ‘I think—I think—your mother can speak with the animals of this world. I am not quite sure yet, but imagine if it is real, wouldn’t it be just fantastic?’

‘Umm— Certainly—’

‘Certainly! Yes! Certainly is the word. It would be so—oh—I better get Simba fed something before he comes running back here. You tuck yourself in. Be good. I will send Reva in, she will sing to you. Don’t you love her melodious voice? I have experiments to perform. Feel the beautiful breeze, my darling. It’s so wonderfully cold. Ah, the new world! The new, new world!’

Chapter 4

Menace in Business

For the next few weeks, Miss Anira could only either be spotted at the city zoo interacting with all sorts of animals; in the museum, learning about extinct animal species; or in her personal library, where she had called for hundreds of books and encyclopaedias to engross herself in assimilating information on every fauna that ever lived. But most of all, she could be tracked down in her garden, chattering away with birds and composing fresh melodies on her piano. She would expend hours sitting on a garden bench and hundreds of birds would flock around to listen to the poems and stories she narrated in an animated sincerity. Some birds would perch themselves at the action frame of the piano, pecking at several bars in the musical notes they either wished to identify, or for her to play again. Her obsession had grown too much so quickly, that it had begun agonising her husband.

‘Where is she?’ asked Anay.

‘She is at the zoo, sir,’ answered Reva, timidly.

‘At the zoo? AGAIN? That’s the third time this week.’

‘It is the zoo of Floristine, sir. She flew out last night. She said she shall be back by the time you return from your meeting.’

‘Flying to a zoo in a different city,’ he thought to himself. ‘No. This is getting out of hands now. I have to speak to her.’

‘Very well, I will wait here,’ he told the caretaker. ‘Call for some watermelon juice and snacks.’

Reva nodded and left.

Miss Anira being riveted to the animal world had caused her to disregard her work responsibilities thoroughly. Anay was the Vice President of the company Miss Anira was incumbent on as the chairperson. Thus, he was acutely aware of the losses her absence was causing for the firm, and its people. The responsibility of the company group and its twenty subsidiaries had fallen on his shoulders all at once. Even though every operation in every department commenced under his guidance already, the bigger decisions and the greater trust relied on her, and when she had refused to look at the ten new marketing proposals last week, they had backfired in their faces. When she denied attending the meeting with the President of Lumbornkood, his upset had

caused them billions of units of losses. The board of directors of subsidiaries had bombarded her with mails and emergency requests, but they all remained unresponded.

‘Please take care of it,’ she would tell him.

‘She is in the inventor mode,’ Anay had excused. ‘She is working on some secret project.’

The board then had acquiesced that Anay Pourwall was to handle all the affairs until their celebrated mastermind returns with a unique innovation and wisdom, while he had to bear the truth that his wife, the great inventor, had only grown heedless. The house too was not being maintained. Visitors were being sent away, and their daughter had not met her mother for days. She would ask him- ‘What is Mamma up to? She always finds time to read to me during the night,’ and when he would try and compensate for it by reading himself, she would fling obstinately—She reads it like this. She reads it like that. ‘Daddy, You don’t know how to tell a story!’

He also couldn’t remember any conversation with his wife that did not involve the funny memories of her favourite cockatoos whom she had named Valerie and Nancy. She had even cancelled all her interviews for various magazines as well as gatherings of her favourite book club. Moreover, her health deteriorated due to lack of physical activity and disturbing eating schedules.

Aunt Ellen, a close relative to them, suggested calling for a psychiatrist, but Anay turned her down. He was conscious of his wife’s peculiar endeavours of the past—her sudden escape to the rainforests, locking herself in a room for a week working on some fascinating blueprints without any intake of food, and above all, marrying him within a week of their first informal meeting.

Even so, initially, Anay had believed that she was hallucinating about this animal-talk, until two weeks ago, when he was first proven wrong. A white horse Anay Pourwall bought as a leisure pursuit, kicked him off the saddles, and Miss Anira very politely requested the horse to allow him a ride, promising no perniciousness or iniquity. Aggression suddenly wriggled out of the horse’s body, and it not only let him ride, but also helped him turn around smoothly at places he feared he kept the reins too loose. Also a week ago, when she asked Simba to bring a blue file from her study? After clearly stated instructions—left to the entrance, second table, first object with a packet of uneaten chips beside it, he fetched the file within five minutes, and also some carbs.

And how could he forget the day after that, when a white dove plunged on his arm on her command. It was aesthetic.

'Yes, it is all great, but for how long can it continue this way?' he spoke aloud to himself and got lost in his meditations. In only half an hour, when he stared out the window at a red-yellow birdhouse Miss Anira had painted herself, horns of a car blared.

'She should feel like I understand her and then put my point across in a way that is persuasive,' he decreed himself, and then gabbled a few sentences for practise. He imagined how she would enter the room and in all the kindness in the world, they would sit together, and toil on understanding each other, only to realise how effortless it was all along. When Miss Anira entered the bedroom though, she hustled, denying the existence of anybody else there. 'I was waiting for you,' said the husband. She moved around fiercely, blasting off her brown jacket, quickly putting her purse, jewellery, and other belongings away.

'Reva told me you have been to a zoo in Floristine,' he nudged her again. Still without a response, she began wildly rummaging a cupboard, apparently looking for clothes to change into.

'ANNIE!' he finally shouted.

Miss Anira turned and looked at him lightly, frowns visible clearly on her forehead, a disconcerted twitch on her lips, and agony in the eyes.

'Why do you shout? I am here, not two miles away!' she spoke indignantly.

'When I speak normally, you don't listen,' he replied, in a calmer tone than he could have expected at the time. She stared at him for a while, and suddenly flinging her hands into the air screamed- 'When will this stop, Anay? It is ridiculous. Ridiculous!'

'What will stop? What do you mean?' he asked.

'The tyranny of humans, the block-headed evil that they pursue blindly.'

Anay sighed and the fog cleared at once. He recalled all the occasions when Miss Anira visited a zoo, a circus, or even a national park in the last month. She would arrive home upset, and deny food or sanity and scribble in her little notebook something she would reveal to nobody and sleep off in her study. He would often get surprised at such a conduct of his otherwise disciplined and emotionally controlled wife. All the same, he would console her the next day, and shower her with affection. Today though, he felt no love or pity, or even a

grain of affection towards her. All he could feel was anger and suppressed frustration that he disguised in his kindness well.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked.

‘The animals...ALL of them...Well—Most of them. This is just atrocious.’ Her hands flailed around the empty air of their spacious room.

‘Is it that they are in a cage that’s bothering you? Honey, we have spoken about this. There is nothing we can do. It is the government’s responsibility. We have our campaigns and funds running for the forests already. Do you wish to expand the donations budget?’ He spoke gently, holding her by the shoulders. Love and care sparkled through his eyes, as if a switch had been turned on. But he retained in his mind the details of the conversation he wished to carry with her and waited for the right moment to slip it in.

‘Oh, no, that’s not—No No!’

‘Then what?’

‘They don’t think they are chained. They are unable to imagine a life outside of the cage. They don’t even know.’

‘They? Who are you—?’

‘Had they been aware of being chained, their life, even if in suffering would be spent with awareness and hope. Although, they are so comfortable in that prison that they don’t even aspire to be out. Actually, they don’t even know the concept of ‘out’, like their curiosity of a billion years has been chained too. It’s not all of them of course, but most of them. Especially the ones bred in the zoo itself. Oh, it’s terrible, how terrible! Imagine if you are in prison and unaware of it. That’s the worst kind of prison in possibility.’

‘But isn’t it better that way?’ he now spoke stubbornly with an absolute will to finish his statement. ‘It’s the best way in fact. If you don’t know you are in prison, you can live your life in peace.’

‘No,’ snapped Miss Anira. ‘Illusion of freedom is the worst. When you know you are trapped, only then can you walk out of the trap, or actually learn to live to the least. Haven’t you seen it with us humans? When we are aware of our chains, we turn the best of ourselves, and work towards being unbound from limitations. Years of shackling has led to such an ignorance of knowledge today, the knowledge and perseverance of billions of years that caused our existence in the first place. If I could show those bears and lions the forests,

birds the sky and branches filled with fresh tree leaves; If they knew again where they belong for a little while, or maybe longer—’ she fell into a trance. ‘But what could you do about it? They are the property of the zoo,’ he shouted this time, wanting to set the continuity of her ravings to a final stoppage, not seeing a practical solution to the mess of such hypothetical sauntering. ‘What if they were all sent to a forest?’ she asked like an innocent child, still dazed, as if she possessed two minds, one that existed in the room with her husband, and the other plotting and creating something in an absolutely different world. ‘Then they or other animals of their species would be brought back to a different zoo.’ ‘What if the forests were guarded against humans? A sign that says—no humans allowed, the place is reserved for animals?’ ‘The forests belong to the governments. Why would they ever stop humans from going in? Besides, they do try to restrict, but people get in anyway. There’s a lot of corruption in that community.’ ‘I see,’ she said and shifted her gaze from the glass pane she had been watching, towards her husband. Her face appeared the normal size as opposed to before, as if a spirit had jerked off her body. ‘Who was the architect who helped us construct our headquarters in Seasonwood?’ ‘Mr. Brickster?’ ‘That’s the one. Isn’t he a college friend of yours? Why don’t you invite him for dinner the day after tomorrow?’ ‘What for?’ ‘I have a new project for him. Also, who designed the landscape of our chain of green hotels in Tirewood?’ ‘That must be—Mr. Figuresand?’ ‘Oh yes! I shall ask Tasha to call him too, also Mrs. Landwill, the realtor.’ Tasha was Miss Anira’s assistant, who also didn’t hear from her for a month. ‘A new project?’ Anay’s eyes brightened. ‘Yes Indeed. It has been a long time since something so magnanimous struck my breath. Now, if you don’t mind, I need some sleep. It was a long journey.’ She kissed him and paced away into her dressing room. ‘I don’t need to speak to her now,’ he thought. ‘She is calling on realtors, architects, and designers. A new project? And I thought she was losing her

vision.' With a hope that he will soon be seeing his wife back into her office, he skirted out of the room effortlessly, as if hovering over a cloud, with a smile brimming over his face constantly.

Chapter 5

First meeting

The dining table was set for six. For each seat a big white flowery plate, a small blue plate, an even smaller white saucer, set of four bowls, two spoons, three forks, knife, a piece of cloth, a glass for water and another one for juice, lay neatly to the left. Jugs, condiments, sauces, saltcellars and pickles also aligned at regular spacing throughout the disposition. Colourful, effervescent candles refracted a rainbow at the ceiling. The kitchen, only a few feet away, sometimes emanated smells of distinct vegetables, and the next second, freshly baked cookies, then perhaps tomato soup, and then vegetables again. Had someone the nose of a dog like Simba, could go frantic, and not simply bobble around the doors to the kitchen, containing the urge to engulf the compartment.

‘Into your lair, Simba,’ ordered Miss Anira, entering the hall with three strangers Simba effort to recognise. ‘Or maybe if you behaved, you could stay,’ she added on noticing his sunken face that instantly brightened up on her improvisation. He padded to the carpet beside a glass door closed at the garden and sat himself wrapped in his own skin. The spot, the centre, was best suited to observe all activities in the correct volume (humans are unusually loud at dinners conversations, was his general opinion).

The bulky guest, whom Miss Anira referred to as Mr. Casa Brickster, exhibited a paunch in the middle of his stout body, spectacles hiding away his old eyes, and a few white, few golden hair spread unevenly and scantily across his shining scalp. In his brown chequered coat, black pants, and little boots, he appeared small in comparison to the tall man that walked beside him. He was called Mr. Artie Figuresand, a lanky young man with a long nose and curly black hair enclosing all his head and ears. He wore a blue coat and jeans, which fit perfectly onto his scrawny legs and piped arms. He possessed a dreamy look on his face, which also was analytical, and a suppressed smile that wasn’t visible, but promised a tidy little fixed position on his lips. Simba felt an urge to rip their coats off and sniff at their butts while he prepared to roast them for a special dinner. He would probably use the lanky one for bones, and the fat one for meat. The last stranger was the most formally dressed amongst all, Mrs. Profty Landwill, who was a broker. In her tweed jacket, trousers, and high-

heeled boots, her stature appeared taller. She was swarthy, possessed enumerable attractive features and an irresistible voice that must come handy in her profession.

‘The house as well as the garden makes such a volatile use of space and is solidified too,’ remarked Mr. Brickster. ‘I especially enjoyed the tour of the bird houses.’

‘Why, thank you. It was you, who recommended the architect. Reg Courte has such a fine sense of collating aesthetic styles,’ humbled Miss Anira.

‘Indeed. She used to train under me after her graduation. I have never met a more reliable fine artist as well as a mathematician. She would often ask me— “Where can I find the proper proportions of this cement and that putty material?” and those nitty gritties. I obviously guided her into procuring the best of things, but when I told her she need not worry herself with such specifics and detailed perfection, she tells me— “I can’t do something until it is perfect, sir. That’s why I asked to train especially under you, and not high paying Multinationals. Such a dedicated creator! I couldn’t ask for a better intern in those days.’

‘No doubt, I am glad to know her myself.’

‘The chandelier is different than the one I saw the last time I was here, it was butterflies and colourful LEDs bordering the centre lamp,’ pointed Mr.

Figuresand again, after criticising the arrangement of flower beds, the paint on the bird houses, the dullness of the entrance door, and the colour of Rudolph on one of the playhouse walls.

‘Good eye, Mr. Figuresand. A disaster in one of the children gatherings last year compelled us to change it. We preferred it more compact this time, for the safety of children.’

‘No wonder it has a dull tinge in its appearance because of its smaller size, even with more colour, design, and character. Changes are not always a treat to the eye.’

‘Maybe time shall sort that disparity,’ ensued Mrs. Landwill. ‘I must say, I never could understand your large land requirements ten years ago, but now that I see how you have maintained this place, it all makes sense.’

‘All thanks to your relentless negotiation with the owner so unwilling to give it away. The weather is the best in this town. Please seat yourselves. Oh very well, Anay is here. He was picking up Mishka from her grandmother’s.’

‘Oh hey, everyone’s here,’ cried Anay. ‘I am sorry we are late. Our little missy here ordered a compulsory detour to the bookstore,’ he added, putting away the shopping bags in his hand. ‘Casa! How long has it been!’

The party of six esconced into the dining chairs, bobbing their heads around in appreciation of the table setting. Banter, laughter, revival of old memories seized the table in rapture. Aroma of delicious appetizers plumed across all dimensions. Mishka clocked in the meeting on her high chair. Mr. Brickster, who carried an incredible sense of humour didn’t miss any opportunity to exhale jokes, one of which about what would happen if bricks had legs not only made the table laugh, but the servants too dared to burst out ridiculous noises in the air. The group discussed topics beyond real estate, design, or business, for a change. They spoke of dark matter, climate disasters, Thor’s hammer, water body cleansing, dying aunts and uncles, education policies, fat control, meditation, and the cats and dogs they found cute. At desert, Miss Anira lastly revealed her intentions of summoning them.

‘You must be wondering why I have summoned you all here together,’ she said. ‘Reva, please fetch me the red folder I was working with this afternoon in the study, the one on the first table on the top of all others.’

Reva left instantly.

‘It is something I wish to do for myself,’ she continued and all heads listened attentively. ‘Since a few months, I have been feeling lost on purpose. Life seemed mundane and senseless like always, but unlike other times, I happened to be giving into its grave displeasure. Even though our businesses thrived and ideas revolutionised, no adventure seemed to be left for me here. Until the day before yesterday, when I had a rather instigating conversation with my husband.’

Their eyes met and he smiled in anticipation of the good news.

‘So, I invite you all to participate in my next project. I am going to build a private forest,’ she announced with an enthusiasm that appeared comical to others. Everyone looked at her vacantly. Anay stared at her with raised eyebrows, not knowing what to ask.

‘It may not sound a great or unique thing to do, but it is. I am going to build a forest for zoo animals and others who might want to join. I was thinking an area of 7000 km squares should be enough for a start.’

A spoon clanked on the floor.

‘Seven thousand square kilometres!’ yelled Mrs. Landwill. Expressions on the faces of others synchronized with her cadence.

‘Yes, I think we need the area for lakes, dense trees, caves, and separate spaces for different species to move about.’

‘But Miss Anira, there already exist plenty forests in the world. The forest reserve has begun. We could move the animals to those spaces, or build around or within them. In fact, many animals already live there.’ After having spoken, Mr. Brickster realised how ridiculous, or rather disparaging could be his declaration, and blushed out of the reasoning. To Miss Anira, his proposition didn’t seem preposterous enough to not generate a response. Reva handed over the cherry red folder to her.

‘Of course there are, but they are handled by the government and we all know they aren’t doing a very good job. It’s 2025 and we are approaching a climate crisis, aren’t we? No animals are safe in the forests for centuries now, an axe or a hunting tool always on the brink of shattering their homes or the species itself. This shall be a private forest. No one will be able to interfere with this place.’

‘We have national parks for that,’ joined Mr. Figuresand, enjoying the idea of building nature, and struggling with the quandary of being surprised or condescending, or accepting, for he could see the unusual in the usual.

‘That’s too restrictive and useless. I spoke to some animals there. They don’t approve of the falsity of the space,’ she replied. ‘Besides, the more the forestry, the better.’

‘You spoke to the animals?’

‘Yes yes, but that’s a separate subject.’

‘But how are we going to get so much land in continuity? It is impossible,’ declared Mrs Landwill.

‘It is very unlikely, yes,’ responded Miss Anira in a positive calm, for she had been prepared for such contravening response. ‘But I have been able to study some geographical regions that might be of use to us. They do have some villages interfering but it could still be possible to gain them through persuasion.’

She took several stacks of stapled pages from the folder and handed over the first pile to Mrs. Landwill. ‘This is what I could agglomerate in my first step of research.’

‘Mr. Brickster, these are some rough blueprints you might want to have a look at. We might need you to build more structures later.’

‘And Artie, Sir! Maybe you could study these drawings and give your inputs on how we could better the design.’

She passed on the last pile and everyone attended to documents at hand.

Anay, who had been reticent after his wife’s unexpectedly appalling declaration, seemed to have finally transferred his temper into his voice as he yelled rising up- ‘Forest? A private forest?’

‘Yeah,’ said Miss Anira. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘What’s—What’s WRONG? When you talked with me the other day about a new project, I assumed it was a new BUSINESS project, you know, for one of our product companies. But now I when I think of it, I remember, Oh no no, she didn’t say “Business Project”, but just “project”. How stupid I was to rejoice in your expositions!’

‘Surprising, isn’t it?’ she grinned, which enraged him further.

He roared— ‘Have you lost your mind? It has been weeks since you have shown up at work. We bore some significant losses that could have been prevented had you been present to monitor your goddamn responsibilities as a CEO and chairperson of over TWENTY subsidiaries that now hang in the balance owing to your heedlessness. Your health has ludicrously deteriorated. Have you forgotten you are diagnosed for diabetes? You seem to have no time for me or Mishka, who must have forgotten by now that she even has a mother! And when I hoped all this weird frenzy would come to an end, you bring this up? A forest? We could buy some land and get some trees planted. You plant that every year. But Casa and Artie and Mrs. Landwill—I—’

Miss Anira sighed and he looked around at the stunned faces that stared at him bewildered with larger ears and redder faces. Regret outweighed his angst for a while. He should have had this conversation in private.

‘The board wants you to take control as a chairperson and CEO of *Revolve*. I think you should do it,’ she dropped the announcement with such dispassion that it appeared demonizing, mollifying the tension in the hall.

‘Because you want to build a forest,’ he muttered.

‘Yes and No,’ she got up. ‘I have been thinking of walking away for a while now. This life no more appeals to me. It made sense when my motivation was to create something outstanding or to make the world a better place. I think I

have played my deed and I hardly care now, I must never have. Anyway, the forest shall need attention for at least five years, and so, it is only fitting that you take charge. You are the most fitting person for the job. I have been monitoring your work for a month.'

'You have been monitoring my work?'

'Yes. I may have been busy with my distinct affairs, but I have looked into each file you put on my desk. I and the rest of the board had a meeting yesterday—'

'I am on the board.'

'Yes, well, the board except you see you as the best next candidate for CEO. Your fear of not being good enough was coming in your way initially but it isn't anymore. You don't have to do things my way, but YOUR way. You know everything about the company and have been making it function perfectly well for over a decade as the Vice President.'

'How could you do this to me?'

'Huh?'

'In all this conversation not once did you ask me whether I wanted this for myself or not. You just assume.'

'Why wouldn't you want to be the CEO?'

'That's not the point. The point is you did not care to ask. You never care to ask!'

He turned away, not able to understand the fury that kept resurfacing in his skin no matter how many times he attempted to shut it down. He took a step away but was halted by Miss Anira's hand on his shoulders.

'You are an incredible businessman. All you have to do is believe the same and follow your instinct. I am sorry if I—you know.'

He nodded and replied nothing. Her words didn't abate the anger but refuelled it, amplifying the diminution he felt so strongly now.

'How much is this forest going to cost?' he asked.

'I have an approximate estimate of eight hundred billion units for the first five years. Isn't that right Mrs. Landwill?'

'Oh yes, that is accurate,' the woman in the tweed jacket answered.

'That's nearly half our fortune,' he said, without moving a muscle.

'Yes.'

'Very well,' he affirmed turning around the table. 'I hope you enjoyed dinner. I have some work to attend to for now. See you later.'

He walked out of the house and drove away, somewhere.

‘So, what do you say?’ asked Miss Anira in a sudden unprecedented cheer. ‘Umm—it looks fine on paper, but to execute it would be a challenge.’ Mr. Brickster kept his gaze stuck on the blueprints as if he was speaking to himself. ‘And the designs do intrigue me, Miss Anira,’ started Mr. Figuresand. ‘But there’s so much abstraction, which is, again intriguing, let me just—’ and he fell into a wonderment.

‘Most important of all is the land. With the current scarcity and governmental restrictions, it is very difficult Miss Anira,’ prompted Mrs Landwill.

Grinning at the responses, Miss Anira giggled before uttering—‘What pleases me the most is that none of you deem the proposal as an impossibility. That is enough progress for me. It is a challenge, sure. But only because of its scalability for now, which also is an opportunity. With such scale, you get a million chances to experiment and fail. You can unleash your creativity, rise beyond your reservations, whichever way you desire, as long as it syncs with the cause. Mr. Figuresand could paint vivid colours, Mr. Brickster could laud biological architecture in its primitiveness, and Mrs. Landwill, Ma’am, this could be the biggest negotiation of your career, something to give a shot I suppose? And it's such a great cause, If we do not turn a blind eye to its benefits. Seasonwood hasn’t received such scarcity of rains ever like this year. Animals get culled every month in the zoos. The air is difficult to breathe in. If you look at the forest solving these problems, you are actually performing a service to humanity. I don’t know if I could deliver a more inspiring speech. I just wish you could see what I see and then show me all else that could be possible. You don’t have to get on board today itself. Take a day or two or a week, but not more.’

In the silent air, the meditating minds staring at the table thought nothing. There was nothing to think. Their current timelines, commitments, finances, etc? Even that, was really, nothing.

‘I am onboard, Mamma!’ Mishka raised her hand. ‘Simba will join us too.’ Everybody laughed and finished their reheated desserts. The wind was colder than most evenings. Fresh new whiffs found their way into the house through many open doors and windows, and farewells were bid in the hope of coming together again and they did.

**

One month forward, the misty wind of the winters eavesdropping during their first meeting had faded absolutely. Tulips, acacia, and Gulmohar sprouted out of the empty branches in hundreds of trees. Under a gazebo gathered the team of four as the sun was rising orange in a watery sky. It had been an hour since their discussion commenced. Mrs. Profty Landwill had been able to find the perfect land for the forest, but arguments stowed around obtaining it. A hundred villages swept over the plain, and the villagers had to be convinced to sell their houses and farmlands. They had planned essential meetings with the government officials concerned, but to persuade the common people for leaving their homes, and preventing them from protesting seemed impossible. 'Okay, so plan A as discussed, is we first speak to the villagers without assuming their disinclination, and try to convince them of the idea of selling their properties to us,' said Miss Anira. 'Then we buy the land for a price that is favourable to both parties.'

'A good chance says that the plan shall fail or take a new turn. Plan B then is to offer them alternative, more profitable land options. A proposal is needed here which shall be Mrs. Landwill's responsibility.'

Mrs. Landwill nodded as she scribbled notes in a diary that rested uncomfortably on her lap. Her eyes widened for attention.

'That too, has a potential chance of backsliding. Plan C would be to offer them a deal they cannot reject. Something they really need and cannot deny accepting. What could we give them that they cannot throw in our faces?' For exactly five minutes nobody spoke. To know what other people need is the biggest challenge everyone faces all the time throughout their lives, let alone providing for it. However, these were the leading people of the business world, and it was greatly possible for them to locate the vulnerabilities quicker and better.

'Electricity,' Mrs. Landwill spoke first. 'We could get them electricity.'

'Oh—okay—electricity,' assented Miss Anira.

'I mean—they do not have the supply twenty-four seven. If it could be possible for us to ensure such a feat which the government shall still take years to ascertain, we could win their trust.'

'Water too,' entered Mr. Brickster. 'It's scarcer than ever.'

‘Accessibility to services,’ pointed Mr. Figuresand.

‘Transportation.’

‘Better Internet.’

‘Retaining Fresh food, Trust, and peace.’

‘Infrastructure! Schools!’

‘SO—we need to provide them with a place that guarantees all the necessities of urban living without the noisy settings of urban areas.’ concluded Miss Anira.

‘Yes, but, where are we going to find such a place? The villagers will never agree to relocate to a city, with the pollution and lack of peace, and so much noise and such fast life. And where shall they farm their lands then?’ argued Mrs Landwill.

‘Then maybe we need to create such a place for them,’ ventured Mr. Figuresand.

‘Exactly,’ remarked Miss Anira at having her idea conceived. ‘We are going to create a sustainable city for them, a space with all the pros of a village as well as a city. We could call it paradise city or something. Oh, that is good. That is good. We should plan on this.’

‘Meanwhile, Mrs. Landwill, please deploy research teams to five villages each and propose these three plans and note their responses, agreements and disagreements.’

‘Reva! Arrange refreshments here. We cannot miss the sunrise, Let’s break.’

Chapter 6

Getting the Land

White paint on the walls of the old building scraped off at random latitudes. Iron bars on windows rusted orange. Worn-out wooden doors opened unclean offices with ancient looking marble floors. The building was dead for years and yet, hustling crowds of people that walked in and out of it pretended to be alive all the time. Some did so by smoking cigarettes in between their laughter, as if inviting the rust from the windows onto their chests to revive the bars, and thus, themselves. Some carrying not-so-important files rushed into their expensive cars and drove away from the stagnancy. Some, like Miss Anira were drawn towards it, for as temporary a stay as possible. Through the passage that appeared like a tunnel with drippy ceilings, she stood gawking at the first door on the left at the second floor. The office of Mr. Dolosus Diddler, the Rural Development Minister of the time, was the most contrasting component in the whole structure. The door was a clean glass, peacocks painted at its centre in shades of blue and green. Walls around it were covered in spotless bright orange paint. A varnished long bench was placed towards the left for visitors, which now lay empty. The office was built in such a silent corner that one sitting inside could be made to believe it was an empty building while activity rippled about everywhere.

‘It is probably going to be more difficult than I reckoned,’ she thought to herself. The Bellboy, Ramu who had guided her to the destination cabin knocked at the door twice before an approval adjured.

‘Aah, Miss Anira!’ said a beefy man in a suit folded into disparate turns as he continued to slump in a moving chair. He was bulky, moustached, and possessed one of those countenances that had he not been ensconced in an office chair in a well-tailored suit, you might speculate he was a goon hired to murder someone.

‘Mr. Diddler, at last. How are you?’ she shook his hand, in which he only let his fingertips participate.

‘Please have a seat. Ramu, fetch us two cups of tea.’

‘I have perused your proposal, Miss Anira, and it looks impressive,’ he started, without bothering to deplete time in formalities. ‘We have a few hiccups though. As you may understand, seven thousand kilometres square is an

exceptionally large area, stating the obvious.’ He stared at her plainly for a second, and moved back to fiddling with the papers in his lumpy hands. ‘No one has ever during my profession has put forward such a request before, but as you seem to have a special referral from the Prime Minister—’ He glanced up again. This time he stared for a longer duration and then immersed himself in the stack of papers.

‘I understand,’ said Miss Anira, interjecting unnecessarily to build an affirmation.

‘Do you, though?’ he asked grimly. ‘The world population has exceeded eight billion and land concerns are not theoretical anymore. Colonising the moon or mars will take at least two more decades. The systems are only setting up. We are short of land and then this extremity of climate change! Every tiny project relating to construction and real estate runs by thousands of protocols now and eighty percent of them are rejected every month due to emission threshold issues or efficiency issues or when the objective of an entrepreneurship is unnecessary. In this scenario, to even consider this huge landmass is impossible. You do know that there are villages up for compromise?’

‘Yes, I am aware,’ replied Miss Anira. ‘And I completely agree with your concerns. But as you can observe from my offerings, none of such issues exist in my ventures. It is just forestry—’

‘Miss Anira,’ Dolosus interrupted in a frightening politeness. ‘I deal with many businessmen every day. Now, they may not be as great a personality as you are, but I can guarantee that not one of them will be spending half of their fortunes to build a forest on an almost barren land. I know how their brains function. If they could, they shall convince and fool people into believing that it was better to be wearing oxygen masks all day as a lifestyle statement or health benefit, and chop down every last tree on this planet without regrets as the entire world would be paying them for oxygen cylinders with alacrity.’

Miss Anira was conscious how one inappropriate comment could abate her chances of procuring what she came for, and how silence could bring her no harm, and so, remained quiet to strike only at the right time.

‘You, on the other hand, Miss Anira, not only speak of your responsibilities, but have proven it to us, with your electric motors, and plantations, and desalination projects. That is why we are entertaining this meeting in the first

place. I still find myself hard to be convinced with your ideas but who am I to question the prime minister if he has complete faith in your proceedings?’ The sarcasm in his voice pressed like alarm and thunder in her chair. Usually, whenever she needed something sanctioned, either no meetings needed arranging but just a call, or her secretary or lawyer or sales managers executed settlements. This was unlike those occasions though, and the evidence of her personally being present put a check to that lack of persuasion. If she wanted the land, Dolosus Diddler needed to be brought to reason.

‘If it was the prime minister who handled everything, we wouldn’t have you as a minister here, or even others, to manage these concerns,’ she spoke abruptly, as if a manipulative switch had turned on in her head. ‘And I would be sitting in the Prime Minister’s office, not yours. It is a matter of great consideration as you spoke so yourself. And therefore his involvement was initially required to schedule an appointment with you, sir, so that you can make your decisions based on listening to my case personally.’

How ironic. The power the prime minister, the ruler of an entire nation, possessed could provide only a temporary thrust, but her future security relied on the man sitting in front of her, a rural minister of just a few state capitals, who appeared more powerful to her than any other man positioned in any part of the world. She understood the concept thoroughly as a businesswoman, and the Chairperson of her company. The marketing manager held more power than she did sometimes, or even the technical head. It then was of no prominence that she might hold prime powers of interest, she was turned into a mere follower. Such arrangements in a system often intrigued her.

A smile crossed over his egoistic face that burned Miss Anira’s heart. Anger rose in her as if his smile was a tinderbox, lighting an instant wildfire. This petulance and acrimony passed quite often within her now, it was positively complex to determine why.

‘You have a huge bricked fence proposed here covering the entire land,’ said Mr. Diddler. ‘That can get people incredibly suspicious. How about I enter “Independent Research related to generating bio fuel through plants” in your job description at the site? That invites the least amount of questions and mistrust, especially after your reputation. Yes, yes, you might be building a

forest but it needs to have a clear placed plan and purpose behind it in the paperwork for approval.'

She dreadfully wished to tell him that there was possibly no purpose, that it was for the animals imprisoned in the zoo, or that none of the stupid, extraneous government or people had any business interfering with her intentions. She nodded and he proceeded with scribbling on many pages. The door into the office opened. It was Ramu with a steel-lined teacup holder. He quietly put down two glasses of tea on their table and was only prancing away when he was asked - 'What took you so long?'

'It was the tea boy, sir. He hasn't come today. His mother is sick in the village. He only rushed there this morning. The replacement got a leg sprain and rushed off home too. The other lad I bought this from was late and had a busy queue. It is the rarest of coincidences today,' narrated Ramu sincerely, casually, slowly. He was not concerned about the tea being served late, but found the reasons leading to the event interesting.

'Ah, the poor child!' animated Mr. Diddler. 'What do you know? At last we have some tea.'

Clouds thundered and Ramu's expression filled with wonderment again. He walked out looking up at the ceiling, as if it was nonexistent and the rainwater would fall directly on his thin, dark face.

They discussed the prospects agreeably for the next half an hour, procured each other's' signatures on various documents, got on call with various lawyers and ministers, and at last, Mr. Dolosus Diddler talked business.

'Well, there you go! The land shall be yours in a month at the price proposed. As for the service costs are concerned,' a hidden grin streaked through his plump, wrinkled face. 'We might be able to settle twenty years of taxation for about two hundred million units. Or if you are looking into fifty years, then five hundred million units, after which it goes tax-free, unless the government changes the law.'

Miss Anira looked sternly at him, his fat nose and fat belly, creases of which lay hidden under his folded white shirt. His wicked eyes wandering about with greed rushed indignation into her bones. 'He should be the one paying me for all I proceed with, let alone demanding a bribe,' she thought to herself, fiercely controlling her agitation. 'I should have been offered this land as a donation for

the well being of the climate and animals long back, but blaming isn't going to help. It's unfair! Yes, it is, but that is how businesses work. Relax. Think.'

The two contradictory voices struggled in the chaos of her drifting mind. The business ideals or even human ideals were slipping away from her grasp. She tried turning to logic but a blur cloud spread all over. She had to close the deal but it was impossible to find the right words or conduct. But then, in a shiny moment, she found a hold of it, pulled it closer, and exhaling some air, almost invisibly said-

'And what about the cooperation of the Judiciary, the Urban Ministry, Senior Tax Department, and other Government Sectors?'

'Oh, do not stress yourself with those affairs. I just have to make two more phone calls and the land will be sanctioned in your name with proper documentation in a month with perfect support from all bodies.'

'Alright then, Mr. Diddler, we have a deal. You will receive the funds by next week, Saturday. The price shall remain what we have agreed on.'

'Yes yes. Although, the property of the villagers does not fall in our Radar. We will be sending them notices stating how government intervention in that land will cease in a month. We still have no idea how they might react. The private property is still there's but the roads, schools, wells, etc have been bought by you privately.'

'Very well, we are in talks with the villagers. I shall keep you updated regarding the same.'

'Then we have this sorted. We shall commence the rest of the paperwork next week.'

'Thank you so much, Mr. Diddler. I will be taking a leave now.'

While they ended their meeting in positive light, Miss Anira carried nil expectations with her as she got up from her seat. When she turned, she was stopped with a question.

'Miss Anira! I hear you are quitting Revolve?' he asked, reading a text from his phone.

'That's correct. That's where I am heading now,' she said, cool air engulfing her face and mind.

'Err—Why?'

'I am bored.'

He widened his eyes and brows arched further away from his temple.

‘Don’t worry Mr. Dolosus. My husband is going to take over the firm and he is much better with handling finances than I ever was. The value in your shares will only multiply with time.’

He nodded. Half convinced, half perplexed.

She exited. Rain poured down the soundproof glasses of her old Mercedes.

‘To the headquarters,’ she told her driver. The most difficult meeting was yet to be attended.

Chapter 7

Who's the new CEO?

Water wriggled down the window glass on the thirty-first floor of the building branded *Revolve Group & Company*. The conference room was empty except for Miss Anira standing with face intimately close to the windowpane, moving her fingers about the rain streaks she could not touch. Shortly, several suited men and women commenced the room. She quickly turned her gaze to observe the thirty black designer rolling chairs being occupied by the personnel greeting each other and her, placed around a huge rectangular table that clocked up most part of the room. A projector, whiteboard, air conditioner, markers, pens, and paper pads were the only other visible accessories.

Anay Pourwall was the last to enter. He donned a navy blue suit with a black-red striped tie, which Miss Anira downrightly despised. With every step that he neared towards the table, she could read him more and better. The pettish, rage, disapproval in his eyes that he hid under a smile and humbleness; the envy, the confusion, the guilt, was as clear to her eye as a blob on a crystal. She marvelled her faith in him, as it kept getting harder to retain it. He was the seemingly most able man she had ever met, but Miss Anira was also apprehensive of the worst that he could be. He showed a complete disregard for her as he greeted her by looking at her face only for a second. 'Just a glimpse?' she thought. 'This behaviour does no good for the day.'

'Good evening, everyone,' she started. 'We are all aware of the objective of today's meeting. We have discussed it informally already, and today we declare my resignation formally.'

'How amazing has this journey been, building each block of this beautiful empire for fifteen years! A few of you were a part of it with me during the nascent days. Like *Markie* here, who wrote the tagline-'*Old enough to drive? Get your gears right*'- for our first market launch in motors. *Creo* designed our first outreach program to students, when we really needed some free hands as interns, or *Maggie*, who helped us find the right talent when we finally chose to hire the big team. If I wish to speak of all those wonderful and inspiring memories, it might take a few books to agglomerate. So, skipping it for literature, I just would say that it has been great and I would never give it up if it was not necessary, but hey, the magic of life is in letting go.'

'I have things to attend to, and projects that need my participation. I hereby declare my resignation from the chairperson, and CEO of Revolve group and company, and thank you all for your immense support, dedication, teamwork, for the firm as well as me. I also want to make it a point that my ideas, hope, guidance, are always available to anyone from this group who wishes to make use of it. Well, that's it then, Cheers!'

The announcement that had been imminent since the first entrance, was not welcomed by claps or celebration. The sullen and disallowing faces remained quiet in their seats, not willing to take a gander up. They were with themselves and the news alone for a few seconds, silent. That was the most flattering response Miss Anira could expect while leaving, but it mattered more in whose administration she was abdicating her responsibilities.

'It exists in my knowledge,' she continued. 'A new CEO needs to be appointed immediately. As per our discussion two weeks ago, I hope we all agree that it needs to be someone from the company itself, not hired, someone who concurs with the visions of the company and operates in best interest for the fulfilment of its goals and profits.'

The bench nodded along. She turned her gaze to her husband again, and there, she saw it, his confounded glee. How could she entrust the reins of her most beloved creations to a man so reluctant, envious, impaired, hypocritical, and repugnant? No, her decision was now made.

'Five votes from the board will decide the fate of the company. I nominate Sally Lite to take on as the CEO of Revolve.'

The board legally held no authority over an appointment of the CEO whatsoever. She owned her company, not requiring to answer to anybody. The board was appointed five years ago to manage the subsidiaries of Revolve that she herself thought incompetent to make all decisions for, including the real estate, packaged food, and robotics. She had offered all five members, four of which were men, shares in her ten subsidiaries to get onboard a 'wisdom committee'. Today, when she remained confounded with apprehension, they were her lifeboat, and while she knew their decision might differ to hers, this stunt was to make a point. She had revered them with power, which they may return as an obligation in the future, at least thirty percent of them.

Murmurs of shock and diligence scanned for Sally Lite. The woman in her forties, the white woman in the black jumpsuit, the blonde with beautiful blue

eyes who headed design. Miss Anira beamed at Sally. She returned the smile in the little time that her jaw managed to not drop down. Anay, paranoid with shock, had even more trouble concealing his loathing for his beloved wife. He could no more imagine this being a professional rivalry as he had prepared himself, but a personal war. Miss Anira proceeded in full awareness of the fact that Anay could still be delegated CEO in the majority of votes, but she could not commit a mistake once the realisation of the doom had struck her, no matter how late. By the percentage difference of sixty-forty, Anay was appointed CEO of *Revolve* after all. The paperwork commenced instantly in the presence of the legal team. When Miss Anira hugged him, congratulating him with utmost sincerity, he got out of her clasp, as quick as he could, and marched to the extreme other part of the room. She watched him shake hands, sign papers, receive his team in joy, and she saw a commitment and discipline, not knowing what it meant. Sighing, she walked away, not wishing to look back again.

**

Later that night, when Miss Anira laid back on her bed, waiting for the arrival of her husband, an event that refused to occur, she witnessed a green spectacle on one of the walls. She had switched the lights on to gulp in some water and had forgotten to switch them back off. It was a grasshopper.

‘Hey!’ she called.

The creature didn’t shift, but its hind legs and forelegs kept moving on the wall in a pattern, like a strum on the guitar strings.

‘You know, in the human world people believe that grasshoppers are a sign of good luck; that they connect with your inner voice and appear as a sign for you to believe in yourself. It is strange how deceitful can this inner voice be. It could be all false and vain, and a leap of faith could be an illusion. Therefore, in other cultures perhaps they see grasshoppers as bad luck. How to know which one is true?’

It made no other motion, engrossed in the process of rubbing its wings.

‘Do you have a name?’

No answer.

‘Do you need something? Are you here with some purpose?’

The insect began turning in a clockwise direction, one set of legs at a time. It wriggled towards the shaded part of the wall where there fell no direct LED light.

‘Good, that’s good. You stay at a distance. That way you won’t sting me, and I won’t accidentally hit you and you won’t die.’

The grasshopper heaved its head upwards revealing a peculiar set of two large and three small eyes casted upon Miss Anira and resumed a still posture.

‘You know Greeny, can I call you Greeny?’

The eyes, hidden under the absence of direct light gleamed narrowly, the tiny dots of brightness guiding their way into faint visibility towards Miss Anira, who sat wondering at a three-metre distance.

‘It is certainly much easier to execute something big that coincides with the majority of belief, and all the more impossible when you know the beliefs won’t ever synchronise with the majority. When I was innovating, creating, developing this business, the world might have stood against me, but I knew it would turn around. That it will see what I see and eventually it did. Revolutions commenced, and I was soon very popular. However, this time, with this tiny idea of a forest, it could never happen. The notion has been presented to this race a million times in a million distinct ways and it still does not make enough sense to most of them. The concern for the climate is fine, but that is not, and never was my purpose. If I can see these animals, speak to them, if I can gauge such a power, there must be some intent of the universe behind it. Even if there is not, and I could help, why won’t I? It is frightening though, to perform anything on this planet with humans everywhere, they still scare me to death, after all this while. I am not pessimistic; it is a pet peeve, human beings dressed as their contradictory selves. Then I wonder whether I am doing the right thing or just hallucinating, whether I have ever commenced on the correct path, and invited the right energy, or it has all been just a waste. Ugh!’ The creature moved its head around, in a back and forth motion.

‘C’mon now, I know you can speak to me. Haven’t you figured it out yet?’

‘Do you know who you are?’ finally hissed a voice. It was sharp, tensed, and darting.

‘Not really. Do you know who you are?’

‘You are what you choose. Call yourself the saviour of life forms, or the chosen one, or the brave, or the smart one, or a revolutionary, whichever title you like, because you must be one of these titles. You must and you must.’

‘Wow—that’s one hell of an advice,’ snorted Miss Anira, hiding a sarcastic laughter. ‘You don’t make much sense to me. The way you portray yourself and the kind of words you chose thereafter.’

‘Your language is limiting!’ it shrieked. ‘Thoughts turn stale, stupid, and unimportant, limiting my imaginations to your logics! How loathsome is the process. Nevertheless, you shall try to seek purpose in my speech. You are meant to follow this path. Just go along. Do not let fear get you off your destiny. Fear has many forms. Sometimes you believe it is not fear that is stopping you, but your commitments, or songs, or love, or attachment, or some other engagement. However, it is always fear. We feel your pain of the future.’

‘We?’

‘The energy.’

‘What energy?’

‘The vibrant energy of this world that resides in us. I will take a leave now.’

‘No no, Hold on! You speak as if YOU are making me do this. Like it’s not me but fate, making me choose.’

‘No, dear, not in any world. It is your individual choice and we are grateful, so grateful. We thank you.’

‘But—but—’ she could not find any more questions to put forward even when she apperceived she should. She didn’t solicit nor require any more counsel. It was preposterous. No questions left? How did the creature know to address the doubts rising in her? The energy? She peered at the grasshopper, no more turning its head, or rubbing and moving its legs.

‘You are beautiful, Greeny,’ she said and turned off the lights sinking her head into the pillow. Only after a few seconds, she turned them back on to check on the grasshopper. There was only the cream paint on the walls left for her to stare at. She hunted for it, everywhere—on the walls, and tables, and floors and carpets; on the glass, and inside the closet. For a minute, she was overwhelmed. Was it really an omen? Some miracle? Then she turned the curtain of the glass window she remembered she didn’t check, it was half-open.

‘Must have jumped out the window,’ she murmured, and slept a dreamy sleep thereon.

Chapter 8

Under the Gazebo

Over a rustic span of a month, Miss Anira possessed a piece of land that even Kings and Queens would struggle to procure in such an era. Registration was complete, inspections escalated, and it remained a deal like no other in the history of business deals. The villagers though, had denied surrender and were unwilling to sell their houses and farms. To address this concern, another meeting was held under the gazebo, in the morning, when the sun was hidden away by unexpected clouds. Clouds were always unexpected these days, and the climate unpredictable like no other time in history, yet. Miss Anira, and the three other team members were busy on their laptops, browsing through files and folders required for discussion. The Gazebo had been transformed since the last time. Desks, chairs, electrical plugs, and brighter LED lights were put together in a decorative office setting. Soundproof glass doors now enclosed them against the activity and noise in the garden. Miss Anira planned the meetings in her property to maintain secrecy of the project, but it kept leaking through.

Mrs Landwill had broken to them the news about the protest of villagers against the idea of selling or leaving their lands and premises. Oblivious to the clause in the contract that stated that the government land in the villages shall be passed on as a private property only after the villagers decide to leave, they had been showing disappointment against the tyranny of the government throughout media. Manipulative headlines breached- *'The government still running away from responsibility towards the farmers?'* *'Does business mean extirpating homes of the poor?'*

An old lanky man, who was a resident of a village called Sclera, announced in an interview- *'We shall not leave our ancestral land and heritage just because some businessman wants to fill in more pockets with money. This is where we belong, and it has more value to us than all the cash in the world.'*

The media didn't stop at interviews or reports, but also inspired the villagers to fight for their rights by pumping in words like- *'We support the grain providers of this nation!'*

This information did not dissolve the mood of the meeting at all. They had a problem at hand that required solving and were interestingly busy contriving a

way out. When inquired about the responses of the residents on the idea of this new city, Mrs. Landwill had informed- 'It was neutral. Some affirmed it in theory, and some were sceptical about it, but no one rejected the proposal completely. It was of course just the fifty houses that our research team visited in five different villages.'

'This is good,' said Miss Anira. 'It is better than we expected. We need to push this further then, the idea of a prolific calm city. We should develop on the city plan and shower some cash in the mouths of the media to shut them up for the time.'

In the later hours of the meeting, they discussed the prospects on the specifics of the city model. With a hundred villages and an average population of eight thousand people, they needed to incorporate about eight hundred thousand people, which they approximated for a million. The group harmonized on the notion of high-rise buildings, galore of trees and vegetation, and shopping complexes, libraries, schools balancing the force on the ground around each building. With the farmlands surrounding hundreds of such buildings, the approximate area amounted to sixty kilometres square for a decent bargain. The gladdening element of this was that Miss Anira already owned seventy square kilometres of fertile land near the borders of Floristine.

When she asked Mr. Brickster to collar complete responsibility for the development of this city, he blushed into a daydream. From designing buildings for corporate, households, governments, and even mini cities, he was enrolling into a sphere of abstraction. He had the freedom to experiment and forge a colossal mass of land his own way. He could have some buildings circular, some taller, some traditional, some spacious and others congested. It was made unequivocally known to him that he should bear no interference, as long as he incorporated the required population felicitously, and updated Miss Anira every month on the progress. Stepping away from middle adulthood, he could not let this opportunity of being himself slip away, and so he was to perform brilliantly, or so was the theory of Miss Anira. The same energy of an 'artistic maniac' shuddered in Mr. Figuresand.

When Miss Anira told him- 'We may need more colour here, Mr. Figuresand,' his heart leapt and took a sharp turn towards excited satiation of art, like in a painting. All those years of his relentless landscape projects, and how he wished to experiment with more colours, and how little was he allowed to!

Everybody wanted their houses to be 'simple' or 'posh' or 'brown', and the offices to be 'minimalistic' or 'office-like' or 'focussed' or 'calm' or even 'designer'. Rarely did anyone ask for 'vibrance', 'music', or the 'variable energy of colours', all about consistency and no expression. Now, he could create, and create absolutely. He drew up some ponds and began shading their outer brick surfaces while everyone had tea. He had proposed the idea of different sizes and shapes of ponds at several places and Mr. Brickster had welcomed it. Mrs. Landwill didn't quite relate with or decipher what exactly actualised between them. She could notice a frivolous downpour of money and in-loss deals. Whether it was philanthropic or stupid, she could not really tell. The one thing that excited her was to strike the biggest business deal of her lifetime, not because of its scale, but because of its complexity, and so, she listened intently. And when others asked her about customer needs and the questions she is put to most while buying estates, she felt important. Miss Anira was often applauded in the entrepreneur world for choosing the right people for her ventures, and she was contended in her selection. 'What a team!' she thought. Her heart floated away in the skies and mind stayed stuck onto the white paper on which she drew her ideas in a chaos only she could structure.

'You wait, my friends. Just wait. You will be out of those cruel gabions in no time,' she mumbled at dusk.

Chapter 9

First day at the Field

Miss Anira after weeks invested in planning and brainstorming on the paradise city model, finally drove to the borders of the forestland for her first inspection. Today, May fifteen, when the construction of paradise city was only commencing, the forest had already been rooted into development over three weeks ago.

The land was to be lined and protected by three layers of walls, each three feet thick and twenty to thirty feet tall, with voids betwixt for traps. She had been primed that hundred feet of complete wall construct, and two hundred feet of innermost wall construct was at the finish.

She stepped out of the car and was immediately received by a sturdy ivory man with a black cap housing his bald head, protecting him from the calefaction from the sun that burnt a little north above their heads. He wore an aqua blue T-shirt with sleeves rolled over. His name was Carl Crane, and his countenance was such that he appeared a man who was always up to something. Miss Anira had noted it about twenty-five days ago when she first hired him and was not disappointed thereon.

‘Over here, ma’am,’ he guided her to the working spot. The cemented bricks were laid in a curvature along a two hundred feet length as promised and four masons worked each side of the wall executing further lines. About ten feet away from the innermost wall construction, a stripe drew as a depression on the soil into a marking that extended until where they both now stood. It covered and formed a rectangular area, which appeared darker and denser than other parts of the land. It had been turned high yielding.

‘That’s Albero Caphill,’ said Carl, introducing a young man in a green T-shirt and brown pyjamas.

‘He looks like a tree, perfectly dressed for work,’ bantered Miss Anira and all three of them chuckled.

‘That’s what my name means in Latin. It is a pleasure to meet you.’ His voice wrung in her ears in a beatific surprise. Bold but gentle. Firm yet placid. Then she noticed his face reveal out of a deceiving black cap. Fair and resilient. A bewitching smile that forced a dimple on his left cheek. Eyes that glee with vigour and compassion. They shook hands.

‘What happened to Miss Crockfire?’ asked Miss Anira.

‘She fell sick with Dengue and asked leave. This man here volunteered who was more than qualified for the job, so we joined him as an interim. He also told us that he was one of the botanists who were part of your greenhouse energy converter program,’ explained Carl Crane.

‘Oh well, of course! You worked under the professor,’ she remembered. ‘But you left a long time ago.’

‘Yes. I have joined recently again as a freelancer,’ informed Albero Caphill.

‘That’s incredible, Caphill. How is the Professor?’

‘My name is Albero! You can call me Albi. Everyone does. The professor is fine. He pretty much works on his own now. That’s best for him.’

Miss Anira reminisced the professor for a split second but shook him away from memory instantly.

‘I gotta get the new truck over here,’ said Carl. ‘The driver is having trouble finding directions. I should be back in half an hour. Albi here shall explain to you the progress and agendas for the day. If you permit—’

‘Yes yes. Run along! Don’t delay.’

Carl Crane mounted on a grey motorbike and drove off. Miss Anira scrutinised the field. A water tanker lodged a few metres away, and a green hose extended until where her feet now scrambled. She had to step away to avoid the running water wet her shoes. Two cement and brick trucks stood half eaten beside the tanker. Hundreds of bags of compost and fertilisers agglomerated around the vehicles. A few countable trees sprang up at random places, old and distinct in their appearances.

‘The soil fertility for this two thousand square feet area, as you can see is covered in a rectangle, has been increased to maximum, which we refer to as Stage four. All the waste, dust, plastics, etcetera, have been cleared away from five thousand square feet areas abut. We intend on moistening the soil for another two thousand square feet there today, cleaning five thousand square feet area over there, and planting seeds on the ready soil,’ explained Albi.

‘And how much plantation do we intend to cover today?’ she asked.

‘A thousand.’ He blew a whistle and gesticulated the workers to come gather. They sauntered in.

‘They are Ramesh, George, Anita, Herb, Neem, Naaz, and Parth. George and Parth are cleaning the land. Neem, Naaz, and Ramesh have been moistening

the soil as well as manuring and composting. Anita and Herb have been sowing along with me. Isn't that right, team?'

Everyone nodded, spoke their greetings and dispersed to resume work. Miss Anira, not slightly pleased with the statistics, replied- 'That's too inefficient for so many days of work.'

'Well, those are just a few villagers who needed work. They came in only yesterday, aren't even gardeners or farmers. They are in training. I brought them here because Carl had lost his workers,' explained Albi, calm as the foot of an old Peepal tree they now sheltered below.

'The workers left? Why?'

'I don't know. They are workers. They leave for all sorts of silly reasons. If one man quits, they all quit. If one falls sick, everyone else does too. We only had eight workers anyway.'

'I can't believe this. I was so occupied with the city project that I lost complete sight over the forest under the dependency of Mr. Brickster. We have to ready a forest, not a little garden. The soil needs to be percolated for aerial seeding next season.'

'Err—you probably need to speak with Carl regarding that, I am just a temp. I am not even supposed to be doing this. I was brought in here for advising, but then I found there wasn't much advising to be done. And what better for a botanist to spend time on than soils and seeds.'

'We can always find something more for you to do. Get along with your digging, Caphill.'

'It's Albi!'

In Miss Anira's consultation with Carl and Mr. Brickster, she was enlightened how Mr. Brickster had temporarily cut loose funds for the forest, because of additional requirements in the paradise city project. Finances were arranged tout de suite and she then decided to requisition the growth of the forest and be directly involved with every tiny discourse, relieving Mr. Brickster of all his duties here. When all the funds were arranged and a new plan was set in place, she was spotted carrying a spade, digging in the field in muddy T-shirt and trousers the next day.

They were planting Maple near the tamarind seeds already sown the day before.

'I can't wait to see it all grown up,' said Miss Anira as she plopped another bunch of seeds into the dug hole. 'There shall be a forest here soon.'

'Sure, but it won't be a real forest in your lifetime,' reckoned Albi, who was now mulching a part of sown seeds with compost.

'What makes you say that?'

'A forest is not just a bunch of trees randomly planted together. It is so much more than that. This place can turn into a forest only after you are deceased.'

'Oi! Lunch time for an hour!' called out Carl.

'I am hungry,' got up Miss Anira, a little irked.

'You can't leave the seeds in the open like that. You have to cover them up before they turn sapless with all the excessive heat. Most gardeners make this mistake often, they don't understand the seed is already a plant, and should be treated like one,' remarked Albi.

'How does it matter? I would be long dead before this ever makes a forest anyway, so long a tree.'

She stooped down to cover the seeds with the soil and Albi sniggered. 'Do you get so cross so quickly with all your employees?'

'Just a select few, besides, you are not an employee, are you? You are a freelancer. And your existence itself seems to be a catalyst for lost patience, Caphill.'

'I could tell there was some connect from the beginning.'

'Maybe a few cross-off-lines on the behaviour there, Freelancer.'

'Sorry. You go have your lunch. I will tidy this up in five minutes and join you.'

After the hard bound labour, sweat, and lurching stomachs, the lunch was the most gratifying. The chapatis tasted crispier, water sweeter, rice softer and richer, and the vegetables carried an exceptional aroma of mingled spices. Even though it was modern times, the villagers, manager, masons, driver, were all surprised and thrilled to have Miss Anira among them. Racism through colour and creed might have ceased in their eyes over the years, but the rich were still rich, and the poor still poor. This belief prompted them into building an unnecessary respect for the woman who sat with them under the shed of a tent they had built with a huge cloth, ate ordinary food, struck ordinary conversations, and laughed, she could laugh like them!

Two hours before sunset, Miss Anira sat herself on the coarse ground, her hands acting as a support and getting hurt like it did not matter. The skyline

was wide and magnificent, and the horizon empty, ground under it endless. She knew exactly where it would end, where the sea would begin, but it was impossible to sight or measure. Albi found a sandy seat near her offering some salted peanuts, which she pleasantly accepted.

‘All done for the day then?’ he reckoned.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘What—what did you mean when you said the forest will take more years than a lifetime when we were sowing?’

‘It’s just the idea that trees don’t just grow in a forest, they communicate. They share, compete, pass on their wisdom, and even take care of each other, for ages and eras. Such bondage requires more than just a few years. It is evident in researches. Some scientists say plants have a conscious. Not all botanists still understand or approve of these findings, but I have also been studying it and one cannot deny its existence howbeit cannot prove it yet. It’s incredible how beautifully these legacies are formed and transformed in jungles and forests.’ Miss Anira received the idea quietly, not foreign to its presentation, but wondering why was it so hard for her to unravel his statements quicker. She travelled back in her memories, to recall when she had heard it first.

‘We had this conviction in the town that I was born—’ she spoke. ‘—that god resides in plants just like he does in human beings, not all plants were treated with specialty though. Just Basil, Peepal, Banyan, amongst the many. We were told to not disturb the plants after six in the evening as the gods slept (possibly to keep away from the CO² emissions). I was six years old and ridiculed the idea, until I planted a plant myself in my house balcony, in an earthen pot, with lemon seeds and mud borrowed from a larger money plant. It grew! Every week it grew at least an inch. It was magical to know how the plant was alive. It surely had brains and heart and bones etcetera. It was long before we learnt the difference between living and non-living at school and details surrounding it. I think we used to call the thing God because we didn’t understand it.’

‘Indeed. I was instructed the same in my family, but then, it was mostly during the discussions on Friday night, and they would say the same about animals and eat complete steak dinners in pride after prayers, calling acquaintances to join in, commenting on the crispy textures and half cooked skins of their gods.’ They exhaled a silent titter.

‘The forest might take time to exist, but you are setting up a base for growth and life. You are creating a foundation for this legacy, which is nothing less than great.’

They both looked deeper into the horizon; as if there was something else, their eyes could not catch onto, millions of thoughts running over, but no words to describe them.

‘I am a researcher,’ he continued after minutes of silence. ‘I was heading towards the rainforests for three years for my next paper when I heard about your new venture. Then I stayed and jumped at the first opportunity to participate.’

‘You compromised your research expedition for this project?’ she asked, startled. ‘Why would you do that?’

‘Well, the last time I worked with you, it was wonderful, even though we didn’t interact on a person-to-person basis. I heard you were bestowing away the biggest business in the world to build a forest. I thought it would be something grand and mysterious which people are unable to notice and I didn’t want to miss it, so I stayed back for a while, and then got offered a job on the field.’

‘Fascinating.’

‘Moreover, it is an interesting story to live around, the dominion of the business race ceding the empire behind to go feed the plants, such an irony. The person who built the shackles of these products, now steps down to notice the damage. It’s the recklessness in the businesses that’s destroying the climate, human brain, and the world, isn’t it? People now want more clothes, mobiles, celebrations, show off and a gateway from responsibility. The materials later all go to waste and burn in the heart of the lands that turn barren, more chemicals are released in the ever polluted air, while the businessmen sit in their high polished chairs to smile silently at the cash, as if they have got limited sighting. Their ten parts of confident damage is then covered up with one part charity or a photo in a magazine farming on a small piece of land or talking about climate change. It is ridiculous. A few individuals do try to eradicate it, but what can one or a few men do?’

‘One man can change the world.’

‘or a woman, who just abdicates the thrown in reality and comes labouring with us peasants.’

She smiled a small smile, but only because she could not resist it. She wished to clear a few of his perspectives, and give him a strong argument against his biases, but felt too tired to do so.

‘So, you left the company three months ago,’ said Albi, brushing off the dust from his hands.

‘Two months according to the official statement.’

‘Do you still feel weird leaving the place behind in the hands of somebody else, even though it’s your husband?’

‘I think it matters more that the company keeps progressing than my feelings about this whole show. He is the right man for the job,’ she said plaintively. ‘He will bring something new and better for sure.’ Lie. She didn’t know or understand how her husband might perform at his duties, and her apprehension was clear in her expressions. They hadn’t spoken for more than a month. He never arrived home before she was asleep and always disappeared antecedent to her waking up. On being questioned, he would ostensibly declare that he has been keeping busy. He would then not reciprocate any messages directly or pick up any calls. Only today morning he had informed her that he should be sojourning in another country for a few days to set up new office spaces. She checked her watch and thought—‘He must be on the plane, flying away.’ She desisted from making any solid guesses about what hovered about his mind, but was prepared for the worst.

‘I heard you didn’t vote for him,’ insisted Albi, mystified at not having infuriated her till now.

‘You have a surprising amount of insider information,’ she rebuked.

‘I planted my sources before I left,’ he winked.

‘I just wanted everyone to make an informed choice and commit to their loyalty wisely. It is also better that headlines don’t read all crazy nexus on nepotism. This way he has a worthier welcome at the company. I owed that to him. He has contributed a lot to Revolve already, and now also took complete charge.’ In reality, she wanted the board to rethink their choice so that maybe she wouldn’t have to bear any responsibility of any damage in the future. If the things go haywire, she could turn back and tell herself she did the right thing. Albi observed her chatter away unnecessarily and watching her lost in thought, he declared to himself that she was untruthful.

‘Men’s real scars and character show up only when responsibility is thrust upon them or when something important is taken away from them.’ She muttered.

‘And you didn’t want your love for him to come in the way of this truth. That’s some dedication for *Revolve*.’

‘Love? yeah,’ she sighed and looked at the skies more interestingly, eyes concentrated on a cup shaped cloud. ‘Are you married?’

‘Me? Oh no. Why do people get married! Why did you?’

Just then, something slithered on Miss Anira’s legs, and she shook it off with a yelp. It was two metres long, textured brown, with eyes that didn’t close. Its thin body shined smooth under the sunlight and tongue hissed out of what appeared a mouth. ‘That’s an eastern brown snake!’ shouted Albi. ‘Get away from it. It’s positively deadly!’

Miss Anira did not hear him. She was busy listening to something else, not the hissing, but the movement of its body.

‘That’s ridiculous!’ she scowled. ‘It’s very typical, isn’t it? You attack us by calling us your enemies. What have we exactly done to share that enmity? We just sat here and gossiped away and you out of nowhere squirmed over my skin. It was pretty natural for me to dislodge you away.’

The snake stopped wriggling towards her and performed funny stationary movements, sending out vibrations through his skin.

‘No. We are building a forest here, for you and other animals. Yes, I am going to get the bears and the birds and the rats here.’

It performed a stunt by lifting himself in the air a little above the surface and landing down.

‘Nothing is going to happen to your peace. It is a huge land, worth sharing. And don’t you need food? More animals mean more variety for you.’ Saying this alarmed her senses. It was terror. Animals eating each other? Why hadn’t she been able to think of this before?

The snake performed another stunt. It formed three rings placed on the top of each other through his body.

‘Alright then, Go along. There’s enough space for you in the west to wander alone. Let us not disturb your peace and DON’T BITE anyone!’

It stood erect and craned the now visible neck.

‘Okay. You are handsome and charming, and the colour of your eyes is mesmerising—,’ she said sluggishly and it craned in closer, ‘—and dangerous. Tick away now. No, you just skedaddle, curvy man, thing, creature. I don’t want to stroke you yet.’

It slithered to the right and then to the left and soon out of sight.

‘What was that?’ asked Albi, shocked. ‘I’ve never seen—’

‘I can speak to animals and they can speak to me.’ The answer was abrupt, plain and terse. Before Albi could shower her with questions, she blurted out—

‘You know where the Professor lives now, don’t you?’

‘Yes, but—’

‘I need his help. You need to take me to him.’

‘He won’t want to see you.’

‘I know he is cross with me and that’s why I need you to take me to him. That way he won’t electrocute me at the entrance.’

‘He will grind me down if I take you.’

‘You know he won’t do that. Please, Caphill, it’s important!’

‘I will stand outside the door.’

‘Fair deal, thank you!’

‘Tomorrow morning then.’

She nodded and almost broke into a hug, stopped in time, shook hands, and ambled towards Mr. Carl Crane, her mind bristling with ideas.

‘And its Albi! Albero for you.’ he tailed along.

‘Later, Caphill!’

The instructions administered to Carl Crane were simple— ‘Mr. Crane, we need twenty ponds to be dug at every two hundred kilometre distance before the rain starts in June. You might not need to bring the water via tankers or from the lake anymore. The hills on the north have to be cleaned. The two cement roads at the fifty-kilometre distance there need to be extirpated with the waste transferred away. Devise a plan and hire hundred farmers and hundred masons for a three-month contract. I think we should begin bifurcation of wall construction, I was thinking of putting fifty parts into action this month, and fifty more starting next month. We also require more water harvesting traps placed before July, and bring in a few camp tents for workers, in case they choose to stay through nights. A building needs construction seventy kilometres north from here. That’s where we plan the entrance to the forest.

We will set up a few labs and living spaces there, as a team is going to get aboard. Don't just scribble it down. I want you to look at the prospective workforce and discuss the plan with me for action day after tomorrow. And hey, I might be able to bring some extra help for the seeding. And thank you Mr. Crane, you are doing a great job!

Chapter 10

The Professor

They drove two hundred kilometres the south of Seasonwood to Milsio, a small town down the Mavecorl Hill, a large hill among other small hills, and therefore a landmark for travellers. The route was unmade, the car jumped around bumpy rocks, and they had to make unusual tiny turns in order to avoid the branches of unpredictable trees popping out into their eyes. 'It's like travelling through a jungle,' Albi remarked shifting nervously on the steering wheel. He had never visited the Professor at his home, but he was certain about the address. Miss Anira was unconvinced by his assurance and when they espied a man wearing a red cloth as a turban over his head ride a motorbike towards them, she was relieved. He carried a hay bag of what appeared to be grains adjusted at the decked footrest.

'Excuse me, Helloo!' called Miss Anira and the man put a brake on. He was pale skinned, old, and possessed fragile muscles stuck all over his body. His generous eyes glittered with dust that must have flown into them over years of riding this path. He smiled through his gray moustache that irregularly covered his lips.

'Sir, where can we find the Professor's house?' asked Albi.

'Professur?' His voice was heavy and raw, with an accent not the most sophisticated.

'Professor Wig yarn, man with little hair, talks all gibberish, a scientist.'

'Doctor!' he exclaimed. 'Not in village. Straight left. Follow path. Big house on right.'

'Thank you, Sir.'

They drove on. The turban man did not leave until they disappeared. He continued to stare creepily, sometimes grinning with an exaggerated kindness. He possibly wished to speak more but did not know so himself. With the little of their language that he understood, he was maybe constructing more sentences of furthering a conversation, or maybe it is too self-conceited to be presuming so of him.

After having driven about half a mile, they caught sight of the huge mansion towards their right. It wasn't in the middle of a jungle as such, just on the outskirts of a well established village, but as far as your sight went, you could

only notice trees, fields, birds, and an open sky. The house, mostly painted wooden brown in camouflage, was a two storey building and had a huge garden surrounding it on all sides. One could identify tomatoes, coriander, okra, mint, capsicum, radish amongst many fruits and vegetables from a far off distance. A test tube stand, telescope, and other experimental equipment stood surveying them under an open shed on the left. Sunlight had crept over the clouds when they parked the car recklessly in the sand.

'If he outcasts me, it is YOUR responsibility!' said Albi at the front door.

'Just ring the bell,' said Miss Anira.

'Who is it?' called a voice from a speaker that they noticed later stuck onto the wall above their heads. It was shrill and pretentious.

'It's me professor, Albi.'

'Albi who? Are you one of the children coming to prank me again? I will burn your hair with electric wires, Gram! Shoo away!'

'No—no—Professor, I am Albi from the Lab. Albero Caphill, sir, the botanist. I caused a blast in your Hydrogen crystals and you grew very cross with me, remember? We have been communicating over the email for a few months.'

'OOOOHHH! Young Captain Albero! What a crazy day it was, I beat you with a stick. I remember, of course. Why are you here?' His voice was no more shrill or carried an intimidating pretence. It was an old man's excited voice. The voice Miss Anira could recognise anywhere.

'I needed your help in a project, professor. Aakav gave me your address.'

'Oh very well, very well. Come in Captain.'

'Why doesn't anybody use my real name?' mumbled Albi.

The door swung open. Miss Anira stepped inside in an instant.

'I better stay here,' reckoned Albi gingerly.

'Oh, C'mon!' Miss Anira grabbed his arm and dragged him in.

What inside was not, was clean, tidy, or organised. As they put their feet on the wool rug, the dust soaked in for probably weeks ascended up in the air making them sneeze and cough. The sofa placed in the middle of what possibly was a living room had about thirty fat books cloaking the maroon brocaded upholstery. The red curtains, most normal looking, obscured all five closed doors and windows. The only light that entered the house was through the main door that now automatically shut close, and the apparent window in the middle of the staircase. A few parts of what might have been machines lay

scattered everywhere. A vacuum cleaner stood at the rightmost corner, unplugged. The kitchen carried a test tube stand, with different coloured chemicals employed within. The sink was crammed up with unclean dishes and a conglomeration of unwashed fruits and vegetables from the garden. Copper wires grazed everywhere. Photos, sticky notes, maps, and boards surfaced all corners of the walls that might have someday looked peach. Compasses, magnets, screws, and a million other shambles sparked up the room.

‘Come upstairs! And DON’T touch anything!’ commanded the professor from the beyond.

They hobbled around the screwdrivers, cardboards, batteries, and other little devices that guarded against them like stun guns before the staircase.

‘DON’T step on anything!’ screamed the professor again. ‘Everything needs to stay where it is. And don’t start cleaning! Like most visitors.’

‘He still whimpers over his toys, doesn’t he?’ whispered Miss Anira. When they finally stood behind the door of the terrace garden, she signalled Albi to enter first.

‘Hiya Captain! Just in time. Look here, I FINALLY repaired the solar juice generator,’ he pointed enthusiastically towards a huge robotic machine with discs and metallic bolts rotating and making a squeaky sound. ‘The silicon was such a poor quality, and the screws all rusty. Even the inverter needed to be replaced they said, but I reversed the polarity and fabricated a few metal holdings, turning it as good as its new less-efficient counterpart, huh, but now—now I can skip a meal every day. I will have all kinds of juices to keep me going. Might have to refrigerate it though, but that gives me a cold. I will just keep it sitting outside for a while. What do you think?’

‘I think it is brilliant, professor. But don’t you think it is too bulky for a juicer?’ reckoned Albi.

‘So it is. Isn’t that just fantastic?’ he jumped up again jestingly.

Professor Wig yarn was fifty-nine years old and bald, except for a few hair near the ears and the back of his head, which he had dyed brown. His eyes were also brown, dark circles and wrinkles surrounding them both, contrasting his fair facade. The nose, surprisingly perfect above his teathy smile and unshaven beard, was covered in dust at the tip. A white T-shirt on his average chest had the conventional ‘*Schrodinger’s cat—dead or alive*’ text printed with a black and white illustration, half of which was now soaked in red paint.

‘What brings you here then?’ he asked, now engaged in tending to a money plant. ‘Is it something about the halophytic seeds you are trying to grow? I reviewed the derivations. There was one obvious calculation mistake. I sent you an email in the morning, didn’t you see it yet?’

‘Professor, it’s just—’ began Albi.

‘Professor—’ Miss Anira cut him short and stepped out.

He turned his head around in horror and gaped at Miss Anira.

‘What are you doing here? Did you bring her here?’ he eyed at Albi.

‘I followed him here,’ said Miss Anira. ‘He didn’t know I was trailing behind. I needed to see you.’

‘Oh, look at you, all innocent,’ he walked towards the fence, aggrieved. ‘Still making silly stories to fool people! There’s only one car parked beside the garden, which you should both now use to drive off!’

‘Professor Please, I have apologised to you a hundred times.’

‘And I haven’t forgiven you. So your being here is ill mannered and impertinent. Now go! And leave me alone.’

‘Oh please, whatever happened was three years ago.’

‘You shoved me out!’

‘You left me with no choice. You claimed your littling device was ready and got ten people signed up for research. The next day, the rat you experimented on burst into ashes in front of hundreds of journalists and business executives. It was a vote of no confidence by everyone in the company. I stood up for you, but had no defence. They told me it was my company so I had to be the one to fire you.’

‘There was a fluctuation. Some idiot kid messed up the calibrator, but I am still working on it. I just have to find the right diamond to recreate a wignium and then you see, I am going to die a little man!’

‘Can’t wait.’

‘But to put that over everything I have ever done—’

‘You also burned down a potential factory that cost the investors a major loss.’

‘Hoho okay but—’

‘AND you threatened a research student who had won a scholarship from the organisation to leave by putting a bomb over his chest. He sued us later.’

‘He was dumb and messed up the system every time. I asked him to leave politely so many times but he wouldn’t skip out. It’s not my doing that he was so foolish and adamant.’

‘You also made him drink an untested antidepressant prepared for the pigs in the south country.’

‘That—he—well if I am such a problem, why are you here?’

‘Because Professor, despite all this—and more—you are the most brilliant scientist I have ever known and no one else but you can help me.’

‘Adulation won’t work. I cannot help you. You must leave now or I will have to use a musket.’

Disgruntled, he turned his back to her and started adjusting a few buttons on his solar juice generator, pretending to be busy. Albi sat down on a cubical rock placed by the fence, aiming to stay out of the way, grinned and stretched his eyebrows upwards, signalling Miss Anira to keep talking.

‘Professor, you know I think you are amazing. Papa brought us together years ago, how could it ever be otherwise? You have been my favourite ever since you taught me that song,’ she implored.

The professor turned his head with a frown, his ire flattening away.

‘What song?’ he asked, faking incense.

‘The song you wrote for me when I asked you to teach me about this particle you said you were inventing. What did you call it? Err—the song of—the song of everything!’

‘Ah yes, you were only seven.’ His frown disappeared and reappeared several times. ‘You wouldn’t remember it now.’

‘Of course I remember it.

WHAT ARE we all? Just atoms and atoms,

What further dwells? Just particles and waves.

Some called electrons, some protons, they move around in webs!

What is life? Just atoms compressed.

They dance around in patterns,

Making us learn and play, like puppets ensnared.

What are you and I? Just physics expressed.

How you think is still a test.

Leave the worries, the marks and the ponies,

Come with me! Let’s learn and learn more,

About the wonderments of the universe instead!

Professor Wigyarn looked at her, then at the ground, and then stared right into her eyes, an event he had been putting off since her arrival.

‘Are you here about the forest?’ he asked.

‘Yes!’ cried Miss Anira. ‘How did you know?’

‘It’s my grandson. He is a journalist now. He was changing jobs, and had to land into the liars’ farm. They offered him chunks of money to write against your project. He demurred, but the other folk who took it up was worse. He has been writing about how you are an icon of how rich dominate the poor, insane bastard!’

‘Professor—’

‘No kid, I am all good with science, but I can’t help you deal with these blood sucking good-for-nothing preachers of morality. With the legal goons, the government, the police, the robotic minds—I can be of no use. Do you see though my dear? That’s what they do. They don’t get our ideas, discoveries, and a will to do something better. They are sick and rotten and slaved and evil and— ’

‘I am sure they are all disgusting. What I really need from you is to man the research team on this project.’ Miss Anira grinned at him flummoxed. ‘I know of no other scientist who would be perfect for such a task. I really do need for you to say yes.’

The professor looked at her with an apparent perplexity. The puzzled expression on his face soon turned irritable when he spoke, very calmly; so much as, it was grim and scary— ‘Is that what you think of me then? You want me to grow plants? It is a brilliant thing that you wish to grow a forest, I favour you. Nevertheless, I think you are at the wrong address. I could help you find a gardener.’

‘No Professor,’ interjected Albi. ‘You are getting it all wrong. It is not about just growing plants, it is so much more.’

‘Yes Professor,’ said Miss Anira. ‘Caphill and I have been discussing a few ideas on our way here. Let us share them with you before you make up your mind.’

They elucidated to him their plans with the forest, the hundreds of kilometres of design that will grow for centuries. They told him that ten teams of botanical research students were to depart on expeditions for collection of seeds into the rainforests, cold plains, islands, and Ghats. Assortment of seeds

of about five thousand plant species was the expectation. In case of inability to wagger seeds, branches or leaves were to be brought in to genetically reproduce them in the labs here. Albi revealed how he had been able to increase the halo-tolerance of a few halophytes by ten percent, and how he wished to experiment planting those seeds near the sea in the forest. Professor Wigyarn was requested to train a few animal species to eat artificially grown food. He was to study the food requirements of about four hundred species, their nature and purposes of hunting, and then creating the taste, smell, nutrition, and training programs for each of them, especially for the omnivores and carnivores. Farms of the villagers, attributes of the desalination plant, efficient use of solar panels were discussed too with a few jokes about how insolent were those villagers. The statistics pertaining to the climate of the forest were laid out before the professor, predicting how the forestry could impact it in the coming years and other studies. At present, the forest resembled the climate of Seasonwood and invited all seasons openly. As many as twenty ponds were needed to be filled up by the month of August, which could prove a significant water resource for further plantation. Even though it was comparatively rainy in the forest area, it didn't rain as much as required for upliftment of the quality of soil and plants.

They also expounded on how a couple of villages could be preserved; roads could be zapped away but houses could reprieve for larger animals to find shelter. When the Professor pointed out he may need some animals to experiment on initially, Albi proposed to arrange some with the help of his contacts with the National Forest Reserve from the zoos of nearby cities. 'A few animals and birds get culled in these zoos every year because zoos are unable to contain them' he told.

'What if someday the forest also isn't a sufficient place for all creatures?' thought Miss Anira and then shrugged the idea away.

When the Professor voiced being a little hesitant about performing closed experiments on wild animals, the time for the revelation had arrived.

'There's one thing we haven't told you, yet,' Albi waved the green flag.

'Actually, I can, sort of, err' Miss Anira placed Fluffball, a pet of Professor's, away from her feet on the carpet where she now purred. She had first arrived into sight when the Professor had collapsed in his rocking chair with a then cold cup of tea finally assenting to a conversation. She sat purring on his lap all

the while and Miss Anira, conscious of her tantrums, huffs, complaints, and sarcasms, had skilfully ignored her to retain the focus in their meeting.

‘I can talk to your cat,’ she completed promptly.

‘I have a name, human!’ Fluffball rebuked.

‘Oh yes, I am sorry, Fluffball,’ she said.

‘I actually prefer to be called Princess Fluffy.’

‘Princess Fluffy it is then.’

‘Excuse me,’ said Professor Wig yarn. ‘Are you making fun of me?’

‘Oh no, Professor. I really can speak to her. I mean, not that she likes me much but—’

‘What do you think of me, child?’ He was not just vexed, but positively incensed. ‘I know I pretend like I understand my cat and often perform telepathic experiments with old circuitry. I am also aware I speak to her about my inventions and implement her suggestions, and when I am lonely I even pour on her my personal grievances, but that you would make fun of me again like that is abysmal.’

‘Professor,’ entered Albi. ‘You need to calm down and let go of your tantrums from three years ago.’

‘But—’

‘She isn’t making fun of you. She really can speak to your cat, and snakes, and perhaps all animals.’

‘What?’

‘I discovered it a few months ago.’ Miss Anira explained quickly. ‘On my birthday, which you didn’t attend by the way, I wished for an adventure and there was this peculiar bird that appeared, and the next thing I know I could understand all that the animals, birds, and even insects spoke, and they could understand me too.’

‘Really?’ The sound of the Professor’s voice was low and hushed. ‘Prove it to me, ask Fluffball to go inside. She never listens to me when I say it.’

‘I can’t “ask” her, but I can request, certainly. Princess Fluffy, could you please make yourself comfortable inside the house living room?’

‘Very well,’ answered the cat. ‘I am least interested in your nagging, anyway, and it can’t be called a living room as much as a garbage bin, that. Give me some milk and I’ll be off. The old crackpot won’t bring me any fish. My soft skin is drying out.’

‘We’ll get you some milk inside in a moment,’ said Miss Anira.

Fluffball pounced away lazily through the door and vanished through the stairs.

‘Wicked!’ reckoned Professor Wigyarn. ‘You weren’t speaking English.’

‘I was speaking English. So was she, I guess, or more of a royal tongue,’ muttered Miss Anira.

‘No no, you were speaking some mumble jumble, and she was just meowing. Maybe it’s your way with trained pets. I have been trying to make a telepathic translator for her. Maybe it has begun working!’

‘No no, that’s not it,’ spoke Albi. ‘I saw her speak to an eastern brown snake last morning. She sent it away.’

‘Blimey!’ shouted the Professor. ‘You really can speak to animals?’

‘Yes, Professor’ said Miss Anira.

‘How do you do it then? What kind of science is that? Is it some transmitter in your head?’ He held her head, jerked it about from left to right, back and forth, and started digging through her hair strands into the scalp through his right hand.

‘Professor!’ Miss Anira shrugged his hands off. ‘It’s no science, just magic, and you need to behave!’

‘There’s no such thing as magic, only science we do not understand yet. Is it some consciousness-sharing device? Some trickery with nano particles? Who conducted this research for you? Was it Blane? Kriya?’

‘There has been no research. It just happened—like a wish is granted, like Magic.’

‘Don’t say that word. It’s almost an insult.’

The Professor managed to pacify himself and seated himself on the harsh stone beside Albi. His face suddenly carried a charm that was old in his being. The kind of peace that exists, the kind of excitement that persists, but never shows up except for these moments of natural surprise and curiosity.

After a long pause, Miss Anira said- ‘I was wondering if this solves your problem of working with wild animals? I could speak to them, convince them not to attack you.’

The professor glanced at her, gravely, with shrunken eyes. He contained the stare for a few seconds, which nobody dared to disturb. Then, he abruptly got up to say—‘We need your brain scan.’

‘No way!’ cried Miss Anira.

Chapter 11

Questions that make you uncomfortable

The Professor rushed down the stairs, his silhouette on the door cueing them it was only an hour before sunset. They both followed the trail that ended in the living room. Observing the professor gather equipments from the cupboards, his study, stack of books, kitchen, and even the laundry, was like watching a kid ride in an inflatable bouncy castle. He swung things around, caught wires in his scanty hair, and scuttled with his tiny old feet across the little dumps on the floor, almost plummeting down at least six times. In about ten minutes, the middle of the room was cleared away except for a high chair, LED monitor, a headphone-like device, and other gadgetry arranged systematically.

‘Come and sit,’ instructed the professor.

‘No,’ declared Miss Anira, taking a step back, cracking a remote.

‘Why not? I just need a little brain scan here.’

‘You need an MRI machine and other technical arrangements for that.’

‘Oh, that’s very old school. This has dynamic MRI, SEPT, CT, X-ray, PRTO, and everything else we need. It is quantum, and can detect even the most intricate electrical signals, aiding me into performing multiple scans at the same time.’

‘You are going to cannonade me to ashes.’

‘Of course not, I just need to observe your brain patterns. It is just observation, I promise.’

Miss Anira frowned at the warbling old man, closed her eyes for three seconds, and on their opening, pushed herself on the high chair with a snuff.

‘Now, put this around your ears,’ he instructed, handing her the headphone-like device, but only three times bigger than a headphone with erect rods placed on both sides. He also offered her to drink a green chemical in a teensy vial, which she refused. He then injected it through her neck and she shrieked with curses for jabbing things into her without her permission. ‘You wouldn’t take it orally’ he replied, shifting his shoulders that irked her further. ‘It’s for your own good,’ he said later, leaving her disconcerted.

‘Captain Alberio, ask her these ten questions. Every time I signal you with thumbs up, you ask a question.’

He handed over a piece of paper to Albi and set off regulating the machinery, turned on his laptop, on which ran a cryptic code. The screen was chequered

blue. A few pop ups appeared when the Professor hovered his hand over the screen, and disappeared when he let go. He then picked up a device resembling an infrared thermostat, and bleeped its red LED closer to Miss Anira's face, and the Laptop screen suddenly displayed all sorts of sigils and graphs.

'Perfect!' The Professor exclaimed to himself and turned a few knobs on a rectangular box. Eventually, after several more adjustments, he pressed a big red button on the control. Miss Anira's heart raced faster than she imagined any machine could keep a track on. 'Okay. Now read her the rules,' he said wheeling towards her, grinning creepily.

Each descriptive question needs to be answered in at least three to four lines.

One-word answers shall not be entertained unless proposed with a mathematical problem.

Any moment that you wish to quit the process, ask yourself the following questions—

Don't you want to know what's happening in your head?

Don't you wish to understand WHY you can speak to animals?

'Now, isn't that wonderful?' His grin got scarier and its expressions felt louder in the room, with two slanted teeth protruding out of the little space between his lips. Miss Anira and Albi gazed towards each other, exchanging signs of excitement and apprehension, and with thumbs up from the professor, the interrogation commenced.

'Okay,' started Albi. 'First question—what do you understand of the string theory?'

'Err—that the theory suggests that universes are constructed out of vibrating strings,' said Miss Anira. 'The subatomic particles that appear point-like are actually strings with distinct patterns? Every universe has a different frequency of vibrations or patterns, and some don't exist because the number is small, and some collapse because—the number—is too big? They collapse into themselves?'

Albi smiled at her nervous and uncertain articulation, squeezing of the eyes, and faltering of speech, that he noted for the first time in the two days they

had known each other. He almost broke into banter but the Professor saw the forthcoming and signalled him to continue with the questions.

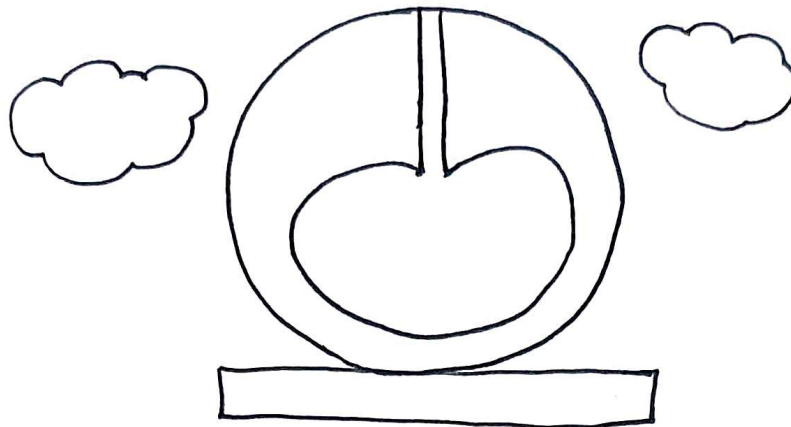
‘What is the speed of light?’

‘Two nine nine, seven nine two, four five eight, metres per second!’

‘What is ninety nine times forty eight?’

‘Err—ninety nine times eight—seven—carry—four—six—FOUR THOUSAND SEVEN HUNDRED FIFTY TWO!’

‘What do you make of this sign?’



‘Oh! It could be a fruit on a table with an internal fallopian tube and bees hovering around. It could also be a little monster kid who had his eyes stolen and possesses two ears that are also getting sucked away by a dark force as a punishment, or maybe those are its floating eyes. It could be an experiment, with a tube or a flask packed inside a spherical ball fuming out dangerous chemicals, or maybe it’s a ball with weird stuff in and around it? Or maybe some space provided in a toy for marbles to roll around and make sound? Yeah—that’s all I can think for now.’

‘Do you find Alberio Caphill attractive?’

The professor furtively glanced away from the monitor to find that Miss Anira was already casting an indignant stare at him. He quickly retracted.

‘Maybe a little,’ she spoke. ‘He is handsome, young, energetic, intelligent, very easy to talk to, and even easier to get irked at.’

She winked at Albi and both smiled out of comfort at each other. This was an old skill Miss Anira treasured, to eradicate the awkward in an instance, which made people enjoy her company. She did fail sometimes at reciprocating for her terse remarks, but due to her position, it was often forgiven.

‘What is your feeling about the absence of your husband’s support in your biggest venture of the lifetime?’ asked Albi and quickly looked away from the raging face of Miss Anira. She was finally vexed to the point that she wanted to throw the device away, hitting the Professor’s eyes where they shied, and Albi’s mouth because of the heedless utterances from his end. Remembering the instructions, rummaging for sanity, her hand holding the headgear tightly loosened its grip, making her think. She was well aware that the Professor was the last person on the planet whom one might expect to engage in frivolous gossip. He had never been minutely interested in her personal life even when she wanted him to. ‘Maybe he is triggering emotional responses, stress due to lying, chaotic spaces turning into order,’ she thought. ‘It must have a purpose.’ Taking a deep breath, she answered with a staggering aplomb—‘A little anger and disappointment, sure, but what I did to him was worse. I think people tend to dramatise marriages. We never did. Thus, today even when we are hurt, we are only hurt a little. He could have avenged me in a hundred distinct ways and put barriers in the execution of the forest project, he did not. His revenge is limited, and so is my disappointment.’

Albi, now ashamed of the questions being put forth by him, muttered the questions to himself before speaking them aloud. He now also stole glances from Miss Anira, but couldn’t help putting off the questions even when he wished, as they all were made compulsory by the professor.

‘Do you feel guilty about the whole affair?’ he asked.

Miss Anira raised her eyebrows and let out a chuckle at the audacity of the circumstance. ‘Not for this particular venture, I cannot afford feeling guilty. However, for the previous few years, yes, I do. Living a life of an innovator, I could not excel as a perfect partner. The repercussions of which have only begun showing now. It’s a little human thing, this guilt, doesn’t affect me much.’

‘Ahem!’ interpolated the professor, a sign to move forward.

‘Create and sing a song,’ remarked Albi.

Miss Anira chuckled, cleared her voice, and threw a rather irregular melody in the air-

*Flowers outside call my name,
Ground holding them close touch down my feet,
Under the crazy sunlight it all repeats!
I can feel it growing in my heart
The lovely song, that never lets us grow apart.
Can you hear the bees hum the perfect beat?
The mooing and cooing in the farmer’s field!
There they all come in delight,
Chirping birds in the height of sky.
Sing with me and feel the light
Music can make our hearts turn bright!*

Albi clapped his hands together and Miss Anira blushed at the stop. The Professor worked faster with the controls.

‘Now,’ said Albi. ‘You are supposed to make a conversation with the CAT.’

Miss Anira, now enjoying the streak of activities and attention drawn to all her acts, called out ‘Princess Fluffy’ with an audible exhilaration. The snowy cat, which had been hiding away curled up under the bookshelf, ignoring the drama in the living room, came squandering.

‘A princess answering the call of a liar! Ugh!’ she mumbled.

‘Are you calling me a liar?’ asked Miss Anira in banter, as if speaking to a kid, prepared not to take anything seriously.

‘You promised me milk.’

‘Oh, right. It’s the old professor then, isn’t it? I told him, but he is too lousy to perform his duties on time.’

The cat glanced at the professor who was now glinting with fascination at them both.

‘Yeah, the old man’s a pussy!’ declared Fluffball.

‘Sure, I wonder how you bear with him!’ Miss Anira, amused by her undertaking, didn’t want to miss a single chance of giving it back to the Professor.

'Ah, it's all noise, noise, noise! Sometimes the cooker bursts, or a canister explodes. He keeps blabbering nonsense to himself mostly, and other times, he grabs me and explains to me his nonsense, doesn't care that I don't care. I am a princess. I need sleep! But the old crackpot doesn't get it, does he?'

Miss Anira burst into laughter.

'You amuse at my miseries,' snorted the cat.

'Oh no, I don't. I am sorry.'

'You aren't sorry. I sense happiness and joy.'

'You can sense that I am happy?'

'Of course, how else do I trust you? Words can be manipulated easily. If someone tells me "I am here to help," I should sense worry or empathy. If I sense apathy or harm, I should run away. You are a human, don't you understand vibes?'

'You mean, you only speak to me when you are certain that I am safe?'

'It depends on who you are speaking to, girl. Koala bears like to strike conversations with their enemies too, I have heard. They are awfully curious, even though dull and dangerous, the black monsters! One of them fought my great grandfather, the rascal! Princess needs sleep now. Ciao.'

Miss Anira watched her walk away into a different corner, under the kitchen platform, near the plastic boxes, curling up into her own little world. 'So those birds KNEW I meant no harm,' she wondered recollecting her experiences in her garden. 'Do I really mean no harm though? Or am I simply being selfish and tyrannical in the future. What shall manifest in the future is who I am now, which no one can sense or see but me. Am I bringing them trouble?' It was all so obvious and yet so new and profound.

'What are your dreams for the forest?' asked Albi again, disturbing her deep corrosion of words, and she was brought into a superficial state again, which she could only comprehend during the transition.

'It's green! Green is the colour of the forest, and so is Orange, and Brown, and Blue, and Black, and Red. Miles and miles of tree ranges, only halting to let the water flow within the ponds, catering to life in the fishes. The bears running wild, Giraffes standing tall chewing away the long leaves of old trees, lions resting in their caves, and no human to disturb their peace, a safe home for all, no killings, no future danger of hunters and knives or fire. It is like building a house with a garden and garage and kitchen, a small beautiful house.'

Wait, was that right? Was she trying to control the forest? The truth was she wanted to be the benefactor of all the species who entered HER world. The forest was HERS and no one else's. The forest is meant to be free, not safe. Oh, her head could explode just now. Morality is so tiresome, and it was eating at her muscles. She could speak no more, nor think. How difficult was answering a mere, ten questions. Was it the chemical induced in her brain? Was it slowing down her brain processing so she felt so fagged out? Or maybe it was just her recklessness. No—stop! She stared at the ground and closed her eyes. Her silence was well received by both gentlemen for a minute.

'For the last bit, you have to drink this,' the professor offered her another vial of liquid, this time shining aqua blue. 'This will instantly put you into a light sleep. You may feel dizzy,' he said.

Miss Anira bottomed down the drink without any reluctance, not wanting to be jabbed by a syringe again. She now yearned to decipher more about her powers than when she first started. Within only a few moments, she felt giddy, and half dozed off, half remained conscious in her seat. She floated in the air, and when Albi called out her name, she remembered it for a miniscule second. It was difficult to think or differentiate between thoughts, impossible to point at what was real and what was not. It was a dream state, but not so much. With no recollection of time or energy, she saw clearly and vividly, a parrot sitting beside her, but what it sat on, she could not tell. Was that right? Was it hovering in the air?

'Oh my my! You appear to be flying all wrong!' rung a cackling voice in her ears. She managed a slight smile, though couldn't feel her lips twitch or stretch.

'I have been drugged,' she said.

'What's Druggged?'

'Just some liquid turning me stupid.'

And she passed out again, this time, definitely and completely.

Chapter 12

Results, no results

Yellow light sprawled across the ceiling, a rather rigid pillow supported her head, and a red-coloured plaid blanket embraced her body, when her eyes flickered open. She studied the small, immaculate bedroom, carrying nothing more than two cupboards, a chair, a mirror, and the wooden bed she had slept on. The lack of light entering from outside concluded for her that it was nighttime. 'What's that smell?' Following an effervescence of burnt food, she walked out of bed onto the cold-tile floor into the backyard. Professor Wig yarn was busy laying a few lumps of spiced Paneer onto the barbeque grate, and Albi was picking out the ones already cooked with a pair of tongs. Two huge plates carried pieces of meat buns for hot dogs, which sourced the smoke. Both men wore woollen caps and sweaters reminding Miss Anira of how cold it was and she regretted not bringing along the red blanket.

'Hey, you are up early, we thought you were going to be passed out for centuries,' said Albi. 'We got lots of veggies for you here. The kitchen was a mess, so the Professor suggested a barbeque.'

She sat herself on an empty carton box, grabbed a plate, and quietly gushed down what she could pinpoint was some capsicum, tomato, cottage cheese, garlic, salt, and other spices she couldn't identify. After feeling half full, and ignoring Albi's comments about the sudden chill in the weather to not get conscious of the freeze, she finally said arcing her eyebrows—'So, Professor, I hope you have a detailed explanation ready for all that occurred today?'

'The experiment—Oh well—I had to make sure your brain was fully participating,' he began in his fast and sloppy speech. 'First it was general information retrieval, its synthesis, and reproduction. Then, I moved onto math, logic, creativity and transitions. I wasn't sure whether it was the right way to proceed, but then the risk assessment showed this to be the best trial choice and I was right! Dynamic connections once established made it easier to send out high level frequencies and then charting became all the more exciting!'

'What about those personal questions?'

'That was necessary too, wasn't it? For the amygdala! It's the big triggers for the brain, human connections, anger, guilt, romance, love! You shouldn't look

at me like that, and eating is important, don't stop or spill the food! Your stare would narrate a different story once I showed you what I am about to show you.'

He quickly hustled into the house followed by Miss Anira and Albi and picked out a piece of paper from the hundreds that lay scattered on the piano, and fondly exhibited to Miss Anira. The paper had imprinted a colourful diagram of the structure of her brain. Red, green, yellow, blue, purple, and brown shaded regions overlapped each other at distinguished places highlighted in bright lemon-green colour. There also were printed a few bold lines at some boundaries on the sketch.

'Don't you see?' exclaimed the Professor.

'You mean the lines across the top region?' asked Albi, who studied the scan from a distance.

'Why yes, It's phenomenal!'

'What is it?' asked Miss Anira.

'I have no idea!' The cheer in the Professor's voice was least misleading to them both when he returned explaining excitedly. 'I had turned the RF altercations highest while you had a conversation with the cat, and this is the result I got! There have been transmissions above your head. The different shades are for the activities within your brain corresponding to various internal factors, but the lines over the boundaries are something else. When you were almost asleep from the doze of injection I provided you with, the same high levels were maintained, and—' He rummaged another sheet of paper out of the pile. It had a much thicker line above the brain. So thick, that the paper couldn't contain it.

'You see? It wasn't limited anymore. You were transmitting everywhere. The field stretched for at least a few centimetres on the sheet, pumping out of you!'

'This must be true for all brain scans,' spoke Miss Anira. 'We all have a consciousness. Maybe you haven't tested other people with a procedure so accurate and with such high frequencies.'

'Oh no, no, no! The experiment has been performed MANY times with significant variations and people have shown all kinds of individual readings with even an RF higher than I exposed you with. They all displayed prominent changes in activities WITHIN the brain. You see the red and yellow shades?

They are the regions with highest activity. It increased and decreased inversely in different people, but no one had an arc over their heads. It hasn't been recorded. Not in the history of any of these brain scans!'

Miss Anira was lured to touch her head and check for the pressure above her skull, but contained herself, not wanting to appear stupid. What she couldn't control was the validation of being special. What stood before her must be something unexplainable, something magical. The Professor didn't discern it either, which was not a common occurrence. She has been chosen. She hasn't been fooling herself all this while. There must be some link with the forest and everything else. It was beginning to make sense, and not just sense, heroic sense.

'It's like having an aura,' said Albi amusingly, while he studied the sheets again.

'You could say that, but I have my own theories,' expounded the Professor.

'The most fitting among them is that You, Annie, develop a shared consciousness when you connect with those animals. It is sort of a dynamic space. It is triggered by their presence and then you share similar intelligence, understand each other's language. The other creature doesn't really need to learn the strategies of information processing because it is already using your circuitry.'

'But, Professor, how do they then remember everything from their perspectives and sightings days after I have spoken to them?' asked Miss Anira, not out of the will of getting the question answered but to simply blurt it out of her head into formation.

'Ah, so they even remember!'

'Yes. Your cat has been sulking since we entered the room. Can't you just feed her already? And the birds in my garden also have a great memory. They talk about different shapes and colours I can never see.'

'They talk of these colours presently or from a memory?'

'From memories of their travels, recent ones. They see so many different skies, while I see just the one.'

'That's curiously then,' hushed the professor and fell into wonderment.

'So, are you implying, Professor,' interpolated Albi. 'That for now, we could call this MAGIC?' The grin on his face shone into a banter.

‘NO! There’s no such thing as magic!’ screamed the Professor and turned to Miss Anira. ‘Are you sure you are not hiding something from me, some secret experiment under your nose?’

‘I told you already, no! I know nothing about any of this,’ said she, vexed for the hundredth time.

‘Well—I had to be sure. Worth a shot, huh?’ he muttered to himself and sighed away from the scene, lost in his thoughts and dreams. Albi and Miss Anira later spent their night watching moving planets and burning stars through a telescope on Mavecorl Hill, and drove away next morning.

Chapter 13

Three weeks later

Miss Anira sank into a chair in relief on returning home after three weeks spent in the forest preparing for the sail-off of the thirty voyagers onto their journeys into distinct forests to collect seeds and plant samples. Her eyes gleamed with energy, heart thumped recklessly, and sleeplessness of several nights did not deplete her vigour to the least.

Anay's return was due the next day for which she planned vividly the arrangements within the house that had witnessed neglect for days together in participatory absence of both owners. Reva was instructed to carry out deep cleaning of the entire house, every nook and corner, replace curtains and bed sheets in all rooms, even those unoccupied, and guide the chef to ensure the availability of all groceries for preparation of her husband's favourite meals the next day. He had told her that he wished to discuss something of importance. She didn't bother to imagine the details and waste her breathe, but rejoiced in the idea that they might have a proper conversation at last.

'Ma'am,' entered her assistant Tasha in her blue-grey formal suit, interrupting her delirious trance. Due to Miss Anira's absence from a permanent office and an erratic schedule, Tasha now coordinated with her directly from her residence on a weekly basis, after confirming her availability with Reva, the head of staff.

'Glad you are back. Your meeting has been scheduled for an hour hence.'

'Meeting?' asked Miss Anira.

'Yes ma'am, your meeting with the President of the farmer's protection committee of the green revolution, the FPCGR.'

'How fancy,' retorted Miss Anira. 'I told you I don't want to engage in any of these little follies? Why would you put me through such hell?'

'She insisted, ma'am. She has a special recommendation from the Minister. He left you a note stating this will help you maintain the right public image.'

'Well if it's the MINISTER—' sarcasm dripped through her voice morbidly, evaporating every trace of the rapture she was experiencing a few moments ago. 'What better way to rue the day eh? Fine, I will speak with her. What was her name again?'

‘Leena Hammock. She walked the stage with you in the national parade two years ago.’

‘So she did,’ remembered Miss Anira. ‘We shall meet in my study. I don’t want her anywhere near the garden commenting upon my plants and my ill gardening procedures while I try to blow her off, and Tasha, loosen up the uniform, will you? We are in a living room, the place is technically built for comfort. I wouldn’t even mind you in your PJs.’

‘Noted, ma’am. She shall be sent in your study at four.’

‘You aren’t going to stop wearing those things, are you?’

‘Sorry, Ma’am. I think it better to be dressed in formals.’

‘Good, it suits you.’

*

Leena Hammock did not show up at four. She was seated on the second table to the right of the entrance to the study, flipping roughly through the pages of the book *‘Botany for physicists by Rein Chatterjee’*, half an hour early. When Miss Anira arrived, exactly at one minute to four, she remarked—‘Oh hello, it is wonderful to finally have you here. I have been waiting for only half an hour.’ Ignoring the absurdity in the comment, Miss Anira simply said—‘It is a pleasure to meet with you again, Leena,’ and grabbed a chair.

Leena Hammock was a short, stout, dainty woman with milky skin. Somewhere in her mid forty’s, she seemed healthy in her well-fitted yellow Kurta, and high bouts of energy in her speech. Her handbag and car keys were arranged neatly on the table on her side.

‘The pleasure is all mine,’ she smiled.

‘Would you like some tea?’

‘Oh, no! Miss Reva has been incredibly kind to me in those matters. I just finished a cup.’

‘Maybe some for me, then.’

Miss Anira signalled Reva who peeped through the entrance to bring in snacks, tea and water, which was compensated immediately.

‘So, how may I help you, Leena?’ she asked finally.

‘Your latest real estate purchase has become a topic of national interest,’ began Leena. ‘All kinds of rumours are encompassing the same. We, as an organisation also took liberty in our endeavours into learning more about it.’

My team spoke to a few farmers who narrated their incidents of being coerced to move away from their lands, but some were also pleased at the fact that you proposed an alternate land and even a creative building space, about which I have received factual confirmation only today morning. I have been driven close to this project by surprise and curiosity. I understand there must be a lot more under the bridge that the media and villagers haven't shared with us.'

She paused, expecting a comment from Miss Anira. When none came, she continued.

'I am not only the President of the Farmers' protection committee of the green revolution movement, but one of the few select leaders who have strengthened the entire movement for the last two decades. Consider me a Flagship leader for the movement currently. I am even a vegetarian, just like you.'

Miss Anira's face indicated no change or impression. She simply wished to listen to the mumble and get rid of the old chatty Minister lady as soon as she could.

'I have a few collaborations I wish to propose to you. We have charted them out in the favour of both parties, but first, if you could highlight on the importance and characteristics of your project. I shall be pleased to after all listen to your version of the story.'

She stopped. Miss Anira leaned forward from a restful position, and commenced calmly and slowly.

'Leena, the villagers are being asked to move out of the place because that piece of land is the only idealistic land area that the government could provide us with. It is a huge empty mass, and those villages occupy only a few square kilometres in the middle, a nut bolt or capacitor in a gargantuan machine. It is very unreasonable to expect us to procure another piece of land, which is not even technically possible in today's circumstance, than to let us try to crack a deal with the residences of those villages. We have ensured that they move to a more sustainable place, where the lands are five times more expensive in future prospects. Their farmlands have been compensated for, and we are building a fully self-sustaining city for them, one of its kind. They aren't being forced to do anything, but we shall obviously be required to convince them in our own ways. It is only logical. Once they understand the deal, most villagers

have been happy to make the shift. Media has been portraying things differently, yes. You know how it is, not their fault. Only little information is available to them in the matter.'

The diplomacy in the last phrases was already exhausting Miss Anira. She was done with such shrewd conversations. They made no sense and carried no purpose. She felt as if she was drifting away from these humanistic alliances too. It was irrational, yet the experience was taking over her thoughts, and she struggled hard to keep her mind logical and sane.

'And about the project—it is a private investment. I am just planting trees, as you might have heard. That is all there is to it for the moment. Why waste the space when you can turn it green and alive?'

'I must say I have heard a lot of stories about this private investment of yours,' suggested Leena.

'And what might they be?' An amused expression surfaced Miss Anira's countenance.

'For starters, that you are going to be working on sustainable energy generation through plants, bio fuels and the like. The other rumour went on saying you are stepping into an agricultural venture. Some, quite popular stories say that the land is being walled to conceal future illegal activities planned for the twenty second century underworld and how it is extremely capitalistic to take away the lands of poor villagers for personal monetary benefits. The last one, which is the most prevalent, and went along with your resignation to Revolve is that, you have gone crazy, or what youngsters like to call—mental.'

Miss Anira let out a chuckle. The meeting was turning into a fun retreat in the after all.

'Which one do you believe in?' she asked.

'None, they are mere stories, and are the least of our concern,' said Leena, bringing out a file on the table that she had extracted from her brown handbag a few moments ago.

'I have a few proposals here for you. We would like you to collaborate with us. You could become a great example for people across the world to relate with the food crisis. FPC is starting new campaigns for the awareness about how agriculture protects the environment and benefits of vegetarianism. We have fifteen NGOs already tied with us. Some volunteers have begun working on

small pieces of lands inherited by various old farmers in Floristine already. You could be the ambassador for the same and market a strong positive image. One of the stories could be validated and then whatever you do behind those closed walls, no one would interfere for years.'

Leena Hammock grinned and shined her twinkling eyes subtly.

'And how do you profit from this?' asked Miss Anira.

'Profit? It's our job as a community. We have the responsibility for the future!'

Miss Anira raised a brow.

'Well, okay. We need more volunteers from across the nation to contribute to us free of charge because the government funds are all being dumped in other schemes. With too many independently formed initiatives, we have little sustainability and traction. Your face could market this well.'

A pause embraced the air for a minute. Miss Anira stared at the table, with her hands clasped, thinking. Suddenly getting out of her meditation, she spoke—

'Do you know why I met with you, Leena Hammock? At the parade, when you walked with me two years ago, you offered me a hand and saved me from stumbling over a trinket some kid had thrown on the carpet. Later, you offered me a cup of tea, which was extremely aromatic and delicious, with the perfect drop of ginger. You were so kind to me. Today, utmost unwilling to have any unnecessary meetings further on, I had you invited to return the kindness. I believe I have accomplished the task.'

She observed Leena's clueless face turn pale.

'The conclusion is that I am not interested in any collaboration or involvement with your campaign or organisation at this point. However, I truly appreciate your generosity and efforts to try to turn this over. I might also go on a limb here to state a few additional facts. You obviously did not meet with those villagers out of concern or curiosity, rather to collect enough data to offer me a fair deal, to find my weak spot and push on it. I am also certain that your deal doesn't end here and you eye at a few monetary benefits from this association. It's not very hard to identify these strategies, and I might have even accepted your offer on some conditions if I cared about my image in this world, I don't. Besides, even then this plan was—not—very good. Anyway, I am simply planting trees and don't wish to be disturbed. I hope you understand.'

With this, the meeting was concluded. They exchanged a few cordial lines before parting and Leena Hammock chose to leave the file of the proposal at

the desk, just in case. After she left the study, escorted by Tasha, Miss Anira screeched loud and lividly— ‘Why is talking to humans becoming the most difficult thing in the universe! How long will this persist? How much further am I to carry on this way?’

Chapter 14

The tiff

The arrival of Anay Pourwall was handled by the house staff with subtle ferocity. At nine in the morning, blaring car horns made their way into the property. All the chores and cleaning that was often stretched until later part of the noon was complete, and each staff was on their foot to receive the commands from 'Sir' at the slight ring of the bell.

Miss Anira had dressed up in black, their favourite colour of choice and had adorned herself with great many accessories; the most influential of all was her bright smile. Mishka had also cleaned herself early to receive her father after days, returning with the fulfilment of her special requests of foreign toys and gifts. They both waited at the front door while he stepped out of his car. He wore a full-powered black suit and charmed his way in. Mishka ran and jumped into his arms, flinging both her hands around his neck, making him lose a little balance on the rocky pavement. She was now nearly six, and heavier, and it was getting all the more difficult to carry her around.

'Did you get all my toys, papa?' she asked.

'Oh no!' animated Anay. 'I was so busy with the work, darling. I am so sorry.'

'That's okay,' she spoke reassuringly in her childish maturity, looking furtively at her mother who taught her with her glance to let it go. 'Maybe the next time, I hope your trip was good.'

'Aren't you the sweetest kid in the whole world!' said the father and pecked at her cheek. 'There's a car on the way from the airport bringing a huge bundle of toys and gifts demanded by my princess.'

'You GOT THEM ALL?'

'Of course I DID! How could I NOT? Now go with uncle Drively and ask him to put it all in your room real nicely.'

She gave him a last kiss and slipped away, waving the frills of her purple frock in the air.

Anay then walked towards his wife, embracing her and planting a subtle kiss on her hair. Miss Anira, along with others, could not help but notice the impulsiveness in his conduct, but ignored it instantly. She had vowed to only see what he wishes to show and only hear what he says, judge nothing, so that a peaceful day could be possible for both of them. She felt guilty looking into

his eyes and remembered all her actions of the past that caused him hurt, biggest of which was the ignorance of their conjugal affairs, and she yearned to make amends.

‘How was the flight?’ she asked.

‘Good, really good. I flew in our jet. It was so comfortable, I have possibly overslept!’ he spoke jeeringly and turned to the staff with greetings and inquiries.

They walked into their bedroom. After freshening up, discussing the weather, Mishka’s school progress, calls from relatives, and other trivialities, Anay displayed a folder out from his office bag.

‘We are boosting our investments in the Mars Project. Plans for three new product chains for the coming year are set up already. Personal space planes, transformed gardens, and comfort in space. These will also deal with the terraforming problems, medical emergencies in space amongst other things. We will be the first suppliers for a variety of as much as hundred important space products in the next ten years. We are also working on introducing space travel for common man very soon. It is all just like you dreamt of. We are going to be the first elite business on Mars.’

Miss Anira flipped through the file, and mirthfully rejoindered several remarks.

‘Is that the spring model design with ventricular engines?’

‘What’s the power loss on this thing?’

‘Ah! It can be recalibrated later maybe!’

‘I need to speak to you about something,’ Anay spoke hesitantly this time.

‘Yes, of course.’

She put the files and pages away, gazing at him attentively to his surprise.

‘We have been planning to set gear to project Ceasefire and project Freehold. You know the ones proposed two years ago in our annual meeting?’

‘But they break two of our signed climate treaties, and five others pertaining to environment and human growth ethics.’

‘They abide with all the essential ones set by the government and other private businesses. These are OUR treaties and we are breaking them now, especially with fashion, packaged food, automobiles, and real estate.’

‘WHAT? Why would you—’

‘It is costing us a lot to keep up with these self-created laws and the productivity isn’t at par with expectations.’

‘This is NOT NEWS! It has always been like this. We always put sustainability and purpose forward even when we had to incur these costs, and we never had to topple a loss because of these.’

‘Yes, but now things are different. We HAVE to make different choices.’

‘HOW? How are things different?’

‘We have significant responsibilities. The Mars project needs to collate sufficient funds by the next two years—’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘We are pretty much at the acme of our business here on earth, if we do not make haste, the Mars could be taken away from us. We have to start growing as an inter-galactic entity before we get there. And for that, we have to take these measures.’

‘We don’t have to do this. Earth is just as important! I won’t let my company turn into a nature-destructing-human-clone-building-piece-of-anarchy! I understand your concerns with the efficacy, but even with this ROI, we are still at our best and are most profitable. We can wiggle things around; something can be made to work. Look at the long-term consequences. We are what we are because people connect with us and agree to what we do. How can you sell the healthiest packaged foods of the century if you are damaging the crops themselves? We have to be better not worse.’

Anay sighed and Miss Anira stared single-headed and wide-eyed in his direction hoping for a turned response.

‘You are just overreacting,’ he said. ‘And it’s a decision made by all the board of directors.’ His voice was firm this time.

‘Then they have gone crazy!’ squeaked Miss Anira. ‘I won’t let my company, something I created to serve the basis of humanity to turn into a senseless business outrage!’

‘It isn’t doing any of that. You are simply exaggerating. We are going to abide with all the government rules. No business in this world takes all these matters so much above the profits. We need to scale now, and you should have thought of all this before resigning.’

‘What’s that again?’

‘The wife resigns the company and husband snatches at her job without consent!’ He flung a newspaper towards her. ‘It’s all over the news.’

She put the paper aside without reading.

‘How does it matter? It’s the funniest headline I have ever heard. You know why I did what I did. Had I voted for you, it would stamp a trademark on your capabilities. You have been chosen despite the disagreement. That proves YOUR credibility. And you were the Vice President of this firm since long ago. All the team loved you from before.’

‘That’s not how the world sees it though, does it?’

‘Why does it matter? They will forget it in a year when you prove your worth. Do you care about your company to think well of you or the people outside?’

‘Both, it affects the market.’

‘Not as much as you think. Besides, you already had a great reputation even before—’

‘LINKED WITH YOU!’

His words screamed so loud, that the little lights on the chandelier above them vibrated into tinkling sounds. His expression, for the one second that he breathed it out, made him appear a monster trapped inside a handsome human form. His rage and temper filled in the room in the kind of gloom and gravity the place had never seen before, and thus, did not respond to it very well. Both of them halted their reins in silence. Miss Anira sipped in a glass filled with coconut water kept on the bedside. Anay strolled across the room and sat down on the sofa, tapping his black shoes on the carpet.

‘We are also shutting down all the NGOs,’ he announced finally.

‘How many more of such shocks shall I be expecting today?’ Her voice was now distant and not participatory, like it had lost all colour, out of tiredness perhaps, disguised into a strange calm.

‘There are a hundred of them, all in association with Revolve. We need investments for the Mars Project so we are letting them go. Don’t worry, we shall provide the orphanages, old-age homes, and schools enough time to get everyone out. We just have announced no new intakes. Once everyone is passed out or dead, we will shut them down. It might take about twenty years. I have spoken to the board and they are fine with the timeline.’

‘Why are you doing this?’ Her face had turned kindly and exasperation had snatched over her tone. ‘The Mars project could still happen if you don’t start parallel projects and focus the revenue on just this one.’

‘But what about business growth in other sectors?’

‘They are all already growing.’

‘We need more numbers.’

‘Since when do you care so much about the money?’

‘Since you took it all away without even seeking my agreement.’

‘TOOK AWAY the money? I freaking gave you all my shares in Revolve. I made you the owner of my company, something I dedicated my life to.’

‘You SOLD them to me!’

‘For one fourth of the market price! So technically, no, I did not sell them to you. I gifted them to you.’

‘As a compensation for your guilt and disregardful actions?’

Silence.

‘Look,’ he said. ‘I can’t stop you from spending YOUR money. I just never realised I didn’t have as much. To be a reliable CEO, I HAVE to make these tough calls. Billions of units of investments are needed every month, and this is the only way to go right now, unless you are willing to let go of the forest?’

‘Hah! The FOREST?’

‘Yes. Consider it a choice between the NGOs and the forest.’

Miss Anira got up weekly and strolled towards the window trying to pacify her mind from all the unnecessary turbulence around the air. She noticed a pigeon flapping its wings at her from the nearest tree her eyes could fix on. She smiled at it and felt a rush of cool breeze settle within her body.

‘There never is any choice with the forest. It is mine.’ She said.

‘And I cannot give up my plans,’ he replied, calm this instance. She turned towards him and observed his face. Nervous; his muscles stiff from the anger he held graciously beneath the twitching lips and the bulged flaming nose.

‘It’s not just the project, is it?’ she spoke. ‘There’s something more?’

‘If you must know—I am going to turn an old man in the span of only a few years and am facing a midlife crisis. I have to become the richest man in the world before my body is unable to cope up with eighty hour work weeks.’

‘Richest man in the world? What would you want to do that for? Oh right right—I get it—it’s a competition with me.’

‘No. It’s a lot more complicated than that.’

‘I am listening.’

‘It’s about proving to myself that I could do it too—all of it—stand in your shoes as a CEO, I wish to earn the same respect or more. People are always

comparing me to you. I just want to pave my own path and be best ever at whatever has been offered to me as an opportunity.'

'Right, a husband wanting to outrun his wife, it had been days since I heard something like that.'

'It isn't that.'

'It is.'

'It is not!'

'I hardly care. I just have a favour to ask, after which I shall be off.'

'Tell me.'

She asked him to place the headquarters of five of his new agriculture and software-based companies near paradise city, to which he readily agreed. She also proposed training the eligible villagers to employable skills. Buildings were already constructed waiting for occupancy. Even rentals were made available for workers coming to work from the city areas. She also requested him to mark the city as a significant delivery location for the ecommerce giant that was Revolve. He noted down all the requests and ensured their completion without any hesitation. As she walked towards the door, he said- 'There's one more thing.'

'Yes?'

'I don't love you anymore.'

'Hah!' she scoffed and stepped out. It was difficult to breathe, or walk, or speak or exist, for both of them, but they did anyway.

Chapter 15

The Queen Hyena

Two Sambar deers, two Parakeets, a Raccoon, a Hyena, three Chimpanzees, and a Koala Bear were rescued from being culled in the Creekhood zoo, as a courtesy of Albi's contacts in the National Animal Reserve Department. A few net cages were set up in the middle of the forest, far beyond the wall or pond constructions. The Professor had some tents established near the animal resorts for a temporary laboratory and a power generator was placed outside to feed on the sunlight for maximum electrical output. A veterinarian, Dr. Glop was called in to check on the Hyena, a parakeet, and the Koala Bear, who continued to be displeased and inactive, and as reported by the zoo, were 'too sick to be aided for'. The doctor had left a few bottles of potions with the Professor, who secretly mixed it along the regular food chunks he serviced to them for experiments. For the first two days, the animals declined Professor's food shamelessly. The third day though, the fifth prototype was accepted by all exempting the Hyena. The Koala Bear was especially quick to acquiesce with a replacement for Eucalyptus-tree leaves; a 'koala tart' as the professor called it what appeared like freshly baked cookies.

Miss Anira visited the cages daily during her breaks from mulling the soil, administering the building work, and learning from Albi the hacks into efficient forestry practises. Albi and she, while consistently planning and instructing the workers along with Mr. Carl Crane on distinct ways of increasing the fertility of the soil, and plantations, also performed little experiments of their own, aiding Albi in the research he seemed to be missing out on before.

Apart from the hundred masons, workers now numbered over two hundred, most of them from villages around, trained by Albi on the basics of plantation and nurture. A few of them, in enthusiasm that the botanist had induced in them regarding forestry, brought vegetable waste collected from their villages early morning everyday, which they used as manure for trees either through water, shredding, or simply playing 'Who throws the peel the farthest' with their fellowmen. The most convivial part of the day for them though, apart from lunch, and throwing away waste onto the seed soil, was to peer at Miss Anira speak to the animals in their cages, and register the sight of the animals responding in strange poses and activities, for tales to tell their children.

‘It’s just a few more months, I promise,’ said Miss Anira to the Koala Bear, who munched on the false Eucalyptus, just a child, not bothered to reply.

‘Take me back,’ groaned a voice to her left. She wheeled about, studied the four-legged creature and noticed the movement in her muzzle. Frail from disease and malnourishment, the Hyena elevated her head feebly upwards and stared distortedly through her black eyes at Miss Anira. Her fur was rough, white patches prevailed across the entire coat, and the black spots were fading grey. Miss Anira walked closer, and kindly lowered her eyes. ‘Take you where?’ ‘To my sisters, my children.’ Her voice even though low-pitched, shrieked a tearing sound. ‘They all wait for me. They need to be fed.’

‘The people in the zoo were going to kill you because you are sick,’ said Miss Anira. ‘You are not in the condition of feeding others. We had to bring you here to save you. Your children are being taken care of, not as well as with you, but they will be fed and live a long life.’

The animal jumped up and stood with a humped back. Her shorter hind legs making her crouch to maintain a balance.

‘I was the queen of my clan,’ she said. ‘My children, prince and princess. I was captured in the north, while we hunted fresh Wildebeest. A human shot one of the Nanny’s and we attacked them. We were trapped in a ring and never set free.’

‘I am sorry. I promise you we shall soon set you free, but right now, you are sick and tired. You have to eat and rest.’

‘The food was better in the other prison. They gave fresh birds and antelopes every now and then.’

‘This food is fresh here too. It is organic, so that no animal is killed or eaten away. You keep updating me about the changes you want; we will tweak it according to your taste. The Professor was confident you would like today’s meal. He was very sure, indeed. Give it a try?’

‘It’s ready!’ shouted the Professor from a distance. Albi, who always joined the team during the time of feeding, assisted him into bringing a football sized lump of food that smelled like a dead mammal’s feet. It was reddish, smudgy, and was gross enough to not to be handled in hands. They rolled it in the cage through a small opening and waited. The Hyena reluctantly neared the food, smelled it, and tore away a bite. Everyone watched her with crossed fingers and alert minds. The Professor clenched his teeth.

‘So? Is that better?’ asked Miss Anira.

The Hyena didn’t answer. She chewed away a few more nuggets before halting to say— ‘This should work, yes. As long as you keep away those pathetic potions!’ and then continued tearing and gnawing.

When the Professor was informed of the affirmation, he jumped and hopped screaming ‘Oh yes! Eureka Eureka! I am a genius!’ He was especially pleased and rewarded himself with the fact that the animal couldn’t identify the presence of potion drops in the food. Albi joined with Miss Anira in her joy of the Hyena finally speaking to her after days of arrival.

‘They will all soon be out of here,’ said Albi, addressing an invisible thought in her mind. ‘Once we are done with the forest, there shall be no more cages.’

‘But what if one of them doesn’t live till then?’ uttered Miss Anira, voicing a thought she didn’t remember thinking. ‘In case one of them passes away before their deserved freedom, the blame shall be on me.’ Her eyes continued to capture the Hyena who seemed healthier to her than before, even when she knew it was practically impossible in a mere few minutes.

‘At least they will be able to live longer than in that zoo. Isn’t that better?’

‘Yes, it is.’

They grinned.

Chapter 16

For Paradise City

*A year more and a city was born,
Seven hundred high-rises thawed.
Green was its colour, and so was Magenta, Blue and Red,
Out of every windowsill, you could spot tiny plants that crept.
Schools, shops, and gardens with swings,
Busyness in the temples of the future in-built.
Solar powered farms and lights, and a promise of water,
Roads tempted clean, and signs of a mystic charter.
Electric buses honked around the 'Free run' street,
Tamarind, guava, wood apple, and more, a narrow lane of trees.
By the ponds, across the streets, iridescent rally of flowers,
Bougainvillea, Marigold and Magnolia, entrancing visitors into a deep shower.
In the bushy effervescence of roses, Hyacinths, and Lavenders dreamt,
The freedom from reckless towers.
Farmlands stretched, unused and brown,
Waiting for the ploughs to play over the sturdy grounds.
Creased a smile when you looked at this city so wide,
Untouched by the world outside,
Visit sometime, it's called Paradise.*

After the visit to each corner of the paradise city, and a thorough discussion with Mr. Brickster, it was concluded that the city might need three to six more months before occupation. Outburst of some pipes, incompleteness of the desalination plant, remaining workshop for furniture in five residences, checking of Bolts and switches, were just a few of the reasons. This did not upset or disappoint Miss Anira at all, and even with crossed over deadlines, the result was subpar her expectations. Her delight was ruined by the realisation that even building this impossible city was easier than actually being able to sell the idea to the villagers. Even though she claimed certainly in her heart no hypocrisy or betrayal in her acts, there was no possibility that the villagers would be able see it the same way. She instantly set out on tours to the ten villages that were repudiating of her offer.

The first village she entered was 'Flowercased'. The village was old, beautiful, with sightings of a mountain range. It had no concrete roads and sand leaped off the ground and flew into your eyes with every step forward. Flowers bloomed out of plants set irregularly outside all houses. The homes were a special attraction, and the one belonging to Siren Goaltick, the head of the village, captured all eccentricities.

The two storey house was built on a five feet standing in between which were crammed stairs leading up to the front door, which was left open. To the right of the staircase was a slope, at least seven feet wide, meant for cattle to walk inside the house after harvest. The ground on the standing, which could be supposed for an unkempt lawn, shone light brown, the colour of earthenware under the sunlight. The walls were coloured blue and varied hand paintings in traditional designs swept over most of their area. One of them, which was painted red represented a Swastika, an ancient symbol of divinity and spirituality.

When Miss Anira climbed up the stairs along with her secretary Tasha, and a burly man, apparently a hired bodyguard, she could see a unique world unravelling. The house appeared bigger on entering than one might have expected standing outside. It appeared so possibly due to the gigantic frontyard, which carried only a cot, a pot on the right end corner, some coal that glittered under the sun, and a few clothes hanging by a rope. Eight doors around the yard led to different small rooms. All doors were coloured yellow. On the cot lay an old man, coughing and caressing his moustache. He wore a plain white Kurta that proudly displayed a bulged belly, a red cloth rested on his shoulder.

'Kunal, Get some water!' he called in his hoarse and dominant voice. Kunal, a child of probably nine, thin as a splinter, came running with a tumbler of water to his grandfather. He gulped the water down in an instant and returned the mug in an action very slow for the little boy, who had already circled the cot twice, waiting. Picking out a cheap cigarette from a worn out pack, he lit his body away. Noticing strangers at the front door, after scrutinizing their appearances with his small eyes, he nodded as a cue for them to enter. In no time, another cot was put across by two women in Sarees, introduction of whom was offered to them as 'My daughter-in-laws'.

‘It is a pleasure to meet with you, Mr. Goaltick,’ said Miss Anira. ‘I appreciate you taking time out for this meeting.’

He nodded again sluggishly, still puffing out smoke of his undiluted cigarettes. In many regions of the world, one could call the act as disrespectful, but it was apparent in his conduct that he meant no harm. He possibly was a man who had never convened with such strangers in his village who might get discomfited with his smoking or rather, nobody ever pointed it out to him. After having being served with water and been insisted on tea a hundred times, the meeting commenced.

‘No person from this village is leaving their home. It is our FINAL decision and it cannot be changed,’ stated Siren Goaltick.

‘Sir, I understand how difficult it must be for you all to even think of leaving this place, and had we any alternatives, we wouldn’t coerce you into this. Unfortunately, we have already put all facts in front of you and this process is the only way for us. Besides, you don’t have to make your final decision just now. You can live in the city for a month or two and then choose.’

People had often argued with Miss Anira about the ways in which she negotiated deals. She would often claim that honesty worked for her better than any other tactical tool. She had organically learned the way with the words too, but in the matter concerning her heart, she would often falter. On such occasions, luck would favour her, and mostly, her job would be accomplished.

‘Just tell us all your concerns. We are here to listen to them one by one. We can work on them together.’

‘Haha!’ jollied Siren Goaltick. ‘You don’t understand, madam. You are a big businesswoman. It is not about whether we like your proposal. Look around you! Look at this village. We follow tradition, culture, and protect it in our veins and practises. It is imprinted on our buildings. People come as tourists to see what we have savoured here. When the entire world has turned around, we have retained our authenticity and we wish to die the same way! Please take your offers away. We are not selling any lands to you.’

‘Mr. Goaltick, we understand. My father was a farmer. The new city has been designed considering everything you just mentioned, and only better. You could have your culture savoured and shared over there amongst—’

‘We don’t want better—’

‘Let me finish.’

His face bulged up at this, but eyes were still set upon the calm and earnest face of the lady who thought she knew better. He knew somehow that it was impossible to convince a lady of his perspective, and that women took no interest in understanding the situations of men. He expected her to go on and on with her ideas, but he was prepared that nothing makes a difference to his decision.

‘It is NOT fair that I ask you to leave your home like this, even though we have been asking for over a year and a half. We live in a society to help one another. I need this land, and to compensate for the inconvenience, I am willing to offer an extra one acre land to each family of this village along with a separate home that at least costs five times more than this house, while already compensating for the farmlands.’

‘Money, money, money, that is all you speak of. We don’t want this. Take your offers away and leave us in peace.’ It was the first time that Siren Goaltick had raised his voice. It was husky, loud, and exceptionally proud.

‘The government was anyway soon going to urbanise this place. It might ask your sons to leave the home offering ten times less than what I offer. You may not be able to even argue a deal with them.’

‘The government will take decades like it always does. Until then, we protect our land and culture. I am a government employee too. I am the head of the village.’

‘Then you probably have already received enough compensation to handle this case efficiently and step away?’

There was a pause. Frustration instantly rose in the eyes of Siren Goaltick. His cheeks convexed even bigger. On the other hand, Miss Anira remained deceptively calm, willing to retain the courtesy of a conversation.

‘I know it’s difficult to leave your home, but look at the benefits you are getting,’ she added. ‘No one is oblivious to the suffering state of the farmers. You can own your production, be your own bosses, automatise it. We are also offering training and employment in agricultural supply chain and economics.’

‘That’s it! I WILL NOT let you snatch away our land so that you can progress with your business and we suffer. Have you no shame!’

‘I am not using this land for business, sir. Right now we are simply planting trees.’

‘You lie! My son told me! It was in the news. You have taken away funding from all your NGOs because of money. Why do good if you retract it later? Same shall happen with us.’

‘NGOs register under the name of Revolve and I have resigned long back. I have nothing to do with it.’

‘Running away from responsibility then, isn’t that the general conduct?’ he frowned and looked down, restless in his body fuming rebellion.

Miss Anira, in the process of trying to comprehend the sudden aggression that had taken over Mr. Goaltick’s cadence spun halfway to peer at the gate. As many as thirty spectators had gathered outside. Kunal too was no more feeding the cows, which had now begun making a lot of mooing noise, distracting Miss Anira with their wise words. The women of the house sat together in the second room to the left, listening. Miss Anira turned loud, and from the corner of her eye, watched the villagers listen.

‘I am not running away from any responsibility Mr. Siren Goaltick, sir, YOU ARE. Your sole responsibility is the benefit of this village, is it not? Yet, when you are getting a chance of making their lives better, you are choosing to thrust your limiting ideologies on them? You may own lots of farmland and might be mighty rich, but the other villagers are not. I am offering AN ACRE land and better homes to EACH VILLAGE FAMILY of Flowercased, amongst so many facilities like a reliable hospital, good school, free electricity, employment, away from urbanisation. The first private, most compact desalination plant ever shall be available for YOU. Why do you wish to take it all away from them? You know the government is stopping its supplies into this area. They are not going to make an exception for a single village. In case the media forces, they might make temporary adjustments, but what after that? Your village will be forgotten!’

What she spoke next was heard only by the old man.

‘You know what happens when you disagree. I either take this deal by force, which is not going to look very good, or I leave this village alone and wall around it and build a forest so that there remains no space for you lot to move around. It becomes a prison for you and you die here, away from all of civilisation. Believe me, I will do it if necessary. Isn’t it better to retain your dignity and become the saviour of your villagers? You can be the mayor in the new city if you want, or maybe an area chief. You have twenty days to

convince the villagers to move to paradise city for a month as a trial before they sign their contracts. Let's pretend you own the power to stop me.' She winked at him and moved away, greeting all the villagers and taking a leave. She paid her last look to Kunal, whose eyes gleamed wide open. She secretly put a little brown box under the sheet that covered their cot. Grandfather stepped out to bid her farewell at the gate. Kunal quickly rummaged the box out. On opening, he found a bundle of red papers that appeared like vouchers. It contained a balance of about two hundred fifty gifts. He could order any two hundred fifty objects— books, toys, clothes, or games— FOR FREE, from an ecommerce company belonging to Revolve. 'She must be telling the truth,' he thought, and jumping with joy, hid his present in his cupboard under his clothes, not believing the miraculous present he had just received.

After exactly six months, he moved to his new house, which he adored. They were provided with a separate house on land unlike many others who occupied taller and more sophisticated buildings. He was told it was because of their family size, but he knew it was a bargain with the lady who visited their house months ago. He would have preferred staying on the tenth floor, but he was informed that it was a lot better to have a little house of their own, and so he made peace with the idea. What he couldn't make peace with was the fact that even though he had been allotted his own separate room for the first time in forever, his mother stayed there all day. She filled one of the big cupboards with stuff that didn't belong to him. She put a strange smelly spice mix on his bed the other day, and when he entered the room to relax with his new secret videogame on his gigantic bed, the pungent smell drove him out. Even the dressing cupboard possessed the kind of things and cosmetics he didn't know the names and uses of. The problem was, he didn't yet have much stuff anyway to occupy any furniture in the room fully. He had only used ten coupons offered to him by the kind lady (secretly). He got a set of ten books in the children's collection that included his favourite story by Agatha Christie, a box of his favourite chocolates, a pair of clothes, a videogame, set of notebooks, set of special kinds of pen, a jacket, pair of shoes, a football, and a cricket bat. So far, he hid the items well. He feared though, if he ever orders anything else for himself, his mother could easily take notice. This thought made him angry at her interference. She had already been suspicious about

the football and the cricket bat, which he had excused, was gifted to him by the school. When Gautam, his friend from school had come home to play and she had asked him about this gift, he had favoured Kunal by justifying how only a few good players were offered the ball and a bat. She was pleased immediately and let it go. However, if he ever ordered a TV or a mobile phone, he couldn't tell her that the school provided it to him. So, he restricted the use of coupons to stationary and books for the time being.

He was ten years old now, and the new school was kinder to him than ever. He was learning a new language, mathematics, and science. The new teachers knew a lot more about food and chemistry than his older ones. Their logics synchronised with that of his. Still, whenever he came back home, he heard his grandfather speak complacently- 'It's just a month more and we can go back to our village. Just like old times.' This antagonised him further. Afterward, the elders in the family explained to him things about maintenance, legalities, trust issues, market fraud, land ownership, etc, which he did not yet understand. 'They must know better' he would conclude, but never believed.

He would often wonder whether the kind lady, who apparently was the richest person in the world, ever have teachers like he had, or a room like he had, or climbed over trees during her childhood like he did. 'That's ridiculous! She must have had it a lot better, and a much bigger tree to climb on,' he would think and fall asleep on his huge bed covering only one fourth area on the sheets hoping that she makes it all better, and he won't have to leave this place after a month.

Chapter 17

The progressive years

January 2027.

The voyagers bore about five thousand plant species on their return. When the last team arrived on 18th, they gathered at the headquarters, which was now a large white building at the entrance to the forest, the centre for all research and lab work. They exhibited the stockpile of botanical treasures congregated throughout their journeys. Germinable seeds of about a thousand new habitable plant species from all over the world sat trapped in the brown hay bags. The other four thousand species were brought in different forms of leaves, stems, flowers and notes, for researching and reengineering the plants out of them, a technological field many researchers in the group were already exploring.

‘It’s brilliant!’ screamed Professor Wigyn, touching, scrutinizing, and sniffing various stems and seeds. ‘Isn’t this shoot from *Grevillea robusta*? Of course it is. Carver, how many germinable seeds do we have of every specie?’

‘A hundred on an average, professor, minimum ten, maximum a hundred and forty nine,’ responded a young boy wearing a light blue sweatshirt and a pair of white shoes. He looked like a university research student. ‘Although, that’s just the number of seeds. We aren’t sure how many of them are germinable. We calculated an approximation of about eighty percent.’

‘Yes, that should suffice, yes, brilliant, brilliant!’ Professor Wigyn next occupied himself directly with observations of a variety of flowers at his aid. The colours and structures on the bearings appeared so distinctly vibrant, he would stare at a specimen for minutes before beginning to sample it.

‘And do you remember the red panda? Dare you take that branch away from it! It would shred you to pieces!’ Maya, a zoologist was heard speaking, reliving her memories from the rainforests.

Everyone marked the date for such stories and celebration. The voyagers exchanged their funny and dangerous tales, falling asleep in the building itself. It was when a boy named Adrian narrated his experience about how an eagle attacked their group while they tried to peer through a few metres of distance at its child, and they fell off a rope, resulting in a bruise that ached every time he wore or took off clothes, that Miss Anira’s head lolled sideways to the left on the black bean bag she used as a relaxing console that day. When she woke

up to the gleaming sunlight nudging her eyes from a deep and peaceful sleep, she saw that their celebrations continued. The sight pleased her so much that she decided to build a house at the forest entrance, a garden, and a farm. She often wondered about this sight, for the next many years, when people cackled and shared adventures in beautiful, lively words amidst the woods she planned herself. It was like a happy ever after or beginning of a movie she wished to always be a part of and it was a reminder too, that she was a human after all.

**

For the next two years, Miss Anira's schedule was bifurcated into strict routines. Three hours in the morning, she monitored the fertilisation and seeding of the land, for which she hired even more workers every week, at least ten. She utilised this time for insightful brainstorming conversations with Albi as well, which was mostly a positive refresher for the day ahead. After food, she studied and created plans for forest friendly architecture for each animal species from the zoo. Next, she collaborated with Professor Wig yarn on food production and research, learning and passing on suggestions from the caged animals. Then she chirruped away with her favourite humming bird, pigeon, and barn owl for perspectives, while playing the piano, or reading a new poem, or simply instructing to them the operation of a quantum computer. They were called *Chirpy*, *Kiren*, and *Visser* respectively. The last two working hours were spent on snacking and understanding of media propagandas, operation in the city, meetings with corporations for establishments in the city, addressing the financial support system, and handling the well-being of her house remotely.

In the evening, she spent, without fail, an hour speaking to her daughter, Mishka, every day over a video call. Whenever her daughter asked – 'When will you come home, mamma?'

She would reply with— 'I will be there at the end of every month until the forest is ready, my darling.' Same reply every evening, and yet, Mishka would ask the question everyday without fail. She was now nine years old and could descry the conspicuous tension and differences between her parents, and often turned restless to get the unpleasantries sorted, which led her to ask

uncomfortable questions, pose stubborn and unfitting wishes, as a result of which she suffered numerous scoldings from her mother. This made her even more restless. Nevertheless, Miss Anira would read or sing to her on the phone every night and she would fall asleep peacefully. Reva, the senior housemaid would cover her with a blanket, put the phone away, and sometimes, when the connection was sustained, speak to her Madam and wish her good night. At the end of every such evening, Miss Anira practised her new ritual with her team. The bottom floor of the research building was turned into a residential cave to accommodate about thirty to forty people, half of which remained occupied. Every night, Professor Wigyarn, Albi, Miss Anira, Mr. Hentley (a botanical researcher), Maya, five other researchers, and ten farmers, who mostly stayed within the boundaries of the forest, would gather outside in a garden-like space that bloomed with flowers and fruity trees, but mostly empty space, and lit a fire exactly at nine. Food was brought down, and in the whistling wind, beneath a sky that now showed many stars up above, unlike two years ago when they first arrived, they stuffed their stomachs with laughter, food, and stories. It only got better with each passing night with the introduction of music, movies, and passages from favourite books, dances, and even funny animal noises or tragic news from the world they no more could imagine themselves belonging to. It was this underrated entertainment, because of which they could find a motivation to get up the next day and work ferociously. The fire grew brighter, conversations more colourful and lighter, and their laughter echoed across the horizon contagiously, infecting the winds to bring sufficient water to the plants tomorrow, for the next many years.

Such routines paid off to finally turn the forest into a sufficiently habitable land by the beginning of year 2029. The wall stretching about seven hundred kilometres constructed in two hundred parts now secured two thirds of the forestland. Most empty villages had been broken down to waste, except for the houses, which were retained with the vision of sheltering animals, and for indoor farming. Some houses simply appeared like caves and dens with their doors and windows removed, and some were especially designed by Albi into attractions for birds like owls by choosing the right plant species, placed into right proportions, sizes, smells, and looks around and into the houses. One of such homes, Miss Anira had remarked, looked like a dream holiday destination.

‘Like in fairy tales, when an old man or woman appears magically in the middle of the forest, guiding you through the rare passages when you had lost your way,’ she had said, and Albi, taking the compliments too seriously, manually designed three more houses in the same architecture. About three thousand square kilometres of the area in the forest was made heavily fertile to support proper plant growth for the next ten years, until nature could take its course completely. The manual plantation continued along with aerial seeding, and only a thousand kilometres of land area remained to be seeded. It was confirmed that at least half of the seeds brought in by the voyagers had germinated and even turned half-grown plants, which surprised and pleased the team.

While the fields flourished and the team expanded each month, funds in Miss Anira’s account diminished by the day, only a trillion units remaining, but that least concerned her now. She was in full awareness of the finances yet to incur as had been planned and studied thoroughly by herself every year. She worried over other matters instead. Prime of which was how would she manage the animals acquiescing into coming and staying in the forest. As a mother worried about how her children could be raised in a house so small, she would often ponder on what else could she innovate to keep the animals happier and proud. The most significant step in the same was the introduction of five divisions in the forest, each covered with a long fire-resistant wall containing two fireproof doors for animals to move around. A long debate commenced around the idea, and even though she was dubious, she stuck with the choice, and the forest was divided into five parts of about 1400 square kilometres area each. Fire alarms with radio waves distribution were set up, triggering noise and amplifying waves uptill the research building and her own house. ‘At least if the fire starts in one part of the forest, we can contain it and safeguard other four areas,’ she would say on disagreement of her team members. She even went to the lengths of suggesting Professor Wig yarn that they should find a way to eliminate fruit flies and mosquitoes from the jungle so that the tigers and lions could sleep in peace. The suggestion was reciprocated with a laughter that annoyed her absolutely. She thought and thought of what else could she innovate, but the forest was a place so natural and organic; there really wasn’t much she could do except wait, and how long a wait it was! Four years had passed already and the forest still resisted. She had called up her

manager, Tasha, to increase the labour on plantations as well as masonry three times, so that within a year, they could launch the forest for its new residents from the zoos. When told how it wasn't possible to get the labour immediately and being reassured that the current fertility team could accomplish the target for her, she had even screamed with frustration at her secretary, for which she immediately apologised, but couldn't prevent contemplating her outburst in the matter. She would often observe the state of mind of the professor, who had managed to curate varieties of food for about five hundred species of animals and birds, experimenting in the wild, in zoos, in national parks. He wouldn't sleep or eat at regular timings even after consistent insistence, adversely affecting his old body which was now turning ridiculously frail. Even so, his excitement to experiment was consistently positive, while Miss Anira now worried about the results, way too much.

'There you go!' said Albi, entering the room where Miss Anira perched over her bed brooding, with a leaf bowl filled with deep red coloured strawberries in his white hands. He wore a brown T-shirt on which was imprinted the quote- *'It is never too late to plant a tree.'* His deep brown coloured sport shoes contrasted on his blue jeans perfectly. His hair was puffed over his curved skull and his handsome face, adorned with his ever so contagious smile, was lit up with anticipation. The room was tidy and spacious. Unlike her fully furnished bedroom in her older house, Miss Anira did not bother with interior with her new room in her new house by the forest. With just two huge cupboards hugging the wall, a bookshelf, a queen sized bed, a small dressing area enclosed with flowery curtains on the left, a sofa, a desk by one of the two glass windows in the room, it still appeared posh and rich, contrasting the barren land outside, enclosed with a wall of hundreds of trees. Albi pulled a chair near the bed and offered her a munching. She picked out a berry and fell wide-eyed with surprise on a bite.

'Wow,' she said. 'That—is the best strawberry I have ever tasted! How is it so sweet and textured?'

'Isn't it great?' reckoned Albi. 'I planted five strawberry trees two years back in the forest, a little farther away from the standard ground for plantation where everyone else worked. These seeds were brought in from the Dream Forest, hundreds of them. I kept adding a few of my personally curated fertilisers and look how they grew! Have it all. Don't hesitate. I am full with a bowl already.'

Miss Anira transferred the leaf bowl in her hands. It was light and bendy. She continued to munch over the berries that, to her relief, were properly washed. 'Yes. The bowl' remarked Albi, recognising the still curious expression on her face. 'I learned to make it from a farmer, Snehal. She makes these leaf utensils in various designs and sells in the urban market. It's interesting and fun! We washed some fallen off wet Sal leaves for this. Palm leaves are also cool to use. In fact, I proposed to Snehal, she could sell her designs online. This is a normal bowl, but she innovates a bigger variety, you should see once and guide her maybe. You are awfully quiet. Is everything okay?'

'How does it feel to finally get the fruits of the plants you sow years ago?' she asked.

'It is alright,' answered Albi, shrugging.

'Have you shared these with others, Caphill?'

'Oh yes, I plucked out five bowls today.'

'Good. I will speak to Snehal tomorrow. We could market her products online ourselves to help her and she can keep creating new designs.'

'AWESOME!'

Soon, the bowl was empty. It is when one broods unnecessarily, that one tends to attach metaphorical meanings to all experiences. Miss Anira too fell into such trap of words and thoughts. The empty bowl left a shudder down her spine. The fruit lasted temporarily. A fact all, especially she was well aware of, and was forever untouched by the idea for the same. This time though, fear and attachment complicated her mind.

'What is it?' asked Albi again.

'Sometimes, I tend to wonder why did I, or do I, have to strive against all norms to create something I am not even certain would work or last. It is easy at the inception when everything is afresh, appealing, and exciting. However, just like any new business idea, or a creative idea, you begin to feel with time that you must be doing something awfully wrong. Yet you keep going, because there is no way of knowing the consequences before they ever happen to exist, consequences of its impact on yourself. I also have no why or purpose behind this project except for a want. It is simply personal satisfaction, with no other return of investment. This makes me wonder if it remains worth it in the end.'

'But then there are other returns,' said Albi. 'The climatic good, saving of hundreds of animals, the renewal of plant life on this land, creating a

harmonious living situation for all species, not just humans. It is a huge thing! A greater purpose. Putting life of thousands of creatures above money and comfort. People of the world too shall soon learn about them and the norms may then turn into your favour to offer some moral comfort. It shall all seem right then, I guess. It's exactly what happens before every scientific discovery too.'

'But these thoughts—they don't exist except as a lie. All that you mentioned may be unintended consequences of our doings, but not the purpose. My purpose is selfish. I am the one who feels for those creatures and wish for them to live differently. It is true everywhere in the universe, and yet nowhere. A tree doesn't merely grow to supply us and other life with oxygen. It respire for its own survival, same do the bees, or the cows, and the man. But men, great men, get to live a life with greater purposes and thinking. In that context, I qualify as the least of human beings, for my purpose is nothing great or exceptional or even good, only a will, a want, an illusion of purpose, which I justify with this extraordinary power I have. Now that I think of it, it is not even love, just ego, and an attempt to satisfy the ego.'

Albi did not speak but stare into the emptiness of her words. He wanted to tell her how all humans, even the great ones fall prey to such dominance of the ego. How everything a man does is selfish, that's how he has evolved, but he refrained himself from doing so. For one, she did not really care much about what other people have done or do, but her own credence. Secondly, he wasn't even sure that he had unravelled a conclusion for what was a powerful question grappling humanity since the dawn of civilisation and power to think and debate around the same.

'How is the Hyena?' asked Miss Anira.

'Very ill,' he replied. 'The vet said she might live another day, or week, or maximum a month. There is no certainty.'

'Then, maybe we should set her free once. She has been requesting for so long.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, why not? We have a huge piece of land ready anyway. We can scatter a few pieces of her favourite food at the far extreme.'

'That could be nice,' his voice grew heavy.

‘We did try, Caphill,’ consoled Miss Anira. ‘Had there been anything else we could do, we would. She is old too, and everyone has to die someday.’

He nodded, understanding that she wasn’t just consoling him but herself too, telling herself a factual story of the world to accept the unwanted fate that hurled towards them. He got up from his chair, Miss Anira imitating him.

Chapter 18

Into the wild

The professor observed the Hyena from a distance with his arms folded on his back. A pinkish lump of food lay untouched beside her in her wired cage. The black spots that had once distinctively shone in the dimmest light had faded in the brownish skin, brimming the fat deposits because of little or no activity of many days. The black eyes still seemed sharp, and indicated that even so frail, had there be any trouble, she was prepared to rise up and fight back, and beat you down.

Miss Anira, with her nose brushing against the wired cage, met her black eyes with a smile.

'I am sorry,' she said. 'We are unable to do anything more.'

'You promised the forest will be ready soon,' spoke the Hyena, hauling her little tail in the air and pulling her triangular muzzle forward.

'It is ready, for you.'

'My family—they need my protection—'

'I am so sorry.'

'Am I dying?'

'Yes. Do you wish to die in the woods?'

Miss Anira had to fight off a lump in her throat to utter a question so horrible, that she felt devilish next to the sick animal. The Hyena pulled herself up, staggering against the weight she hadn't yet learned to handle. The front two legs balanced better in comparison to the smaller rear legs.

'Albi! Ask Carl to send in the tractor and food,' she said. Albi scampered to fetch an electric cart towards the north. It arrived within five minutes. The Hyena watched all the activities intently and remembered how she was brought into this rugged place that now seemed home.

'Now, we will get you out of this block and into the tractor. We will travel into the forest together in that tractor. You can drop off into the forest and rise within the woods. Just don't hurt anyone, alright?'

'Indeed,' spoke the Hyena, louder than before. Her round ears stirring back and forth, fur on the head standing up, and eyes, brighter and vigilant.

Miss Anira flung the cage open. The Hyena came tottering out warily, as if an uphill walking rock with a face and legs. It pounced on Miss Anira, alerting

everyone around, but then she simply cuddled her head into her arms to everyone's relief. The sharp hair on the back tickled Miss Anira's face, as she caressed the bulged nozzle of a once speed-driven wildcat. They touched their noses and stayed in the posture for a minute and upon releasing, the Hyena hopped around, fuelling speed in her breathless body. She was soon carried at the back of the tractor where Miss Anira asked her to sleep and not be afraid. In about an hour, they had driven deep into the forest, tall, full-grown trees welcoming them from all directions. They could spot the first plantations, near the first brick ever laid for the forest wall, and some had stretched up to twenty feet tall! Birds had already begun nesting on their branches. Wild grass grew alongside and between stems. Some algae surfaced over a little patch of water near a willow tree. Ram, the driver, opened the door to a sleeping Hyena, who jerked her eyes open at once.

'C'mon, then!' said Miss Anira.

The Hyena stunted a long jump to the ground and studied the surroundings skipping around.

'Don't kill any birds or snakes!' commanded Miss Anira. The Hyena came briskly walking to her for explanation. The lady showed her an aqua blue ball lump, this time striped in white.

'All your favourite food varieties shall be spread across the forest,' she clarified.

'Thank you,' said the Hyena and ran off. Miss Anira watched her sway with her majestic feet winning over her humped body and disappearing behind the long grass or stems of trees.

After the truck took a U-turn and rode in an opposite direction, Shraddha, the assistant vet, and Maya, tossed away lumps of food through the windows in both directions. The Hyena suddenly popped abreast the truck, catching up to its speed, shocking them. The faster ignited the truck, the more acceleration the creature embarked, all the fat tissues on her body hung downwards as she did so. Miss Anira laughed at her playfulness, and after watching her for a while, she turned her head towards the left window to feel the wind losing the track of time. After about a kilometre or two, or possibly five, she turned her head in the Hyena's direction again, but all she saw towards her right were little green bushes on a brown fertile land.

'Stop the truck!' she screamed.

Stepping out instantly, she ran, as fast as she could. After what seemed like a few seconds or a few minutes, her wavering eyes could foresee a small elevation on the ground a few metres away, in between the palm trees. With every step of her run, she sobbed, her worn out feet not willing to step nearer to prevent the truth. She reached the spot sooner than she expected. Sinking down on her knees, she dropped her hands into a pat on the triangular face she had caressed only some time ago. She stretched the wretched legs into a proper vertical. A tear and one more drenched the tips of the fur covering the humped back.

‘You beautiful beast!’ she murmured. After a few minutes of silence and emptiness, she witnessed three human figures approaching the scene from a distance.

‘She was fifteen and sick. Fifteen and sick. Fifteen and sick!’ she justified to her guilt-prone heart, even when her mind wondered around a myriad of unanswered questions-

‘What if we had decreased the speed of the vehicle?’

‘What if I had forced her to eat that blue vitamin ball as a medication last night that she denied?’

‘What if it isn’t really that one moment of happiness and freedom that is worth dying?’

‘What if I hadn’t looked away?’

‘What if I had reached her in time?’

‘She had just come here!!’

Shraddha, Maya, and Ram, had arrived closer. Miss Anira’s head throbbed into fuzziness and eyes turned red. She looked into the eyes of the beast, lifeless, and with one trembling hand, closed them forever. ‘She was fifteen and sick,’ she muttered again, and in a dignified prose, walked along with the trio into the truck, leaving the fate of the dead body to the mercy of nature.

Chapter 19

Door to the Forest

It took Miss Anira two days to give in against the denial of thinking. She no more excused herself the prying guilt that scorched her with more and more questions. Had she known the Hyena would die of the running, would she let her out in the open? But at least she died happy! Or did she? Could she have simply walked around and rested a bit more to have lived a few more days? Could she slow down the truck? Was the idea somewhere in the back of her mind that she neglected or never reached her conscious? Was she truly committed?

And then she would study the past for comfort, remembering how she had saved the creature from getting culled years ago, and justifications poured in. It was easier to remember the story of being a hero, rather than responsibility of an untimely death. 'Saving someone from getting murdered doesn't give me the right to murder her,' she would then think. A doctor who provides a wrong treatment for a disease cannot be spared, even when he cannot be labelled a murderer. Her head would rumble, feet would ache, and after a whirlwind of thoughts, her conclusions would always end the same. It was her ignorance, lack of knowledge, and hallucination of assurance that caused this. 'I cannot let this happen again, not ever! I have to be alert. This ignorance could be present in other activities as well. I can't take a chance. Oh no, I can't. I may not be able to eliminate all mistakes, but I can reduce them once identified. Oh you wonderful beast! I am sorry! so sorry...' she would tell herself. 'In the end, we all have to give in to what's inevitable. How sad it all seems! Why have we no control to prevent the most brutal, illogical, the worst things in this world, least of all death!'

Her conviction only grew stronger for the security of animals in the forest after the incident. She enrolled in an advanced course in zoology and botany, so that she couldn't be overlooking any vital information that could lead to a repeated mistake. She assessed every little detail with caution and took rounds within the forest to address tiniest of the issues that might pop up after the animals enter for another one year, only after which, the forest was declared ready to be inhabited. Not all the plantations had fully grown. Some were still just seeds swaying about to the mercy of another aerial seeding attempt. Some were

mere saplings, and some had only just learned how to produce flowers. The first wall securing the forest was complete. The other two outer layers still demanded another five years of construction. Today was 13th January 2030, the day the door to the forest was to be hinged into the walls. It was a thirty feet wide and twenty two feet tall brown double door that marked the entrance.

‘THE FOREST’

Property of Miss Anira

No trespassing allowed

was printed in bold golden ink at the centre, spread over both the doors. The doors were thick and sturdy, made out of Schinopsis Brasiliensis wood, and required four to five people to open or close.

‘The last hinge has been tested, Ma’am. If you could please come and check?’ reported Sriram, the carpenter, while Miss Anira watched the process through her window, scribbling something with a pencil on the notepad. Her eyes twinkled in assurance to the tall, burly man, with an awfully long nose and exceptionally round face. And with this final assessment commenced the moment of celebration. After ensuring the proper placing of doors, they were opened to the laughter in Miss Anira’s farmhouse. The gardens, empty spaces, and even inside of research building as well as Miss Anira’s house had been decorated by evening. Lights were deposited on every possible tree, stands were dug deep for more lights, tables, chairs, beanbags, crockery was put in for dinner, and Adrian, who brought in his music skills with a Guitar, was set on a mic along with Taka (a landscape designer), who carried a flute. Mr. Brickster, Mr. Figuresand, and Mrs. Landwill also joined them that night. As happy were the forty people who joined the party that evening, sadness of it all being over was not untouched from their souls. Their fat salaries were paid for, and they had to move away soon now. Regardless of the forthcoming silence, they commotioned on the brown sand with hundreds of songs and stories they narrated and sang together.

It’s a happy day

With the work all swayed

The forest is born

In the night and dawn

*Where the birds shall sing their songs
It's all been so great
We had a blast, okay
The trees grew tall
The sky will show more stars
And we shall visit them far
It's a lovely day
To sit and talk away
The fun of the cards
Remembering of the past
Memories sing with us the songs that last!*

The dinner was the most fulfilling. Chapatis, vegetables in different curries, pasta, chocolate cake, wine, tomato soup, cold drinks, garlic bread, sauces, sandwiches, and pizza! Miss Anira was the most surprised person of all, as she planned not a thing in this party, and the lip-smacking food that was evidently cooked by the team itself, left her in awe.

'The forest is born, and may it grow until forever!' spoke Albi before the clinking of the glasses and the reverberation of 'Cheers!'

Music was played, bonfire was lit, and everyone ate in their own time their own choice of food, at their preferable spots. Animals from the cage, the Koala, Sambar deers, parakeets, and others who were set free on a healthy recovery into the forest came running to the sound and peered at them curiously. When all people raised their glasses to them, they rushed back in and disappeared into the dark.

'So that's it then?' asked Albi after dinner.

'Yeah!' said Miss Anira, who turned at a familiar voice creeping in from the back. She sat cross-legged under the casing of the forest door at the edge, staring into the dark.

'Thank you, Caphill! You have been so wonderful!' They broke into a hug.

'So have you!' They smiled the most heartfelt smile and stared into the dark together.

'Every time I look at the forest in the night, it sends a shiver down my spine' she spoke. 'Even though I helped a little to create it, the forest seems to have a

spirit of its own that is hard to connect with. Life and terror, staring into your face.'

'I like to think of it as a good thing,' replied Albi. 'The trees are the oldest of us all. Had they been kind, how would they survive? And if they have been kind in perspective and survived, we should be how ashamed of ourselves and fear every time we dare to look into them!'

He had half laid, half sat himself on the grass with the support of his elbows. Miss Anira imitated him.

'Whenever I speak to you, I get reminded that trees that are alive could have a consciousness too,' she said. 'And then I go back into thinking how they have been raised by nature to be slaughtered by us later. All those—'

'You cannot save everything and everyone.'

'That I could call an excuse had I any ideas of solving this dilemma.'

'Maybe if you have a plan in the future, we could collaborate again. The woman who saved the animals now saves plants too!'

'What do you mean in the future? Are you leaving?'

'Well of course! The project is over.'

Miss Anira searched for words to utter but nothing truthful seemed good enough. Could you ask someone to stay and work with you just because you like their company? They could have been called friends, but wasn't their relationship more professional? Or could she simply tell him that she had grown too lonely and it was better for her that he stayed around? She finally said—'But we are yet to bring in the animals to the forest!'

'Oh yes!' The charm that was innate in his face could now be seen and glittered. 'How do you plan to do that?'

'We steal from the zoos.'

'WHAT? STEALING?'

'Stealing. We are going to raid two zoos during the night. I am still in conversation with a few people who work there. Each zoo has about thousand animals and birds with about four hundred varieties of species.'

'You are kidding!'

'I am not.'

'This is so awesome! Stealing? Breaking the law? Kidnapping them! Oh such an adventure! But—'

'But?'

‘Are you sure? It’s not a small amount of animals. Anyone could get into trouble for this, even you. It is too easy to get caught.’

‘You suggest a better plan then.’

He thought for some time and Miss Anira pleased at his attempts to come to a solution to a problem she had been addressing for months already.

‘Bring the animals from the forest,’ he said.

‘Bring animals from fully grown forest homes to a trapped budding forest?’ she scoffed at the frailty of the response.

‘I know. It was ridiculous to even let the thought emerge in my head.’

‘The forest was built for those lives in the zoos. They need us. They REALLY are trapped.’

‘Alright, then. We shall kidnap them together!’

‘Then it shall be real fun.’

‘I always forget to tell you. I met this girl on an expedition I went with the Professor on, for collecting some vegetation for food research and production. I told her about how a woman once told me she could speak with animals. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell her it was you. Surprisingly, she wasn’t surprised at all. She spoke of this woman, who also claimed the same thing. She said she was her aunt, and that she lived far off on the other side of the sea or something. Do you think you might be interested in meeting her? I didn’t get a chance to speak to her in detail. She was in a hurry and came with a team who were just leaving when we arrived. I spoke to her for an hour and this conversation came up only in the end. Would you want to speak to her?’

‘Maybe, what would I wish to speak to her about though?’

‘I don’t know. We don’t even know whether she really can do what that girl claimed about her.’

Miss Anira really wished she couldn’t. The thought of some other person in the world also possessing the same ability not only made her feel less special, but haunted her. She wished to meet her, but so wished she would never meet her, or that she didn’t even exist. Albi, noticing the sudden change of emotions on her face, attempted to change the direction of the subject.

‘Let’s talk about it after the animals come to their new home. Looks like I am staying after all! As a thief this time,’ he winked and they both giggled lightly. While one by one all the members of the party bunked themselves either outside on the sofas that were brought in later in the night, or inside the

building and the house, they both welcomed the morning with chatter, talking about everything.

.

.

‘With so many stars and light, you can see why Vincent Van Gogh found more colours during the night than the day!’

‘Yeah, there was also less pollution during his time and how wonderful the sky must have appeared to eyes that could REALLY sense wonder.’

.

.

‘And do you remember how you then jumped off the puddle? It was hilarious! I we only had a camera to catch that.’

.

.

‘Of course I could blow a whistle! Let’s see who can blow it louder. Maybe some deers will come running again.’

.

.

‘I remember reading it in the news headlines. He revealed about the new product launch in an interview last Sunday or something.’

.

.

Chapter 20

The zoo at night

Miss Anira, Albi, Maya, and Ned (a graduating researcher in Agronomy and Crop Science) entered the Seasonwood Zoo as per the plot at three in the afternoon, well, five minutes past three, as Ned's sandwich delayed them at the check-in counter.

'But I won't give it to any of the animals, it's for me, see I am taking a bite now, Mmm, who would dare to give such a delicious sandwich away?' said Ned in his squeaky voice as he unwrapped a cheese vegetable sandwich emanating strong mustard smell.

'You can please eat your food outside and then enter, sir,' spoke the woman in the security uniform in a deliberately exacting tone, embarrassed as Ned savoured a morsel slowly in his mouth, impervious.

'C'mon, Ned, we have to hurry. We don't have much time,' whispered Miss Anira. 'I will get you an entire box filled with sandwiches after we leave!'

'I presumed I would be done eating this by now, but the anticipation and excitement of the mission has affected my eating abilities negatively,' he sighed as he obediently but reluctantly dropped the sandwich in a green plastic bag and walked inside, staring goofily at the bag until it disappeared, making the other security personnel uncomfortable.

'Why did we have to bring him again?' hushed Miss Anira to Albi.

'He volunteered,' he answered, shrugging.

The sky was blazing hot, conveying the message of the oncoming summers, and the heat fell uniformly over the rocky passage beyond the dome-like structure at the last security checkpoint. Several board signs with pictures of birds and animals pointed in different road divergences, and they chose the one that read 'mammals'. Miss Anira's gaze hunted for a man named *Gates*. He supposedly was a security guard stationed at the back gate. She had first interacted with him five years ago, when she regularly visited the animals and on learning of his destitution, helped his thirteen-year-old daughter with an admission in a good school that she had to leave due to financial debacles within the family. When the lady had volunteered to pay all his daughter's tuition fees, *Gates'* teary eyed self had promised that he would return her favour in any form possible, and now was the time. Whether the watch guard

engaged in this assignment realising a moral responsibility, or for the proffered money, or simply out of an obligation to Miss Anira, he did not reveal. Miss Anira had arrived weeks ago to settle the deal with him and others, and again two days ago to confirm the arrangements. She had also transmitted the message amongst the animals about how they were soon going to be rescued and how she shall make them familiar with the protocols that they must be ready to follow. The bear and lions took some convincing, others agreed instantly.

In a few minutes time, two men approached them at the Chimpanzee cage. One of them was medium heighted, wore a cap and a brown uniform. His moustache, trimmed. Face, black. Shoes, torn. Eyes, twinkling with kindness. Accompanying him was a bulky, taller man, without a uniform. He wore an untidy blue T-shirt, sand-smudged pants, and an odour of animal fur.

‘Gates!’ called Miss Anira in a hushed voice.

Skipping the trivialities of hand shaking, greetings, and introductions, Gates spoke furtively in a heavy manly voice—‘Follow this man. His name is Caret. Do so stealthily. Saunter away and watch the animals at all times. There’s CCTV cameras everywhere.’

Uttering these instructions, and placing a last nod with Caret, he left. Everyone followed the bulky man with utmost pretence; halting to glimpse at the creatures, chattering away, laughing, nudging each other at a joke. Whenever Miss Anira would inform an animal at a cage saying, ‘I am here, spread the message. You are all leaving this prison today,’ – The macaws would flap their wings outrageously, monkeys would chatter aloud, white deers would stand up straight peeping out the cage, their noses blending with the wire, and crocodiles would move, awing people as they passed by. Caret noticed the cameras as he walked on, through the corner of his eye. He would also halt to check on an animal when others were left far behind. He was a caretaker. After feeding a tiger, when he reached a triangular intersection, through which, led a road with no CCTV, he fished out his phone from a dangling pocket. Time was fifteen minutes past four. Amongst two unread messages, one received at ten past four read—‘Done.’

The four followers arrived confused and thrilled at the empty road, where entry was allowed only to the zoo staff and veterinarians.

‘CCTVs are shut down. You can walk freely now,’ announced Caret.

‘Why didn’t you get them shut before?’ asked Ned, now restless to converse. ‘The zoo electricians take off at four. The person who manages the electricity station is on a leave for a week, so it is left empty, that’s why we chose today’s date. We tipped off an electrician and hired a guy from outside to manage the CCTV. He was hiding here since the morning, must have left now. There shall be no cameras running until the morning now. All the staff shall leave by six. Until then, you will have to hide. Come now.’

They trailed behind him at the first exit, which was again out of bounds for visitors. They dodged a red ribbon covering most part of the pathway. There were no cages here, only trees and bushes on both sides. After walking for about a kilometre, they paused to face a small quarter on the left—a shack, a room, or maybe something you could call a tiny hollow block. It was bricked and not painted but had a door. Caret shut the door open and ushered everyone inside. Dusts, fungal wood, and zinc were just a few uncomfortable pongs in the room. It was dark and congested because of numerous little items shoved in most fraction of the room.

‘It’s temporary storage,’ informed Caret. ‘I couldn’t find a better place. You wait here until six. I shall fetch you when the coast is clear.’

‘Our trucks will be arriving in two hours,’ informed Miss Anira, her green eyes gleaming in the dark.

‘Mr. Gates will take care of that. He will manage entry and parking through the back gate. He is officially on leave today. See ya!’

With the closing of the only source of faint light, he left before hushing from the other side of the iron door— ‘Don’t sneak out! You will get caught.’

‘Wow. How cool is this!’ spoke Ned, turning the torch on his phone and scaring everyone into a shriek. Ignoring the retorts, he continued— ‘We are hiding in a zoo! In a cupboard! Well, a shack. Stealing animals! How adventurous! Being a thief is fantastic! I wanted to do something crazy this year. This just makes it perfect!’

After having spoken all that he had spoken, he felt embarrassed at himself thinking whether it was a stupid thing to say and froze his tongue.

Miss Anira, sensing the wavering, replied, with a rather ostensible enthusiasm— ‘It gives me the same chills as those famous five adventures of Enid Blyton I loved as a kid.’

‘Or Nancy Drew, although there isn’t much mystery here but,’ said Maya, blushing through the end. ‘I liked her best.’

‘We are like spies on a mission,’ added Albi with a rush of excitement. ‘The good guys who have to do wrong things to make the world right.’

Ned, who was back in spirits smiled at Miss Anira, blessed with a confidence for the next frontier. ‘I was wondering—why didn’t we enter through the back gate instead?’ he asked. ‘Wouldn’t it be easier than confining ourselves in this—congested situation?’

‘I just thought we could improvise better from the inside than the outside if anything goes wrong. Besides, the security outside is stringent. Even with all CCTV checked, we may never know. We have our trucks hiding away the number plate and are also painted a different colour. The windows are artificially black-shielded on the inside to prevent the exposure to the drivers’ face. We should also probably be wearing masks when we cross the threshold. I also wished that we entered the area earlier and make the animals familiar with ALL your faces so they don’t feel threatened, and immediately obey. Either way, maybe you are right, Ned. We shouldn’t have entered through the front gate, but we did not know who else to trust except Gates and Caret. Nevertheless, we are gonna get caught. I just didn’t want to get caught as an idiot. So far, it works.’

‘We are going to get caught?’ gasped Ned.

‘Of course, kid. We aren’t stealing data of a billion people or some seven hundred year old gold vase from a museum. We are stealing thousands of animals from a government property out of which many species are rare and almost extinct.’

‘Then why are we even planning this?’

‘Because, to get captured, we first need to commit the crime, and do so in a way that it appears a well-thought crime, when in fact, it’s really a statement.’

‘So we aren’t actually committing a crime then?’

‘Oh, we are. We most certainly are.’

Ned felt a twinge of regret for jumping in to this quest after all. He glanced at Albi, who stared down at him with a poker face. Then at Maya, who seemed as riddled as he was, granting him some relief. His discomfort was readily ignored as they expounded on their plan in detail, considering any practical loopholes they hadn’t addressed before. Ned and Maya, who hadn’t yet witnessed Miss

Anira speak to wild animals, always interrupted with scepticism, when Miss Anira said 'I will talk to the Lions. Don't worry.' Or 'Oh those tigers are very peaceful, they wouldn't create any fuss.'

'We can't rely on that plan' they would utter and Albi would hush them.

At about five minutes past six, their door was banged. 'Come out now!' spoke aloud the voice belonging to Carter 'I will fetch your backpacks from the baggage check-in'. Ned transferred the tokens into his hands.

They stepped out into the setting sun. Orange and red strokes painted themselves on the sky hovering over the green leaves of pine trees, as if someone was casting a spell through the dark. The passage they came through was empty, now that all staff and visitors had left. Most animals ambled in their comfortable little homes. It was when Miss Anira arrived that their eyes and minds were set on alert. They all had been thoroughly provided with the information, not once but more than thrice, to retain even in their comparatively smaller heads, that the strange human lady who visited them often, who was friends to some of them, was going to set them free.

'Your trucks are all parked outside,' cried Gates, panting as he scurried towards them from the back gate. 'But, mind you, they are plenty. Not all could accommodate in the parking area, it's impossible, and so we need to be quick, before someone spots trucks coming along the road lines at night.'

Miss Anira nodded and informed him that not all trucks had arrived yet. She then asked Albi to coordinate with the truck manager, explain him the situation, and ask him to send only ten trucks at the time interval of every twenty five minutes. 'Ned! Maya! Do you have the list?' she asked. The list was a record of all the animals, their species, their numbers, and the trucks to which they had been assigned. If the two chimpanzees had their number marked as ten, they were to enter truck number ten, wherein they would find appropriate food and required ventilation, and some hours of dreadful confinement.

Both responded affirmatively to the question by uttering a 'Yes Ma'am' in military tone.

'Ned, you go outside and manage the trucks with Gates. Make sure they stand according to their numbers. Each truck should open at the door as discussed. Cross check the animals entering with the list at the time of departure.'

Ned bolted off.

‘Maya, you will be helping me here, giving me information about all the species and their assigned truck numbers.’

Maya pointed thumbs up at her.

‘Albi, you are about to witness MAGIC,’ she winked and he laughed recalling the ashen face of the Professor at the comment and also their first encounter with the snake in the forest.

Gates followed Ned to manage the trucks and animals outside. Caret stayed with them quietly, without signs of intrigue or any uneasiness, bearing Ned’s backpack in his left arm, all others distributed to their owners.

‘Maya,’ called Miss Anira.

‘Yes. First on the list,’ narrated Maya. ‘Panthera Leo; Lion; Four different trucks; First male- truck one; Second male- truck two; First mother and the two cubs- truck three; Second mother and the cub and daughter- truck four;’

Caret steered them to the Lion’s Den. Miss Anira had visited the zoo so many times now, that she needed no navigation even if they switched cages, but spoke nothing against his aid. The Lion wasn’t sleeping inside, as one would expect usually. When people mostly visit the zoo and peek at the Lion’s cage, more often than not, they are heard whispering—‘It’s inside the den, sleeping, it shall come out soon.’ and it mostly does not, and they leave disappointed.

Today, the oldest Lion of the family was stationed exceedingly near to the cage wiring, waiting. When Miss Anira appeared in sight, he roared, and so did the Lioness who sat graciously surrounded by her two cubs. This cage was bigger than the rest surrounding it as it occupied four adult Lions and Lionesses along with their children.

‘Shh!’ uttered Miss Anira, standing against the small wall that stood between her and the cage. ‘Don’t roar! You will alert the caretakers in the lodgings!’

The Lion digitigrades towards the net on his four paws to get a closer look, the mane over his head flailing thinly around him.

‘You are food,’ he says.

‘Ugh—again! I am not food’ retorts Miss Anira.

Taking off the backpack from her shoulders, she revealed and threw a little pink football sized piece of lump through a rhombutal opening in the cage. The Lion sniffed at it slowly, taking time to properly carry his immense body weight, and gnawed at it through his protractible claws, making it vanish within

seconds while the cubs watched their father intently, bustling about, the Lioness detaining them.

‘It’s nice,’ he said.

‘Good. Now you need to stop being so thick and listen. Here’s the deal- You are going to walk out of this cage with me into a truck, QUIETLY, NO ROARING, and we shall drive you to the jungle. You shall NOT attack anybody. There is plenty of ventilation and food in the truck. It will be difficult for a few hours to stay in confinement, but please bear with me. As I explained earlier, all members of the family will go separately. The kids will stay with their mums.’

The Lion roared once again, making Miss Anira roll her eyes, and he turned towards his family to explain what he had already been explained day before yesterday.

‘Dude, did she really...? Uttering those strange sounds...? Can she...?’ spoke Caret, watching everything in the background.

‘Oh yeah,’ grinned Albi.

‘This is so cool. How is she able to do that?’

‘Well— she has been learning animal languages since many years now. I guess she got fluent with time.’

‘I would love to enrol in such a course, man. I didn’t even know it was possible! I mean, she isn’t really speaking English, but also not roaring.’

‘Yeah, me too, but I don’t think they teach that anymore. Just watch her talk to chimpanzees, you won’t be able to stop laughing.’

‘Man!’

Albi secretly marvelled himself for yet another believable lie to protect a friendly secret, and smirked.

Miss Anira observed the lion intently, how he took responsibility for his family, and how the creature that feared none could easily be made apprehensive when it led up to his family. She listened to his hushed words and concluded that he prepared them more against the dangers than the idea of trust.

Eventually, the lion veered to her to say—‘We are ready.’

Miss Anira lunged forward, closer to the cage, and stared subtly into his glittering eyes under the yellow streetlights with a smile. ‘They will all be fine, I promise,’ she said.

The cage was opened through the back lock by Caret, allowing the lion to pass. Miss Anira stroked his mane, caressed his stinking mouth, and put her head

close to his. 'You can dance around under the trees, sleep in the dens YOU choose, travel distances again for a fitter body, and let your children run free in a world you have yourselves grown in and known,' she whispered. The Lion, now habitual of being tamed, but not spoken to in a language he could understand, rubbed his fury mane against her cheek.

'C'mon' she said, walking alongside him, careful not to step ahead which might cause a provocation. Albi, Maya, and Caret had all scattered to the corners and gaped at the scene, bewildered. Even in a constrained setting, the walk of a lion was a majestic sight. It sent shudders down your spine; created an aura of thrill and surprise, alongside fear, which you mostly, readily wish to ignore. Albi and Maya, who had felt a similar awe only once in their lifetimes, in the deep forests, hiding away from a tiger, now bare open in the presence of a live wild beast, stood still, wide-eyed, and overwhelmed at the same time. While the other lion and lionesses followed, the animals in the cages gasped for breathe, singing a quiet song only Miss Anira could hear.

*Walk of the lion, the hum of the beast,
The turn of his gait, travels in the east,
The roar that makes leaves tremble and eyes bleed,
Majesty of the king and eyes so kind, indeed.
Walk of the lion, we all wish to see,
But before we are caught, we all have to flee,
Darkness calls and he will sense your breathe,
Rush into your holes, and miss the sight so divine and free.*

The trail of a lion family, even without the loudest roars, was mythical, grand, and difficult to depart with. In no time lost, they arrived at the end of the zoo. Four truck containers lay open near the main gate. A slope of blue metal covering the skin of the container inside awaited their huge paws to trudge. Some balls of various colours, effusing odours of dead animals, along with barrels of water, lay inside a huge rectangular standing. A netted covering at the top ensured ventilation and proper lighting. The Lion spun his head to the left, sighting Miss Anira along with his family. She beamed at him. 'Your family will be with you in no time, I promise,' she spoke softly. 'Just sleep a good sleep and when you wake up, your kids will be running around you in

their cackles on cold grass under the sun. I am sorry, but how else do we transport you hundreds of kilometres into the jungle? Bear with me. This is the last cage you shall ever be in!’

He said nothing to her overcompensating gestures, but simply pawed on and lay comfortably in the truck and closed his eyes. Miss Anira heaved a deep sigh of relief and uneasiness, and love, unable to assimilate the amount of trust the Lion showered her with. The other members of the family, obedient to their leader, did not question Miss Anira at all. The cubs did display some twinges of curiosity in their restless bones, moving heads, and incessant nudging at their mother, but they dared not contradict their father’s instructions. They were exceptionally pleased on finding some toys they could chew at and kill apart in the truck with them. While more animals hopped into their assigned trucks, the occupied ones disappeared onto the wide road, newer empty trucks replacing their positions.

Next came the bear, giraffes, ostriches, chimpanzees, crocodiles, white deers, snakes, about four hundred fifty three species of about fifteen hundred forty animals. When the bigger and wilder species had been dispatched from the zoo, the remaining smaller ones were handled by two freelancing animal breeders who had been called in later than night. While Ned, Maya, and the breeders took charge and moved the yellow Wigtails and Macaws who screamed and screeched at the conduct, Miss Anira grabbed Albi by the arm and set on with him to Floristine in their car.

Chapter 21

Revelation of the Tigress

Around midnight, they reached the Floristine Zoo, and detected a few trucks loaded with animals, a few empty. Apparently, it was the last batch of trucks, for the numbers at their front glass read in nine hundreds.

Entering through the back gate, sauntering on the zoo pathways, they sighted many empty cages marked with banners reading 'Hylobates Lar (White-Handed Gibbon)' or 'Lepus Americans (Snowshoe Hare)', etcetra.

'The smaller breeds of animals have already been taken away by the breeders,' informed Miss Anira, satiating Albi's inquisition. 'We just have to collect the rare wild breeds, might I say the most interesting creatures I have ever seen.'

'So we are raiding another zoo tonight?' asked Albi. 'And the one famous for harbouring most rare and endangered species in the world for that matter?'

'Yes, just this last one. C'mon!'

Miss Anira sprinted across the zoo, dragging Albi by the arm, until he stood in front of a big white cat, with stripes embossed like tree branches on its skin in deep aqua blue. 'It's the Lost Ethereal Tigress,' said Miss Anira, flinging her arms into presentation, gleefully.

Albi watched the tigress sit meditatively in an infectious calmness. Her skin was whiter than the kind of white he had ever seen. When she tilted her face, it seemed as though she could sense and control the conduct of each detailed aspect of her body organs. Her child, a fully grown tiger, sat opposite her, licking his paws. Another child, a fully grown and beautiful tigress, restless and curious, wagged her tail at the strangers.

'Hello Again,' called out Miss Anira. 'It's time.'

The Tigress turned her big face and gazed at her through her deep green-orange eyes. Without twitching a single muscle in her body, except for the mouth, she said— 'You are a powerful lady, but I shall only go with you if you conjure a bet.'

Her voice was distinguishably feminine, almost like an echo to Miss Anira's ears. Surprised by the uncanny behaviour of a creature who wasn't expected to predominantly understand the concept of bargain, she replied— 'I don't understand, only yesterday you said you will come. Anyway, sure, what is it?'

‘The hoomans think we are the last of our species, and so they keep us here,’ she paused for a meditation, cautious in her utterance. ‘Although, that’s untrue.’

Resisting her eyes from giving a pop, to ensure respect for the calmness and aura for an old and wild creature, Miss Anira listened intently, and imitating her, Albi too controlled his excitement, but couldn’t help the eye-widening. He was quick to notice a white tiger seated on a far corner flash his blue eyes in disgust at them, a vision that cropped a tingling in his throat.

‘My family still dwells in the cold forests, hiding away from hooman eyes. As you may have noticed, we are comparatively calmer than other tiger families, so it is easier for us to predict action and hideaway in time. We have been adapting and growing for a long time, eras, and understand not half of our abilities, yet, that is probably why we were caught and brought here, while the others, more careful ones, still wander in the wild.’

The two brows on Miss Anira’s forehead had formed a creek, her eyes set upon the Tigress’s, glistening in the artificial street light, the image of a woman and a man visible clearly, even from a distance. Albero Caphill stared to and fro from Miss Anira and the tigress, daring not to disturb the power-filled conversation. He felt as if a crystal white halo had surrounded the six of them in a bubble no one could break free from even if they desired.

‘I fear though, that they shall either be killed soon, or captured and brought here, or anywhere else on this terrain, the fear grows stronger each day.’ She now moved her elegant body, one limb at a time. First, the two legs surged forward lifting her weight up and creating streaks of shiny light on her exceptionally light fur, highlighting the depth of the blue in the stripes. Then, turning her hind legs, she slowly and graciously plodded closer to the netted silver lines between herself and the lady dressed in red. Her children assembled beside her, except for the tiger at the far end.

‘You are not the first to understand our language, but surely the first to act on our requests,’ she spoke, her voice now colder and frigid. ‘Furthering the appeal, we wish for you to bring our family to us from the cold forests, for we can live a few more years together in the forest you claim exists. We do not intend to live forever, but at least to die together. The world and air around us changes too frequently now, limiting the possibilities of our survival. Maybe a

generation could arise in our wake. It might seem a trivial request to bring back a family of a specie, when you intend on saving hundreds already, but—'

'It's not trivial,' interpolated Miss Anira. 'Are you kidding? It is the most profound thing in the universe. Wanting to be together—now that's something! The forest is itself a family, and I shall mend any broken pieces for its sake if I have to. After this forest is inhabited, and things turn stable, we shall go and look for your family. We promise to bring your family back to you. It's a deal, but for now, you will have to come with us, for your own safety.'

'Thank you, human child. We will come with you.'

'She is lying,' snorted the tiger from the corner in a husky voice. 'It's a trap.'

'Your pessimism is not needed today, Taurus, thank you,' snapped the tigress.

'Never mind him. He is not a fan of hoomans, wants to tear them off the planet once and for all.'

Miss Anira cast a wry grin, and spoke aloud— 'Caphill, get the doors open!'

The doors were immediately unhinged and the family sauntered towards their assigned rides. When the four tigers stood at the precipice of walking inside the truck, Miss Anira shouted—'Hold on! You said I was not the first person to understand your language. Have there been other people before me who could do this too?'

The tigress turned to face her. In an amusing cadence, and with a twitch behind both her black whiskers, her teeth shining under the moonlight, she spoke the words most cheerfully and elegantly, while they sounded to others as little roars and ruffs— 'The forests have called out for help in different forms for years, Miss Anira. In every form of magic we know, together and distinctively, we have left clues and signals to the one specie who disrupted it all, and the one specie who could alleviate it. We have been excused for thousands of years with rational arguments. They have excused themselves, by stating that they have created a powerful world. We have tried to save them too, many times, but have failed. What you promise to all of us, and create, might seem quite ordinary to you and your relatives, but for the soul of the forests, it is an accomplishment like no other, after failures of years, some peace of heart, some hope for survival. We never wish war, for we have lost already, but we do wish to survive as does life in every form. And therefore, you shall witness our utmost cooperation.'

‘Umm—thank you. I just— it’s really—not—has there been another human—woman—that you spoke to?’

‘In this century, yes.’

‘Then why didn’t she do anything? And where can I find her?’

‘She chose to follow her dubious mind over the spirit of her soul,’ said the tigress, and walked away, enclosed in a blue box, waiting.

‘WAIT!’ shouted Miss Anira again, and the driver turned still, ceasing his act of closing the container.

‘You called him Taurus, that tiger, do you all have names? What’s yours?’ she asked, in a growing concern.

The tigress grinned, shaking her head and sighing—‘Names hold too much power in this universe, my child, more than you humans realise. I will not be revealing mine to you, not today, perhaps not ever.’

Miss Anira blinked foolishly as the door closed and the tigress vanished.

Chapter 22

They come home

Professor Wigyarn anticipated the arrival of the thousand trucks at the edge of the forest, peeking through his binoculars, fidgeting his restless feet every few seconds. Dawn had dawned. The sky had begun painting violet brushstrokes on its skin, sheltering the darkness away. Twigs on the heavy trees wagged their slinging leaves in welcome. Sun was soon going to be up, and the animals in their enclosed moving cages were evading hope.

All truck drivers were allotted specific zones for parking and releasing animals, marked visually on the map of the forest, which was supplied to them in advance. There were five hundred seventy two zones for all species, each indicated in an ideal space via a placard.

Miss Anira planned an orientation for all creatures the very day of their influx. Even though tired, and undergoing a deficiency of sleep, she and others on the steal-team were all vigour and jigs. The two-hour sleep that Albi had ensured for her on her return journey was partly responsible for this enthusiasm. He had called for a fully equipped minibus after their raid in Floristine, and commanded his supervisor to 'GET A SHUT EYE!' She was no more a supervisor though, a friend, the kind you learn things from. He often looked at her with awe and wonder. 'How easily could life be handled her way—by simply acting and reflecting,' he would think, aware that behind what seemed effortless was a massive net of emotions, intellect, and discomfort put to work, and he constantly laboured at unravelling that chaos, to discover clues into her reasons. He revelled in their tête-à-têtes amid the work, or during meals, and in the evening, under the bright blanket of stars. The merit that she would affix to every opinion of his, no matter how stupid, made him feel valued. It was too easy to be around her. This venture that they had traced together, should never end. Even though sentient that the forest solely belonged to her with her money, time, relationships invested, and the fact that she could speak with animals, she never made him realise it did not belong to him too, and so now, it was gruelling to even think of letting go. When he suggested the notion of placing placards into different zones, she instantly acceded and chucked away her plan of simple map guidance. Then when he proposed that each driver could have a different map to avoid confusion, affirming the idea, she quickly

called up a student to execute it. While people may reckon it a business management skill, he knew indeed the audacity of her kindness, which had only intensified over the past five years, with her losing grip of all manipulative sanity, and how more beautiful had she bloomed in its wake! Her face glowed like beads of pearls glistening under a shining sun, and the smiles she weaved around silently in her well-accorded face could infect a life miles away. Her aura kept getting stronger, but he also now noticed her imperfections and limitations that lay bare in the world, her darkness and ordinal self that was set free, that he chose to stay mute about. Her inability to sing in tune even with such a beautiful voice and skill, her irritant responses to the team during her frustrating hours of thinking, her disregard for personal health, her irrationality taking over her arguments sometimes sinking into the chaos of possibilities, her failure to distinguish between reality and imaginations when she lost track of time so often so easily, her affection for a few birds making her a little unkind to human beings. He would make efforts to avoid these miseries for her, and sometimes even point them out inadvertently, and she would usually welcome them with a receptive ear and heart. It was a perfect friendship, and a great learning opportunity he did not wish to let go. More than anything he saw ardour in her eyes and body, he saw life and ideas gnarled like bristling waves of beautiful stories floating around her in unison, all of which he wished to make his own, and he was, how he had grown too! Perspectives transformed, eyes valiant than they could ever be, and the air felt strong in his bones somehow, magically refreshing.

‘Has the food been delivered to all zones?’ asked Albi, shouting from the bus, addressing the Professor.

‘Oh yes. The last truck must be coming around in a few minutes,’ replied the professor, unable to obliterate a grin on his face that made him look silly. He was evidently fidgety to hear a feedback report on his food supplies.

Miss Anira and Albi travelled to zones one, two, three, up till a hundred, ensuring that all dangerously large animals were taken care of first. They were reunited with their families, and were instructed readily, to which only the chief of families paid heed whatsoever.

You are not to kill or hunt ANY creature in the forest for you shall always be supplied with food.

It is now safe to move about anywhere. The Zones are just an idea to locate where your food could go, you don't have to limit yourself here.

A truck shall arrive everyday to distribute food, and should not be considered an enemy or danger.

NO KILLING.

No Killing or Intimidating.

All birds, animals, insects are a family. This place is a place of equality.

No show of power or murder shall be entertained. You kill, and you are out of here, back into the cages in those stinking zoos.

Miss Anira, who felt silly after her proclamations, attempting to edify morality to creatures who possibly were simply infants in the culture of logic and literature, was stunned that they all agreed to her requests without vacillation or convincing. On being asked whether they had any concerns, a bear responded to her— 'We are getting food. Why would we then kill and eat?' This made her quickly pluck the memory of the old vegetarian and non-vegetarian debate amongst humans, incensing her, dipping away all rationalisation. 'Such an atrocity, these humans!' she murmured, and Albi, concerned by her growing disregard for her own specie consistently, pleaded her away from the zone, observing slyly what he deemed her disregard for her own existence.

The birds required no zones and were set free in the middle of the forest with their food scattered onto its lengths and inches. The owls chose to set camp in the storage below the ceilings of the preserved village houses. Other birds attacked tall trees mostly at the front corner of the forest. Their initiation was considered culminated the moment they entered the jungle. Miss Anira had concluded earlier, how communicating a message was easier and reliable through birds, and had simply allocated the task of orientation to her favourite bird friends, *Chirpy*, *Kiren*, and *Visser*. Maya, the zoologist, had even brought tiny stitched tuxedos and plaid jackets for them as a joke, which they boasted pompously, commanding their way through their flocks. Visser chose to carry a mouth whistle stuck onto his bow tie, to which the Professor installed a sensor, so that it chimed a siren every time Visser's beak touched the surface, making him the focal point whenever he had an announcement to make. They

somehow seemed to Miss Anira the most intelligent beings of the forest, considering herself and other humans in the contest.

The last orientation, and the most entertaining of all, was that of the monkeys. As per a biologist's proposal, the monkey zone was built into a stunt maze. Poles were dug deep in various colours, stretching forward into hammocks, protected swings, rope adventures, wooden bridges, slides, and hanging tyres. The primary appeal though was the immense magnitude of bananas splattered across the grounds and the activity midgets. Their frenzy was an evidence of their pleasure, but Miss Anira was thoroughly displeased when she visited them. No matter how strident and domineering her voice was, they just wouldn't listen. At the end of the maze, she bellowed, finally exhausting herself—'SILEEENNCEEE! ALL OF YOU! STAY. YOU ARE WORSE THAN CHILDREN IN THE PLAYGROUND.' And they all transformed into marble statues.

'You are unbelievable. Now, you will listen to everything I say or you may find your way back to the zoo being restrained in a jumpy net basket! Do you understand? Also, no one is to put banana peels over my head or grapple my bag. Give it back! Caphill, the zoos have sufficient empty cages now, they might not mind you trapped in there for a while. I don't see what's so funny that you cannot restrain your tee-hee.'

The bag was tossed back to her immediately, and no more peels catapulted her way. Albi concealed his laughter away at a hedge, where he couldn't be seen, and continued to amuse himself, and in sometime left to the research headquarters to rest.

In this banter and cooperation, Miss Anira wrapped up the orientation by afternoon. It was lucid that the animals were here to conform and not cause much chaos, which not only surprised Miss Anira, but also made her anxious about her understanding of their world, and ominous about the future. Yet, while she drove towards the farmhouse, when she glanced at the forest through the open ceiling of the minibus, breathing in the scent of the heavenly scenery, she felt lightheaded and content, after a long time. She contemplated the idea of crashing between the woods, the place she couldn't believe she had some part in creating, which still seemed an impossibility. Then she drove on, as it was still highly probable that any carnivorous creature could stealthily attack her and gnaw and chew over her flesh. So, inviting the finish of a fulfilling day, closing the doors to the forest, she dozed off in the comfort of

her bed, and so instantly, that the thought of waking up never reached into her conscious.

Chapter 23

Reality is a dream

Nine butterflies magnified fifteen times their usual size, assembled themselves in a pattern, each of them with a distinctive bicoloured print on wings in blue, red, white, and purple. An old man in ragged clothes, a falling-out beard, and a long wooden stick in his hand, hollered at Miss Anira from her right—‘Elevate yourself up now!’

Miss Anira tried to catch a glimpse of her body that felt strange with appended new features, but her eyes somehow fixed out front into the oblivion. She kicked off from the ground, jumping into thin air, attempting in numerous ways to balance her weight, and jiggled forward behind the trooping butterflies. Grass transformed into roads, roads into buildings, as she flew higher and farther. Only when she had begun relishing the exhilaration, suddenly, a Frisbee came hurling in front of her eyes. A bright, yellow coloured disc so big, as to blocking her view. Another one smacked her head at the back. She browsed her surroundings, then the bustling ground. Losing balance, staggering in the air, she fell with no surface to contain her feet into an angry mob of humans throwing Frisbees, balls, and oranges at her. They screamed words, but Miss Anira couldn’t make out a single one of them. Gasping for stable air, feeling like the last breath could leave her body any moment; she swung back on, hovered just a couple feet above their heads bouncing into a sudden streak of flight and away from the clamour.

‘Miss Anira! Madam Anira! Madam!’ yelled a husky, manly voice. It was the new caretaker, Fringe. With her bleary eyes and her aching head, she studied his face loom over her from an arm’s distance. An old face with curly white hair stuck scruffily over an oval head, like on a dishevelled doll crafted by a kid in art class. A humble face, with brows stretched across, which would rarely ever go up, and a smile that quavered in her presence.

Faint light invaded the room through the slight opening in a window. The clock on the opposite wall read five. She wasn’t floating in the air anymore, but being pulled down on her bed. There were no butterflies, only the lacklustre wooden furniture and the anxious phizog of fringe, who often fretted over little things wanting all events to be perfect in the house. The tumult though,

had followed her into reality. The sounds were not vague any longer and could be discerned clearly.

'Justice is not just a human right!'

'Money can't buy you everything; let the creatures go in peace!'

'East or West, Miss Anira should wear a killer's vest!'

'Say no to animal violence, raise your voice, eradicate silence!'

She sat upright rubbing her eyes, trying to wade off the memories from the dream. The more she tried, the more real they became, making her realise, in fact, it was all a reality.

'Hundreds of people have gathered around the forest, Ma'am,' spoke Fringe in his ever so edgy voice. 'They say the funniest things. All the masons building the outside walls have left early too—they bore many stone pellets. One of them even got hit near the eye. Sir Albero and the Professor called for a doctor. These people come with cameras, and sticks, and banners and what not! We dialled the police.'

Miss Anira scrambled out of bed to open the window and peer outside to check, but Fringe stopped her.

'No Ma'am! The media has cameras everywhere. You shouldn't be seen at all. Mr. Lyring, along with Sir Albero and Professor Wigyarn, with two accomplices are waiting for you outside in the living room, if you could please get ready.'

'Why didn't you wake me before?' she asked, indifferently, still absorbing information. 'And I only went to sleep at three in the afternoon, how come the world turned topsy-turvy within two hours?'

'Madam, it has been twenty six hours since you were asleep, and we did not wish to bother you, but the stone pelting left us with no option,' he said culpably, averting his eyes.

'I slept for a day! Really? That must be the first time I have ever done that.'

'Except when you were an infant madam, then you must have slept long hours quite conveniently.'

'Point taken.'

'Might I say, ma'am, I did not intent to intrude on your privacy like that. I shouldn't have entered your room, but Laura is on leave and it was fairly urgent.' Fringe cautiously stepped backwards, still abashed enough to not look at Miss Anira in the eye. 'We waited for some time, but you weren't waking up. We also worried for your health.'

‘Fringe, Fringe, you don’t have to apologise or worry yourself over this. You did the right thing, and might such a conundrum arise in the future, I count on you to wake me up, regardless of the compromise in the usual decorum.

Understand?’

He nodded slightly, shying a faint smile, and quickly scrambled out of the room. Miss Anira was left to herself and her thoughts while she cleaned up and got dressed in a suit. In only five minutes, she chuckled outside in rage.

‘Hilarious!’ she announced, addressing the five people seated expectantly on the chocolate brown sofa in her living room. Albi and the Professor abruptly got to their feet.

‘The never-ending palaver of unrelenting human stupidity. What is it this time? Some propaganda on social media?’

‘Yes,’ explained Albi. ‘A rumour proliferated on social media that you stole the animals from the zoos to use them in research; that you are going to kill most of them to study artificial life growth in depth.’

Ned, who sat stunned in his seat with frizzed hair, handed over his phone to her. It displayed thousands of posts with hashtags – #FreedomForAnimals #MissAniraOrMissKillera’ #StopAnimalTorture’, and so on.

The most highlighted post, emerging from a username ‘JerryforTom’ read—

The social media revealed to us yesterday that some rare species of animals were stolen for torture and selfish agendas from the zoos we pay taxes to save. Within twenty-four hours, hundreds of people gathered to voice against this injustice, to free the animals. This is the power of people. Power of Internet. Power of fighting against the rights of those with a lack of speech! #StopAnimalTorture #FreedomForAnimals #MissAniralsALiar

Posters, videos, philosophical quotes, opinions, banners, memes, kept filling in by the minute.

‘What dramatic Bullshit!’ flung Miss Anira and burst into an uncontrollable hysteria that everybody watched shockingly but quietly. ‘This is so freakishly complicated.’

‘I wish I could blow them up with a missile or something,’ she muttered in her head, ‘although that might cease all the fun.’

‘How do we get out of this, Mr. Lyring?’ she asked the spectacled tall man in a black suit, perched at the edge of the sofa with a laptop and a folder placed neatly over his lap. Lawrence Lyring was Miss Anira’s lawyer since ten years, and was the least reactive to her temperamental shifts, unlike Ned, who blinked feverishly.

‘The only wise solution I can contemplate now is to get an F.I.R. registered for trespassing and assault,’ he spluttered quickly and monochromatically.

‘Is there no other easier way to get rid of this frenzy? Couldn’t we sort this here itself, by simply seeking security from the police without pressing any charges?’

‘There is no guarantee, ma’am. It could only fuel the outrage, and might lead to a major damage to your property. Once we file an F.I.R. mentioning their ill decorum, defamation, and harassment suits, which can easily be vindicated, we might have an edge even when public and the zoo become prosecutors. If they file the complaint first, which seems highly probable from my sources, we won’t have the benefit in court. Either way, it has to move to court. Our first move in this circumstance will put water to the case for some time, and the threat to the property can be eradicated with security intervention.’

‘Did you speak to Mr. Naturil?’

‘You mean the director of the Floristine Zoo? Yes, ma’am. He was very upset. He pointed out several times that you had promised him a properly laid out plan. I proposed to him to stick with the “I had no idea” protocol. He has obviously launched a fake investigation into the matter. Funnily enough, he congratulated you in the end too, for a successful uh—theft.’

Miss Anira slumped into a rocking chair, both her hands on the chin, and meditated for a few seconds. She couldn’t possibly undo what had occurred, so the thought slipped off her head permanently. She couldn’t make a public statement, as it would hold no credibility after the stealth. If she delayed the process of the F.I.R. any further, the mass could break into the forest or even damage it from the outside. The sea route was still accessible to people, and it wouldn’t be long until they discovered it. They could throw fireballs or lighted matchsticks in rage, damaging the plants and endangering animals. The fireproof walls weren’t a poor idea after all.

‘Alright, talk to the police,’ she said finally. ‘Ask for protection and get them out of here.’

‘Yes ma’am. It will be taken care of,’ assured Lawrence, and got two blank sheets of paper signed by Miss Anira.

‘We should also revise our social media campaigns, and other publicity strategies, Lawrence.’

‘Indeed. I will call for a meeting with the digital, content, and publicity experts tomorrow.’

It took another two to three hours after which the screams diminished. Some media professionals still camped at the front gate with two police constables. Albi, Professor, Maya, and Ned stayed for dinner with Miss Anira. They seated themselves at the dining table at nine, at the mighty aid of a delicious tomato soup and salad. Mr. Fringe rattled dishes in the kitchen, his old palms nervously sautéing the vegetables.

‘So, it’s all sorted then?’ started Albi, who repressed a million questions sparking in his brain, wilfully alert of the company around.

Miss Anira’s eyes met with his, some understanding passed through them, and heaving a sigh, she muttered—‘Oh yeah, I might have to go down the station once tomorrow, and there might or might not be a hearing in the court of moral law, not immediately though. I have suggested a two months time window. It depends on how these people react after all. Until the court reaches a verdict, I am instructed not to harm the animals or perform any research on them as were the claims—HA!’ she burst into hilarity again, rubbing her forehead. ‘Oh my lord—ridiculously painstaking. This is exactly what I wanted to prevent from happening.’

‘Why do you find it so funny?’ snapped Maya, putting away a spoon after taking a sip of the extremely hot soup.

‘Don’t you?’

‘I find it disappointing, sure, sad too, maybe, and unfair. Not funny though, not in the least.’

‘It is though, isn’t it? For all sorts of reasons. One of the most prominent of which is the intensity of human ignorance, disguised in dramatic actions.’

‘I don’t understand. What ignorance?’

‘Well, first, it is the series of practical ignorance. The initial one occurred on my part, in the form of going a little overboard on trusting my entire team, one of whom is responsible for this fuss. Then the incomprehension of that team member, or acquaintance, who couldn’t gauge the grandness of this project

and how it could supersede every other thought, feeling, monetary, and other forms of benefit. Then the idiocy of people who convinced themselves that all they read on social media is the truth, and lack of faith in the idea that someone, somewhere, could actually do something good in this world. Then draws the real ignorance—the fantasy of every human being involved in this chain, thinking, they did not do it all in full awareness, which is the most ridiculous of all. Of course, everybody does everything on purpose, the purpose, in the end, if you dig deep, and you know reflects in every action, is the escape from the tragedy of life itself; the evil in our eyes, the creation myth. From what I see, my ignorance for the life balance most people seek has been my doom, because chaos pleases me. With the forest complete, and the animals in their positions, I presumed my major task was done, what else is there? I was restless and scared that we are reaching denouement, but now, there is so much more to deal with, and even more is coming I tell you, and although tragic and blood burning, it's stimulating. It's comical. Don't you feel so too?'

'To be honest, I did not comprehend nearly half of your articulation. I will lead with what I could wrap my tiny head around,' a sneer crossed Maya's face that she secreted well, but it couldn't escape Miss Anira's prying eyes, that were in constant search for an answer unknown to anyone else in the room. 'How is their intent evil and out of a different, deeper purpose? Besides, these people are unaware of the ultimate truth, the fact that you mean no harm, that the news conveyed to them is just a rumour, or that the animals are actually better off here in the forest. Their intentions cannot be necessarily iniquitous. They just hanker after the security of animals, something you desired in the first place.'

'Oh Maya, you make me laugh even more. Your innocence and reasoning are foolishly captivating. Those people simply cry for a gratification of their ego, akin to most of us. Practically, more than half of them are non-vegetarians, wear fur, and would not engage in plantation drives that demanded more than a few hours a month and they come and cry for animal justice? In all fairness, the idea itself is unfair. When you natter about intentions, you see the broader picture. When a bird chooses to fly, every limb in its body partakes in the process, not just the wing, the legs, or the beak. The same way, if you intend something, you intend it completely, or at least almost completely, else it IS an

impossibility. Even a walk couldn't be possible if it wasn't completely intended. Same follows for destruction, riots, and everything that occurs around us. This remains to be my belief. Humans are very good at reasoning against their flaws and incompetence. They repeatedly use the word 'intention' as an excuse to their transgressions or cowardice. I incline to comply with no such deed. Even though I cannot prevent it completely, and cannot be always certain of the real consequences of my actions. I am not going to be bamboozled by these preposterous, mediocre excuses, when half the energy in my body is being expended in not killing those insolent, half-minded lunkheads dramatising an atrocious stage play outside! OR Maybe I am just a fool. A brainy two-faced fool who has lost understanding of all the words in the universe, and nothing shall ever make sense again.'

'But it just means you have a different perspective into the world that is comparatively ordered and lucid to others,' said Maya. 'You are the one who committed theft, after all, and you believe you deserve impunity. You are a human turned public figure turned criminal. They are just trying to take the right stand.'

Albi broadened his eyes at Maya, who quickly succumbed into her shell around the soup, but it was already too late.

'There you go,' Miss Anira banged the table so that a little soup from her bowl spluttered out, bathing the salad and the pasta in liquid red.

'Why do some people want to build things that could perhaps, someday, maybe in a different time, change the world? Why do some people write stories that were never written, never thought of even, that might never even make sense, and might even mean a doom on their financial, personal, and existential security? Why do some outlandish, abstracted, thick-headed fools, spend a dramatic amount of their time on this planet calculating, scheming, discovering ideas that may perchance change the course of humanity? Their default position is failure, and hardly anyone ever succeeds, then why do these idiots knowingly succumb into the monstrosity of creation? Why do they shatter and create their beliefs a million times when everyone around them lugs their 'favourite one' all their lives? Why do they risk their lives, their comforts, luxuries, and even insecurities to be put to test against this stupid world that somehow still manages to exceed as a population because of those little minds who decided it did not matter whether they succeeded or failed,

but to try on the behalf of the whole of life itself? And what gives these mediocre minds, who obviously cannot comprehend the depth of this 'why', the right to sabotage their work, motivation, talents, at every critical stage that they can manage and then preach about treating everyone fairly and get away with this 'reasoning' that nincompoops like themselves evolved and injected in the brains of the majority? Because you are right, they do see the world differently, and their views are too mediocre and irrelevant to the growth and survival of this world that they claim to wilfully protect. I might never say this again, because I feel stupid putting anyone down, because I am doubtful, all the freaking time, about everything I believe in or speak! GOD! It isn't about what you see, it is about what you can't see. Why can't these morons just stay out of it? In business, I could bear them every second, cause it happens all the time, but this? Why don't they get that there could be something more important than their vanity and perspectives and comforts and beliefs. I still don't...'

Her face turned uncharacteristically red. It was getting tougher to maintain a tranquil stance. The loudness in her voice increased with every breath. She shut her eyes and murmured to herself like a little child—'Anger is your enemy. It solves no problems but only complicates everything. It does nothing but gives you instantaneous pleasure, and then, regret of a lifetime, useless anger. Get rid of it, get rid of it.'

Albi scrutinised her with curiosity and concern, recognising the focus of the outburst a charade, hunting for a clue into what truly was roller coasting in her chock-a-block brain. It obviously wasn't about people outside the forest, but more, something personal, and deeper. The Professor, busy with his Lasagne that Fringe had shortly brought in during the conversation, peeped at her during regular breaks of meticulous chewing, choosing not to interpolate unless asked. Maya, dumbfounded by the peculiar passion, stared into Miss Anira's disturbed countenance, and stayed mum. Miss Anira inhaled deeply and feigned relaxation. Her arms were still rigid with ferocity and eyes watery with aversion.

'Excuse me,' she said finally, fiddling with her mobile device that constantly rung message alerts. 'I need to attend to something immediately. You should please finish dinner and ask Fringe to prepare your beds as you please. I had a heavy lunch and do not have the appetite for more today. Mr. Fringe! Do serve

the new wine we ordered from the land of Quesha. They call it “drops of hell” all over the world, was very difficult to get hold of. Please take care of my—our animals until I return.’

Chapter 24

The curious kid adult

She nimbly walked out of the house into the chilly air exhaling a sigh of relief. She ejected her antagonism by throwing fists and kicks in thin air before climbing into her new electric car. 'We still need to work on optimising solar electricity,' she mumbled to herself. 'I think I left the business too early.' The ignition had just kicked into a rumble when a few earnest shouts followed her into the parking.

'Miss Anira! Miss Anira! Wait please!' screeched Ned. Panting, he held onto the edge of the pushed down glass near the passenger seat. 'Look, I know you are fuming with rage and probably have no time for this, but today was supposed to be my farewell. I may not be able to bust into these gatherings again, I might never see you again. If I don't ask you these questions, I might regret it for the rest of my life. So, before you go, could you please tell me what's going on? Please? It's weird I know, and you are too busy for this immaturity and stuff, but you know how curiosity kills the cat? Oh please?'

Miss Anira sighed and flung the door to the passenger seat open. Ned scooted in. Miss Anira raised her eyebrows, signalling him to ask a question.

'Am I going to jail?' he asked.

'No, you are not going to jail,' said Miss Anira softly.

'Are you?'

'Maybe, it's extremely unlikely.'

He widened his eyes, but under the soft, impassive stare of Miss Anira, stiffened himself into a relaxed posture.

'If I may ask, what was your plan all along? You told me in the zoo we were going to get caught, but now that we are, you seem appalled and angry.'

Miss Anira studied him for a minute, lost in some contemplation. She massaged her forehead, and then smiled the most satisfactory smile that petrified Ned for a moment.

'There was no plan, kid, not in the essence of having strict procedures, at least. It was just a set of random experiments. The directors of the zoos we raided were aware of the oncoming threat. They were convinced that the animals were better off with us, in the forest. Very nice folks, those two. The staff of

the zoo though, except for a few of our people, had no clue. I had asked the directors to pretend being oblivious to this incident.'

'That's very stupid.'

'I know, I know.' She chuckled.

'So, why didn't you simply use your influence and power to achieve this feat in front of everybody? The directors agreed with you. The government might have offered you the opportunity to care for at least half of the creatures.'

'Because—then I wouldn't be able to make the point I was trying to make to the world. If it involved government intervention, some form of legislation would still be hanging behind our backs always, interfering with the growth of our forest every now and then. With a theft, the statement is clear. The animals are not government "property" anymore.'

'So, your plan all along was to get caught, even when everyone knew what you were up to?'

'Yes and no. The news of any such theft first reaches the directors, who were going to handle the media and the police under our command. They were to stall the investigations for a few days, while we subtly build a narrative for the public, to make the message reach to the masses in an acceptable way.'

'What kind of narrative?'

'A mixed one. Whether what we did was right or wrong. Some videos from the forests we had clicked some time ago. Few ideas and theories could be pushed into people's minds through social media, brain training etcetera, you know. Making people think. So that, when we go to court, we could have some public support, and the judges won't be solely hated on the case when they rule in our favour.'

'Like Robin hood.'

'Pretty much, except he wasn't a trillionaire, who could be hated so easily by the world.'

'Yeah, this plan doesn't sound very stupid, except that it was potentially ruined.'

'Thank you.'

'What do you think wrecked the plan?'

'I still don't know, but I have my guesses.'

'I see.'

‘Humans really still think they own this planet. They are simply tenants who are breaking the walls and furniture of the residence every day, while their landlords are on a vacation, and they don’t have enough resources to build new houses. They are soon going to be homeless, and it scares me more than I ever thought I could be scared. I could give away the forest to those animals in a second and volunteer in it, really. Although, to protect them from other humans, I have to call this land mine and fight for it. I think it is turning into a habit, something I need to work on. Because now I see it, the cleaner air entering our house, the sweeter water, the calmer mornings and nights, stars in the sky, I have never felt so healthy, and so, we need more of these forests everywhere, and compromise a little while we look for more residences in the universe. I say this even when I did not intend this—project—for the good or well-being of humanity. It was just something cool and nice, you know.’

Ned nodded and grinned, pulling out a box of chocolate cake from his backpack, which had ‘Farewell, Ned’ frosted on it in white icing. He cut a piece and offered it to Miss Anira, who reluctantly chomped a bite.

‘We will obviously have a better and much grand celebration of your farewell once this is all sorted out, kid. You can come visit this place anytime.’

‘Thank you. And might I say, to know you and to be a part of this pietistic crime was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. I am going to proudly tell the world I was a part of this feat.’

‘Yeah, better not do that for a few more months until this case runs cold.’

‘Well, of course.’

‘Now get out of my car. I have a place to go to.’

‘Yes, yes, bye.’

‘See ya.’

She drove off.

Chapter 25

In the bedroom

It's a six hour drive during the night to her old house. She sees it glinting from a distance, the decorative lights making the white domes look red, red bricks of the guest house appear orange, and the gardens, partly lost in darkness, appear paler than ever. The security guard pulls his cap and bows to her at the entrance. An old man with white hair and a small face, with a familiar evergreen smile, which has now faded into a formal greeting, through the window of a new car he doesn't recognise. She soon stands at the entrance to the house, instantly noticing the unattended dust around the flower vases that show fawny under the shimmering yellow lights which she is told had been put up for a house party couple of days ago. The artificial flowers hanging at the door casing have their dark leaves frayed, and the doormat has gathered dust from the last time that she was here, which was two months ago. Reva, who had been called in by the guard opens the inside door for her madam, with her fully awakened, surmising eyes. Miss Anira observes that she has put on weight and has arrived to her in a purple nightgown. The cushions on the sofa arranged in an atrociously incorrect order beyond her maid, make her gasp. The water in the flowerpots is at least two days old. The walls that appear clean from a distance look paler and dustier on a close observation, a consequence of lack of supervision during spring cleaning. Patches are visible under very bright light if one was to endeavour evidence. The space is condensed and tense, the vibe uncanny. It is impossible to explain to a non-resident member of the house, how the little dent on the air conditioner flap, or even the apparently clean floor tiles needing extensive brushing, is disturbing the ambience and integrity of the beautiful house, even amplifying the misery of Miss Anira's situation. Miss Anira, with a stern look on her face, perches herself on the sofa and Reva brings her a glass of water. She looks at the old maid, only a few years older than herself, and yet so agile, shakes her head in dismay, and snaps herself out of her anguish. The song and colours flashing in her head disappear.

'Is Anay home?' asked Miss Anira, wishing to ignore any further distresses regarding the arrangement of the house.

‘No Madam, he hasn’t arrived yet,’ replied Reva, gingerly. ‘But his secretary left a message on the phone that we should prepare breakfast for him and Madam Maria by six in the morning. His arrival must be impending.’

‘Very well, and Mishka?’

‘She is asleep in the bedroom.’

‘Is she behaving nicely?’

‘Oh yes, very nice. She takes care of the house very well too. Sir hardly sleeps here and has reduced some working staff, so she monitors everything. She treats us all with respect and dignity. One couldn’t think of her as a ten year old little girl, but much wiser and older in her thoughts and actions. Even her friends who come home happen to be so, though they are comparatively naughtier.’

‘Good good. Friends have a significant influence on our growth. I am glad she is making good friends. I hope she doesn’t trouble you very much, Reva.’

‘Oh no, she is a sweet kid, madam. She has more resemblance to you than one generally expects daughters to have with their mothers.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘In the most extraordinary ways, madam. She plays different kinds of games every day, mostly puzzles and ball games. She writes, a lot, reads a lot too, and the kinds of books children remain unaware of at this age. Her teachers often point how she asks the most intelligent questions, while she complains to me how her teachers are dumb when they fail to answer her, and although she is deemed lazy and uninterested in classrooms, she scores brilliantly on her tests. Her relationships with her friends are limited but real and strong just like yours. She may not be known as a prodigy in some particular talent, but she exercises her mind everyday without failure and very quickly. And madam, she has maintained your garden just like you would, perhaps better. She stood up to her father who wanted to turn a part of it into a second swimming pool last year and gave in to her persuasion.’

‘Haha! Oh my! To hear such praise for her is a relief, and a melody to my ears. Besides, I did not know you have such knowledge of my character, Reva, to compare my daughter so accurately and confidently.’

‘It’s only what you have taught me to be important, madam. I see your reflection in her conduct. When it comes to reason, I cannot explain it, it is just there.’

'I know what you mean,' smiled Miss Anira. 'That little devil is just too beautiful to ignore even in the worst of times. Is she exercising and meditating regularly now?'

'Yes, madam, everyday. The instructor has different music and regimes designed for different days of the week with her yoga, exercise, and dance, so that she doesn't get bored and morose now. Mr. Musley, her dance teacher suggested she could be enrolled in an advanced dance and Karate class with other kids by the end of this year.'

'That's very good. Maybe she should hold off another year in private sessions. She already gets enough exposure in school. I still cannot imagine why we couldn't home school her enough. I should have not let her go.'

'Madam, she is a big girl now, might I suggest you consider the importance of her mingling with other kids her age?'

'She is just not like other kids her age. She is my daughter, and we have to be a lot more careful about her security.'

'Yes, indeed madam, but in the end, she is just a kid.'

Reva passed on a small smile, which Miss Anira compensated with a nod, shutting her eyes and laying her head at the edge of the sofa. After a while of quiet, which Reva watched pass by intently, Miss Anira asked—'This Maria, who is she?'

'A friend of Sir, madam.' Reva wrung her hands and hesitantly but steadily picked up an empty tumbler from the coffee table to take away.

'Does she stay here pretty often?'

'Sometimes, madam.'

'During the night?'

Reva pursed her lips and turned to move towards the kitchen.

'Reva, You can tell me. You SHOULD tell me.'

The sound of the whirring engines of a sports car interrupted the interrogation, relieving Reva from the burden of a confession. Anay Pourwall entered, shocked and alone. No one else stepped out of the car. This disappointed Miss Anira. Albeit miffed, she yearned to see Maria. Whether to compare herself with her or criticise her behaviour, or to intensify her feelings of condemn, she couldn't tell yet.

'Annie! I didn't know you were coming,' Anay spoke in an exceptionally friendly cadence, loosening the tie on his teal shirt.

‘It’s my house. I can barge in here anytime I want.’

‘Of course you can. I didn’t mean—’

‘In the bedroom, NOW.’

Anger revolted in her, he could perceive it, and so could Reva, who was timid from premonitions about a riot between the couple. He obediently followed her into the bedroom, unwrapped his coat on the bed, and faced her with the kind of confidence that fumed her further.

‘How could you?’ she asked. ‘Why did you?’

‘Why did I what?’ he asked, placidly.

‘The rumour started on YOUR social media platform. You were the only person except for my team and helpers who were aware of this stealth. Even the truck drivers had been released out of country with an NDA as soon as the animals were delivered in the forest.’

‘Are you suggesting that I spread those rumours?’

‘No, what I am saying is—All you had to do was keep your mouth shut, but you blurted it all out to your new girlfriend, who, in a vengeful endeavour of the past—a time when she had begged me for collaboration as Revolve’s shares were skyrocketing, but being aware of the lengths she went in business, I had rejected all her offers, which weren’t even worthy of an investment—started this mess. Maria did this, and YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR IT!’

‘What are you—’

‘Don’t try and cover it up, Anay, it is only going to make the matters worse.’

‘Well, alright. I just came to know about what she did and—’

‘And you fought with her. That’s it, right? A minor setback in your relationship. But what about me? Imagine what would have happened to those thousands of innocent lives if the public outrage had escalated any bigger. One matchstick, one attempt at the sea shore, and a million ideas of breaking in and out. You know public propaganda is never about any cause except for aggression. This DRAMA WAS NOT NEEDED and YOU—YOU—’

She broke down. Her emotions burst like fireworks, her voice trembling in rage, eyes all welled up from the melting sight into the fire of her heart. Anay held her by the arm and made her sit on the bed. After a minute of silence, and a glass of water, when she seemed comparatively relaxed, he said- ‘I had no idea she would do such a thing.’

‘Had you told me about her I might have been able to do something to impede it or prepare for it.’ Her voice was softer and hurt.

‘Wait—Told YOU about it? It was none of your concerns,’ said Anay, frowning to himself, experiencing culpability in its most unique form, making him tetchy and restless.

‘The secret was mine, and so it was my business.’

She stood up and played her hands around the orange curtains with prints of roses and lilies. She tried to grasp each flower before the silk curtain would flail away from her hands. Anay stood defenceless staring into the floor, confused, altered, yet firm in his speech.

‘It’s fine if you didn’t know, but once the post was out, could you not handle it then? Scrub the data before it goes viral? Find the sources and corrupt them? Start a counter hashtag? Or just—just CALL ME?’

‘I did try.’

‘HOW?’

‘When I got aware of it all, it was already too late. I scrubbed the ten posts that started this wave tracing back to their origins and disabled the bots, but it had already reached a million shares. There were so many variations of the texts too, and it had gotten the media attention already. It all happened during the night. I was asleep.’

‘Oh of course, you were asleep. Why won’t you be? The one time you could turn this around and you were asleep. You pick up your calls even in your dreams, Anay!’

He thought back in time. It was midnight and he was reading under the night light. His phone buzzed with messages, which he ignored conveniently. He hadn’t slept properly in thirty two hours, just the two hour nap on his office desk, and the one-hour nap in the car. The phone kept buzzing like it had never buzzed before, not during any emergency, but perhaps he was unable to keep count in the drowsiness. A call from a friend, from the developer Shareen, from the marketing executive of his core project team, and he remained oblivious to it all, as if sedated into a state of least moral submission. He did not want this anymore, so he didn’t look, for the first time in the seventeen years of his career, he didn’t pick up the call or checked the message. He had been practising this twenty-four hours availability for what? A revenge on his wife? He missed her. He missed his passion for work. He owned the biggest

company in the world and had no idea what to do with it anymore apart from turning it into a money making machine. What was wrong with him, his mind? What was this resentment? His head throbbed. He knew lack of sleep wasn't the cause of it, and he dozed off, as if drowning in the pool of anguish. Had he picked those calls, could he have stopped this from happening? Could he have retained his wife's trust? Did he have enough time to encounter the issues differently? The answer lingered over his head like a bullet—'Most probably.' Guilt dirtied his soul further and uncontrollably, which he tried to pull away from, and offered the justification he couldn't imagine thinking of—'How can you expect me to be helping you with this anyway? You are accusing me of not taking the matter in hands as if I am supposed to be there at your aid. I don't have to. You don't own the company anymore.'

'I am aware that I don't own the company, but—'

'And you don't have the right to control my decisions too. I have always helped you with whatever you need, and you have too, and even in the future whenever you ask, I shall be there. But you can no more expect that from me as a duty to you.'

He felt a thick lump in his throat and his chest felt heavy. Miss Anira, on the verge of shedding another round of tears, straightened herself up, and after a struggle of a few moments, uttered— 'When did we last stand in this room without a fight?'

'When did we last stand in this room together, anyway?' he asked.

She blinked, once, twice, thrice.

'I think...we should...file for a divorce.'

'What?' he moved towards her, but she stretched out an arm, turning away.

'What about Mishka? You said it won't be healthy for her. She is still so young.'

'You have already ruined things for her, by bringing that betraying wretch into this house so often. The kid already wasn't seeing her mother with her father, and then she saw another woman share lunches and dinners with him so frequently, what do you think must happened with her little heart and brain? Divorce might be hard on her but it's better to have your doubts get a reality check than having them haunt you for the rest of your life.'

'Annie, I am sorry. I didn't mean to—'

'No. You are not, and that's fine.'

She left quietly. Anay, with his hands wrapped around his head, tried to make sense of the situation in his blurred consciousness. 'Destruction,' he thought. 'No creation,' he thought. Guilt embraced every remaining inch of his body, and confounded with mixed emotions of gratitude and anger, he shut his eyes, worried in the bed, hoping to faint into a deep sleep, so that when he wakes, if he ever does, everything swerves into exactly what he wants it to be. He missed her, terribly, but more than that, he missed himself, he missed purpose.

'Madam!' Reva stopped Miss Anira at the gate. 'Mishka shall be up in an hour. Let me serve you tea and biscuits, after which you can chat together. She will be so pleased to see you here!'

'Not today, Reva. I will meet with her soon. I was so wrong in leaving her here, I am such a bad mother.'

'No madam. Mother always strives to do the best for her children. She misses you, madam.'

'I know she does.'

'We do too.'

She smiled and trudged down the stairs, tears pouring through her eyes at the exit, her heart broken into tiny pieces like an unsolved jigsaw puzzle.

Chapter 26

Not Taurus

‘But you have a court case coming up,’ said the Professor.

They were seated in the house garden on chairs built out of saple wood of the forest, brown and poignant, contrasting the tranquilizing fully-grown flowering plants that spread their effervescence everywhere. Albi nodded along, inconsiderate of a verbal response, busy sipping the most aromatic tea he had ever drunk that Miss Anira had prepared herself.

‘The hearing is in two months. There’s plenty of time for me to come back,’ said Miss Anira, chewing on a biscuit, stretching her legs over the grass that anticipated to be mown the next day, sunlight resting on its tips like a field of yellow diamonds.

‘But what’s the certainty you shall be back from the cold forests so soon? To go searching for a tiger no human has ever been able to spot or capture for about a decade! There is great chance you are going to be lost yourself, let alone looking for this tiger family you have promised to find. The place is dangerous. Many other deadly creatures dwell amongst the deep cold forests. All humans have failed, and many have not lived to tell the tale.’

Albi nodded again, slurping the last nip of his ginger tea, and eyeing the samovar for more.

‘The question you should be asking, Professor, is what am I going to do differently than all other humans who have embarked on this journey and have failed,’ she grinned at the ingenious idea that had captured her mind for some days now.

‘Oh well, that certainly is the question. The limitations of other explorers pertain for you as well. You might have a unique cause, but why would the tigers reveal themselves to you or trust you?’

‘Professor, you are forgetting that I hold a power no other human in history has ever carried into the cold forests.’

‘You mean the power of animal speech? So you are going to scream “lost and found” for hundreds of kilometres, hoping those exceptionally alert and evolved creatures will believe you, trust you, and show up in front of you? If that’s your plan, then two months is too less a time as a promise of return.

Besides, you might be attacked by black wolves or even dragons much before they reach you.'

'Uh—no—that's not—my only plan. I am going to take a child of the lost ethereal tiger family along with me. The tigress has a younger tiger brother. If he agrees to join us on the venture, he could guide us against the ominosity of the cold forests. While he walks with us, the hiding family will either show themselves to attack us to save their kid, or if the situation is ideal and forgiving, they might listen to our story and come forward in peace.'

'That's brilliant!' shouted Albi, gorging on a piece of butter cake after finishing another cup of tea. 'That's an adventure I vouch for—to wander amongst the snowy trees and grass alongside a dodgy tiger, in the hope to be surrounded by more and deadlier ones.'

'Good. Because you are coming with me,' announced Miss Anira.

'What? No way! I am not going to pave path for my death, or loss of a foot or ear at such an early age.'

'Oh, c'mon, you promised to help me find the tiger family. Besides, you love forest adventures.'

'Not the ones with the surety of me being killed.'

'How can you say that after all that you have seen? Didn't you observe the kindness shown to you by the animals?'

'To you, you mean. They were the animals of the zoo, Ann. And how many times have I told you that the forest is not just the animals. Let's assume that the animals and birds make peace with our visiting there, but what about the trees, the wind, the weather, would they show us kindness? Have you not read Lord of the Rings? There aren't even any tribes around that space.'

'Yes, but, that's the fun part,' convinced Miss Anira, overlooking Albi's assail on an entire box of tea cakes. He was a master stress eater. 'Besides, we shall go with all the preparations. I have a new electric jeep bought out just for this. We are going to research and—'

'NO!' Albi's declaration was muffled due to half his mouth filled with not masticated cake, which pulled some weight off his argument, making him regretful of the time and choice of his wolfing.

'And what about me?' asked the Professor. 'I could use an adventure to sight rare species and stories.'

'You can't accompany us,' declared Miss Anira. 'You have weak knees and older bones and you administer all the food here. All the animals recognize you, and we need someone here for protection and monitoring while we are gone. Whom could we trust better? I am going to get you in touch with my assistant and my lawyer before I leave.'

'I wasn't going to let myself get manipulated like this, but I do enjoy flattery,' grinned the Professor good heartedly.

'Nobody is going anywhere,' blurted Albi. 'It is too dangerous. Just go and tell the tigress that we decided to put it off.'

'We can't! We promised. And she needs her family,' entreated Miss Anira.

'Ok then what if the tiger doesn't agree to go with us? He was very disgruntled around you before too, in the zoo, eyeing you with suspicion and all.'

'We need to speak to the tigress about this.'

'What if she says no?'

'Then we convince her.'

'What if she isn't convinced, or even if she is convinced, the tiger says no?'

'Then we turn to plan B.'

'What is plan B?'

'I don't know yet.'

'I do. Plan B is that we DROP OFF THE PLAN!'

'She won't say no. The kid is brilliant. He will help us.'

'Professor!' Albi got on his feet, pointing accusingly at Miss Anira, in a humorous way friends do. 'It's like she has a blindfold of goodness and positivity stuck in not only in her eyes, but also her "once smart tongue". She might get us killed even here. How do you manage adventure with the do-gooder-calming-smile-type?'

'Oh shut up, Caphill,' snapped Miss Anira.

'That's better isn't it?'

'Let's just go and talk to the tigress to learn her say in the matter.'

'And what about me?' interposed the Professor. 'You just decide I am not going?'

'We really need you here, Professor,' said Miss Anira.

'I wish I was needed here,' mumbled Albi.

'Oh cut it out, Caphill. Let's go and talk to the tiger.'

**

Zone eighteenth of the forest was a huge grass-embellished landmass with a tiny pond and a variety of fruit plantations including apples, bananas, and berries strutted along with tamarind and maple tree clusters in the middle. Albi and Miss Anira did not locate the cubs move about their shelters or food stations, as was the expectation. The little tigers, occupied in their collective play, didn't turn stern and vigilant on their visit. They peered at the hoomans with their curious blue eyes, the two familiar faces from the zoo, and then resumed with their mockery, of which three white deers were the prey. They did not pounce or attack them, or scratch their muscles with their budding claw strikes. They simply bent the Ashoka and Banana tree branches over their deery heads, so that the leaves covered their antlers. When the deers shook the leaves away, scattering them everywhere, including their sudden waft on the faces of the cubs, the young tigers would jump around with joy, licking each other, and then annoying the deers again, who enjoyed the play just as much. From one tree to the other dangled two monkeys, both black mouthed, chibbering to a macaw that flew onto different branches, threatened by their stunts. The monkeys would jabber, imitate some actions and then jump and hang around, and squeal, to which the bird would ruffle its feathers, flap its wings away, and enunciate annoying expressions.

The eldest tigress sauntered towards them. Her four paws lifted her white weight graciously, well balanced like a ceiling over four pillars. Her whisker tips shone under the sunlight, eyes heavily sedated with wonder and excitement. She then stretched out the two front legs and yawned, nodding slightly.

'It's unbelievable,' reckoned Miss Anira. 'It's only been two days and you have bonded with other animals so well.'

Everyone, including the monkeys were now alert to an important conversation, halting every now and then from their affairs to learn about the situation.

'What business do we have as predators when you provide us with food, and how stale is life without hunting! It is almost as if we are discovering other possibilities of survival and living. Besides, if you wish to observe the pride in the tigers that stops them from mingling with other species, you should check on other tribes of tigers not very far away, still living in recluse. They even growled, pounced, and scared away an owl the other night to prove their worth in their territory. Flaunting their orange fur coats for shame! Nobody does that to owls in a forest! They are the wisest creatures of us all.' The

tigress now sauntered across the ground, and once she checked her children, turned to move away.

‘Miss Tigress!’ called Miss Anira. ‘Err—I am sure they will come around, the OTHER tigers. I just came to see you about your family in the cold forests. You remember you spoke to us about them?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yeah, we have arranged an expedition for that.’

The Tigress sat upright, her forelegs flat forward, and hind legs below the entire body weight.

‘But we face a pickle,’ continued Miss Anira. ‘The thing is— many humans have voyaged to the cold forests, but no one has been able to discover even a footprint of the Lost Ethereal Tiger family after your tragic hunt. It is thus evident that they are hidden particularly from humans, and if we go looking for them, they won’t reveal themselves to us, or shall probably launch an attack on us. But, if you, or any other member of your family was to accompany us, you could tell them that we mean no harm, and then we can explain to them about this forest and if they wish, we could bring them here!’

The Tigress remained calm for a while, and nobody disturbed her meditation. Albi, unable to decipher but conscious of the fact that her friend had just revealed her plan to the Tigress, clutched at her T-shirt sleeve so firmly out of fretfulness, that Miss Anira had to slap his hand away. The cubs, on listening to an indirect mention of them, came scurrying to their mother and played around her.

‘My children shall not leave,’ declared the Tigress. ‘But Taurus shall accompany you.’

A white lump moved from a distance away on the left. Had the tigress not mentioned him, no one would become conscious of his presence or even existence. A healthy young lost ethereal tiger yawned and brooded silently in a corner beside the rock. He perceptibly did not enjoy being where he was, nor did he approve of the company around him. If one was to remark a judgement, one could say he wouldn’t really be happy at any place in the world. He roared and stared in disgust while sauntering languidly forward.

‘Accompany these vile nobodies?’ he spoke.

‘Now now, Taurus, let us not give way to bad speech, but open ourselves to the sight of possibility that lies in front of us,’ said the Tigress. ‘They wish to bring back our family.’

‘So they say. How can you trust and mingle with them!’ He roared again and the two deers that lay peacefully on the grass straightened up and dashed away instantly. The monkeys peered through the tree branches they hid inside.

‘They freed us from the cage of years, did they not?’ reasoned the Tigress.

‘They put us there first!’

‘They are not the same humans who put us there.’

‘But—’

‘Taurus, I will not accept resistance at this point. You need to help us find our family. Go with them and help them in any possible way. And if they seem dangerous still, you can kill them.’

‘Oh, Alright.’

Miss Anira eyed at Taurus with both excitement and terror. ‘And if they seem dangerous still, you can kill them,’ words rung in her head. She wished to convey them to Albi but feared he could disagree to the trip. Not mentioning her concerns to the foreign creatures as well, she said— ‘We will pick you up tomorrow morning then, Taurus? We shall go by the sea.’

‘OK, Whatever.’

Taurus pawed back to his rock, and seating himself on the grass, examined the visitors leave impassively.

‘Thank you, Tigress.’ Miss Anira bid them a goodbye. Albi looked at her sceptically.

‘That angry one is coming with us, isn’t he?’ he asked after they boarded the jeep.

‘He is called Taurus,’ said Miss Anira.

‘He will rip us apart!’

‘We don’t seem to have a choice. I can’t pressure the tigress to send with us her children, and she needs to be with them right now.’

‘Why not? Just speak to her once more and tell her you are scared of Taurus. We could take them all three with us if she wishes.’

‘No, Caphill. She might herself then attack us out of distrust.’

‘So much for your “LOVELY” animals of the forest.’

‘So much for the years of manipulation and destruction our race is famous for. Why would any specie trust us for their survival?’

‘Okay, but tell me why won’t she want her children to go along and why Taurus? He is obviously a bigger problem here.’

‘First off, it is dangerous and she won’t risk her untrained children with no experience of hunting in the wild to be exposed to the tragedies of the cold forests. Secondly, she obviously has her trust issues with us still. If you noticed, I did not even mention Taurus, hoping he wouldn’t be brought into conversation, but she might have already thought it through, which is strange. Sending Taurus is wise on her part as he will always be wary of us, and protect their tribe in case we change colours. Also, if we are the people of our word, she wants Taurus to see that first hand and accept us. He also is a tough animal, well familiar with the survival strategies in the cold forests and will be a more informed help.’

‘Wow! Did she actually think of all this? The TIGRESS?’

‘I guess so, maybe. It is too mysterious of her to think on all these levels, but I reckon she does. Anyway, she is a mother, the politics rather grows on you whether you are able to think it or not.’

‘I would still be extremely watchful of this Taurus. I might take some protection with me. Like Guns and Knives or something.’

‘We aren’t taking any weapons! Hold on! Does that mean you are coming?’ After the shrugging, pointing, defying, Albi finally gave in with a sigh.

‘Yes, only if Maya comes along too.’

‘Maya? Oh, yes. How could I miss the cues? I am so dumb. You fancy her!’ bantered Miss Anira. ‘You couldn’t take your eyes off her in the zoo as well, and dinner the other day! I wondered why she was at dinner with us. You invited her, didn’t you? You so fancy her.’ She chuckled.

‘I don’t—I don’t fancy her—she just happens to know a great deal about these peculiar forests. She once wrote a research paper about the survival of the wild in cold forests, and has explored more wild forests than me or you.’

‘Yeah, you would know.’

‘You need to stop that. She is a zoologist, and none of us is. I just thought it would be a good help and safer.’

‘Let’s get you a date in the ocean, Caphill.’

‘It’s not a date.’

'Sure is.'

'Is not.'

'But it is.'

'It's NOT a date!'

Chapter 27

Sailing off

The blue sea, stretching into the oblivion, glittered at the zenith, convening with the sky that moved the clouds in the shapes of cups and rats. The cruise, called Mishka, painted white and golden, just a tiny dot in comparison to the eternal ocean, was huge enough for a man to spend his life in. It was a private luxury four decked-cruise, with thirty-eight rooms, plus other amenities and storage facilities, as they were informed. What made it atypical was that it also was a partial fighter cruise. The captain, if wished, could throw off tiny missiles into the ocean, or even initiate a sword shield protocol around the base of the ship. Miss Anira had the defences installed secretly while building the machine for a family journey, assuming how dim-witted could it be to take your children into the arms of a deadly ocean with teeming detrimental life without weaponry. The secretariat or the ocean law ministries did not need to know, so the weapons were properly concealed within the architecture of the ship, and their licenses passed smoothly.

The Captain, popularly called *Captain Train*, whistled the final call for the passengers to board. Taurus, the impossible tiger as they now called him, had already been received at the port side. He had resisted a transporting cage, but after several arguments, and a promise of better and fresh food, he gave in, pretending to fall into deep sleep with the wuthering air ruffling his fur into waves resembling that of the ocean.

Albi, Miss Anira, and Maya, who had gotten busy sporting with the water on shore, boarded at last. A crewmember, who apparently was also the communications officer, locked the entry doors, informing the captain of final boarding through a marine radio channel, over a walkie-talkie. The captain had been coerced into reducing his preferable crew into an eighteen member-staff from a general forty, and thus, adding a few secondary roles for everyone. He had been upset initially, but considering the dangers of the mission, and the involvement of wild animals and ammunitions on deck, had consoled himself that it was a wise decision to leave a part of his team behind.

Command to sail was issued instantaneously and the cruise was dragged down the dockyard into the water within minutes. The concerns about the weather that had first bothered the captain now seemed to fade away. The sky was

clear, and no storm, as was the forecast, seemed to follow them through the journey. Although, after twenty years spent within the seas and the oceans, he knew he could expect anything, and had prepared himself as well as his crew for the worst.

As for the passengers, the tiger had been allotted a secluded ventilated room for the protection of the crew, some of whom weren't very welcoming of a "WHITE TIGER ON THE DECK". They staggered away from it very often, affecting their efficiency over the cruise, his roars teeming their confidence down for the dangerous of the ocean. Taurus did not mind being put out of the way much, as he was being fed continually, and the cushions and blankets were surprisingly relaxing for his usual everyday naps, and the room big enough to bask. The other three savoured the luxury of the cruise in a myriad other ways. First was their Chef, Foodie, who cooked them everything they demanded at any hour. He also presented them with his innovative recipes, and was astonishingly humble in welcoming their feedbacks, resulting in their having extra meals against their usual diet. They jogged around to keep light on their feet for their hunt two days prior. They also sung journey songs, and other songs. Albi took over the drums, Miss Anira the ukulele, and Chad, the Able Seaman, played the piano, while Maya guided them with the lyrics. They amused with card games in the mini casino, especially Poker, which Albi happened to win at mostly. They discussed latest science, the art of Monet, while falling asleep under the night sky that twinkled with a hundred stars over the starboard, where they chose to sleep as opposed to the rooms, even after the disapproval of the Captain who saw obvious peril in their staying out at night.

When they woke up the third morning, the ship had traversed about seventy-five percent of the course. Miss Anira was the last to awaken that day, and quite unusually too. She did not flicker her eyes open at the glow of the star tapping at her eyelids, nor did the guffaw of the crew and her friends who had the noisiest breakfast together tossed her up. It was a ringing, an eerie murmur, plugging her head, that made her leap on her bedspread. The sound of the singing was so loud that she felt it emerged from within her. All her dreams about a vegetable market and a dragon attacking the city faded away into silence, while this sound enraptured her mind, too beautiful to part with, yet too painful to retain any longer.

When she sat upright, she had anticipated it to stop, but it only grew voluble. Now, it wasn't just her head that drummed it, and not the air around her, but something a little farther yet reachable, probably the ocean. Was the ocean singing to her? Why did it hurt her head?

'You are awake!' called Albi. 'Come have some pancakes. The Syrup is just amazing. Chef Foodie prepared it today morning itself, or maybe you want to try this delicious Poha. Oh hey, are you okay? Why are your hands over your head? Are you having a headache?'

'Miss Anira, Ma'am, could I get you anything? Would you want to freshen up in your room? Should I get the hot bubble bath ready?' It was Jeff, a steward, in a white uniform. Miss Anira waved her hand to tell him away.

'No. Caphill, I heard a voice,' she said, wincing and getting up, her legs more drowsy than her head, her eyes widening out, and face crumpled into painful strokes.

'A voice?' he said.

'It's like a singing, but it's not actually singing. I can't characterise it. First it was in my head, but now it's all over the place.'

'Maybe you had a bad dream.'

'No.'

'Maybe you are having one now.'

'Caphill!'

'Ma'am, would you need some water?' asked Jeff, to which she nodded and he immediately rushed to the lower deck to fetch it for her.

'Do you need a medicine for your headache?' joined in Maya.

'Or maybe she needs some pinching to realise this is not a dream anymore,' bantered Albi, anxious and apprehensive as he spoke.

Miss Anira, ignoring them, grasped onto the hand railing, staring into the deep ocean. There was nothing unusual about it, no strong waves, no out of the ordinary movements.

'Hey,' said Albi, standing next to her on the railing. 'A singing?' he asked softly.

'Yeah, it's eerie and undecipherable.'

'Like in the little mermaid?'

'It's not that sweet and precise. It's sort of like a message, but more of a feeling.'

'Okay okay. Do you need to lie down and relax your head?'

‘No. Just just—give me your binoculars.’

‘My—’

Without waiting for her companion to respond, she pulled out a belt from around his neck and peeped through the lens of the binoculars over the stretches of the ocean. For a time that seemed like forever but measured only a minute, she assessed all directions, yet again, gauged nothing odd or informatory. She played with the focus settings grossly, and shortly enough, spotted something—a disturbance in the water. Before she could follow it, her eyes and binoculars had moved a tiny left. She looked again, trying to find the spot, but her tired arms failed her into submission.

‘What is it?’ asked Albi, reading the terrified expression on her face.

‘I think I saw something.’

He blinked goofily. ‘What did you see?’

‘I couldn’t—there was a disturbance. I couldn’t see what caused it.’

‘Let me have a look.’

‘Ma’am!’ approached Tarang, the first officer, sprinting. ‘The captain has summoned you to the bridge ma’am. He saw something.’

The three of them hustled towards bridge control, Albi attempting to fit the binoculars onto his eyes, observing on the run, but very inefficiently and funny looking.

‘Captain Train, Sir!’ saluted Miss Anira.

‘There’s nothing to freak out about, I thought,’ said the Captain. ‘I noticed a shark reel our way some time ago. It was fine, really. We could just speed across it. I could steer right and avoid collision. Although, after two minutes, what do I see? More big fishes! Five, ten, fifteen, heading towards us from all directions! Moreover, they ain’t just sharks, Whales and other giant fishes I have never seen in my life. There’s also this water force flowing along with them, like a tide or something. Now, even though it’s a strong ship, it may topple after the fishes attack, and we don’t know how we could retain balance. It’s the strangest thing in the whole dang world.’

‘How far are they?’ asked Albi.

‘The nearest one would be about three kilometres away, but it’s at top speed, must be here in seven minutes.’

‘That—is great.’

‘Ok, here’s what we are going to do,’ said Miss Anira. ‘We are going to let them come and secure all the crew inside. I will speak to the fishes and find out what they want. It is obviously not going to be much trouble. They might simply need some help. Captain, could you slow the ship down to the minimal speed?’ ‘Wait, am I hearing this right?’ spoke Captain Train. ‘You are going to talk to the fish?’

‘She can speak to animals,’ answered Albi. ‘But that’s not the plan.’

‘Yeah, that’s not the plan,’ repeated Captain Train.

‘With what certainty can we swerve past them at top speed?’

‘They are approaching from all directions, and we can only sight till a distance of a few kilometres. If the ship manages to kill one or two at the north, we may be able to overtake the group, but—if they attack us first, and there are more approaching beyond the sight, there’s no way we could be escaping.’

‘What about the singing in my head?’ interposed Miss Anira. ‘It probably is the fishes calling out to me. I have to know what they truly want. And if they feel threatened by us, they won’t oblige, and will attack us surely.’

‘I am sorry, I don’t follow this,’ reckoned Captain Train. ‘We really have a problem here, can we focus?’

‘Captain Train,’ insisted Miss Anira. ‘We have to let the fishes come.’

‘But—’

‘Now I know it is a little hard to believe. All of this might sound rubbish to you, but it’s my ship and I request you to do as I demand in this matter. I have an elaborate plan if you listen.’

‘It makes sense,’ said Albi. ‘We cannot escape them with certainty anyway. If we kill one of them, and lose the route, others will launch, the ship goes down and us with it. We could let them approach and prepare for the worst.’

‘Oh, all right,’ The Captain gave in, ‘and it’s my ship as long as I am onboard.’

‘Of course, thank you, Captain,’ said Miss Anira. ‘Caphill, check on Taurus, make sure he is inside a room, not in the hall or balcony. Make sure all technicians convene in the control room in the basement. Executive Captain Rowler will navigate us from the bridge.’

A young man tugged his white cap in affirmation, taking charge of the steering.

‘The rest of us will access the lower control room. Maya and you can find yourselves a luxury room and wait.’

‘Are you serious? You want me to find a room and relax and miss all of this?’ scoffed Albi.

‘Caphill, Taurus—’

‘Maya, please go and congregate all crew and Taurus. Take the comms from the control with you so that you stay updated.’

Maya scuttled away quietly.

‘You are a pain in my ass, Caphill,’ said Miss Anira.

‘Always.’ He winked.

Chapter 28

Colour of the Sea

The plan was disclosed to everyone through radio. Miss Anira, Albi, and Captain Train grasped onto the north railing on the first deck starboard and stared into the stunts that the ocean staged for the arrival of its most haunting and powerful residents. In only a few seconds, all the fishes were visible in plain sight and the humming in Miss Anira's head had turned into a verbal exchange.

'Are you the woman who built the forest by the Osmoris sea?' spoke a voice. Miss Anira identified its source in a great white shark that dived in front of them, splashing the brackish ocean water at their faces.

'Yes, I—I am.' Miss Anira fumbled in her speech but managed to retain the confidence in her voice. More sharks, whales and other fishes dived all around the ship.

'We shall be sending our representative to your vessel.' This time, the source of the sound was untraceable because of a myriad of look-alike fishes everywhere. As far as they could see, they could see fishes. Many questions whirled around the heads of the three, mostly out of fear. The large teeth of the mammals that shone every time they yawned or breathed in, or spoke something, frightened their limbs to the imagination of death. Miss Anira wondered what representative it could be. Was her decision wrong? Should they have taken a risk of escaping? Could they escape? Probably not, definitely not. She now wanted to believe they couldn't, and if she made out of this alive, she would tell the world the story that an escape was an impossible resort and no other choice remained. Was a shark going to lunge onboard? No, sharks cannot survive without water. What if the water waves were to swamp them undersea and they were to drown in silence? No, they just questioned her about the forest. What grudge could they hold against her? In either case, she and others had to be quick on their feet. Should she ask Captain Train to initiate defensive protocol already or should she wait for this representative? Suddenly, another shockwave rippled out in the ocean, and splashed a creature from the depths of the sea onto the ship, rolling above their heads, landing on the wooden floor behind them. A little smaller than a foot in length, the creature appeared like a run over tiny toy train. For a moment, they forgot

the terror that beheld them in its grasp and fixated their eyes and souls on the most colourful thing they had ever seen in their entire lives, or had they seen something more colourful, they had forgotten about it. Greenish appendages, bluish face, pinkish eyes, reddish torso, a trailing blue-green shaded body covering until a few inches.

‘That’s a mantis shrimp!’ declared Albi at once, dragging them out of a daydream. ‘Better stand back.’

The mantis shrimp coughed and wavered its body around a small circle before sputtering in its shrill voice—‘Do you mind some water?’

Miss Anira quickly fetched a barrel, three out of four parts filled with water, and meticulously put it a little away from the animal. Albi whispered in her ear from the back—‘They are deadly creatures. They live in the deepest part of the ocean. Don’t get the wrong impression from its size.’

The creature dragged himself into the barrel, wobbling its head and bending its body in irregular shapes within the vessel before it settled the train inside, only his engine like head peeping out at them.

‘I—Ahem—Acchee—Aagh—Ahem—’ it began in his squeaky coughing undertone that contained an impression of a curious little child. ‘—am the representative of the ocean for your highness, Miss Anira. Are you her?’

‘Yes, I am her,’ replied Miss Anira.

‘My God, you are beautiful!’

‘Why— thank you.’ She blushed.

‘No, no, I mean, look at the light all around you! The blue floating on your red skin, such power!’

‘I am sorry, but I don’t have blue and red skin. Caphill, he says I have the colour blue floating on my red skin.’

‘They have sixteen colour receptors in their eyes,’ whispered Albi. ‘They can see millions of colours we can’t.’

‘Anyway, coming down to business,’ echoed Shrimp’s voice. ‘I have been sent here to request you a favour. On behalf of the big mammals of the sea and the oceans, who fear extinction, I request you to build a separate ocean for us, or maybe secure one, just like the forest, and offer us peace.’

‘WHAT?’

‘What is he saying?’ asked Albi.

‘That I build an ocean for them just like the forest and secure it against humans or something.’

‘That’s insane.’ Albi frowned at the creatures, surmising a deadly attack any minute.

‘YES,’ said Miss Anira. ‘Dear Mr. Shrimp, that’s ridiculous. How can we build an ocean? We are humans, not god, or the planet.’ she asked.

‘I know, right?’ said the shrimp, which resulted in the agitation of fishes around them. They dived with greater thrust and uttered rumbling sounds. The shrimp, timid from the rancour himself, improvised in a heavier tone. ‘I mean, you could secure one though, right?’

‘No, I can’t. I can’t BUY an ocean for you. Even if there was a protocol for that, which there isn’t, I wouldn’t have enough money. Besides, there are sufficient treaties in the system introduced by the government years ago to not permit businessmen and even common people to interfere with the oceans and seas in a way that’s destructive, but hardly anybody follows. A collective call of people would never be to stay away from the water bodies, and humans change their minds quite frequently about these things. I mean—I am sorry—but you really need to think what you are asking—it’s ridiculous.’

‘Look lady,’ started the creature. ‘I am least interested in this communication. You really think I care about what happens on the upper surfaces of the ocean? I stand here only as a punishment of breaking the teeth of Queen Shark’s child, Fiona, who is quite a catch by the way—and—for also flinging a sharp blow at a sea horse for fun, killing him and then not eating him because I wasn’t in the mood, and laughing about it undersea. Haha, you should have seen the expression I left on his face. I am this place’s most wanted, so I scarcely care.’

The shrimp commenced into hilarity while boasting his crimes. His heedlessness and non-objective mirth weirdly pleased Miss Anira. ‘I am forced to come up here, but only because they, the creatures of the ocean suffer a terrible life, the kind they couldn’t imagine for a million years. They cough all day and night, die as black bodies, get tossed and hunted unnaturally, and how terrible is the water, filthier than smoke! Coming from different shores those terrible, terrible things, spreading in everyone like wildfire! You probably don’t see it through this deceptive blue of the surface waves, but we feel it, the children of the ocean. Our plants die, they choke. Our children seem to have no future, and so we seek help—’

‘We understand, Mr. Shrimp—’

‘—and if you do not heed to our requests, you and your friends will not leave the ocean. You shall be sacrificed for the sins of your ancestors.’

Miss Anira gulped down all the saliva she could find nervously flailing in her mouth and weirdly lifted her eyebrows. ‘Right,’ she murmured.

‘What is he saying?’ asked Albi.

Miss Anira looked around the cruise. Sharks, whales, little salmons, and other fishes she couldn’t identify, swam around them forming a ring, standing by to strike on instruction. The water too sent torrents toppling the cruise sometimes to the left, sometimes right, frightening them into holding onto the railings and pillars for balance.

‘They are going to kill us if we don’t agree to build an ocean for them,’ she informed both.

‘What? That’s—Oh my god.’ Albi shook his head side by side in disapproval.

Captain Train, who had been entranced by the sequence of unnatural events, was shaken back into command on this news.

‘Captain, it may be time for plan C,’ she whispered.

‘Plan C?’ spoke the oddly coloured cartoonistic tiny beast. ‘Look, lady, I may have not sounded much threatening because the air above surface makes my voice soft, but I haven’t lied about the fishes ready to murder you. If you try anything smart, you are doomed. Believe me, I speak from experience.’

How was he able to listen to the whisper near the Captain’s ear so vividly, and also understand it? She willed to ask him, but then answered it herself to save the time. ‘He can obviously see things other creatures can’t.’

‘Oh no, Mr. Shrimp,’ said Miss Anira.

‘My name’s Gresha.’

‘Of course, Gresha. I meant plan ‘sea’. You see, after remembering our moments with the sea we had just crossed, we, the passengers of this ship, happened to see what you are seeing too. And so, to see to the fact that the sea does not bear these troubles we see in the future, we prepared ‘Plan Sea’ together yesterday itself. It is only in the beginning stage as we could spend only two days drafting it, just a map that we would love for you to see. We all see the same things really, except for the colours and the sound.’

The creature, dumbfounded by the disposition, took a few seconds to respond.

‘Then why would you disagree before?’ he asked.

‘Well, it was mostly frustration. We have been trying to help you for so long and all plans seemed to fail, as if we had no control. Now we know we can experiment differently. As you said, we cannot buy the ocean, but can certainly guard it for you.’

‘So you are ready to offer the ocean to us?’

‘Yes.’

‘So you will make THE PROMISE.’

Miss Anira did not know what ‘THE PROMISE’ was, but had learned enough in a few minutes to be convinced that she did not wish to make one. She browsed the water again, where the teathy fishes had come in closer and now floated more on the surface than underwater. ‘They are beasts,’ she thought. ‘They shall kill us at the first opportunity they get.’

‘Wouldn’t you first want to see or know our plan?’ she said to the creature.

‘That way, you will be sure of what you are getting into. You can assess our undertakings and decide whether we are even skilled enough to take on such a project. Forest was easy, ocean will be tricky.’

‘Alright, what’s the plan?’ asked the creature.

‘It is under the deck.’

‘The boy with the untidy hair can bring it up.’

‘But there’s too many design models and maps and charts. We need at least four people to carry it up on the deck. It will be difficult, but I think we could manage it with us three.’

The shrimp thought and thought and thought, and at last asked to be carried to the bulwark, which Miss Anira took into her hands. He consulted the fishes.

Miss Anira could listen to their singing, but to all other watchers, the fishes simply swam, and the shrimp performed ridiculous stunts in the barrel.

Meanwhile, the captain kept stealthily typing commands on a device he hid under his coat pocket, not bigger in size than a mobile.

‘Alright, then you carry me down with you,’ said Gresha, the mantis shrimp after his final consultation. ‘And remember, I will cast a blow on your neck dropping you dead if you try and outsmart me.’

Miss Anira, Captain Train, and Albi looked at each other. Captain winked at them, to which both nodded slightly and grimly.

‘Alright, then. Tag along, Gresha. You are simply gonna love our plans,’ announced Miss Anira, Albi watching her through a squinted eye throughout.

The barrel that carried him was transposed onto the trolley. The aquatic creature, unfamiliar with the vastness of the land, inquisitively studied what looked like just another barrel with a handle and tyres. Albi pushed the handle down the stairs with both his hands, keeping a two feet distance. The creature toppled and rubbed inside the barrel making earthly moaning sounds until they reached the lower ground. After they climbed down, Captain Train, who was the last to enter, closed the only door above them, latched and locked it. They walked together into the corridor that brimmed with yellow and white lights, paintings, tables, and a few brown polished doors that led into distinct rooms.

‘The colours of God!’ yelled Gresha.

‘Does it make any sound?’ whispered Albi, his hands now quivering.

‘No,’ answered the Captain, sternly. It didn’t seem like a big deal to him anyway, and so, it was plausible that he should be the one to beget the task. Miss Anira turned a final nod, stepped away into another dimly lit corridor towards the left, and disappeared into darkness saying, ‘Let me go check whether the equipment has been transported into the study, we will need to go straight into the game room itself. Why don’t you show him around for that time, Caphill?’

Captain Train, who walked behind the creature and Albi, revealed a revolver from the inside pocket of his black coat. He slowly, with damping footsteps followed them into the dining hall, where Gresha awed at the chandelier, and the placing of the exotic fruits and vegetables, and most importantly, the painting of a sunflower.

‘How could a flower give off such energy and radiance? Did a human create this? Really? Who was this human?’ The thrill in his voice invigorated the hall. Albi observed how his movements focussed in the direction of the painting, and guessing the shrimp may wish to learn more, he remarked—‘That’s Vincent Van Gogh,’ and then he tittered at his stupidity. The animal could only converse with Miss Anira. Those words most possibly sounded to ‘it’ a bit of mumbo jumbo. Now, it got easier to see the creature as someone else, something different, and it made making terms with what was forthcoming easier.

‘Ah, right!’ said Gresha. ‘You think I don’t understand you? I do! I learnt it recently. After talking to the lady, I explored all of your language and your

sounds. Vincent Van Gogh, eh? I can see all the colours in white you know. I can see every shade coming out of white. Each colour reflecting musically in patterns so weird and—'

His eyes, bloodshot pink, stayed open, sinking into the little barrel, which was meant for carrying drinkable, life saving water throughout the journey on the ocean. One of his orange tentacles hung in the air, signalling the presence of death within the cylindrical chamber.

'Now now, Ann!' said Albi, embracing Miss Anira by the arm. She had jogged into the hall in time and stared blank sighted at the creature. Albi dragged her alongside Captain Train towards the control chamber. 'Ann, C'mon! We don't have time to grieve right now,' he uttered midway, managing to distract her and put her into full awareness.

Chapter 30

Killings in the ocean

The control chamber was a large room with all sorts of important machines. The Chief Engineer, *Watts*, manned the controls near the big QLED screen. It displayed the videos of activities from around the ship. At the first glance, Miss Anira noted the noxious teeth of one of the sharks awaiting their savage, and her decision was firm.

‘Alright, everyone,’ she spoke to a team of ten. ‘We need maximum information before proceeding. Captain, the sailfish is the fastest fish in this or any ocean that we know of, correct?’

‘Oh yes,’ said the Captain. ‘The fastest speed of seventy miles an hour.’

‘Watts, did we observe a sailfish in any of the footages?’

‘Undoubtedly,’ informed Watts. ‘Many of them in fact, mostly at the north end.’

‘Alright then, we need to be at our top speed. Watts, how long can we stay on the top speed before engines explode?’

‘We can go hundred and ten miles an hour for ten minutes, after which we have to slow down to at least eighty. We can manage eighty for twenty minutes, and sixty thereon.’

‘That’s brilliant. So now, we need the time lag of five minutes for acceleration up to hundred and ten miles an hour, is that correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can we steer, Captain?’ This time she spoke into a communicator.

‘Affirmative,’ called Captain Rowler from the bridge. ‘I have all navigational details ready with time. Just need a signal to proceed, Ma’am.’

‘Roger that. Can we switch on the defences from here, Captain Train?’

‘The shield defences, the missiles and the silver daggers are automatised,’ informed Captain Train. ‘The spikes and other weaponry can be launched through a few manual commands from control. It will kill almost every creature that tries to get even near the ship.’

‘It’s like battleship,’ said Watts, grinning and fiddling through a few red and blue keys on the controller.

‘Watts, time the automation, and get the weaponry set for operation immediately, while the Captain can step on the gear,’ commanded Miss Anira. ‘Wait for my cue, gentlemen.’

‘I thought I was the captain until an hour ago,’ murmured Captain Train. Miss Anira grabbed onto a microphone that connected to the system with a plastic spring wire. Her voice could be heard around the cruise through the speakers on the upper deck for announcement.

‘Dear creatures of the ocean,’ she began. ‘I am Miss Anira. I am the lady who built the forest, the stories of which descend to you through the lives that dwell in the sea of Osmoris, that banks with the forest. I am the human who rescued a few animals, built a home for them, and the one you thought you could trap and threaten. Tell you what, it doesn’t work like that. YOU DON’T THREATEN ME TO KILL MY FRIENDS!’ calming herself into a morose cacophony, she continued. ‘Now, my decision is to not help you the way you wish for me to, because it is not a systematic possibility in the human world. I could work towards finding ways to reduce human activities into the ocean, but I cannot keep them at bay from your residence forever, or even for a significant period. As for your threat and plans to attack us, you should know that we are armed, so back off and leave in peace. We are prepared in the most human way possible, with weapons and strategy. Let us leave and we won’t be a bother. And—I am sorry to inform you—but—Gresha is dead.’

It took about two seconds for the first jerk to commence.

‘GO GO GO!’

They were speeding up, the shields popped above and below the keel, darting deadly blows one after the other on every fish that came as close as five metres of the ship, others were dealt with missiles. They fell here, there, everywhere, clunking their heads together, or simply falling down on a chair. The upper deck was rumbling with the sounds of beating, smashing, and other various thuds. A fish had boarded the cruise, possibly a shark.

Taurus growled every time he slid from one end of the room to another. He scrambled and looked around for explanations, and in the fear of confusion broke the bed and tore his favourite velvet quilt apart. Maya stood by the entrance to his room, clinging onto the handle of the locked door, in order to not be thrown away into the corridor. Water had begun to leak through the roof everywhere. Draining pipes were thus turned on immediately.

‘We will have to abate speed to eighty sooner than we thought. The rotors are heating up too quickly,’ informed the Captain.

Miss Anira attempted to look out through the glass windows. All she could view was splashes of red. Almost trembling with fear, she said—

‘Drop and let the defences stay. I think we must be out of danger by now.’

After a few minutes, when there remained no sign of activity on the upper deck, they clambered up together. Captain Rowler waved from the bridge control, he was safe. The long passageway no more showed the mahogany brown-wood design, but a big white shark lying motionless. It was a child shark, only four metres long, and its teeth shining white in the hideousness. Some other fishes and creatures like a seahorse lay splattered onto the floor, which had once been flooded with ocean water. Over a puddle of little water, a fish with orange coloured fins, ten inches in size, stuppled up and down.

Captain Train threw the fish out in the ocean on his way to the bridge. ‘We should get them all in the water while Waterstun checks the pipes,’ he said. Waterstun was the plumber. The crew prepared the rescue. Miss Anira collapsed onto the hardwood floor. A stream of tears flowed down her eyes, head thumping in frenzy. The stench, the awful stench, roasting the remains of a burning heart.

‘Let’s get you inside,’ said Albi, aiding her onto the lower deck. Before they could reach her room, she collapsed again, and such that he couldn’t hold her anymore. Her hands touched the wood on the corridor floor in defeat.

‘I murdered them, Caphill!’ Her sobs were no more muted in her screaming soul, but out in the open.

‘You did what you had to do. You saved us,’ he patted on her back.

‘Don’t glorify a murder. NEVER glorify a murder!’ she bellowed. ‘How easy it is to make these decisions for survival. There is no right and no wrong, only survival. It is after you survive that—it doesn’t feel worthy enough. Oh Caphill, I killed them, I killed them all! Hundreds of them! It actually happened, didn’t it? In reality, and not just in mere imagination or a plan!’ her sobs dampened in the solace of Albi’s coat. He moved his hands around her head to calm her, so many ideas and arguments bristled into his mind, but he chose to remain quiet. He could feel through her words how he too bore the responsibility of their deaths. How he didn’t stop her because he was too scared. How he chose silence as a tool for his survival.

‘Why everything I do and do properly needs to have a purpose or responsibility?’ she flung into a temper. ‘I HAVE NO PURPOSE! The forest makes me feel good. The idea of its existence is refreshing and pushes me off my personal limitations. Why don’t they get it? It is exhausting how they expect unreasonably. It is the same thing—what they think I should do is what they think is right—the story of the world. They all appear wrong and unreasonable to me and at the same time I feel this guilt and repentance. I don’t want to feel this. It is terrible, this confusion, and the pain. I also don’t want to be responsible for those sins. How do I reverse it?’

‘Caphill, they say I built the forest for welfare which they deserve too, the hell with that! Let alone their idea of putting forth their ideals in here, but truly, I don’t care about all of this, I really don’t. I love the forest and every creature in it. That is all. I might seem to your unreasonable and evil right now but that’s the reality, really, or maybe it isn’t. Oh Caphill, the Hyena, Gresha, and then the little shark and those other wonderful souls!’

‘I know, I know,’ whispered Albi, embracing her. Within an hour, her sobs died out, eyes closed, and she, for once, resembled the streaks of carcasses that formerly lay above her.

Chapter 30

Forest and its marvels

The sun stood over their heads when they caught the first glimpse of the island where lay the cold forests. All the cadavers had been dumped into the ocean using nets, pulleys, and even bare hands. The deck had been swept and scrubbed with powerful and scented detergents, and smelled like a fresh rosy bloom. The cook, Foodie, had brought in tomato soups for everyone, waiting on it himself. His usual screaming for the waitress Glen and Steward Jeff to take away and serve the food QUICKLY or 'Do you want them to be eating the pizza cold and criticising my cooking skills?' had stopped for this once. All passengers were back onto the porch, unwinding in the wooden chairs brought for them upstairs. Their surroundings bore no evidence to any tragedy that still raged onto their minds vividly as if it might have occurred only a few seconds ago. With every sip of their aromatic tomato soup, they found themselves nearer to the shore. The white-green splatters of paint transformed into faint images of snow, trees, and flowers. Within minutes, even the varieties and sizes of trees were distinguishable for them. They could tell a willow-like tree from a Banyan-like one. The cruise docked onto the white land. No more metal spikes protruded from the ship's bottom to ensure a safe beaching on the shore. It was a forest, all right. Subsequent to a huge mass of land where the water wet the sand, began a clumping of high foreign trees, with canopies stretching to as tall as thirty feet. They welcomed the visitors through a raw lane on the left, that seemed unused for years or months.

The crew, save for Miss Anira, Albi, Maya, and Taurus were to stay behind. Albi doled out copies of the cold forest guidebook he had prepared, a five hundred pages long spirally bound book. It covered everything, pictures and factual details of all possible tree species in the forest, with their fruits and leaves, what should be or should not be eaten, what dangers can be circumvented and how, and what tree or part of tree works as a poison or medicine in difficult circumstances. It also additionally carried information about a few rare deadly wildlife that was known to wander about near the sea, and how to deal with them.

'We have a huge pile of fruits and vegetables that should keep you sorted for a month, but who knows how long is it going to be here. If you need to climb

trees, or kill some hunt, you will need this,' he had explained to the group, exhibiting his notes.

Taurus fed on hundreds of kilos of food before commencing onto their quest. They had planned for an average scenario of seven days before which they would find the tiger family, and to ensure their safety with Taurus, the angry tiger, they had to make sure he was well fed even aside from the extra food they were bound to carry with themselves.

The solar jeep convertible was brought into descent on the ground in no time.

'You sure you won't need a car?' The Captain asked. 'It's compact.'

'The Jeep carries more things. Besides, Taurus would be more comfortable with an open roof,' replied Miss Anira.

'Isn't this your design? I saw a few sketches in your room sometime ago,' remembered Albi.

'It is my design! I was working on the assembly and test launch of this vehicle when I quit the company. The first fully powered EFFICIENT solar vehicle!'

The thought amused her and made her forget the dreadful feeling pertaining to the killings that had enraptured her heart and soul for hours.

'But Madame,' bowed Albi in badinage. 'The sun shall be disappearing behind the clouds or canopies any second now, and a solar powered vehicle won't be much use to us then.'

'The electric charged batteries are inside the trunk of the car. They will make us survive for at least a month.'

'That's brilliant then.'

'This is so exciting!' exclaimed Maya, in her ever sweet sounding voice, analysing a map that they had gotten a hold of from an old researcher, Chatur Mapper. He had once voyaged onto the island only to draft a map half a century ago. It had taken him a total of five years to properly mark it with no resources at his aid, and had turned a legend who shared stories now most popular about the cold forests. He had learned many secrets during his dwelling, people said, secrets he shall take to his grave.

'We will be starting north!' said Maya exultantly, not peeping away from the huge sheet of paper in her hands.

'We will be honoured to follow you to the north, my lady,' spoke Albi, flirtingly, as he hopped onto the driver's seat.

‘HEY! I thought I was driving,’ said Miss Anira, putting her hands over the steering wheel.

‘Like I am ever going to sit with Mr. Growly at the back! You handle him. And besides,’ he now whispered to her. ‘Maya is the navigator. She has to sit in the front.’

‘I wish I could join you in this adventure,’ said Captain Train, chuckling at their banter and making final arrangements for their departure, cross checking all the amenities in their list.

‘Maybe next time, Captain,’ reckoned Miss Anira. ‘You gotta stay with the crew here and let us know through radio if we are in range about any dangers that arise.’ She showed him her receiver intact in the inside pocket of her tread jacket, that did not do a very good job against the cold, even when it was the best option anyone would have in warm clothing. ‘Maybe you should light the fire now itself.’

‘Very well, Au revoir!’ he finally said and flew towards the ship, issuing commands and safety instructions to his crew.

They turned the car to the north. ‘Hey Taursy, hop on!’ Miss Anira called the tiger, who was savaging his last lump of food with great pleasure. He instantly jumped onto the backseat of the jeep, jerking it into slight turbulence. Miss Anira patted him on his face, and he, closing his eyes, crashed onto the ground below the seat. One could now say they had developed a special bond. After living through a tragedy together, Miss Anira had explained all events to him, and he had astoundingly understood and even empathized. It became quiet natural for him to trust her after she saved his life the second time on the ship. As for Albi and Maya, they still waited for the tiger to strike at them with a powerful life-threatening blow with his sharp nails, but uttered not a word about these doubts to Miss Anira.

As they travelled deeper into the forest, the paths turned bumpier, shaking them from side to side in their seats. The trees warped greener, taller, and the flowers and fruits on them more colourful, the white of snow melting away, bringing into notice the mosses shining dutifully over the tree trunks. The paths were darker now that the sun or any form of light was not able to reach the depths of the tall tree clumps, save for little, like an end to a zigzag maze. Despite the fear and thrill that the forest brought over them, they were jubilant as they journeyed forward marvelling the eloquence of the forest.

Having Taurus by their side also instilled in them some confidence. They presumed that the deadliest creatures would not prowl, while their red, blue, green, yellow, and orange eyes gleamed in the dark, if they saw that a lost ethereal tiger was their mate. Attacking wild animals, thus, were least of their worries. As they progressed deeper and deeper, the eerie rustling of the leaves, or standing of the trees, made them inspect the peculiarities of the species that was the green. Their common sense interrupted telling them a tree only stands, and never attacks the way they were dreaming or envisioning. Their factual understanding was preceded by their imaginary fears that now felt more real. The map also stopped helping them. Every path they traversed on was rerouted because of either a fell over tall tree trunk blocking their path, or the rocks too huge. Miss Anira, who could hear the whispers from hundreds of creatures, little and big, short and tall, but see nobody in sight, contained herself from indulging in any conversation with any creature in the wild. Her urges grew stronger as the whispers grew louder, and her head ached from the amplification of sounds and the amount of information. She focussed along with others on the other things that surprised and terrified them. The fruits never seen, with red more vivid than any red ever; Berries more juicy and round than ever tasted; and leaves more healing and poisonous than ever studied.

In the silence were heard the noises of breathing, of stealthy chirpings of the migrating birds, and the rustle and tussle of the tree leaves, that now prevented ANY sunlight from entering, so much so that they had to get their torches out to walk, even during the day. Freezing with cold, they lit a fire the third day in an empty space they had found after hours of search. They no more hushed or signalled each other instead of proper talk, relieved from the pressure of hundreds of eyes watching them at all times. When Albi was telling them—‘That’s Gregoria Majoris. Taken in small quantities as much as five milligrams, it can cure poisoning in seconds, but if you intake more than that, even a milligram more, the leaf will drop you dead in milliseconds!’, they heard a noise, a humanly noise they did not know whether to be happy or worried about.

‘Did you hear that?’ asked Albi. ‘Didn’t it sound like a gunshot?’

‘Yes, probably a fire shot from a blunderbuss,’ said Miss Anira.

‘Does that mean there are people in here?’ asked Maya, excitedly.

'I wouldn't be so thrilled about it if I were you,' said Miss Anira.

'Yeah,' agreed Albi. 'They could be hunters.'

'They are near too. If they saw Taurus, they may hunt him down with that gun,' worried Miss Anira.

'We should hide ourselves I suppose, and be armed at all times,' said Maya in a whisper.

'Yeah, we could drink beer for warmth and put out the fire, and arm ourselves with a gun each, such that it is quickly accessible in our coat pockets or socks or whatever is faster,' said Albi.

'Guns? You brought Guns?' gasped Miss Anira.

'Err—No—Yes?'

'I don't believe this! The one thing I told you not to do! We have Swiss army knives and other gadgets. Didn't we cut through the bushes the other day? We don't need guns.'

'It's not his fault or thinking,' interposed Maya. 'It was really a silly idea to come to a jungle without a gun. It's like knowing you can live and still stupidly supply yourself in the hands of death. I suggested to him we need guns and the idea seemed plausible to him.'

'Oh, plausible shmausable. He only agreed cause he likes you,' muttered Miss Anira. 'Stupid Botanist.'

'WHAT?' exclaimed Maya.

'Ann—' tried Albi.

'Don't speak to me Caphill,' she said this with such calm, that it was almost more frightening than a scream or a harangue. 'It isn't about how wild or dangerous the forest is. You lied to me and brought guns on the expedition without me approving of it. You broke my trust. If there was a rulebook about how to survive the cold forests as a team, the first rule is to be able to trust your teammates. How can I trust you with my life in the jungle when I don't even know how to look at you anymore?'

'But Ann—'

'I knew you were slightly wary of Taurus at all times, and I understand it, but he is obviously not as smart as you, and has his own reasons for being so suspicious towards us. How do you expect him to have faith in you when you have none in him? And you should look at him! How is he still gawking all about terrified by that gunshot.'

‘Alright, I should have told you. I am sorry, Ann, but we do need guns. And why are you bringing it down to Taurus? We could use ammunitions against hunters.’

‘Because—’ she whispered again. ‘You didn’t bring the ammunitions to be used against hunters. You didn’t even imagine this situation or else we would have surely discussed it. After all that happened on that ship, caphill! You brought these guns as a security against Taurus’s family.’

She made sure she whispered correctly, only to the two of them, while Taurus yawned and stretched a little farther away from the fire, under a tree that resembled Banyan.

‘So he did,’ spoke Maya. ‘What is wrong in that? What if they attack you? How do you deal with that without any weapons? We haven’t got claws.’

‘We DON’T NEED weapons! We shouldn’t. Anyway, let’s put out the fire before they come here following the smoke.’

Maya shrugged. Albi thought he understood why his friend, the wisest of them was being unreasonable. He connected to how remorseful she felt for the events at the ocean, and wished to compensate for it every chance she got. He was also now certain that many of her decisions in the jungle shall come out of that mortification and emotional reciprocation, and he was prepared to deal with it.

Before putting out the fire, they indulged in sips of beer, and gorged on their sandwiches with potato-mesh-salad filling and vegetable fried rice packed in golden foils and disposable containers by Foodie, their Chef on the cruise. They were careful to eat only one sandwich and a handful of the rice, so that they could use the food for the next day as well. Even though they had managed to bring fresh food as well as uncooked packed meals for an entire week and more, with the cold and the tiredness, they had already guzzled provisions for an entire day only in a few hours of their travel, and they knew the journey was only to get tougher. Taurus too had his dinner with them and for a while questioned the little slice of food being put in front of him, but he was still so full from the afternoon two days ago, that it hardly bothered him, and might not bother him for a couple of more days. He was also in a rather cheerful mood as opposed to others. Initially, coming down the forest was overwhelming and he didn’t know how to act or move about. After years spent in cage, it had seemed an impossible idea that he could ever survive on his own

in such wilderness, where mosses grew over the rocks, the grass was much rough, pointy, and chilly, and the days much darker than the nights. The cold pricked through even the thick layer of his white fur. His paws ached after walking a considerably large distance, but the tigress had edified him that one grows into the wild gradually. He could get faster and stronger only with time. He had already caught and killed a butterfly that meandered around the white blossoms, and had even pounced over and over again on a rodent, hunting him down in the end, which he thought was pretty cool and impressive as he had not hunted for years and was already weak in his knees. The lady, Miss Anira did not approve of the act, but what of her approval? He was free and learning. She also told him that his fur coat could get thicker and more impenetrable for the cold, and his knees shall not be weak after walking and running for several days. She said so with such conviction that he immediately believed it. The blue collar around his neck, that he once loathed, now provided him with a warmth and belonging, and he wished to pounce more and walk more and explore more.

After they took their multivitamins, they doused the fire and prowled in the direction of the gunshot sound. Their jeep had long left their side, and they kept flagging sticks and clothes to mark their way back. Their plan was to follow the hunters rather than have the hunters follow them.

‘Ann—’ said Albi, hobbling over a puddle of drench. ‘I really am sorry, I should have understood and at least told you.’

Miss Anira smiled and winked at him, and from then on, it seemed as if she had never been upset, and he had never been sorry.

Chapter 31

Deeper into the jungle they go

After footslogging for a few hours, when the perceptible hunters they set out to follow seemed to appear nowhere, and no sound attracted them after the sound of that gunshot, they decided to call it a day and slept in their bivouacs, while Taurus pretended to sleep peacefully under a Banyan like tree. It was impossible for him to rest during the night, while there was too much left to be explored, but his knees ached, eyes drooped, and reminiscing the tiresome virtues of the day, even he, after some time, fell into deep sleep.

They dreamt of land beneath their feet cracking into deep death holes of death, giant green monstrous taking control of their jeeps, strange animals they thought they had never seen attacking them along with red skinned tigers while they skipped around few hammocks they had built over come trees, water drenching them in a claustrophobic cave with trees that tangle their legs, and fireflies travelling to the moon during midnight.

Thrifty sunlight crept sneaking through the foliage of the taller trees the next morning, the fourth day. Half their provisions had poured out and they held no clue on the whereabouts of the lost ethereal tiger family. Lost in the delicacy of bodily revitalisation of millions of cells, put at work to heal themselves from the traipsing of yesterday, Miss Anira and Albi wouldn't stir all day if Maya did not scream nudging them ravenously- 'Albi! Miss Anira! Wake up! Taurus isn't here, he is gone!'

They quickly scrambled onto their feet and perused their environs idiotically. They swirled in the empty space, searched for him fastidiously behind the trees, under the branches, near the clumps of bushes, on the top of the trees, and even around their sleeping bags. As if he was a little creature who could manage to hide behind a tree, or be covered under a few mid-sized leaves.

'Oh, great! We brought him here to find the other tigers who wouldn't show themselves in three days, and now, we lost him too?' said Albi cantankerously, mounting his backpack on his shoulders.

'Taurus! Taurus!' called Miss Anira.

'That's not going to help and you are only attracting attention of other wild animals. Once they notice we are stranded, we will be in grave danger without

Taurus. Besides, we can simply track him,' he said displaying a small rectangular device with an LED monitor on the top. 'The Professor put in a tracking chip inside the blue belt around his neck. Even if the GPS doesn't work here, it sends out powerful radio signals for a five kilometre radius. Don't look at me like that, Ann. That's the last bit of preparation from my side. It is your first time expending into unknown forests. I have had some troublesome experiences before to plan this, that's why you brought me along, C'mon.' The device bleeped directions to them with the aid of a disc like red coloured diagram that kept changing shapes on the LED monitor which Albi explained was a digital compass setting, programmed to help them pick the right frequencies and intelligently determine the most efficient path to Taurus. They walked for about a kilometre. Whereon, reaching a big rock in a small clearing, they halted to rest and eat their morning snacks. Maya was only halfway gobbling her last bite of cuppa noodles, when they heard another gunshot, this time followed by murmurs of two men.

'They are near,' whispered Maya.

'I say we follow the sound, but try and remain inconspicuous,' said Miss Anira and the other two nodded. It was difficult to stay hidden in this part of the forest with literally no sound, not even of the chirp of a cricket. They had to be painstaking with even a scratch onto a mosquito bite, while walking surreptitiously for a few meters, keeping cover behind the bushes, trees, and gigantic rocks. When their rendezvous changed to a strangely located swamp, around which grew dense trees in a dozen, figures of two men materialised into sight. Only their backs were visible. One of them, a sturdy giant, wore a russet cowboy hat and lugged a rifle on his left shoulder. The other, leaner one shouldered a bag over a brown hunter's vest. He was heard saying— 'I am telling you, I saw one! It was white with blue spots and then it disappeared in a minute.'

'Why didn't you wake me up, jackass?' asked the bulkier man.

'I did! But in the process I lost sight of him, so I ran to the north where I had seen him face, but I got caught in the swamp and fell over.'

'You timid, unworthy, good for nothing, scumbag! If you weren't Shoton's brother, I would have shot you down right here! Had he not had that accident, I wouldn't be stuck with you here instead of him, and he would have never lost the sight of a rare tiger species. C'mon now, you have had enough rest. Let's

hunt the bastard down. We will be the first ones to do so in a decade at least. They say it is impossible. I say it is silly and weak to say so.'

Both men got up and walked straight into another clearing.

The three explorers followed them continuing their furtive attempts. They stopped every now and then when the Bulky gunman would turn around to check his environ in suspicion, because of a step on a twig, or a sneeze whose sound couldn't be deafened even with the throttle of six hands. They urged to call out to the hunters. They were humans after all, and could be spoken to. It was a yearning rather difficult to oppress having spent a day in a dark and lonely forest. They had succeeded in their secret chase for an hour at least now, when a loud beeping sound startled them. It was the tracker.

'Shut it off!' whispered Miss Anira.

'I am trying!' replied Albi. He moved his fingers about various buttons on the device, but before he could silence it, they were discovered. The two men stood behind them casting suspicious glances, the lean guy holding another rifle to their heads.

'Who are you?' asked the burly man, studying them solemnly. 'And why are you following us?'

'WE—We are researchers. I am a botanist and they are both zoologists,' said Albi, both his hands up the air.

'Yes,' continued Miss Anira. 'We heard the gunshot and saw you two and even though we first thought we should come and talk to you, we didn't know if it was a good idea, and because we haven't been in a forest before, we didn't wish to take a risk.'

The men analysed them for a while, fixated eyes and guns, and then, in one shiny moment, they were able to breathe again when the heavy man grinned.

'We are fishermen,' he said. 'We came here all the way from _____ to snatch away the skin of a white tiger. I had lost all hope and was returning home, in fact, but this lumberjack claims he sighted one.' He smacked his companion on the head who stupidly smiled at them. 'My name is Grop and he is Flint. What about you?'

'Wow, that's amazing. I am Albi, she is Maya, and that—umm—she is Ann.'

'You look very familiar, madam,' spoke Grop in his ever intimidating voice.

'I just have a very common face,' said Miss Anira with hesitation.

‘Huh! That’s likely! Alright then, you will assist us in killing the tiger,’ he declared, smiling through his red teeth again.

‘Aren’t white tigers a myth?’ asked Maya, trying to pretend not to know their business, and shying away after a glare from Albi.

‘Oh no, that’s just an excuse for people who cannot find them. My father had hunted one down in old days. We still have the white skin hanging down as a painting in our house. He boasted it for years and no one in our village ever got tired of it. Wish he was alive to guide us before we came in here. Mysterious creatures those bloody tigers. Very smart, unlike other animals like eagles or wolves that are easy to hunt. What did you come researching about anyway?’ ‘Umm—just collecting some data on the seline family of flowering plants. We are studying if in such climate, it is possible for the species to evolve,’ said Maya, rather confidently. ‘If we find one, our many hypothesis about the family will be confirmed.’

‘Are you those science people who are searching for the cure of cancer in the woods?’

‘Yeah, that’s—that’s exactly what—we are doing.’

‘Ha—that’s what they all do. When science fails to provide answers, they come looking for them in the woods. Well, did you find anything?’

‘Not yet. It’s only been a couple of days.’

‘All right, that’s all right. You will find them all right. Shall help us cure more diseases, this seline family of flowers?’ he chuckled. ‘Let’s get moving.’

Miss Anira looked at Albi for cues, but he shrugged. They trailed behind the hunters again, but this time in close quarters and visible.

‘Why did those trackers beep?’ whispered Miss Anira.

‘Because the tiger is in ten metre proximity,’ he replied softly.

‘Holy Crap! Couldn’t we just knock them on their heads and turn them unconscious?’

‘We fail, they kill us.’

They soon neared the back of a cave. Green, yellow leaves of comparatively smaller trees sprinkled around the water puddles that had melted on thaw, glistened under the little light, source of which was unknown. Vines stretched, flowers of different colours lay crushed, and bees ever unseen hummed on the growing grass. Grop commanded them to run around the cave to the entrance. Alert and anxious, they followed the orders, him leading them at the front.

‘What do we do?’ whispered Miss Anira, but no answer came.

‘You have been carrying the heavy bag for so long.’ Maya said to Flint. ‘I could take it if you want. I hardly have anything in my backpack. We could exchange.’

‘No!’ frowned Grop. ‘He carries the bag.’

They had to retrieve guns and other weaponry from the huntsmen, but without any verbal exchange, it was least likely that they could devise a strong plan. The cave was only about twenty metres in length, and a pasture extended to its right, allowing them to notice from a distance that the space around the cave entrance, or at least the part they could manage to see, was empty, save for flowers and petals that adorned the land over deep green, and sometimes red grass. It was a rare part of the forest that appeared nourished and trimmed, as if a gardener had decided to create the best work of his life, travelled so far for inspiration, and settled into this tiny corner of the world, building and tending to a masterpiece of a lifetime.

They were only few feet away into the revelation, when Miss Anira stepped on Taurus’s blue belt as she lunged forward to get a better look. She bent over to pick it up. She caressed it, not knowing why. ‘Taurus must be around,’ she thought, and before her brain could process further ideas, a gunshot startled her, slipping the collar belt between two large, muddy rocks. She lurched. Another shot was about to leave the blunderbuss, when she grabbed his gun and changed the angle. Boom, smoke clouded their view of each other.

Chapter 32

The bullet that kills

‘What are you doing?’ he shouted, and at that one moment when he bore the gun loose to probably adjust it well in his sweaty palms, the one terrible moment, where she could read it in his eyes was devastation oncoming. The one lucky moment, that could change their fate, and paths and roles, and if lost, could cost them their lives, or possibly others’. That one glitch, that one millisecond second, Miss Anira grabbed the gun, nicked it out of his hands, and smacked him with it, knocking his bleeding head down.

Maya got working on tying his struggling hands with handcuffs, while Albi forced them together.

‘Help me, you idiot!’ he growled at Flint, perplexed as to how he ended up tied up with dirt smeared on his face scratching the ground.

Flint seized Maya by the arm. Albi smacked his head too with the blunderbuss, and attacked him with his knees on the crotch. Flint lay whimpering in pain near his companion. Miss Anira rushed towards Taurus, but so did the creatures from the cave, who growled and roared at her. They were about ten lost ethereal tigers along with their many cubs, all dressed in white and blue fur, green-orange eyes, loud and restless.

‘Stand back!’ she shouted. ‘He is my friend. I am here to help, I promise,’ she gabbled out all she could manage. ‘I brought him here to you, freeing him from far off zoos. I am Miss Anira. I built the forest. I didn’t harm him. That bad human did. He knows me. Oh Taurus, Taurus.’

The tigers stopped short in astonishment. When Maya and Albi hustled towards Miss Anira, escaping the grabs of Flint, who was now also tied with a rope, they snarled again. The angry tigers whiffed at the guns and weaponry in bags confiscated from the hunters.

‘They are my friends too! Those two are not,’ spoke Miss Anira waving signals without taking her eyes off from Taurus. He lay motionless, the left side of his body covering the grass. Blood whooshed from under his bloodshot furred skin. The white had been painted red, the blue, black. A depression was visible on his coat, on the extreme right of his potbelly, where the bullet had pierced through.

‘Caphill! We need to get the bullet out! It can’t have pierced deep. The layers of the fur are thick, and we are lucky it only shot at the extreme right, not in the middle. We have to prevent an infection. It is not deep and not around any vital organ, I know, I somehow know. We don’t have a surgeon on the ship, we must get it out,’ said Miss Anira in her quavering and deranged voice.

‘Let me see.’ Albi rummaged his backpack and began fishing out a first aid kit, tools, guns, and some chemical solutions in tiny glass bottles. Meanwhile, all the tigers inspected them disbelievingly, except for two, who were busy mauling Grop and Flint, their clear enemies.

On realising this, Miss Anira shrieked—‘Stop! They won’t harm you now! We have food for you in the jeep.’ She felt like a maniac, and spoke all that she could speak, like every word was an appeal to make a little difference. She was late in doing so though. Grop was already bleeding to death and Flint had climbed to the top of a tree with a few scars and broken arm.

‘Stop! Now!’ she screamed again. Both tigers gazed at her weeping face, the lachrymose, helpless, frowning, angry face.

‘He is enemy. He is food,’ said one of them.

‘Well, finish him then! Eat, but leave the other one on the tree. He is no harm. We have plenty of food for you in the jeep.’ They obeyed and Flint climbed down to Maya’s rescue. She handcuffed him, fomented his arm with icepacks, and put antiseptic solutions on his scars on the head, arms, legs, back, as it bled lightly all over. Albi, taking out a pair of tweezers, ran towards Miss Anira even though she was merely a feet away. Taurus stirred uneasily on his arrival, and moaned lightly.

‘We can use this size to get the bullet out,’ he said, displaying the metal tool. ‘I can hold him steady for the right blood flow. You get it out. But in case it is deep, leave it just as it is.’

‘You do it!’ spoke Miss Anira.

‘How would you know where to hold and how much pressure to apply?

Besides, look at the pack stare, it scares—’

‘Maya could do it! She is a zoologist.’

‘The tigers won’t let her. Ann, Taurus is already uncomfortable in my presence. What if he shrieks? The tigers will rip us to shreds. He only trusts you. You are the one to do this.’

‘Okay!’ she yelled again and picked the tweezers in her trembling hands. ‘Now now, Taurus,’ she started eyes widened. She had to perform an act contrary to her lunacy. More than Taurus, she attempted to calm herself down with the power of words. ‘This is going to hurt a bit, but we promise it is going to be fine in the end. You will be up and running in no time, trust me.’ Taurus closed his eyes with a painful sigh.

Albi put both his hands around the wound, ready to push. ‘Wear the gloves!’ he said. ‘Take the cotton,’ he said. ‘Soak the blood away,’ he said. ‘There’s more cotton in the box.’

She obeyed the instructions quietly. All other tigers surrounded them in a circle, probably ready to pounce on any opportunity they get. Taurus breathed heavily the little breathes and moaned. After the cleaning of the blood, Miss Anira watched the bullet clearly piercing through the muscle.

‘Okay, good,’ said Maya, observing from a distance. ‘Albi, remain stable and do not let his other muscles move. Miss Anira should be very careful and not let the fragments slip. It hasn’t pierced deep. Make sure should it gets out in one shot, unfragmented like it is now. Be watchful of the distorted shape of the bullet. You can do this.’

Miss Anira did not remember how she held her trembling hands steady to put the tweezers at task. She had no memory of when and how did the bullet hold and slip out of her grasp once, which she was able to capture with another hand, making it itch with a scar. All she remembered was the drop of the metal on the green grass, and the potions brought in by Maya that Albi had secured throughout their journey to further aid the wound.

‘He is fine,’ said Maya, consolably patting Miss Anira on the shoulder.

‘Oh Taurus!’ wept Miss Anira. She hugged him and felt his heartbeat as he groaned.

‘Pass me some water, Caphill,’ she said. ‘You are all fine now, Taursy. Had the bullet been somewhere else, we wouldn’t be taking it out, and lord knows what damage it would do. But it was not deep. You have been very brave.’ She fed the almost unconscious tiger water with a spoon as one feeds an infant. Half the water rushed out, and the other half was swallowed.

‘We need to haul him together to the jeep. Dr. Prudence might be able to help us once we are in the ship to deal with the wound better,’ suggested Maya, holding Flint in custody.

‘Very well,’ agreed Miss Anira, still trembling between her fear and excitement of a successful partial surgery. She stood up, weak in her knees, to address the tigers who watched her intently with questioning gazes.

‘He will be fine,’ she started. ‘We have sedated him for a while and Maya is now giving him the right medications. The Doctor in our ship shall be able to examine him. And so, we have to pick him up and take him to the jeep that is parked only a couple of kilometres far from here. But before that, let me answer your questions.’

There were indeed many questions. Each tiger asked one, and none of the cubs.

‘Who are you?’ asked the old one.

‘Miss Anira, the woman who built the forest.’

‘Why are you here?’ came forward the young ravishing tiger with a bigger than normal tail.

‘To take you home to the rest of your family. They are all free from the zoos. Me and my friends rescued them and now they are happy in the new forest.’

‘Why should we go with you? And why should we trust you?’ asked a tigress narrowing her eyes at her.

Miss Anira took a pause before she answered this.

‘Humans like Grop are going to come here into the cold forests to hunt you or capture you all the time. There might come a phase when you are unable to escape them. Not to discredit your wisdom or skills, but you shall be safer in the forest that possesses no human danger, and you don’t even have to hunt! You get all the food you want and need. Taurus here must have explained you how it works in the forest. As for trust, I risked mine and my friends’ life to come here just for you, because your mate, who won’t tell us her name, asked us to. And, I can speak to you, there must be a reason for that?’

Now the tigers murmured and exclaimed amongst themselves.

‘No hunting in the forest? What would we do then?’

‘It sounds boring.’

‘We have been living here for very long, we should try a new place.’

‘She does have a point.’

The eldest of the Lost Ethereal Tiger family pawed forward, carrying his heavy coat of fur with much fluidity as it swayed back and forth with his every step. He sniffed Taurus, and then, after an intent analysis of her face, declared—

‘Alright, we will come.’ Instant growling and roaring by the other tigers followed. ‘But if you cause us any harm, we shall gobble you and your friends like little chipmunks, never to be found.’

‘Deal.’

Albi, Maya, and Miss Anira heaved Taurus on the back of the second eldest tiger, Spont. Taurus moaned slightly and fell unconscious again. Albi held Taurus’ hanging legs, and Miss Anira the head, distributing the weight, which improved Spont’s walking speed and led to an arousal of gratitude for the two humans. Maya directed them through the tracker. Albi claimed he had left his cell phone in the jeep and it could be traced easily because of the settings embedded in it by the Professor.

Flint timidly trailed behind them, eyeing the two tigers closely who shared flesh from Grop’s body amongst each other. Specks of blood still shone around their jaw that made all kinds of feelings emerge in him.

‘We couldn’t take Grop with us,’ mentioned Albi, mournfully.

‘That’s because I allowed them to eat him,’ confessed Miss Anira.

‘You did what?’ He asked, stunned. ‘I thought the tigers killed him even after your intervention. That you must have tried to save him. You saved Flint.’

‘He was already dead.’

‘We didn’t know for sure. We didn’t check the pulse or the like.’

‘Oh alright!’ she said impatiently. ‘They were hungry and angry. It’s fine now.’

‘No! It’s not!’

‘He deserved it, Caphill. He tried to kill Taurus. He could have killed us all.

Didn’t you see how he treated Flint? He was a monster and he deserved it.’

Albi was appalled at the meaningless loud appeals of his friend. He would have argued next—If Grop was a monster, what were the tigers who ripped him apart? What was she? When she knew, we had enough food in the jeep to fill their appetite and still let them take him. However, he stopped himself for he convinced himself that she wasn’t really thinking or listening. He was dumbfounded by this vision.

‘What has gotten into you, Ann? Think about what you are turning into,’ he said and Miss Anira, realising that her cheeks had turned all wet, looked away, her mind throbbing in insane rhythms. She craved for some sleep, and possibly, some rest.

‘How does it matter anyway?’ she said dreamily. ‘The universal consciousness dislikes humans.’

‘What are you talking about?’ scoffed Albi. ‘Why does the universal consciousness dislike us?’

‘I don’t know, maybe we are disturbing its design or purpose in some way. For a life form such low on calibre, to be able to cause this drastic impact is both admirable and offensive to the ego.’

‘Hold on, how do you know that?’

‘I can feel it. Besides, why else would it drive us to our destruction so soon, before our time?’

‘Well, feelings can be wrong. They are mostly always wrong. How exactly is it driving us to our destruction?’

Miss Anira raised her eyebrows. They were walking behind the troop. Only Spont was able to hear them, and in all possibility, unable to decipher their conversation. Maya and Flint had hit it off with chitchat about fishing and funny anecdotes on forests and the sea.

‘Our own minds operating on a universal consciousness?’ remarked Miss Anira.

‘We are leading ourselves onto a path of clear destruction. Look at us. Do you think we could survive a thousand more years? Our learning is exponential, and we are doomed. Homo erectus survived for two million years evolving into us, possessing not even tenth of the knowledge we possess in only some thousand years. Sometimes I wonder whether Homo erectus had in prior received all this knowledge from the eternal conscious and refused to evolve into us, or if they captured and nurtured the knowledge into their imaginations and our unconscious then revealed it to our conscious slowly for us to get a grasp onto it in civilization, or too slow for us to be dumb enough to take it for granted and not put into proper use. It’s an absurd idea, but so much fun to philosophise.’

‘Most of us don’t even realise that we are collectively causing this misfortune,’ said Albi, thinking hard. ‘If the universe wishes to get rid of humans, why would it enable some of them with the meta consciousness of questioning themselves with such power? Most humans are too automatic. However, some of us are maybe relentless in our pursuits of the truth and have a vague idea about this authority.’

‘You think this is power? Something I clearly have no control over is supposed to make me powerful? Or anybody? I feel like I am a puppet, Albi. The laws and ideas of the consciousness seem to be written in a language impossible to read. Unlike physicists or explorers who question it with mathematics, and strangely invented languages, I am so close to it all the freaking time with no clue or idea how to unravel its mysteries. I stand there every day, with the curiosity of what lies behind the closed wooden door, but I am only allowed to stare at it twenty-four seven, not being allowed to leave, not being allowed to open it. I just hang in the balance, and keep doing what “feels right”, which is also not in my control. It’s not fair.’

Albi watched her gravely, and when no further response darted his way, opted for silence, providing his mind the time to tinker.

They reached the jeep in about two hours via a shortcut, hauled the heavily breathing Taurus onto the backseat, and drove to the shore. The tigers, after being fed with little food balls, walked on either side of them in procession. All sorts of animals, including wolves, beavers, and even leopards, who had laid invisible all this while, came out of their hidings, piercing not just their eyes, but their complete bodies, through either the branches of the dark trees, or the bushes on the ground. Nobody dared to move closer in the presence of a herd of tigers. Their eyes were more interested and puzzled than the usual terrorising. By the time they reached the shore, it was dark, stars had cropped out in the sky, and the ship crew was gathered around a bonfire, drinking wine, eating snacks, and laughing. Albeit the instance being imminent, when a herd of tigers approached them, they were alarmed and dumbstruck, rising straight in terror.

‘Fetch Dr. Prudence!’ called out Miss Anira and a steward abruptly loped into the cruise.

‘Now, tigers! This is my team,’ she addressed the Lost Ethereal family. ‘They aided me and my friends to travel to you. We will be journeying back with them, and you are to behave on the ship. They pose no threat to you, but as both species are unfamiliar with each other, for their safety and approval, and the fact that only they can sail this ship, you will have to stay in a hall in this ship. There’s plenty of food and space for you. Taurus will be with us until he recovers. It may sound all strange right now. You just have to stay inside the hall for the time it takes for us to cross the ocean and reach the forest. It is all

right if you are scared. Just a little faith will help. Please ask any questions if you will.'

Spont asked a couple of questions and everyone else simply acquiesced. Once they trust you, they trust you.

Taurus was attended to immediately. Dr. Prudence suggested only animal soup and melted food. Albi proposed he could help with the melting of the stored food balls from his experience with the professor in the forest. Taurus's band-aids were changed. Some medicines were fed, as all his family watched with excitement and curiosity.

'He is out of danger for now. Well done you three!' said Dr. Prudence. 'Dr. Glop, the vet, can see him on our arrival to the forest, but I think heal a lot more before itself. Let's let him rest for now.'

Taurus ruffed at these words, his eyes meekly opening, the first sight of Miss Anira's face flashing before him.

'Hey Taursy! How do you feel?' she asked softly.

He shut his eyes again, yawning into sleep.

'He is fine, don't worry,' said Dr. Prudence. All tigers were shown into the hall down the deck. It was long and wide enough for them to saunter around, with enough food and water for a week, and the velvety sheets and comfy pillows drawn on at least thirty sleeping spots. The door was locked, ventilators were turned on, and the old tigers were left pondering on their decision, which couldn't be altered now.

'We have to take a reroute, isn't that right, Captain Train?' reckoned Albi. 'We cannot risk going back the same direction we came from. The sharks and other fishes might attack us.'

'Well, Of course,' answered Captain Train, a little heavy in the voice due to the one-month vacation being cut short only to a few of days. 'We could land at the southernmost peak of the country and drop the ship there for repairs, if that is okay with Miss Anira.'

'Whatever your discretion allows Captain,' said Miss Anira. 'We could certainly take buses and flights from there to Seasonwood, and then the forest. It is a longer route but safer and better.'

'So we continue south?'

'We continue south.'

They left immediately. It was warmer in the ocean than the cold forests but still nippy. Albi and Miss Anira exchanged no words for two entire days and she kept to herself in her room, where Taurus also rested. Flint, on the other hand talked about the torturous man that Grop was gregariously to everyone he could spot on the ship. He shared how he used to beat him up every given chance, confiscated money from the people of his village that he never returned, and how he took ALL the fish home at the end of the day. He beat his wife and kids too.

‘He had a wife and kids?’ asked Albi, calling out from the porch.

‘Oh yes, a beautiful wife and two lovely, smart kids. He was the sole wage of the family,’ spoke Flint, with a newly discovered melancholia. ‘I don’t know how I would break the news to them.’

Then he narrated how Grop wasn’t an all bad man, like people do at funerals, for the sake of it. It turned out he had saved Flint’s life once when a bull dashed towards him. He held his arm and pulled Flint away, taking the injury by the antlers himself. He had also let his brother, Shoton borrow some money for getting new fishing equipment, and never asked for it back. He fed Flint’s family for a month when they had no money to survive after losing all the crop growth to rains.

The third day on the ship, Miss Anira offered two yellow envelopes to Flint saying—‘We shall reach the shore in an hour. I might not have time to give you this then.’ One of them was addressed to him, and the other to Grop’s family. They carried life-sustaining vouchers to reimburse the basic needs of the family for three years, and a few letters of recommendations from Miss Anira, personally signed, along with employment possibility brochures.

‘Thank you,’ muttered Flint with a difficult smile. She nodded and sat beside Albi, her legs and arms folded, imitating him.

‘So your romantic holiday with Maya is officially ruined then, huh, Caphill?’ she said, attempting a banter. Albi reciprocated no response but stared silently into the ocean, his silky black hair tousling and playing through the wind.

‘Are you upset with me?’ she asked awkwardly.

‘No,’ his reply was sharp and indifferent.

‘I did not—I mean—’

‘I am not upset with you and you do not need to change your thoughts. It was just scary for a while there with your uncouth screams and those words, as if

you would kill him yourself if you had a chance.’ His words were cursory. He wanted to finish speaking as if remembering a well-rehearsed dialogue of a known play.

‘We may not be the ones who get to always decide who deserves what, but we possess rights to feel and express it sometimes.’ She was stern in her conduct now. Albi looked at her.

‘So you really think he deserved it? That’s why you ordered his killing? Which is not a thought but an action?’

‘I don’t know! I don’t even know if I care or want to care. I just was too angry and in pain to strongly feel he deserved something worse than death for taking pleasure in someone else’s death and such ruthless one at that. Caphill, he would have killed the entire tiger family in the name of defence against the cruelty he himself was responsible for—I do not understand any of this anymore.’

Albi clasped her hand and pressed at it lightly in assurance. She rested her head on his left shoulder and slept away. Albi sunk into his wayward thoughts. He knew something was brewing in her head, something unexpected and strange. He could sense and feel it. Something bigger was coming their way and Miss Anira did not seem prepared for it. He knew she would handle it anyway, but he saw her treading so far away, as if a light stretching out beyond the sun, on various stars, light out of control. He was tired of guessing games around her, essential to her care. ‘She should rest, it could simply be my hallucinations,’ he thought and reflected how his life had taken peculiar twists and turns in a span of mere five years. It was so weird and uncertain now, and so dark, that he wished to just fly away. How easy was it to believe that everything in front of him was mere life? He could go back, quit his responsibilities, work in his lab, go out with friends, come home, turn on the television, sleep away, and then repeat the process all over again. There would be no forest, no exploiting of his conscious or conscience, no loneliness, which he felt now. She could never do that. She could never run away. He had noticed such vulnerability in her for the first time and he was frightened. He recollected all those moments in his life when his aggression had seemed out of his control. When he wished to shoot the tiger’s head off on hearing another growl, when he killed ten mosquitoes at a forest camp without a single shred of regret, When he crushed beetles and gorged turkeys until his stomach

was full, when he urge to smack the heads of bullies at the school playground, or when he hated life to an extent that he wished he wouldn't exist. In those moments, had he direct power, he could have used it. Could he really murder a man? He now knew he could, and so could the butler frying cauliflowers for lunch, or Jeff, the steward who danced to the aesthetic tunes of the violin, and so could everybody he had ever known. This scared him, a realisation that could change his life if he let it. His head was giddy, and he finally saw the shore approach them.

Chapter 33

Woman who talks gibberish

Unlike the shore of the deserted island of the cold forests, this alien shore was laden with boats in all sizes, and people with the kind of human chatter that forms a deceptively busy world.

‘It’s a tourist spot,’ Captain Train had told them. ‘Some village I guess.’

The cruise ship docked, population emptied, and exploration on the ground commenced. Trees here appeared nothing like the one in the cold forests.

They were normal trees. They somehow felt normal. What exactly was the difference was hard to tell. No snow capped leaves, flowers, or land, perhaps. Had there been things frozen here before their arrival, the sharp sun bellowing from up above had unfrozen it, and the raging sea waves had embraced away the thaw into the ocean. Anglers in dark coloured skins and mostly lanky body builds, spread in a line with their nets floating on water surface as far as the eyes could see. A few women were lugging away the fishes that their husbands, sons, or daughters had caught in the fishnets. Boats, both big and small were scattered over the shoreline of about a few kilometres. The population paid no heed to the cruise members arriving, as if habitual of such a course, or maybe they presumed they would be approached first.

‘What’s this place?’ asked Watts, the Chief Engineer, to an old woman, who was transferring squirming anchovetas from a net to her huge red bucket. She was fat, dark, brown-haired, and ugly. Not one feature in her physique could appear to one as prepossessing. Like almost all women on the spot, she wore a floral printed skirt that stretched until where an anklet designed out of seashells and silver touched its hem flirtingly. Blouse was full sleeved, cropped, revealing a few centimetres of stomach skin, and hands covered in sea jewellery. However grotesque the visage, she was exceptionally kind in conduct and melodious in her narrations.

‘It’s the village of FloodRose, good sir,’ spoke the lady in a sweet, affable voice.

‘Is it?’ he returned. ‘Where would be the nearest airport, madam?’

‘There’s one in the city, two hundred miles,’ she replied, now resuming her work with the fishes, and simultaneously responding to the stranger.

‘And how do we commute there?’

‘You take a bus.’

She looked at him with scrutiny. Then she turned her gaze to the cruise and studied all people.

‘Next bus leaves tomorrow evening. They might have to stay the night. We don’t have private transportation.’

She gathered her stuff and motioned to go away. Watts bombarded her with a million other obligatory questions, which she answered curtly and then vanished.

‘Well then, two of you could travel to the city and bring in trucks, buses, cars, as our arrangement for the longer journey,’ declared the Captain after Watts shared his researched information, and commenced a discussion on their requirements and necessary protocols—one more night in the ship for everybody. It wasn’t a problem for them, as the night almost marked the last date of their holiday, and they had enough supplies for a hearty party by the shore. Watts, the chief engineer, and Jeff, the steward, were packed and sent for sorting the arrangements in a jeep. Miss Anira attended to Taurus, who was now conscious and healthier, and sat upright watching people move about him intently and calmly. Albi followed her.

‘Okay, we should leave now,’ he announced.

‘Leave? We can’t until tomorrow, when the buses arrive, right?’ said Miss Anira stroking the white fur on Taurus’ back, making him purr.

‘Alright!’ he perched himself on a railing, rummaging his backpack. ‘Do you remember what I told you the other night when everyone was celebrating? That there was another woman who had the same powers as you and you expressed a wish to meet her?’

Both Taurus and Miss Anira stopped their affairs to listen better.

‘Well, I dug into it a little while we were back home, and after some research, I found this.’

He handed over a crushed piece of paper to her. It was an old newspaper clipping, dating January 8th, 2022.

The Woman Who Speaks ANIMAL LANGUAGE!

In the village named FloodRose last night, when a leopard smacked havoc, a woman named Sonia Pivlin came to the rescue of locals and calmed the beast just by speech. Sonia is a thirty-year-old businesswoman who claims to possess special powers in what appears to us as animal

linguistics. 'I just asked him what was wrong,' she narrated in an interview with our reporter. 'He was lost and scared and I soothed him.' The residents of FloodRose, who had pelted rocks at the animal, thanked the woman when the creature walked silently away into the jungle. On Sonia's insistence, they also managed some fresh meat for the leopard. This incident beautifully reflected the thousands of year's old association between humans and the wild. Can she really speak with animals? Maybe not and maybe we all can, if we simply wish to find a way to connect.

'Yes! I thought she might be the one!' said Albi, completing the sentence Miss Anira did not speak herself.

'I investigated further and found that she doesn't live in this village anymore, but about fifty miles from here, in a district called Sirtops. We could visit her today itself.' Not awaiting any confirmation, he quickly announced. 'Let me speak to the Captain to get an E.T.A. on the jeep, or maybe we should just take the car.' He leaped from the cruise to the land, where captain Train stood facing the sea, pondering, either over trivialities, or over things enlightening, who could tell?

Miss Anira, not knowing how she felt regarding the affair, described the situation to Taurus. 'Please promise me you shall behave while I am away? Else, I will have to leave you with the rest of your family and not your separate room.' Taurus torpidly ambled to his designated room, speaking nothing, as if preserving his still lacking energy for an attack, if a situation of an assailance ever arises.

Albi and Miss Anira set on the journey in only two hours. They reached their destination by afternoon. The district of Sirtops was a scattered plain. Empty. Scanty. Like a universe brimming with invisible dark energy.

They called on two men who were plucking leaves from the only shrubbery across the road. The first man almost screamed at the mention of the name-Sonia Pivlin.

'That crazy old crone! What business would you have with her?' he said.

The other man, carrying a plastic bag in his dusty hands, screeched even shriller—'Crazy is much less a word! She mutters all sorts of nonsense. You ask her where she was born, and the ten times you ask her, you get ten different answers. Sometimes it's Floristcane, where she would run about the mountains in a little blue dress, or its Freeland, where her father was a fisherman and she would dance about the sea every time he caught a fish or its Cameoplate, where she was raised in a castle like home, with not less than ten

servants to take care of her. She says all kinds of stupid things even! She is not just crazy, she is a lunatic. We don't send our kids to play around her house, or she would grab one of them and feed him with a cup of spinach soup and tell him she is an alien from the stars. What a stupid old twit!

'And yet the lord blesses her with so much money! One-fourth people in the district pay her rent. So nobody says to her anything.'

The district seemed just a few houses speckled across a large space.

'Where do we find her?' asked Albi.

'Go straight for a few metres, turn right onto the unkempt road, keep driving until you stop at a wooden house. She is so rich, and yet chooses to stay in that dumpster! What a stupid woman! I suggest you not to go and meet her. Her insanity is contagious. Kids could be running away from you soon too.' The man narrowed his eyes in a warning.

'Thank you,' said Albi and they drove further away. The two men stared at their car in silence.

'Who are they?' asked the first man.

'Some relatives of hers I bet! Why else would someone visit her?' said the other and they both turned back to business.

The house sat amidst the woods. Her house was a two-part house, one part wood, the other part brick. A huge garden, where grew flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Guessing with their might, they knocked on the wooden house door, studying the beautiful brick mansion, thinking how foolish it would be to not live in a beautiful place such as that. Somebody hustled inside, the rattling of utensils giving the suspense away. She opened a half door, right by the main door. She was a fifty-year-old woman. Half grey-hair, a lilac maxi dress, fair facade, short nose, in her slippers, height much bigger than that of the little door.

'I was phoned about you two!' she spoke in a coarse voice. 'What do you want?

'Hello!' greeted Miss Anira. 'I am Miss Anira and he is Albero Caphill. We have come here to have a chat with you regarding the special powers that you—about once that you saved a leopard. A friend of our claims to – umm—be possessed with similar powers. She is all magic and stuff and we wished to help her on your advice.'

‘Are you reporters?’ asked Sonia narrowing her eyes, which seemed to be the way of the town.

‘No no!’ said Albi. ‘We are just scientists. We are curious of course, but more importantly very worried for our friend.’

The old lady quickly shut the door on their faces. Later, a bolt on the bigger door turned, and it swung open. The old lady stared at them with scrutiny and folded hands.

‘Your face,’ she says to Miss Anira. ‘It looks so familiar. Oh wait—aren’t you that woman—that businesswoman—that—’

Miss Anira nodded lightly.

‘Wow! Incredible! We could talk some business while you are here,’ she winked and then studied Albi, concluding nothing.

The house was one with no partitions between kitchen, bedroom, living room, or dining. It was a huge furnished space, like a never-ending hut. The kitchen platform hung on the right most corner to the entrance. The cutlery on the other hand adorned the left. The bed was placed right by one of the walls above which, stuck a huge window leading to the open area of the garden. A library opened right beside the staircase. Chairs scattered everywhere of different kinds.

‘My “Proper House” is the other one,’ informed Sonia. ‘But I choose to stay here, a lot more cosy and real. Besides, when the thieves come, they don’t think to lookie here, while there is no treasure in the BIG MANSION.’ She chuckled at her own smartness and signalled them to seat themselves on the two chairs. They did. There was no sofa or bench.

She poured them a cup of tea from the pot and sat facing them on a Windsor chair she pulled out from near the bed.

‘So, what do you wish to know?’

‘We actually—’

‘Not about the woods I suppose? About why I live so far from the main district, where the people miss the care giving philanthropist like me? Well, it wasn’t like that when I first came in. This whole place was deserted. The land just lay there without use. I bought it. Five acres of it here, and another ten on the opposite end of the district. For a long time, I didn’t make use of it out of tiredness, and stayed in the big city. Then, when my business shut down and I moved back in town, I thought why don’t I build houses and rent them at high

prices? So I built a few houses at the south end, you must have not seen it. The place is congested and brimming with so many people. You find a man every twenty metres. At last, when I chose to settle at this far end, you know, to monitor my other eighty houses from a distance, tall trees had already set their roots growing all and around. I was left in the middle of this chitter-chatter of nature, which I eventually began to enjoy. Its true isn't it? The forest is a phoenix. You cut it away, destroy its identity, kill its residents, and all it does it keep looking for ways to rise up in one form or another. There can't be any ashes left for long. Anyway, eventually, I just happened to stay aloof in a jungle. Now and then, the naughty kids trespass my land, playing with their marbles by that river, or under my favourite old Banyan trees, or even near the road. I owe to teach them a lesson every time.'

Then she began telling them about her tours to torture kids with pranks all over the village, how she loved stealing bulbs from the house of the villagers. They both liked her and deemed her 'not crazy' but exceptionally weird and conceited.

'Could you now tell us err—about your experiences with animals? I mean how you began speaking their language and what all happened.'

Sonia sighed, took a long sip of tea, and began—

'It was about two decades ago. I owned a mineral water manufacturing firm back then, which I sold later. I was heading to my house from the office after a stressful meeting with the investors. I suddenly started hearing strange voices everywhere—on the roads, in my balcony, sitting by the office window. They were sweet and sensible voices, but I did not understand where they came from. When the madness did not stop for two days, my mother suggested I go visit a psychiatrist. I did! He discovered various ways to call me schizophrenic, bipolar etc at first, and then he too, somehow seemed to be giving up. I carried a ghost party with me wherever I went. When one day, a friend of mine invited me over to dinner, and she seemed to own a bitch who had recently given birth to some pups and when I sat on her sofa, watching them play with each other, I heard those voices again. They were arguing with each other! I called on them and they stopped! I asked them to hop and sit next to me and they did! We cuddled and they said they liked my perfume. My friend, Natallie was surprised, obviously. She called me a weirdo and showed me out. That's when it first struck me, I could speak with dogs. Then I realised later, it was not just

dogs, but pigeons too! Then parrots and then it was all birds! All animals! I couldn't believe at first, but then it was getting clearer. It was magic, you know. They could hear my English and respond in the same language. Certain logical deductions they took time to understand or never did, like children, but that's alright. Oh look at that, your cups are empty! Let me bring in some snacks, water, and perhaps more tea.'

She rustled.

They whispered.

'What do you think?' asked Albi.

'What do I think about what?' asked Miss Anira.

'Is she telling the truth?'

'I don't know. It's hard to say. There's such passion and fluency in her narration, but I wonder about what those two men said.'

'I know. Besides, she could be merely a crackpot, cooking stories to wade away boredom. Many old people who live alone end up imagining things. Some turn writers, and some mere loathsome lunatics.'

'Let's just wait for her to finish the story. Had I not been exposed to this magic myself, I would never believe a word she said.'

'Yeah, let's not judge so soon.'

'I prepared these cookies and crackers today morning, itself!' She rolled up with two trays in both her hands. 'Go on! Have a piece. Don't be shy!'

They picked out the chocolate cookies and crackers. They were the best chocolate cookies and the worst crackers.

'So, what happened then?' asked Albi.

'What do you mean?' asked Sonia, staring wildly at them both.

'You found out you could speak to all animals. What then?'

'Oh! Oh well, then I began speaking to them all the time. I travelled with them into the wild, discovered their secret spots, grasped onto ideas from owls, stories from Lions. I had turned a tourist in the human world. Two months passed. I was happy. However, then, these strange creatures began appearing all around me! They began asking for help, but nothing specific. Birds whose trees got chopped came in blurting miseries. Owls became too wise and irritating. I did not know to do. I mean, I built a few birdhouses, gave them food, but nothing was ever enough. I started ignoring them. That's all I could think of doing. Then that Leopard incident happened when I had only come to

visit my old village, and I told the reporters about my powers. It all—stopped—suddenly. I couldn't prove to people that I could speak with animals because I somehow couldn't anymore. They mocked me, laughed at me. Business in the city went down so I sold everything, came back to FloodRose, and then to Sirtops. For a few days after that interview, the birds tortured me even! They wouldn't speak to me, but they would shit on me, and my balcony, ten times a day. Destroy my flowers and gather in flocks outside my window to sing songs. Even that ended after a while. I—well—stayed away. That's it.'

Silence unfurled. The frown on the forehead of the old lady was an indication of her frustration and sadness, which disappeared automatically after a few seconds when Miss Anira asked her—

'Just like that?'

She smiled and left behind a door that apparently led to a washroom. She sat came back, sat down, poured out another cup of tea, possibly the third, and spoke, in a voice so terribly calm and serene, as to leave Goosebumps on their skin.

'Yes.'

'Umm—do you think it was because you told the reporter about them that your powers vanished?' asked Miss Anira. Albi stared at the strangeness of the lady, calm and wild, quiet yet ravenous. He was constantly studying the house for an exit, in case the mad old woman attacks them.

'Initially, I thought so too—but then I realised—it was not just that. How could it be? It's so silly. Everybody shares things. I guess I was of no help to them, so they abandoned me. I was not worth spending time and energy on.'

'Them?'

'The animals.'

'You mean, you think it was the animals who chose to speak to you?'

'It's a possibility now, isn't it?'

Miss Anira remembered all her first-time encounters with the animals of all sorts. They were usually surprised at her prowess of conversation. So, she negated such a theory from her head. It wasn't the animals, no.

'It's really good now though,' said Sonia. 'I am happy they have stopped talking. Lord knows what they might ask me to do!'

'What are you saying?' said Miss Anira. 'What would they ask you to do?'

‘I don’t know. They were all mean and wild, like any other life form including us. The key to life is survival. If their survival was at risk and they chose me to help, I could be jostled in their grips forever. I am not demeaning them or accusing them in anyway. Understand this—what business are we humans to them? We deem it our responsibility to help the biodiversity. It’s nice. But what responsibility do they hold for us? We dominate this planet because we fought, survived, sustained. Imagine us humans turning against each other for them. They will win and eradicate us forever. It is hard to understand this for many people. They may think I speak out of some grudge. Although, that’s untrue. I speak a fact. Each specie would bring other down, if it came to their survival. I was aware of this, and I did not wish to leave the hands of my own people to join into theirs. It was so surreal. Besides, they simply use you and throw you away, Miss Anira. They will be all nice and of help to you until you listen to their nagging, give them a priority, sacrifice yourself for their benefits, and then case you out, just like me. Such small brains, little complexity, what can be done? Who can be blamed? Suggest your friend to stay away from this mess. She would be dumb to get into all this.’

They blinked at the lady, who breathed into an inhaler.

‘Very well,’ said Miss Anira. ‘I think we have all the answers.’

They stood up and reckoned to leave. ‘Just one last thing—Why then, Sonia, do you stay here? Away from the cities, and even people of the village? So alone and lonely?’

‘Because, as much as I could see the battle of survival of the wild Miss Anira, I could also see the humans for what they are. Monsters! True monsters! Mean, selfish, and barbaric! I cannot trust many humans and so connect with them only as needful. I stay amongst them, but help no one. I am on no side of the battle.’

Just then, a Labrador came running in through the open door, barking at the strangers, and leaping onto Sonia’s lap.

‘Here you are, you little snuffy,’ Sonia nuzzled the dog, as if talking to a child.

‘No, bad boy, they are our friends. What did I tell you about not barking at friends?’

‘Umm— thank you, we will leave now’ said Albi. She nodded at them both and they showed themselves outside.

Through the closed door, they could hear Sonia Pivlin speak.

‘A black cat, you say? That’s strange. I asked that stupid man to get rid of her, or else he will have to empty the house. I will deal with him tomorrow—Oh no no, you don’t get to eat the chops today. You are growing fat, you little monster. Go eat your soup—and did you bring me the letters from the post box?—Haha, yes, those devilish screams in the new episode freak me out too—’

They shrugged and drove away, laughing jocosely at a few stupid wits of the old lady.

‘We need to be careful in the court.’ Miss Anira told Albi, and billions of questions popped into their heads. Unanswered mysteries of the universe, awaiting them, frightening them, challenging them, and putting them to wonder and sleep.

Chapter 34

The Final Hearing

It was painted in black, white and a compulsory brown. The board outside the hall read 'Court of Moral Law, Seasonwood.' People wearing caps, coats, microphones, writing consoles, and secret recording equipments entered the big doors, also striped black and white. The seating inside was exquisite, having been designed the year itself. This was the first court of its kind in the country. The walls were little pieces of dark and light glasses positioned together into various art details like a tiger, a cup, and even national currencies, justice, peace, etc. The chairs were arranged in five columns, each column containing ten rows of black and white chairs placed alternatively. On the left end to the main door was a purifying water tank, digitalised and reflecting the message- 'Save water if you want to save yourself' on the screen at its top. A few feet away from the tank set in train a line of fifteen police officers, each separated at a metre's distance, and a gun belted at the back, facing the chairs at the centre. Abreast the police line, a podium, an absolute black. At the centre was the table of the judge, the only brown placement in the whole court. Extending to the right was the table of the jury, where two men and women, sat discussing something in hushed voices.

Everybody rose as the judge entered the court. He was a fifty year old, fat bellied, fair, bald, stout man with a puckered face. Everybody sat as the judge occupied his seat. All conversation stopped. The reporters straightened their digital writing pads, lawyers arranged their papers, and the culprit, Miss Anira took a gracious sip of water and looked straight, as if nothing was up her sleeve and she did not know exactly how it was all going to turn out. The judge was a lever to which hung the entire courtroom, and now, everyone was quickly reminded of this fact.

'I do not stress this enough, this is the Court of Moral Law,' started the judge after preceding formal announcements. 'Unlike the Supreme Court of law, our proceedings here are informal, but we still expect you to give your justifications in a manner that follows basic protocols. We have created new laws in this court. It never happened when there was lack of decorum, but rather, with politeness, discipline, and conformity. There are no oaths and strict formats in this court, and we expect each people to rely on their best

judgements. ' He browed and held his tongue for a few seconds, expecting a riot. When none occurred, he asked. 'Both sides ready?'

'Ready for the people, your honour,' a man in black coat, distastefully well-combed hair and a harsh face stood up.

'Ready for the defence, your honour,' Lawrence Lyring, Miss Anira's attorney, stood up, grey eyes, handsome face, well set dense black hair, a conduct much sophisticated and mature.

'The prosecution may please present the charges,' announced the judge.

'Your honour and ladies and gentlemen of the jury,' started the raggedy man, whose name was Trupil, 'The defendant, Miss Anira has been charged with the crime of a theft of two thousand animals from the zoos of Seasonwood, and Floristine. The evidence I present will prove to you that the defendant is guilty as charged.'

'Your honour and ladies and gentlemen of the jury, our case shall develop as the court proceeds,' said Lawrence Lyring. 'My pleading is that my client is innocent until proven guilty. Thank you.'

'The prosecution may call its first witness,' announced the judge.

Miss Anira grinned, which, to a person not knowing what her business was would appear deceptively evil. The accused, even if sleeps, appears dead.

'Miss Anira,' started lawyer Trupil. 'Did you or did you not, on the evening of February 6th, 2029, break into the zoo of Seasonwood and Floristine, stealing two thousand animals from the property, knowing it was a punishable state crime?'

'I did break into the zoos,' she declared, leaving all the people in the court wide-eyed, gasping, disappointed, and, well, weird. 'Although, I disagree with the manner in which the truth is presented. I did break into the zoo, but not to steal anyone or anything. I have freed and not stolen any animals. They aren't a commodity to be stolen. And I expect people in this court to appreciate and thank me for it, not accuse.'

'There you go your honour!' claimed the lawyer. 'She accepts her crime and unabashedly so! It's a disgrace. We demand strict punishment for her theft and wrongdoings to the people, country, and the government.'

'Your honour,' called Mr. Lyring, the only person in the room not surprised at Miss Anira's words. 'My client might have accepted the responsibility of the actions, but we are yet to prove it's a crime. As you said, this is the court where

laws are made. My client exceptionally requested this case be taken in the court of moral law, this space, in the presence of your honour, Mr. Mount Mouthful, who would guide us in the process of understanding this grave situation. If I may have the permission to proceed, sir.’ The judge hesitated a moment, pondered for a few seconds before responding—‘You may proceed.’ ‘Thank you, your honour. Miss Anira, would you please explain to us the reason, intention, as well as consequences of your actions?’

‘Certainly,’ replied Miss Anira with a monotony, as if rehearsing a script. She spoke looking in the direction of the reporters in the audience. It was clear that she hardly cared about verdicts or justice. It was also apparent that she knew exactly what evidences the prosecution possessed, and did not waste any time defending.

‘It all began five years ago, your honour, when I was informed by a zoologist in my team that some animals are being culled by a few National Zoos. It disappointed me. I was already retired from my job, working on a climate change project. As you are well aware, your honour, I dedicated more than half of my life savings into buying a land to simply plant trees and work towards protecting the planet against climate change, the proof of which lies with you. The government had sent out drones and Helicopters last year for an investigation without any prior information given to me and the data exists in the records that you may have accessed before the hearing, as presented to you by my lawyer, Lawrence Lyring.’

‘Anyway—I already had a lot of space, with trees and free land. I thought, why not let the animals use it? They can’t do any harm. Why allow them to be killed? And so, I arranged them to be brought to the forest instead of being culled. They were still caged, but only for some time, the forest was soon ready and they were set free. Not just like that, but with food. Some scientists even helped us provide plant based customised meat for every species. They rejoiced in it, did not attack each other and sustained freedom. We thought we were good hosts. Then I went in and studied the zoos, it broke my heart. I had all this space where they could be better preserved and safe, if provided with the right kind of food and training. I spoke to the directors of the two zoos, Mr. Naturil, and Mr. Cobo, who have been kind enough to attend the hearing today.’

All heads in the audience turned to face the two plump men at the back. Albi sat near them, shocked by this new information himself. When he had asked Miss Anira about her plans of the court, she had said—‘It’s taken care of.’ He did not know it was being taken care of for so long a time.

‘They put in my proposal at the monthly meeting with the central government, stating that I could possibly carry some animals to a private forest, with no government interference whatsoever, and my proposal was declined. I had no other choice, sir. I couldn’t see them suffer in their cages. Thus, I brought them here, in their own open home, and they cooperated. I believe I can connect with animals and understand them. It’s a personal thing. You could ask that to any worker of the zoo, how the animals responded to my arrival there. We also have CCTV recordings for the same your honour. All animals connected with me, and in the CCTV footage, you shall see how they changed their manners on my arrival. I see them happier in the forest, your honour. Besides, nobody owns them. They are alive and can make their own decisions.’

Lawrence Lyring passed on a digital tablet to a courtier, who further passed it to the judge. He saw videos and images from various angles—how bears walked towards the woman in the red shirt, lions, macaws, deers, straightened up on her arrival. She spoke something and they reacted. The peacocks danced and squirrels pecked out of the cages.

Miss Anira kept prompting herself that she shouldn’t reveal her secret, and how her goal was not to eradicate punishment, but reduce it, and how the real victory would be through the journalists who scribbled onto their writing pads vigorously.

‘What were you speaking to them?’ asked the judge, amusingly.

‘Normal stuff, your honour. Just like how you talk to a child. They don’t understand you completely, but you are still somehow able to explain to them a few things and they somehow get it.’

‘Your honour,’ came in the persecutor. ‘All this is an emotional manipulation. There is no report from the zoos she mentions about her adopting any such animals.’

‘That’s because it was done informally, through verbal agreement,’ responded Miss Anira.

‘And let me guess, not by you?’

‘No, a friend. He is a—’

‘Is that because perhaps you did not wish for your name to be associated with the ACT?’

‘No—because he knew other zoologists in the national parks and zoos with whom he coordinated.’

‘And connections must come in with extreme difficulty to the richest woman on the planet. Or shall I say, second richest person now?’

Miss Anira perused the audience, and there he was, her husband, in a blue suit and black tie (how much she hated that tie!), the richest man in the world.

‘You did not wish for your name involvement here, and no name involvement in the affairs of the villagers, whom you intimidated to serve your purposes and assigned the city project not to yourself but Mr. Brickster and Mr. Figuresand to remain in hiding. Who wouldn’t doubt that something has been up your sleeve, Miss Anira?’

An unexpected frown appeared on her forehead, her body restraining the anger that had kicked off boiling in her veins.

‘I intimidated no one.’ She said tersely.

‘So you would say. However, the truth is that you did! You visited the village named *Flowercased*, on date June 18th 2026, and intimidated *Mr. Siren Goaltick*, the head of the village, to empty the village and not interfere in your affairs, in his own house! Your honour, I would please request to call Mr. Siren Goaltick into the witness box,’ he said.

‘Proceed,’ said the judge.

The man entered, brushed off his palms, like a nervous murderer brushes off the blood, and tremulously, feigning confidence and victory, stood grabbing the handrail on the opposite podium.

‘So, Mr. Goaltick, would you please describe to us how you were intimidated in your own house?’

‘Well of course,’ he began in his coarse old voice, not meeting Miss Anira in the eye, while she stared so deep, as if her eyes could see through his heart, thank god for the light and distance, else the man couldn’t bear another stroke. ‘This esteemed lady visited my home with a bodyguard and one other pupil and talked with me regarding the new arrangements for us in some city she was building. When I refused to leave my house or to allow anyone from the village to sell theirs, she told me that she had bought the government. That she is

offering me a great deal and she won't offer a penny if I don't listen, and it shall be worse for me that way. That I should take it or suffer.'

Miss Anira signalled her lawyer with her brows for the next move.

'It is clear, your honour, that she risked the lives of thousands of villagers for personal benefits,' said Trupil. 'She intimidated the poor million residents of hundred villages into moving to a different place than their own, causing them emotional trauma and financial encumbrance, just so that she has a continuous land for what she claims is a forest, where she later took the stolen animals, the precious species our government has been trying to preserve for years due to their endangering status, and as news has it, she tortured them, for obtaining research and production material,' he concluded.

'Tortured them for research?' shouted Miss Anira. 'I didn't torture anyone. How can you even—'

'Miss Anira,' reprimanded the judge. 'Please maintain decorum of the court. Mr. Trupil, please study your evidences before passing any conclusive remarks.'

'Your honour, I would like to call Kunal, the grand child of Mr. Siren Goaltick into the witness box,' announced Lawrence Lyring.

Kunal, shocked and careful, plodded lightly. He was dressed in a little black suit, and was made comfortable with the soothing words of the judge and the lawyer—'You don't have to fear anyone', 'You are safe here.'

The kid actually needed none of that. They didn't fathom a simple fact that all the bravery he needed was already with him. Why else would he graciously walk into a COURTROOM and stand against his grandfather, the only man he feared the most in the world? He was ready to be questioned. His grandfather gawked at him from the audience in fearful ferocity, but the child chose to ignore him.

'Kunal,' started Mr. Lyring. 'Would you please describe to us the events about which you wrote me in a letter two days ago?'

'Yes, sir,' said the boy, looking at Miss Anira for assurance, who blinked a comforting affirmation for him. 'This lady did come to our house three years ago and she offered us a bigger house in the new society she was building, double the farmland near it in exchange of our then property. She said she understood what one's house can mean to someone and will try and make us as comfortable as we need. Grandpa and other villagers agreed in the end to

spend a month in the society and see for ourselves. We had everything there—freedom, greenery, water, electricity, accessibility, clean air, employment, and cool playgrounds. I even got my own separate room! We loved it there so we moved in.’ He veered to look at his grandfather, twitched a lip in hesitation and continued. ‘Then this man!’ he pointed at the prosecutor, ‘turned up in our new house two weeks ago to threaten my grandpa to give a statement against Miss Anira. He told all kinds of things. Like how he would confiscate his properties, take away his grandchildren, like me, torture him, bad-mouth him, and so much more. That’s why grandpa had to come here. He even offered a lot of money but grandpa refused to take it.’

Before he could be cross-questioned, Kunal sobbed and shivered. Two men rushed to his aid to relax the child, and the judge ordered he should be taken outside.

‘That’s a lie, your honour!’ claimed Trupil, desperately. ‘Let’s ask Mr. Siren himself. He will be able to tell us how his grandson was lying—under pressure of course. Could we have you in the confession box, please?’

The old man stepped into the box, this time, holding a stick. He shook his head at Miss Anira, and said—‘My grandson was right, sir. I spoke under the influence of this man and other powerful people. I wish to not extend this any further. I have no bearings against anyone. Not Miss Anira, not Mr. Trupil, sir. I hope to do nothing with this case. It will be nice to have some security though.’ The hearing continued for about two hours wherein all facts, details, morals, were weighed in front of the justice. In the end, judge Mouthful formulated his statement for the audience.

‘Considering all facts, evidences, perspectives, confessions, arguments, and votes of the jury, this court has reached to a conclusion that Miss Anira did steal two thousand animals from the zoos of Seasonwood and Floristine, but not with a bad intent. The court can permit her to keep the animals in her forest and care if she allows for an inspection by the animal welfare department officials every year, for the next five years. That said, the crime of theft and inconvenience caused to the zoo, employees at the zoo, protocols, public emotions, cannot be neglected. Consequently, she will have to pay a penitence of five hundred million units. Miss Anira, are these two conditions acceptable to you?’

Miss Anira pursed her lips tightly. The rage, the fire burnt in her veins stronger and streamed faster. 'I wouldn't give these assholes a penny, and kill half of them if I was a cool person,' she thought. Calming herself instantly, she processed what lay before her.

'If these two conditions are acceptable to you, the case shall be put to an end here, or else, it shall be moved to the Supreme Court of law, which will mark an extension to this hearing,' he added.

'Is it possible, your honour,' she said. 'That the inspection is aerial like before? The animals think the forest their home and are free to roam anywhere. Having such strange human faces pop in might be a little troublesome for them. We could also manage it with the food trucks, if the officials are willing to take a ride on it in hiding.'

'Sure, I can put it down in the papers.'

'In that case, your honour, I accept both the conditions.'

With that, the case closed.

After written formalities, and when all reporters were shoved out of doors, Miss Anira searched the hall for Anay Pourwall, but he was nowhere to be found. 'He left early to avoid any questioning,' she inferred. She remembered how their eyes met while she stood in the confession box, she recalled his mortified smile that she perhaps did not observe then.

She met Albi at the secret backdoor exit, to avoid the hustle of media around the front door. The driver had taken the car for some emergency repair, making them wait.

'I spoke a lot of lies today, Caphill,' she said gloomily like a small child.

'You did what you had to do,' his voice was stern and compelling. 'But yeah—you did play it ugly.'

'The sad thing is, not one of them was a plain lie! Everything was twisted and manipulative, just like in business.'

'Well, that's what business is most of the time.'

'That's not all that business is, we change the world and make it better in many ways, but I get what you are implying. I cease to be a business woman today then, Caphill, for the sake of my—our forest. It's going to take some practise, but I think I could do it.'

'Good for you,' he murmured, stealing a glance.

‘Oh hello!’ she suddenly said, greeting a cobra that slithered only three metres away from them. ‘Do you need a place to stay? I have a forest you could share. I could take you there. I mean no harm and I would make pathetic food, but you might enjoy it with your other snake friends. C’mon.’

The snake quickly wriggled on the floor, on her body and finally into her hands. She grinned.

‘I was very philosophical myself today, inside,’ said Albi. ‘With all that you said, I realised more powerfully how, we humans are a representation of life, of its curiosity and perseverance. We sure are a miracle. However, we cannot forget that this pinnacle was achieved after millions of striving years, possibly billions. Organisms flourished and consistently so, to be curiouiser; to do more, learn more, and then we came and performed even more, which is great. Although, we need to understand the concepts we ourselves created. We shouldn’t be the extinguisher of life, as the most ungrateful and evil specie there ever evolved in a million years. We carry a legacy on our shoulders. It’s on us to answer whether we were a huge mistake, or an idea worth fighting for and creating.’

A significant pang struck Miss Anira at her heart. She felt dizzy, but in a mere few seconds, it was gone. It was not the first time that she felt such an ache, and not the first time she ignored it.

‘You are right,’ she said, sitting down on a pavement under a tree, some yards away from the court. The snake now rested over her bag on the side.

‘Are you okay?’

‘This is only just the beginning,’ she said. ‘We have to fight more battles, automate food processes, you and Mishka could learn animal language with my help, we could build translators, bandwidth rich mind computers, write about our experiences to pass on, redirect sea routes to protect the forest from flooding, finish that second wall secure, and plan the courtroom dramas better. Would you wanna do it with us?’

‘Of course,’ said Albi. ‘I mean, this is only just the beginning, right?’

They smiled. The car arrived. They were just standing up, when,

‘Ouch! Can you please tread lightly, Miss?’

Miss Anira looked around.

‘I am here, still under your shoes, if you could be kind enough to get away your fat, chubby, feet from over me, you are killing me lady!’

She stepped away.

‘Aah, finally, thank you.’

She had just freed a twig.

‘Am I—dreaming again?’ she whispered.

‘Oh good lord, child,’ spoke the tree. ‘You don’t have to be dramatic about it. I mean, it was pretty obvious, wasn’t it? You can only get a step further in discovering various facets of life. Now, about that ache in your heart, we think you are developing symptoms of cancer, not diagnosable in your world for at least five years, but I think we have a cure for it—’

‘Ann, what is it?’ asked Albi.

‘I—I need to rest,’ she said, bulging her eyes in terror, and they geared to the forest.