

A NEW FAITH

by

TinJar

Chapter One

Part 1

Alia felt as if someone had split her head open with an axe. The pain was instantaneous and reached every neuron in her brain. She, literally, felt like stars were shining in front of her tightly shut eyes. If it didn't ease up soon, she thought that she would faint. Then, almost magically, it began to ebb. And she could hear a voice. No, voices. They all seemed to be yelling at her.

"Wake up, Alia!" Maria was gently shaking her. Maria's face was grim. When the investigation into Sequoia's first-ever murder had stalled, Maria had noticed that Alia started taking sleeping pills. As days had turned into weeks, both the frequency and dosage of the sleeping pills had gone up. Last night, Alia must have taken an, especially, high dose.

"Uhhh... whaaat?" Alia mumbled. She managed to identify the owner of the absolutely livid voice blasting from the speaker of her phone. It was Sonia, her boss and the police chief of Sequoia.

"If you don't answer your damned phone right now, Alia, I swear I am going to turn you back into a beat cop. ALIA?!!"

Alia meekly answered the phone, "yes... yes... I am here, boss."

"AAAH... FINALLY!" thundered Sonia.

"We have another one and I need you to get down here ASAP."

"Huh?! Yes... yes..."

"Meet me at the park on Rose and Vine in ten minutes. I got here five minutes ago. I had your team call you but to no avail. And since when did you start ignoring the official calls? No, don't answer that. We shall talk about it later. Just get here ASAP."

"Of course. I will be right there."

Through the haze of sleep and flashes of pain, Alia groggily tried to sit up. She had been lying with her legs and arms splayed on the floor as if she had dived off the bed.

That fucking dream. No! She should be calling it a damn nightmare now. She had dived at the end of it. Probably, for the umpteenth time. And obviously in the latest instance, she had dived in the real world, too, because of which she had hit her head on the edge of the side table.

She put the phone down and gingerly got off the floor. She heard the soft whoosh of the flush and then Maria floated back into the bedroom.

“How many did you take last night?”

By then, Alia had managed to stand up by resting on that same side table which had also been the source of the shining stars that continued to blink, albeit dimly, inside her head. She slowly turned to face Maria and shook her head.

“Really? You were out like a light last evening. You didn’t even taste the baklava that I made specially for you,” she was pouting.

“I used orange blossom instead of rose water and that new peach-infused honey.”

Alia mumbled something. She was not sure if she could take a step in any direction without falling down. That blinding pain in her head had diminished but not gone away. It was making everything wobbly.

“What was that?”

“Nothing. I am sorry... I was... y’know... tired... and I... Fuck... Please can you get me an aspirin?”

Alia walked with deliberate steps to the wardrobe and pulled on an ankle-length dark blue skirt. She rummaged around and snagged a frilly white top that Maria had exclusively designed for her.

“You look like shit. Wash your face and brush your teeth before you head out. You stink, too.”

Maria was saying all these things kindly. She was starting to get concerned with her partner’s overall demeanor.

“BTW - did she say that there was another death?”

Alia nodded from the bathroom. She splashed some cold water on her face and tried to run a comb through her tangled hair. The comb merely snagged and made her wince. She gave up and just tied a bandana to cover up them up. She pecked Maria on the cheek and left.

In the first five years of her city's existence, there had been no deaths at all, let alone murders. And now, in one month, two had occurred. The first one was still unsolved and Alia was the lead investigator for it. No wonder she was having that same stupid dream - correction, nightmare - where she chased fleet-footed suspects all over the bloody place. Never catching them. The dream invariably ended with her grasping at thin air as the suspect got away. Sometimes, she had the distinct impression that her dream-self almost didn't want to catch the suspect and was intentionally falling just short. She shook her head in a determined manner. She did not need this kind of an attitude if she was to solve that case.

She shivered as she swiftly strode to the new crime scene. It was still summer, and yet there was a surprisingly chilly breeze. She should have picked up a cardigan to go with that linen top. But she really liked wearing that top on its own. Partly because it was handmade by Maria and Alia loved to show off her partner's craft; and partly because, it fit in a way that made Alia feel most comfortable. As if Maria knew each and every curve of her body which Maria most definitely did. And with that thought, her purposeful stride slackened into a stroll. Again, she shook her head to snap out of thoughts about Maria and picked up the pace.

Ever since she was a little girl, Alia wanted to become a detective. She had been absolutely smitten by the fictional detective from Australia, Miss Phryne Fisher. She had secretly watched all the episodes of that TV show on the tiny screen of her phone. Of course, the life of Phryne from 20th century Australia was impossibly different from Alia's life a century later in Iran. For starters, Phryne could do whatever the hell she wanted. Alia couldn't even step out of her home without wearing a hijab. Even with the hijab, a male relative had to accompany her at all times. And disclosing her sexuality to anyone at all would have been the fastest way of getting tortured to death. When she was a teenager, she had heard rumors about the massive protests that had engulfed Tehran where women had demanded more freedom. The government had, of course, brutally smashed the protest. Many people had died and many more had been jailed. If anything, the restrictions on women became even more draconian since then.

Somewhere in her fate though, she was destined to experience the life of Phryne. After moving to Sequoia, she was asked what she wanted to do. Without any hesitation, she had answered "Police". She had no prior experience of policing. So the first three years were mostly devoted to basic training coupled with simple duties such as patrolling. As her problem-solving talent became apparent, two years ago, she was asked to join the small team of detectives some of whom had a little bit of experience prior to Sequoia. She easily outshone her colleagues and was quickly promoted to the rank of a senior

detective in the squad. She loved her job and was excellent at it. Every time any thought of her past life crossed her mind, she thanked her stars that she got the opportunity to move to Sequoia, a place where she could just be herself.

She reached the intersection of Rose and Vine. Even though it was 4 am, it was not dark. Sequoia, after all, was located within the Arctic circle and it was still August. Even after five years, she was still getting used to these extreme conditions: seeing the sun all twenty-four hours during the peak summer months versus not seeing it at all for weeks on end in the middle of winter. But not getting used to something didn't mean that she didn't like it. On the contrary, she loved it all. The fact that she - a young woman - could walk outdoors on her own in the middle of the night was incomprehensible to most women who were not lucky enough to live in Sequoia.

Most Sequoians made full use of the summer months. So much so that perennial fatigue due to lack of sleep reached epidemic proportions during the mid-summer weeks. Alia - a stickler for punctuality - had to learn to be patient with her colleagues during summer as they more often than not showed up late at work. She felt that humans behaved exactly like plants in these higher latitudes. They tried to soak up as much of the sunlight as possible whenever they got a chance.

Ironically, most of Sequoia's residents had come from tropical regions where sunlight was generally considered a hazard to life. There was just too much of it and it tended to produce unbearable heat. By default, tropical people preferred being in shade to being out in the sun. To them, heat had morphed into a deadly threat in recent years. They used to find it incomprehensible that white-skinned folks from Europe and America craved the sun. So much so that they would spend a fortune to travel thousands of miles away from their homes during winter to places where they could take off all their clothes and simply lie in the sunshine for hours doing absolutely nothing. After being transplanted to the Arctic Circle, however, practically every Sequoian had become a worshipper of sun and heat. All that muscle memory about the sun and heat being bad had gone out the window after experiencing the first cold dark winter that seemed to last for an eternity.

One adapts. One evolves. That was what life was all about. Pretty much from the beginning of time.

Alia heard her colleagues long before she saw them and could tell that Sonia was very agitated. She rounded the corner, crossed the street, and walked into a small park with a bubbling stream passing through the middle of it. Sonia was gesticulating at someone.

Unlike the first murder where the victim's head had been brutally cleaved with a shovel, this one showed no sign of any violence at all. Not a leaf seemed to be out of place.

Except, of course, for the body of a man peacefully hanging from the branch of a Rowan tree. Alia thought that while there was no sign of blood, there definitely was a lot of red color from the distinctive red fruits of the Rowan tree. She walked around the body trying to take in as much as she could. Sonia noticed her and beckoned.

“Not a single death, even by natural causes, for the first five years. And now suddenly two murders in one month!” Sonia voiced the thought that was soon going to be at the top of everyone’s mind.

In a large city packed with migrants from all over the world, the latter was not the strange part. The former was. Such an extended period of peace was practically unheard of in human history. But people got used to a pattern and they started thinking that that was how it had been all along. “Shifting baselines” was the name of this cognitive phenomenon. Alia had read about it during training. She had also been taught about other cognitive biases that most people routinely exhibit. Actually, there were quite a few of those and she always felt that she should permanently keep a cheat-sheet handy. It would be useful when talking with not just suspects and witnesses but also colleagues. And friends, too. Basically, everyone in the world.

Sonia, meanwhile, continued with her commentary, “...and two Muslim men at that. I mean - what are the fucking odds of that happening?

Women outnumber men by two to one in Sequoia. At least on paper, that is. Who the hell knows what everyone considers their gender to be anyway. And Muslims are less than a quarter of the population.”

Alia raised an eyebrow at these statistics. The odds were indeed quite small. But then she thought, two data points were just that - two data points. They did not indicate a pattern. This could still be just a coincidence. She grabbed a tablet from one of the uniforms and started scanning the information about the victim. All his basic information had already been downloaded from the chip implanted in him.

The first murder had been deemed to be a crime of passion while this one seemed to have been methodically executed. Outwardly, the two victims looked nothing alike. The man murdered three weeks ago was a fair-skinned bearded former Syrian while the one hanging in front of her was a dark brown clean-shaven Sudanese. Qasim, the Syrian, had been 30 years old while Nadeem, the Sudanese, was 27 years old. The age was not really a helpful parameter, thought Alia. At that moment, everyone in Sequoia was between the ages of 23 and 40.

“Do we suddenly have a serial killer to deal with?” continued Sonia with a strained laugh. She was known to attempt poorly-worded humor. Hardly anyone bothered to

react to it.

"The city council had been getting impatient about the unsolved first murder. With this second one, I don't know what I am going to tell them."

"Well," Alia thought, "don't tell them that!"

Even though she seemed outwardly calm, Alia's heart was hammering away. She didn't know why she was feeling this anxious. She was not unaccustomed to death. Rather, she had seen too much of it in Iran. Way too many people died in her village due to natural causes and not-so-natural causes. Diseases were common and unfortunately, so were arbitrary executions by the various militia. Her own father and elder brother had been summarily shot dead when she was a teenager. According to her mother, she used to get nightmares for months after. Later, she had done what most people did when faced with a never-ending procession of traumas, she became numb to the pain. Then she stopped trying to make sense of it. And at some point later in time, she simply tuned it out.

The crime scene investigation team arrived with their kit and started collecting whatever evidence they could from the body and the immediate surroundings. The medical examiner, Leela, had done a quick in-situ medical examination and was supervising the lowering of the body to the ground. Helping the cops was a part-time job for Leela. Her main occupation was that of a professor at one of the teaching hospitals. However, as luck would have it, she had been trained in conducting post-mortem examinations before she had moved to Sequoia. She was one of the few folks in the police department that had extensive hands-on experience in the job that she was doing. That particular skill of hers had not been called upon in Sequoia until last month.

She walked over to where Sonia and Alia were standing and said, "at first glance, the cause of death seems to be straightforward - strangulation and the resultant asphyxia.

We haven't found any evidence as such. There are no finger-prints. No tears in the clothes. No signs of struggle anywhere around. Looks like the victim did not put up any fight.

The rope used is available in most hardware stores in the city. We shall try to see if we can get any traces from it.

We picked up some foot-prints in the vicinity but they may not have anything to do with the murder. This park is quite popular, especially, in summer."

Sonia made a face. There was not much evidence found for the first murder either. Although, in that case, the evidence had been washed away by heavy rain. No crowds because that crime had been committed outside the city in a research camp. They had not even found the body for three days.

“We shall interview the neighborhood as soon as folks are up and about. Hopefully, we shall get some leads on his movements from last evening,” said Alia.

Leela was looking carefully at Alia’s expressions. She could tell that Alia was tense, but couldn’t figure out why. She had been one of Alia’s instructors and had gotten to know her fairly well over the years. She had found Alia to be a preternaturally calm person. But since the first murder, she had sensed that something was amiss with Alia. Initially, she had put it down to nerves as Alia was asked to lead her first-ever murder investigation. But now that she thought more about it, it didn’t seem to be nervousness. Maybe something else. She just couldn’t put her finger on it.

She patted Alia on the shoulder and added, “we shall figure it all out soon enough. Try not to get too bogged down. Sometimes these investigations take more time than usual. But the perp always makes mistakes. And that leads to their arrest. We shall get them. Don’t worry.

And remember what I said after the first murder. The killer is still here in Sequoia. That chip they injected in all of us when we came here ensures that if we put even one toe outside the designated boundary, it automatically gets flagged.”

Instead of seeing relief, Leela was puzzled to see the tension deepen somewhat before Alia managed to wrestle her face back to a neutral expression.

“Yes, of course, we shall get them,” Alia murmured. She nodded at both women and left. Sonia had told her that her team had assembled at the police HQ.

Leela and Sonia continued to talk after Alia left. They were about the same age and among the older residents of Sequoia. They were both Bengali but from different countries. Leela was from West Bengal, a state in India, while Sonia was from Bangladesh. Since it was just the two of them, for a change, they could freely talk in Bengali, their mother-tongue. It was nice to air their thoughts that way.

Leela glanced at the rapidly vanishing figure of Alia and asked Sonia, “she seems to be taking this hard. You sure that she has it in her to lead not just one but two murder investigations simultaneously?”

Sonia was thoughtful for a few moments and then she quietly said, “she is our best

chance at cracking these cases.”

“Hmm... okay. By the way, you mentioned the city council’s impatience. How about the UN administrators in New York? What are they saying?”

“Nothing so far. They seem to be taking it in their stride.”

“Well... let’s hope that we solve these cases satisfactorily.”

“Yeah... cheers to that. I think, I should ask Alia to focus mostly on Nadeem and put Qasim on the back-burner for a bit. I feel that that we are more likely to make progress on this one than Qasim’s. We may never solve the first one.

Just a feeling.

Anyway... gotta go.

And please make the post-mortem of Nadeem your top priority.”

“Of course!”

Chapter Two

Alia decided to walk to the HQ. She needed some time to calm down and organize her thoughts before she faced her team. She was not sure why she was feeling so unsettled ever since that first murder. She was just not used to feeling this way. She paused to take several deep breaths and then started walking briskly. Tall and lithe, she reached the HQ within half an hour.

The team was fidgeting as she walked into the incident room. They had, of course, received the preliminary details. Some of them had been to the crime scene for a quick look-around before assembling at the HQ.

In the first week immediately after the first murder, the team had worked round-the-clock as they applied everything they had learned to find the killer. However, that energy started wearing off after the second week as none of the leads yielded anything useful. Almost a month later, the team appeared to be simply going through the motions.

Alia had the difficult task of re-invigorating the young team and fervently hoped that they could solve, at least, this one quickly. She stood at the podium deep in thought when she realized that everyone was patiently looking at her. She looked up and nodded at them.

“Alright, let’s start putting together the dossier on Nadeem. Address, friends, work place, social media...”

Tozi, you take the lead in compiling the dossier. The rest, send your notes and data to her as you collect it.

Carlos, find out where Nadeem worked. You and I shall go interview his colleagues right after this.

Santosh, take the forensic team to Nadeem’s home. Don’t interview the neighbors right now. You and I shall go there later in the evening.

Nadia, start tracing Nadeem’s movements from yesterday. Take the uniforms for a thorough door-to-door questioning around the crime-scene. Start with a couple of blocks radius and expand if you strike out. Make sure the uniforms get all the relevant details down. Many are still in-training. Maybe do a quick refresher on questioning before heading out.”

Everyone nodded and got busy with their assigned tasks.

“Oh... and Tozi, I need you to pull Nadeem’s pre-Sequoia details. Whatever you can find.”

This last item had not been considered in Qasim’s case. Seeing Tozi’s puzzled expression, Alia shrugged and said, “well, let’s think a bit differently this time around.”

For most Sequoians, their lives before arriving in Sequoia were not much worth remembering. It was not that people were not in touch with their families and friends back home. To be sure, “back home” was not really the way most thought about the places where they came from. Sequoia was their home and it would be so until they died unless they decided to leave it for good. Staying in touch with folks from their former homes meant having some sort of a virtual conversation and that was pretty much it. Those were the terms they had all agreed to in exchange for living in Sequoia. Most were focused on making something good with the rest of their lives. Not much emotional bandwidth was left to indulge in nostalgia.

The more important reason behind Tozi’s puzzled expression was that none of the Sequoia residents had any family living in Sequoia. In fact, the residents had been, specifically, selected in such a way that no one was supposed to even know anyone else from their pre-Sequoia days. Then, Tozi wondered, why would the past life matter in the investigation?

“Should I also try to pull up similar information for Qasim?” asked Tozi.

“No. This is a long shot. Let’s see if something useful pops up for Nadeem before we spend more time on Qasim’s case.”

Tozi studied Nadeem’s official data to identify key search parameters. He was from the town of Nyala in South Sudan, one of the deadliest regions in the world. The relentless droughts and unending civil wars had left tens of millions of people homeless. Most gravitated toward refugee camps set up by international aid organizations or the UN. The rest wandered around the land searching for safe refuge from marauding gangs.

As far as she could tell, no one else from Nyala had come to Sequoia. A few came from that country, but they were from other villages and refugee camps. She ran a quick query to see if there were any linkages between him and anyone else in Sequoia. Nothing popped up. Another dead end.

She scrolled through his meager social media presence. Most of the pictures were from when he was in his teens. There were no pictures of him since he came to

Sequoia. This was not surprising as quite a few folks found that their real-world social life was way more interesting than whatever they could find online. In any case, the online world had taken a turn for the worse ever since generative artificial intelligence had arrived on the scene several years ago. The difference between real and fake was no longer apparent to anyone. Most people now used online tools only for direct communications with people they knew in real life. The notion of interacting with a stranger online had more or less become obsolete.

She zoomed in on one of his photos. She stared at it for a few moments, trying to articulate her reaction to it. She felt that his eyes betrayed fear. Another thing that struck her was the way he seemed to be turning away from the camera while simultaneously pulling his turban's flap across his face. "Evasive" was the word that sprang to her mind. Why didn't he want his picture taken? Who was he hiding from? Who was he afraid of?

He was probably 18 or 19 when the picture was taken. He had a wispy beard and a faint mustache to go with shoulder-length hair. She hadn't visited the crime scene. So she pulled up some of the crime scene photos to compare with. And they showed him to be completely clean-shaven with short stylish hair.

Unbidden, she remembered her older brother Juan as she stared at Nadeem. Juan was frail and got bullied by other kids in their village in Mexico all the time. That particular look in Nadeem's old photo was the same as Juan had when he was trying to escape his bullies.

Unlike Juan, though, Nadeem was not frail at all. Rather, he seemed to be a stout guy for someone from South Sudan. She had seen the news footage from that region. Most of the people were emaciated and their eyes had that far away look, as if their spirit had already left the earth while their body merely survived in that godforsaken place. Something was not adding up. Even Nadeem's clothes in that old photo were quite decent. No obvious tears or rips. They even seemed clean. Then why that hunted look?

There was only one video of Nadeem. He looked somewhat younger in it as compared with the photo. No sign of any facial hair at all. He was playing the flute under a tree in the middle of a what looked like a blistering hot day. There seemed to be some sheep behind him but she couldn't tell whether there was any audience in front of him.

The tune he was playing was incredibly fast. It felt like he couldn't wait to get out all the notes. She closed her eyes and heard the tune. The image that sprang up in her mind was of a herd of wild horses galloping across a pasture with unbridled passion. Each one lost in its own world and yet somehow their hooves synchronized in a harmony that only they were aware of. It had a rhythm and there were quite a few high notes close to the end as if those galloping horses were about to reach their destination and leap high

into the air. She had no idea what kind of music it was. She could tell, though, that this guy knew how to carry a difficult tune. More importantly, in the video, his eyes had none of that hunted look from the photo she had seen earlier. Instead, his eyes glinted with such intensity that she felt a bit intimidated. After he finished the tune, though, his face transformed back into that same hunted look.

Chapter Three

Alia went to her desk and started dictating the preliminary case notes. But her mind kept wandering all over the place. Then Maria called and she reluctantly decided to answer it.

“Yeah...” said Alia noncommittally.

“Looks like our own Phryne has not just one but two murder mysteries to solve now!” Maria chuckled.

For someone who created shows for a living, Maria simply couldn’t be bothered to read the room. But then that’s how Maria was, a bundle of emotions that was always leaking this way and that. Most folks who met Maria for the first time, struggled to understand her constant mood shifts and usually ended up being annoyed with her. Alia had, instead, immediately fallen in love with that kaleidoscope.

At the moment, though, Alia was simply not up for Maria’s effervescence. She was about to make an excuse and hang up when Maria blurted out, “our show, today, had to be postponed because Nadeem was our only flautist and that instrument is one of the crucial elements of the soundtrack.”

“What the... how the hell do you know Nadeem is the one who died?” Alia was flabbergasted.

“It is all over social media. Some passerby must have recognized him while you guys were doing whatever it is that you do. I even saw a photo of his body in some clip. It is him alright.”

Alia made a face.

“So this guy was a musician?” Alia was waving Carlos over to her desk as she put Maria on the speaker-phone.

“Yes and no. He plays the flute. Quite well, I must say. But he works at the concert hall as one of the sound technicians. We had been rehearsing at the hall over the last couple of weeks and he used to hang out with my musicians all the time. When he heard that our regular flautist was sick, he auditioned. And I thought he was a good fit.”

“How well did you know him?”

“Hardly. I didn’t speak to him much. The music director worked with him. I probably told him something or the other about the music piece while we were rehearsing.”

“Thanks! I will call you later,” Alia hung up and turned to Carlos. She was about to tell him to call the concert hall when he interrupted, “I had found his place of work and I had already set up an appointment to meet with the assistant manager in about an hour.”

“Great! Let me finish my notes and we can go. We can grab some breakfast on the way. I am famished.”

Alia and Carlos got on the tram. It was not particularly crowded that early in the day. The news flashing on the TV had not yet mentioned the second murder. Sonia would issue a press release later in the day.

Both of them made a beeline for the breakfast counter in the tram. They bought Turkish coffee and a couple of flaky pastries. Then drifted apart as they dug into their pastries. Both of them had things on their mind.

Carlos was busy formulating the questions that he wanted to ask Nadeem’s colleagues. Alia was trying to figure out where her discomfort was coming from and also what that recurring dream meant. The ache in her head had merely receded in the background with all that was going on. She automatically touched her head to see if there was any swelling. And sure enough, there was some. Luckily, it was hidden by the bandana she was still wearing.

It was another lovely summer morning. The streets were starting to fill up with folks strolling to work. Some were lazily riding their bikes or coasting on their skateboards. Cars were not allowed in Sequoia which had been a total bummer for people like Nadia, Alia’s colleague. Nadia had grown up in a nomadic tribe in Tunisia where her male relatives routinely raced horses and camels. If they had diesel to spare, they would race the jeeps and pickup trucks .

Of course, Nadia was never allowed to race anything at all. But that didn’t stop her from dreaming about it all the time. She had been absolutely fascinated with car-racing ever since she had seen the Fast-and-Furious movies. One of the reasons why she had applied for Sequoian citizenship was because the city was in Norway where women were allowed to drive cars. She was crestfallen when she arrived and saw that cars simply didn’t exist in the city.

The few professions that offered at least some use for a car-like vehicle included police and freight transport. Driving a freight van seemed way too boring for someone like her. She was a quintessential extrovert. So, police it was. Not that she got to drive around in a car with the flashing lights and the blaring siren. But there were at least some occasions when she was asked to drive an all-terrain vehicle outside the city. It always cracked up Alia whenever Nadia would try to create elaborate schemes to venture out of the city on official business. That trick rarely worked on Sonia. But Nadia never gave up trying.

Alia's thoughts were just not coalescing that morning. She gave up trying to figure out her situation and let her gaze wander outside. This was a familiar route. It had some of the best murals in the city. A few days ago, Maria had dragged her there to check out a new one. They had gone late at night because it was supposed to be viewed in the dark. As the tram winded its way down the street, Alia moved closer to the window to see how the mural looked during daytime. She was stunned to see that it had been painted over already.

The one she had seen was that of an ethereal waterfall with exotic trees and animals arranged all around it. She had been entranced by it for a long time. And had assumed that because of its popularity, no one was likely to paint over that mural any time soon. But lo and behold, she was now looking at a gorgeous portrait of a young woman with ravishing hair cascading along the left side of the face. Subtle tattoos and jewelry covered the face and exposed neck.

She stared at the beguiling face. She was about to comment to Carlos about how quickly that waterfall mural had been painted over when it suddenly hit her. It hadn't been painted over at all. It was the same mural. Because of the magic of using paints with distinct chemical properties, the artists were able to juxtapose two entirely different paintings.

The shimmering waterfall at night was the same as the cascading hair of the girl during the day. Unbelievable! Alia had an excellent memory and she could immediately spot all the things from the night-time painting that were transformed in light. She couldn't help clapping at this astonishing feat.

Then the tram entered the next block and reality crashed into her brief sojourn of art appreciation. She winced. Just like that day-night painting, maybe there was another way to look at her thoughts where they would make perfect sense.

She was experiencing really strange emotions. Sometimes they were laced with some sort of anxiety. Sure, she was responsible for solving these cases. But it was a job. Nothing more, nothing less. It was not as if someone was going to fire her if she failed. At other times, she felt fearful. This was absurd. Why would she be afraid? Of what?

There was anger, too. That could be partially explained by the fact that she held herself to a pretty high standard and the failure to solve the first murder was gnawing at her pride. She was a damn good detective and yet, she had gotten nowhere in solving the first murder.

The new feeling of dread was, probably, because of the second murder and the off-hand comment by Sonia about serial killers. That was the last thing she wanted. Serial killer stories are nice for TV shows and movies. In the real world, they can mess up entire communities for years, sometimes decades. She had read lots of case-histories as part of her training.

Her early assessment of the stark differences between the two murders strongly suggested that the perpetrators were different. Unless this was some really weird psychopath who went out of their way to change their methods for each kill. It hadn't happened before but that was no guarantee that it would never happen. The second murder just felt really different than the first one. She was almost hundred percent sure that they were completely unconnected.

Chapter Four

It took Alia and Carlos another five minutes to reach the tram stop closest to the concert hall. They hopped off and rapidly walked to the side entrance where someone seemed to be waiting for them.

"Hi! You must be the police.

My name is Vidya. I am one of the assistant managers here."

Vidya was a well-rounded woman with almond-shaped black eyes. She had accentuated them with some kohl. She was wearing what felt like a stylish boiler-suit and seemed surprisingly fresh given the early hour.

"Good morning, Vidya," Alia greeted her.

"I am Alia, the lead investigator. And this is my colleague, Carlos.

Thanks for meeting us at such short notice."

"No worries. I was already here when you called," Vidya said while shaking Carlos' hand.

"We have a complicated concert scheduled for today and I wanted to get an early start."

Alia nodded at Carlos. Earlier, she had told him to lead the interview. Carlos had the potential to be a good detective because of his unusually meticulous approach. But he also got tongue-tied when it came to interviewing people. Sonia and Alia had decided to nudge him out of his comfort zone.

"So... umm... Vidya... umm... we-shall-try-to-wrap-this-interview-up-quickly."

"Excuse me!?" Vidya looked at Alia to see if she had understood what Carlos was trying to say.

Carlos's face was crimson with embarrassment.

Alia debated whether to take it from there but decided to give Carlos another chance.

“Patience, Padawan,” she could almost hear the voice of Sonia in her head.

In a quieter and steadier voice, Carlos started again, “sorry about that.”

Vidya simply nodded.

“Do you know Nadeem?” Carlos asked right off the bat. Alia couldn't help herself and frowned at him. Did he really want to just dive in without any preamble? As she turned back to observe Vidya's reaction, she caught a fleeting half-smile being replaced immediately by a neutral expression. "Interesting," Alia thought.

“Why? Is he in some kind of trouble?”

“Do you know him?”

“Yes. Quite well, actually.”

All the color had drained from Carlos' face as he realized that he had asked about Nadeem in the present tense. Based on Vidya's reaction, it was clear that she didn't know Nadeem was dead.

He froze and then in a flat low voice said, “umm... we are very sorry to inform you that Nadeem was found dead earlier today.”

The reaction on Vidya's face was instant and devastating. Gone was any semblance of poise. Her face turned ashen. She crumpled right in front of them as if someone had let out the air from a balloon. If not for Carlos' quick action to catch her, she would have hit the ground hard.

Alia knelt down to cradle her head. She pulled out her water bottle and sprinkled some of the water on Vidya's face. A few moments went by. Carlos anxiously looked at Alia wondering if he should call for an ambulance.

Slowly, Vidya stirred. She opened her eyes and started crying softly.

Alia let her cry for a bit. She gently stroked her back as Vidya sat up on the floor. After a few moments, she softly asked, “were you two close?”

Vidya nodded and even more tears streamed down her cheeks. Those beautiful black eyes looked like muddy ponds and some of the kohl started spreading under her eyes.

"Why don't we go to your office and sit down for a bit?"

"Yes... yes... of course."

Vidya stood up with their support and led them inside. Her shoulders sagged under the weight of the immense grief. Alia continued to lightly hold on to her arm as they walked. The building was quiet as a tomb except for Vidya's deep breaths.

In contrast to Nadeem, Qasim had been a loner and Alia's team had never really gotten to know much about him from anyone around him - not his neighbors, not his colleagues, not even the cafe that he frequented for his meals. He was doing research and only seemed to interact with his research cohort if at all. Even those conversations were limited to academic discussions. No one seemed to know Qasim, the person.

They patiently waited for Vidya to calm down. The office was functional. There were no items of personal interest. It was probably used by many people as and when needed instead of being permanently assigned to any one person in particular. It had all the hallmarks of being a space that was re-configured frequently. The table was askew and the chairs were pushed into the corners. There were different kinds of paraphernalia lying on the desk and scattered around the shelves resting against the wall behind the desk. Alia figured that the forensic team was unlikely to find anything of value in there.

Finally, Vidya started talking.

"I said that Nadeem and I were close. That is not really true.

I liked him... I mean... a lot."

A bit of color rose in her cheeks.

"But I am not sure how he felt about me," she murmured.

"We had been working together for a while. He was the quietest one in our team. He basically did what he was told. He would speak up only if he strongly disagreed. Which happened rarely.

The only other time he opened his mouth was when he played his flute. That usually happened during his breaks when he would sit in one corner of the stage and play his haunting tunes."

Carlos asked, “did you two ever go out? I mean, for lunch or something?”

“Well... I did invite him out a few times. He always declined.

I tried to chat with him one-on-one during our breaks. But now that I think about it, he rarely said much in those conversations. He seemed to prefer listening to me chatter away.

I used to tell myself that he listened because he must like me, too. Else why would he hang out with me?” Vidya looked at them defiantly.

“Was there anyone that had any problems with him? Any arguments? Any fights?”

“In two years, he must have lost his temper, maybe, once or twice. I think, the first time was right after he had come aboard and we had all gone out for drinks. Everyone was a bit too tipsy than usual. And someone - now I can't remember who - was asking Nadeem where he came from. Nadeem suddenly got livid. He even smashed his wine glass.”

Carlos pointedly looked at Alia.

“And the second time?”

“I am afraid this was with me. I had told him to change some settings in our audio equipment. It had been a long day... heck a long week!

We had been preparing for this really complicated show. There were numerous disagreements with the performers and everybody was on the edge. At one point, I simply gave up trying to convince the performers on what the correct settings were. I told Nadeem what to do. And he reiterated why that was the wrong thing to do.

Maybe, I was a bit short with him. I told him to just do it and move on to the next task. He didn't say anything but the expression on his face really scared me. His anger just wafted off him like a winter gale. I made an excuse and ran out of the room. For the next few days, he avoided even making eye contact with me.”

“When did this happen?”

“Maybe a few weeks ago. Dunno... I think it was before the previous show.”

“Anything outside of these two incidents? Say, from his past?”

“In all the time that he has worked here, he has never mentioned anything from his past. And, especially, after that outburst at the bar, no one asked him about it again.

Anyway, the past is the past. What’s the point of talking about it? Even I get annoyed if someone goes on and on about their past.”

“Before working with you, what did he do?”

“He was an electrician. And he had also been certified as an A/V technician.

Actually, I was on his interview panel. Not only was he good at the technical aspects, because he was a decent musician, he had an excellent ear for sound.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Yesterday, during the last rehearsal of the show. After wrap up, I didn’t see him leave. I was quite preoccupied with the show’s creator.

Between you and me, that one is a lot to handle. She keeps changing her mind so many times.

But I gotta say, the show is gonna be phenomenal. I can’t wait to see it as an audience member.”

Alia smiled but didn’t say anything. The creator Vidya was referring to was her partner, Maria, of course.

Carlos had done a good job of interviewing. He got more and more comfortable as the interview went along. Vidya had also stopped crying and was quite composed by that time. Alia felt that this was the most they could get out of her for the time being. She looked at Carlos and nodded.

He thanked Vidya and mentioned that they would like to interview the rest of her colleagues as soon as possible. She promised to arrange that. She also offered to get a list of performers that Nadeem had come in contact with in the last few days.

As they were walking out of the office, Carlos glanced back and noticed that tears had again started streaming down Vidya’s cheeks. She had somehow found the strength to

pull herself together for the duration of the interview. The moment it was over, she succumbed to her grief all over again. He wished that he could go back and comfort her. But he was a cop and she could be a suspect.

By that time, a few staffers of the concert hall had trickled in because they had gotten conflicting messages about whether the concert was happening or not. Some had heard about Nadeem's death but, again, were not sure if that was true. They were nervously talking in a huddle when Alia and Carlos stepped out of the office. Alia decided to interview them right away. It took almost three hours to finish all the interviews. Other staffers kept trickling in as the morning wore on. Once they were done with the interviews, they decided to stop by the crime scene before taking the tram back to the HQ.

While Carlos walked around the crime scene, Alia checked in with the two uniforms who were keeping guard. A couple of crime scene technicians were still collecting evidence. There had been nothing out of the ordinary, according to the uniforms. A few people had tried to chat up the uniforms. But that was about it.

Just as Alia turned away from the uniforms to summon Carlos, she noticed a tall black woman staring at the crime scene from across the street. There was nothing suspicious about her. Another gawker, no doubt, thought Alia. But even at that distance, there was something about the expression on the face of the woman that stuck Alia as odd. Before she could process that feeling, Carlos came over and told her that the rest of the team was ready for the debriefing at the HQ. She nodded and turned around for another look at the woman. But the woman had vanished.

On the tram ride back to the HQ, Carlos couldn't help himself and promptly asked Alia, "boss, how did I do?"

"You did well!" Alia smiled encouragingly at him. Then seeing that he was looking for some more feedback, she added, "it is best to ease into the conversation instead of getting to your main questions immediately. You have to show some compassion to the person you are talking with. It helps them trust you a bit. That way, you are likely to get good quality information from them.

Of course, sometimes using a provocative technique is necessary to throw them off their balance.

Which style to go with is something you have to learn to figure out."

Carlos was nodding his head as he jotted down these tips in his notebook. Alia was not a big fan of noting everything down. She preferred to assimilate new information while

she was getting it. That way it stuck in her head. "To each his own," she thought with a mental shrug.

The tram was crowded. The official press release about the second murder had been circulated and there were a lot of subdued conversations happening all around them. Understandably, everyone was in shock. The effect of the first murder had been fading as most people were beginning to write it off as an anomaly even though the killer had not been found.

Alia gazed around her and tried to infer the mood of the crowd from the expressions and the brief excerpts she could overhear. Was there fear? Anger? Apprehension?

It was close to lunch time and the tram's lunch counter was open for business. The delicious aroma from the oven lassoed them. Without exchanging even a look, they made their way through the crowd to the counter. She bought kebabs drizzled with lemon sauce while Carlos picked up some shrimp tamales.

This was not exactly the food they had grown up with because none of the food in Sequoia had meat in it. She knew that there was no animal being bred for food. There were no farms in the traditional sense. Everything was grown in these gigantic vertical farms enclosed in glass-houses. She had vaguely heard about the "meat" being manufactured in factories, whatever that meant. And she was quite sure that nothing much was imported from outside Sequoia because it was ridiculously costly.

It didn't really matter as she bit into the perfectly charred skin of the kebab and more or less inhaled instead of eating the tender "flesh" within. She was instantly transported to her happy place. No wonder she felt that these kebabs tasted exactly like the ones she used to eat in Iran. Or maybe not. She was not really sure about that any more. Initially, everyone wanted to replicate the exact taste from their pre-Sequoia homes. But as they all settled down, people became adventurous. And the chefs responded with panache. They not only fused the various cuisines in novel ways but also developed entirely new cuisines.

Alia found her and Carlos' choice of food entirely predictable. In moments of stress, people invariably revert to their comfort zones. Both of them had sub-consciously chosen their respective comfort food items. In fact, for the last few weeks, she had been craving Iranian food ever so often that Maria had gotten restless.

Maybe she should look up what Nadeem's last meal was. Or what he ate, generally. She turned to Carlos and asked him to jot down this line of questioning. He gave her a puzzled look but didn't say anything. He was generally open-minded and didn't mind going down rabbit-holes. In Alia's opinion, that was another important quality of a good

detective.

Until that first murder, the detectives worked mostly on burglary cases. Most of them were simple cases. The perpetrator was, often enough, one of the employees at the place where the theft had occurred. Usually, the perpetrator confessed to the crime within the first couple of interviews. Typically, the burglary was the culmination of a series of petty misdemeanors that had gone either unnoticed or unpunished.

The perpetrators were, more often than not, genuinely ashamed of their deed. It also became apparent that they had relied on thieving since their childhood, driven mostly by hunger. There was no malice behind most of the thefts. On the contrary, both the investigation team and the victims of the crimes were, in many cases, disarmed by the naiveté and innocence of the perpetrators. Most of the perpetrators were sentenced to community service of varying lengths depending on the value of the stolen things.

In a few cases, the thefts were quite creative. Some perpetrators seemed to not even want the thing that they had stolen. For them, the act of planning and executing the theft seemed to be the whole point of the act. They considered themselves to be artists.

The murders, though, were something else. There was no possibility of absence of malice. And there was nothing creative about them.

Chapter Five

Sara was the tall black woman seen by Alia across the street near the crime scene. That location was not on Sara's usual way to college. In fact, it was quite a detour for her. But she had to see. Like pinching oneself to make sure one is awake. She needed to check if she had indeed annihilated Nadeem.

She was wearing dark blue bell-bottom pants and a matching loose-fitting V-neck top. The bottom edges of the pants, the sleeve-ends and the neckline of the top were beautifully embroidered in an identical pattern of bright yellow leaves and delicate white flowers. That morning when she woke up, she felt that she wanted to wear something that reminded her of home. Her grandmother had embroidered a similar design on the clothes that Sara used to wear when she was a toddler. When still had a home in Nubia. And a family. All she had were tattered clothes when she moved to Sequoia. But she had learned to sew and embroider. Then she had made this special set of clothes. They were her only reminder of her family and home that had been viciously snuffed out a long time ago.

Her hefty physique was not because of exercise. She had come to Sequoia severely under-nourished. The photo they had taken of her showed her skin stretched over her pointy cheekbones and chin. Over the course of the first year in Sequoia, the consistent and nutritious diet in a safe environment had transformed her from a wispy waif to a very solid and real person. Just like many of Sequoia's other residents.

By design, Sequoians were young. Specifically, below the age of 35 when they had arrived. All had come from places where they had faced severe adversity while growing up. That, in turn, had two kinds of somewhat offsetting impacts. On one hand, when they all came to Sequoia, the drastic improvement in quality of life in every which way imaginable led to most of them thriving like trees do in the short summers within the Arctic circle. No wonder, the once emaciated Sara was now working at a freight moving company - actually, lifting and moving around heavy loads as if she had grown up doing this kind of work.

On the other hand, many of them carried some kind of baggage, both physical and emotional, because of which their health was more likely than not permanently damaged in some way or the other. In Sara's case, the damage had been so bad that while dropping off a package, a few days ago, she had first seen Nadeem and become catatonic in mid-stride. Exactly, like a deer freezes when it senses the lion in its vicinity.

How could this have happened? What were the odds of a man from the same corner of the world as hers getting selected to move to Sequoia along with her? Far more

importantly, he was a monster! Everyone knew that! There was no way anyone could have knowingly selected him! How had he managed to slip into Sequoia?

To be accurate, she had heard him playing the flute before seeing him. The music had stopped while these thoughts ricocheted in her mind. Her heart had been racing wildly and she had fervently hoped that she wouldn't faint on the spot. She had quickly delivered the package and under the guise of looking for someone to sign the receipt, she had wandered through the auditorium. No one had paid attention to her as there had been quite a commotion happening on the stage. Some feisty woman had been standing on a chair attempting to organize something. Sara had carefully looked at each person on the stage and breathed a sigh of relief.

Maybe it had all been in her mind. Maybe she had heard some other tune on the flute and had mistaken it for the one she feared. A tune she and thousands of people in southern Sudan had feared all those years ago. Maybe it had been the same tune but it hadn't been as obscure as she had imagined and someone else had been playing it. Was she never going to be allowed to forget what had happened?

She had been a ten year-old wisp of a girl when her world had collapsed all around her. She had been woken up by the sound of thundering hooves. The Janjaweed, a demonic band of pillagers, had finally found their way to her obscure village. For months they had all lived in fear that one day their luck would run out and they would fall victim to the Janjaweed. Many had left the village, correctly, assuming that it was only a matter of when not if their village and their lives would be destroyed.

She had been so scrawny that her grandmother had been able to quickly shove her into the leaves and branches that made up the roof of their hut. Barely had she done that when the front door had been smashed open by a couple of thugs. Her family had cowered in a corner too scared to run or scream. There had been absolute pandemonium in the village for a few minutes and then as if all sound had been sheared off by a blade, a foreboding silence reigned. Within a few moments that silence had been rent apart by the frenzied playing of a flute. They had heard about the vile flute-playing chieftain of one of the marauding gangs. This must be that gang. Whatever, flickering hope they had of finding mercy was swiftly extinguished by the notes cascading like a torrent from that flute.

The two intruders had playfully swung their swords while they had tossed her family's meager belongings. The moment the flute had begun, they had gotten started. First, they had casually beheaded her father and brother. As a rule, the men were always killed immediately before the real terror began. The force of the blood spatter had reached all the way up to the roof and some of the blood had gotten in Sara's eyes. She had gone numb and could barely see through the leaves and the mist of blood. Then they had yanked her mother and elder sister forward. They must have raped them repeatedly before killing them because she seemed to remember the screaming going

on for a long time before it became quiet enough to hear the eerie sound of the flute again. Her grandmother had fainted and those two monsters had simply forgotten all about her as they had hitched up their pants and left the hut to hunt for more victims.

She must have come around a few minutes later, even though it had felt like a lifetime had passed. She had managed to somehow extricate herself from the branches and had fallen down on the floor. She had felt her grandmother stir. Slipping and sliding in the blood all over the floor, she had crawled to where she could hear her grandmother whimpering in shock.

“Are you hurt, grandma?” she whispered.

“Uhuhh...,” came back the weak reply.

Her grandmother had slowly sat up and seen the carnage enacted on her family. There lay her daughter, her son-in-law, and two of her grandchildren cut to pieces. She had been amazed that Sara had somehow escaped the brutality and had crushed her to her bosom trying not to sob too loudly. Her freely flowing hot tears had mingled with the blood on Sara’s face.

Carefully, her grandmother had lifted the far corner of one of the wall coverings to peek outside. It had looked safe. That part of the village had been decimated and no one seemed to be around. She had pulled Sara through the opening as quietly as she could and had started crawling through the dark toward the shrubs.

Their strength had failed them as they reached the first dense shrub. They had crawled into the middle of the shrub and hoped that they would not be discovered. In a whoosh, they had heard rather than seen their neighbor’s hut go up in flames. And right there in the light of the burning huts, Sara had seen him. She didn’t know his name then. She wouldn’t know it for another 20 years. Until she went to a land far away from her home.

He had been calmly riding his horse while playing the flute. His crew had gone about gleefully torching the village while he had provided the horrific background score for their atrocities. His face had been utterly emotionless. A complete sociopath. She had been transfixed by the scene. Once all the huts were ablaze, he had stuck the flute in the pocket of his robe and had waved at the riders to get going. All of them had instantly obeyed his order. There could be no doubt in her mind that he was their leader. She had not seen any other face that night. Not of those two men who had actually tortured and killed her family. Not of the other raiders in the party. No one except him. No wonder that face had been imprinted on her very soul that night. Since that moment, for her, he had been the face of evil.

She didn't remember much of the next few days as she and her grandmother had wandered through the desolate wilderness in search of food and water. They had trudged at night as that had provided them with the most cover from the human predators roaming the land. Non-human predators had long ago abandoned this dried out part of the world. Finally, they had been found lying almost comatose in a dry stream-bed by a small team of UN personnel that had been surveying water resources in the region.

They had been taken to one of the many refugee camps administered by the UN. She had lived in the camp for the next 15 years. There she had learned to read and write. She had also picked up some math and science. She had helped wherever she could. And she had found her calling as a nurse in the makeshift medical clinic. She had never said no to any task that had been assigned to her. She had been unfailingly compassionate to all the people who came to the clinic. Food had always been scarce at the camp. She had routinely offered her meals to those who had needed it more than her.

Then one day, came the announcement for the selection of candidates for relocation to Sequoia. Out of the hundreds of women between the ages of 18 and 35 living at the camp, she had been selected to go. And her grandmother, her only family, hadn't hesitated even for a moment in telling her to leave. There was nothing to keep her in Sudan. Her grandmother had been in poor health and was not going to be around for much longer. The tears in the eyes of the two women had dried up long ago. When the day came, they had hugged each other and Sara had left Sudan with the faint hope that she could start a new life somewhere far away. Where she could finally be safe.

She had a difficult time adjusting to the weather in Sequoia. The first winter had been extremely distressing for many Sequoians. Several had even considered forfeiting their right to be in Sequoia and going back to their native land. A few had thought of committing suicide because to them going back was akin to death anyway. But no one had acted on it. After all, Sequoia was where they had finally found respite from seemingly perpetual trauma, not only the one imposed by nature but also by other humans. For the first time, they had adequate food, clothing, and housing. They had water! Lots of it. They could shower in it every day. They could drink as much as they wanted.

It might be unbelievably cold outside but indoors would always be warm. They were safe in their homes. No more marauding men who could attack them at will and leave them broken for life. For the first time, they had the opportunity to build their lives in exactly the way they wanted. Just as they had adapted to the heat and the sun, they would adapt to the cold and the dark. It was only a question of time. And time was on their side. They were all young. They had survived their terrible homes and of course, they would survive in this safe space. They had found peace, finally!

“Or had they?”, wondered Sara. Her past had followed her from Sudan to Sequoia. The evil had merely stayed dormant for the first five years in Sequoia. It had simply bided its time and then reappeared in her life, reminding her that she could never really escape her fate.

She had to do something, anything, to escape from this evil. She had plotted to kill Nadeem over the course of a week and then clinically executed her plan. Throughout that week, she had felt as if she were watching another person who looked just like her, go through each step of the execution. She had read somewhere about “out-of-body” experiences. This had to be that. The deed had finally been done last night. Justice had been delivered. The souls of her dead family could now rest in peace forever. Most importantly, she could finally be safe. Forever.

She was jolted out of her reverie because of a loud thunderclap that was accompanied by a squall of rain that drenched her in seconds. The consequences of her action blazed through her mind just as the sky was lit up by another round of lightning. How could she have acted so recklessly? What had she done?! She was bound to get caught. They would force her to leave Sequoia and her cherished life behind! They would send her back to Sudan where she would be punished. Maybe they would take pity on her and just hang her dead.

Panic gripped Sara and left her gasping for air. She was stunned by the enormity of the predicament that she had landed herself in. She had to lean on the wall behind her as she felt her knees buckling under her.

When she had come to Sequoia, she had promised herself that this was going to be a new beginning for her. She had been born again. She would leave all her past behind her for good. It was easier said than done and she had struggled through many nights filled with nightmares from her childhood. By the second year in Sequoia, those nightmares had started dwindling away both in intensity and frequency. The stellar work done by the indomitable therapists from all over the world volunteering their time had helped thousands of her fellow citizens in breaking away from their past. All that had come to nought. One brush against the past and all the efforts that she had put in over the years had disintegrated in a flash.

Or maybe not! She tried to systematically recall all the events of the last week. As far as she could tell, she hadn't left any clues behind that could lead the police to her.

The anonymity and ubiquity of moving vans had certainly come in handy when she had stalked Nadeem for days. She did not own the moving van. She borrowed it from the city government as and when she needed it. More importantly, the van had allowed her to hide the unconscious Nadeem for several hours last night before moving him to the park around midnight to hang him.

The panic gripping her somewhat subsided as the squall passed. She was drenched and had to go back home to change before she headed to the college. That is when she realized that the clothes she had been wearing yesterday may have picked up traces of Nadeem. They would yield his DNA that could tie her to his death. She had to get rid of those clothes right away and more importantly make sure that no traces were left in her flat. She carefully put those clothes in a dark cloth bag and using a strong disinfectant, carefully wiped down all the surfaces in her flat. Then she got rid of the clothes and the bag in the medical waste incinerator at her college.

Chapter Six

Alia saw that Santosh was back from his trip to Nadeem's flat. Nadia and her uniforms were back, too. The rest of the team was also waiting for her in the incident room. She cleared her throat to attract everyone's attention.

"Can we do a quick update please?"

"Let's start with Santosh."

Santosh was from one of the forest-dwelling tribes of the state of Jharkhand in India. He was small guy with a dark brown complexion and a shock of oily black hair curling around the left side of his forehead. His large black eyes reflected his emotions instantly and completely. He was like an open book that even the least perceptive person could easily read. Unlike the others, he was also very quiet and rarely spoke until called upon to do so. Funnily enough, for someone of his stature, he had a deep baritone that surprised people all the time.

To a lay-person, it was not obvious what Santosh was good at, as a cop, that is. He - of course - could have made a fortune doing voiceover work with that splendid voice of his. He even had a knack of mimicking accents which had landed him in trouble growing up. For Alia, Santosh was, simply put, Mr. Reliable. He just got things done, without any fuss. He didn't need to ask many questions. He simply figured out what was expected of him and then invariably surpassed it.

"We reached Nadeem's flat at 8 am. The flat is located at... "

"Santosh, save those things for your formal report. Talk about what you found there," cut in Alia.

Santosh nodded and continued, "based on my observations, there didn't seem to be any sign of any other person - male or female - in his flat. The forensic team will tell us later if they found any trace of another person in his flat. No signs of a struggle.

The flat has the usual furnishings - bed, table, chair, etc. Most of his personal possessions seem to be music-related. There were a few posters of musicians stuck to the walls. He had very few clothes and majority of them seem to be of the mundane kind - jeans, t-shirts, etc. He did have one set of the traditional east African attire - white robe-kind of thing - and that religious cap Muslims wear. He also had a prayer mat that seemed to be in regular use."

“How did you figure that out?” asked Carlos curiously.

“There was no dust on the mat. It was carefully rolled up by the window that faced toward the southeast. Some of the other surfaces had dust on them.

There was no TV but there was a really nice audio system. There were very few books on the only shelf he has. A few of them were in Urdu, including, a well-used copy of the Koran. Most of the books were about music - theory, biographies, music-sheets, etc.

There was no other equipment. The forensic team is taking apart his phone,” continued Santosh as he settled into his narrative. His voice was quite soothing and Alia felt like nodding off. The lack of sleep from the previous night was starting to catch up with her.

“There is an art gallery attached to a small cafe that is open only during the evenings. We saw a couple of women in the common area. Both live in the same building and had known Nadeem by sight. But they had rarely interacted with him. Their impression was that he mostly kept to himself even when he was hanging out at the cafe. He always wore his headphones and seemed to be lost in the music. They could not remember seeing him in the last few days.

We shall - of course - go there again today evening to see if we can interview more of his neighbors. Any questions?” paused Santosh.

“Let’s hold the questions until we do the full round of updates,” interjected Alia.

“Tozi - you are up.”

Tozi was a plump woman with the narrow brown eyes and high cheek-bones characteristic of the Aztecs. Her complexion was a rugged honey wheat and she had a penchant for wearing some Aztec artifact every day in her waist-long dark brown hair. Sometimes it was not an object but Aztec make-up. She used to say that this was her way of staying connected to the spirit of her ancestors. Everyone else thought that it was an excuse to wear something colorful everyday.

She was actually quite good at make-up. In her spare time, she would offer to do make-up in the common area of the building in which she lived. Initially, she would do it for free as she could try out new ideas in addition to the traditional designs that her clients asked for. As her creations grew popular, she started charging a fairly hefty fee for her services and her appointment book was filled up for several weeks in advance. Recently, she had collaborated with Mythily who used to do make-up for the famously extravagant Kathakali dancers of Kerala before arriving in Sequoia. They had created a

whole new style that was catching on in the fashion world of Milan and Paris.

All those make-up activities were her hobby, though. Her day job was being a cop which she loved far more than anything else. She had been training to be a software professional in Mexico City before she was selected for relocation to Sequoia. Her focus had been database development, especially, for diverse kinds of data such as video, audio, text, numbers, etc. Even though it was a nascent field when she had selected it, it had appealed to her in a visceral way. She had observed that she was different from her family and friends, she experienced everything via all her senses. For example, her brother Juan listened to music in a way where he mainly experienced the sounds and remained ignorant about the words. Her dad was the opposite of Juan, he was all about words and rarely noticed the tune. Her mother preferred watching music performances instead of listening to them. But Tozi absorbed and enjoyed all aspects more or less equally. Sometimes, in fact, she would insist on attending the music performances in person so that she could also experience the crowd, the ambience, the smells, everything.

To the police department, it was obvious right away that she was best deployed to organize information instead of being out in the field trying to collect it. And she was an absolute genius at that. She had finished her studies in Sequoia while training to be a cop. She had been instrumental in setting up the information architecture for the Sequoia police department. Some of the European mentors of the Sequoia police department were secretly quite jealous of that database design.

Unsurprisingly, Tozi walked over to the windows and lowered the shades as her update would be a mix of audio-video material. Then she went over to her computer and projected her presentation on the barren beige wall behind her.

“I am going to focus on the information pulled together from various online sources.”

The screen showed various photos of Nadeem starting from the earliest ones - probably, from Sudan - all the way up to the post-mortem ones sent by Leela's squad. It was fascinating to see the progression from a seemingly troubled teenager to an increasingly assured young man.

“Nadeem didn't have a birth certificate on record. His only known address is from Nyala. That region has long been an unsettled place because of the drought going back several decades. Then there is the chronic menace of the militia, both freelance and government-backed. The refugee camps in that region run by the UN and other aid agencies did try to keep some records. But I have not found anything on Nadeem in those databases. Nomadic tribes are quite common in that part of the world - so it is quite possible that Nadeem was part of one of them and hence, never got included in any database.

Same as Qasim, Nadeem was also not socially active. He had boosted announcements about concerts on his social media page, probably, after he started his job at the concert hall. And then there were a few links to music that he had posted several months ago. He has a couple of dozen friends in his social network and they seem to be mostly colleagues from the concert hall and past performers that he had gotten to know. He follows a few musicians and bands but overall his level of activity is limited to once or twice a month.

I found some photos and videos of him that were posted by others. Some had tagged him while the majority were suggested by the facial recognition software. There was one video where he seemed to be sitting in a pasture playing the flute. It is hard to tell where it is shot - there was no meta-data with it. There appear to be a few folks in the audience and even some animals, all out of sight but their sounds were picked up by the microphone. I could recognize some neighing - so probably, horses and maybe some mules.”

Tozi clicked on the video and the room was immediately filled with the tune she had earlier listened to. She skipped through the video a few times to highlight the sounds of clapping and horses neighing close to the end of the video.

“He seemed to have been living well within his means and there had been no official complaints about him. His main expenses seem to be the usual - food, clothes, etc. Other than that, he spent money on music, especially, concerts. He had a few subscriptions to music services on-and-off. However, it looks like he mostly relied on the freely available audio-video material over the internet.

In terms of the places he frequented, he was consistent. The same grocery stores and cafes show up all the time. Most of the cafe receipts also indicate that the bill was for one person suggesting that he either ate alone or split the bill conscientiously if he went out with others. Nothing out of the ordinary. Not much to work with.”

Next, Alia directed Carlos to bring everyone up to speed on their conversation with Vidya. He had the habit of injecting his analysis into his observations in such a way that the audience had trouble keeping the two things separate. She interrupted frequently to ensure that he stuck with the observations and didn’t spend too much time on his commentary. She valued his analysis, of course. But now was not the time to get into that. It was too early in the investigation. Analysis built on limited data could lead to biases that seeped into the very foundation of an investigation. Those biases, then, become hard to drain out at a later time. It was best to keep as open a mind as possible in the initial stages of an investigation. To simply observe and compile data.

Sonia had been quietly listening to the updates from the back of the room. She needed to make her own observations in order to brief the city council later that day.

She was confident of Alia's talent. Alia possessed all the necessary qualities one looks for in a lead investigator - intelligent, calm, good leadership skills, and most importantly, extremely perseverant. Alia had effortlessly resolved each and every theft case assigned to her.

She looked at each one of the team members in turn. She felt good about her selections and even proud of how far this cohort had come in such a short period of time. They were all good in their own unique ways. On top of that, they complemented each other well. Vitally, they were all in this for the right reasons. She had not detected even a single false note among them over the last five years. That was quite an achievement, given her naturally critical nature. Then why was this team struggling for the last month?

Her first instinct had been to lead the investigation. However, the city council persuaded her to delegate. They had correctly pointed out that she was leading the entire police department and there could be other crimes while the murder was being investigated. Her job was that of a manager. Being in the field was the last resort. There were at least a couple of guys in the team who had been part of murder investigations in their pre-Sequoia days. She - though - had not been particularly impressed by their skills. Therefore, she decided to go with her gut and picked Alia to lead the investigation.

Boy, had she regretted that decision when she saw the look on Alia's face while entering Qasim's campsite. Alia had been utterly stricken. She just stood there like a statue for a full minute. She didn't faint or anything like that. Just as she had been about to change her mind and send Alia back home, she noted with pride the superhuman effort made by Alia into pulling herself together. It had been touch-and-go, but Alia had taken one deep breath, shaken her head, squared her shoulders, and then nodded at her as if saying, "I got this!"

From that moment on, Alia was the very image of a typical experienced detective. Sonia had eased back from the investigation and was content with observing the team at work. They left no stone unturned. With absolutely nothing to show for the effort.

After that first briefing on Nadeem's case, she started getting a tad worried. The second murder was not violent - well, every murder is violent in its own way, but at least not as visibly gory as the first one. But there were unmistakable similarities as she had facetiously noted earlier in the day to Leela and Alia. The two victims were similar - quiet guys who seemed to keep to themselves and were, at least, privately devoutly religious.

Lots of people in Sequoia were devoutly religious and most of them kept that aspect of their lives private. There were a few places of worship scattered around the city. To the

best of her knowledge, those places never really got crowded. Her impression - unscientific and anecdotal - was that most people didn't really have much interest in religion beyond as one of the many ways to stay connected to their past. She, herself, had not given much thought to religion for a long time. She was born into a Muslim family and while she was a child, she had gone along with the rituals and customs that her family had made her participate in. She hardly remembered any of that.

As she was turning these things over in her mind, she became vaguely aware of Alia asking her something. "Sorry - what were you saying, Alia?"

"Boss - do you have any questions or comments for the team?"

"There is one question that comes to mind - did we dig into Qasim's past the same as we are doing for Nadeem's?"

"Not really. And even in the case of Nadeem, we are not sure if that is going to be a good use of our time. It was just an idea. Too early to say."

Carlos raised his hand. He could be a bit too formal at times which became tiresome after a while. Alia wearily nodded at him, "we are not in a classroom. You don't need to raise your hand every time you have to say something."

"Sorry. Do we know for sure that Nadeem's case is that of murder and not suicide?"

"Hmm... you are right. We don't. Tozi - please can you check with Leela about what they have found in their autopsy?"

Let's keep an open mind. If it turns out to be a suicide then we can go back to focusing on Qasim's case."

While she was outwardly talking about keeping an open mind, Alia's gut told her that it was a murder. She just couldn't put her finger on exactly why she felt that.

"It is already 4 pm. We have all had an early start. Let's call it a day.

God knows I am sleepy myself. We can pick this up tomorrow."

"But boss - I had planned on going back to Nadeem's flat to interview his neighbors in the evening," chimed in Santosh.

“Ohh... right! We need to do that. I’ll go with you. The rest of you can finish your reports and send them over to me and Tozi before you leave. Tozi, please could you take a crack at pulling together the full summary and send it to me. I will look at it later this evening. Santosh, let us leave around 5. I need to go take care of a few things.”

“Okay, boss!”

As Alia was walking to her office, Sonia fell in step with her and gave her shoulders a squeeze. “What does your gut tell you - murder or suicide?”

Alia stopped and turned around to look at Sonia. “Well... we have to wait to hear from Leela, don’t we?”

“I asked you, what does your gut tell you. Remember, a good investigator knows how to take into account both the evidence and her instincts as they chart the investigation pathway. So what do you feel?”

“I am inclined to think that it was a murder.”

“Okay - if it was a murder, then have you given any thought to the possibility of both the murders being connected in any way?”

“I don’t see any connection apart from the obvious similarities of both being lonely Muslim men.

But, there is no dearth of such people in Sequoia.”

“I think, your thought about digging into Nadeem’s past was a good idea. I suggest you do the same with Qasim. Maybe have Tozi allocate a little bit of her time to get that going while the rest of the team focuses on the interviews and other tasks.”

“Okay - I will talk with her tomorrow. I have to say though, it has been five years since all of us left our pasts behind. My working assumption had been that it has been long enough that the past is not relevant. Given our lack of progress on Qasim’s murder, I simply wanted to try something different with the second one.”

“Hmm... I think leaving a place is much easier than leaving the past behind.”

Alia didn’t say anything. But she knew exactly what Sonia was trying to get at.

Chapter Seven

Nadeem's apartment was in northwestern corner of the city. Alia and Santosh got on a tram where the happy hour was underway. The regular clinking of glasses full of colorful cocktails interspersed with peals of laughter provided a pleasant background score for their journey. Unfortunately, neither Alia nor Santosh were in the mood of indulging. In any case, Sonia had a strict rule of not imbibing while on duty.

In the rush hour, it took them about twice as long as off-peak to reach Nadeem's apartment. Their tram had to stop frequently, people getting in and people getting out. The higher frequency of the trams meant that almost every intersection was busy. The pedestrians and cyclists made the congestion worse.

Nadeem's neighborhood was relatively quiet because there were a couple of commercial establishments located in it - a sports complex and a small garment factory. It was unusual to have two such establishments located in adjacent blocks as the city planners had aimed for not having dead zones anywhere in the city.

All apartment blocks in Sequoia were more or less identical. Each one consisted of a six-floor building excluding the ground floor which was completely allocated for commercial purposes. The building was square-shaped and built around a ground-floor courtyard. The entries to each flat opened in a common balcony that overlooked the courtyard. During winters, the courtyard would be covered with a weather-proof ceiling allowing the use of the courtyard year-round. Of course, during summer, the ceiling was left open.

Each flat was about 60 square meters with an open layout that included a large room and a bathroom. The room could be easily configured with prefab movable partitions to create smaller rooms that could serve as a bedroom, living room, and kitchen. Usually, when people decided to live together, they would try to find a couple of flats sharing a wall and merge them. Not that many people had chosen to pair up, though. Most preferred to live alone and hang out with others when they felt like it.

The similarities among the buildings ended at the level of basic structure, though. The way each building looked and smelt and sounded and felt was completely different as the tenants, both residential and commercial, had gone out of their way to make it unique. These were the new homes of a people that had decided to build a new life from scratch. And they had been eager to put their personal stamp on it.

Nadeem's building was an inviting place with most of the corridor walls covered with murals that the residents themselves had painted. The cafe/lounge in the courtyard doubled as an art gallery that appeared to specialize in water-color paintings, mostly

landscapes. But there were also a few exquisite sculptures depicting the flora of the tundra. When Alia and Santosh entered the building, the cafe was open and a few art enthusiasts were checking out the exhibit while in one corner a couple of tenants were catching up with each other in loud and carrying voices.

“Did you hear about Nadeem?”

“Who?”

“The guy who lived in flat #4D... I think?”

“What about him?”

“On the evening news, they said that his body was found in a park today morning.”

“What happened?”

“They didn’t say anything about that. They are urging folks to contact the police in case someone has any information about him.”

“Do you think it was a murder? That first murder from a month ago is still unsolved, isn’t it?”

“Dunno... maybe. Why else would the police be involved.”

“I think... I had seen him around. Did you know him? ”

“Not really. I think he was into music. I was in Maryam’s flat when I heard him playing the flute. She is in #4E. He was quite good.”

“How do you know it was him playing it? Could have been a recording. Or someone else...”

“He is a total loner. I doubt he had anyone visiting. And he was definitely practicing. Or maybe composing a new piece.”

Alia and Santosh had been surveying the building from the courtyard and had overheard this entire conversation which seemed to reinforce the observations from Santosh’s earlier visit here. How come the guy lived here for five years and his neighbors still knew so little about him? This case was becoming just as vexing as

Qasim's.

Alia walked over to talk with them.

"Hi!

My name is Alia and this is my colleague, Santosh. We are from the police department and we are investigating Nadeem's death.

We couldn't help overhearing your conversation. We would like to talk with you about Nadeem."

"Uhh... we don't know anything. I mean... we just knew that he lived here.

But we didn't really know him!"

Muscle memory is a powerful influence. People who came from places where the police were more often than not the bad guys, as a rule, tried to minimize their interaction with the police. There was nothing remotely oppressive about the Sequoia police department for the simple reason that it had been mostly invisible as there just hadn't been much crime in the city.

Alia sighed, in her mind. She had gotten used to this.

"You don't have to worry about anything. We are here to only ask questions."

"Ummm... okay."

This was the woman. She looked a bit on the older side - probably, the same age as Sonia. She had dyed her hair with henna into a vivid shade of red. Yet she was wearing quite sober clothes - grey formal pants and a plain white shirt. The guy seemed to be of a similar age and was wearing capris and a yellow kurta with thin blue stripes running down the length. He had a carefully groomed goatee and deep-set eyes.

"My name is Lisa and this is my neighbor Kiran."

"Thanks.

When did you last see Nadeem?"

Kiran straightened up.

“I don’t remember when I last saw him, specifically. I have seen him around.

I think he was doing something in music - professionally, that is.

In the first 2-3 years, I think he was studying and his fellow students visited him a few times. I vaguely remember them talking about harmonics and what not.

I hadn’t seen anyone visiting him in the last few days.

He sat in the courtyard, especially, on the weekends. But always wearing his headphones.

He may have chatted with folks. Dunno. Not a social guy.”

Lisa was nodding her head in vigorous agreement. “He was quiet as a mouse. Except - that is - when he was playing his flute.”

“Anything else?”

Both Lisa and Kiran shook their heads.

“Okay - thanks! Is it okay if we get your contact details so that we can reach out to you in case we have additional questions?”

“Uhh... we don’t want any trouble. I mean... really... we don’t know much anyway.”

That instinctive fear of police. Again.

“No trouble at all. We promise you. This is just in case.”

“Umm... fine. I guess.”

Alia nodded at Santosh and he stepped forward with his notepad and pen.

Alia wandered over to the cafe counter to chat with the barista.

"I know who you are! I have nothing to say to you people. You are useless!

Look what has started happening now. They have started targeting Muslim men. This is how it always is. We are targeted wherever we go. He did nothing to anyone. He went about his business. And yet, he was killed."

Alia was taken aback by this unprovoked outburst but outwardly she maintained her composure. While Sonia and she had discussed this similarity between the two victims briefly, it had not even come up within the team so far. How had this guy reached that conclusion so quickly?

"Sir - it is too early to suggest anything like that is happening. And even if that were the case, I assure you that we shall find the guilty party and hold them accountable."

"Did you know Nadeem?" Alia continued.

"Yes - I knew him. We chatted a few times. Usually, late at night when I was closing up the cafe and he was still here listening to his music."

"What did you talk about? I am sorry, before we continue, please can tell us your name? Are you a resident in this building?"

"What are you going to do with my name and my address? Target me next?"

This was getting a bit irritating.

"No, sir! All the information you provide is strictly confidential. We shall not be releasing it to the public."

"Yeah... we shall see!

My name is Shahid. Yes - I live here - Apt # 5H," he said pointing to his flat.

He had a well-tended beard and a crew cut. Alia could smell the jasmine oil that he used for his hair and beard. He was quite dark and about the same height as she was. But he looked strong. He was wearing a traditional muslim salwar-kameez that was beige in color. He continued to glower at Alia and Santosh.

"It was nothing. Just chit-chat.

Come to think of it - I did most of the talking. About customers and sales and all that.

Sometimes we prayed together.”

“Sir - why did you think anyone was targeting Muslim men? Had anybody said anything to Nadeem? Threatened him in any way?”

“Oh - as if you don’t know. They have always been targeting us.” He glanced briefly and pointedly at Santosh.

Santosh was wearing a red dot on his forehead, courtesy of Tozi’s enthusiasm. Tozi happened to be experimenting with different colors for one of her makeup projects. And Santosh was one of her regular guinea pigs who allowed her to use his face for testing new ideas. Santosh thought that he had cleaned his face before leaving the office that evening, but apparently some red makeup had not come off. It looked quite similar to a Hindu teeka.

“Who has been targeting you?”

“People like him,” again he stared at Santosh.

Alia decided to ignore this accusation and focus on the interview.

“When did this happen?”

“Ever since my childhood! All my life!!”

Shahid’s voice had risen. The rest of the people in the courtyard had stopped talking and were gawking at the three of them.

An altercation was a rare event in Sequoia. Initially, as everyone had been still using their native languages to communicate, frustration and all kinds of other emotions frequently spilled out. Voices did get raised a lot. Fists were shaken. Violence, though, had been avoided. One might have expected a fair bit of violence given that city consisted entirely of young people who had few social structures to constrain them for the first time in their lives.

“I am asking you about incidents here in Sequoia?”

“Ummm... no... well... they still don’t treat us well here either.” Shahid’s body language

was now distinctly defensive. Alia could tell that he was tense. He had, inadvertently, brought the spotlight on himself because of his shouting. He was looking around at the other people with blazing eyes.

Alia decided to change tack. She had to be careful in choosing her words to ensure that she was not disclosing any detail about the cause of death.

“Sir - right now we are here to talk about Nadeem. But, I am happy to take down any complaints that you have against anyone else while we are here.

In the morning, we visited his work place to talk with his colleagues. Now we are here to talk with his neighbors and friends. Did he have any friends that you know of?”

Shahid relaxed somewhat. The tension in the air was still palpable, though. There was no question about Alia’s ability to handle any violence that Shahid may have wanted to cause. She was excellent at unarmed combat. Santosh, though, had only achieved the minimum level of competence required by the police department. He would have stood no chance against the muscular Shahid on his own.

Moments before Alia had walked up to talk with him, Shahid had been scrolling through his social media feed where there had been numerous posts highlighting the fact that both victims were Muslim men. A muscle memory of another kind had kicked in - a paralyzing fear which could instantly transform into mindless violent action.

As a 3-year old kid growing up in a village in northern India, Shahid had been traumatized by the public lynching of his father. A crowd of fanatical young Hindu men had continued to pulverize Shahid’s father’s body long after he had ceased breathing. The entire crowd had been wearing those Hindu teekas on their foreheads and saffron clothing. Their chants had haunted Shahid’s nightmares for several years. He had survived because of a kindly youth in the crowd had gotten scared of the sudden violence that his friends were inflicting on a poor man. That youth had quietly backed away and stumbled over the prone body of Shahid who happened to be wearing the traditional muslim skull cap. He realized that Shahid would not escape the violence unless he was hidden. He had picked him up and quietly rushed away from the location before anyone noticed him.

Despite the five years of peace that Shahid had experienced at Sequoia, away from all the persistent terror of both natural disasters and human predators, that trauma had festered in his sub-conscious. He had clung on to his past through the addictive drip of social media. That connection had been sufficient to nourish his fears.

Of course, he had heard about Qasim’s murder. Over time, that news had receded from

his consciousness since he had not known Qasim. But the news of Nadeem's death had shaken him to the core. While he was barely trying to process that at a personal level, the social media python had already started coiling around him, whispering horrifying stories. The sight of Santosh with that red dot on his forehead was a sufficient trigger for that subliminal fear to burst forth.

Alia's innate calm reasserted itself in the situation as the tension slowly started ebbing. Shahid thought for a few moments about what Alia had said. Did Nadeem have any friends? He hadn't seen Nadeem hanging out with anyone at all. Maybe Nadeem would take off his headphones once in a while and briefly chat with someone in the cafe. But that was it.

Shahid shook his head.

"When did you last see him?"

"Not in a couple of days at least. I think, he had mentioned that he was busy with a show. He had been quite pleased that he was selected to play his flute in a show for the first time. We had celebrated that evening with the new pastry that I had introduced earlier this month."

"Okay. Thanks for talking with us. If you do remember something, we request you to get in touch with us as soon as possible. Here is our contact information."

Shahid gave her a tentative nod and took her card.

Alia turned to Santosh, "Let's call it a night. I am really tired. Tomorrow, we shall get the team to canvas the entire building in the evening. In the morning, Carlos and I will continue interviewing Nadeem's colleagues at the concert hall."

"Okay boss. I will write up my notes and send them to Tozi. Good night!"

Chapter Eight

The next morning, Alia reached her office earlier than usual. She had gotten good rest, during the night. So she b up early and feeling fresh. She wanted to spend some time thinking about the case before she gave everyone their tasks for the day.

The previous night, she had quickly edited Tozi's daily report. Tozi was excellent at organizing information in a very short period of time. That was the understatement of the year, she thought. In fact, Tozi was a genius at connecting the dots. Then she had sent it on to Sonia.

It had been a long and exhausting day for her. Maria had made dinner, a stew of long-grained rice, lentils, squash, dried bay leaves, turmeric, and dried red chillies. Maria knew that this was one of her comfort food items. On the other hand, Maria had an unexpected day off because of the cancellation of the concert.

After dinner, she had fallen asleep with her head in Maria's lap. She dozed fitfully. The nightmare had showed up, almost like clockwork, the moment she closed her eyes. Yet again, she had the strange sensation that even though she was pursuing the suspect, she was unsure of actually wanting to catch the suspect. Or even know its identity. That was a really disorienting feeling. She had sat up suddenly. But then she just shook her head and then went off to sleep on their bed before Maria could react.

She had taken the tram to work. Usually, she walked during the summer months. She intentionally took a circuitous route that wound through as many parks as she could fit in without really going off on a tangent. She never tired of the greenery. But that morning she had felt like she needed to get to the office as soon as possible. The tram had passed by a mural of a gorgeous phoenix gliding in the sky that was painted across an entire block . In the last frame at the end of the block, the phoenix disappeared into mist. Another thing vanishing from her sight. It had reminded her of the recurring dream. It seemed like the artist who had painted the phoenix was rubbing her face in her inner turmoil. Not fair! She had frowned at the mural and looked away as the tram crept closer to her stop.

The last conversation of the previous day had unnerved her far more than she wanted to admit. Was it only Shahid who thought this way? She must get Tozi working on this right away, get a feel for what the public sentiment in Sequoia was like.

Leela had sent over the post-mortem report overnight. It was murder. They had found a heavy dose of over-the-counter sleep medication in his blood. Too bad that sleep medication was easily available from vending machines across the city.

The sleep medication, though, had not killed Nadeem. Death had indeed occurred due to strangulation. Time of death was between 12 midnight and 2 am. There were numerous traces found on his clothes that would need to be checked against all the people that he had come in contact with before his death. She needed more help for sure. Unlike Qasim, Nadeem had come in contact with a far larger number of people and her small team was simply not sufficient to tackle that.

Qasim's body was found at a research camp-site just outside the city, all alone in the wilderness. It was unambiguously murder. His head had been cracked open by a single blow of a shovel that was found next to him. The shovel had traces of his blood and hair on it. It had rained and they had found no fingerprints or other clues such as foot-prints around the body. Leela hadn't been able to narrow down the timing of his death. It could have been anywhere between a few hours to a few days because of the rain and the unseasonal chill that sometimes settled down at those latitudes.

During the investigation, they had found that Qasim seemed to have been one of those solo researchers who spent most of his time in the laboratory or the field. He did collaborate with researchers in other parts of the world - especially, those who funded his work - but those contacts had been purely transactional. Lots of communications related to work. But, none of his regular collaborators knew anything about his personal life. Nor did his neighbors. He came and went at odd hours, rarely talked with anyone in his building, and seldom hung out with anyone. According to his remote colleagues, he had not been in touch for almost a week before he was found.

In contrast, Nadeem had worked with other people in Sequoia on a regular basis and seemed to keep normal hours. He had also seemed to do a few normal things such as drink coffee in a cafe and chat with the barista. So far, a couple of people - Vidya and Shahid - had been able to describe him. And Tozi - god bless her - had come up with some potentially relevant material from Nadeem's pre-Sequoia past.

Why would someone want to kill a researcher and a musician? The first murder had all the hallmarks of being a spur-of-the-moment crime. The perpetrator had grabbed whatever weapon that had been available. The second murder seemed like it was meticulously planned. Nothing opportunistic about it. Someone must have been with Nadeem to have fed him the sleeping pill at some point in the evening. Then that someone must have worked out a way to move the unconscious Nadeem to the park. Finally, they must have hung Nadeem in a public park without anyone seeing them do so.

So far, there was nothing to connect Qasim and Nadeem. There was no apparent motive for both murders. Nothing had been stolen. It didn't seem that Qasim and Nadeem had caused anyone any harm of any kind. They barely seemed to have talked with other people. For five years, nothing. And then suddenly they were murdered in

quick succession.

Was the motive religious? Alia knew that practically every single person in Sequoia came from troubled parts of the world. Men preying on women had been a common occurrence. Conflicts arising out of religion, race, culture, caste, and all kinds of tribal identities happened routinely and were often extremely violent. This had been one of the primary reason why Sequoia's residents were selected in such a way that no one was related to each other as far as possible. They had actually used DNA mapping to ensure this. No one was even from the same village. The goal was to not have any pre-existing tribal identities carrying over from their place of origin to Sequoia.

For five years, there had been no violence of the tribal kind. Sure, there had been numerous inter-personal conflicts that had at times led to minor violence. Many of them had been the result of misunderstandings as lack of a common language had been a problem for the first few months. Misunderstandings also arose from ignorance about each others' cultures and norms and behavioral patterns. As no one was keen on getting thrown out of Sequoia for misbehaving, all those inter-personal conflicts had been quickly and amicably resolved. At times cops had to be brought in, of course. But to a large extent, people had tried to resolve their differences on their own. The cops also had made every effort to keep those interventions unofficial. They had tried to, primarily, nudge the aggrieved parties to sort their problems out. At most, the cops would mediate. This had worked quite well so far.

The downside of the process of selection - e.g. no relatives - was that everyone was, literally, on their own and had to build their social networks from scratch. Some folks found that easy while others didn't. Alia was in the latter group. While she was generally sociable, she was a quintessential introvert. In a group setting, especially, of strangers, she was not likely to be the one to speak first or at all. Maria was the opposite. But the real queen of the social world was Nadia. She was, immediately, the beating heart of any gathering.

On top of that, the lack of a common language was a huge barrier to form those networks. To a large extent, though, the language barrier had been overcome through the constant use of universal translators that were ubiquitous on everyone's wrist. But the ones who struggled, did struggle a lot. On the plus side, there was the lack of any consequential tribal form of organizing. Or was that really the case?

Alia started to jot down tasks for her team. In addition to doing those tasks, she wanted them to keep their eyes and ears open to organizations that appeared to have a tribal slant. This was going to be a challenging ask. She was not even sure what signs they should look for and how they should interpret them. Maybe, Tozi could come up with some tips based on her scans of social media. Maybe, she should discuss this with Sonia before talking with the team.

As if on cue, Sonia poked her head into Alia's reverie, "how's it going?"

"Good timing, boss. I was just about to come look for you," said Alia as she continued to jot down her list of tasks before she forgot something important.

"Tell me!" Sonia said brightly as she delicately perched herself on the corner of Alia's desk.

"Not much to go on, so far," Alia said, carefully.

"Early days, Alia... early days. Keep digging. Something will pop out, I am sure.

This murder happened in the middle of our city and was pre-meditated. There must be some trail left behind by the killer."

Alia nodded.

Sonia knew what was going on through Alia's mind. She added gently, "Qasim was different. We knew that would be hard to solve right from the beginning."

Alia didn't react. It was nice that Sonia was not judging her performance. Yet. Nevertheless, Alia was not happy with her failure to solve the case so far. She was not being harsh on herself. She knew that Sonia was objectively right. Yet, in her eyes the outcome was not what it should be. The killer should have been found and punished. Anything other than that was wrong, however, realistic and pragmatic it seemed. Alia's particular form of idealism was what kept her on her toes all the time. Another person may have taken their boss up on this way of thinking in order to absolve themselves of any responsibility. But such moments only made her uncomfortable. And as always, she dealt with it by moving on to talk about something else.

"Leela has managed to pin the time of death to a small window, midnight to 2 am. The death was by strangulation even though they found quite a bit of sleep medication in his blood. Which means he was intentionally drugged. That implies the killer had to move him to the park. So... there is that."

"Excellent! Then there must be some witnesses. C'mon! It is a city of three million souls living in close proximity with each other. Sure, it was late at night. But it is summer and the murder happened in a public park. This is good news, Alia. You may want to consider doing a public announcement to see if anyone would like to step forward with information."

"I agree. We should do that. I shall get you a draft of the press release later today. Also, we are going to need more help. Do you think you can make some more uniforms available to us? For answering phones and chasing down details once the tips start coming in?"

"Absolutely! Tell me what you need. Although, I am going to have to keep track of the budget. We blew through quite a bit of it during the investigation into Qasim's murder. I am going to have to go to the Council and get some additional resources approved. Any other leads?"

"Since Tozi managed to dig something up on Nadeem from his life before Sequoia, I was wondering if we should ask for some help from the Interpol to get in touch with the Nadeem's home country law enforcement folks."

"Hmmm... where was Nadeem from, again?"

"Sudan."

Sonia sighed, a bit too theatrically than was warranted.

"You know as well as I do, Alia, a country such as Sudan is in dire straits. God knows how many years it has been since they last got some relief from the drought. I am not sure we are going to reach anyone there who could find something useful for us. They probably don't even have records worth sharing with us. I wouldn't hope for much. But, in order to not leave any stone unturned, I will get the ball rolling with the Interpol. I hope they don't ask us for funds!"

"Thanks. I just have this nagging feeling that both the murders may have to do with something with their past, that is from their lives before Sequoia."

"Why do you feel that?"

"With Qasim, we know for sure that he was a total loner. No social circle within Sequoia to speak of. With Nadeem, I am getting a somewhat similar vibe. It is too soon to say for sure. But he does sound like he wasn't particularly close with anyone. Maybe it is 'man' thing."

She chuckled and added, "maybe we should check with Santosh and Carlos about their social circles! After all, Sequoia is a strange place. Women outnumber men by two to one. And men don't run anything. Who knows... how much of this has distorted the usual social dynamics of men. Apart from our colleagues, I hardly hang out with

any men.”

“So bloody true,” thought Sonia.

Alia continued to think aloud, “with Qasim, nobody seemed to have much of anything to do with him. He stayed out of trouble. To be able to antagonize someone, there needs to be some meaningful interaction. We didn’t see that with him, at all. He spent a lot of his time camping outside of Sequoia. Most of his interactions were with folks based far away from Sequoia. Maybe we need to interview them more closely to see if they remember anything he might have said about his past life.

We shall know more about Nadeem as we dig further. I sure hope that he chatted with someone somewhere. We are just not seeing even the hint of a motive yet. Establishing means and opportunity is not likely to be a problem.”

“Hmm... has anything turned up in the search of their places? I know Qasim lived a very spartan life. Although - I remember - we found some personal stuff at his campsite. Some photos and souvenirs. Did we ever manage to track them down?”

“No - we didn’t find any real leads from those. But I think that maybe we didn’t try hard enough. I will get Tozi to see if she can find any visual matches for those pieces online. We have been spread quite thin with the interviews. We had to cast a really wide net!”

“So - this is all a gut feeling? I mean, this hope that the murders are connected to something from their past?”

Sonia looked carefully at Alia as she asked that question. In her opinion, there was absolutely nothing wrong about going with the gut. And a gut such as Alia’s was something worth going with. Always. Alia - in her judgment - possessed an excellent combination of a logical brain and an instinctive grasp of how various pieces of a puzzle fit together. But still, she really wanted her top investigator to be more deliberate about this. The budget was indeed getting tight and cajoling the Interpol to do anything quickly was going to be tiresome. In general, the Interpol tended to ignore their queries until Sonia made a song and dance about them with the right folks at the UN.

“The way I think about this, boss, is that it has been a difficult adjustment for most of us. We all left our homes five years ago knowing full well that we can never go back. In a way, it was a choice we made, but maybe it was not really a choice. We all left because it was an extremely difficult life. It was the innate survival instinct that dictated our actions. And we came here alone, literally. At the same time, not really alone in a very fundamental sense of the word. We may not be with our families and friends and the society that we grew up in. We are here - instead - with people who came here for

the same reason. I guess... one could even say that we have more in common with each other in Sequoia than we ever had with the society that we left behind." Alia paused to gather her thoughts.

"We share a unique kind of camaraderie because our individual futures are dependent on us succeeding together. Collectively. We are, in my view, a forward-looking bunch of individuals who are forming a new kind of society. A society that is not based on any shared attribute, as traditional societies have been, but on shared objectives about our futures."

Sonia was nodding her head in agreement.

"Maybe, Alia, that was the cause. I mean, maybe Qasim or Nadeem or both of them were impeding our future in some way and that is why someone decided to do something about it."

Alia was silent for a while as she worked through this possibility.

"Sure. That is possible. But I would say, very unlikely. None of us has a clear picture about our future, yet. We are barely getting settled here. Getting to know each other a bit. I am not sure a violent reaction can be caused for something so vague and hazy. I would be quite surprised if that was the motive.

But, I do see the past having such a powerful hold on someone that it would compel that person to commit a murder. I do think that is a far more likely possibility than what you are suggesting. We may not be brooding much on our past as I was saying earlier. But some trauma can be deep-seated and it can trigger such a violent action."

"Fair point. I trust your instincts any day over mine. Go for it!"

"There is one thing that I want to flag, though," Alia paused as Sonia turned back toward her.

"Yesterday, Santosh and I interviewed one of Nadeem's neighbors. He runs a cafe in Nadeem's building and seems to be one of the few people who had known Nadeem. This guy - Shahid - went off on a tangent pretty much right from the start of the interview. He made it sound as if this was some anti-Muslim pogrom. Qasim had definitely been seen in the mosque on a few Fridays. We shall check out the mosque to see if Nadeem prayed there, too.

What worries me is that people like Shahid may turn this into something where there is nothing. I guess - it is possible that someone targeted these two victims because they

were devout Muslims. But we don't have any indication of that. At the same time - hardly anyone waits for actual evidence to form opinions anyway. People do love to jump to conclusions. I am hoping that Shahid is an outlier that we can ignore. It just - you know - left a bad taste after that interview."

Sonia thought, "it was, most definitely, not good!" Then she promptly forgot about it. Until a few days later when the topic popped up again in a totally different conversation and in a far more serious context.

Chapter Nine

The Pope's assistant, John Murphy, was reviewing his notes before his daily briefing for His Holiness. The Catholic Church had been steadily losing followers for decades and it was not alone in this predicament. None of the major world religions were able to provide the succor their followers were desperately seeking in the increasingly turbulent times. How could the followers continue to bring themselves to believe in a higher power if that higher power seemed to feel no compunction in letting them suffer all the time?

Worse, the major religions were singularly inept at competing with the sheer showmanship of the charlatans. The literally mind-blowing displays accompanying each sermon made full use of the entertainment industry's state-of-the-art skills. It created a magical mixture of exhilaration and numbness in the minds of the audience. That instant relief was akin to a drug that distracted the followers long enough for the charlatan to rip them off. Eventually, those victims would free themselves from the charlatan's hypnotic control. Unfortunately, rather than learning from that experience, they would promptly choose another one to follow. And, in all likelihood, get victimized all over again.

Murphy, an Irish middle-aged man, sighed. This just happened to be the day when he was supposed to summarize the data about church attendance from across the world. The charts - like the corners of his mouth - glumly pointed down. He was not looking forward to sharing that data with His Holiness and the other staff. It invariably descended into another round of fruitless bickering and unnecessary recriminations.

Among the news headlines that had caught his eye that morning, was the news about the second-ever murder in Sequoia. That curious little city up by the north pole had more or less vanished from news over the last five years. There had been some hope when the city was being populated, that it would welcome the Catholic Church. After all, the entire population consisted of lonely people who came from the poorest and most climate-impacted places in the world. They would all need some spiritual help.

The Catholic Church had, along with most other religious institutions, lavished charity on Sequoia. Strangely, there had been no substantive response to those generous enticements. Maybe most of those folks were too numb from the shock of their relocation to have any capacity left to engage with the spiritual world. Murphy had shrugged that off as yet another instance in a growing list of failures.

Most folks around the world had lost interest in Sequoia a while ago. All that had changed within the last month. Apparently, after the first five years of no deaths (and no births either!) there had been not one but two murders within a few days of each other.

The one and only thing that was common between the two murders was that both the victims were, apparently, Muslim men.

As is the instinct of most people, sure enough, the journalist (or was it some vapid opinion-writer?) had established a trend by connecting two data points. Really, Murphy thought, people need to be able to distinguish between data and anecdotes. This was one of his pet peeves - people extrapolating when they shouldn't be. Murphy had scanned through several sources of news from around the world and it became quickly apparent to him that the Muslim rabble-rousers had already started pointing to this "trend" as proof that Muslims were not safe anywhere including Sequoia. This was, especially, galling because Sequoia was established for the express purpose of moving people from unsafe places to safe places. The usual garbage about persecution had been dusted off amazingly quickly. The references to the millennium-old crusades were not far behind.

This was the difference between the old religious institutions and the fly-by-the-night hucksters. The old institutions had survived for centuries because they had taken the long view while these frauds were in it solely for short term gain. Almost like the cut-throat capitalists, there had to be a return on investment and that too in the next quarter! Else, their followers would leave them in the same way shareholders abandoned the stock of the companies that were deemed to not have delivered big returns in every single quarter. Maybe the old institutions needed to find a better balance between taking the long view and the near term developments. Or else these old institutions might not survive.

All these thoughts about long- and short-term views reminded him of the famous Keynes quip, "in the long run, we are all dead!" Murphy had read economics and politics in Dublin before he found religion. He had always been good at math. It had been a simple choice for him between science and economics. He had not enjoyed science in school and hence, economics it was. He had fancied himself as a political economist who would shape the thinking of the world. But within two years of college, he had become disappointed by the ephemeral nature of the ideas that he was learning. He had briefly considered switching to science - maybe, Physics - but there also he felt that too many core ideas about how the universe worked were still being refined. He was thoroughly dispirited by all this constant evolution. It kept him on the edge, never allowing him to settle down. He didn't like that feeling at all.

One day, he had been sitting in the back row of a church, when he started listening to the priest's service. He hadn't even realized that it was a Sunday and this was the weekly mass that he had walked into. He had been whiling away his time by biking through the hills near Dublin all summer wondering what to do with his life. That day, the uphill ride had been quite steep and the sun had been, especially, hot and relentless. Not a cloud in sight all morning. He had felt a bit light-headed and entered through the first open door he had come across. It had been that of the church. And

his life had changed. He had found certainty in the venerable priest's service that morning. He, no longer had any doubt about his true calling from that moment on.

Murphy glanced through the open window that looked over the oval ground in front of the Basilica. Tourists had started gathering. It was another hot day in the Vatican. Many tourists were carrying parasols and umbrellas to find some respite from the sun. As usual, the touring groups were the first ones to arrive and congregate in the oval. He had gotten good at recognizing from afar which groups were from which country. The Chinese and Indian groups were always the largest ones and most common ones. No surprise there! The Chinese tourists dressed very conservatively while the Indian tourists were always easily identifiable because of their vibrantly colored clothing. Quite a visual contrast to see these groups gather around their tour leaders who were reciting the standard instructions about the dos and don'ts.

Murphy found it quite interesting how tourism to religious places never actually changed anybody's mind into adopting a new religion. Tourists - from all over the world - were somehow able to consistently maintain a distance between themselves and the place or people they were visiting. It was no different than humans going to a zoo to look at animals. If only that had not been the case! The Catholic Church would have had no trouble adding new devotees as the Vatican continued to draw in tens of millions of tourists, many of them not Christians, every year. They came and ooh-ed and aah-ed at the artwork in the Church's museum, ate the gelatos and pastas, took a gazillion pictures of every church in Rome, and then went back to their un-Christian lives.

Murphy stood up and started organizing the papers that would go into his attache. He was, momentarily, distracted by the sound of fire crackers going off in the oval. It was dangerous to do that in a crowd. But there wasn't much parents could do to keep their children in check. Kids will be kids. But even as he was mentally shrugging his shoulders at that thought, he heard several screams. They seemed too loud to be caused by the fear of a kid's firecrackers. Murphy rushed to the window and was aghast to see the carnage that had taken place in mere seconds. Several people were lying covered in blood. He couldn't understand what was happening even when somewhere in the back of his mind he kept hearing the firecrackers. And then he saw the two gunmen gliding through the crowd smoothly as they ruthlessly mowed down the people in a hail of bullets.

They looked too stable to be running and were probably using a hoverboard, Murphy thought subconsciously. More people keeled over as they got cut down by the killers who were shouting something as they kept going. Pieces of paper were also fluttering all around them as if they had disturbed a flock of white pigeons. It was happening so fast that Murphy's brain was the only thing functioning while his body had become completely paralyzed. But all that changed in an instant when a stray bullet hit the window where he was standing. The shards of glass hit him as if in slow motion.

Instinctively, he dropped down with both his arms covering his head.

Then as if by magic, both the gunmen crumpled up in the same instant as the snipers finally managed to nail their moving targets. Of course - the Vatican had snipers posted all around the oval for exactly this kind of a situation. Unfortunately, they had been too slow in killing the two gunmen because the gunmen had been moving really fast and in an unpredictable manner. And that too in the middle of the crowd. The snipers had been, rightfully, reluctant in taking multiple shots as they feared they might hit innocent people.

Once he felt sure that the shooting had indeed stopped, he stood up careful to maintain a safe distance from the window. To Murphy, the tableau seemed inconceivable. The pop-pop of the guns had stopped and the screaming had ratcheted up in a big way as the survivors of the assault came out of their daze. The long drawn out wails of the injured then seamlessly blended into the sirens of the emergency vehicles. Loud screeches of tires spinning pierced through them, as the police cars and ambulances pulled up to the oval.

The entire oval felt like an artist had gone berserk and splashed red paint around willy nilly with all his paintbrushes. To Murphy's conservative sensibility, this Jackson Pollock-like image was unspeakably disgusting. He finally regained his will to look away from it. He was still shaking as the adrenalin continued to course through his veins when the door to his office was whipped open and a Swiss Guard swept in without any warning. He stumbled back toward the window as if hit by a truck and almost over-pitched through the window before the Swiss Guard pulled him back into the room.

"Sir... are you alright?" he asked calmly.

"Yes... yes... I... I am fine," Murphy managed to stammer out as a part of his mind was marveling at how this youngster was able to stay calm through this upheaval.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Sir - if you are okay, then I shall go and check on the other staff members. My superior will come and brief you on the situation in a few minutes."

Murphy nodded and sat down heavily in his chair.

As the guard bolted out of the room, he felt sick as bile rose up in his throat. He had barely managed to grab the waste basket when he threw up several times. There wasn't much that came up as he had not had any breakfast yet. He was still retching

when he heard clipped footsteps approaching his desk. The Captain of the Swiss Guard had arrived.

“Sir - may I request you to come with me to His Holiness’ chamber?” the Captain asked urgently. Unlike the young guard, the Captain seemed to have been far more affected by the tragedy. His face was crisscrossed with lines of worry.

“Yes - you go ahead. I will follow you in a few minutes. I need to use the bathroom to tidy myself up,” Murphy waved at him without looking up. He was still feeling sick. Even if he had wanted to, he wouldn’t have been able to stand up immediately. He was completely drained of strength after throwing up. He needed a few minutes just to catch his breath.

“Okay! Please be there in five minutes,” said the Captain. It was obvious that the Assistant must have seen the carnage from his window unlike His Holiness who had been in the process of dressing for the day and had neither heard nor seen anything until the Captain had gone over to his quarters.

Murphy rinsed his mouth and washed his face with cold water. That seemed to do the trick. He felt much stronger and refreshed. He straightened his clothes that had somehow gotten all twisted up when he had thrown up. They, most definitely, did not look as freshly pressed as they had been a few minutes ago. But they would have to do. He drank a couple of glasses of the cold water. It tasted bitter at first and then sweet.

His Holiness was calmly sitting at his desk while the Captain stood in front of him across the desk. A couple of His Holiness’ senior staff were standing on the far side of the desk as Murphy entered the room. The door had been left open and there was obviously no need to knock under the circumstances. Murphy went and stood by the side of His Holiness. His Holiness waved the Captain to get started with his briefing.

“Your Holiness, it was a terrorist attack. There were two gunmen who were shot down by our security team. There are numerous casualties. We don’t yet know how many are dead and how many injured. Once I get the report, I shall bring it to you,” the Captain spoke calmly and precisely. Not one unnecessary word anywhere. Simple and short sentences with no ambiguity whatsoever.

Murphy asked, “who were they and why did they attack?”

Even though Murphy had asked the question, as was the practice, the Captain continued to address His Holiness.

“They appear to be Muslims. We don’t know their identities yet. They were shouting ‘Alla-hu-Akbar’ as per the accounts of our security team. They also had flyers that were falling through their satchels. The flyers had the pictures of two men. Both the men in those photos appear to be Muslim based on the names printed below the pictures. The rest of the flyer clearly states that this was an act of vengeance. The two gunmen, it seems, were avenging the wrongful deaths of the two men whose pictures were on the flyers.”

Again, the clipped precision from the Captain. While one part of Murphy was listening to the Captain and observing him, another part of his mind was wildly gesticulating. Murphy knew the answer to his question even before the Captain replied.

“By any chance were the names of the two men on those flyers Qasim and Nadeem?”

The Captain was taken aback and lost his composure for a brief moment as he took his eyes off His Holiness and stared at Murphy as if he was seeing a ghost.

“How did you know that?” the Captain had forgotten the protocols in this moment of disbelief.

“Your Holiness,” Murphy turned and said, “the two young men mentioned in the flyer had been murdered in the last few days in the refugee city of Sequoia. Qasim was murdered four weeks ago and Nadeem, last week. I had read the news but had not felt it important enough to include in your daily briefing. I had assumed that the two murders were local affairs and not of importance to us.

In any case, the few details that I had seen, suggested that the murders were not connected. There didn’t seem to be any indication of religious violence. Now, after all this, it seems that there are at least a few who think otherwise. And going by the scale of the tragedy that happened a few minutes ago, these people feel so, quite strongly.”

“Oh dear!” His Holiness murmured.

Chapter Ten

The irony of this particular rally was not lost on Jake as he rode his thundering bike, excessively festooned with confederate flags, down Massachusetts Avenue in Washington DC. Not a single Christian person had died in the Vatican massacre. All of the fatalities and injured victims were either Chinese communists or Indian Hindus. Yet, he had been ordered a few days ago to organize a Christian rally bang through the middle of DC.

In true foot-soldier fashion, Jake had gotten the ball rolling through the various outreach mechanisms that he operated for his chapter. The messages were fully synchronized across all the platforms of live media and social media ensuring that there was a simple theme around which rallies would be organized all over the US. The theme was, "Christians are under attack." It was not a particularly new theme, but then the terrorism incident at the Vatican was merely an excuse to flex muscles yet again. Facts had stopped being relevant for Christian organizations in the US, and for that matter all over the world, a long time ago. The goal was to manufacture outrage through victimhood in order to keep the flock together. The topics pertaining to material well-being that the progressives wanted to talk about had mostly been driven out from the political discourse.

The rally was to start on top of the hill in northwestern DC, at the stairs of the Washington National Cathedral. Yes, these days, they made it a point to highlight the overt religiosity of the rally. Then, it was to proceed down Massachusetts Avenue where many of the Embassies were located and on to Dupont Circle where it would turn on to Connecticut Avenue and head for the Ellipse in front of the White House. It was meant to make a point to all the nations and the current occupants of both the White House and the Naval Observatory. Usually, this route would never have been permitted because of the presence of so many international buildings. But then, the current party in charge of the government was a big fan of such religious fervor. Of course, they would be allowed to barge through this security-conscious area.

Jake was a poster-child for the white Christian nationalist organization that he had been part of since he left high-school. He was tall and muscular with sleepy light gray eyes. His blonde hair was closely cropped but he nourished glorious burnsides. If not for that, he would have looked like the shy 30-year old that he really was. Not this scary impression of a foot-soldier in the army of Christ.

What most people missed about Jake though was the clever mind that kept ticking along all the time in the background. He made sure that that fact was kept under wraps because his organization didn't like independent thinkers. He had gravitated to the organization for an absolutely mundane reason - there were plenty of girls always

hanging out at the local chapter's office and they were always up for a good time with the good ol' boys. He knew that he was never going to be able to afford college. Even if his parents had money for his college, they would have never allowed him to go to one of those heathen colleges. His best shot at having a good life had been to join right-wing politics. His hormones and his parents' views aligned wonderfully when he announced that he had joined the local chapter as a volunteer.

He didn't have much of an opinion about religion and race until he joined his organization. But the colossal amount of brainwashing that he was subjected to in the initial years did a number on him. He would frequently drive around on his motorbike, brandishing a shot gun, yelling at anyone who didn't look like a white Christian. Getting in trouble a few times for unlawful activities - for example, beating up some black or brown dude in a bar - was his ticket to a rapid rise in his organization. It was never serious trouble because invariably the cops were sympathetic to his cause and more often than not the public slap on the wrist was later offset with a drink at the local dive when the same cops were off-duty.

The problem was Jake's conscience. It started really struggling with the orders he was being given. The chasm between the kool-aid he had been force-fed and the reality was becoming more and more apparent every day. For starters, he rarely ran into any non-white non-Christian person in the real world. Rural America just didn't have those kind of people. The few that he ran into were mostly trying to stay out of sight as much as possible because of fear. The last thing on their mind was attacking a white Christian person. They barely even raised their head when spoken to. He started wondering how in god's name he was supposed to feel threatened by these petrified people.

Initially, he simply told himself that it may not be happening where he lived but it definitely happened in other parts of the world. But that also didn't seem to be accurate the closer he looked at what was going on around the world. Sure, the US seemed to be stuck in some kind of Cold War with China and yes, there sure were far more Chinese than Americans in the world. However, it didn't seem like the Chinese were interested in crossing the huge Pacific ocean and invading the US any time in the near future, if ever. The American economy was a juggernaut compared to the Chinese, especially, as Europe tended to often side with the Americans. The rest of the world - the Indians, the Africans, the Arabs, the Latin Americans - they all just preferred to stay on the sidelines trying not to piss off both the US and the Chinese as far as possible. There was simply no threat to the US in any shape or form.

He had been quietly reading books - yes, even those that were banned by his organization - to deal with the increasingly insistent voice in his head that kept pointing out discrepancies between the realities, the alternate and the real one. He had a burner phone on which he accessed all kinds of material and then instead of picking fights with random people, he thought and thought as he drove around his little part of

the US. The voice in his head just became louder the more he read and thought. It had not yet caused an existential crisis for him as he was still one of the top dogs in his organization. And that still gave him quite a high. He did what needed to be done but increasingly dispassionately. His sleepy eyes and poker face served as excellent allies in keeping up the pretense of being a lunkhead.

He looked around with a smug look on his face - well, at least he thought he was giving a smug look even though there was no difference between this look and when he was feeling all humble - at his fellow rally-goers. In a very showy manner, he wrenched the accelerator of his bike, his big muscles tensing up in the hot sun. The sound deepened and the rumble seemed to shake the ground around him just that little bit and the exhaust belched. Funny thing, his bike was electric but tricked out in such a way as to look, sound, and smell like a regular bike running on gasoline. Right-wing folks were partial to gasoline bikes and trucks even though it was incredibly stupid to use the wildly expensive fuel. Unfortunately, it was now a part of the performance - "American oil and gas!" - that the right-wing continued to feel compelled to rely on. Jake had got a custom-made electric bike that looked the same as a typical gasoline bike. He had rigged an audio system with an, especially, powerful sub-woofer that went well beyond imitating the rumble of an old-school road hog. Then there was a smoke machine hooked up into the fake exhaust system that produced copious amounts of dirty smoke on demand. So far no one had noticed that it was not as foul-smelling as that of a typical old Harley. No one noticed these things because the bike was decked up with the usual paraphernalia proclaiming the superiority of white power. Idiots! The only thing he needed to make sure of was to not race these idiots ever. His run-of-the-mill electric bike would have wiped the floor with those gas hogs and more! Maybe that smug look on his face was not so fake after all, but simply aimed in the wrong direction.

His boss was at the front of the rally procession sitting on top of the hub of a monster truck with a megaphone in his hand while he shot t-shirts at the crowd that had gathered to watch. Every now and then he had to rest his delicate throat from all the screaming. To a large extent, this rally was a pretty standard issue event to remind folks of who they were and that they still had the clout to make a mess of the evening commute. The federal government had become somnolent a while ago. Even a knowledgeable person like Jake was hard-pressed to remember the last round of meaningful legislation passed by Congress AND signed by the President. It was mostly theater. They were all a bunch of peacocks in Washington DC who preened all day long in front of the cameras. Not a single meaningful word came out of their mouths. It was like a crap reality show that never ended. Cast members seldom changed in this show as the incumbents were rarely challenged in any serious manner. Both parties had locked up their fiefdoms so tightly that there was not much chance of power shifting toward either side in any substantive manner. And that is why he and his organization had to do these rallies in DC. To help keep keep their side on top in this fragile tussle as long as possible.

What was somewhat unusual about today's rally, Jake felt, was that the number of folks

that seemed to have showed up was quite a bit more than he had expected. Maybe it was the nice weather. Maybe the news that the “Vatican had been attacked!” had resonated a lot more than he had imagined. It was getting a bit hard to figure out which thing would stick in the minds of the public and which would slide right off. Another score for Jake. The boss was sure to notice the size of this crowd and would acknowledge Jake later for pulling this together so quickly. All is good, Jake thought.

Just when he was about to “rev up” his bike and move toward the front of the procession, he heard the sound of some new slogan being shouted. It sounded like hissing. It was just one word being repeated incessantly. He couldn’t really make out the word over the loud reverberation of the sub-woofer installed right under his seat. He slowed down and simultaneously turned down the volume on the subwoofer with the special dial installed right next to the accelerator. The slogan burst through the immediate din around him. “Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill the towel-heads! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill the towel-heads!”

Shouting about killing all kinds of folks was not at all uncommon at such rallies. Yet, there was something quite ominous about this slogan. It seemed to be resonating from the ground up. He saw that some of his fellow rally-goers had also noticed this new slogan. Maybe some new fringe group had joined in. This slogan was, most definitely, not part of the approved slogans to be used in the rally. These days, in order to drive up the recruitment numbers, they had all been told to dial down the violent slogans and dial up the white victimhood angle. That was designed, explicitly, to raise sympathy and bring in much-needed recruits to their movement.

Jake’s boss continued his screaming from the megaphone at a higher volume hell-bent on drowning out the new sloganeering. His boss was not pleased that his show was being commandeered by someone else. As he shouted and waved his hand, the boss looked around to find Jake. When his eyes landed on Jake, he gestured at him to go take care of this new problem. Message discipline was paramount. It was the foundation on which the right-wing had built its political power. The left-wing had no message discipline at all and hence, had been struggling with stringing together even modest wins at any level of the government. Mobilizing at the national level was no longer even an aspiration of the left.

Jake acknowledged his boss and wheeled his bike around to the side so that he could go hunt down the folks who were breaking the ranks with this new slogan. Just for a moment, he forgot to dial up the volume and the smoke as he turned the accelerator. The bike sped up noiselessly and he panicked. Luckily, the tires had spun so fast that the crunching sound covered up the lack of the engine rumble while the smell of burnt tire rubber and tar overwhelmed the lack of exhaust. He quickly spun the dial and punched the smoke machine before anyone discovered his secret.

Within a few minutes he found the cohort who was hissing the violent word again and

again. They were dressed in surplus army gear and carried rifles. There were no banners among them. The common thing was that they were all old, probably well in their 60s and 70s. And they had a harsh, utterly pitiless look in their eyes. They didn't notice Jake until he waved his free arm a bit more vigorously.

"What gives folks? This is not the slogan we had been told to use today," Jake said in his most pleasant voice. The young 'un act usually worked like a charm on the oldies. They continued with their march, and yes, it was a march, Jake noticed. They were marching like a platoon or whatever army grunts marched in. One of the oldies peeled off and walked up to him.

"We are not with you, son!" he growled.

"Say again, grandpa?" Jake held his ground while mildly revving up the sub-woofer on his bike.

"We should have finished off these towel-heads way back during the crusades a thousand years ago. We let them live. We had another chance to do that with the two Bushies in the White House. But, again we decided to be benevolent. No more. We are gonna get the job done this time around! Gotta kill every last one of 'em. They have been a menace to the world for far too long."

"Whoa... whoa... slow down, Sir," Jake switched off his bike, put it on the side-stand and approached the oldie.

"What are you talkin' about, old man? There ain't no war going on right now. We ain't talking about killing anyone right now," Jake decided that playing the reasonable junior but physically superior guy was the best approach to deal with this wiry bent old guy.

"Anyway we are the top dogs in the world and there ain't anybody threatening us. No one even has the balls to look us in the eye!"

"Stand down, son. We have bled for America. We have been to hell and back. We know how bad the ground situation is. All you young 'uns and politicians in DC are gonna do is pussy-foot around on TV and your social media and do nothing else. We are gonna get this shit done once and for all. Stand down or I will blow your head off," he snarled.

As if on cue, the air was suddenly filled with gunfire as all the oldies started shooting at the sky. Now those were reverberations, Jake thought. The ground shook as if there was an earthquake and the smell of hot metal was everywhere. The cops who had been milling around the procession were caught completely off-guard with this sudden

gunfire. This was supposed to be yet another rally through the town. Most of the rally-goers hadn't even brought weapons and whatever weapons that were on display were not loaded. They were, specifically, for show. This was totally different. As their training kicked in, the cops took cover and pulled out their weapons quickly. They started scanning the procession to ascertain where the gunfire was coming from and if there were any casualties. Their commander cursed fluently. This was not gonna look good on the evening news. He could already hear his boss chewing his head off later that day.

The cops realized that the gunfire was not aimed at anyone. All the guns had been pointed straight up in the air. A broad swathe of Massachusetts Avenue was now covered with shell casings. The cops looked at each other uncertainly. They were not sure what to do next. No one seemed to have been hurt. What the hell was going on?

Just as it had started, the gunfire ceased in unison and there was a deathly silence.

"Shit!" thought Jake. These guys are not kidding round. They just fired a shit ton of weapons right next to the Veep's home. No one from their side was supposed to pull this kind of stunt in DC. The Veep and President were on their side, for chrissakes!

Jake now noticed that the procession was entering Washington DC's Embassy Row. But there was one building that was not an embassy and the procession had stopped right in front of it. The Islamic Center. It was not just a typical cultural center in DC that hosted events but it was also a mosque. In fact, when it had opened in 1957, it was the largest mosque in the entire western hemisphere. It also happened to be a Friday, the holy day for prayer in Islam.

Unbeknownst to the cops, the namaaz in the mosque had ended and the doors opened to let out a stream of devotees who had heard the gunfire and were now fearfully looking at the procession on the street from beyond the iron fence.

About fifty of the guys with rifles broke ranks and formed up again in a line outside the fence separating them from the mosque and the muslim devotees. All those guys were wearing military-grade camouflage gear and had their faces covered in war paint.

As if it was happening in slow motion, Jake noticed this posse line up. The hair at the back of his neck stood up. He knew what was going to happen before it did. As bile rose up in his throat, he saw the posse get into position. In unison, the safeties went to off position and the thunder of gunfire erupted again. The difference was that the guns were no longer pointed at the sky but at the people inside the Islamic Center - unarmed people, many of whom were kids and women. It was all over in a few seconds as the posse emptied its magazines in the crowd of devotees. And then the sound of gunfire ceased - again in unison. But it did not get silent. Instead, the

atmosphere was filled with heart-wrenching agony as those that had not been killed found their voices.

The message had been delivered to the world loud and clear.

Then it was time to get out of Dodge and pronto. The posse had vanished like smoke even as the cops and the other rally-goers were trying to figure out what had just happened.

Over the next few days, it dawned on Jake that he was going to have to completely revise his career path. Rather than be angry about it, he was quite pleased with the thought of this. Maybe the world had reached another inflection point where there was a non-zero probability that the world could move toward a better future instead of the terrible one that he had resigned himself to.

Chapter Eleven

Sara's actions had other consequences too, those that had not yet crossed her mind. She was starting to realize what could happen to her. Because of the complex web of human relations spanning both space and time, she had inadvertently unleashed mayhem that not only upended the peace in Sequoia, but went far and wide into the world. Of course, she had never intended to affect Sequoia, let alone the rest of the world. As best as she could make sense of her out-of-character actions was that she had, momentarily, lost all control of herself when she had killed Nadeem. She was not regretting his death. But she was certainly aghast that she had caused it. That was not her. It would not happen again, she vowed to herself.

Shahid's instinctive reaction when Alia and Santosh had questioned him was the second domino to fall in the ensuing mayhem. The thing with the "falling dominoes" metaphor is that the dominoes have to be placed together in the correct order and sufficiently close to each other for the first one to eventually cause the last one to fall. Put too large a domino next to the first one or put the second domino too far apart from the first one, and nothing much happens except the fall of the first domino.

The ubiquity of the internet, social media platforms, and a more or less permanently connected device in the hands of every human being on the planet had ensured the creation of an extremely sensitive and incredibly efficient system of dominoes. At the command of the owners of these social media platforms, the speed with which the dominoes fell could be controlled quite precisely. Or at least the owners thought so. In reality, the control was uni-directional: how to increase the speed of propagation. There really was no dial to slow things down. But they didn't really care much about slowing anything down. After all they liked to assert, "move fast and break things." No one among them ever said, "move slow and build things."

The human domino takes a lot more effort to topple for the simple reason that most humans don't really want to expend energy, whether physical or emotional. Very few, voluntarily, choose to climb hills, especially, steep ones. Most just prefer to lope downhill. That is, if they need to move in the first place! Similarly, very few people even make the effort to change someone else's mind let alone kill them because they disagree with them. After all, it takes a tremendous amount of effort to kill someone. And an even larger effort when the intended victim is fighting back. So, most humans simply prefer to find ways to get along with others as it takes the least effort on their part.

That is why, it takes extraordinary effort from someone to get not just one but many humans to hurt others. It is extraordinary because one has to know exactly which buttons to push and how firmly. In addition, appropriate tools are necessary to push

those buttons. The social media platforms that proliferated since the turn of the century were those tools. Very effective tools, especially, in the hands of the people with the most depraved intentions of all. Authoritarians that unleash wars were an example of those kind of people.

Of course, those button-pushing skills and the tools could also be deployed by good people to get others to do good things. Those who do these good things end up becoming the saints that people look up to. One key difference between the bad-intentioned actors and the good-intentioned ones is that the former don't want their followers to think for themselves, while the latter want the exact opposite. Being good is innate and that is what the saints have been relying on. But being bad requires one to shut down one's conscience completely.

Shahid was not wired, naturally, to go and kill someone. Just as Sara hadn't been. But the social media platforms through which they had maintained their connections with the world beyond Sequoia, had put them in such a position where their vulnerabilities could be harnessed for nefarious purposes. It is not as if they went and sought out the knowledge that exacerbated their pre-existing grievances. But neither did they realize that the platforms that they thought existed to help them get along with others, were being systematically used to trigger their worst instincts. So when Nadeem inadvertently crossed Sara's path, her worst instincts took charge of her actions without her realizing it until it was too late. The same thing was about to happen with Shahid.

The two triggers that are most effective in provoking a violent reaction in a person are the perception of being disrespected and treated unfairly. To be sure, these triggers don't have to actually exist. It is sufficient that the person only perceives the existence of those triggers to react to them. And react with extreme prejudice!

Sara's enduring sense of being treated unjustly all her life was the trigger that had led her to destroying Nadeem. In reality, Nadeem had not even seen her let alone touch her or harm her directly. In her mind, though, she saw no difference between him and his two gang-members who were the ones who had actually tortured and killed her family. To her, delivering justice to Nadeem was the same as punishing the real killers.

In Shahid's case, the trigger was perceived disrespect. As a Muslim growing up in Hindu-dominant India, his entire life had consisted of being treated as a second-class citizen at best. Most of the times, he was just invisible to the Hindus in power. He was a nobody. Except when the powerful Hindus were looking for some Muslim to make an example out of. The police had, typically, served as the designated henchmen for delivering the pain. In his eyes, Alia and Santosh were part of that same police force who had routinely abused him back in India. The way that Alia had questioned him, had left a perception of being absolutely humiliated in his mind. In reality, both Alia and Santosh had been professional and respectful. Ironically, both Alia and Santosh had themselves faced discrimination in their pre-Sequoia lives - Alia for being a Muslim

woman in Iran and Santosh for being part of a forest-dwelling tribe in India.

Nonetheless, that interaction was sufficient enough reason to tip Shahid into a vicious spiral of self-victimization that was further fed by the hatred flooding his social media feed. Yes, the term “feed” was indeed apt even if it may have been inadvertent. Shahid was being forcefully fed hatred. Which he voraciously and unwittingly consumed. Thus, a decent cafe barista and an art gallery owner in Sequoia became easily radicalized. The healing power of Sequoia had been overcome by the poison of hatred from far away lands. Shahid stewed in an ever-deepening pool of fetid emotions that inexorably led him to violence of the most horrific kind.

Tozi, who had already begun monitoring the social media platforms for collecting data on Nadeem (and Qasim), started seeing alarming signs of provocative forms of communications among the people of Sequoia. Other people living in far away places had also begun interacting with Sequoians around these deadly issues. Within a very short period of time, the sense of Muslim victimhood had exploded. And in almost no time, following that particular emotion, the notion of “jihad” (or holy war) started spiking in various places. Most disturbingly, thought Tozi with dismay, one of the spikes had shown up in Sequoia. She frantically scrolled through the histories of the most talkative voices on the various platforms and was stunned to see that this spike had come from nowhere. None of the voices had shown any sign of anger or violence whatsoever for the past five years. Then suddenly, as if someone had thrown a switch in their heads, the anger had been activated. It was the vicious kind which usually culminated in violence. Virtual at first, but she was sure that it would become real soon if something was not done to stop it in its tracks. She pulled together a short presentation with this data and sent it to Alia who then passed it on to Sonia.

Shahid was shaking with an odd mixture of fear and anger. He had just finished watching the videos of the Washington DC and New Delhi massacres that had taken over his social media feed. The fear was primal. He had been afraid all his life. Of violent death that could come for him at any moment. He had seen it take away many people since his childhood in India's Uttar Pradesh, one of its poorest and most violent states. He had seen his father's death. A memory that had started fading, especially, in the last five years, but which now had suddenly become vivid.

The anger was the unusual reaction in his case. At some point in his life, he didn't remember when, people had started treating him like a do-er and not a child or a victim. His family had actually started asking him for his advice. Even when he moved to Sequoia, his family had continued that practice. The fact that he was running a small business, a successful one at that, in Sequoia brought him even more respect from people beyond his immediate family. When he first got angry with someone back home, he was not sure who it was, probably his mother, he had seen the fear pop up in her eyes. He had felt ashamed immediately and tried to calm her down after that incident. But it had also felt... good. It was an entirely new feeling for him - to be able to

express anger at someone and then to be feared because of that. He was confused because he didn't really have much to feel angry about anyway. So that sense of power he had felt in that moment had fizzled out over time. Every now and then, he would become faux angry just to see the fear in the eyes of whoever he was talking with. It was like a guilty pleasure of sorts.

The anger that was coursing through him right now, though, was nothing like that. He had lashed out online and it had not satiated him at all. This was the kind of anger that seemed to seek something to consume. It was consuming him, no doubt. But that was not sufficient. Watching little children being mowed down by automatic rifles in the Washington DC mosque had driven him so mad with grief that he had cried all night, eventually falling asleep out of sheer exhaustion. Then on top of that came the bloody videos of families from Delhi. The violent mob had used swords to hack away at the cowering families. Then the mob had gone out of its way to gloat about it and film it for posterity. The revulsion that he had felt couldn't be expressed in words. Initially, he had been viscerally scared of getting killed by the Christians and Hindus in Sequoia. But that feeling had slowly passed as the anger started exerting its power on his heart. He had to do something. He decided that ranting online was not sufficient, he must act. He would not be a victim anymore. He was now someone that others feared. He was going to war. And in his mind, the first face that swam into focus was that of Santosh wearing that traditional Hindu red mark on his forehead. He decided that he was not going to merely hurt Santosh, but he was going to do something that would strike fear in the very hearts of the others. Make THEM quail in front of his fury. The time for mere words was over. It was now time to act!

Unfortunately, there were no countervailing ideas that Shahid could draw on that would have steered him away from the violent course of action that he had embarked upon. No voice of sanity, no voice of reason, no principles, no morals, no religion... just an utter absence of beliefs that could have pushed back on his violent impulses, firmly and unrelentingly. Sequoia had come into existence in a hurry. It was a physical place. It had a purpose in the sense that survival can be a purpose. And survival is not exactly a conscious purpose for most living beings, especially, humans who have long been inventing new ways to survive.

Sequoia took care of mere survival, in any case. There was shelter, food, water, and other basic necessities for living. The purpose of Sequoia was to somehow generate sufficient income to be allowed to exist in its current form. While that was a common goal for all Sequoians, it didn't easily translate into how someone should feel about something or what to do and not do. So people like Shahid and Sara simply fell back on the ways of thinking that they had grown up with - relying on family values or religious principles or societal norms that they were most familiar with. The passage of time had just not been long enough for a unique Sequoian way of life to fully emerge and get universally embraced. No one had even attempted to articulate what this new way of life could be. Then how would Sara and Shahid know how to think about the

issues that been thrown at their faces by life?

Chapter Twelve

The team had been trickling into the incident room. Alia had noticed that everyone was quite subdued. The news of the shoot-out in the Vatican and its direct link to the two murders in Sequoia had no doubt affected all the members of her team. The subsequent massacres in places such as Washington DC had further dampened their spirit. The perpetrators of those massacres had clearly pointed out that their actions were to avenge the Vatican attack. The fanatics around the world had decided to use the excuse of the Sequoia murders to light an inferno that could burn everything down.

Usually, Tozi was colorfully attired. That day, it was all black with no other color visible. No sign of a head-dress nor any makeup adorning her face. Almost as if the real Tozi had decided to take the day off and sent in her shadow to work. Carlos always made it a point to seek out Alia's attention and smile at her enthusiastically every morning. Today, he could barely bring himself to look at her and nod. Definitely, no smiles today. And Nadia, the effervescent one, was walking as if all the weight of the world had been loaded on her shoulders. Instead of floating into the room all light-footed grace, she shuffled in like a sick old woman and sank in her chair. Santosh hadn't showed up yet. He was always punctual and when he was delayed, he invariably informed Alia beforehand. She glanced at her phone to see if there were any messages from him. But didn't see anything. She decided to give him a few more minutes before calling him.

They were all very much now in the collective spotlight of the entire world. Finding the perpetrators of both murders as soon as possible had become a topic of international importance. For almost five years, the world had left Sequoia alone. Treating it as an absurd little experiment playing out in a long forgotten corner of the world. That isolation was over now.

There had been several tense video conferences between Sequoia's city council and the UN. Sonia had been hauled in by the city council and then later made to brief the UN on the investigation team's progress. She had been grilled for several hours. Overnight everyone at the UN had become a detective and was giving her all kinds of advice about how to track down the killers in Sequoia. To her credit, Sonia had lost her temper only a couple of times during the actual briefing. Although, she did lose it numerous times when she was talking with the city council. Her dark eyes would flash dangerously when she was faced with people who knew far less about criminal investigations but still felt that they could give her advice.

After those frustrating conversations with the UN and the City Council, the previous evening, she had gone over to Alia's flat to both vent and check on the progress. The two murders were now pretty much the most important things to deal with for the

Sequoia police department. She didn't want to take over the investigation - yet - from Alia despite all the pressure from the city council and the UN. That would both undermine Alia's position as the lead investigator but more importantly, signal to the entire investigation team that they were not good enough to get the job done. With a young, creative, and enthusiastic team that was getting the hang of policing in a completely new urban environment such as Sequoia, nurturing the confidence was the key for ensuring the long-term success of the city. And if Sequoia did indeed become a success story, there would be more new and similar cities coming up. The experience of her team would be absolutely invaluable in training the police departments of those places then. For all her reputation of volatility, which was mostly relevant to how she communicated, Sonia had a very astute mind that weighed the pros and cons of every major decision from multiple perspectives.

"Boss - should we get going with the daily status report?" Tozi quietly asked Alia. She knew that Alia was in a tough situation and dealing with a lot of pressure. This was no longer just a murder investigation. This had spun out of control quite fast. The social media feeds that she had been monitoring were lit up with violent reactions. Alia looked up from her phone and said, "I was waiting for Santosh to join us as he has been following up with Nadeem's neighbors. I would like him to bring us all up to date on that."

That is when Sonia barged into the incident room, her usually dark brown complexion was several shades paler and those dark eyes were livid with anger. She was so angry that instead of shouting at them all, her voice went down to the lowest octave. Yet, the barely controlled fury and the terse low voice had no problem slamming into each and every team member.

"Santosh is dead. Someone slit his throat. His body was found a few minutes ago in a trash container by the garbage collectors. They called it in and I have already dispatched Leela and her team to the location."

For a few moments the room went completely silent. And then the dam broke. Sonia's eyes filled up with tears and she shouted, "what the hell is happening!" Santosh, our dear Santosh - gone? That kind quiet little guy who was always the most dependable and reliable person in the room. They all knew Santosh as well as anyone knew anyone else in Sequoia. Literally, no one had ever thought negatively about Santosh. No one had even said anything bad about him behind his back. Who would want to kill him in this gruesome manner?

Alia had gone cold. Sadness and anger were locked in a death match in her mind. Her hands were clenched till the knuckles gleamed white, all the muscles tensed up to lash out and give way to the anger seething inside her. At the same time, tears had moistened her eyes and she felt a sob coming up to the surface. She wanted to just cry and let it all out. Neither was the right thing to do in front of her team. She must hold it

all in until she had a moment to herself. Her team was not just under the hammer, but now they were also scared because one of them had been brutally killed.

She got up from her seat and went to stand by Sonia's side. Alia gave her a side hug and whispered in her ears, "I got this boss. You go and deal with whatever you need to deal with. They will need a formal statement from you soon." Sonia looked at her gratefully, turned around and left the room quickly. Alia watched her go. She was trying to organize her thoughts before she addressed her team.

"Let it all out. Right now. Don't hold it in. But, remember what you are feeling right now. Print it on your brain! We shall find who killed Santosh and we shall punish them. Even if it is the last thing we ever do."

Carlos started crying and Nadia sat down next to him to put her hand around his shuddering shoulders. Tozi looked out of the window - her face blank. Alia sat down at her desk again and prayed that she would not throw the monitor at the wall. Anger seemed to have handily won the death match in her mind. Sadness was cowering away in the corner of the ring while anger was stomping around the ring just itching to throw a few more deadly punches.

Reflexively, Tozi glanced back at her monitor. She had received an email from an unknown address and it had a video file attached to it. Almost in a trance, she opened the file and the video automatically started streaming both on her monitor and the large screen in the incident room. In preparation for the briefing, she had already hooked her computer up to the large screen.

The entire screen filled up with Santosh's terrified face. His liquid brown eyes were wide open and staring fearfully at whoever was holding the camera. His mouth was taped up. His whimpering filled the incident room and everyone involuntarily stood up and started drifting toward the screen.

Alia snapped at Tozi, "what's this? Where did you find it?"

Tozi whispered, "I got an email with this attached to it. Just now."

"Boss - I have the same email," murmured Carlos.

Alia glanced at her monitor and saw that she had also received the same email. They all had received it. Sonia rushed into the room and then stopped abruptly at the door as she saw Santosh's face on the screen. She mutely nodded at Alia confirming that she had also received the email.

Alia waved at Tozi to continue playing the video.

Slowly, the camera zoomed out and they could see all of Santosh, trussed up with zip ties and sitting on a low chair. Subconsciously, all of them noted that there were absolutely no clues in the view. No marks or objects on the wall behind Santosh or anything lying around him at all. Just a blank wall of some grey-ish hue. The chair appeared to be a typical 3-D printed one. No distinguishing features at all. The picture steadied as the person holding the camera seemed to have attached it to some stand. The angle went a bit askew and then it was straightened up.

Then a black shadow spread across the screen as a person walked from behind the camera toward Santosh. Carlos was the only one who flinched reflexively but everyone had noticed the small knife glinting wickedly in the right hand of the killer. Nadia's hand went to her mouth as she realized what the video was about.

The black shadow resolved into a person towering over Santosh. The killer was dressed in a flowing black robe and the face was covered in a balaclava mask. Only the eyes and the mouth were visible. But the killer's figure was ever-so-slightly blurred to ensure that nothing was clearly articulated. The killer must have processed the video before sending it to ensure that he would not be recognized.

The sound of static filled the incident room. It seemed that the audio portion had also been passed through a distortion filter and then substituted for the original audio. A guttural sound issued as the killer cleared their throat and looked straight at them through the camera. The eyes of the killer were filled with anger. But then there was also some sort of excitement or maybe exhilaration as the killer had achieved his purpose. Despite the loose robe, it did seem like it was a man.

"For too long the non-believers have killed devout Muslim men for no reason. We shall no longer allow that to happen. We shall avenge the death of our brothers by killing non-believers. Glory to God!" the distorted machine-like voice intoned.

Then the killer raised the knife and in one smooth motion slit Santosh's throat. For a moment, Santosh's eyes stared in disbelief at what had happened to him. Then realization set in and incredibly, his eyes crinkled at the corners as if he was shyly smiling one last time. The blood had started gushing down his chest and the light went out of his eyes. The eyelids drooped and then his head leaned over slowly as the last breath left his body.

"You have been warned! If you don't treat us with respect, then next time the punishment would be far greater. This is a mere taste of what is in store for you if you don't comply!"

Abruptly, the video ended and desolation settled down on the incident room. The sound of people starting to breathe again reminded Alia that she too needed to breathe or else she would faint. There were very few people living in Sequoia that had not seen if not experienced horrific violence during their lives before they had come to live in Sequoia. Their childhoods had been littered with thoughtless violence of varying degrees. Sudden deaths were the norm. They had numbed themselves to those tragedies as they attempted to survive from one day to the next. In fact, this was the most fundamental survival mechanism that humans are born with - the ability to make oneself numb and forget in order to focus on the challenge in front or the one that is peeking from behind it next in line. But all this experience drawn from childhood was no match for the flood of emotions they were all experiencing that morning.

The last five years had changed the norms utterly. Sequoia was a truly safe place where violence was rare if it happened at all. Even verbal violence was rare. They knew that being kind to each other was the only path to healing both individually and collectively. They had forgotten that violence still existed because of those five years and how much it could hurt if it was allowed to enter their lives again. Now, with a terrifying decisiveness, violence had arrived in Sequoia. However much they had thought that they had left it far behind in their past, it had somehow managed to breach the defenses that Sequoia had put up and was forcing each of its citizens to confront it.

Alia had suffered through the tribal warfare in Iran as the Shias and Sunnis had fought each other. Similar tribal spirits seemed to have infected Sequoia. From two unfortunate and possibly unconnected murders, the situation had morphed into a war between the so-called believers and non-believers. What were they going to do now?

Chapter Thirteen

A few days went by as the team interviewed pretty much all of the people that Nadeem had come in contact with. At work, Vidya indeed appeared to be the one who had talked the most with Nadeem, both professionally and personally. Alia had made Carlos bring her in for another interview, far more detailed, at the HQ. She was a bit daunted because it was at the police HQ and in one of those scary looking interview rooms - mirrored glass, glaring overhead light, simple table with hooks for handcuffs, and uncomfortable chairs. Despite this set up, Carlos was a lot more successful at putting her to ease this time around. No fainting spells. But, also no new insights from her.

Tozi had largely struck out with her database mining. The Interpol had given her restricted access to their database and she hadn't found anything relevant to the case. The Sudanese police were dragging their feet. Not because of any particular reason, just that this was a really low priority for them. Also, no one was really going to hold their feet to the fire, anyway. They had, vaguely, tried to finagle some funding from Interpol in return for cooperation. But the Interpol had conveniently acted as if they didn't get the hints. Tozi thought, briefly, of just hacking into the Sudanese databases. Then decided against it because the Sudanese servers seemed to be more offline than online because of power-cuts apart from all sorts of hardware and software problems. Her time was far too valuable for that.

Nadia had far more luck in finding a few leads from their other interviews. She had been exploring all other potential contacts. Nadeem was not a crazily social person like Nadia. But he did frequent some places for food and drinks. His preferred places were those that had live music. She had finished visiting the places that Nadeem seemed to have visited during the day-time and she was just getting started on the ones that Nadeem went to in the evenings.

In one of the interviews, she had gleaned that Nadeem had mentioned a bar called L&S. When she was updating the team about it, Alia decided that she would join Nadia for checking it out. Sonia had been reminding Alia that part of her job was to observe her team in the field and if needed, mentor them. Unlike Carlos, Alia had found Nadia to be quite good at interviews with people. So she had not prioritized tagging along with Nadia during the ongoing investigation. But this seemed like a good lead and Alia figured it was time to go hang out with Nadia and see how she was doing.

Nadia was an Arab woman - flashing dark eyes, fair but weather-beaten complexion, lustrous hair, and medium height. Her hair was streaked with purple and blue shades all throughout. She was the youngest in their team and also the most mischievous of all. At times, Sonia thought of her as a child and scolded her for all the pranks she pulled

on various unsuspecting members of the team. But beneath all that vivacious and outgoing demeanor was hidden a very keen mind that absorbed all that came her way like a sponge.

She had grown up in a house filled with brothers who at times - probably, most of the time - forgot that she was a girl and treated her just like a boy. Because of which she had become an excellent marksman and the most agile member of the team. Of course, as police, everyone had to undergo weapons training which Nadia aced right away and ended up becoming an instructor.

Most important of all, Nadia was the only member of the team who had a thriving social life, both in the real and the virtual world. Alia always wondered how Nadia found the time to do all the things that she did. In terms of access, it wasn't that hard to have a social life in Sequoia. Rather, the hard thing was to avoid a social life. Every residential building had a courtyard. These courtyards were communal spaces. During the long, dark, and cold winters the ceilings of these courtyards would be closed up. That is when they would become de facto common living rooms that served as the main places for socializing without having to leave the warmth of the building. For a social butterfly like Nadia, those were the best days as she could flit from one party to another all night, practically, every day.

In the police department, there was seldom any reason to call upon Nadia's physical skills. She usually got tagged to pick up the slack in whichever task that was short on staff. For the two murders, she was asked to focus on the social presence of the two victims and canvassing the neighborhoods in which the crime had occurred or where the victims lived and worked. Those social skills came in extremely handy for those tasks.

Both Alia and Nadia went home to change before they met up at L&S. Nadia was wearing a dress with a lot of glitter. When she walked or moved, it felt like she was floating a few inches above the ground. Alia, mentally, shrugged at the fashion choices that Nadia made. Also, those that Tozi made. Although, Tozi's were more about the makeup and accessories. Alia, herself, was dressed up in a relatively sober manner. Relative to Nadia, that is. By Alia's standards, she was flamboyant. She kept blushing all the time when she was dressing and Maria kept making inappropriate comments. Well, maybe not inappropriate, but definitely untimely. Alia was on the clock. It was not as if she could go late. Or could she?

Alia nodded at Nadia when they met at the door and they both headed in. L&S stood for Lily and Severus, from the Harry Potter universe. "Now that's interesting," thought Alia. She remembered that Lily was Harry's mom who had married Harry's dad, James Potter, while Severus Snape, Harry's teacher, had pined for Lily all his life.

They went up to the bar and sure enough, there was a guy dressed up like Snape with the long dark greasy hair and the black flowing robe. He was trying to glare like Snape did, but his eyes were way too humorous and twinkling for him to pull that off. On top of that, he had no sign of pasty white skin. He was brown and had lots of freckles. It just made him look funny instead of threatening. He winked at them while he finished serving a couple of other customers.

"Aren't you that crazy gal from the Solstice party? Or was it the Equinox one?" he exclaimed when he recognized Nadia.

Of course he knew her, Alia thought. Sometimes she wondered if there was anyone left in Sequoia who hadn't run into Nadia. And not remembered her. Nadia was not a celebrity. People knew her because they met her and she made such an impression on them, that they didn't easily forget her. Nadia gave the bartender a broad smile and with mock humility, said, "Solstice it was!"

"I kinda felt that I had been here before, but couldn't place it. Must be all those lovely drinks that you made for me that made me forget everything from that night!" she said while winking at him.

"Yeah right! You can hold your drinks, girl. The way you sashayed around the room, you were a total hit. I wish we could have you come around here all the time. So many customers remembered you and later asked about you!"

It was as if Alia was part of the furniture. The bartender and Nadia started chattering away at breakneck speed. Alia didn't mind that at all. It gave her an opportunity to carefully scan the place. Sure enough, she spotted the supposed Lily Potter, the other bartender. No way were her eyes naturally that green! Her eye makeup was done in such a way as to make her eyes look almond-shaped. It kinda sorta worked. But not really. She was clearly east Asian. Her eyes were simply too narrow to pull that illusion off. She was wearing a midnight blue robe with stars and moons on it. She was also wearing a wizard's peaked hat. She was busy making a large order of drinks and had not noticed Alia checking her out. Strictly professionally, that is.

Alia looked around the bar. It was not yet packed. But it seemed to be humming with a certain infectious energy. In the far corner, one guy wearing a shabby robe and round glasses actually appeared to be teaching a dozen or so customers. Alia had read the Potter novels after she came to Sequoia and had enjoyed them. She had watched the movies, too. Plus the TV adaption that came out recently. The movies were okay. A bit rushed, she felt. The TV show was much better, in her opinion. That had more magic in it than the movies. She had loved that. The TV show also had more space for the other characters in the story.

There were some beakers and flasks filled with colorful liquids that the "teacher" was using. The customers were all imbibing their drinks while trying their best to listen to their "teacher." The other tables seemed to have menus that customers seemed to be intently reading. Strange for a bar.

Suddenly, it dawned on Alia - why that particular name for the bar. Both Lily Potter and Severus Snape were excellent at the subject of Potions. In fact, Snape had been Harry's Potions master for several years and that "teacher" was probably Professor Slughorn who had taught both Lily and Snape when they were students at Hogwarts. This bar's theme was "Potions". Nice one!

She was in awe of the creativity of her fellow Sequoians. They came up with such fantastic and innovative ideas. She was dating one such artist - Maria. And worked with another - Tozi. She turned back to Nadia and Snape. She cleared her throat and gently nudged Nadia's elbow. Time to get to work! Nadia didn't show any sign of registering the two gestures, but she smoothly started her transition to interviewing Snape. Good!

"Hey, you know, I have been trying to find this guy I ran into a few months ago. I am hoping it was here at that Solstice party. He was a flautist and I remember chatting with him. Then another friend of mine was asking me the other day that she needed someone to play the flute in her new band. So... I thought about this guy...", Nadia trailed off. That "trailing off" trick usually worked quite well. Most people just couldn't help themselves from completing a sentence that was left hanging. Snape was no exception, he immediately obliged.

"I think you are referring to that guy who was murdered last week. Aren't you?"

"He died?" Nadia feigned surprise at this news. But she also was aware that she shouldn't push it too much. After all, practically everyone knew about the two deaths in Sequoia. Snape stared at her with twinkling eyes.

"Ohh... right... you know what? I do think it was him. Maybe that is why I thought about him. I must have seen his photo and something clicked somewhere. Sheesh... too bad he is dead!" Nadia sounded reasonably crestfallen.

Snape wasn't buying all this. He kept quiet for a beat. Then he looked at both Alia and Nadia, and said conspiratorially, "I know you guys are cops and are here asking about Nadeem!"

Neither of them showed their surprise which they, of course, were. Snape mischievously smiled.

“Now that was a good bit of magic, wasn’t it? I put the Legilimens spell on you and now I know everything in your mind!”

They both laughed out loud and he joined in with them.

“I used to be a cop and my dad was a cop and my uncle was a cop... I know cops. I tagged you the moment you walked in.”

“So why didn’t you volunteer to be a cop here?” Alia asked.

“Naah... I was done with that life. Like really really done. I wanted to do something totally different. I tried a whole bunch of things when I came. But nothing clicked.

Then one day, I was in an intro chemistry class and Lily was my partner in the lab. We discovered our common passion for the world of Harry Potter. Then we discovered that we liked all kinds of booze. Of course, a bar based on the Potions theme was the perfect fit for us. We actually started paying attention in the chemistry class after that. Later, we took every mixology course that we could find.”

He sighed as he looked at Lily.

“I was so smitten by him.” He smiled fondly.

When he saw the confused looks on their faces, he added, “Lily used to be Huy and he was so beautiful that I couldn’t keep my hands off him. Alas, he wanted to be a she, and just like in those novels, my love was gonna be unrequited. Hence, the name for the bar.

Of course, we are the bestest of friends. But still... I miss him... like... a lot!”

He made a face. Lily must have caught sight of it and she bustled over.

“Did he just tell you his sad love story?” she asked them.

She ruffled his greasy hair and gave his shoulders a quick squeeze.

Then she looked at them questioningly.

“Did he forget to make you a drink?”

“Ohh... no... he did ask.

Actually, we are cops and here on duty.

We heard that Nadeem used to hang out here at times and we were just asking him about it.”

Lily frowned at that.

“Yeah... he came here a few times.”

“Do you mind answering a few questions?” Nadia assumed control of the interview. She had switched over seamlessly from a party girl to all business in a flash. Alia was quite proud of her.

“When did you last see him?”

“A few days ago. Maybe... a week?” Lily looked at Snape and he nodded.

“Do you have an exact date? Thursday? Friday? Wednesday?” Nadia probed.

“I think it was Thursday.”

Both Nadia and Alia held their breath. Were they in luck? Was Nadeem here the same day he was killed? That would be a fantastic break!

“Are you sure about that?”

Snape chimed in, “yes - it was last Thursday. That’s the day our Dumbledore had unexpectedly taken the day off.”

“Umm... what?” Alia exclaimed.

“I mean... we have a Slughorn and a Dumbledore who run mock classes on mixology Tuesdays-Thursdays-Saturdays.

This guy - Nadeem - he was kinda keen on the Dumbledore. Always trying to chat him up,” Snape explained.

“Nadeem had come in looking quite excited about something. Said he couldn’t wait to tell it to Dumbledore. But our Dumbledore had an upset stomach. Wrong potion, apparently.

Or maybe too much potion, more likely!” Lily said, sarcastically.

“Nadeem was quite disappointed,” she added seriously.

“What happened next?” Nadia asked.

“It was a busy night for us. So it is all a bit jumbled up. I think, he did stick around for a bit at the bar. I made a drink for him - on the house - I kinda felt sorry for him.”

“Did he leave after that drink? Talk with someone? Can you remember anything else?”

“Not really. I remember making that drink for him and kinda nudging him to get going after that. We don’t need sad puppies in here dampening the vibe... if you know what I mean,” Snape said with a knowing look.

“Me neither. I was running the other class in place of Dumbledore. So - I wasn’t behind the bar that night. I did see him sitting there. That’s all.”

Nadia and Alia looked at each other. At least, they now had one of the last places Nadeem visited that night. But still not much to go on with. Nadia pursed her lips.

Seeing their disappointment, Lily said, “why don’t you ask the people around here?”

“These folks are regulars. They were probably here that Thursday, too. Do you want me to announce?”

Nadia vigorously nodded.

“Potions students!” Lily shouted at the top of her voice. The buzz got subdued as everyone turned toward her.

“Looks like last Thursday that guy who died recently had been here. Did any of you see him?”

Like... talking with someone?

If you know something then please come up here and help these two detectives.”

Lots of exclamations got tossed around but no one made a move toward the bar. Then a small group of people came over and said that they had seen Nadeem sit at the bar.

“Did you see anything else? Maybe... anyone talk with him?” Nadia keenly looked at them. They seemed a bit too high, to her. To be of use, that is. But no harm in asking, she felt.

One of them said, “I am not sure if he knew the lady sitting next to him. But I saw them talking.”

Maybe they were getting somewhere, Alia fervently hoped. Hell, this might even be the killer.

“Can you describe this lady? Did you hear any of what they were talking about?” Nadia asked.

“No - I was at the other side of the room. I was at the Slughorn table. I just saw them.”

“How about a description of the lady?”

“She was tall. Or more like big. She was bigger than you,” the woman said pointing to Alia who was definitely on the larger side when it came to women.

“Okay. What was she wearing? How did she look like? Anything that can help us identify her?”

“She was dark. Black. Yeah... she was black. She had the light behind her... so I couldn’t really make out her features. But she was black. I am sure of that. She was wearing some loose clothes. I didn’t pay attention to that.”

“A big black lady, then?” Nadia tried to get confirmation.

“Yeah. Definitely.”

“Okay.”

She looked around to see if anyone else had any more information. But no one else

came forward.

She and Alia thanked the bartenders and left. They had a vague but still a description of a potential suspect.

Outside, they noticed a few folks smoking at the corner. They wandered over there and Nadia bummed a smoke from one of them. She lit up and casually asked, “were any of you here last Thursday, by any chance?”

The smokers gave them a cool appraising look and a couple of them nodded, “yes. We were here that day.”

“See anything unusual that night?”

“Unusual? Not really. L&S customers are quite high when they step out... so we always see a few stumbling around before they find their way. Nothing different last week, either.”

Out of curiosity, Alia asked, “does anyone fall down? Like too drunk to walk?”

Lots of chuckles and a few affirmatives erupted from the group.

“Of course. What do you expect?”

“Who helps those drunks then?”

“Well - we do. I mean, unless someone else comes along to take them away.”

“See anything like that, last Thursday?” Alia warily asked.

“Yeah... I think we saw a guy who could barely stand up. He staggered out and was almost about to fall when his partner, this big woman came out and slipped her hand around his shoulder to support him.”

“Really? What happened next?” both Alia’s and Nadia’s hearts were beating fast now.

“We were about to go help him, but she waved us off. So we got back to our smokes.”

“What did she look like? Did you see her face?”

“Yeah... she was black. Like... really dark. There isn't much light here in the shadows... so... I don't know about her face. Anyways... what difference does it make. Why do you care?”

“Oh... nothing... just curious. That's all,” Nadia said nonchalantly blowing off smoke rings. She flicked some ash away and looked in the distance.

“Did you see where that woman took that drunk?”

“Naah... they went around that corner. Didn't see them after that. I was watching just to make sure that they both didn't fall down.”

“Hmm... too bad. It would have been great to have know where they went,” Nadia said wistfully blowing out another smoke ring.

Someone else chimed up, “I heard a van's whine soon after they turned the corner. They could have gone in it.”

Bingo! That must be the killer. Both Alia and Nadia looked at each other in the same instant. They had indeed caught a break. About time, thought Alia.

Chapter Fourteen

Sara had been hiding as much as possible over the last few days. She went out only for her classes and work. Even then, she had taken to wearing a hoodie and masculine clothes. Anything that would cover up her complexion and the fact that she was a woman. Someone at L&S had overheard the back-and-forth that Alia and Nadia had with the smokers outside the bar. Then that person had promptly mentioned it online and it had become public information.

With a sickening feeling, Sara had read that the cops were looking for a large black woman. There were tens of thousands of black women in Sequoia and many were large, whatever that meant to the cops. It had indeed been her who had sat next to Nadeem at L&S that evening. She couldn't have avoided it. She had to drug his drink so that she could stuff him in her van. She thought that she had been unobtrusive. But alas, she had been seen and even if the description was vague, it did match her. She had no idea if the cops had discovered any additional information about her. As far as she could tell, there was nothing else that connected her to Nadeem. Still, it was better to stay out of sight. No point in attracting any attention, if she could help it. What she couldn't help was, was having regular panic attacks.

That is why, she could not believe her luck when she saw the news about the terrorist attack in Vatican City. Of course, she agonized over the deaths of the innocent tourists since that was a direct consequence of her actions. Then she heard about the retaliatory massacres in Washington DC and New Delhi which made her feel even more guilty. When the explosive video of Santosh's murder swept through Sequoia, she found herself in a very dark place indeed. Her nightmares were entirely composed of different forms of punishments that she was being subjected to.

The second emotion, initially a mere spark somewhere at the back of her mind, was that of relief. Slowly but surely, that spark grew stronger and forced itself from the back of her mind to the front. She not only became fully aware of it, she started nourishing it. A sense of exultation spread across her entire body as she told herself that if the two murders were being considered to be linked and it was turning into a conventional tribal confrontation, then she was going to be safe.

She had, of course, no idea who Qasim was and she definitely did not know who had killed him and why. She started convincing herself that the rapid global escalation of events would diminish the importance of solving the murders. All the attention would switch over to preventing the escalation from affecting Sequoia. It was quite curious how her initial compassionate impulse - the pity she felt for the world-wide victims and Santosh - was surprisingly quickly replaced by an almost entirely self-centered interest in preserving herself whatever the cost.

In her mind, regardless of the fact that her actions had resulted in deaths of many innocents, Nadeem deserved to die. He was the leader of the band of thugs who had laid waste entire villages in Darfur. He had to be punished, swiftly and decisively. She had delivered justice because others had failed to do so. No doubt, she thought, Nadeem had powerful friends who had helped him to leave Darfur, unpunished.

She even told herself that he was sent to Sequoia for causing the same kind of harm that he had done in Darfur. By killing him, she had simply made sure that he wouldn't be able to damage Sequoia. But a small voice in her head would firmly insist that the damage to Sequoia had been done after all. Santosh had died an untimely death. The damage was also spreading across the world.

Sequoia had also caught the fever that had spread around the world like a plague. People had started looking at each other with suspicion. Seemingly overnight, overt displays of anger had materialized out of nowhere. Minor confrontations between the generally phlegmatic citizens of Sequoia had started mushrooming into full-blown fights, fortunately, often verbal and seldom physical. The powerful muscle memory of normalized violence that resided in each and every citizen of Sequoia had been brought forth, at last.

Everyone, as if ordered by someone, had started segregating themselves in their tribes. As if whatever unique and beautiful identity that they had painstakingly cultivated for themselves over the past five years had been wiped off by a dirty rag to reveal the ugliness within. Were their new selves so superficial that they could be discarded so easily? Or had they never really let go of their former selves, the ones they had been born with?

All Sara knew at the moment was that she did not want to be caught and forced to leave Sequoia. She did not care about the other consequences of her actions. She had run into Shahid while she had been stalking Nadeem. She had struck up a conversation with him while she had waited for Nadeem to show up on one of the days. Once she had sussed out Shahid's overall personality - a bit dim and paranoid while also being shy when it came to talking with girls - she had decided to play the part of a demure and devout Muslim girl. She had used him to know as much about Nadeem's social life and his routine as possible. Even though she had loomed over Shahid, the impression that she had conveyed was that of a shy Muslim girl who was diffidently asking him for tips about running a cafe. Shahid had opened up quite easily and had, in fact, become quite talkative. In his expansive monologues, he had never noticed how he had been frequently nudged to talk about his neighbors, especially, Nadeem.

Sara took to stalking the online forums in the aftermath of Santosh's murder and she soon noticed that Shahid had become quite a vocal defender of Santosh's murderer. She hadn't been able to bring herself to view Santosh's video in its entirety even once, but she had caught some snippets of it. A couple of times, she felt that there was a hint

of Shahid in Santosh's murderer. The voice had been distorted but the words were just as stilted as she remembered Shahid's had been. The murderer had also seemed to be stocky and short despite the free-flowing robe. She couldn't imagine that shy barista having the guts to abduct a cop and then kill that cop in a gruesome way on video. But what did she know of people anyway? On the face of it, even Nadeem's appearance had not exactly advertised that he used to be the leader of a gang of killers. Nadeem had looked like a sad and lonely guy, quite harmless.

The sudden spate of extreme violence around the world including that in Sequoia had somewhat dampened the ardor of most folks for more violence. No one in Sequoia really wanted to see things get completely out of hand and lead to more violence. They all had everything at stake in Sequoia. No one wanted to ever leave Sequoia and go back to whatever hell they had all come from. Tensions simmered and got vented verbally, but outright violence was still in check.

All of this was happening, voluntarily. It was not as if the Sequoia police force had to be deployed to manage the situation. And that was not good for Sara. If the Sequoia police were not out in the streets maintaining the peace, then they were trying to solve the murders. She had looked up the lead investigator's record. Alia had no experience when it came to solving murders but her record at solving other crimes was topnotch. This was one smart cop who was no doubt spending all her time figuring out who Nadeem's murderer was.

Sara needed to change this situation as quickly as possible and she was trying to decide whether Shahid could be used to distract the cops. What had to happen was some good old-fashioned rioting on the streets to get all the cops to leave behind the murder investigation and do some fire-fighting, metaphorical as well as real.

It was not difficult to manufacture a scenario to trigger Shahid into taking some extravagant action. The tricky part was ensuring that there was a critical mass of people around him who would in turn fan the flames into a substantive altercation. Ideally, it would be good to have that altercation evolve into a full blown riot. But she would be okay if it was just an altercation involving a crowd and not just one that was between two individuals.

Sara found that opportunity almost immediately after she had decided on her plan of action. Early in the day, she was picking up an order in one of the warehouse districts of Sequoia. As usual, the warehouse district was most crowded at that time of the day because everyone was stocking up. Shahid happened to be negotiating for bulk coffee at the warehouse next to the one Sara was loading up at.

She heard his voice clearly and recognized him without having to look at him. He was agitated because the warehouse didn't have sufficient stock of the particular brand of

coffee that he wanted to purchase. Shahid had started dressing in all black clothes including a black turban in the last few days. The guy he was talking to seemed to be a Caucasian guy who was wearing a conspicuously large cross on a chain hanging around his neck. There was even a cross with Jesus stuck on the wall behind the counter. Overt displays of religiosity had substantially ticked up since the death of Santosh.

Shahid shouted, "you imperialist infidels are always trying to shortchange us Muslims. Why can't you sell the stock that you have to me?"

The seller glared at Shahid and made a brief gesture to one of his colleagues. Just in case Shahid decided to go beyond shouting, the seller wanted to make sure that he had backup.

Shahid continued his rant, "you are all the same. For centuries you have looted us. We have slaved for you. It is never enough for you. Even here in Sequoia, you are oppressing us. GIVE THAT STOCK TO ME!"

Sara quickly dumped her load into the van, locked it up, and wandered over to Shahid's side. She plastered a bewildered look on her face. She had also wrapped a scarf around her head in a typical Muslim manner.

She stuttered, "what happened, brother Shahid? What seems to be the problem?"

Shahid looked crossly at her and then seemed to recognize her. He also noticed the scarf and his face softened into a smile. She was one of HIS people.

The seller gave her a withering look and turned back to Shahid, "Sir - that stock has been reserved for another customer who will be here later today to pick it up. I don't have any deliveries coming in until the next week. If you want, you can order for next week."

"Who is this special customer? Must be one of your kind," Shahid glanced disdainfully at the cross on the wall.

"Sir, please could you consider brother Shahid's request and maybe inform your other customer to wait until next week?" Sara stepped forward and reached out to touch the seller's arm. Instinctively, the seller shrugged his arm as if to free himself. The tensions were running high all the time and the seller was in no mood of getting double-teamed by these Muslims.

Sara was no light-weight. But she used that shrug of the seller to somehow engineer a

stumble and a loud scream as if the seller had violently pushed her to the ground. She stumbled backward and fell down in a dramatic manner. She would have put to shame any professional footballer who routinely and theatrically fell down without ever being touched by the opposition players, all in an effort to eke out a penalty kick.

Shahid was stunned. Violence was still not instinctive for him. Sara was going to have egg him on some more. She whimpered pathetically as if her wrist had been broken. That seemed to do the trick. Instead of helping her, Shahid launched himself at the seller. He had to protect his people - a Muslim woman at that - from these infidels. He was short and the slap that he aimed at the seller from across the counter barely scraped the guy's face. But that was enough for the seller to retaliate with a punch of his own to Shahid's jaw.

"Good," Sara thought. Now it was time to pull in some reinforcements. She flailed around shouting at bystanders, "they are attacking us. Just like they had attacked Qasim and Nadeem. HELP! Please save us."

At least a dozen people, all presumably Muslim, immediately started running toward Shahid and her. At the same time, the seller's colleagues closed ranks around him.

"Time to fan this small flame into an inferno," thought Sara. She jabbed a finger fearfully and also angrily at the seller, "he threw me to the ground and then punched Shahid. We had done nothing to him. Brother Shahid was only demanding his right as a customer. It was only fair. But they will never treat us as their equals. They will always look down upon us and treat us like dirt. They have done that for hundreds of years. They will never stop!"

That was that. The two sides, all men, closed in on each other and a regular fist-fight erupted. Sara was pleased with the outcome. For a brief moment, she thought, maybe she should have gone for a career in acting. She was a natural. She swung a couple of good punches in. Then she conveniently stepped back and called the cops. There already had been a couple of calls made about the fight and the cops were getting into gear. They told her to step away as far as possible from the melee. For good measure, Sara threw in a couple of hearty sobs in the call and then hung up.

By then quite a few folks had joined in and the air was thick with all kinds of things flying around. This being the warehouse district, quite a few of them were heavy boxes. No one seemed to be holding back in throwing them at whoever caught their eye. Sara noticed a few scrapes and bruises but no blood in sight, yet. She fully expected that to change as the volume and frequency of the shouts kept going up. There it was - someone had finally drawn some blood. It was one of the seller's colleagues whose nose had been broken and copious amounts of blood was streaming down his face and shirt.

That inflamed the fighters further. Someone had lit a box on fire and threw it inside the warehouse where the flames quickly grew. There was a lot of combustible material stored there. The sprinklers instantly turned on but the fire appeared to be winning the initial round. A bit of lull dawned on the crowd as everyone looked at the fire and the sprinklers raining down water on it. In that quiet moment, the sound of the sirens crept up surreptitiously at first and then was suddenly upon them and no one could hear each other talk at all. Some of the fighters half-heartedly tried to throw a few more punches at their opponents but the fire and wailing sirens had taken the wind out of most of them. The cop vans screeched in, followed closely by a fire engine and an ambulance.

Sonia and Alia led a dozen police officers into the middle of the riot as the fire-fighters rushed into the warehouse to squelch the already fading flames. The severely hurt people were taken to the ambulance and then the police lined up all the rioters by the wall. Sara slipped away from the scene unobserved or at least that's what she thought. But Alia had noticed her. Alia felt that she had seen that big black woman a few times in recent days but couldn't place her. In any case, she was distracted by the task at hand.

The rioters were to be arrested and taken to the jail until the powers-to-be decided what was to be done with them. Luckily, no one had died. There were lots of cuts and bruises but nothing that would require hospitalization. As she was scanning the long line of rioters, at least four dozen in all, she saw Shahid. She hadn't recognized him earlier because the left side of his face was red and rapidly turning into purple. "Was that a coincidence?" Alia wondered. Finally, the boiling point had been reached in Sequoia. The pressure on her to solve the murders had just gone up by a few more notches.

Chapter Fifteen

Sonia was surprised to get the call from Kaija. Although it was symbolic in nature, Kaija was the designated mayor of Sequoia. Also, Kaija was the sole non-refugee resident of Sequoia. In fact, Kaija was Norwegian-born and -bred.

Kaija hardly spoke in the City Council meetings. But the few times that Kaija did speak, she had caught Sonia's attention. She was not completely sure about who Kaija was except for one thing - it seemed that Kaija had been a key person in the creation of Sequoia. Because of that one reason, Sonia was eternally grateful to her. She had never expressed her gratitude to Kaija, but she felt it strongly whenever she dwelt on that fateful day when her life had taken a turn for the amazing - the day when she found out that she was leaving Bangladesh for good.

Apart from the gratitude, Sonia genuinely respected Kaija. In her opinion, Kaija was an innately kind and generous person. A considerate person who thought carefully before she uttered a single word. A democratic person who carefully listened to all and treated everyone respectfully. Without exception! This was no act, Sonia had observed.

Kaija was part of that community of good white people that she had come to grudgingly respect. Sonia hadn't liked white people, in general, before she came to Sequoia. Her experience with white people in Bangladesh was based on the white tourists she had interacted with during the couple of years she had served in Dhaka, the capital of the nation. In her view, they were voyeurs at best and obnoxious racists at worst. They came to ogle at the poverty and exotic aspects of Bengali society. They shot videos and left. They tended to treat most of the Bengalis with contempt and suspicion. She had learned enough of English language in high school to be able to eavesdrop on the conversations the white tourists had among themselves. Most of the time, it was not nice.

Then she had to deal with them - as a junior sub-inspector in her police station - when they came in to file complaints about theft. That is when the racism dripped not just from their mouths but emanated from their entire bodies. The way they wouldn't even sit down when a chair was offered to them. As if the chair was too filthy or disease-ridden and they couldn't wait to get out of the police-station. She had met some good white people, the ones who came to her country and stayed. The ones who lived and worked with her people. The ones who never complained. The ones who treated her and her people as, well, people should be treated anywhere in the world. But these good ones were a tiny minority.

Sonia had been so strongly prejudiced against white people that she had almost not applied to Sequoia. Somehow sanity had prevailed and she had sent in her application

just before the deadline was up. She had forgotten all about it until the day she received the official letter at her police-station. She hadn't known what to think of it and for several days didn't even tell anyone that she had been selected. Gradually though, it had become clear to her that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for her to escape the misogyny she had faced all her life.

She had always been an excellent cop and she had been fully aware of that. Even better, she had also been a natural leader. If she had been a man, she would have been on the fast-track to success right from the beginning of her career. Alas, she was a woman and every single man, irrespective of his rank, had hated the fact that she was so obviously better than them in every aspect of their jobs. So she had gotten shunned and then eventually, dumped in a village where she had been destined to live the rest of her life in anonymity. The silver lining - if one could say that - to her situation had been that the village got designated as uninhabitable in the process for selecting new residents for Sequoia.

She was unambiguously happy to be in Sequoia. Her extraordinary skills and experience had been so obvious to the UN team responsible for setting up the law-and-order system that she had immediately been appointed as the Police Chief in Sequoia.

Sonia had never really been sure of why Kaija had chosen to permanently leave Oslo and her family in order to move to Sequoia. That was an absolutely baffling decision in Sonia's view. As a city, Oslo, was as good a city that ever existed in human history. Who would want to leave it? Anyway, someday she would find the right moment to ask Kaija about it.

Until that evening, Kaija had never invited Sonia to her home. They had never really hung out in a social setting. It had mostly been a professional but caring relationship. Sonia knew that Kaija had been scheduled to speak at the General Assembly of the UN as the representative of Sequoia. Sonia had briefed Kaija and the rest of the City Council the day before. What could Kaija want to discuss this late in the day and at her home?

Kaija's building appeared to have missed the attention of most mural artists for some reason. There was minimal artwork. For once, the building looked like an old-fashioned apartment building and nothing more than that. Sonia took the elevator to the top floor and rang the bell to Kaija's apartment. A moment later, the door opened and Kaija warmly welcomed her.

The apartment was done up in a very unusual way. It was the same size and general layout as most other flats in Sequoia. But the interior seemed to have almost a primitive feel to it. Like a log cabin out in the wilderness. Seeing modern appliances within the

space felt odd. It felt as if Kaija had tried to recreate something from memory. Quite a few pieces were extremely old and suggested a distinct culture that Sonia was ignorant about.

She had always, in a generic sort of way, assumed that the primary history of Nordic countries consisted of Vikings. Basically, the gorgeous Thor. As a young girl, she had watched the Thor movies and ogled at the guy playing Thor. She didn't much remember the movies themselves. Maybe they had not even been about Thor. Her eyes, though, had been fixed on him whenever he was on screen and yearning to see him when he was not. The decor in Kaija's home had nothing in common with all that Viking stuff Sonia had seen in those movies. There were pictures of reindeers roaming the Arctic landscape sprinkled around the living room.

Kaija was keenly watching Sonia take in her apartment. She felt a sense of comfort when she saw that Sonia had not judged her home but simply observed it with interest and curiosity. She liked Sonia, too. The evening, though, was not meant to be a social occasion. She sat down at the chair behind her desk. There was another chair set up next to hers and she invited Sonia to sit next to her.

"Thanks for coming over to my home. We are going to be doing a video call together. I was explicitly asked to include you in it and that we should call from a secure location where no one could overhear our conversation."

Sonia sat down and raised one of her eyebrows at the same time. This was strange. She had assumed that Kaija wanted to talk confidentially about the murder investigation and the riot and maybe the general law-and-order situation in Sequoia. The last thing she had expected was a video call with someone. Clearly, with someone who was outside Sequoia. Who could that be? She nodded her head and waited for Kaija to elaborate. Instead Kaija clicked on a link that dialed someone. Instantly, the screen filled up with the faces of two women sitting next to each other.

The woman with blonde hair and blue eyes spoke. She seemed to be about the same age as both Sonia and Kaija, in her mid to late thirties. She was wearing a formal beige shirt and had tied her shoulder-length hair in a sensible pony-tail.

"My name is Rachel and this is Camille," she said leaning her head toward the woman sitting next to her. Camille seemed to be a bit younger, maybe late twenties. She had dark red wavy hair and gray eyes. She was wearing one of those leather jackets that was severely weathered just like the face of its owner. While both Rachel and Camille were white, the latter seemed to be spending most of her time outdoors and the former indoors.

"Thanks for taking this call," continued Rachel. Then she smiled. A lovely warm smile

that reached her eyes and the blue in them lit up like the summer sky at noon.

“Kaija, we met once, a long time ago. I am not sure you remember me,” she said. Then looked at Sonia and added, “you must be Sonia. Glad to meet you!”

Rachel’s warmth was so infectious that without realizing it both Kaija and Sonia smiled back at her. Their shoulders had been hunched when they had started the video call. That is when Kaija recognized Rachel. The kindness in her expression was what reminded her of that moment several years ago when she had visited the land that would soon become Sequoia. Kaija had been there to say one last goodbye to her best friend buried there. Kaija had been sitting next to the grave and lovingly smoothing the turf overgrown with wildflowers. She hadn’t realized that her eyes had welled up as she sat there until a woman wearing the UN hard-hat had kneeled down next to her and patted her back kindly. That woman was Rachel. Kaija had never seen her again or heard from her until today. It was so strange to be reminded of that part of her life. She nodded in recognition and Rachel’s smile broadened some more.

“Let’s get the introductions out of the way and then we can talk.

By the way, we are calling from New York city.

I am with the US delegation stationed at the UN. I serve as the deputy ambassador. In my own way, I helped with the creation of Sequoia.

Camille also played a crucial role in the creation of Sequoia. She - well, let’s just say that she is part of a global network of folks that are trying to end carbon dioxide emissions as quickly as possible.”

Rachel turned and winked at Camille, “did I get that right?”

“It is accurate and of course, we are not going to get into the details of our methods,” replied Camille solemnly.

“Kaija is, I guess, the person most responsible for the creation of Sequoia.”

Camille nodded her head vigorously and looked with frank admiration at Kaija.

Kaija blushed slightly and mildly said, “you give me too much credit. There are far too many people who must have worked tirelessly to make Sequoia a reality.”

Sonia noticed that this was not the usual modesty that most people showed when

being praised. Kaija's eyes had a distant look in them and she seemed to mean every word of it.

"I kept Sonia's introduction for the last because there is a crucial difference between the three of us and her. While we have helped in creating Sequoia, the future of the city and the idea behind it now depends on Sonia."

Both of Sonia's eyebrows shot up instantly. She had been politely listening to Rachel. With that statement, though, she sensed that this was not a social call but something far more serious. Later she would think that it was not just a serious but an existential conversation.

"Let me explain...", added Rachel.

END OF PART 1

Chapter Sixteen

Part 2

About a decade before the murders in Sequoia...

The same way the sun declined to set during the summer months, Kaija's flood of tears stubbornly refused to ebb. The lush green valley and the impossibly beautiful waters of the lakes stretching out like a necklace of aquamarine jewels, always a sight that soothed her during trying times, was simply no match for the grief ravaging her soul.

She sat cross-legged next to Jaska's grave for hours. Jaska, her reindeer, had been her favorite person by far. She couldn't imagine her life without him. She remembered her mother bringing the baby reindeer to her when she was a teenager. She had been a moody kid. A loner. His infectious playfulness had drawn her out of her cocoon. He had, literally, never let her be alone, always wanting to frolic with her in the wilderness.

Then just like that, he was gone. It felt as if her heart was irreparably broken.

She had been away from Jaska for almost a year, the longest ever in their decade-plus relationship. Through the long winter, she had yearned to get away from the garishly lit Oslo and go to her cabin near Skibotn. Finally, in the spring, the governments of the three countries - Sweden, Norway, and Finland - had agreed to the Sami proposal. Instead of handing over the northernmost regions of their countries to mining companies, the Sami were to be made stewards of their ancestral lands.

One hundred thousand square kilometers of land surrounding the Three-Country Cairn, the intersection point of the three countries, was to be handed over to the Sami to do with it as they will. After decades of struggle, the Sami were finally going to be reunited with their land, their waters, their trees, and their beloved reindeer. Kaija, a precocious twenty-five year-old PhD candidate studying anthropology, had led the Sami delegation through those months-long arduous negotiations.

Her elation at this outcome had known no bounds. She had been looking forward to the formal declaration. But before that, she had planned to slip away from her colleagues and spend two whole weeks with her beloved Jaska. He was the best listener ever and she had a lot to tell him. His twinkling eyes always made all her problems seem distant and trivial.

The sojourn had started well enough. Her cabin had survived another brutal winter and was in a surprisingly good shape. Within a day, Kaija had it all cleaned up and ready

for her vacation. The same day, Jaska had showed up as if he had immediately sensed that she had come to see him. Of course, he had! They were soulmates, after all.

It had been a glorious summer that felt even more joyous than usual because of the long period after which she had visited her wilderness respite. The warm breeze had smelled of clean water and humid soil. The plants and trees which had to make do with a very short summer, were bursting across the land as if they wanted to make sure that they took the deepest breath possible before the inevitable dark long winter buried them again under heavy snow.

The sun had always been there except when it was playing hide-and-seek with the thunderous clouds that would march across the sky. Kaija had lost track of the time of the day as she spent hours walking with Jaska and swimming in the lakes. Several heart-to-heart conversations had taken place and she had been looking forward to spending many such summers with him. Somewhere at the back of her mind, she had known that he was quite old and wouldn't be around for long. But still, she had deluded herself that he would be with her all her life.

There had been no warning at all, not that she had any contact with the rest of the world. There was no phone or internet service at her cabin. But more importantly, there had been no warning given by nature either. Around dusk, she had nodded off after a particularly wholesome meal of stew. Then the next thing she remembered was waking up drenched in sweat to the sounds of Jaska moaning in agony.

Dangerous heat waves had simultaneously been occurring in north America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Kaija would learn about those things much much later. At that time, though, she had been condemned to watch her beloved Jaska succumb to the debilitating heat.

She had fainted several times. Partly because of the heat and partly because she couldn't bear to see the suffering of her beloved friend. There had been nothing she could have done. There was no air-conditioning for the simple reason that her cabin was truly off-the-grid. She had used water to douse Jaska and herself to bring down their body temperature. But to no avail.

She had desperately fanned Jaska even though the humidity was so stifling that she could barely breathe herself. Shade had meant nothing. During one delirious moment, Kaija had felt that that was it - she and her soulmate were going to ascend to the heavens together. Away from this hellish weather. She had almost felt grateful for the relief that it would bring.

Alas, it wasn't to be. Jaska had become quiet after a while and then had gently slipped away while Kaija had fainted yet again. It was a while before Kaija had woken up and

that too with the sound of buzzing flies. That is when she had known that her worst fears had come true. Jaska was no more, but she had been spared.

The heat had eased off. An entire day had passed, as she had sat with his head in her lap grieving. The silent tears falling on his face had never stopped even for a moment. She knew she had to bid goodbye to her friend and promise him that one day they would be united again in the afterlife. She had buried him in the same meadow that he loved to prance around whether it was neck-deep grass in summer or knee-deep snow in winter. Through her tears she had smiled as she remembered the frolicking little reindeer.

She packed up her belongings, tidied up the cabin, and said one final goodbye to her best friend. The hike back to her car took almost five hours. She barely noticed the path as her thoughts continued to dwell on the tragedy for which she couldn't find any explanation at all.

Heat waves were not uncommon in that part of the world. However, they were never that intense and nobody had ever gotten hurt by them. They had usually lasted a day or two after which relief would arrive in the form of thunderstorms. It made some people run to the hardware stores to get portable fans and air-conditioners. But, most people simply waited them out. The animals had plenty of lakes in which they could cool themselves.

This one had been different, though. She had fainted and Jaska had died. A hardy creature like Jaska who lived through major swings in weather had succumbed in a terrible manner. What had happened?

Loss of a loved one was a new emotional experience for her. She had no idea it could hurt so much. Physically! It felt like someone had placed a heavy load on her chest. There were moments through her hike when she couldn't breathe. She stopped, bent over, gasping for every breath until the pounding in her chest subsided. She felt that her heart would just stop beating. She couldn't understand what was happening to her.

She reached her car and switched on her phone to see if there was any signal. Only one bar registered and the spinning wheel indicated that all kinds of notifications were being downloaded, albeit extremely slowly. She sighed and started on her hundred mile drive back to Tromsø from where she would take a flight to Oslo.

She was just going through the motions, she knew that. Soon she would have to focus on the most important day in the lives of the Sami people. She would have to meet with her colleagues from the International Sami Council to discuss the text of the announcement that the governments of Norway, Sweden, and Finland should have

sent. She kept telling herself that later she would have time to grieve.

She switched on the music player hoping that it would lift her spirits a bit during the drive through the desolate countryside. The dark clouds that had been hanging around the horizon when she had started her hike, were on top of her head. The wind gusts picked up and rain was splattering on the windscreen every few minutes.

The light turned into a an ominous shade of green, blue, and yellow - neither dark nor bright - as if nature was trying to tell her something but was not sure what words to use exactly. The summery pop music picked up by the radio jarred against the view which felt like it was becoming sadder by the minute.

It was all probably in her head. And her heart. Then the incessant pinging of her phone started. "What now?" she thought as she quickly sneaked a look at the screen of her phone. There were hundreds of notifications of all kinds clamoring for her immediate attention. That was unusual, to say the least.

Her family, friends, and colleagues knew that she would be unavailable for a couple of weeks. In any case, they were used to her being incommunicado when she went into the wilderness. Rarely had they tried to reach her. They also knew that she was unlikely to get their messages because of sporadic coverage but more importantly, they knew that she would have switched her phone off for the entire duration she was at the cabin.

She pulled off the road at the next turn-out and grabbed her phone. At that instant, there was a prolonged flash of lightning that lit up the whole valley through which the road traversed. The terrifyingly loud thunderclap arrived a few moments later and her car literally shook from side to side as if it had been in an earthquake. She almost dropped the phone in surprise. *First the heat wave, now an unusually violent thunderstorm, whatever was going on with the world.*

Some of the initial messages seemed to be about her, asking her if she was okay. The heat wave must have alarmed her well-wishers. Of course, they had been right to worry - she had lost her best friend and was still unable to stop crying for extended periods. But then, those messages quickly petered out and still the notification count showed that there were hundreds more.

She started praying that they had nothing to do with the announcement about the agreement between the Sami people and the three countries. It wasn't. It was something so terrifying that she was chilled to her bones as she watched the videos and photos on the tiny screen of her phone.

That year, the summer in the northern hemisphere had been hot beyond comprehension. The temperatures had risen beyond fifty degrees celsius for huge swathes of humanity. So much so that they had no longer been considered as novel occurrences. The media had stopped reporting the new records created daily in some place or the other. Only the climate and weather nerds had looked at that data in abject terror.

What had been far more scary about that August was that the wet bulb temperature had risen beyond thirty-five degrees celsius in several places with sizable populations. Worse, the night-time temperatures in many of those places had not dropped by much. Together, those two phenomena had caused deaths in unfathomably large numbers over the course of just one week. It was estimated, that at least ten million excess deaths had occurred across several countries. Most countries had simply stopped counting and announcing the number of deaths as they neither had the capacity to collate that data nor the heart to do so.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, a grand total of twenty million excess deaths had occurred over 2020-23 across the world. At its worst, 100,000 people had died in a week during those three years. In the initial months of the pandemic, the world, literally, had shut itself down to try and prevent the spread of the deadly virus. The success of the vaccines had been stupendous and prevented tens of millions of potential deaths. But what could one do with a heat event of the likes humanity had never experienced? There had simply been no time to do anything.

The initial reaction had been of utter disbelief. The reports of the tragedy had started trickling in first over social media and then in a torrent via mainstream media. What had stayed with viewers were the videos showing entire villages and towns strewn with bodies with no obvious signs of violence. People of all ages had simply keeled over and died. Their brains had shut down as the bodies could no longer cool themselves because of the deadly combination of the high temperature and high humidity.

The event had been so surreal that most people had promptly slipped into denial without even realizing it. All evidence had been refuted as fake. It had been in nobody's interest to accurately tally the number of deaths once the excruciating job of disposing of the bodies was over. In most of these places, the military had been called in to dispose of the bodies. The world had glimpsed the mass graves and mass cremations during the Covid-19 pandemic. This time around there would be no video records kept by anyone simply because no one had the ability to sufficiently distance themselves from the tragedy to hit the record button on a camera. Most of the military personnel who had been assigned this task were emotionally so broken that they would soon be discharged on medical grounds. The trauma would stay with them for the rest of their lives many of which were cut short because of suicides.

Kaija, already struggling to cope with Jaska's death, couldn't deal with this catastrophe

at all. She simply stopped talking. Her eyes were empty, as if there was no heart or brain left in her body that would tell them what to show. There was nothing to show. The body was an empty shell.

#####

She had no recollection of those first three days after she had come back from her cabin. The survival mechanism had kicked in and the mind had refused to record those horrible memories in order to protect itself from complete disintegration. Somehow she had managed to drive to Tromsø and catch her flight to Oslo.

On the fourth day, she was sitting in the corner of the conference room at the International Sami Council's office. She heard some voices. It seemed that some of her colleagues were shouting at each other. She was puzzled. The last thing she seemed to remember was leaving her cabin. *How did she get here? How long had it been since Jaska left her?*

More than ever she wished she could hug Jaska and bury her head in the fur of his neck to escape from all this. As these questions tumbled around in her mind, she realized that large fat tears had started flowing and she was again helplessly sobbing. The images in front of her eyes blurred and the voices started fading as all she could hear was Jaska's weak whimpering.

Simone hurried over to her and sat down next to her. She quietly hugged her for a long time and waited for Kaija's sobbing to subside. Slowly, Kaija's tears stopped and heaving one deep breath, she looked up over Simone's shoulders at her colleagues.

"I am okay now. Thanks Simone!" Kaija said softly as she extracted herself from the warm hug.

"What day is it?" she asked.

"We are two days away from the announcement!" shouted Hans.

It was a strange exclamation. There was joy in Hans' voice but his face seemed stricken. With a massive jolt, Kaija remembered the news she saw on her drive back to the city. *Oh my god! That had been no nightmare. That hadn't been her mind playing tricks on her because of her grief. It had been real. It had happened.*

She started shivering and Simone tentatively moved toward her again in case Kaija collapsed. Simone was puzzled. The expression on Kaija's face had been of shock and also of some sudden realization. But that didn't make any sense. She had just been

crying.

“What happened Kaija? What’s going on in your mind?”

“I... I just remembered... that horrific tragedy. I... it all happened... didn’t it?” Kaija said, more a statement than a question, not aimed at anyone in particular.

“Yes. It is terrible. But if you just remembered it, then why were you crying earlier?”

“I lost Jaska. I mean... Jaska died when I was with him last week at my cabin.

He just couldn’t survive the heat.

I miss him so much.”

A moan escaped her as the pain in her heart returned.

“And then on my way back to Tromso, I stopped to check my messages and I saw the news...”

“Oh dear! I am so sorry to hear about Jaska,” Simone replied with moistening eyes.

In a trance, Kaija got up from the chair and walked to the window overlooking the courtyard. It was a bright afternoon. In her heart, though, the darkness had settled back in.

#####

The day before the signing of the treaty, Kaija managed to pull herself together long enough to finalize her speech. The heartache was still there. She was able push it into the background for those brief periods of time when she was talking with her colleagues or working on her speech.

In one of those rare periods of normalcy, the thoughts of the global tragedy swept through her already debilitated mind. All she could think about was the pain felt by the families, friends, and communities that had lost loved ones in the horrific tragedy. Millions had died just like Jaska. Tens of millions more had suffered through the heat just like she herself had. And hundreds of millions were now heart-broken just like she was.

Her pain would ebb over time or at least she hoped it would. It wouldn't happen to her again as there would always be only one Jaska in her life. But for all those hundreds of millions heartbroken people, the possibility of similar tragedies happening repeatedly was very high. In all likelihood, the ones who had died would be the blessed ones. The ones who had survived would be the cursed ones as they would have to live day after day through the heartache the same as Kaija.

Billions were living in places that were in the crosshairs of future climate disasters with almost no hope of getting any material support for coping with them. They were condemned to death or something even worse, living long enough to suffer through repeated catastrophes while also carrying the burden of unending sorrow for the rest of their lives.

How could the rest of the world be okay with this? Kaija's world had hitherto been a compact one. She had not really been aware of the world outside of the Nordic countries. In fact, she had never even traveled outside of that region. She had lived in a bubble that consisted mainly of Sami people. The pandemic had made this bubble smaller. Every now and then when she had to spend time in one of the major cities such as Oslo or Stockholm, she had run across people from other parts of the world. Sometimes she had ventured beyond her comfort zone and attempted to taste non-Sami food. But those occasions had been rare.

Those people who had lost someone in the global tragedy were complete strangers to her. She would have been hard pressed to even point those locations out on a map. She knew no names and she certainly wouldn't have been able to put a face to any name she may have come across in the news. But she was connected with those people in a very fundamental way. She knew their pain. She had experienced their pain. She knew who they had become after the catastrophe and what they were going through without ever meeting them.

#####

Finally, the day arrived. Kaija was the one who had made this day happen. She was the one who had worked tirelessly to cajole and press the governments of those three nations to allocate at least ten percent of their land mass to be autonomously managed by the Sami. Nights and days, weeks and months had passed in coming up with the arrangement as none of those nations had been willing to even consider such autonomy. But Kaija was that unusual combination of intellect, passion, and compassion who had made it a reality.

The Sami would be designated as the sole "Stewards of the Land". However, they would have no rights to exploit the natural resources in their domain. Not that the Sami had sought autonomy to exploit nature in the first place. On the contrary, the Sami had

always held nature as sacrosanct. In fact, they had sought autonomy over their domain to limit the national governments from exploiting nature.

The text of the treaty had been finalized in late July just before Kaija went on her vacation. All that was remaining was the formal signing that would kick off a month of celebrations. Of course, in the light of the global catastrophe, there would be no celebrations of any kind.

On the morning of the day when the treaty was to be signed, Kaija sipped a cup of chamomile tea and some toast at the hotel's breakfast counter. In their excitement about the day, most of her colleagues had already finished their breakfast and were eagerly glancing at Kaija every few minutes to see if she was done. They were all going to walk over to the venue of the press conference - the plaza in front of the Nobel Peace Center.

Kaija was deep in thought. Simone assumed that Kaija was going over her speech. They had all read it and provided feedback to her. It was a good speech - dignified and replete with compassion for nature. The Sami could finally look forward to a self-governed future after centuries of being largely ignored by the dominant Scandinavian society. Kaija was exactly the right person to deliver that speech. The numerous compromises and assurances that Kaija had managed to wrangle from the three countries was quite an achievement from a purely diplomatic perspective. Simone thought that young Kaija could easily become one of the leading global diplomats if she decided to follow that path.

The only black mark against this achievement was the utter lack of interest shown by the Russians. They hadn't even bothered to talk with the Sami, let alone come to the table with the other three countries. The tensions between the Nordic countries and Russia had continued to simmer ever since Russia had launched its long and brutal campaign of annexing those countries that used to be part of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Norway had rapidly become a major provider of oil and gas to Europe which had decisively reduced the market for Russia's main export. That had severe consequences for the Russian economy and in turn the domestic politics. Since then, the Russians had simply embargoed all serious conversations with European countries.

Hans couldn't help himself and started nagging everyone to start walking to the venue. Kaija was the last one to get up from her breakfast table. She looked calm. Nary a sign of the nervous wreck she had been over the past week. She looked focused and grim. Maybe, she was summoning up all her strength for the day, Simone felt. Although, that wouldn't explain the intense sparkle in Kaija's eyes. Kaija rapidly strode up to her colleagues and then continued to go past them instead of slowing down to exchange pleasantries - almost as if she was on a mission and did not want to be distracted by anything.

#####

Quite a large crowd, maybe in hundreds, was gathered at the venue. The majority, obviously, were the Sami dressed up in their traditional attire. Of course, there were numerous supporters of the Sami in the crowd, too. There was some singing going on. But the exuberance was muted at best. Probably, most folks simply wanted to get through this event as quickly as possible. The global tragedy was, no doubt, continuing to weigh on everyone's minds.

As the clock struck 9 am, the various dignitaries stepped onto the stage. The Prime Ministers of all three countries had decided to bless this event with their presence instead of merely sending their respective Interior Ministers. The four women - three Prime Ministers, all in their first terms, and Kaija - sat down together at the table placed on the stage. The treaty document was laid out in front of them on the table. As per the sequence determined before the event, the Swedish Prime Minister affixed her signature on the agreement first followed by the Norwegian PM, the Finnish PM, and finally, Kaija.

There was a brief but raucous moment of applause as the press snapped pictures of the four women, proudly, holding the treaty together for the world to see. All three PMs were smiling broadly. But Kaija continued to look grim throughout the signing ceremony. If anything, her stare became even more intense. Simone was getting a bit worried. I hope the speech goes well, she thought to herself. *Fingers crossed!*

The three PMs delivered their remarks, again in the same sequence in which they had signed the treaty. While the remarks were all delivered in their languages, the content of all three speeches was more or less identical. It was mostly about patting themselves on their backs for finally managing to do right by the Sami. It would play very well on the evening news later that day and in the newspapers next morning. Their supporters would applaud them while their opponents would try to find ways to criticize them. Within a couple of news cycles, this treaty and the event would be lost in the noise.

After the Finnish PM sat down to yet another round of polite applause, the TV cameras swept over to Kaija. Just for an instant, uncertainty flashed over Kaija's face. It was quickly replaced by the grim look as she stood up and walked to the podium to deliver her speech. It would be among the most purposeful ten steps from the chair to the podium that the world would witness.

The dilemma that Kaija had been mulling over for the past twenty-four hours was resolved. She brought out a copy of the speech and laid it out carefully in front of her on the podium's table top. She pushed an errant strand of hair back behind her left ear. Then took a deep breath and tried to slow down her racing heart. Another deep breath

and clearing of throat got the small audience fidgeting. She looked up from the paper, squared her shoulders, and announced forcefully, “we, the Sami, extend an invitation to all the people affected by the global tragedy to re-locate to our land where they are far less likely to face the harmful impacts of climate change!”

Chapter Seventeen

Camille Hansen had been standing all the way in the back when Kaija had made her sensational statement. Well - it was sensational for the people who were paying close attention to what was being said on the stage. Almost everybody else had only been listening to the speeches in an absent-minded fashion. Some, such as the journalists, were there just because they had been ordered to cover the event.

In any other country, a press conference where the Prime Ministers of three nations were standing on a podium would have been a major event. In the Oslo, it merely raised a few eyebrows. The mention of Sami people in the same breath as the three Prime Ministers made those precious few eyebrows go right back to their normal altitudes. If not for the ridiculous reactions of the three Prime Ministers to Kaija's statement, this would have been the non-event that everyone had expected it to be.

After a stunned moment of silence in the aftermath of Kaija's invitation, all three Prime Ministers had collectively lost their minds. They had sprang up from their chairs and physically pushed Kaija away from the microphone. She had stumbled for a few steps and then crashed down on the stage. The Prime Ministers then proceeded to mindlessly jostle with each other to get their hands on the microphone to say something.

After a few seconds of madness, they looked at each other and stopped fighting. The same unspoken thought seemed to have passed through their minds. The Swedish and Finnish PMs stepped back and the Norwegian PM took charge of the microphone. She cleared her throat but still she could only croak out, "please ignore what she said just now." Then she made a sign to her team to end this event and along with the other two PMs walked away briskly before anyone from the audience had a chance to react.

Camille and her fellow protestors had shown up for the event solely because of the three PMs and the TV cameras. They happened to be in Oslo that day and had nothing else going on. Camille had to cajole all of them into going with her to the event and do their usual schtick of shouting slogans and waving signs. She and her friends had been so de-spirited since the tragedy of the heat wave, that they had taken to getting high most of the time. At some point, Camille had been awake long enough to have scanned the local news. She had noticed that event and purely out of long habit, she had started preparing for protesting at it. The morning of the event, most of her friends had still been hung over. She woke all of them up and poured liberal amounts of strong coffee in them. None were in the mood to do any protests, but Camille's steady stream of encouragement and infectious optimism had got them going that morning.

As a teenager, Camille had enthusiastically joined the Fridays for the Future movement

that Greta Thunberg had launched several years ago. Initially, it had been fantastic. She had participated in the protests every Friday without fail and then some. She had become one of the top organizers of protests in Norway. She had also helped plan numerous protests all over Europe. Slowly but surely, though, she had gotten dismayed by the lack of change in policies.

The pandemic years had stymied their movement as all group activities were canceled. Barely had they started to get their act together after the pandemic, when the war in Europe had begun. A few good things did happen in Europe in the initial couple of years of the war, though. People switched to efficient heat pumps from gas/oil furnaces. Many others dumped their petrol/diesel vehicles and bought electric cars.

The climate disasters continued to unfold all over the world including in Europe. Rivers dried up and heat waves killed thousands. Floods destroyed entire villages and towns. Experts grew hoarse as they tried to remind the politicians to do more. The grim reports forecasting future horrors kept piling up and the world grew numb to the daily tragedies that were taking place at some place or the other. Yet, the stranglehold of the fossil fuels on the world stubbornly refused to relax.

The strident optimists would proudly showcase the successes. The weary pessimists had more or less given up any hope. The doomers spouted dark stuff that was almost tailor-made to bring down whatever little hope that existed in the minds of the few who were still thinking about these issues. Then there were those who had started contemplating the use of extra-legal force to enact the necessary changes. They were actually thinking of blowing up things such as oil/gas pipelines and coal/gas power plants. They knew that this approach could backfire and turn the masses against them. But they had run out of peaceful ideas to achieve their objectives. They were desperate.

In the end, some of these desperate folks found an outlet for their anger by deflating the tires of large SUVs and attacking works of art in the hope that their actions would catch the imagination of the masses. They hoped that, in turn, this would create a new bottom-up movement that could lead to bigger changes at the ballot-boxes. Of course, that did not happen. The elections in democracy after democracy were getting decided through the terrifying use of dark money that fueled the humongous growth of misinformation. Reasonable discourse almost vanished. People became too jaded to engage with any worthwhile topic.

Camille and a few like-minded folks had toyed with the ideas of destruction. But they just didn't seem to make any kind of sense when one started to think about the impacts of those actions. Although, the fossil fuel companies would be affected to a certain extent, the predominant impact would be on the poor who would get even less fuel because they couldn't afford it. She had defaulted back to organizing protests throughout Europe. It was an empty gesture, but still, it felt like she was doing

something rather than nothing. The heat wave tragedy a few days ago had snuffed out even that pitiful spark of enthusiasm. Everything just looked bleak.

It was during this funk that she and her friends were forcing themselves to go through the motions of protesting at yet another official event where the three PMs happened to be on a stage together. Camille had read about the event but by the time she and her friends had showed up, she had forgotten what it was all about. She hadn't even been paying attention to the speeches as she was busy distributing flyers and shouting her usual slogans. No one else in her group had been listening to the speeches either.

They all looked up toward the stage when there was the sudden silence. Camille glanced at the large screen where the speech was being projected. Maybe this silent moment was in remembrance of the recent global tragedy. She fully expected to see everyone on stage standing still with their heads bowed. Instead she could scarcely believe her eyes when she saw the three PMs physically assault the young woman who was giving the speech at the podium. She was livid with the unfairness of that action - justified or not. What the hell was going on?!

Without realizing it, Camille started running toward the stage to not only express her indignation but to try and help the poor woman who seemed to have collapsed on the stage. Subconsciously, she noted that none of that woman's colleagues had stepped up to help her. In fact, not a single person came forward to help. That was strange. To top it off, one the PMs mumbled something and then all three of them were whisked away by their security entourage. The crowd was not sure how to react to what had just unfolded in front of their eyes. The nimble people of the press were the only ones who had registered the words and actions. They understood the full import of it and instantly broke up in two teams, one headed to the stage to interview Kaija while the other rushed off behind the three PMs.

"What had this woman said that would elicit such a reaction from these famously peace-loving and polite politicians?" wondered Camille. It all seemed incomprehensible.

One of her friends joined up with her as she neared the stage. The press beat them to it and completely surrounded Kaija who seemed to be sitting now. Camille managed to barge through the gaggle of reporters and their camera-persons. She dropped down to her knees and asked Kaija if she had been hurt. Kaija shook her head.

"Did you really mean what you said?" a young man with glasses and unruly hair yelled.

Camille helped Kaija to her feet. She still did not have a clue about what Kaija had said on the stage a few moments ago. She held on to Kaija to steady her. She noticed that

the young woman's body was almost vibrating with emotion as her eyes blazed at the reporter.

"Of course - I meant every single word!" she snapped.

Then regaining some amount of her composure she repeated what she had said in a steady even voice, "we must offer refuge to the people who are most affected by the climate disasters. We cannot idly watch as millions and millions of them suffer and die. On behalf of the Sami people, I invite them to the land that has historically belonged to us and was today formally returned to us. It is the right thing to do. It is the only thing to do!"

Camille was awestruck by this young woman. She didn't even know her name let alone have any idea of who she was and what she represented. But the statement she had just made was so blindingly simple and straightforward, that it felt like she had been plunged into a bucket of ice-cold water. Duh! Of course, it was the right thing to do. Of course, it was the only thing to do. And just like that Camille found a way out of the depression that she and her friends had been afflicted with. The fact that the PMs had rudely and forcefully pushed Kaija aside meant that the resistance to Kaija's statement was staunch. In that instant, Camille decided that she would do anything and everything to make Kaija's simple proclamation a reality. Even as she was making this resolution, some of the cops who had been on duty at the event firmly separated her from Kaija. Then they formed a small circle around Kaija as they escorted her away from the reporters. Clearly, they had been ordered to do so by someone, albeit somewhat belatedly. That small delay in quelling Kaija's voice was sufficient to ensure that her idea would not die prematurely.

Chapter Eighteen

The governments of Sweden, Norway, and Finland promptly tore up the treaty with the Sami. Not satisfied with that, they viciously leaned on the Sami to completely disown Kaija. Then the three PMs savagely reprimanded the Sami leadership behind closed doors for allowing this to happen in the first place. An official statement was read out by the Sami spokesperson where it was mentioned that Kaija had recently been impacted by a great personal tragedy because of which she had not been in her right mind and that she had never discussed her speech with any of her colleagues, friends, and family let alone with the three national governments.

None of the Sami were able to articulate their protests. What Kaija had gone and done was beyond their comprehension. The whole point of their movement was to protect the Sami land from the rest of the world. The Sami leaders had been absolutely bewildered by the complete about-face by Kaija when she had invited millions - maybe, billions - of refugees to come live on that same land. She MUST have completely lost her mind.

After the initial state of confusion, many had felt betrayed by her and were understandably livid. They had probably lost the opportunity to carve out a place for themselves for good. There was no way anyone was ever going to take them seriously in the future. They were very vocal in their denunciation of Kaija as they carried the faintest of hope that the treaty could still be salvaged.

Then there were the few who genuinely felt bad for Kaija. Poor thing - she needed help. But they were scared to reach out and give her that help because they were worried that they would be cast out by their community if they did so. So they stayed quiet. It didn't matter. The three national governments had decided to put an immediate end to this topic. There would be no further discussions with the Sami. Or at least that is what they thought.

Unfortunately - for those three governments and the Sami (not that their opinion mattered much) - Camille had very different thoughts about Kaija's announcement. It was as if Kaija had flicked on a switch somewhere in Camille's soul. The passion that Camille had fitfully tried to channel in the protest movements against the well-entrenched fossil industry had now found the right direction. She was going to force the issue of migration as a way to deal with the terrifying impacts of climate change.

Camille's initial impulse was to rely on loud and frequent demonstrations in front of the major government buildings in Oslo, Stockholm, and Helsinki. She used all her experience to help organize the biggest demonstrations that had two immediate effects. The first one was good. The demonstrations brought the world's attention to

Kaija's speech. While the video of that historic speech went viral, the real Kaija was nowhere to be seen. The second effect was the opposite of what Camille had been aiming for. The demonstrations unleashed such a massive wave of nativism that it threatened to completely drown Camille's nascent movement. The three nations had never seen such a toxic mix of racism, nativism, fascism, sexism, and many other kinds of ugly -isms bursting forth in their respective societies.

Camille was stung by the viciousness of the vitriol that was being flung at her for the first time in her life. She was used to the crassness of the online trolling from the fossil industry. She had developed a thick skin against that crap. But this was something entirely different.

It came from everywhere including her family and friends. Why were her parents shouting at her? Grand-parents? Aunts? Uncles? Random old men screaming at her as she walked down the street? The people that she had looked up to while growing up had instantly been transformed into rude assholes. The people that had been supportive of her advocacy against fossil fuels seemed to have lost their marbles and their sense of perspective completely. It was as if evil had captured their souls and turned them into demons that would lash out at her whenever she happened to be in their vicinity.

What had Kaija said that had caused such a revulsion among the society that she had grown up in? Initially, when the media had begun to cover the demonstrations, the governments had been worried. But as they saw the mood of their societies swing so decisively against Camille's movement, they gleefully joined in to torch it whenever they got a chance. Their spokespersons could barely keep their joy in check as they smugly held press conference after press conference to shake their heads at these troubled young people. They would not reject any opportunity to give interviews all over the world about how the young were being misled by unhinged leaders such as Kaija. Again, there was absolutely no sign of Kaija anywhere in all this ruckus. She had simply vanished since that fateful day. Some even assumed that she had been secretly imprisoned or even worse, executed and her body disposed off. No one, of course, tried to find out what really had happened to her. She was one of the most hated figures in Scandinavia.

#####

Camille and her friends decided to hit the pause button on their demonstrations. In fact, they went underground. Away from the spotlight, they wanted to take stock of the situation. In a few days, the media lost interest as there was no one left to beat up. Secretly, the governments heaved a sigh of relief as they had started to worry about the increasing support for fringe ideas that were a bit too close to outright Nazism. The last thing they wanted to see happen was the right-wing parties using this to expand their voter-base. It was best to use the disappearance of Camille's movement from the

public domain to cut off the oxygen to this issue. The outpouring of so much bile had also left a bitter after-taste for many people. It was best to forget this whole thing and focus on other issues.

Camille fruitlessly ruminated over her experience of the past few days. Despite the numerous heated discussions with her friends and the leaders of the movement, she was not at all clear why their near and dear ones had so definitively opposed the obviously kind gesture of providing a refuge to unfortunate people from climate-ravaged countries.

Camille called her favorite aunt to inform her that she was alive but planned to continue her incommunicado status for a few more days. This aunt had lived in the state of Georgia in the US during her graduate studies many years ago. She had witnessed the tumultuous struggle between the two political parties on the issue of voting rights. The white supremacists who were dominant with one of the parties wanted to turn the clock back to the pre-Civil War days when the blacks had no rights whatsoever. While the liberals in the other party wanted to put an end to the discrimination that minorities continued to face despite the painstaking progress that had been made over the decades.

During the call, Camille's aunt made a simple observation that maybe the native Norwegians were scared that their world would vanish if hordes of foreigners were allowed to live in their countries. Even if the reason for those foreigners to be in their countries is for pure survival and not as a conquering army. To Camille's aunt, this was such an obvious explanation that she mentioned it only in passing as they were about to hang up the phone. For Camille, though, it was like bolt of lightning reveals the entire landscape.

The perversity of the behavior of her near and dear ones disgusted her. They were fine with democratic and liberal values only when most of the voters were people similar to them. The mere possibility of majority of the voters being completely different from them, made democracy and liberalism untenable for them in such a visceral way that even they had managed to surprise themselves. Wishing away those democratic and liberal values was just as distasteful for them. After all, no one wanted to bring back apartheid. Kaija's speech had forced them to confront this choice without any warning - live with refugees who would vastly outnumber the natives and may have fundamentally different preferences OR live in an apartheid. No one wanted to face this choice. That is why they had raged at Camille's movement.

They really did not want to even think about this. Thinking about it made them feel bad about themselves. They hated the fact that they were unable to think of every human as being equal. They had always thought of themselves as these enlightened liberals who routinely castigated bigots. But when faced with the possibility that they would be outnumbered by people who did not look like them or talk like them or think like them in

their own country had brought to surface their innate bigotry. The bigotry that they did not know they had in them all along.

The story that they had been telling themselves and others where they were the glittering stars who looked beatifically upon the world was after all just that, a story. Just as unreal as a novel or a movie. And they truly hated that fact about themselves. It was no surprise then that they had hurled abuse at the person or persons who had forced this realization on them. The reaction of the three PMs on that stage when Kaija was making her speech now made complete sense to Camille. No one ever wants to be put in a situation where their hypocrisy is revealed to all, but most importantly to themselves. Especially, a hypocrisy that doesn't pertain to a trivial personal vice but to a fundamental belief about their essential personality.

Camille hastily convened the whole group and described her revelation to them. Slowly and then vigorously, everyone started nodding their heads in agreement as they thought about their own experiences over the last few days. This rang true. There was elation as they felt that they finally understood the main reason behind their pain. They were excitedly pointing out numerous examples that validated Camille's insights.

That sense of excitement started ebbing as it started dawning on them that knowing the source of resistance did not mean that they had any ideas for overcoming it. All that had happened was the anger they had experienced from their loved ones was no longer something mysterious. The hypocrisy of their loved ones made them feel terrible. Some felt so sick that they stepped out to throw up. Some were deeply saddened and started crying. Some became so angry that they smashed stuff lying around them as the veins in their faces threatened to pop. Camille grew silent as the emotions of her friends walloped her. Her jaw was clenched tightly as she stared unblinkingly at some point in the distance that only she could see. The unfairness of it all was so galling that she couldn't even find the right words to express it. She silently fulminated against the whole society.

She felt trapped. No longer were her main antagonists faceless evil fossil-fuel corporations. She was confronting people that she had known all her life. People she loved and admired. People that evoked powerful emotions in her heart. She had laughed with them. She had cried in front of them. She had begged them. As a child, she had innocently manipulated them. The very notion that their hypocrisy was akin to being evil would have seemed laughable to her. How was she going to persuade them? Would any words that she could muster together ever move them from their impregnable position? She couldn't really understand how the kindness and generosity and love that all these people had in them, that she herself had experienced countless times, had suddenly dried up so completely. What could she say to break through this wall that they had built seemingly overnight? Maybe... maybe, she thought that the time for words was gone. It was time for something visceral.

Chapter Nineteen

When Camille had started organizing protests rather than merely being a participant in them, she had spent quite a bit of time learning about the history of protests. She had watched numerous documentaries and even some movies about famous activists.

One particular scene from an old movie, “Gandhi”, had stuck in her mind. It was the biography of an Indian freedom-fighter who had thoroughly rejected the violent form of protests. Decades ago, almost single-handedly he had motivated tens of millions of Indians to successfully use non-violent and peaceful protests which led to the defeat the British colonizers.

The scene from the movie that had hit Camille in her gut showed the famous Dandi Salt March. The British had imposed an unfair tax on salt. To protest that, Gandhi had marched for days on end to the coastal location of Dandi where he had defied the British by taking the salt without paying any taxes. Over the course of twenty-four days, thousands upon thousands of protesters had joined him in that march. All unarmed. All peacefully raising slogans against the draconian tax.

As the popularity of the march had grown, the British had panicked. They had to put an end to this march before it became a nightmare for them. Just as the protesters had been about to reach the salt works, the British troops had barred the protester’s path.

Then something incredible had happened. The protesters hadn’t stopped their march. They hadn’t attacked the soldiers. In fact, they hadn’t even prepared to defend themselves from the soldiers. Instead, the protesters had formed rows and walked steadfastly toward the troops. Fear and courage had competed in their hearts. But such had been the power of Gandhi’s idea of nonviolent civil disobedience that they had held each other’s hands and walked into a barrage of blows the British soldiers had mercilessly rained on them. As each row of protesters had fallen to the ground covered in blood, the one behind it had fearlessly stepped forward to take the blows.

Not a single protester had raised their hand against the soldiers. The soldiers couldn’t believe that it was humanly possible to not retaliate. This had been unprecedented. Camille had tears of rage in her eyes as she had watched row after row of people of all ages getting cut down by the soldiers. The freely flowing blood had drenched their mostly white clothes. Her fists had been clenched as she found herself screaming at them to fight back against this injustice. The protesters had easily outnumbered the soldiers and could have overwhelmed the soldiers if they had wished to do so. But the protesters hadn’t even tried to protect their faces from the vicious whacks of the truncheons. They had been so firm in their belief that they had somehow managed to

control their reflexive evasive actions.

The press that had assembled to cover this confrontation had been aghast at this spectacle. And then, the faces of the soldiers had come into focus. They had been the ones who had the weapons. But they had fear in their eyes. They had tears in their eyes as they followed their orders to crush the nonviolent protesters. And that was exactly the outcome Gandhi had been seeking. He had wanted the oppressors to confront the consequences of their actions. He had wanted the oppressors to change from within. He had wanted them to abandon the evil they were perpetrating.

The change would - then - be real and resilient. Force cannot create such a change even if it subdues the opposition because that action always leads to a reaction - as Gandhi had put it cogently, "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." His goal had been to resolve the conflict once and for all by changing the hearts and minds of the oppressors. In that endeavor, if he had to personally suffer through immense physical pain, then so be it. These stories continued to inspire millions all over the world in subsequent years. The mass marches that Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. had led in the US to end segregation were explicitly based on the nonviolent protests pioneered by Gandhi. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela had been inspired by Gandhi.

Camille hadn't been able to sleep for days after watching that movie. That scene had played over and over in her mind. She had re-lived those emotions of anger and sadness again and again. Later she had read the stories of other freedom-fighters who had gone on hunger strikes when they had been jailed. One story in particular was that of Bhagat Singh, a young Indian idealist in his early twenties who had been sentenced to death for a non-violent act of protest. While in jail, he had undertaken a hunger strike to draw attention to the horrible conditions of the prisoners. One of his fellow strikers had died after rejecting food for 63 days. She was in awe of the incredible passion and courage that these people - as young as she was - had shown almost a century ago.

It was time to emulate those formidable acts from another time and another place in order to achieve the change that she was seeking here and now. The time for peaceful protests was over. Hunger strikes were required and not symbolic ones. The real ones where the strikers were willing to die if their demands were not met.

One quiet morning, Camille asked everyone to assemble in the open space in their camp. Calmly and precisely, Camille spelled out the proposal to undertake hunger strikes in order to force their governments and the public-at-large to accept climate refugees.

There was pin-drop silence as she concluded her speech. Slowly, several people nodded their approval. Camille's resolve seeped into the consciousness of all her friends. Every single person joined her in this endeavor knowing full well that some of

them may not survive. But then, what was the point of surviving in this world anyway. How could they live in their safe bubbles when millions suffered all over the world? If this was not a do-or-die situation then they didn't know what one was. If they were not able to back their fundamental belief with action commensurate with the seriousness of the situation, then they would never be able to face their conscience again. If this didn't force people to change their minds, then nothing else would. There would be no point in living in that world anyway.

No time was wasted in further discussions. Camille and her friends set up their protest at the same venue where Kaija had made her now famous speech - the plaza in front of the Nobel Peace Center. Two dozen people formed a small circle as they began their hunger strike. The rest of the group put up the signs stating their sole demand, "let the climate refugees in." On a separate sign, the group printed out a formal statement where they had noted that they were prepared to fast until death unless their demands were met. The statement was broadcast widely on social media.

More than a hundred years ago, a union leader had made a pithy observation about movements - "first they ignore you. Then they ridicule you. And then they attack you and want to burn you. And then they build monuments to you." Camille and her friends were about to find out how accurate that observation was.

Indeed, the government chose to studiously ignore the group of fasting youth for a whole week. These entitled bunch of kids did not have any idea what it meant to be hungry - the thinking went. Running out to do protests on weekends where the main activity was carrying signs and shouting slogans while shooting videos that would be posted on social media - that was all these kids were capable of. They didn't know what suffering was all about. Within a couple of days, they will go back to their rich parents whining that no one came to check on them.

In fact, the parents made the same calculation and ignored their children's hunger strike for two full days. But the kids surprised them and out of concern the parents showed up at the strike to convince their child to eat something and, of course, stop this nonsense. The wan faces of their children showed a calm and steely determination that they never knew existed. The entire group - those who were fasting and those that were there in solidarity - had taken a vow of silence. There were to be no discussions and debates, they had all decided. Their demand was crystal clear and so were the consequences of it not being met.

After a few rounds of persuasion, both individual and collective, the parents realized that the kids seemed to be resolute and unified. Not a single kid broke the vigil. Although, the parents thought them as kids, every single one of the fasting youth were, legally speaking, adults and there was nothing the parents could do by force.

The parents were getting increasingly worried as hours went by with no change in the situation. They had seen with their own eyes that the kids were deadly serious. They thought that maybe the kids will get over this tantrum if they got the attention they were seeking. So some of the parents who were well-connected with the media arranged for a press conference. The hope was that once the kids felt that they were heard loud and clear, they would end this stunt.

It was true, a fair number of parents indeed thought that this was a childish tantrum that their entitled kid was throwing. In general, they had been supportive of their kids' advocacy activities. But when the kids had picked up the issue of climate refugees, that support had evaporated. When the protests had ended and their children had gone away, the parents had assumed that they would smoke some pot and get drunk for a few days before getting back to their usual lives. The last thing any parent was expecting was this escalation where lives were at stake. If not lives, at least short-term health was at stake, thought a few optimistic parents.

The press had been ignoring this hunger strike for the simple reason that their audience had become tired of all the protests. There was someone or the other always protesting for or against something and there was only so much emotional energy the lay person could rustle up to engage with whatever that issue was.

The media's overall wariness also had another important reason. When Camille and her group had marched the first time around in support of climate refugees, the public backlash had been formidable. The media coverage - including, the critical one - had been deemed as providing support for Camille's ideas. The media had faced the brunt from advertisers and were justifiably reluctant to incur the wrath of their audience all over again.

It took two full days of entreaties by the parents to get a response from the media. The mainstream media decided to continue to ignore them making up all kinds of excuses so as to not sound cruel. The alternative media, in contrast, saw this as an opportunity to further cement its image as covering important issues, especially, those that the mainstream media chose to not cover.

A bunch of alternative media journalists showed up for the press conference right on schedule. They were greeted with a hastily put together podium where the parents of the fasting children were aimlessly milling around. The hunger strikers and their friends had continued with the vow of silence. It had been almost five days. Not one individual among those who were fasting had eaten anything. On the contrary, another half a dozen had joined them over those five days. All they had done was occasionally sip a few drops of water.

The impact of the fasting was evident as a few needed to lean against some kind of

support in order to stay upright. The loss of weight was noticeable. The parents were becoming more and more anxious. They had been consulting doctors about the implications of multi-day fasting and what they were hearing was equal part good and bad. The good part was that no one was in any danger of dying. These were all healthy people in the prime of their lives. Their ability to recover from this was excellent. The bad part was that there would be some adverse health impacts and it would take a good chunk of time to recover from them. The longer the fast continued the worse the impacts and the longer the recovery time.

After several minutes had gone by, the journalists became impatient and prodded a few of the parents to get the press conference going. The parents looked at each other questioningly and then they all turned to look at their children. They had told the children that the press was there to talk to them. But the children had merely pointed at the printed statement. Finally, one of the parents stepped up to the podium and began to speak softly. He said that he was reading the statement on behalf of his son who was among the people who were fasting. Then he indicated that the statement had already been circulated online.

The statement was so direct that the journalists didn't know what was left to ask. So they ended up ignoring the statement and made a beeline for the human element of the story. What were the names of the people who were fasting? What were their backgrounds? The parents had no choice but to talk about their children in far more detail than they were prepared to do. But they were the ones who had brought in the press in the first place. Their children had not even deigned to look at them or the press.

The journalists tried to find some interesting angles for their stories in the interviews with the parents. But almost no one tried to go and talk with the children. It was apparent that the children were not going to budge from their vow of silence. Still, the visuals of the obviously starving children were too powerful to ignore. In a few hours, several stories popped up online that described the lives of Camille's group along with heart-wrenching photos. Most of the journalists who had filed those stories did not expect to get many hits. They had mentally moved on to their next stories immediately after filing them. Somewhere, though, maybe it was the stark photos that did it, but something resonated with young people across Norway. In a short time, the echoes from those stories emerged all over the Nordic countries and then from many parts of Europe.

The next morning saw a trickle of youngsters from Oslo and surrounding areas making its way to the Nobel Peace Center. They had come to see for themselves if those stories were true. Over the rest of the day, the trickle grew and grew until it was a steady stream. Teenagers, college kids, and young professionals came in groups to the site of the hunger strike. Many had come simply because some friend of theirs was going and they had tagged along for the heck of it. But when they came and saw that

circle of young people who were quietly recording their ultimate protest, they were infected by the passion radiating from that place.

In that day alone, several dozen more people sat down to join the hunger strike. Hundreds more stood silently in support. Thousands more raised their voices both in the real and virtual world to emphatically state the demand of the fasting folks. The simple and straightforward logic behind the demand that had first appealed to Camille when she had heard Kaija speak, now seemed obvious to the rapidly growing movement.

Mainstream media was stunned by the scale at which this silent movement had grown overnight. They could no longer ignore this story. Finally, the big-name journalists showed up on the site and attempted to talk with the strikers and their supporters. Again and again, the strikers pointed them to the statement and persevered with their silence. Eventually, the journalists were forced to let go of the human element angle and focus on the demand itself. For the first time, the demand was broadcast in its entirety across the mainstream media not just in Norway but all over the world.

It stated:

“Europe and North America are both responsible for and the beneficiaries of the activities that continue to cause climate change because of which many regions in Asia, Africa, and South America have become uninhabitable. Europe and North America have vast tracts of empty habitable land. Therefore, Europe and North America must immediately make this land available for the resettlement of people from Asia, Africa, and South America.”

That's it. No mention of money. No talk of complicated policies. Only the demand to move people out of harm's way. In the immediate aftermath of the horrific heat wave that had killed millions barely a couple of months ago, it was impossible to argue against any aspect of the statement however much the so-called experts valiantly attempted to do so.

The impact of this simple idea was electrifying. Hunger strikes began in Stockholm and Helsinki. After all, it was the PMs from those two countries, too, who had pushed Kaija to the ground along with the PM of Norway. Camille and her friends had catalyzed movements in those two countries without any formal coordination. Again, the strikers consisted, primarily, of college students with broad support from school kids and young professionals.

Ten days had gone by since the first hunger strike had begun. Those who had started their fast ten days ago were visibly wasting away as their bodies had used up most of the stored fat and had started eating away at the muscles in order to survive. The

cheeks had sunk in. The eyes, when they were open, had that bright look that sought to convey their unwavering commitment to their cause. The families and friends were getting frantic as they watched their loved ones suffering. There was a touch of pride, too. These young people had the world at their feet. Yet, they were ready to die in solidarity for people unknown to them. Their humanity blazed through their defiant eyes. Their clenched jaws expressed their resolve. They would all live together or else, they would all die together. No more would there be the inhuman instinct of "to each his own."

Another couple of days passed. The doctors and nurses who were monitoring the strikers realized that at least two individuals were in immediate danger. As they prepared to move them to a hospital for advanced care, the strikers pushed them away and formed a tight cordon around those two indicating that the strike would end only when their demand was met. This was a delicate moment. The politicians had maintained a studied silence. They had calculated that the moment there was a genuine threat to life, the strike would collapse on its own. They thought that these kids would just not have the courage to see this through. But they had underestimated this movement.

One of the two individuals who was now in mortal danger died on the fourteenth day. He had last spoken with his parents a day before. He had been in high spirits even though he had no strength left to move. Then he lost consciousness as his mother cradled his head in her hands and cried quietly. She held him close to her chest all night as she realized that he was fading fast. She wanted him to live. But more importantly, she wanted to honor his simple wish. All he was asking for was to move people out of harm's way. In the morning, her husband noticed that their son was dead even though she continued to hold him in her arms. No parent should be so unfortunate as to see their child die. The sorrow of his death overpowered his father. Heart broken, he collapsed next to his son's body and died without a word. The mother had to be moved to a hospital as she fainted because of the twin tragedies. A silent shudder of grief rippled through the crowd. Tears flowed and every single person paid their respects to their fallen comrade. Their resolve strengthened and several more people began fasting. The message was crystal clear, "we shall not back down from our demand."

The government was unprepared for this development. Their first reaction was of shock and then that morphed into anger. The PM called a meeting of the cabinet and plans were discussed to use force, if necessary, to end the strike. This had gone too far. They had made a mistake in ignoring it so far. They had hoped that it would wither away on its own. Now they would bury it with such force that no one would ever dare to do something like this again. Orders were issued to the police and a few army units were put on alert in case the police were overwhelmed by the crowd. Ambulances were lined up and military hospitals were readied to bring in all those who were fasting for treatment, regardless of their wishes. If need be, the government would pass laws to ensure that these actions would be legitimate. All the other parties had quietly assured

the government that they would unanimously support the ending of this strike. None wanted this to ever happen again, especially, when they were in power. This could not set a precedent.

The problem was that these politicians had forgotten that the police and medical professionals who they had ordered to execute their plans happened to be people. Many of them knew someone who was participating in the strike. More importantly, many were quietly in agreement with the demand of the strikers. Again and again people were finding out that there was no argument that could defeat the inexorable logic of the demand. The two deaths had galvanized their empathy. So on the morning of the day when the strike was to be dismantled, the police and medicos handed in their resignation letters to the government and joined the strike. By some rough counts, there were at least three hundred thousand people at the site. Calling up the army units to break up this large a crowd was no longer an option. The politicians had lost.

On the twentieth day, as Camille opened her eyes unsteadily, she saw that the Norwegian PM was sitting in front of her trying to gently rouse her. Camille was so weak that she could barely stay conscious for more than half an hour at a stretch. Her body was completely shriveled up. No movement was possible without the immense use of will-power. So it took her a full five minutes to sit up and focus her attention on the PM. The anxious PM had no choice but to wait patiently. After a few moments of gasping from the effort to sit up, Camille's breathing steadied. She didn't say anything but simply waited for the PM to speak.

The PM knew that she had an impossible task. She sighed, to herself, and said, "we are willing to consider your demand, provided you end your fast immediately."

She could not bring herself to look at Camille when she spoke. She had been hoping that her bowed head would be taken as a sign of respect for Camille's movement. But what she was really keen on ensuring was that the indifference on her face, something she had not been able to shake off, would not be captured by the cameras. She waited for a couple of moments and then looked up as she realized Camille was not speaking. She stared at Camille. What was this girl up to? Why was she not saying anything?

Camille smiled at her amiably and then waved her hand at the board where the demand was posted. Then she added in a soft voice but with a stubborn expression on her face, "we are not negotiating. We are DONE negotiating. You either accept our demand or else we continue our fast." The microphone had picked up this conversation clearly and the cameras had captured a lot of vigorous nodding from the crowd. But everyone held on to their silence.

The PM's eyes flashed dangerously, just for an instant, before she managed to tamp down the emotions in her expression. She shook her head sadly, "you are not thinking

straight Camille. What do you want me to do? Just open up Norway for the hordes from all over the world? There will no Norway left. Then what? Anarchy? Chaos? Suffering and death? What will you and your comrades do then? Where will you go? You will suffer, too. You may die. Your family and friends - do you want them to suffer, too?"

However much the PM had tried to keep her emotions in check, she had ended up blurting out what had been in her heart all along. She had been blunt. No political aphorisms. No ambiguity. She had not slept well for several days as this crisis had her and the rest of the cabinet debating day and night among themselves and with politicians from other parties. She had even spent hours discussing with the PMs of the other two countries that had been present on the dais when Kaija had made her famous announcement. After all, Camille's movement had spread to their countries, too. They were also faced with the same set of issues that she was struggling to address.

The PM was not a bad person. She was a career politician. She loved the world of policy and politics so much that she had chosen to stay single. All through her career, she had tried to be on the correct side of issues. She fought for policies that benefited the most needy in Norway. But this had completely stumped her.

She served at the pleasure of Norwegian voters. What the likes of Camille were saying was essentially that she should not only look out for her own voters' interests but also for the people across the world. She had no disagreement with Camille about the unfair plight of the people suffering in other parts of the world. In fact, she generously donated to international humanitarian causes. That these people must receive help, was also something she fully agreed to. In fact, her proposal to Camille was going to be a huge increase in aid from Norway to all the countries that were hurting in the aftermath of the tragedy.

She just couldn't see her way toward even considering Camille's demand. She found it utterly childish. Yet, this demand, however intractable it seemed to her, appeared to have resonated with hundreds of thousands of people across the Nordic countries alone. Who knew how much support existed for it in other parts of the world.

In response to those blunt - and to the PM's mind, extremely difficult - questions, Camille smiled broadly and beamed at her. There was an intangible, almost incongruous joy on her face. Then Camille said, "well, none of us wants to live in chaos. None of us is keen on suffering ourselves. And... you know... what we are aiming for here is to ensure that those who are re-settled here do not suffer either. In fact, we want them to be out of harm's way. We want them to not only survive, but thrive."

The PM was entertaining thoughts on the lines of, "this girl has lost it. She is just

babbling now.” But something in Camille’s eyes held her from laughing out sarcastically at this statement. She waited for Camille to catch her breath after that exhausting series of statements. In a firm but low voice, Camille said, “all we have to do is figure out how they will live in our country harmoniously.”

She continued, “but first we have to accept that they are going to have to move here. Once we accept that, then we shall find ways to deal with the how. We are confident that with the vast land and wealth that we have in our country, we shall be able to figure out something viable for everyone.”

Camille reached out with her left hand. The PM, instinctively, reached out with her right hand. With quite a bit of effort, Camille leaned forward and held the PM’s right hand in both her hands. She brought her wan face close to the PM’s and said, “I don’t want to live in a world where millions may die because of our inaction. Would you want to live in that world?”

There were unshed tears in Camille’s eyes as she continued to hold the PM’s hand. She was not pleading. She was - just - sad as she sat there. Her body was wasting away. Her cheekbones poked out like tent poles stretching the skin. The fingers on her hands were like twigs. There was not much strength left in them. The resolve, though, had not diminished at all. She would die if her demand was not met. And dozens of other young men and women would die with her. The PM couldn’t bring herself to imagine that scenario.

The PM sighed to herself. She knew that she had lost the argument with Camille. Her shoulders slumped. With her left hand, she cradled Camille’s face and said, “okay. We shall find a way to save as many souls as we can.”

“Please can you now end your fast?” she asked quietly.

Camille nodded and the plaza instantly erupted into a celebration as everyone hugged each other with joy. The PM sat with Camille as the medical team came over to administer the recovery of all the people who were fasting.

Chapter Twenty

That same day, the PM held a press conference to announce the creation of a committee to figure out how Norway would handle a substantial increase in the population of climate refugees. Inevitably, it came down to the question of numbers. The simple fact was that the total population of Europe and North America was less than a billion. While the collective population of Asia, Africa, and South America was 4-5 times that. Even if one considered only the subset of population that was trying to survive in the currently uninhabitable places, that number was easily greater than one billion. Given the speed with which the climate was changing that number would also rapidly grow.

The day the committee met for the first time, the nativist backlash erupted in the streets of Oslo. The naked fear of the “others” drove thousands of people to violently reject the idea of having to share their land with any foreigner. In sharp contrast to the hunger strike, these protesters were armed with whatever they could get their hands on. They were prepared to protect their homeland with force. The ugliest of the nativist rhetoric reared its head as the frenzied mobs openly threatened the government with violence.

Eugenics had long ago been exiled to the recesses of the civilized world ever since the end of the 2nd World War. But now, people were explicitly saying that the non-white non-Christian people of the world were paying the price for their own sins. The most rabid of the protesters would rather die than let a single refugee reach their shores. The hate-crimes against the non-white and non-Christian citizens of Norway escalated overnight. The law-and-order apparatus was quickly overwhelmed as it never had to deal with such widespread violence. The government was forced to declare a state of emergency and bring in armed troops to patrol the streets of the major cities. This move was backed by all political parties as none knew how to navigate this treacherous situation.

Arbitrary curfews were declared with 15-minute warnings to keep the violent mobs subdued. Armored vehicles were visible every few minutes. The scenario was disturbingly similar to the chronic one that existed in many of the unstable parts of the world. It was shocking to see this scenario unfold in the Nordic cities, of all the places in the world. The situation in Sweden and Finland had evolved in a more or less similar pattern to that in Norway.

The PMs of the three countries were huddling together every evening to figure out a way out of their collective predicament. There was no going back on the promise to accept a substantial - yet undetermined - number of climate refugees in their countries. Most of the folks whose fasting had compelled the governments to make that promise were still in intensive care units where the hopes of their full recovery vacillated daily.

Three in Sweden and one in Finland were in coma and the doctors had indicated that they were unlikely to survive. Their families were being asked to think about removing life-support.

Never before had any government been caught between two such extreme positions. On one hand, a vast number of their citizens led by the youth wanted to peacefully absorb tens of millions of climate refugees. On the other hand, a far smaller but exceptionally violent mob led by the old folks wanted to not only block any refugees from entering their homeland, but to throw out the existing non-white non-Christian citizens. So far, the violent nativist mob had not attacked the armed forces. But soon they might and then the armed forces would be forced to shoot at them which would lead to more anger at the government and the situation could descend into a vicious spiral of ever-increasing violence with no end in sight. If a solution was not found soon, the situation was likely to devolve in anarchy.

It was apparent that the overall public sentiment was in favor of accommodating climate refugees in a yet-to-be-determined manner. During yet another virtual huddle when the three PMs were miserably venting their frustration to each other, one of them muttered, “fuck the Sami.” The other two silently nodded their heads as they wrestled with the biggest crisis in their political careers. After all, if they had not humored the Sami in the first place, there would have been no treaty. If there had been no treaty, there would have been no signing ceremony. And then Kaija would not have made that speech. The speech that was now threatening the very foundation of their countries. Yeah, that was right — fuck them.

None of them were remotely proud of their hasty action in the middle of Kaija’s speech when they had pushed her to the ground and taken the microphone from her hands. That was bad. That was undignified. They all wished they could take back that moment. They all wished they had dealt with it in a diplomatic manner. It didn’t matter much now. They were meditating on their individual and collective plights when one of them muttered, “why don’t we just dump all the refugees in that Sami preserve then. Let them deal with it all.”

It was not clear who said it. But it jolted all of them out of the funk. At the same moment, they all looked up at each other via their computer cameras. Could THAT be the solution to all their problems? The same thoughts were rushing through their minds as if they had formed some kind of a Vulcan mind-meld from Star Trek. The same political calculations. The same compromises that could be viable. They stared at each other. Each one was daring the other two to find some fundamental flaw in their thinking and say it out loud. Then that brief shining moment of hope would be crushed again. A moment passed. Another one passed. None of them said anything. Then they all smiled in unison. This could work! Rather — this better work!

Excitedly they started putting together the proposal that they could take to their

colleagues later that night and if they managed to get the buy-in, then they would present it to their voters as soon as the very next morning. All the details were not clear to them yet. There were a few major problems. But the big idea was crystal clear. All three nations had anyway allocated a big chunk of their land way up near the Arctic Circle to the Sami. The treaty had been unceremoniously torn up right after Kaija had made that speech. Yet, in the process leading up to the signing of that treaty, the three PMs had built consensus across their countries in allocating that land to the Sami.

It was a fair bit of land — about five percent of the total land of the three countries. Even if two percent of that allocated land — about thousand square kilometers — was used to create a refugee camp, it could easily accommodate 20-30 million refugees which would be comparable to the total population of all three countries. The two key elements of the proposal were that the refugees would be confined to that plot of land and they would have no legal rights of any kind outside that plot of land.

This met Camille's demand of moving the climate-affected folks out of harm's way. With that proposal, no one could argue that the three countries were not serious about accommodating a substantial number of climate refugees.

"Out of sight, out of mind" should take care of the rabid nativists who were threatening violence. The refugees won't even be seen by anyone let alone become part of the society in any way. They had all been seeing the inevitable resentments that build up against non-natives however valid the reason behind their presence amidst their societies was. It had happened routinely. Sweden had revoked the visas of Syrian refugees and sent them back to their country at the end of the Syrian civil war. The Poles had been a picture of generosity and compassion when the Ukrainian refugees had streamed across the border to escape the Russian invasion of their country. But that compassion had faded as weeks turned into months and months turned into years. The anger had spilled out in fits and starts. Over time, though, it had congealed into a movement that had infected the entire polity. This proposal would be able to prevent that from happening.

There was no doubt in their minds that a lot of details would have to be worked out to make it acceptable by both sides. But there was a glimmer of hope now. They quickly reviewed the one-page draft of their big idea and then jubilantly high-fived to their futures. The next step was to convene their respective cabinets in the middle of the night and somehow persuade them that this proposal was not just a fantasy of theirs.

Most of the cabinet members were not sleeping well, if they were sleeping at all. The rapid destabilization of their countries was permanently keeping them on edge. They tried to catch a nap here and there between meetings or one-on-one discussions. When they were alone, they were at the mercy of their own minds which painted all kinds of dire scenarios that then would send them into an emotional tailspin. So, the call from their respective PMs, especially, in a voice that could barely hide the

excitement, was welcome. They quickly and quietly left their homes and assembled at the conference rooms in their office buildings.

With astute foresight, the PMs had also invited the leaders of the other parties whether in their coalition or in the opposition to the meeting. At any other time, the cabinet members would have been extremely unhappy with being in the same room as the opposition, especially, when they had no idea what their PM was going to say. But these were extremely unusual times and the political parties had completely dropped their adversarial stances as they all tried to figure out a way to bring normalcy back to their society. If the countries devolved into anarchy, then there would be no government and no need for political parties. They had to come together to deal with this crisis. Their careers depended on it. Even their lives. As it is, they had been getting mercilessly trolled. On top of that, their families and friends had received numerous ugly threats of violence.

The initial reaction to the proposal was of cautious optimism. The main pitch was that the three countries would offer a secluded and physically isolated piece of land for the settlement of refugees. The refugees would never become part of the host country in any way. It wouldn't be a prison, but the refugees would not be able to leave the settlement unless they left the country altogether. Inside the settlement, the refugees would have their own set of laws.

Hundreds of thousands of acres in the northernmost parts of the three countries were lying empty. There was no development of any kind. No resources to be extracted. Those parts were not even frequented by tourists. Hence, it had not been that difficult to hand over a portion of that land to the few thousand Sami. Most of the Sami lived in the cities, anyway. It had been a symbolic gesture, nothing more. Now, that same land - rather a tiny part of it - could be used for another symbolic gesture, re-settlement of climate refugees. No one could have any objection to that.

Once there was an agreement that this proposal could work well, the PMs made their second pitch to sweeten the deal. The settlement would be the responsibility of the United Nations. In other words, the cost of transporting the refugees, providing them with all the basic necessities of life, maintaining law and order, and ensuring that no one left the settlement would all be done by the rest of the world. The three countries would provide some necessary transportation infrastructure to support the settlement. But that would be it.

This was indeed a fantastic idea. None of the governments would then be responsible for the refugees. They would have an easy scapegoat to blame in case anything bad happened. Yet they could corner all the glory for being the first among the wealthy nations to accommodate a large number of climate refugees on their land out of the sheer goodness of their hearts. That sweetener indeed clinched the deal. The cabinets and all the political parties unanimously and enthusiastically endorsed the proposal.

This really solved all their problems.

Over the next week or so, the PMs put together a formal policy proposal and announced a joint press conference where they would present it to the world. The uneasy peace enforced by the military patrols in their cities provided them with the respite to polish up the proposal while simultaneously working closely with some of the top marketing agencies and political consultants to develop a sophisticated outreach campaign around the proposal.

Chapter Twenty-One

Camille was now out of the hospital along with most of the other people who had been fasting. They were young and healthy. Hence, their recoveries were fast. They had won a major battle with the powers-to-be. Of course, the frequent curfews were a constant reminder of the violent opposition that existed in their society. But, there was reason for hope. The governments had not buckled in the face of this violence. Rather they had taken a tough stance by taking the help of the military to enforce law and order. The war was not over by any means. The recuperation period had been useful in figuring out how to ensure that the governments delivered on their promise.

Camille and a few of her friends showed up at the press conference. All of them were now famous and everyone at the press conference acknowledged their presence. The three PMs nodded at them as they made their way through the auditorium to the stage. A few key members from the cabinets of the three governments and the main leaders from opposition parties followed them on the stage and sat down behind the main dais. This was, clearly, an attempt to showcase the consensus for the proposal even before it was announced to the world.

It was a somber occasion, yet, the three PMs seemed to be suppressing a weird sense of excitement. Camille was puzzled by it, but decided to be patient. Neither she nor any of her friends had been consulted by the governments. According to social media, there were no indications that even experts of any kind were consulted by the three governments. So, it seemed that this was an entirely political proposal. Camille felt that that was not an entirely bad thing. All said and done, in her short life and even shorter experience of movements, it had become abundantly clear to her that technocratic consensus was far less important than political consensus to get anything done in the world. The fact that there were no experts involved was a good sign. The fact that all political parties were explicitly supporting the proposal was a good thing.

As the press conference was in Oslo, the Norwegian PM had been designated as the lead presenter. She enthusiastically stepped up to the podium and beamed at the cameras. The entire body language was positive. Then she tapped at the microphone to get everyone's attention and raised her right hand to indicate that everyone should take the seats and settle down. Once all the sounds quietened, she began her formal presentation.

There was no formal acknowledgment of the hunger strike that had forced the governments' hand in coming up with this proposal. Camille was not at all surprised by that. Neither did she mind it one bit. The PM had managed to pull a somber expression together as she started with the implications of the heat wave tragedy. She even shared a few pictures depicting the ravaged villages from Africa and South Asia. The

images were carefully blurred to ensure that death was not being depicted too blatantly.

Then the PM couldn't help herself and almost smiled. The fact that one is being charitable and that too publicly makes most people feel really good about themselves. They almost begin to preen in the attention that they get because of their altruistic deed. They don't realize that the fact that there is charity required means that something bad is happening. Of course, the PM was a lot better at controlling her expressions than most people. She was a consummate politician, after all. Then she made the grand announcement that the three countries were collectively making one thousand square kilometers of land available for the resettlement of climate refugees.

Several of the nativists were also attending the press conference and they immediately started raising loud slogans against this announcement. The PM let those slogans go on uninterrupted for a few moments and then she slightly nodded her head to someone at the back of the auditorium. That was the signal for the police that had been explicitly positioned around the auditorium to move in and remove these miscreants from the auditorium in as dignified a manner as possible.

She raised her right hand again to indicate that she wanted to address that particular concern. A map of the three countries showed up on the screen behind her. It had a blue and white circle marked out near that spot where the borders of the three countries intersected with each other. She pointed her finger at that spot and said that the designated refugee resettlement would be located in that circle. Then, she took a dramatic pause and made it clear that the circle was drawn to scale. This was the important part. Anyone looking at the map would immediately realize that this location was in the middle of nowhere and the circle looked tiny as compared to the rest of the land mass of the countries. The Mercator projection was shamelessly used to exaggerate the smallness of the land allocated for refugee resettlement.

Again, after another meaningful pause, she delivered the final piece of the proposal. The reason why the circle was painted in blue and white was because the three countries wanted the United Nations to take the responsibility of building an appropriate settlement for the refugees at that location and serve as the permanent administrator. The refugees would not have any legal status in the three host countries. They would have resident status only inside the settlement. If they left the settlement, they would be treated the same way as illegal immigrants were treated and would be immediately deported.

In essence, the PM summarized, the three nations were lending land to the United Nations for the sake of moving climate refugees out of harms's way and into a safe haven. With that she turned around and looked at the other two PMs and all the people sitting behind her and invited them to stand up and proclaim their unanimous support

for this proposal.

Most of the folks in the auditorium were trying to wrap their head around the proposal. A few of the nativists who had conveniently stayed quiet after the initial ruckus caused by their fellow-protesters now stood up to shout more slogans. But their heart was not really in it. The proposal had thoroughly addressed the basis of their opposition. If the refugees wouldn't even be physically part of their society then what would their objection be. They tried to find something intelligent to shout but gave up and sat down. This was exactly what all the people who were solemnly standing on the stage were expecting from the nativists. In their minds, they were toasting each other for coming up with this brilliant proposal.

Camille stood up along with her friends and everyone's attention instantly focused on them. After all, even though the folks on the stage had not formally acknowledged Camille, everyone knew that all this was happening because of that hunger strike. Were they going to be satisfied with this proposal? Someone brought a microphone to Camille and she addressed the auditorium from where she was understanding. She merely nodded at the three PMs who were expectantly looking at her.

She said, "we agree with this proposal. For the first time, we are seeing justice being done."

There was an audible sigh of relief from the stage. Okay then! It looked like the crisis had been averted.

Camille ignored that sigh and continued, "as a gesture of our sincerity, we propose that the resettlement should accommodate at least one refugee per citizen of the three host countries. Ideally, we should be prepared to use all the available land to re-locate every single human being who is adversely affected by the impacts of climate change or who would be affected in the near future. That number is at least as large as 2.5 billion as per the most recent expert estimate. But we recognize that this will be the beginning of the process, and so we demand that at least 25 million climate refugees be relocated to the settlement designated by the Prime Minister."

Every single politician standing on the stage had to - in their minds and never publicly - accept that this was brilliantly done by Camille. Again, they had underestimated the savviness of this young woman. Just the way the PM, in her presentation, had sought to minimize the size of the land that was being provided to the UN for the refugee settlement with the help of that map with the tiny circle on it — Camille had referred to the entire population that was in harm's way to indicate how small the number of refugees she was demanding to be accommodated was to it. Linking that number to the current population of the three countries was a stroke of genius. One thousand square kilometers was less than 0.1% of the total area of the three countries. In other

words, the existing population of the three countries would have 99.9% of the land while the refugee population of the same size would get only 0.1%. How could this not be construed as fair? No one could really argue against this utterly reasonable demand. Especially, the nativists who would have otherwise pointed out that bringing in such a large number of refugees would destroy their society.

The Norwegian PM exchanged a quick glance with the other two PMs. Twenty-five million was the upper bound for the refugee population that they had in mind. This was not a bad start to the negotiations, at all. She cleared her throat loudly to switch the attention back to herself from Camille. She said, "we are glad that the proposal seems acceptable. We shall now reach out to the UN to see if this is acceptable to them." She didn't mention Camille's latest demand but it was clear to everyone that this was now the starting point of the negotiations. In that moment the torch that Camille had inadvertently picked up from Kaija was passed on to another young woman who had recently joined the American delegation at the UN.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Rachel had no idea what the meeting was about when she entered the conference room. She was about 10 minutes late and the first presentation was already underway. Maya, one of the senior bureaucrats from the main UN Secretariat, was on her third slide. Rachel found an empty seat at the far end of the long oval table around which all of the participants were seating. Maya was a sombre middle-aged woman who had been loaned by the Barbadian contingent to the UN Secretariat. Rachel had seen her around and traveled with her once or twice on UN missions to Africa.

She pulled out her tablet and pencil. Then she borrowed a copy of the agenda from the young man seated next to her. He smiled absent-mindedly at her and passed it over. Rachel's boss, the US Ambassador to the UN, Mitch Harrison, had not bothered to send Rachel any details about the meeting at all. That was in keeping with his usual manner. He couldn't be bothered to attend any official meeting of the UN unless there was a photo-op involved. It always fell on someone on his staff to represent the US at official UN business where they were forced to make up some excuse for the absence of their boss.

For some mysterious reason, her boss had actually known about this meeting and deigned to send her a curt message saying that she needed to attend the meeting at 8 am in the sixth floor conference room. She was to take notes and report back to him. Of course, he had sent the message at 7 am on the day of the meeting. Rachel had to rush through her morning routine which meant that she was barely awake. Luckily, some thoughtful person had arranged for fresh coffee at the meeting. She had picked up a large cup of dark coffee before sitting down.

The heading on the agenda said, "Re-settlement of Climate Refugees in the Nordic Countries." No surprise that Rachel had been tagged for the meeting. Humanitarian relief efforts was her remit within the US delegation posted at the UN. She took a large sip of her coffee and tried to focus on what Maya was saying.

There were so many natural and manmade disasters happening all over the world that the role of the UN had been reduced to mainly bringing attention to the latest one. The UN would beg the member nations to offer some help - any help at all - to deal with the aftermath of the disaster. They would gamely try to appeal to the generosity and kindness of the member nations. They would try to highlight the global importance of the region where the disaster had happened in order to engage the transactional-minded member nations in some quid pro quo sort of way. And then, the next day and the next week and the next month they would do the same thing in the context of a new disaster in a different region.

Within a few months of joining the US staff that worked closely with the UN, Rachel's well of emotions had seemingly dried up as the daily onslaught of disasters and suffering showed no sign of ebbing. She became a generally passive bureaucrat who treated each new disaster as simply another task to be added to her ever expanding list of things to do.

Maya had moved on to the next slide and Rachel realized that her jaw was on the floor. The two bullet points on the slide indicated that the three Nordic nations had allotted one thousand square kilometers of land inside their own national boundaries for climate refugees. A whole fucking thousand?! Was she still asleep? This didn't make any sense at all. No country in the history of humanity had done anything even remotely like this. She pinched herself and looked around the conference table to see the reactions of the other participants. No one had even blinked. This had to be a dream. She fumbled for her coffee cup and took an even larger sip of the still too hot coffee. Of course that didn't help. The scalding hot liquid burnt her tongue. But at least that meant she was wide awake. Why wasn't anyone else surprised?

Then her vision became blurred as she read the second bullet-point - up to 25 million refugees could be re-settled on those thousand square kilometers. Something was really wrong now! She pulled out her phone and looked up the populations of the three Nordic countries that had apparently made this incredibly generous proposal. She mentally added up the three numbers on her screen and just stared at the sum. So... these countries were offering to double their population by taking in such a vast number of refugees? The only times when such vast numbers of people had moved across vast distances were during wars or slavery. And the way Maya was calmly moving on to the next slide, there didn't seem to be any war or enslavement in the picture.

Her lips were still scalded from the hot coffee, so this was all happening. Had she wandered into one of those parallel universes that writers and directors were forever foisting upon them these days? Anyway, why the hell was no one surprised in the room. Were they not getting the incredible nature of this proposal? Or maybe this was not even a proposal. This meeting was probably one of those meetings where participants are encouraged to engage in blue-sky thinking. Maybe that is what Maya was doing right now. Somewhere at the back of her mind, though, Rachel knew that was not true because Maya wouldn't randomly pick out these Nordic countries as an example.

Rachel was the deputy to the US Ambassador to the UN. Unlike her boss, though, she had worked her way up through the ranks of the diplomatic staff at the State Department. Most of the career staff, especially, the senior ones, had left long ago as they had seen the writing on the wall. She was among the few who had stayed back.

She was in her late twenties and still optimistic that the US would re-join the global community. She was born and raised in rural Texas. Blonde and blue-eyed, she had

been a cheer-leader in both high-school and college. Her parents were devout evangelicals and she was their only child. Maybe it was the cloistered life that she had experienced until college or maybe it was just her restless curiosity, but the moment she had enrolled in the University of Texas at Austin as a wide-eyed teenager, it felt as if she had found a wonderland full of people unlike her.

There were people from many different parts of the world. They spoke in strange accents and had weird customs. They had all arrived in this place to quench their thirst for knowledge. Like fish to water, she had taken to this life of exploration and experimentation. She had not only glimpsed the broad expanse of diversity that this melting pot offered, but had dived right in and immersed herself fully in the endless variety of ideas, thoughts, and experiences.

She had majored in philosophy and art with a minor in government studies. By her sophomore year, she had known exactly what she wanted to do after college. She had, in no way, been satiated by this brief taste of the world. She was going to join one of those international organizations and travel the world.

One of her faculty advisers in the government studies program had been a retired diplomat, Tim Scott. He had, mostly, entertained his students with stories from his vast repertoire of adventures as a career staffer at the US State Department. He had given up trying to make sense of the world and how it worked several years before he retired. He had known how it used to work, maybe even how it was supposed to work. But then, it had stopped working the way it used to. So in his last few years at the State Department, he had decided to simply enjoy the exotic locations that he was posted at. He was a UT Austin alumnus and when he was trying to find a suitable place to retire, he figured that a nice lecturer position at his alma mater would be the perfect blend of getting opportunities to tell his stories while also getting paid. He had claimed, frequently, that he was working on his memoirs that had all kinds of scandalous revelations. No one had seen a single word of the manuscript in the three years since he had begun teaching.

The one thing, apart from his stories, that he had retained from his days as a globe-trotting diplomat was his vast pool of contacts spread around the world. When Rachel had gone to him for advice about finding gainful employment in some international organization, all it had taken were a few emails from Tim to get her an offer letter from the State Department. It had only been a matter of time after landing in Washington DC that Rachel had maneuvered her way into the team that dealt with the UN which, in turn, had landed her in New York city.

If she had thought that Austin was a wonderland, then New York was - well - she hadn't found the right word for it, yet. It had been love at first sight. Sure, over the years, many of the city's flaws irritated her. After all it was an American city. Quite different from most American cities but still retaining enough of the problems that plagued all of the other

American cities. For starters, there were too many entitled white boys with way more money than they had any right to. They trashed the city all the time, both physically and vocally. Most of the folks in the city mocked them the few times they bothered to take notice of their latest shenanigans. But like moths attracted to a flame, these boys - yes, they were all perpetually adolescent males - kept coming back to the city for some attention, some validation, some adoration even.

Rachel was stuck working with a few of these boys, including her current boss, who had tried to leverage their wealth and social network into vaguely important sounding roles in the US delegation at the UN. Unfortunately, for them, they had not gained any respect whatsoever despite this so-called public service. They had all tried the same things. In the first few days of their posting at the UN, they had tried to act all important and attend meetings where they would launch into lofty speeches. Then they had tried to get appointed on committees where they could pontificate and patronize folks from other nations - especially, the poor ones. They had held press conferences under flimsy pretenses such as their committee going on a fact-finding mission or issuing a new report. They had never been bothered to read the report or actually travel with the mission. That had been too much work for them. The missions had been invariably to some poor part of the world which no one in the media covered. No photo ops. Nothing. Reading the reports had been even more tedious. Most reports ended up pointing out the bad things the US had done in the past and then concluding what the US could do differently going forward. The tone of these reports had varied from pitiful pleading to sometimes strident hectoring. Those mollycoddled boys had no time for that either. That is when they had stopped showing up at the UN unless the press was going to be there. Rachel, by then among the senior-most staffers, had also become the de facto representative of the US at the UN.

The questions dwindled and at the top of the hour, Maya concluded both her presentation and the meeting. Everyone started checking their phones as they filed out of the conference room. Rachel couldn't understand why they were all so blasé about it. She gulped down her coffee, stowed her mug on the tray, and hustled through the crowd to get to Maya.

Maya was texting and didn't look up until Rachel tapped her on her shoulder. She raised one of her artistically shaped eyebrows. She detested the American ambassador to the UN and didn't much care about the rest of the American delegation. She had seen Rachel in meetings and knew who she was. But she had never really talked with her, especially, one-on-one.

"This is a humongous deal!" blurted out Rachel.

Maya frowned.

“What is?”

“This proposal from the Nordic countries.”

Rachel’s words carried a slightly dubious undertone as she observed an entire lack of excitement from Maya. After all Maya was the one who had made that presentation a few minutes ago. What else was Rachel going to talk about right after that?

“Pray tell, why you think this is a humong... whatever that word is... deal?”

Rachel paused and tried to get the thoughts straight in her head before speaking.

“You do realize that this will be the first time in the history that any nation has voluntarily opened its doors for millions of refugees. Right?”

“So?”

“What aren’t I getting, here? Why are you acting in such an indifferent manner?” a slight tinge of exasperation had slipped into Rachel’s voice.

Maya put her phone into her satchel and looked squarely at Rachel.

“Because it means nothing. It is bullshit!” she said. She didn’t show it on her face, but she was bit puzzled by this reaction from Rachel. Was this young woman naive or was there something else going on, here?

“How? What was that presentation all about then?” more doubt had crept in Rachel’s voice.

Maya was not her usual cynical self that morning and decided to continue the conversation with Rachel in good faith. The participants for the next meeting were patiently waiting outside the door of the conference room. She motioned Rachel to follow her out of the room. Both women smiled apologetically at the folks outside the door and vacated the room.

“Do you mind walking with me as we talk? I have to get back to my office for a video call.”

Rachel nodded and hurried along to match Maya’s long strides.

"I know you came in late and probably missed the first part of my presentation. Let me recap that for you and you will know why I referred to it as bullshit."

"The Nordic folks don't want to integrate the refugees in their society at all. They have merely offered a parcel of land in the middle of nowhere, way up in the Arctic circle, as far away from their main cities as possible. Furthermore, they want the refugees to be strictly confined to that land parcel. The responsibility for administering this parcel is given to the UN. In other words, they have offered a glorified prison for refugees in one of the coldest regions of the world where habitation is all but impossible unless a huge amount of money is made available to build the infrastructure necessary for survival. They know that no funds are available with the UN and hence, nothing will materialize from their proposal. So... as I said earlier... it is all bullshit!"

Rachel was confused.

"Then why even make this offer?"

Maya looked to check if Rachel was kidding with her. But no, there was no sign of anything but sincerity on Rachel's face. She looked genuinely confused by Maya's explanation.

"Which part are you not getting, Rachel?" Maya decided to continue being patient with this young American woman. In her experience, the relatively good-natured young white Americans tended to be naive in their understanding about how the world worked outside of their hermetically insulated bubbles of abundance and freedom.

"If the Nordic folks don't want refugees, then why did they even make such an offer in the first place? Why go through this charade?"

"Are you pulling my leg or just completely out of touch?" Maya said with a touch of irritation. Not that Rachel noticed it. Rachel just kept looking at her with a genuinely confused expression.

"Look, Maya. I just got back last week from Africa. I had been there for the past three months. Since the heatwave tragedy, I have been helping with the logistics for bringing in supplies to the UN refugee camps. The governments in many places have ceased to exist from an operational perspective. I have not had a chance to catch up on news at all. I don't really know what all has happened in that period."

Maya studied Rachel for a moment trying to decide whether to accept Rachel's explanation for her ignorance. Now that she thought about it, Rachel did look quite ravaged. For starters, Rachel's face and forearms were tanned deep brown and

covered with freckles where they were not tanned. There were also numerous pockmarks from insect bites on her hands and face. Rachel's eyes had dark bags beneath them from chronic lack of sleep. There was also an immense sadness in the way Rachel's shoulders were slumped.

She remembered Rachel as being one of those wholesome American girls. She was aware of Rachel's reputation of being an extremely social person who never missed an opportunity to hang out with UN staff and delegations from various countries. The version standing before her looked nothing like the one she remembered.

With a touch of bitterness, Maya thought that at least Rachel had the luxury to leave the catastrophe playing out in Africa. The Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans were condemned to suffer through the horrific aftermath of the heat wave. But she grudgingly acknowledged Rachel for doing what she had done to help out. Most folks from the US and Europe couldn't care less about poor folks in far away countries. Hell, she had seen wealthy Americans and Europeans being mostly indifferent to the pathetic plight of their poor fellow citizens living right in their midst. Now that she thought about it, Rachel had always seemed like an outlier among the usual Americans she had met.

Maya nodded at Rachel. They had reached the door to Maya's office.

"Come into my office. We can talk about this in there."

They settled down on the small sofa chairs.

"So you missed the big announcement and the hunger strike?"

Rachel had big question mark on her face.

"A few days after the heat wave, the leader of the indigenous people in the Nordic countries, completely out-of-the-blue, invited all the climate refugees in the world to the land of her ancestors. She made this announcement at the signing of the new treaty among the three Nordic nations - Sweden, Finland, and Norway - and the Sami people. The treaty was about handing over a large expanse of uninhabited land in the northern parts of the three countries back to the Sami people who have been living there for millennia. And before you ask, no - the Sami were not going to form their own sovereign nation. All they were getting was stewardship of their ancestral land."

Maya could tell from Rachel's expression that she was blown away by this piece of news. Rachel was gaping at her as if she had seen a unicorn. Maya continued.

“Of course, all three Nordic nations immediately pulled out of the treaty. The governments of all three countries hoped that this unexpected announcement would be quickly forgotten if they ignored it and acted as if it had never even happened. They forced the Sami Council to disown their leader. And that would have been that if not for a bunch of Norwegian college kids.

These kids picked up on the announcement and decided to force their governments to follow through on it. Initially, it didn't work. There was a huge backlash against those kids and they, apparently, vanished for a few days from the public spotlight.”

Rachel was absolutely fascinated with the story. Her large eyes were wide open.

“The kids then changed tack. Instead of their usual aggressive shtick, they decided to go in the diametrically opposite direction. They started a hunger strike. You know... like Gandhi? They just sat quietly and quit eating. No protests. No slogans. Nothing. But they put their lives on the line.”

Maya was now fully into telling this story to Rachel. She had read about this. She hadn't really discussed any of these developments with anyone. But in her mind, she had raised a toast to that little-known Sami leader and those Norwegian kids. They took a stand and somehow had made it stick. At least on paper, Maya thought. Describing all this to someone like Rachel was making her realize slowly that this was a very very unusual story indeed. Seeing Rachel's reactions, though, she found herself getting infected by Rachel's enthusiasm and optimism.

“I think a kid died of hunger. I don't remember all the details now. Maybe more than one kid died. Come to think of it, I believe the father of one of the kids who died also died. It was so shocking that the three Nordic governments had to stop ignoring the hunger strike and sit down for negotiations.”

As if the spell was broken, Maya sighed heavily and added, “yeah right... negotiations!”

Rachel was nodding her head. She could see where Maya was coming from. Almost as if she were talking to herself, she said, “what if we can find the money...”

Maya looked at her kindly and asked, “do you know anyone who has that kind of money to give away?”

Rachel looked up at her in dismay. Then something in her manner changed visibly. Her chin jutted out and she squared her shoulders purposefully. She drew herself up to her

full height as she got up from the chair.

"I will find the money to make this a reality. Even if it is the last thing I do. We have to do it! These people have no chance at all of surviving these disasters. Millions have died and billions will die in the future if we don't do anything. For the first time, one of the biggest barriers to moving refugees to safer locations has been lifted. However, cynically the proposal may have been structured, this is still a huge opportunity and we must grab it."

"I understand how you are feeling Rachel. But we have been down this path and it has always ended in complete disappointment. At some point in life, you need to accept reality. Stop kidding yourself. I am saying this not because I have become cynical. It is what it is."

Rachel was not seeing Maya, though. Her eyes were fixed somewhere far away in the distance. There was a sadness in her eyes as the memories of the suffering that she had witnessed over the last few weeks flashed across her mind. Then the expression on her face morphed into that of stubborn bull. The premature lines that had shown up on her face made her look old and wise instead of young and unrealistic. The jaw was clenched tightly and she defiantly stared back at Maya.

Maya found herself getting angry at Rachel. Because Rachel's resolve was inadvertently affecting her. She was getting swept up in Rachel's passion. And she knew that this attempt at finding the money to help people was also destined to fail like all the previous ones had been. She didn't feel like she had any more fight left in her. She was spent after more than two decades of trying at the UN, at the World Bank, at the IMF, at the COP, and wherever else she could think of. She had repeatedly sought money to help poor countries adapt to climate change. The wealthy countries made promises on which they ALWAYS reneged. Shamelessly! Mercilessly! Again and again and again...

Like pitiless stones, the wealthy nations had watched millions die over the decades because of climate change. The climate had changed because of the actions of the wealthy. It was a blindingly obvious situation of cause-and-effect. The perpetrators and victims were defined as clearly as possible. The entire moral argument was on the side of the poor victims. Yet, the compensation had never shown up. Even getting the wealthy countries to simply accept their historic responsibility had been impossible for years. They had eventually accepted it, but they refused to be held liable for it. The world was just so fucking unfair. There was no way she was going to ride this emotional roller-coaster all over again. Rachel was most welcome to go on that ride on her own.

Some part of Maya, though, felt sympathetic toward Rachel. She decided to not unload her baggage onto Rachel. She said, firmly, "Rachel, find even one country willing to put

up a few million dollars and then come talk with me about this. Until then, I am not going to waste my time on wishful thinking.”

Rachel nodded at her and left.

Chapter Twenty-Three

It had been more than a month since Rachel's conversation with Maya. She was sitting in a meeting where folks were providing updates on the Nordic proposal. Maya was leading the meeting. In reality, Maya and everyone else at the meeting were simply going through the motions. The updates, sometimes in the form of flashy presentations, seemed to indicate progress. But there had been no actual progress because it all boiled down to the question of funding. Invariably, each country representative managed to couch their support for the proposal in the form of vague ideas that were contingent on something or the other. They were, of course, taking their cues from the Nordic proposal.

In Rachel's view, it was all quite depressing. She had devoted almost her entire attention to finding money for relocating millions of climate refugees to the Nordic countries. She had utterly ignored her boss during this period. She had done the bare minimum of what she was required to do as part of her various official commitments. She had met with practically every single country's representative at the UN to finagle some cash out of them. She had met many of them multiple times. She had made numerous presentations and countless personal entreaties. She had tried to even manipulate some folks by digging up dirt on them. All to no avail.

She nibbled at her bagel as the presentations sped along at the periphery of her attention. She was thinking about her upcoming informal meeting with her contact in the Chinese delegation later that morning. China was her last major chance, really, to get something for the refugee resettlement.

When she showed up at the Chinese delegation's office for her meeting, unexpectedly, her contact escorted her to the Chinese Ambassador Gang Zhao's office. Rachel had not been prepared to meet the senior diplomat, at all. And there she was, sitting in Gang's office sipping tea.

He was an elderly diplomat and had been representing China at various multi-national organizations for decades. He was unusually tall for a Chinese man of his age. His hair seemed naturally dark which is what tricked people into thinking that he was younger than he actually was. His skin was quite wrinkle-free and without any blemishes. The only thing that indicated his age being a lot more than it seemed were his eyes. They conveyed a calmness that could only have been attained through years spent in the trenches of international diplomacy and corridors of byzantine bureaucracy. His manner was relaxed and cordial. When he smiled, any sense of tension would melt away.

Gang knew that he had surprised Rachel even though she had not shown any sign of

it. He smiled at her and sipped his tea pleasantly. He wanted to give Rachel a chance to marshal her thoughts. He sat quietly waiting for Rachel to finish her cup and then politely asked her if she would like some more. Rachel shook her head and thanked him. He poured himself another cup and then looked at her, expectantly. Rachel received the signal loud and clear. She was the one who was supposed to initiate the conversation.

"Your excellency, thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me," she began formally.

Gang waved his hand.

"Let's dispense with the formality, please. I know you had been meaning to have an informal conversation with my colleague. For the sake of this meeting, I suggest that you talk to me as if you were talking to my colleague."

"Okay then!" Rachel thought, informal it is.

"Well, I am assuming that you are aware of the reason I had sought the meeting. I shall not beat around the bush. I am here to seek financial support from your country for making the Nordic proposal a reality."

Gang smiled, again. Although, Rachel noticed that this smile had not reached his eyes. They were not wary. They were... sad?

"I am glad that you have chosen to be frank with me. Thank you. One gets quite tired of the usual diplomat-speak in this place," Gang said with barely a trace of accent. He was known to be fluent in several languages. No one knew exactly which languages because he preferred to speak only in Chinese. This reputation of his had been established via the grapevine. In fact, Rachel realized, that he was speaking in an almost perfect Texan accent. Hill country Texas, at that.

"Before we get to my answer, may I ask the most obvious question - what financial support is the US ready to commit?"

Rachel's shoulders involuntarily slumped. The answer to this question was, of course, a resounding no. Right after meeting with Maya, she had caught the train to Washington DC to see her boss. And her boss had not even bothered to answer the question. He had simply guffawed. Then he had dismissed her from his office. She had then tried to bypass him and tried to get a different answer from the Secretary of State. All that had gotten her was a reprimand from her boss. The Secretary, a childhood buddy of her boss, had apparently been even more amused as he had chided his friend for allowing

staff to bypass him. As a last resort, she had tried to find someone sympathetic at the White House. No one had even bothered to respond to her query. She had tried the staff of the Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and drew another blank. No one in the US government was remotely interested in that topic.

“Umm... we are working on formulating our response to that question,” she answered neutrally.

Gang shook his head, “...and here I was thanking you for being frank with me. Come now Rachel, just tell me the truth.”

“No one in the US government has even dignified this question with an answer,” she said as her head drooped down sadly.

“Good. I am glad that you are getting back to being frank with me. I was aware of what the answer to that question is even before I asked you, of course.”

Rachel sighed softly and waited for the senior bureaucrat to speak further. Gang took a few moments before he continued.

“This is off-the-record. I had them switch off all the recording devices in this room before you came in. I wanted to speak with you, candidly, if I may.”

He paused again for a few moments. This was obviously an effort for him. Although, Rachel couldn't figure out why it would be so. He had the upper hand in this conversation. He had effortlessly put her in her place. So why this circumspection and all the cloak-and-dagger?

Gang said, “I can see you are confused. That off-the-record aspect is more important for my sake than yours.

What I am about to say to you cannot be repeated by you anywhere else. Do you promise me that? I don't need anything else except your solemn word. In any case, if you do refer to this conversation, I will simply deny ever having it with you and I know that my word carries far more weight than yours.

But still... do you promise me that you will not repeat a single word from this conversation elsewhere?”

“You have my word,” Rachel was intrigued by the strange direction this conversation

seemed to be taking.

“Good. Thank you!

Officially, the answer to your question is no. But - unofficially, I, personally, admire what you are attempting to do, Rachel. And I would like to help you in whatever way a bureaucrat like me can do without drawing any attention to it.”

Rachel perked up a bit at the praise. She looked hopefully at him. He noticed that. He shook his head.

“Let me be clearer. My answer is no BECAUSE the US is not providing any help. If that were to change, then China will do its part.”

He could see that Rachel was crestfallen. The largest economy in the world - the US - had laughed her out of the room. And now the second largest economy was saying no, too. This was depressing.

See her reaction, Gang tried to reassure her, “I can assist you in provision of in-kind support, though.”

She nodded. She realized that that was the best he could do. She was getting ready to take his leave, when he said something puzzling, “even if we - as in China - wanted to provide funding, we wouldn’t be able to do so because we are broke.”

He had said this as he looked out the window. Rachel decided to stay put. Gang, obviously, wanted to expound on that last statement of his.

“This is why all the recording devices are off. This is not our official position. For the purposes of external communication, China is racing to overtake the US in terms of economic and military might. But that is all untrue.” He turned to look at her again.

He knew from the extensive dossier that the Chinese intelligence had on Rachel, that she was not an economic or military expert. They had characterized her as a fairly middle-of-the-road bureaucrat who appeared to be spending most of her time in coordination activities at the UN.

“You see, that official version was not far off from the truth a mere decade ago. We were indeed making huge strides - never before seen in the history of humanity - in an absurdly short period of time to re-take our position at the top of the world. We are indeed an ancient civilization and we were the most powerful nation for millennia before

the west usurped us in the last few centuries.

But our progress ran into a couple of major errors that we had made. And a couple of corrections the Americans and Europeans made. Our rapid growth in the last two decades of the twentieth century that continued into the first three decades of the 21st century was largely a consequence of the western capitalists exploiting our cheap labor instead of their own not-so-cheap labor. Actually, let me correct myself - we were not really exploited because we used the western capitalists to get rich, too. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement. If at all there were any victims, they were the poor and middle-class folks in the US and Europe. Although, that is debatable because they did enjoy consuming all the cheap goods that we manufactured.”

Rachel was listening carefully. This all sounded about right to her. She had spent enough time at conferences and meetings at the UN to be at least superficially aware of how globalization had evolved since the second world war. She vaguely remembered people citing an important chart that captured the phenomenon Gang had mentioned. What was the catchy name of the chart? It was some animal. Oh right, elephant. The “Elephant chart” that had been created by some development economist.

Gang continued, “the problems began with Covid-19. The fragility of global supply chains and the rise of anti-China sentiment in the US to score cheap political points created an impetus for moving a whole bunch of manufacturing out of China and back to the US.”

The obvious question rose in Rachel's mind, if there was no cheap labor in the US in the 80s and 90s, then most certainly there was none in the last decade.

Gang correctly read her expression and answered, “the problem of not having access to cheap labor was solved by bringing in cheap labor to the US under a visa arrangement that neatly hid the bonded slave labor aspect of it. That and the liberal use of AI enabled the US to re-shore the vast majority of its manufacturing.”

He became wistful, “and that gutted our economy which was already struggling because of our rapidly aging population. Add the economic pressure of having to build up our military to counter the American belligerence to this mix and it is not surprising that we are broke.

The endless flow of dollars resulting from the gluttony of the US consumer rapidly shrunk. Worse, even other countries started buying from the US instead of us. And our society never really got a hang of this whole consumption business. We continue to be frugal even if our savings accounts are loaded. This left our massive manufacturing

capacity increasingly stranded.”

He sighed then straightened up again as he continued his monologue, “the west is self-sufficient in terms of the most important natural resources - energy and food. In fact, the re-shoring of supply chains has further saved the west on their oil bill. The cost of transportation has, practically, vanished for them. You should see the vast number of beached oil tankers, coal tenders, and cargo ships dumped on the beaches all across southeast Asia and Africa. They are useless. Even the containers are now being sold off to be repurposed for cheap housing in poor countries.”

Rachel was stunned to hear this admission. How could this have happened in such a short period of time and almost no one knew about it? Gang read the question on her face and answered, “it happened fast and anyway we have always been an extremely opaque nation, especially, to western eyes.

For all practical purposes, we have locked down our population to discourage any social instability. The silver lining is that joblessness is less of an issue because our working age population is shrinking. We are drawing down our immense savings to keep the elders happy. Luckily, as I said before, their needs are few and they see it as their duty to sacrifice their present for the future of the young. We are girding ourselves to be a country that grows smaller over time in every way starting with our population and then eventually our economy. Hopefully, we shall eventually stabilize into a middle-income economy. Ideally, without any major social unrest.”

He paused for a moment to let all this sink in.

“So now you must be wondering, why I am telling you this?”

Rachel waited.

“Climate change has hit us hard, too. Not much gets reported outside of China about it. But we have been severely affected. The heat wave tragedy spared us. We didn’t have any casualties because of that. However, floods, cyclones, and dust storms do leave a trail of destruction.

The point is that we are affected but relatively less so than some of the other countries. In other words, we have something that will be of potential value to other countries - habitable land. We have lots of it in the interior parts of our country.”

Rachel felt like she was getting a glimpse of where this all was going. But, Gang was being maddeningly slow to get to the point. She held her impatience in check. Gang

was carefully watching every expression on her face.

“We can see an outcome where we are able to see our land becoming an economic resource for us in the future. We just don’t see the pathway to it, yet. Which is where the Nordic proposal comes into the picture.”

Huh... what the hell is he talking about now. Yet again, Gang correctly read her expression. He raised his both his hands to indicate that he meant no offense.

“We are willing to lease our land to refugees for a healthy revenue stream that we need to continue growing economically.”

This was not making much sense to Rachel. Had the old guy lost his marbles? The climate refugees are poor. They had nothing. Where would they get the money to pay rent from? Infuriatingly, again, Gang precisely guessed what she was thinking.

“I know that the refugees have no money whatsoever. That is why some folks like me in China are curious to see how this experiment in the Nordic countries would play out. Would it be a socially stable refugee camp? Would it generate any economic activity?”

Aah... this was what he was getting at. He wanted the Nordic proposal to become a reality so that he could study it and learn from it. Wow! This perspective had simply never crossed her mind. She was not sure if it had crossed anybody else’s mind either. Except for Gang, of course.

“Umm... well... your excellency, if we don’t raise any funding then there will be no experiment for you to observe and assess.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“All the best in your effort, Rachel. As I mentioned earlier in our conversation, my nation is ready to provide in-kind assistance. For example, we could re-purpose all those cargo ships sitting idle right now for use as refugee transport. We could provide robots and other equipment for construction of the infrastructure at the camp. We could provide other things that our manufacturing prowess, much of which is sitting idle, can deliver in a short period. But we cannot provide any funding. Unless, that is, the US steps up. Then we may be forced to offer some funding to show that we are not far behind the US. The optics matter a lot to my government.”

This was quite a lot to process for Rachel. She thanked Gang and told him that she would circle back to him with updates at a later time.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rachel was sitting in the bar below her apartment in Brooklyn. It was a Punjabi bar that served an eclectic collection of beers from different parts of the US. The dude - Hari Singh - who owned and ran the bar single-handedly was a handsome fourth-generation Punjabi. His ancestors had made their way to California even before California was part of the US. Through the generations, his family had labored on the farms and railroads; fixed cars in garages and gas-stations; and as dentists and pharmacists in the central valley of California. Over time they had married the white and the latino folks. The notion of being a Punjabi was practically meaningless by his generation. He was 1/8th white, 1/4th Mexican, 1/4th Chinese, and 1/2 Punjabi - whatever, all that meant.

The thing that had brought him all the way across the US to New York City was his passion of exploring alcoholic drinks from all around the world. The Punjabi men drank quite a bit of alcohol. This ancestral tendency coupled with the influence of the white ancestors who had roots in the wine country of California and the Mexican ancestors who had migrated from the Tequila growing region had ensured that Hari had developed a refined palate for alcoholic beverages. In high-school, he had quietly started brewing his own beer and then for a short-time dabbled in making wine.

He had considered going to college at UC Davis because of the world-famous Wine Institute. But college had not really been his thing. He was great at figuring things out on his own instead of sitting in a classroom listening to lectures. He had spent all his youth doing gigs all over California learning how to make all kinds of alcohol-based drinks. In a few years, he had realized that what he liked most was imbibing the drinks and more importantly sharing them with others. He had tried to open a bar in the San Francisco Bay Area. Unfortunately, that part of the US was way too snooty for his taste. So he had packed up his bags and moved to NYC.

He had struck gold pretty much immediately in the recently gentrified neighborhood in Brooklyn, Dumbo (short for Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass). His bar was not quite hole-in-the-wall nor was it as large as a biergarten. Its claim to fame was the collection of beer he carried and constantly updated. And of course, his gregarious self was the biggest draw. Rachel had immediately gravitated to Hari's Bar (which was its unostentatious name) when she had moved to NYC. She even helped out at the bar if there was an exceptionally large crowd and she happened to be around.

That day, though, she was sitting listlessly. She wasn't drinking the beer, just playing with the almost full bottle. It was raining cats-and-dogs outside. Hari had tried to banter with her but gave up after half-a-dozen failed sorties. He had gone back to polishing the bar. He obsessively polished it any chance he got like every bartender that came

before him. It was their thing for some reason. Maybe they just liked to see it shine and had a revulsion for stains. He kept an eye on Rachel while he did that.

A couple of tables were occupied with folks who lived in the neighborhood. It was a quiet evening except for the torrential rain rattling on the glass storefront. He had missed Rachel while she was away in Africa. They had dated for a very short period of time. Then they had mutually decided to be just good friends. Rachel was just not a steady monogamous relationship type of gal. Not that Hari was looking for a long-term relationship either.

Ever since Rachel had gotten back from Africa, he had seen her alternate between despair and zeal. Over time the periods of despair became longer and more frequent. He, of course, knew what she was working on. Unfortunately, there was not much he could do except be there as her friend. Banter around. Try some new cocktails that he was tinkering with or open a case of wine from some far away place made with some weird exotic fruits. That usually helped snap her out of her gloomy mood. That was not working today, he thought, as he started polishing the shot glasses and re-arranging them for the umpteenth time that day. That was another thing that bartenders did almost reflexively - rearranging shiny clean glasses.

Ben swept into the bar shaking his umbrella and jacket as he dumped his satchel on the table that Rachel was sitting at. Hari waved at him. It was always good to see Ben.

"What's up with that wet rag?" Ben asked as Hari poured him the latest bitter he had procured.

"Dunno what's, especially, up with her today. I tried," Hari responded with the shake of his head.

Ben gestured at him to come join him at Rachel's table as he took a large gulp.

"Oooh... that hit the spot. I, so, needed that one!"

Ben nudged Rachel with his elbow as he slid behind the table.

"Anyone home?"

Rachel didn't even bother to look up at him or Hari who had pulled up a chair and sat down. Hari was trying to temper his instinct of polishing the table.

"Where did you get this one from? I like it. A lot! Make it permanent," Ben made a loud

smacking sound with his lips as he had another large gulp. Then he burped loudly. The folks sitting at the other two tables looked around and raised their glasses at the spectacularly disgusting sound.

“Can you please cut that out for chrissakes!” Rachel had finally found her voice.

“What the fuck is it with you guys!”

Now Rachel had participated in lots of who-has-the-loudest-and-longest-burp contests at Hari’s bar. So, this was completely out of character. Both Ben and Hari knew that. They exchanged a look. The whole men-women remark was also not something that Rachel did. Unless, that is, she had run into her boss that day.

“Okaaayyyy...” Ben let that hang in the air for a bit.

“Out with it... what did that jerk do today?”

Rachel looked up at both of them exasperated. She was teetering on the line between losing her temper at them and sobbing. But seeing the genuinely concerned faces of her close friends helped her avoid both those things.

“You know what I have been up to, right?”

“Umm... yeah... that refugee thing...” Ben said cautiously. He had glanced quickly at Hari to make sure that there was no new thing that Rachel was working on. Ben could be absent-minded at times. He was pretty sure that he listened to his friends. But he was not one hundred percent sure that he absorbed every thing fully.

“Earlier today, just before I was leaving my office for the day, that jerk called me to his office. He must have been drinking. I could tell from the way he looked at me. You know... like he was undressing me in his head. Fuckin’ asshole!”

However much this was a horrible incident, this was par for the course when it came to Rachel’s boss.

“He asked me what I had been doing the last few days. So I told him. I stood near the door and was holding it open just in case he tried anything stupid.

He clearly had something on his mind that he wanted to say to me. So I waited after I was done reciting the list of committee meetings that I had been to. I knew that was not

what he wanted to talk about.”

Rachel was feeling really dirty just remembering the incident from a couple of hours ago. She felt like going up to her apartment and taking a long hot shower and scrubbing herself with lots of soap to wash away that feeling.

“Then his face turned an ugly red as he said, ‘did I not tell you to not go behind my back, you goddamned dyke!’

I figured he must have found out about my offline conversation with the White House aide. No big deal. I knew he would throw a tantrum.

Then he just went off on a rant about how all the bitches like me are constantly trying to undermine real men like him.

Easy come, easy go. I started tuning all that out. It wasn’t exactly new material from him.

But then something changed in his expression. He didn’t seem angry anymore. I kinda felt scared the way he was staring at me. I was about to leave when he whispered, ‘you are really desperate to snag a few billion dollars for that pet project of yours, aren’t you?’

He laughed out loudly as he saw me squirm.

Then he added in a serious voice, ‘blow me right now and I will get you a meeting with the President.’”

Ben and Hari were revolted by the expression. Hari got up in a fit of anger. Ben’s knuckles gleamed white. How dare this asshole treat their friend in such an atrocious manner. How dare he treat any woman... any person this way. That fucker had to be taught a lesson.

Rachel remembered the malicious stare of her boss as he saw his words lacerate her soul. She had visibly winced. She was used to her boss behaving crudely most of the time. This was different, though. She had finally seen his unvarnished misogyny. It was hideous. She had swallowed the bile that had rose up in her throat and left his office. In a daze, she had walked back to her home and instead of going up to her apartment, she had gone to Hari’s bar.

“What the fuck! You have to sue him, Rachel. That asshole needs to not just be fired

but must be punished. This is nuts!" Hari said furiously.

"This can't go on, Rachel. Hari is right. You need to drag his ass to the court."

Both Ben and Hari knew that Rachel was not going to do anything about this. There was no one in the office to witness the conversation between Rachel and her boss. This was a classic he-said-she-said situation and no lawyer was going to even take her case let alone successfully prosecute it. The asshole knew that full well despite his obviously inebriated condition. There was no point in taking this up with the HR because that department was headed by the lackeys of her boss's friends in high places.

Sharing all this with close friends had been immensely helpful for Rachel. She had got the worst of her feelings out of her system. She squeezed their hands to show her gratitude. Then she went over to the restroom to wash her face. On her way back to the table where Ben and Hari were talking quietly, she picked up another bottle of beer from the bar. That ghoulish behavior of her boss had wounded her. But she knew that that wound would heal over time. The wound that would never heal was her absolute failure in raising even a single dime of funding for realizing the Nordic proposal.

She sat down and sipped some beer. She wrinkled her nose and shook her head indicating to Hari that this one was not up her alley. He pulled out his phone and made a note of it. After a few minutes of them silently drinking their beer, Ben cleared his throat and asked her about the fund-raising. She made a sad face and shrugged her shoulders.

"I ain't giving up on it... yet. At the same time... I dunno what else to try next. Not a single nation is willing to give any cash for this project. Most are themselves too poor to help anyone else, of course. They can't even do anything symbolic. That is how bad their situation is. The ones who have cash to spare are conveniently making their commitments contingent on the US stepping up to the plate. They know full well that the US ain't gonna do anything. So they get to be the good guys and the US the bad guy. Well... the US is THE bad guy."

This was no different than what Rachel had been talking about over the last 2-3 months of her efforts. Again, they sat drinking silently for a few minutes. The rain had eased up. It had settled into a sleepy drizzle. The other two tables had paid up and left. It was only the three of them left in the bar.

"I think, Rachel, there is one other thing that you could try," Ben said.

Rachel looked at him questioningly.

Hari had gotten up and was clearing the two tables. He wiped them down and was now again behind the bar putting things away for the night. It was not late. He was just not in the mood to keep the bar open after hearing about Rachel's shitty experience. He was sad how men, especially, men in power continued to fuck up the lives of women well into the 21st century. "Will it never stop?" he wondered. What will it take for people to get over this crap? Why couldn't people just get on with their lives and focus on the good things? Like a good beer or a sensational cocktail. It wasn't hard. Just... you know... to enjoy life.

"Umm... let's see... I think I have an idea. What are you doing tomorrow?"

Ohh... nothing, of course. It is a Saturday.

Why don't you come with me for a day-trip? It is a work trip for me and anyway I am going alone. I could use your company and you could get a break from all this. I will explain it all on the way."

"Where are we going?" Rachel was intrigued.

"Texas."

"No fucking way. Why would I want to go there!"

"I know... I know all about your aversion for the land of your birth. Just come with me. I will book your ticket and I promise, we shall be back tomorrow night. Anyway, we are not going anywhere close to your hometown."

"Fine..." Rachel said dubiously.

"Go home and get some sleep. The flight is at 7 am from LaGuardia. See you then."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ben had been pecking away at his tablet throughout the flight while Rachel had dozed off. She had to get up at 4 am and she was not really a morning person. Also the time she had spent in Africa had messed up her sleep for good. She used to be a deep sleeper and could knock out an easy eight hours without waking up. The experience of the refugee camps and the relentless work meant that she was always in a disturbed state of mind. She would wake up numerous times because of nightmares. They had started fading away. However, deep sleep continued to elude her.

Their ride had been waiting patiently at the arrivals gate at Dallas Fort Worth airport. The spacious back-seat had pull-out tables, like the bulkhead seats in passenger aircrafts. They nibbled at their egg and croissant sandwich while sipping crappy airport coffee. Ben was tired, too. He had to work late into the night to prepare for this trip. Finally, after fifteen minutes of silent chewing and drinking, Rachel cleared away the remnants of her breakfast and stowed the table back to the side of her seat. She turned around to look at Ben who was eating his last bite.

“So... why am I here in this godforsaken land?” she began.

Ben daintily mopped his lips on the paper napkin and took one last gulp of his coffee.

“We are going to be doing a quick audit of one of the largest SOZs in the US.”

The words audit and the acronym threatened to put her back to sleep. She rolled her eyes like a teenager while Ben continued his spiel.

“Well, SOZs are what has allowed us, the US, to re-shore most of our production from all over the world - China, India, Mexico, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Indonesia, etc.”

The mention of re-shore and China in the same sentence got Rachel's attention. Last time she had heard those two words together was in Gang's office. He had said exactly the same thing as Ben. She remembered her promise to not repeat that conversation to anyone.

She cautiously said, “yes. I think I know what you are referring to.”

“Do you know what they are, exactly?”

“Umm... factories... right?”

“Yeah... but do you know anything about them?”

She shook her head. Why on earth would she know anything about any factory in the bloody world?!

Ben checked the time. They still had another thirty odd minutes before they arrived at their destination. At that point he was going to get busy with the audit. While he did that, he had organized a tour of the facility for Rachel. He had vaguely mentioned to them that she was a new hire at his firm and that he wanted her brought up to speed.

Ben had been a freshman in college when the Great Recession had happened. He had been majoring in business, specifically, financial engineering. That was the hot new field when he was in high-school. He was good at math and this seemed like a natural fit for his talent. Plus there was the potential for raking in a ton of money in a very short period of time. What was not to like for a bright but poor kid from one of the dead-end industrial towns that were scattered all across the Midwest.

He still remembered that first fall semester when the financial world had come crashing down. He had managed to finish college within three years but had been saddled with a huge loan and limited prospects of making serious money any time soon. Sure, the federal government had done everything it could to save the financial sector. Unfortunately, for him and many thousands like him, the head honchos at the "saved" banks had decided to use the government largesse and the cheap interest rates to line their own pockets instead of creating new jobs.

He had bumbled around on Wall Street from firm-to-firm making barely enough to survive in the still very expensive city. He hadn't made even a small dent in his student loan during those 6-7 years. Then the new-kid-on-the-block, crypto, had arrived. He had been completely sold on the idea of how the government was full of crap and that this new technology was going to make him a millionaire. He had used whatever meager savings he had and even borrowed from friends and family to make big bets on crypto. The initial few years, especially, leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic had been fabulous. He saw his portfolio grow and grow. Prudently, he had cashed out some of it to pay off his college loan and buy a condo without the need for a mortgage.

When the pandemic hit, he had been sitting pretty on a steadily growing pile. Those months and months of working from his tiny condo during the pandemic's first couple of years had been exhilarating. Crypto had taken off like a rocket. He had begun making plans for cashing it all out. He was going to quit his job, buy a nicely outfitted Mercedes Sprinter van, and go enjoy van-life for a year or two. After that, he was contemplating starting his own crypto firm and try to become a billionaire. He had seen

college kids becoming billionaires overnight and he was pretty sure that he was at least as smart as them.

Alas, crypto had been too good to be true and the whole thing came crashing down as one scandal after another came to light right when the pandemic was becoming endemic. Those college kids who had turned billionaires overnight had been ripping off their investors and customers. And people who were supposed to keep an eye on them were instead busy writing paeans to those kids. Ben's fat portfolio dissipated like smoke right in front of his eyes. He had been so blinded by his faith that instead of cashing out sooner, he kept waiting and hoping for the portfolio to rebound. But the music had stopped and he was one of the unfortunate many who were left without a chair.

He had cursed himself for his over-confidence. The silver lining was that he had not quit his job. He and his girlfriend had broken up over the notion of living off-grid in a van. She was very much a city girl and didn't really care much for roughing it out for months on end. A glamping weekend was just about the most roughing out she was ready to do. Ben had vowed that he would never speculate in his life again and buckled down to do his job. He had no savings, but at least he had no loans. He had survived the pandemic bust more or less unscathed. His paper wealth had vanished but at least he was on a solid foundation. He decided to rebuild steadily and with as little risk as possible.

He was the "due diligence" guy for a boutique investment firm. The firm's speciality was investing the wealth of high net worth individuals mostly from the coastal states in the re-shored factories located mostly in the interior states. This was done in a way that the original investors could keep boasting their progressive credentials while making a quick buck - rather, many millions of bucks - from the factories that were almost a throwback to the era of slavery.

"Do you remember the early days in the pandemic when the global supply chains collapsed as country after country entered those crazy lockdowns? The massive shortages of all kinds of things..."

"Of course! I remember, my parents needed to replace their garage door when it was taken out in a tornado. They had to wait for months to get the replacement door shipped all the way from China. It was nuts! A stupid garage door! I think, even the wood was very expensive. My mom complained bitterly how they were forced to pay five times the normal because of some flooding in Canada."

"Right. I mean... sorry about the inconvenience to your parents and all that. It was far worse than that. Folks had trouble manufacturing and transporting N95 masks, PPE kits, etc. to just deal with the immediate needs of the pandemic. Then there was a

shortage of chips which are a necessity for most of the stuff we use in daily life. You know... cars, washers, toasters, whatever.

The haphazard lockdowns thoroughly messed up the global transportation system. Cargo ships and containers were stuck in wrong locations and the logistics had gone for a complete toss. Once the world figured out that aspect, there was a sudden flood of stuff coming to the US which was well beyond the capacity of the ports plus the cargo-hauling trucks and truckers. So we got shortages because of that. We fixed that over time. Just as we were settling down a bit Russia decided to invade Ukraine and the oil prices blew up. One shock after the other to the global supply chain was enough to force the American business owners and politicians to start thinking seriously about re-shoring as much as we could as quickly as possible. You may not know this, but the American taxpayers have been subsidizing this whole re-shoring business to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars."

Rachel listened patiently. Ben tended to be somewhat pedantic when he went into this "explaining" mode of his. He spoke in full paragraphs chock full of information. Most of the time, it was vital information. So she had learned to focus her attention when he was in that mode. This definitely seemed like one of those instances.

"The problem with re-shoring was that the cost of labor was too high to do so profitably. Sure, all that AI and automation was starting to show some real promise. But it was just not mature enough to make a big dent in reducing the labor costs. The American economy was running red-hot and unemployment was at its lowest ever level. The folks who were not working or even looking for work were wealthy enough to sit on the sidelines.

On top of that, as you know very well, being a Texan and all that, many Americans didn't want any poor immigrants blighting their neighborhoods. So we had all those dramatic deportations which scared away a whole lot of our cheapest and most diligent workers back to their countries. Heck, we even lost many boat-loads of highly skilled folks such as scientists and professors. The manufacturing sector that was just beginning to take off in the US ran into this wall of labor scarcity. For a while, a few states even tried to bring back child labor to get more workers for the meat factories and god knows what else. It was absolutely appalling!

Then a strange thing happened. I don't understand politics... you know that. In fact, it bores me to death. Show me numbers and I am a kid in candy-land. Anyway, my boss explained it to me a while ago. Somehow, the moderates from both the parties got together to formulate a new policy for bringing in cheap labor. For starters, they created these special opportunity zones or SOZs that were exempt from most of the usual laws and regulations - federal, state, and local, especially, the big ones that affected the profitability of manufacturing. You can imagine - minimum wages, benefits, OSHA, environment, etc. All were gotten rid off or reduced to bare bones. Then they

created a new visa category, specifically, for bringing in cheap labor from all around the world.”

“Voila!” Ben rarely used non-English words. This must be the punch-line. Rachel knitted her brows and concentrated hard.

“Suddenly, the US manufacturers had the best of all worlds. They had, practically, unlimited cheap labor. They had no major transportation costs... no containers... no cargo ships... no ports... no expensive oil for those ships... no logistics risks... no natural disaster risks... just nothing. They already had unlimited cheap energy... both clean and dirty. Warren Buffet and his ilk had bought out all the freight rail lines and upgraded them to run round-the-clock on cheap electricity.

The national security folks were not particularly happy because their main business was maintaining the US military presence in hundreds of bases all around the world. But they quickly adapted and got into the manufacturing business.

Cash from all over the world flooded into the US to invest in this incredible opportunity. My boss made out like a bandit. And dozens of other CEOs continue to do the same. Everyone wanted a piece of this pie. There was no stopping for the first few years as the manufacturing ecosystem got built out. It is starting to get saturated for some product segments. After all, we can manufacture all we want... but we can't yet manufacture new customers, can we?”

This was a bit of lame humor from Ben. He realized that it was not a good look and frowned.

“Okay... “ Rachel's voice trailed off. Was that the punch-line? She still couldn't figure out why Ben was telling her all this. More importantly, she was still quite irritated that he had made her fly all the way to Texas for listening to this lecture and driving around in this hulking car. She hated flying, Texas, and driving - all of it equally - from the bottom of her heart.

Seeing that mixture of bewilderment and irritation on Rachel's face, Ben exclaimed, “The point, my dear Rachel, is that instead of looking for grants to build out your refugee camps why don't you look for investors. If you can guarantee a return on investment (ROI) of say, 7-8%, I can even convince my boss and our clients to pony up several hundred million dollars for it. I can easily see several billion dollars showing up in practically no time if you up the ROI closer to 10%.”

He looked at her triumphantly. This was the big idea that he had yesterday evening at Hari's bar. After sleeping on it and then explaining it to Rachel, he became even more

convinced that this was indeed a brilliant idea.

“Invest in what? A refugee camp?” Rachel was thoroughly confused. Ben was not making any sense at all to her. That Chinese diplomat, Gang, had also left her hanging with his vague questions about the possibility of refugee camps generating revenues for China. What the fuck was all this crap? She was looking for financial aid for the poor refugees and these guys were looking to make money off them? She knew that Ben was not an asshole. He was a decent middle-aged white guy who meant well.

“Tchaah... Rachel... c'mon. Don't you get it?”

That refugee camp will be producing some stuff, right? I mean... people there will be doing something with their time. It is not as if they are just going to be sitting there twiddling their thumbs. That will create a revenue stream. What if you could use that to pay the investors who pay for creating the camp itself?”

Somewhere deep in Rachel's mind she felt that some sparks were trying to catch fire. She looked out the window trying to process it all when her eyes fell on what must have been a humongous white wall that stretched across the entire horizon. Whatever Ben had talked about for the last thirty minutes threatened to disappear as she stared at that wall. She turned to Ben with her hand pointing at the wall.

“What on earth is that?”

“Aah... that would be the largest manufacturing factory in the world. In human history, actually,” Ben said matter-factly.

“We are going there?” Rachel communicated this not in words but through wild gesticulation.

“Yup. I want you to see it and we shall talk some more in the evening on our way back to New York. Now I gotta check my email. I think, we shall reach in five minutes.”

Five minutes meant that they were still 2-3 miles out and yet the wall was clearly visible. Rachel watched in awe as they approached it. They took an unmarked exit that seemed to be going nowhere. The car slowed down in a couple of minutes as the driver came within a couple of hundred yards of the gate.

The driver flashed something at the security and they were waved through. They probably had far more security at the UN than this place. The wall was not particularly thick. It seemed to be made of iron and then coated with white paint on the outside. The inside looked the color of rust. It was tall - almost fifty feet straight up. A massive

coil of razor wire was perched on top of the wall. All this reminded Rachel of prisons and top-secret military installations.

There were no structures or trees within twenty-five yards of the wall. No one was going to be able to climb it unless they had some specialized equipment. Maybe tunnel underneath the wall. Although, if the wall was towering fifty feet above the ground then surely it must be buried several feet below the ground too. And then there must be some solid concrete foundation on which this whole thing would have to rest on. The tunnel would have to be mighty deep. And who knows how long it would have to be in order to get clear of the wall and the all-seeing state-of-the-art cameras hooked up with the best AI that money could buy.

The inside of the campus was laid out neatly in a grid. Some of the grid squares consisted of massive blocks of buildings, the largest she had ever seen. These damn structures were probably visible from space! The driver knew exactly where to go. There were not many signs along the roads. The few that existed were entirely graphic in nature. At a distance, she could see some taller buildings. They looked like dormitories. Clothes were drying out in balconies. That must be where the workers lived. Within ten minutes or so, the driver pulled up to a building made almost entirely of glass. This must be one of the administrative buildings. Both Ben and Rachel got out and did some stretching. They had been sitting on the flight and in the car for hours. Then Ben motioned Rachel to follow him into the glass building.

There was no reception, but Ben knew where to go. They chose to climb the stairs up a couple of floors and then Ben waved his tag at a plain white door. The door clicked open and they went in. It was a large office packed with cubicles. Each one was occupied and there was the usual buzz of a typical office. Ben walked over to the corner office and they were waved in by a short plump white guy sitting behind a standard-issue office desk. Nothing fancy anywhere. Just utilitarian office furniture all around.

"This is my new colleague, Rachel. And this is Chad, the chief accountant of the Wichita Complex." Ben made the shortest introduction one could make.

"Good to see you Ben and nice to meet you Rachel," Chad responded unenthusiastically and equally briefly. It seemed that accountants continued to nurture their apprehension about outside auditors, Rachel thought. He was clean-shaven and was wearing a half-sleeve button down shirt of some beige shade and a flimsy blue tie. The khaki trousers were all wrinkled as if he had been sitting in them for hours even though it was still early in the day.

"Ohh... right. The tour. Let me get that going before you and I get to work," Chad said as he picked up the phone and called someone. In a minute or two, a young blonde

man with sleepy eyes knocked on the glass door.

“Show her around... y’know our usual tour for first-timers,” Chad ordered the young man. The young man nodded and held the door open for Rachel. Even before Rachel had left the room, Chad had turned to Ben and asked him where he would like to start.

“Hi - I am Jake. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” said Rachel. This dude was really young. Maybe in his late teens. He was tall and had longish brown hair. He was wearing similar clothes as Chad. Maybe this was some sort of a uniform the employees had to wear.

“Would you like to get a drink or eat something? It will be lunch in an hour, anyway.

We can start the tour right after that. It will take us a couple of hours at most.”

The breakfast sandwich and coffee had not been much. Rachel was famished.

“Yeah... I would love to get something to eat first.”

By that time, they had come back down to the ground floor of the building. Instead of going out, Jake swiped his tag on another plain door and they entered a small cafeteria. He walked to the vending machine that must have recently been loaded with sandwiches and snacks. Everything looked fresh. He swiped his tag and motioned Rachel to make her selection. She decided to go for a panini that seemed to be packed with thick chunks of mozzarella and slices of tomatoes and bunches of basil. The bread looked like it had been taken out of the oven only a few minutes ago. She also selected a ginger ale to go with the sandwich. Jake settled for a bag of chips and a coke. They went and sat down at one of the tables to eat. There was no one else in the cafeteria at that time. Maybe it was too early or maybe they all ate at their desks. Rachel tore into her sandwich and washed it down with the ginger ale. Jake seemed to be staring at something intently on the blank wall behind Rachel. He seemed lost in thought.

After they finished lunch, Jake led the way out of the glass building. They went around the corner to a small parking lot and got into a small electric golf cart. It was a cool but sunny day. There was a light breeze. Jake continued to be quiet and distant. Feeling rejuvenated after that hearty lunch, Rachel decided to do what she was good at - ask lots of questions and listen carefully. Ben had not given her much of an introduction to this campus. He had left it up to her to figure out what was important and worth knowing about.

“Sorry, I forgot to tell you my name. I am Rachel.

What shall we be seeing today?”

Jake glanced at her blankly and then he gave her a shy smile as he realized that he had not been a good tour guide.

“Right - I was told to show you the floors of at least three factories and then a quick tour of the accommodations of the workers. Also answer any questions that you may have. To the best of my knowledge, that is. I am kinda new here, too. I joined about three months ago.”

Rachel gave him an encouraging smile in return.

“Which factory floor are we visiting first?”

“Let’s go see the one where we make all kinds of computers - phones, tablets, laptops, VR goggles, etc.”

Jake tooled around the campus passing by many open bays where loading and unloading activities were going on. He stopped at a large building that seemed to have no windows at all. Just huge walls and the roof. It was not very tall but it was wide and long. Wider and longer than probably any building Rachel had ever seen. It must be as long as an airline runway and maybe wide enough to accommodate two runways side-by-side.

Jake parked their cart and led her to a small door, again plain, and swiped his card near the knob. They walked into a blast of air which seemed almost strong enough to blow off their clothes and hair. It was probably doing exactly that. It was trying to get rid of all the dust on them. After walking through the blower, they entered another room where they put on blue suits that covered them completely and were perfectly sealed. The suits had their own oxygen supply. They were thin and Rachel had no problem hearing what Jake was saying.

Through another blower chamber and they stepped into the largest contiguous room that Rachel had ever seen. It felt like the room had no far walls. At least that she could see. The ceiling stretched away to the horizon, it seemed. The room was organized in the form of a typical manufacturing floor with assembly lines stretching into the distance. Rachel noticed all of this sub-consciously. She was transfixed by the sheer number of workers that were in the room. There must have been thousands of workers in that single room. All wearing colorful suits and busy assembling the intricate devices that were ubiquitous in the world. It was not as if there was pin-drop silence or anything

like that. It was just that she would have expected such a large number of people to make way more noise than what she was hearing. The machines buzzed and she could hear murmurs. And the line supervisors made their rounds on their Segways.

She and Jake just stood in one corner of the floor and gawked. Clearly, even though Jake had seen this already, it was still new enough for him that his awe was quite similar to that of Rachel. The closest assembly line to them was about ten yards away and one of the workers there took a small break from whatever intricate task she was doing. She had to look through what seemed to be a massive lens with an in-built light to perform her task. She stretched her neck in either direction. Then she stared directly at Jake and Rachel felt as if they knew each other. There were no signals but Rachel noticed that Jake had a goofy smile plastered all over his face. Was the dude in love with that girl or what!

The girl was quite clearly of Asian origin. She was pretty. Rachel let her gaze wander up and down the assembly line and she suddenly realized that more or less every worker seemed to be a woman. And most seemed to be Asians. At least as far as she could tell.

“Are all these... women? Why am I not seeing any men?”

“Ohhh... yes. I mean, no. Most are women. I think, the ratio is about four to one. Maybe more. Most of the men work in the loading and unloading sections. The assembly is pretty much all women.”

“Where do all these workers come from?”

“They come from all over the world. But I think, most of them are from Asia. Like... you know... Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, etc.”

Rachel started walking toward one of the assembly lines but Jake softly asked her not to go too close. She felt like a slothful giant standing in the midst of this sea of young women working away tirelessly. She had always found it difficult to guess the age of east and southeast Asian people. She was mesmerized by the almost metronomic rhythm of their work.

“How many phones do they produce? Like in one day?” she asked just to make some conversation. Jake was one of the quiet types. In any case, he was back to staring at that particular woman. Or was it a girl? Jake just shrugged his shoulders to indicate his ignorance.

"How old are these workers?"

"The youngest, I think, are about 15-16 and the oldest are probably in their late 30s."

Rachel whirled around and asked incredulously, "are you saying that this facility employs children?"

Jake just stared back at her. He was furiously thinking, "did he fuck up and say something wrong? Why was this chick getting all worked up? She looked like a government-type. Was she here on some official inspection? No. That wouldn't be the case. Chad would not have let her out of his sight then. She was with that other nerdy-looking guy."

"Uhh... dunno. Is that... like... bad or something?"

"Hell, YES! Why are there little girls working in this factory? Where are their parents?"

"I think - we should go back to Chad's office."

Rachel realized that she had shown a bit too much emotion in that outburst. She should have kept her mouth shut and simply observed the place.

"Naah... whatever. Let's get on with the rest of the tour. Not my problem... if these are kids," she said indifferently. Jake was thinking of calling Chad and checking in with him. Eventually, he decided to not do that. He didn't like Chad one bit. And this chick seemed to have simmered down anyway. Might as well do his job instead of raising eyebrows. He was the one who had blurted out the age like an idiot. He had been busy staring at Lan and not been paying attention to Rachel. His answer had obviously slipped out of his mouth, inadvertently. Not gonna happen again!

"Sure. Let's go to another factory."

The next factory was dedicated to processed food and the one after that was for household chemicals. Unlike the first factory, these didn't have assembly lines. Instead they had a lot of piping and heavy equipment that was being operated, again, by a whole lot of young women. In those two factories, they had to wear different kinds of suits. The ones that were there to protect them from exposure to potentially toxic fumes and liquids. The operations were phenomenally complex. Yet, they all seemed to be seamlessly moving along. After an hour or so, Jake turned their cart in the direction of the dorms.

No kidding about that! The residential complex looked exactly like college dorms. Each high-rise had hundreds - maybe, thousands - of apartments. Three people were allocated to each apartment. Each apartment had a small bathroom. There was no kitchen in the apartment nor were there any washers/dryers. There were huge industrial sized laundromat machines in the basements of each high-rise where people could wash their clothes. The cafeterias were fantastically vast. Each hall would probably seat at least five thousand people in one go. The open spaces spread out among the high-rises had parks, gymnasiums, movie theaters, malls, and restaurants. It was a ginormous self-contained city. Rachel took all this in as Jake showed her around as quickly as possible. Since the facility worked round-the-clock spread over four shifts, there were a few people hanging around the common areas.

Jake turned around the cart and started retracing their way back to Chad's office. Rachel was silent on the way back. This was quite some operation. She had no idea anything like this existed on US soil. She had heard about such factories and campuses in China and other poorer parts of the world. She was finally beginning to understand what Gang was talking about.

Jake and Rachel walked into Chad's office just as Ben was wrapping up his work. He made some final requests to Chad and then thanked him and Jake for their help. He nodded at Rachel and they walked downstairs to their ride. This time around it was one of those generic sedans that was used by taxi drivers. The driver, though, was the same as the one in the morning.

Ben saw Rachel eyeing the sedan and said, "it is a short ride on the way back. We are hitching a ride on my boss's private jet from Wichita City. My boss was meeting some of the investors there today. I was told to get on the flight to provide an update on the way back to New York."

Chapter Twenty-Six

In less than half an hour, they arrived at a private airfield and were driven straight to the jet waiting for takeoff on the runway. It was a typical beige nondescript private jet that could fly way faster than a commercial airline. There were no frills included in the service. The co-pilot doubled up as the steward.

This was Rachel's first time in a private jet. Instead of observing the life of the rich and famous, she was busy getting surprised. Ben's boss was an older woman with twinkling brown eyes and silky white hair. She was wearing a sober blue business suit with a white shirt. She was talking with someone on the phone when Ben and Rachel got on the aircraft.

Once the aircraft had taken off and reached cruising altitude which happened rather quickly, Rachel felt, the co-pilot/steward offered them some perfunctory beverages and snacks. No fancy champagne and caviar was being served on this flight. Tomato juice and pretzels was what Rachel settled on. She looked out the window as Ben briefed his boss quickly. There were a few follow-up questions and Ben had to pull out his tablet to show her something. Ben's boss gave him some final instructions and then she turned her attention to Rachel.

"Who do I have the pleasure of flying with today?" she asked pleasantly.

"My name is Rachel and I am here because of him."

Ben's boss waited with a pleasant smile on her face. She wanted to know more about Rachel. Ben was still making some notes. He had not had a chance to make introductions.

"I am a part of the US delegation at the UN."

"Pray, what brings you to Texas? Don't tell me you hitched a ride with us today just to go visit family and friends."

She had detected the Texan accent.

Ben was done with his task. He put away his paraphernalia and joined the conversation.

"Let me make the formal introductions. Rachel, this is my boss, Emily Wood. She is the

founder and CEO of our company, Foresight Investments.”

Then turning to Emily, he added, “it was I who asked Rachel to join me today for the trip to the Wichita City complex. I think, I may have a solution for the problem that Rachel is trying to solve.”

Turning back to Rachel, he added, “until recently, Emily used to be an Economics Professor at the University of California, Berkeley. A long time ago, she had served on the President’s Council of Economic Advisers and the Federal Reserve Board. She also spent a considerable amount of time consulting for the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund during her academic years.”

“It is an honor and a privilege to meet you, Emily!” Rachel stood up from her seat to go shake Emily’s hand.

Emily nodded graciously.

“So what is vexing our delegation to the UN these days?”

Rachel looked at Ben and said, “well... maybe you should be the one to describe the problem since you claim to have a solution for it. I am still not sure what your big idea really is.”

Ben nodded and began, “a few months ago, in the aftermath of the heat wave tragedy, some of the Nordic countries offered a small parcel of their land for re-settling climate refugees.

Rachel, please feel free to jump in with additional details.”

“The size of the parcel is about one thousand square kilometers and they are willing to accept up to 25 million refugees. It is located way up in the north... in the Arctic Circle, I think. They also put some conditions on their offer. The refugees are to be confined to that parcel. And they want the UN to set up the refugee camp and operate it,” Rachel chimed in.

Ben continued, “the problem is that these Nordic countries only offered the land and nothing else. As you probably know, the UN doesn’t have any funding to take them up on their offer. Rachel has been spending all of her time over the last few weeks trying to finagle cash from different countries.

No one is ready to step up unless the US takes the lead. As you can well imagine, the

current US government has zero interest in doing any charity for people from other countries, especially, poor folks living in godforsaken places. I believe they like to use another more colorful word for those countries.”

“Of course!” Emily murmured to herself. One of the least popular items in the federal budget had always been foreign aid despite it being, practically, a trivially small number.

“My big idea for Rachel was to try and get investors to fund the creation of the camp instead of looking for charity from governments. If the UN could offer a reasonable return on the investment then investors would be happy to step up to the plate. I dunno... maybe 7-10% ROI should be sufficient to get some big players interested in this.”

“Now that’s a novel idea! I am glad, I have kept you around, Ben,” Emily exclaimed.

“Please do elaborate. Where would the UN get the revenue to pay off the investors?”

Ben became slightly defensive.

“Well... I was thinking that the refugee camp could be like the Wichita City complex.”

Emily raised an eyebrow while Rachel looked positively scandalized by this statement.

“Surely, you are kidding, Ben!” Rachel snapped.

Ben’s face reddened noticeably. He was not expecting this reaction from Rachel, especially, in front of his boss. And, especially, when his boss seemed to like his idea. It felt - well - disrespectful.

“You think that the UN should become a factory operator? A factory that employs teenage girls and then keeps them locked up in a compound? Are you nuts?”

Rachel liked Ben and he was her good friend. But this was plain absurd. She sputtered with more indignation and realizing where she was, she decided to shut up and fume in silence.

“Even if we keep the factory aspect aside, for a moment, the idea still has legs. Pretty solid legs, I think,” Emily said in a mild tone.

“Where would the revenue come from?” Rachel felt as if they were going around in circles.

Emily looked at her kindly.

“A city is a very effective engine for economic growth. Even without a factory, people do many things to make money. For example, arts and entertainment generate pretty solid revenues. So do professional sports. Restaurants and bars can be quite profitable. When several million people live close to each other, they eventually figure out what they are good at and what others are good at. That is when the magic of trade happens. Ever heard of Adam Smith?”

Emily was chuckling at Rachel’s obvious embarrassment.

“Even more magic happens when that same singer can sell their music to customers who are living in other cities or even faraway countries. Or the chef offers paid online classes to teach people from those faraway places. All those customers send money to that city.

Come now... Rachel. Cities will produce revenues. We have known that for a long time. How much revenue would a city that has been created from scratch generate over a period of time, that we don’t yet know. It will depend on the nature of the city and the people who live there. I think, Ben’s idea is worth exploring.”

“Umm... okay. Fair enough.”

Ben was grateful for his boss swooping in and saving his idea from getting thoroughly rubbished.

Emily wasn’t done though. Again in a mild tone but which distinctly held a clear rebuke, she said, “I think Rachel, you are also judging the SOZs too harshly. As someone who makes money from investing in them, I may be biased.

The lives of those teenage girls from Asia and Africa are immeasurably better than what they would have experienced if they had stayed back in their homes. I am not defending the SOZs in their totality. Don’t get me wrong. I wish we - humanity - could offer every individual a dignified life such as the one that you or Ben or I am getting. Unfortunately, we don’t live in a fair and just world. We live in a world where even relative improvements are important to recognize.

I remember the catastrophic floods in Pakistan that had submerged almost a third of their land for months on end. The destitution was unimaginable. One of the ways those

masses of displaced people tried to deal with their situation was by marrying off and sometimes even selling their teenage daughters off so that they could use the money to help the rest of the family survive. It was horrifying for the girls. I would rather those girls were living in an SOZ where they at least had basic physical security.

Wouldn't you agree?"

Rachel became pale. She was deeply affected by this observation. Like any privileged person, she had simply passed judgment without thinking. Worse, she had done so in a self-righteous manner. It was especially embarrassing because she knew better. She had traveled to many of the poorest and most deprived parts of the world. She was not one of those proudly ignorant Americans.

She kicked herself mentally for slipping into a patronizing attitude. She must do better than that. Not just in front of people such as Emily, but in a genuine and permanent way. She had to get rid of the blinders that come from wealth and privilege. With her head hanging down, she offered an apology to Emily.

Emily waved it off, "it happens. We can do better and we must constantly aspire to do better. But we need to be clear-eyed about the world we live in. So... what do you think of Ben's idea?"

They all sat around for a few moments imagining a fictitious city. Of course, their minds immediately went to their home, New York. Their city did generate vast amounts of revenue. The annual budget of the city was easily upward of a \$100B. They knew that the gross metropolitan product of New York was greater than \$2T, more than the GDP of the vast majority of countries while its population was close to 20M. At least, in a very very crude sense, the idea of people investing in a city sounded plausible. But there were so many unknowns.

"You guys are investors...", Rachel began cautiously.

"What would make this an attractive proposition for you?"

Emily glanced at Ben, "what do you think?"

Ben was a thoughtful guy. He took a few moments to toy around with the ideas flitting through his mind. He frowned a bit as he tried to figure out how to go about answering this question.

Emily gently prodded him, "maybe... we start with the aspect of costs?"

Ben's brow cleared and he nodded his head.

"Yes - we should start with reducing the costs of this operation. Uhh... I mean the refugee camp. Or maybe... we should just call it a city," he looked up in alarm at both Rachel and Emily as he fumbled around to find the right words.

Rachel decided not to bite his head off. Yet. She was getting an insightful demonstration of how Wall Street thought about people and civilization.

"The way I see it," Ben began, "the big costs in the lives of people of any city in the world can be put in three buckets.

The first one is housing. It is more or less entirely an outcome of scarcity. In most cases, this scarcity is artificially created through zoning laws. Invariably, it leads to higher costs than are necessary. In any case, the land offered by the Nordic countries is not a gift to the UN or the refugees. They are not transferring the property rights. They are not giving up their sovereign rights over that land. So - it is as if the land is being offered to the UN rent-free. So what if, the UN in turn constructed the housing and all the attendant infrastructure for the residents and offered it to them rent-free, too. No property rights. No property transactions. As the population grows and more housing is needed, it is constructed and allocated rent-free."

Emily silently nodded her head. Rachel didn't react. This seemed fair and pretty straightforward.

"The second biggest cost is healthcare. This is a tricky one. I mean, the UN can offer it for free to all residents. But it will still be a cost and it is quite substantial however much we try to minimize it."

Ben paused. He was wrestling with what he wanted to say but was doubtful that it would go down well with Rachel or even Emily for that matter.

"The healthcare costs of the various SOZs that we invest in are quite low," Ben said cautiously.

"That is because the people who work there are all young and single. The big healthcare expenditure is usually on older folks and little children. The age of our labor... uhh... I mean staff... ranges from high teens to late thirties. They tend to be healthy pretty much all the time and don't need any major healthcare services. And whatever they need we provide at the lowest possible cost making full use of AI-medical assistants."

Again, a pause to gauge the reactions of Rachel and Emily. There was nothing. But both had a somewhat grim expression on their faces.

“Another aspect that keeps our healthcare costs down is that most of our staff consists of women. And women tend to be more resilient and robust than men. Women also tend to take better care of themselves and each other. Far more diligently than men, for sure.”

Rachel had raised one of her eyebrows. Ben couldn't read her expression. So he decided to just go for it.

“To minimize the cost of this hypothetical city, I would suggest that the residents should mostly be young and relatively healthy women.”

He cringed preemptively as he tried to prepare for the onslaught from Rachel. He had recommended condemning the children, the old, and the weak to more misery while rescuing those who were the most resilient.

Surprisingly, Rachel had a broad smile on her face. In fact, she came over to his seat and gave him a quick hug.

“That is the best thing you have said all day today!”

Ben looked at her carefully. Was she pulling his leg? Was this sarcasm? Rachel didn't really do sarcasm. How in hell was she going along with this suggestion?

“Yes, this is an excellent idea, Ben,” added Emily meditatively.

She saw his disbelieving look and said, “you are a white man. Straight, educated, and wealthy. You simply have no comprehension of the life of a woman... even that of a white woman who is also straight, educated, and wealthy. It is orders of magnitude more difficult than yours. The life of a woman from a downtrodden community in a poor country is unimaginable for a person like you.

Don't take offense. But you just don't know how bad it is. In addition, there is the flat-out exploitation that young women are subjected to in places where their position is already condemned to be marginal at best. It is not just as labor, but as sexual objects. Rape is wielded as a weapon by men against women and the other men that they are competing with. Young women may be the most resilient, but they also are the ones that require the most rescuing.”

Rachel was vigorously nodding her head. The earlier rebuke from Emily and this fascinating aspect of health cost minimization that Ben had brought up seemed to have aligned fantastically.

“Old people and children have far more privilege and access to support as compared with young women in most societies.”

Ben heaved a sigh of relief. He had inadvertently managed to say the right thing. It would trouble him for the rest of his life, this fact, that he was simply unaware of the challenges that women face even in the 21st century and in the so-called developed parts of the world.

He added softly, “and women tend to be significantly more productive than men. So, if we are looking at the city to become a major generator of revenue in a short period of time, then women would not only adapt to that life faster than men, not only learn new skills quicker, but also deploy those skills more effectively.”

“What else?” Rachel asked. Low housing costs and minimizing healthcare costs. This seemed plausible. She would have to see some numbers. But these ideas were most definitely worth exploring further.

“Food is a big cost, especially, given the location of this city. I mean, within the Arctic circle and over an area of a thousand square kilometers, it is going to be almost impossible to have conventional agriculture. Most stuff will have to be shipped in over long distances. Wouldn't it?”

Rachel shook her head.

“Nah. Food is not an issue at all, I think. As long as they have a reasonably cheap source of reliable energy, we can have vertical farms enclosed in greenhouses and precision fermentation for other kinds of food products. I believe, energy is not an issue in the Nordic countries. They have cheap wave and wind energy coupled to abundant hydro-electricity. The foot-print for growing food would be quite small for those many people.”

“Great... then that takes care of the other big cost item that I had on my list. I mean, energy,” said Ben.

“Another cost that manifests in different ways, at least in the US, is the car-centric form of our urbanization. Too much money is wasted on cars and the infrastructure required to support them. In fact, if there were no personal vehicles in general and only mass-transit or micro-transit modes of transportation, then the overall foot-print of the city can

be massively reduced - narrower roads, no need for parking, etc. And of course, no energy needed to power those individual vehicles.”

Rachel nodded her head. Her pet peeve growing up in rural Texas had been those ugly pickup trucks being a necessity for life. The move to New York city had totally liberated her from that abomination. Yes, the hypothetical city could be like New York or any good and dense European city. Like Barcelona or Amsterdam or Paris.

“What else? Which other costs would we have to worry about?”

“Education is considered a big cost in the US for households. But I think it is mainly because of the inefficient way we go about offering it. I think, and I imagine, the people in this hypothetical city could probably learn most things virtually. They don’t need degrees and certifications from Ivy league schools to do their jobs. All they need are skills. The certification is merely to indicate that the person has the necessary skills.

Plus, if it is virtual then most colleges around the world would probably have no problem offering up their digital archives for free to the residents of the city. Also, I hear the AI-teaching assistants are fantastic. They can apparently achieve an extremely high-level of customization for each student without incurring any additional cost. That should help... I guess.”

“So... housing, health, food, energy, education... all these can be delivered at as low cost as possible to the residents. We shall have to nail down the details of providing them... both upfront costs and ongoing costs,” Rachel was murmuring to herself as she stared off in the distance. For the first time, since the heat wave tragedy, she was seeing a glimmer of hope. She was desperately going to cling on to it.

“Emily, you haven’t said much about this,” Rachel inquired.

Emily had been looking out the window. It had been mostly dark, probably, because of the cloud cover. The aircraft was getting closer to the densely populated region of the mid-Atlantic. Every now and then, a window would open up among the clouds and she would see the twinkling lights of some small town or large city flash by. She mulled over the idea. Turned it around every which way in her mind to see if she could poke any holes in it. So far, this was all conceptual. For the purposes of turning this idea into an investment-grade proposal, a lot of number-crunching would have to be done. The more she thought about it, the more she liked it. She turned around to look at the expectant faces of Ben and Rachel. She decided to force them into refining the idea even more.

“So far so good. You’ve done well in minimizing the cost of building and running this

city. I give that to you. I don't see any other places to cut."

Ben relaxed a bit. He had inadvertently become quite tense as he waited for his boss to give her verdict. It was not as if his job was dependent on this conversation. At least, so far. Even then, he genuinely admired his boss and had always sought her approval. For once, he had put himself out there with some new type of thinking. He had been worried that his boss might think it was not so good and somehow whatever impression she carried of him in her mind until then, would be diminished.

"Where do you get the revenue to not only cover the operating costs, but to start paying off the capital and a hefty return on top of it? Do the residents have their own currency? Who decides what they do? What sort of taxation exists?"

"I dunno about currency. I am no economist," Rachel replied.

"The residents decide what they want to do. They will all be given a grace period during which they have to figure that out. They have to find a way to earn. The allowance they all will get would be sufficient to cover their key expenses. Buying food, clothes, etc. It will be capped. At the end of the grace period, the allowance will start diminishing to a minimum amount.

Taxation will be progressive. They will all be aware that they are on the hook to pay for their own way and also to pay off their loan with interest. We shall have to be honest with them about that aspect. If the revenue stops, then the city shuts down and they will be sent back to their native places."

"What happens if the revenue falls short?"

"Short? Of what?"

"What do the investors do if the city doesn't generate sufficient revenue as per the contract? Does the UN just declare bankruptcy and the investors sell off the city to recover whatever they can?"

These were a lot of terms that Rachel had heard before but was not sure what they all meant exactly. Especially, that part about "selling off the city" made her concerned. The city was the refugees. There was nothing else there. No resources, no equipment, nothing that was going to be of value. It was not as if the investors could sell off condos from the city and recover their investments. Or could they? They might exactly do just that. After all, the city would have all the infrastructure. Wealthy people from around the world wouldn't mind having yet another place to hang out near the north pole. Heck, they could convert the city in some kind of a resort and not just recover part of their

investment but even make a handsome profit out of it.

What if, though, she was thinking furiously, the investors went after the refugees and decide to convert the city into another manufacturing campus similar to the one she saw earlier that day? What then? That would just not do. It would never happen. She wouldn't let it happen. The city wouldn't fail. It would not just survive but thrive. It would not only pay off the investors, but the additional revenue that it would generate would fund expansion of the city and maybe even the construction of similar cities for the billions of climate refugees in the world. They HAD to make this work! There was NO other alternative! The alternative future was too terrible to imagine! She had seen what a global climate tragedy could do. She had seen the rotting corpses in village after village in Africa.

'They will generate the revenue. I am sure of it. People always find things to do. Just the way you described it earlier. It not only happens in a large city such as New York, it starts happening even within a refugee camp. It happens rapidly, within days of the camp being opened. Adam Smith's invisible hand shows itself in no time. It has been happening for millennia. Humans are social creatures and we live in tribes. We automatically start figuring out what we are good at and what others are good at. Exchanges of all kinds appear in even the most primitive societies that have been studied.'

The pilot announced that they were about to land and everyone should put on their seat-belts.

Emily nodded.

"I am inclined to agree with you, Rachel. This could work. This could even be a success. Who knows. I would invest once you figure out all the details of this proposal."

Rachel was radiant with enthusiasm. Ben was very happy to see his friend back to her old self. He was glad he could help her. And getting this pat on the back from his boss was a fantastic cherry-on-the-top. Instead of this being a dreary day of travel and staring at spread-sheets and asking difficult questions to accountants who acted as if he was pulling their teeth out without the benefit of anesthesia, this day had turned out to be wonderful. He was tired. But it was all good.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

In the weeks subsequent to Rachel's fateful day-trip to Texas, a flurry of intense activity ensued at the UN. Maya was quickly on board with the overall idea that Ben had come up with. Rachel had fleshed it out further using a reasonable set of assumptions. It was sufficiently detailed that Maya could convene several working groups within the UN that could focus on key issues such as selection of refugees who would be offered the opportunity to relocate to the new City, administrative structure, urban layout, energy, food, vocational training, economic and taxation framework, law and order, and others.

Once the contours of the final proposal had been established by the various working groups, investors were brought in to vet the financial viability. The initial reaction was subdued. However, after several closed-door meetings led by Emily followed by a series of impassioned speeches by the representatives of the climate-affected countries at the UN, a small number of investors had stepped up to the challenge. Unfortunately, their pledges were not even remotely close to the estimated cost of building the city and operating it. The humanitarian appeals put some more pressure on the wealthier countries to get off the sidelines. None offered to pledge financial support, but in-kind support was offered by several key countries.

The in-kind support was mainly in the form of providing crucial equipment. The wealthier east Asian countries such as China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea offered the use of their idling fleets of cargo ships to not only transport the equipment but also the refugees to the City. Hundreds of these cargo ships would be retrofitted into passenger ships. These were no luxury cruise ships. They were absolutely utilitarian in their design. The goal was to safely transport several thousand refugees in one go from their home countries to the designated port in Norway, Skibotn. The last part of the journey from Skibotn to the City was to be undertaken via rail.

Hundreds of other cargo ships were assigned to the task of moving construction equipment and material to the City. The main construction activity was to be done by robots using 3-D construction techniques that had increasingly become the norm in countries such as Japan and China. The buildings were to be constructed with material that not only had to be construction-grade in terms of strength but one which also had exceptional insulation capabilities in order to protect the residents from the absolutely brutal winters of the Arctic.

The layout of the City was to be a standard grid that would facilitate rapid construction using robots. The added benefit was that the transportation system - electric trams - in the City would be easy to install and operate. The natural terrain was reasonably flat and there were no major hydrological challenges to deal with. The heating and cooling for the buildings was to be provided by a geothermal system. The pipes for both the

geothermal system and the water/sanitation system along with the electricity distribution system were to be all located under the grid of roads. The construction of a new hybrid wave and wind energy power plant was to begin simultaneously with that of the rail line connecting the City with Skibotn as both were pre-requisites for the construction of the City.

All the details were getting worked out thanks to the inexorable pressure exerted by the governing committee that was being led by Maya and ably supported by Rachel along with other motivated folks representing various other countries. The governing committee gave a crystal clear instruction for all the working groups - speed was of the essence. They often repeated the maxim, "the perfect should not be the enemy of the good". The experts were told to make their best recommendations in the context of substantial uncertainty. Everyone understood that they were trying something that had absolutely no precedence in human history. There were no right or wrong answers. There were only reasonably good guesses and those would have to do for the time being.

The lack of interest from additional investors, especially, big ones who were needed to make up for the huge gap between the estimated cost and the pledges had been unresolved despite the tireless efforts of many. The biggest concern raised by investors, especially, the ones who were solely in it for the money was about the collateral. They were simply not willing to believe that the risk of non-payment was small. They wanted some hard collateral without which they were unwilling to extend a single dime.

One day, Rachel received a call from Ben inviting her for a meeting with Emily. The meeting was to take place at Emily's penthouse on the upper west-side overlooking Central Park. Even though it was scheduled for early evening, it was most decidedly not a social occasion. Ben suggested that he meet Rachel at the closest subway station around 5:30 pm and then they could walk from there to Emily's.

Ben sounded cagey about the reason for this meeting. He hung up after they had agreed upon the logistics leaving Rachel a bit worried. Was something up with the investments that Emily had helped catalyze? Was Emily inviting her home to let her down gently? That would be an unmitigated disaster! The in-kind assistance would promptly evaporate if even the meager investments that had been lined up decided to dial back their pledges or even worse back away completely.

She went through her work day in a distracted state of mind. Finally, around 5 pm she stopped by Maya's office to let her know that she was leaving early that day. The working groups and Maya and Rachel had been working pretty much round-the-clock for the past month. So 5 pm was indeed early and unusual. Maya was on a call with someone and she simply acknowledged Rachel's intimation and got back to her conversation. The rapport between Maya and Rachel had reached to such a level in

the past month that Maya assumed Rachel had an excellent reason to be out of the office. Also, she knew that Rachel would talk with her if it was something important. They were conferring with each other a dozen times every day.

Rachel walked the mile and a half distance from the UN HQ to 59th and Columbus Circle where Ben was going to meet her. The route took her past the recently renovated Grand Central Terminal, St. Patrick's cathedral, Rockefeller Center, and Radio City Music Hall, and all the things that had made her fall in love with New York at first sight. The ice rink was open at Rockefeller Center now that winter was making itself felt.

All through the last month as the idea of the City was getting crystallized in numerous conversations and discussions, Rachel had started imagining, even visualizing, the City in all kinds of detail. Inadvertently, she imagined the City to be a lot like New York minus the annoyances. She was beginning to think how wonderful it would be for millions upon millions of young women to experience the life that she had been lucky to have been born into. In moments of self-doubt or despair, she reminded herself of that vision and got back to work in resolving whatever problem was vexing her. The vision gave her that extra energy to get through the difficult parts of her day, every day.

Right on the dot, Rachel reached Columbus Circle and waved at Ben who was already there waiting for her. He nodded and together they strode quickly toward the magnificent building where Emily's home was. The almost aristocratic-looking concierge courteously welcomed them and directed them to the elevator that would take them to Emily's floor. Ben had been there a few times. Yet, the building and the furnishings never failed to awe him. This was different than his small condo out in Brooklyn. He marveled at the stylish architecture and small art deco features sprinkled all around the lobby and elevator.

Emily was waiting for them. She lived alone and that evening she had given leave to her maid. She served them wine and invited them to sit in the living room where plates of sandwiches and chips had already been laid. Rachel noticed that Emily was trying to keep the overall mood light. Yet, Emily's brow got furrowed every now and then. That seemed to rub off on Ben as he also showed some signs of tension. But, Rachel decided to wait and let them lead the conversation instead of forcing it.

After a whole month of intense negotiations with an extremely diverse set of individuals working under immense pressure, Rachel had become quite good at reading the room. She had also become an expert in guiding one-on-one conversations and group discussions with a subtle touch. When to be quiet and when to prod was an art. She was getting really good at it. This moment asked for patience. It was already dark outside but as always the lights of New York blazed away. Emily had a few more sips of the Old Vine Zinfandel from one of her favorite wineries located just north of the Golden Gate bridge.

"I invited you today for a delicate conversation, Rachel."

Rachel kept a neutral expression even though the anxiety that she had been nursing all day was threatening to burst out. She was having a dry Riesling as she munched on the chips.

"I can imagine that you are feeling anxious ever since Ben set up this meeting. So let me first put your mind to rest about what I think you are worried about - the group of investors that I helped corral together are holding strong. We are not backing off and in fact, I wanted to tell you that we would like to increase our stake now that our team, ably led by Ben, has studied the UN proposal in far more detail. We have had a small team of anthropologists and economists work closely together to run some simulations of the City. The results appear to be entirely satisfactory as per our risk analysts. Right, Ben?"

Ben nodded enthusiastically. He relaxed a bit.

Rachel bowed her head to show her appreciation.

"But there is a rumor that I came across a few days ago which concerns me."

Emily seemed to be appraising Rachel as she paused.

"I am merely being pedantic in using the word rumor to describe what I have heard. I am quite sure that it is true since I heard it from at least three sources who I consider extremely well-informed about such matters.

Assuming it is true, there is not much you or me or for that matter anyone can do about it. This conversation is just a heads-up for you. Maybe, you will get some time to organize some counter to it. Although I doubt it.

So without further ado, I can see both of you are getting impatient, the rumor suggests that the full investment will become available to get the City built and running."

Ben stood up involuntarily and Rachel almost dropped the wine glass in her excitement. Emily let them have that moment of joy because she was soon going to pour a generous amount of ice cold water on it.

"There are conditions, though, that you are not going to like. That I most certainly don't like."

And there it was, thought Rachel. First the carrot and then the goddamned stick!

“What are they, Emily? I have been patient so far. Please don’t hold the suspense any longer.”

“They want collateral for their investment. And it is not just the physical assets but they want to include the people in it. At the first sign of a problem with the investment they want the right to convert the City into a manufacturing hub and the refugees into bonded labor.”

“Noooo...,” Rachel whimpered. She was stricken. This was the one outcome that she had dreaded the most. So far it had not come up in any discussion at all. Within the UN or elsewhere. The discourse around the City had been almost entirely benign in nature.

“Yes... unfortunately, that is their condition. Mind you, they will not only stick with it, but I won’t be surprised if they somehow contrive to mess up the City so that they can enforce this condition.”

“Jesus,” whispered Ben.

“Who are these people?” he asked no one in particular and started shaking his head as if it would make what he had just heard not true.

“Who are they? Why are they doing this?” Rachel asked firmly but also pleadingly.

Emily sighed.

“Well... you know them. These are the wealthiest people in the world. Their net worth is in tens of billions of dollars. Some are worth hundreds of billions. You know who I am talking about, right?”

Rachel and Ben nodded extremely slowly as they realized who Emily was talking about.

“The kind of investors that Ben and I work with are small fry compared to those. Our typical investors are multi-millionaires from the coastal American cities and European capitals. Our secret sauce is how we aggregate their funds and then spread it out among various investments in manufacturing hubs in the US. Most of my research and the contacts I made when I was in the government or consulting for other global

organizations provided us with the initial insights that drove our investment strategy.

I was thoroughly disillusioned by the lack of success of the policy ideas that used to animate me when I was young. I figured that before I retire, I could use my skills to at least earn a sufficiently good income for a somewhat luxurious retirement and to hell with trying to fix the world.

You Rachel, reminded me of my idealistic young self. I am so sorry that you are facing the disillusionment so early in your life. This is how the world has evolved over the last few decades.”

“Hold on a minute, Emily. Earlier you said that your risk analysts are happy with the projected returns from the City in the way it is currently designed. Right?”

“Umm... yes...,” Emily kinda knew where this was going.

“Then why are these investors also not satisfied with that same or maybe similar models? Why are they insisting on this condition?” Rachel was trying to find some sliver of hope. Something that she could grab on to and find that chance to negotiate away from the condition.

“I knew you were about to ask me that question. I guess, you don’t really know these wealthy people beyond their names and some details that are mentioned in their official bios. Let’s call them the plutes - short for plutocrats. What matters to them far more than their wealth, is the ability that wealth gives them to impose their will on the world. Their money allows them to control governments whether elected democratically or not. They cherish their ability to break entire societies through their decisions and they have indeed done so many times.”

“But they will be getting their return on the investment. You said so yourself,” interrupted Rachel.

“I don’t know how to describe this exactly. The plutes don’t have the same ideas that you, me, and Ben have about the world. They have a fundamentally different view of how the world works. Or maybe the more accurate description is how it should work.

Simply put, they believe that humanity is fundamentally hierarchical. A pyramid where there are a small number of people at the top who control everyone else as per their whims. And, to be honest, that version was indeed the dominant form of organizing human society for several thousand years. The patriarchal society is about men subjugating women. The religious organizations are about the priest telling the masses how to live, what to do, what not to do, etc. The monarchies are about one person

literally ruling over everyone else. The elite class is about a small group of people - based on some tribal characteristic such as race, caste, etc. - exerting control over the rest.

Look at the US - the so-called Shining-City-on-the-Hill as politicians love to say. What is its history? European colonizers invaded North America and slaughtered the indigenous people and took all the land and resources that didn't really belong to anyone until that time. Then to work that land and exploit those resources, the Europeans kidnapped my ancestors from Africa and brought them to the so-called New World. Bountiful free land stolen from others coupled with free labor meant that the US grew tremendously wealthy and powerful in a relatively short period of time.

The Civil War put a damper on this. But the dominant white race simply changed their methods. They started subverting the democratic institutions in order to maintain their hierarchy. They never really stopped despite women's right-to-vote, the two world wars that were explicitly fought to defeat monarchies and autocracies, the New Deal, the labor movement, the Civil Right movement, the Great Society, and so on.

There was a brief but amazing period in the sixties and seventies when the US was truly blossoming into a genuine liberal and progressive society. Things were moving in the right direction. My parents were among those who fought in those mass movements to make that a reality.

Alas, the evil morphed again. Starting in the 80s, the plutes took full advantage of the cheap labor available in other parts of the world that had recently been liberated from the yoke of colonialism. This gutted the opportunities for the vast majority of the people in the US. The plutes lined their pockets with extraordinary profits and then proceeded to use that cash to buy off politicians who kept reducing the taxes on wealth, gutting social programs, and deregulating the economy every which way. The climate disaster is to a certain extent a consequence of this capitalism-run-amok phenomenon.

The growth in income inequality sky-rocketed starting in the 90s and this would have led exactly to the conditions that Marx had predicted a century ago. The poor masses would rise up against the plutes unless something was done. But, the wily plutes had a few more tricks up their sleeves. They used distracting wars against terror and faux nationalism to keep the masses distracted. They used religion to keep the masses in a stupor. Whatever way they could dream of to keep the masses divided and fighting against each other is being used.

They simply don't care as long as they get the outcome they are looking for. They have been doing this all over the world. The same text-book is being used by authoritarians over the last few decades to impoverish the people while enriching the already wealthy. The technology - cable TV, internet, social media platforms, the AI tools, etc. - merely

enabled them to do so at a fraction of the cost than before. Except for a few pockets such as the liberal enclaves along the western and north-eastern coasts of the US and maybe some places in the upper midwest, they have successfully turned the clock back in the rest of the US to the era of slavery and patriarchy. It now comes under a slightly more benign guise, but it is still the same hierarchical structure that they have always been aiming for.

Gosh... you got me started on a full-blown lecture. It has been a really long time since I have seen the inside of a college classroom. Anyway... nothing what I have tried to say is new. Libraries are full of entire sections that cover this literature. I used to have inches-thick reading material for my graduate students on these topics."

Rachel and Ben were silent. They were moodily swirling the wine in their glasses trying to figure out some response to Emily's soliloquy.

"I can think of one counter-offer," Rachel finally spoke up in a measured tone.

Emily gave her a wistful smile. She admired Rachel's optimism and her faith in the inherent goodness of humanity. But she knew better. Humanity had never really been inherently good. There had always been exceptions to that rule and there would always be those - the ones who were good and sought to do good. Since they were exceptions, the rest put them on a pedestal and treated them as saints. The actions and words of these saints became the aspiration for the rest. At least, for brief periods of time in a few locations. Then it got swamped all over again by the inherent human nature which was mostly just plain selfish.

"What if we offer only the physical assets as the collateral? The City itself. Not the people. Just the buildings and the infrastructure. I am not sure the Nordic countries would agree to that. After all it is their sovereign land which they are lending to the UN for the express purpose of constructing this City. But maybe those countries can be persuaded to consider this arrangement. The plutes can monetize the City. For example, they could convert it into a gigantic tourist destination. The residential buildings could become hotels and so forth. Once the plutes make back their investment, the refugees would again be allowed to live in the City. For that interim period, the refugees could double up in half the city while focusing on jobs/businesses that cater to the tourists. I mean... it could be plausible, right?"

Rachel looked at Emily and Ben in turn with a hopeful expression.

Slowly but decisively Ben shook his head, "there is no way that the plutes and for that matter the Nordic countries would end your tourism-era and allow the refugees to settle down in the City again. The economics of tourism is such that the money they would make will be stupendous. They will not stop at the City borders, they will expand the

foot-print to monetize the vicinity through all kinds of tourist activities. It will just keep growing. They will all get addicted to the cash. This would be the exact opposite of what the Sami people fought for. They wanted to save this land from getting trashed by their countries. And they did succeed until Kaija made that famous announcement because of which we are all sitting here right now. The refugees will end up becoming the downtrodden labor force that we see in almost every tourist destination. They will be reduced to cleaning up after the wealthy tourists. That will be their fate. Not necessarily much different from working in a factory. I am not sure this counter-offer is any better than what the plutes have in mind, Rachel. I am sorry... but that is how I see it playing out."

Emily silently nodded her head as Ben finished talking and glumly hung his head. Rachel stared out the window aimlessly. The waves of crushing defeat washed over her. All her dreams of helping build a thriving new city for oppressed women from the worst parts of the world were going up in smoke. All she could hope for was that the City would succeed beyond her wildest dreams and the investors would have no chance of ever exercising their horrific condition. The City would just have to keep making copious amounts of money for many years to keep the vicious plutes at bay. Would they be able to do that? No one really knew the answer because such a City had never existed in human history. It hadn't even existed in anyone's imagination as far as she could tell. But she had to try.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Emily was right. The deal she had described came to fruition in less than a week. The draconian condition that was forced on the UN was to be kept secret from everyone, though. No one except a small number of relevant staff members at the UN were aware of it and they all had to sign extremely stringent non-disclosure agreements. The contractual documents were never shared with the public at large. But Rachel, Ben, and Emily knew. They couldn't do anything with that knowledge but sit helplessly on the sidelines as the contract was approved by the UN.

A major event was organized at the UN HQ where the deal would be announced to the entire world with great fanfare. The heads of states of dozens of countries planned to attend it in person including the President of the US. Maya's task-force consisting of the numerous working groups were told to finalize their plans within a month so that construction could begin right away.

A major detail that changed during that month was that instead of just one large City, there would be three cities. One per Nordic country. The location of the City at the intersection of the borders of the three countries didn't seem as viable as some other sites. None of the three countries wanted to volunteer to take on the full responsibility and so the compromise that emerged was that there would be three smaller cities instead of one large city.

Another compromise was made about the size of the cities. The three Nordic countries had left unsaid the actual number of refugees that they were willing to accept. The statement made by Camille at the press conference where she had stipulated 25 million refugees had been used as the ad hoc number upon which the UN staff had been basing its planning on. But when the 25 million-strong City became three cities, the two smaller Nordic countries panicked. If that 25-million refugee population was divided equally among all three countries then the refugee cities in their countries would end up having a larger population than their entire country. This was just not going to fly with the nativists in those countries. They threatened another round of violent protests. Trying to divide the 25 million by proportion of the three countries meant that the largest Nordic country would do the heavy-lifting in terms of infrastructure. Again, this was not acceptable to that country.

This was all petty bickering. But that was how politics usually played out. Finally, they settled on each city being large enough to accommodate about 3 million people. This was much smaller than what Camille had stipulated. Still, they decided to go ahead with it because the clock was ticking and Camille was afraid that if they delayed too much then the entire deal would fall apart and the next summer was only a few months away. Almost everyone around the world was afraid what new catastrophes that

summer was going to bring about.

On the day of the event, Rachel's boss was hanging out with the White House entourage and had somehow managed to get himself on the stage standing right next to the US President. He saw Rachel in the audience and shamelessly mimed the act that he had proposed to Rachel when he caught her eye. He smirked lasciviously as he saw her turn red with fury. Later, when he was walking past her after the ceremony, he leaned in and said that if only she had accepted his proposal he would have gotten the US to pay for the City instead of the investors who had imposed that horrible condition on the deal.

The construction of the three cities began immediately. In parallel, the selection and transportation of the refugees who would populate the three cities started in earnest. Both these tasks took the better part of three years. By the third anniversary of the global heat wave tragedy, the UN was able to declare that the three cities were settled.

Fortunately, no additional major tragedies took place during the interim years. The La Nina had something to do with that. There was, unfortunately, no dearth of smaller catastrophes that continued to ratchet up the overall count of fatalities all across the world.

At least, though, the UN could assert that while they may not have been able to do much to mitigate the changing climate over the past four decades, they had gotten a major initiative successfully launched to adapt to the rapidly changing climate. For the moment, they could catch their breath. Their work was not done, at all, as the likes of Camille reminded them almost every single day. A tiny fraction of people who had been in harm's way were moved to a safer location. There was still no plan to save the vast majority that remained stuck in the maw of deadly climate-fueled disasters.



END OF PART 2