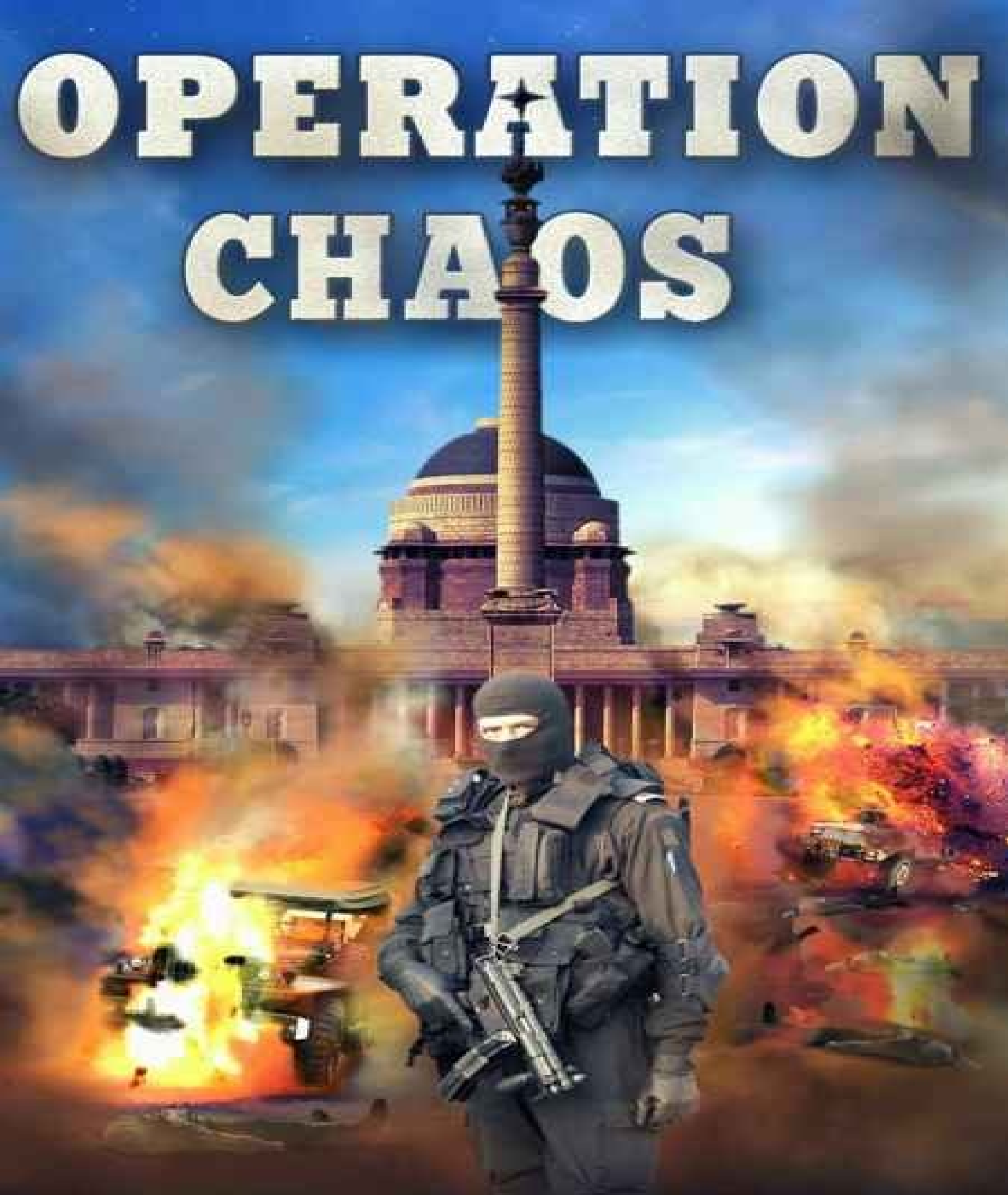
OPERATION CHAOS



HIMANSHU RASAM

Operation Chaos

Himanshu Rasam

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Last but not the least: I beg forgiveness of all those who have been with me, helped me with this novel and whose names I may have failed to mention.

A glimpse of what's in the story:




Cave Number 26
Ajanta Caves,
Time - 03:40 am


Wheeler Island,
Bay of Bengal
Time - 6:32 am

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Prologue

Intelligence Bureau Substation,

Delhi, India.

Time - 18:27 hrs

'The time is upon you... '

The voice was weak and stammering.

'It's time you pay for your actions.'

A definite gasping could be heard. The voice diminished to a weaker tone.

'I want you to suffer. You'll be hurt and you'll be put to pain-'

But the last words stood out loud and clear.

'... EVERY.SECOND.'

Bleep.... Bleep.... Bleep

"That is all we have, Sir. The call terminated at this point," the operator responded, taking down his headphones.

Another officer in a blue formal shirt poured in the details. "It was tapped on one of the Class Red lines. We received it about four minutes ago, Chief!"

The head of the Indian Intelligence's field unit churned out the possible theories regarding this mysterious call in his mind as he rotated a glass paperweight lying in front of him. Placing his hands on the table and maintaining his calm, he looked up at the officer in the blue shirt. "Have you traced..."

"We are working on it, Chief," the officer's response was crisp.

Prakash Mehta was in his late forties, but still in good shape. His closely cropped black hair already greying at the temples and his solemn intelligent face suggested that certain indefinable something about him common to all senior intelligence officers. After completing his early days in the army, he was recruited in the intelligence. The fifteen years of hard work, bullets in his shoulder and his ability to handle some complicated investigations had given

him the necessary expertise to head the field operations unit of the bureau. To the department, he was 'The Chief'.

Prakash replied in a deep and curt voice. "So we have another 'threat' call. You know the drill, officer- trace it, follow it and update me if anything important turns..."

Without any warning, the door slammed against the back wall as a young officer sprinted in the Chief's office waving two yellow sheets in his hands. His face was white and his fingers trembled as he pointed at something on the sheets.

"Chief!" he gasped for air, "You are not going to believe this. We traced the location of that call..."

He stopped for a deep breath. His breath was still ragged, his eyes bulged, but he was trying to gather himself as he continued, "... and we triangulated the coordinates of that place. The call was made from somewhere inside the premises of the Presidential Residence."

The next second was silence.

"The Rashtrapati Bhawan, Chief!!" The young officer repeated in a mild shout.

And the next second was chaos.

Chapter 1

BLACK CATS- Classified Operation

Thar Desert, Rajasthan, Western Frontier, India.

Time - 18:34 hrs

The vibrating clangour from the six-piston engine set your teeth on edge and made an intolerable assault on cringing eardrums. The chopper rotors roared in the sky and its shadow slithered like a snake over the sand dunes. In the cold, bleak and dark compartment at the back of the pilot cabin were ten metal framed canvas seats bolted to the floor. Huddled on those seats were the nine personnel who would soon face their toughest assignment yet. Captain Ashish sat beside the man who was going to lead the mission- a man who had the utmost respect and infallible obedience of every man riding in that helicopter. The chopper lurched as it hit an infrequent air pocket; Ashish grabbed the bar above his seat to steady himself. However, the man sitting next to him was as completely at home in his environment as the most contended oyster in his shell. Quite clearly, Commander David D'costa found the shuddering vibration as soothing as the ministrations of the gentlest of masseurs, the roar of the rotor blades positively hypnotic and the ambient temperature just right for a man of his taste. With a cupped cigar in his hand, Commander David leaned calmly against the seat and gazed thoughtfully into the middle distance. He clearly remembered the details of his mission supplied by the Headquarters a few minutes ago.

'Intel reports suggest that a group of terrorists have been spotted near the coordinates 26° 59′ 06 N, 71° 00′ 05″ E by some informers. Our investigating team has confirmed the reports. Your mission is to secure information about the activities of those terrorists and their intentions. You are cleared to breach in their sectors and the use of a standard class of weapons is approved. Intel says they are more than ten people, but that report is not yet confirmed.'

This was one of Commander David's 'going to hell' situations. Not that he hadn't been in some ugly scenarios earlier, but presently with a team of only eight commandos, not much ammo and no backup, the operation seemed almost impossible. Nevertheless, the seal on his left chest pocket reminded him that he was a Black Cat commando- a member of the nation's elite special task force. Underneath the black uniform that he adorned, lay an uncommon beast ready to tear the enemy apart with his bare hands. Chosen from the best of NSG

commandos and trained in the most dangerous terrains; these Black Cats were the most skilled assassins in the country. Combining their forces with the country's other special operations squads such as the Paratroopers and the MARCOS, they had carried out numerous successful operations in Jammu and Kashmir as well as other parts of the country. There, of course, had been certain incidents where they had failed to deliver their best, but they had learned a lot from their failures. And this was a mission he did not want to fail. Failure meant death in this mission.

Maybe the element of surprise will help us, thought David.

He broke off, fanned the smoke-laden air to improve visibility and asked his pilot. "How much time?"

"3 minutes from the location, Sir."

"Take us as close as you can. Stay low and standby for air support." David then turned and said, "Sergeant Harish, stay in the chopper for sniper support. We might need you."

"Sir!"

"Alright everyone- Lock and Load. Night visions on standby. Two minutes."

David adjusted and locked his CornerShot. He was ready to take on whatever awaited him in the shrouding darkness of those dunes.

Chapter 2

Chief Prakash Mehta was stunned by the news he had just received. The message on the tape had sounded ghastly.

"I want every officer, every available asset we have to reach the Central Secretariat right now," he thundered.

He turned towards the officer in the blue formal shirt standing next to him.

"Sharma, I want the Head of Security at the Bhawan on the line. NOW."

He took out the Berretta 92A1 from his drawer and loaded it. It was quite infrequent for his beloved Beretta to see the light of the outside world, let alone being fired upon a target with Prakash Mehta's finger on the trigger. Picking up the radio on his desk, the Chief called in his best officer.

"Roshan, get all the men you can and set up a two kilometre perimeter around Rashtrapati Bhawan. Get me a Code Red clearance in five. Arrange for a chopper surveillance over the Central Secretariat if possible, and I need the exact location of the origin of that call ASAP."

Pulling on his bulletproof jacket, the Chief jogged out of his office. The intelligence bureau sub-station was now in a state of controlled chaos- agents gathering their ammunition and artillery, technicians fiddling with computers trying to extract more details about the call traced. Formed in 1887, the Intelligence Bureau, also known as **I.B.** served as India's internal intelligence agency and was reputedly the world's oldest intelligence agency.

Prakash Mehta and his subordinates got into the SUVs waiting for them in the basement and rushed towards the traced location of the call; screaming out the sirens.

"Sir, the Head of Security at the Rashtrapati Bhawan on the line," said Sharma, as he passed the Chief his cell phone.

Prakash Mehta took the call, clenching the phone tightly in anxiety.

"Good evening, Sir. I am Ashraf Khan, the Head of Securi-" started the voice on the other side.

"No time for introductions, boy. I will only say this once and I do not like people

who question me back. We just intercepted a threat call from the premises of the Rashtrapati Bhawan. I want you to first secure the President, then assemble your men and search for that caller. My team and I are on our way there. Until we get there, secure all the exits and evacuate the building. However, do not let anyone out of the premises. I would need them for questioning."

"Sir, the President is on his tour of the country. I will pass the message to the officer in-charge of his security. Securing exits now," Ashraf kept his reply to the point.

Prakash Mehta felt a bit relieved.

That is one good thing- the President is not at the Bhawan. Now who the hell is this caller and what could be his intentions?

Many questions crossed Prakash Mehta's mind as the vehicle fought its way through the traffic jammed roads of Delhi. A pedestrian crossing the streets nearly missed being hit by Prakash Mehta's car. The SUV screeched to a halt just inches from the pedestrian. The driver honked the horn. But the passerby didn't appear to care about it.

Typical Indian pedestrians! Prakash exhaled in anger.

Minutes later, the convoy with the SUVs sped onto Rajpath- their sirens blaring through the quiet evening sky.

We are almost there. Hope they have found the caller!

The Chief checked with the Head of Security at the Rashtrapati Bhawan again. They had secured the exits, but the search was still going on. The President's Security Officer, accompanying the President in Assam, had been informed. Prakash Mehta's team at the I.B. headquarters was still tracing the exact co-ordinates. Some unidentified jamming signal was slowing them down.

The huge gates of the Presidential palace now came into view. The monument's Mughal architectural designs, Persian art forms and the European architectural styles were clearly visible as they approached the magnificent gate with four elephant statues upon the two side pillars. The Head of Security of the Rashtrapati Bhawan- Ashraf Khan was at the gate to meet Prakash. Two cannons near the guard posts added a historic feel to the monument. Ashraf climbed in the SUV and reported the happenings to Prakash Mehta.

"We have covered almost all of the grounds and the Mughal Gardens. Now we

are moving to the buildings. I have sent separate search teams to the eastern and western wings."

Another officer radioed in to the Chief. "Sir, we have set up a 2 km perimeter. Awaiting further orders."

"We don't know exactly how our mysterious caller looks, but keep checking their IDs. Detain any suspicious personnel," the Chief replied.

Their vehicles skidded to a halt in front of the Jaipur Column and the agents promptly scattered in search of the anonymous caller. Chief Prakash Mehta started walking towards the main building.

Prakash knew that this search was like searching for a needle in a haystack. It was almost impossible to arrest the culprit if he had already fled the premises. That very moment, there was a beep on the Chief's phone. It was a message from his tech-team.

Incoming Message: Call source traced. Signal tracked from the west wing.

"We have lead now," the Chief said, turning to Ashraf. "Direct your men to the west wing. I hope it narrows down our search."

Ashraf ran towards the stairways leading to the Presidential residence. He switched on the 'talk' button of his Walkie Talkie. "Every one converge their search to the western block. We have information that..."

What happened next second wasn't even remotely anticipated.

A blast of sound reached him first, an almost physical assault upon the eardrums. A tenth of a second later the shock wave blew Ashraf off the ground, launching him forward. The explosion shook up everyone and everything. The SUVs blasted like dynamite sticks, splattering sheets of metal, which flew everywhere. Fire and smoke shot high up into the air.

Chapter 3

DRDO: DEFENCE REASEARCH AND DELVELOPMENT ORGANISATION

PRESS CONFERENCE

Homi Bhabha Auditorium, DRDO HQ,

Delhi, India

Time - 18:30 hrs

"Today, I have called this press conference to proudly declare that we, along with our Russian partners NPO Mashinostroyenia, have successfully completed the phase 1 of the hypersonic version of the *BrahMos*."

Claps, cheers and applause flooded the auditorium as Dr C. Kapoor presented an animated design of the hypersonic version of the BrahMos missile on the screen.

The news reporters could not contain their curiosities for long after the formal introductions. The questions started coming in like darts-

"Sir, what exactly was the phase 1 of the project?"

"Sir, when will the phase 2 start?"

"What is the speciality of this missile?"

Dr. Kapoor, the managing director of the BrahMos Project loved being in the spotlight. He thrived on those flashes from the cameras and questions from the press. He started explaining everything in detail. Extreme detail.

"On August 20, 1998, the US Navy in an attempt to destroy the Al-Qaida training camps in eastern Afghanistan and hoping to capture its leader Osama Bin Laden attacked the training camps with the best cruise missiles of the US artillery-the *Tomahawk missiles*. The *Tomahawks*, which fly over a speed of 550 mph- about 0.8 times the speed of sound or 0.8 mach, took about 2 hours to travel the 1100-kilometer distance over the Arabian Sea. Unfortunately, Bin Laden had disappeared by then-missed almost by an hour.

Many other similar scenarios have created a necessity for faster missiles with a larger destruction impact. Presently, BrahMos is the only supersonic cruise missile in service in the world."

He paused briefly. A new wave of cheers and applause shook the auditorium.

"Even the American Tomahawk is only 0.8 mach whereas BrahMos can reach up to 2.8 mach which is around 924 meters per second. Efforts are going on in many countries currently to achieve supersonic speeds. But our joint venture with Russia has now graduated to the hypersonic domain where we would be using ScramJet engines instead of RamJet. This would expand the operating range above four mach. The phase 1 of the project was to design a surface-to-surface hypersonic cruise missile, which we have successfully completed!"

Cheers and appreciation flooded in while the clicks of cameras continued. The other scientists and technologists on the dais held their heads high with pride.

"Sir, would you please elaborate on the Russian assistance you had during this project?" another question popped up from the crowd.

Mr. Kapoor stared at the young reporter with satirical eyes- elongated and sly. *Why the hell are you more worried about the Russians?* Nevertheless, he continued by putting up a fake smile.

"As we all know that ‘Project BrahMos’ was born on February 12 1998 when an intergovernmental agreement was signed in Moscow by the President of India and Russia’s first Deputy Defence minister, which paved way for ‘BrahMos Aerospace’-the joint venture entity between India’s DRDO and Russia’s NPO Mashinostroyenia. The name decided for this project was 'BrahMos' which is a combination of the names of two great rivers- Brahmaputra of India and Moskva of Russia..."

He felt a vibration in his right pocket.

It's probably just another 'congratulations' call. He had been receiving many since the morning.

"... The aim of our partnership was to design, develop and manufacture the world’s only supersonic cruise missile system- BRAHMOS. The first time we successfully launched BRAMHOS on June 12, 2001. The missile..."

The vibration stopped.

"The missile has gone through a number of modifications since then along with many trial tests..."

Again, he could feel his cell phone vibrations against his thigh.

"... We have also induced it into the Indian Army and Navy. The work on the hypersonic version began in 2008 and since then our team..."

Call terminated. The vibration stopped.

"... has worked days and nights to design the missile."

And yet again- he was receiving a call.

Now who is the moron on the other side of the line? This better be important.

*"*Ladies and Gentlemen, please excuse me for a second."

He stepped away from the mikes as he took out his vibrating cell phone and made his way backstage. The LED display of the screen showed- *UNKNOWN NUMBER.*

His thumb moved towards the receive button on the dial-pad. Little did he know that he was about to pick up *the most unexpected call of his life*.

Chapter 4

Thar Desert, Rajasthan, Western Frontier, India.

Co-ordinates: 26° 59′ 06 N, 71° 00′ 05″

Time: 18:40 hrs

The CornerShot gun was one of the upgrades to the equipment of the Black Cats after the 26/11 Mumbai attacks. The weapon allowed the operator to both see and attack an armed target without exposing the operator to counter attack. The system consisted of a pistol mounted in the front end of the weapon, which could rotate horizontally with a digital camera, a flashlight and a 40 mm grenade launcher- a perfect lethal weapon.

Laser designators, wall surveillance radars, portable X ray machines, night vision, thermal imaging cameras, remotely operated mini vehicles, level 3 bulletproof vests were the new toys the CATS were equipped with.

David had a distinct reputation in his unit- whenever he and his task force went for any operation, David brought everybody back home. He never returned with a soldier killed in action or missing in action. Back in his army days, David had ran 27 kilometres through the woods near the Indo-China border carrying his severely injured officer in-command to a medical camp on his shoulder all the way along.

"Everyone geared up?" David asked.

All of the crew of the chopper nodded their heads in affirmation.

****

Somewhere inside the enemy camp:

"*Janab*, we have got a chopper on our radars."

Their leader rose up from the chair, but his face was calm.

"Must be the B.S.F patrol. For the past eleven days, we have been operating here and they do not have a slightest clue about it. You know the drill- Blackout for next 20 minutes. Kill all the switches. No radio contact until the patrol passes. I don't want them picking up our radio signals. Inform me after they have patrolled out of the radar range. *Aur chaukkane rehena*."

"*Ji Janab*!" was the reply.

****

Seven commandos and Commander David roped their way down on the enemy territory. David radioed the pilot, "Big Bird, we are on the ground. Stay within the range and give them an impression of a regular patrol. Sgt. Harish, you will stay in the chopper for sniper support. Get backup from the BSF if you can."

Turning towards his team he said, "Ok. Here's what we do- we break into their bunkers, take them out one by one, gather whatever Intel we can get from this place and get back home. It's not that easy as it might have sounded right now. But don't worry people. I will take you home- All of you."

The Army had taught him one solid thing- You watch your team’s backs, and they will watch yours.

The eight figures stealthily crawled their way towards the enemy camp. The area, which Commander David had surveyed from the chopper, was pretty much same as given in the maps supplied by the Headquarters. Four bunkers lined up 2 by 2 directly in front of them, a main building beyond the bunkers and a typical watchtower towards the east.

He drew a rough sketch of the map on the ground and explained everyone their tasks. "We split up into two teams here. Rakesh take Sgt Mohan, Capt. Ashish and Cpl Mahesh with you from the left. You are Charlie. The rest of you with me to the right. We are Bravo. They have blacked out, so this will give us a Night vision advantage. Be alert; use your wall surveillance scanners and thermal imaging to navigate. Keep it silent boys- suppressed weapons only."

All of it seemed so customary for David. If he was concerned, no trace of it showed in his face. He resumed his soft whistling calmly, almost leisurely, scanned the sector. The two teams split up and made their way to left and right bunkers. The bunkers lining either side of the mud road, solid, craggy, four square buildings, looked as if they had been defying the bitter desert winters for a long time and intended going on doing so for as long again.

"Charlie to Bravo. We are in position to breach the bunkers. Waiting for your go."

"Charlie, do you see anything on your thermal imaging cams?" Bravo team's reply.

"Absolutely nothing, Sir."

"This could be a trap or an ambush. So stay alert. All right- Night visions on. Go, Go, Go."

Silence.

Both teams blasted into the bunkers- a loud banging of the door, footsteps of the commandos breaching in, and then silence again.

Team Bravo-

In the right bunker, David quickly checked the corners at his 3 O' clock. Nothing

"Check those corners at your nine. "

"Clear, Sir."

"Move. You see anything?"

"Negative, sir! This bunker is clear. Moving on to the next one."

"Charlie this is Bravo. What is the situation over there...?" David tried checking on with the other team.

Some electronic noise could be heard over the radio. Something like buzzing- But nobody replied.

"Charlie come in. Speak to me!" David was getting frantic. His voice over the radio was disembodied; empty, but even the metallic impersonality of those words could not disguise the bow taut tension behind it.

Silence again. A little muffled voice could be heard in the background.

"Rakesh! C'mon, answer into the goddamn radio. Rakesh, you there?"

No word, no signal, no faintest whisper of sound came out from the other end of that radio set.

Chapter 5

He was numb. Totally.

The conscious part of his mind couldn't feel a thing.

All he could see was dust. His ears were ringing from the blast. The front premises of the Rashtrapati Bhawan had now turned into an ignited heap of dust. The palling smoke rapidly made its way into his lungs. He coughed and choked. It felt like someone was forcibly pouring smoke through a funnel into his body.

And then suddenly, there was pain.

Excruciating. Everywhere.

Like a bolt of lightning, it hit him hard.

He could see blood over his burnt body. Pieces of metal piercing into his soft flesh. Face, chest, neck, thighs. His body shuddering, his lungs suddenly gasping for more oxygen. The smoke started clearing out and as his vision cleared, Ashraf Khan saw nothing but dust and bodies lying around him. The Jaipur column was not standing erect anymore. A major part of it was damaged due to the blast. People were running for help wildly- guards, servants, army officials. Every inch around him, he could see blood. As the sense of hearing came back to him, he could distinguish the sirens of ambulances ringing in his ears. And then in the smoke, Ashraf saw two army medics coming towards him with a stretcher. One of the medics kneeled down and grabbed his wrist. "Shit! He is losing his pulse... Sir, can you hear me? Just hold on..."

The medics lowered the stretcher to the ground.

"Sir! Stay still. It's serious. But you are going to make it alive- Just hang in there. Get the First Aid. Quick," one of the medics ordered his companion.

The next thing Ashraf Khan knew was something being injected into him. It was probably some kind of painkiller. Everything started to go dark around him. The voices around became muffled. The dust and smoke started to disappear lightly. He stared towards the dark evening sky as he was taken on a stretcher. The stars were gone. Only the darkness prevailed now.

"Sir!" A medic was slapping his face to keep him conscious. "Stay with me!

Keep your eyes open..... We are almost there...." The next words were lost in the sirens of the fire brigades, police vehicles and ambulances. Leaning over his head to the left, he saw bodies being carried all around on stretchers and first aid being given to the survivors. Suddenly Ashraf saw something which made a cold shiver run down his spine. A dead body nearly burnt to ashes. The dead body of Chief Prakash lying in pieces.

"Hey, mate-" It was almost a whisper. Ashraf Khan couldn't find his voice. The chaos going around made it even more difficult. Ashraf Khan tried desperately to make an eye contact with the medic carrying him on the stretcher. "Excuse me... Hey, you!"

Finally, after a couple of desperate attempts, he finally got the medic's attention. "Listen up, I don't know how you would do it, but I need to...." It was too difficult for Ashraf to wriggle out the words.

"Sir, you need to lie down. Just don't panic. The bomb which was triggered-"

Ashraf pulled all his strength together and made himself clear. "JUST SHUT UP AND LISTEN. You go to any Black Cat commando you can find around here and ask him to call Officer David D'costa on the site. He is the best man, I think, who can handle this"

A moment later, Ashraf Khan collapsed on the stretcher. Lifeless.

Chapter 6

3000 miles away...

Commander David D'costa had some problems of his own to handle.

"Sir, it's almost half a minute. We have got no reply from the left bunker," his subordinate broke the silence.

"Maybe, Rakesh has probably switched his radio off!" David stated a possible reason.

"Should I go and check..."

A moment later the radio crackled to life. An eerie electronic voice of Cpl. Rakesh took over.

"Charlie reporting to Bravo. Sorry, had to cut off radio contact. Took out two hostiles here when we breached in the room. They had a radio transmitter and receiver. Had to make sure nobody was listening to us on the same frequency. Now we are clear to proceed. Over."

"Alright Charlie. We are moving forward. Everybody sticks to the plan. Out."

The Bravo team got in position to take down the next bunker. David turned towards a fairly healthy guy, gestured him to come over.

"Avinash, run and pound your body against the door. Your momentum would be just enough to take it down. The door looks to be in a pretty bad shape. Keep on lying down on the ground and the rest of you take the bastards out. I will circle around to the window to give a covering fire. No survivors."

Keeping his movement as silent as possible, David circled the bunker and reached the window.

Checking on his camera, he got three heat signatures.

"Three armed men in the room. Do it on my go."

Lying under the window sill David adjusted his CornerShot and banged a bullet into the head of one terrorist. The two remaining tangos turned around to see their mate fallen down. Before they could reach their guns, the door came down and the Indian Army bullets tore through them splattering the rear wall with

blood.

"Bunker clear," Avinash confirmed.

"Charlie, status?" David checked with his second team.

"This bunker was empty. Looks like they have almost abandoned the place. All clear. Over," Rakesh gave a quick response this time.

"Plant the explosives. If we go, we take the whole place with us."

"Copy that. Out"

Team Bravo planted the explosives and made their way towards the main building which looked like a rusty command centre with the antennas on its roof.

"Intel reports said they were more than 10. We took out five, which means we still have 5 plus hostiles in the building. Better be careful. Charlie, how's it going?" David asked while reloading his weapon.

"All good Bravo. Making way towards the tower. I can't see anyone up there."

"Roger that. We are in positions outside the door and we are going in. I don't know how many of those bastards are we going to face inside. Thermal cams didn't show us a thing. Check with us in 2 minutes. Out."

David switched off his radio and then turned towards his team. "Same drill. Avinash, you take the door down and we will bust in. All of you in positions?

Go Go Go!!"

Chapter 7

The *UNKNOWN NUMBER* had disturbed Dr. Kapoor thrice already and he wanted to shut it up all for once. He pushed the receive button and barked into the phone. "Who the bloody hell is on the line? How did you get my personal cell number and if it's nothing important you better hang up because I am in the middle of a press conference."

"Sir, I am calling from the Missile Development Facility at Wheeler Island. My name's Suhas and I am the co-ordinator here," the voice sounded frightened.

"Alright. Alright. Now don't beat around the bush and tell me what you need to tell me."

"The issue, Sir, is quite serious. We don't know when or how it happened, but..."

"But what?"

"The missile. The trial hypersonic missile, which we were going to test next week is in danger!"

The most unexpected call of his life.

"What do you mean by IN DANGER?" Kapoor's voice was coated with sudden fear and anxiety.

"A lot of activity is going on outside, Sir. Lot of confusion. There was firing, and I don't think that the security officials have it under control. The missile was in the research chamber, safe and secure in the afternoon. Fifteen minutes earlier, the guards went in for the routine check, but they never reported back. I thought better to report you before taking any further action. What should be our course of action?"

Dr. Kapoor sat down on the floor. His pulse was increasing every second as he was flung into a state of utter shock.

"Sir, you there?"

"Su...Suhas. I need some time. I..I will call you back and give you further instructions. Until then could you send someone else to check on the missile?"

"Yes, but... I think we should move fast. It's an issue of national security! And I

think they are searching for the control room now. I can hear voices outside.. Sir, I think they are here," the fear in Suhas's voice had now gripped the peak.

Over the radio, Dr. Kapoor could hear the door open with a bang.

"NO..PLEASE....!!" Suhas's desperate cries drowned into the silence.

Two masked men had burst into the room where Suhas was having the conversation with Dr. Kapoor. They had automatic weapons, but they had planned something more painful for Suhas. Picking up a pen from Suhas's table the first goon stuck it right through Suhas's left eye. Suhas screamed with intoxicating pain. The other man took out his handgun and pointed at Suhas's other eye from less than 10 cm in front of him and took the shot.

"Suhas, are you there? What just happened?? Suhas...?"

Dr. Kapoor heard nothing but the helpless cries and the excruciating suffering of Suhas. A moment later, the phone got disconnected.

The world was spinning for Dr. Kapoor. He was aware of a fear, a fear bordering on a reason- pure panic, such as he had never previously guessed, let alone experienced. With his trembling hands, he took out a small container of his stress relieving tablets from his pocket. His high blood pressure and bypass surgery had made it difficult for him to handle stressful situations.

A couple of tablets brought his senses back. He got up from the backstage floor and made his way to the water cooler nearby and had a sip of water.

And then he became aware of something else. Yet again, his phone was vibrating. This time it was another *UNKNOWN NUMBER.*

The second most unexpected call of his life.

Chapter 8

"Charlie to Bravo, we scanned through the tower and the surrounding sectors. We got no activity there. No signs of any terrorists. We also scanned through their rest-house. There were more number of beds than the number of terrorists we found here. Terrorists like these usually do not carry extra bedding. I sense something is not right, Sir. Over."

"Copy that. I agree this is a bit strange. According to the intelligence we obtained there should be a small army up here. Maybe they divided themselves into troops and the other terrorists went off somewhere else. Anyway, scan further sectors, secure the outside perimeter and rendezvous at the exfil point. We are going to dig for some information in here. Out."

Commander David and his team made their way into the main bunker. The communication systems were turned off and some documents were piled up in a corner. David put his hand up in the air and rotated his index finger in a circle; a signal for his squad to fan out.

"Gather as much information as you can. Anything- papers, hard disks, floppies, records. We need to know what these bastards were planning to do," commanded David, shuffling through the piles of documents stacked in the corner.

His team slowly fanned out in different directions searching for more Intel. David switched on his flashlight attachment and stepped into the next room. Adjusting his night vision, he moved on towards a row of cabinets. Suddenly, David heard a soft rustling from his right side. He flashed his torchlight towards the right.

The next moment the butt of an AK-47 came slamming on his head from the left. His skull felt the hard blow and everything started spinning. His body was launched into the air for an instant and then made contact with the ground heavily. Just as David was getting up from the ground, another blow of the butt came from the right side. Darkness was setting on him and David's blurred vision could figure out two ghostly figures approaching him from his either sides.

And then, the darkness engulfed him.

Chapter 9

The harsh and bold voice on the other end didn't wait for a 'Hello'.

"Mr. Kapoor, How is the press conference going? I suppose you got your good news by now. The fastest weapon of destruction in the world just slipped away from your hands." The tone was bitter.

Drops of sweat rolled down Dr. Kapoor's forehead. He somehow found his lost voice. "Who is this? And how the hell do you know about the.....?" His voice clearly exhibiting traces of panic. His heart was beating fast. Beating uncontrollably fast.

"Relax Kapoor... Your heart can't stand such excitement. I just wanted to remind you that you will not speak anything about this in the press conference and neither try to mention it to your senior authorities. If we can make a missile disappear right under your nose, it is not a difficult task to make your lovely daughter disappear. Right? Although, we will be needing your alibi to explain the seriousness of the situation to your seniors, but until then, just keep your mouth shut." The voice spoke with a peculiar abruptness.

"You... You swine. You better stay away from my daughter. I will kill you if I get..." Dr. Kapoor was almost screaming now. The reporters broke out into a commotion hearing the screams. But nobody even had a slightest clue of the racket going on backstage. Analysing the situation, Dr. Kapoor's assistant approached him.

"Any problem, sir? Please calm down. The media is waiting."

Dr. Kapoor pushed away his assistant and started marching up and down the backstage corridor. His heart was now pounding against his rib-cage. He clutched the phone tightly. "Why are you doing this to me? What do you want..."

"Stop it Kapoor. What we want is none of your business, but we can assure you that the missile you designed is going to be used for something very destructive. And for your kind information your daughter just received a courier from our delivery boy. lf you choose to remain silent, the contents of the courier will remain silent. Goodbye."

Mr. Kapoor's heart could take it no more- the pounding was way above the human limits. Stream of sweat rolled down his forehead as his pulse kept on

increasing. Seconds later, the chief project manager of the DRDO went into a cardiac arrest.

Chapter 10

Even before David could see them, he was able to hear his assailants as he regained consciousness. It had been a minute or two that he had been knocked out cold and now his wrists were tied with a belt behind his back, his mouth was sealed with a tape. He had been dragged to a different location- something that looked like a basement. His rifle and radio were now placed on the table beside him. Right between the table and David stood the two terrorists arguing with each other. David was able to catch some bits of conversation going on "... so we can't kill him. He is our ticket out of here. *Janab,* try to understand. Killing him won't do us any good. Those commandos are just above us searching for him and it won't take them long to locate this trapdoor. It is better we take him out at gunpoint and use him as our bargaining chip."

"No, Imtiaz! Why don't you understand it even now? We were set up from the beginning itself. That rascal left us to face death from these commandos. Enough of this nuisance. I am going to put a bullet in his head and just end this," the other assailant said violently.

David had made sure not to reveal to his attackers the fact that he had regained consciousness. The barrel of the gun was being pointed right at him. His brain calculated his next moves- distance of his hand from the gun, the reaction time of the terrorist pointing the gun at him, the time in which the bullet would hit him and the potential damage the bullet could do to him. The belt was already slipping off his wrists steadily and all he needed was a little distraction.

A minute later he got his distraction when his radio crackled. "Sir, Do you copy? Do you read me?"

David didn't waste a second. The moment both of his assailants turned their heads around to face the radio, he kicked hard on the right knee of the man pointing the gun at him, leaving him disoriented. The man lost his balance and was falling down when David made his next move. He banged his head onto his attacker's, folded up his leg and punched his knee onto the chest of the terrorist, knocking the wind out of him. The other terrorist reached for his pistol, aimed it at David and took the shot but missed. A split second later, David had rolled over towards the pistol of the terrorist now out cold on the floor. He had a little problem securing the gun with that belt still on his wrists. But before the second terrorist could take the next shot, David had his gun levelled on him. Both the

barrels faced each other. Both of them knew there were only 2 choices- kill or get killed. Ripping off the tape from his mouth, David made the third choice. The talk.

"You sure you are pretty good with that rifle?" asked David.

"I can blow your freaking head off, bastard," Imtiaz replied. Sweat trickled down his forehead and his hand trembled as he levelled the gun on David.

"Not before I put a bullet right between your eyes," replied David with an icy stare.

A moment of silence followed.

David then put forth his proposal.

"I see no point in blowing each other's brains away. What if I say we can cut a deal?"

Chapter 11

Just 18 minutes after the blast, the commandos were back on their legs taking control of the situation. Their leader, Ashraf, had been rushed to the nearest medical facility immediately.

Some camera clicks were distinctly visible even though the media had been restricted beyond a 300 meter perimeter from the gates of the Presidential Palace by Delhi Police. Ashraf's subordinate Captain Raghav took command of the situation and his first move was: damage control. He walked to the steps in front of the Rashtrapati Bhawan and called out for the commandos to 'Fall In.'

It only took five swift seconds for all the commandos to stand in a packed formation.

"What has happened here is a great threat to our national security. I don't think it is necessary to mention anything about this incident to anyone- not to the press and not even to your family. We need to clear this thing up tonight itself. I don't know how you are going to do it, but by the next two hours I want a full report on the situation, the explosives used, the impact suffered, the losses- human and structural, the probable suspects and most importantly, how the hell did those bombs get into that SUV. Every tiny detail. Call in the Intelligence Bureau and take their assistance in finding the answers I need. I am going to search the west wing and find out the location to where the call was traced by the Bureau. Secure a 1 km perimeter around this place. Our secondary officials will keep the media out of this. Declare a high alert and I want the Black Cats headquarters on the line now. Disperse."

The orders came fast. But it took no time for the commandos to assimilate Raghav's orders and then they were on their way. Captain Raghav ascended the steps and started making his way towards the west wing. Twelve monumental pillars stood firm right at the door step suffering no damage from the blast. The royal interiors of the Presidential palace greeted Raghav as he observed the temple bells that adorned those pillars displaying the Indian style used to decorate the monument.

4 floors and 340 rooms. That's a lot of space to cover. No wonder it is the biggest residence of the Head of the State in the world.

The Rashtrapati Bhawan had almost been abandoned and now only a handful of

NSG soldiers and guards were interrogating the local staff. Raghav charted out the main areas of the Bhawan to cover in his mind.

The state library, the state drawing room, the private apartments, the state dining hall and the state ballroom. Where should I start?

He decided to start from the State ballroom, which was named the 'Ashoka Hall'. As Raghav entered the Ashoka Hall, his radio made a familiar beeping noise.

"Sir, Black Cats HQ is on the line," an electronic voice rang in the State ballroom.

"Patch me through to them," Raghav replied sternly.

"Capt. Raghav, this is the HQ. What's the update?"

"I am investigating the situation. May need more NSGs over here. Need to maximise President's security."

"Copy that. We are also sending over David D'costa as per Ashraf Khan's request. Anything else?"

"Um.. Alright. What's the update on Ashraf sir?"

"Not good. The doctors have confirmed his death! Will send over David as soon as he reports back from his assignment. Extend him all the support he asks for. HQ Out."

The Ashoka Hall gave a feel of a large jewel box. Raghav was in and out of the hall many times, yet the wooden flooring, the central dance area and the painted ceiling caught his attention every time. In his early days of duty at the Bhawan, he used to stop to admire the painting on the ceiling done in Persian style. The main painting on the roof depicted a royal hunting expedition while those towards the corners showed scenes from day to day court life. The painting was done on leather and Raghav could clearly figure out the brown tint on the white background.

He took out Chief Prakash's burnt cell phone from his pocket. The cell phone was totally damaged due to the blast, but the SIM card seemed quite intact. Raghav transferred the SIM to his cell phone and read out the two recent messages in the inbox.

New Message 1: Exact location- Durbaar Hall.

Message 2: *Call source traced. Signal tracked to the west wing.*

Raghav took the next left and climbed the stairwell dashing towards the Durbaar hall. The entire floor was vacant. All the servants and officials were sent out and the NSGs were busy searching the outside perimeter for clues.

He switched on his radio.

"I want a couple of commandos sent over to the Durbaar hall right now."

"Roger that," his subordinate replied.

Aiming his gun down the sight, he slowly pushed the large creaking door of the Durbaar Hall inside. He waited for a second and then moved with his gun levelled. He checked his corners and looked up steadily. The two ton chandelier hanging from a height of 33 meters was the peculiarity of the Durbaar hall. The same chandelier now lit the entire hall. Raghav moved towards the other end of the room steadily. He recalled that the Durbaar Hall was known as the 'Throne Room' during the British rule owing to the presence of 2 separate thrones for the Viceroy and Vicereine, which were now replaced by a royal chair for the President after the independence. On the same chair now, Raghav could see something in the faint yellow light of the chandelier. It was a package wrapped in brown paper.

Another feature of the Durbaar Hall was the statue of Gautama Buddha belonging to the Gupta period, fifth century A.D, which rested against the back wall looking upon the President's throne from behind.

At the feet of the statue of Buddha was a strange looking device, a cassette player and a piece of paper.

Chapter 12

In the illuminated fluorescent green of their night vision goggles, the Black Cat commandos were now searching for their missing Commander in the main bunker. A series of muffled sounds of activity could be heard which seemed to come from underneath them. Suddenly, a hand pushed aside the inconspicuous little wooden plank which covered the entrance of the basement. The next second, all the commandos levelled their red dot sights on the hand.

David's loud voice rung from below. "It's alright boys. Just me and a new acquaintance. You can relax your weapons." David pulled himself up to the ground level. If he was concerned, no trace of it showed on his face.

"You OK, Sir? What was going down there? We heard some activity. Then a couple of gunshots!"

"Nothing much. I made a deal with someone. We were both pointing guns at each other and this was the best shot I could take," David said, giving a diminutive version of the events which occurred downstairs.

Raising his voice, so that the terrorist below could hear him, he said, "There's a guy down there. He has got some information for us, so I made an agreement with him. That information for his life. I have convinced him that we would not harm him in any way if he gives us the whereabouts of his friends and the locations of their underground cells around the country. So when he steps up from the basement, I want none of you to point your guns at him. He gives us the information and we let him walk. Everyone clear?"

There was a look of bewilderment on the faces of David's subordinates.

"Sir, we can't let him just get away!" It was not a loud complaint, but a soft suggestion.

"We NEED that info. He had me at gunpoint when we made the deal. I can't turn my back on him now. Keep your weapons down. Now!" David replied with conviction.

Everyone lowered their weapons.

"Good. Imtiaz, you can come out now. No one's going to hurt you. Just as I promised."

The terrorist's body trembled as he sat down with his wrists bound and narrated his story.

"I don't know much about this man, but we got in contact with him 3 months ago. He claimed to have had planned an attack on India and he needed the help of our organisation. His connections with our superiors were obvious. He wired the advance payment from an untraceable account number. We don't look much into who's buying the weapons as long as we are getting our money. He not only asked for weapons, but also said that he needed 9 of our most capable men to accomplish the destruction he had planned. It was decided to deliver the weapons yesterday at this location. The nine terrorists whom he asked for were our best trained men. But he didn't come here personally. He sent us a set of co-ordinates and asked those nine terrorists to come to the location with the weapons."

David was making a mental note of everything Imtiaz said. Every piece was falling into place. The empty bunkers, the extra beds and the intelligence report of more than ten people- all began to make sense.

But who is this guy who needed weapons and nine terrorists?

"So how did you make it across the border?"

"There are certain terrains along the border where we get a blind spot. Usually all the guard check posts patrol throughout the night, but at a certain point of time we get a window to move in."

"And how did you clear the radars?" Capt. Rakesh asked with an enquiring eyebrow.

"We parachuted down across the LOC. Jumped off from the plane and then the wind did its job. No chance of getting caught on the radar."

"Tell me more about the man who contacted you. Tell me what co-ordinates he gave to you." David realised that Imtiaz's answers had only spurred up more questions.

"I have seriously no idea about that. Whatever information I had, I shared. Now please let me go. PLEASE."

Taking a deep breath, David made a decision. "Okay. Then you may leave. I don't know how you are going to make it back across the LOC. But we won't come in your way."

Imtiaz was as dumbstruck as the rest of the commandos. He had never thought that David would actually keep his word. With trembling legs, he made a dash for the door; stumbling upon the floor almost twice. As soon as Imtiaz was out of the room, everyone's eyes were on Commander David D'costa.

"We can't just let him go, Sir. He is a threat to the nation. People like him are responsible for the bombings...."

"He is escaping sir, and we can still stop him," one of the commandos suggested.

The commotion about stopping Imtiaz seemed to have no impact on David; a serene smile appeared on his face as he took his time switching on his radio.

Capt. Rakesh could take it no longer. "I am going after him, Sir!"

David put a comforting hand on Rakesh's shoulder. "Relax Rakesh. You have done enough job for the night. Let our sniper do some work now."

He took out a cigar from his pocket and lit it- his old way of celebrating the completion of a mission. After a deep puff on the ancient Cohiba, he spoke into his radio.

"Big Bird, an escaped terrorist just broke out of the main barracks and is heading east. Do you have eyes on him?"

The chopper pilot took a sharp curve, lowered his chopper and started searching with the spotlight. In the dark and eerie desert beyond the windscreen, he could see a tiny dot running hurriedly towards the border.

"Affirmative, sir! I have eyes on him. He's in my spotlight." The pilot approached the tiny fleeing dot.

"Good. Sergeant Harish, you still there with sniper support?"

"YES SIR!" A crisp reply.

"Bravo! Consider this as your evaluation test. I want that bastard down in 3 shots." The calm in David's voice would have led an observer to believe that the task was rudimentary. It was not. Not even remotely.

But there was a reason Commander David was feared and highly respected amongst the Black Cats. He was no ordinary Black Cat Commando. The NSGs had a special tag for his category: Phantom Commando- something almost no civilian in the country knew about. He was amongst the top 1 percent of the

sample NSGs who achieved the status of 'Phantom' on a 7 point scale. The only other Phantom in the squad was the newly recruited youngster now aligning his shot on the tiny dot getting even tinier every passing second.

The helicopter was shaking abruptly, the convict was running wildly, the drift of the bullet owing to wind correction and the drop of the bullet had to be considered.

Harish took a deep breath, held it for ten seconds, aimed his rifle and pulled the trigger. David heard 2 roaring shots in the silent night sky. The bullet found its mark and Imtiaz's dead body collapsed on the cold desert sand, a form lying still and curiously relaxed in that huddled shapelessness of death.

David and his team gathered some more evidence and made their way to the chopper.

"Central, this is Commander David D'costa. Me and my special task force had been assigned to mission AG158H9 earlier this evening. We successfully completed the mission taking no losses. I request you to direct the BSF to take over from here. Returning to the Headquarters now. Over. "

"This is Central. Congratulations for the accomplished task. Now, as per the events of today's evening your task force has been re-deployed at Delhi. There was a blast at the Rashtrapati Bhawan almost an hour ago. We will be sending you the complete details. Report at the Rashtrapati Bhawan premises ASAP."

Chapter 13

The puzzle is now assembling itself to perfection. The blast was just the beginning- Beginning of the darkest night Indian Intelligence would have ever anticipated. They have no idea how grand my 'Operation Chaos' really is.

There was no nervousness, no slightest hint of doubt in his mind and no reason why there should have been any: with two years of solid preparation behind him, he would have been amazed if anything should have gone wrong. The operation had to be executed with a surgically military precision, marked with a perfectionism that matched the scope of an U.S Marines Op. It was. The preparations had to be made in total stealth and confidentiality. They were. A split-second synchronization had to be achieved. It was. Every possible outcome of every move made and every possible departure from the plan had to be considered. It was.

Through the damp, almost translucent glass of the window, he could still see the smoke hovering over Rashtrapati Bhawan. Sitting in a wheelchair, his right hand tightly grasped the copy of one of the oldest manuscripts human eye had ever seen. He knew that the manuscript was the key to all the missing questions even before he had read and decoded the true meaning hidden in it. He had studied it and solved every puzzle, every code which was just another poem or a *shloka* to the normal eye. And yet he had these questions. And yet his map was incomplete. There were many dark corners in his path, and today he was going to find all his answers. The wound on his right thigh reminded him of the pain he had gone through, the ways he had suffered. Today it was his turn to make someone suffer. The smoke cleared up in the sky as thoughts began to cloud his mind.

Hidden in these books is the key to acquire the artefact. I spent years of my life searching for this opportunity and yet I couldn't lay my hands on it. But today I get two things. I settle my old score and I get my artefact. 'Operation Chaos' will be something that these bastards will remember for years to come.

I will make them pay and disgrace them.

Let's see how much pain he can take tonight.

He had no command centre or control room. All the setup he needed was ready on his table- the 3 LCD screens in front of him gave access to all the locations

his cameras covered. The state of the art technology had made it easy for him to monitor every move his enemies made. His table was filled with ancient scriptures and the rarest of maps- his study of years. No wonder he had designed it as a game. A game that was going to change everything for the Indian Intelligence. His two major enemies, his age and his inability had always slowed him down in his work, had not let him find the object he was seeking. But today he had a trick up his sleeve. He had his N.U.M.

Chapter 14

The Flashback.

About 2 hours ago.

A man in a black leather jacket, climbed on the terrace of the fifteen floored 'Timber Heights' on Motilal Nehru Marg, Delhi. He had a clear view of the crossroads lying to the west of the building. He wasted no time in assembling his M24 sniper rifle from his briefcase and mounting it on the tripod. He talked into his microphone as he adjusted his scope to zoom in on the roads.

" Azar, I have a direct view of the street. Hasib is going to cross that road and you would just have a 10 second time frame to place the explosive. The first vehicle would be our target. I can see the sewer entrance on the road. Have you reached it?"

"Affirmative, Muhammed. I am just below it. I have activated the explosives and the timer has been set to ten minutes. Alert me when Hasib makes his move."

Muhammed then called up Razak, who was their tech-expert.

"Razak! Where are we with the call?"

"The tape just finished. I have activated the jammers so that their tracing algorithm can just locate that it was made from Rashtrapati Bhawan but not the exact location. I suppose Chief Prakash would be handling this and we know his modus operandi. I have set up a surveillance camera right outside the IB sub-station. Will let you know as soon as he leaves with his team."

10 minutes later.

"Azar, this is Muhammed. I can see five SUVs coming up your way in my scope. Hasib, you know what to do. We have only one chance, Azar. Do it and do it right." Their entire operation rested on this split second co-ordination.

Just as the SUV was going to take a sharp left, Hasib got in the way, forcing the driver to immediately apply the brakes. The SUV skidded to a halt right above the manhole. Azar's hand moved swift and smooth like a machine on a lubricant. The lid was removed, the explosive was placed and the lid was closed again. All in a jiffy.

"Everything is set, Muhammed. Now the other team has to get the work done at Wheeler Island."

****

Wheeler Island, Bay of Bengal.

Co-ordinates: 20° 45′ 28.94″ N, 87° 5′ 7.92″ E

Time: 17:54 hrs

A task force of 25 soldiers guarded MODULE 14- one of the abandoned missile launch centres of India. Although announced as 'abandoned' to the rest of the world, it was a prime centre for development of the hypersonic technology for the new BRAHMOS project. MODULE -14 was officially closed down for the world in 2008 as a measure to remain 'off the grid' for the ever hovering spy satellites. Increase in armour and military enforcements were easily traceable on CIA satellites and those areas were immediately marked as 'hot zones' on satellite mappings. The hypersonic missile was scheduled for its first test three days later and the head of the project Dr. Kapoor was supposed to announce the success of this project at a press conference in the capital about an hour later.

Cpl. Gurmeet Singh was one of the security officials guarding the South East check post of the facility. Activity on the island had begun to cease in the past couple of months as the project was almost complete. Only two groups of scientists worked for the final tests of the scramjet engines at the lab. In the control room, Suhas was responsible to manage and keep a track of everything that was happening at this R&D facility.

A few miles away, four men in black leather jackets had taken over a coast guard launch. Armed with the best training skills and tactical weapons, they were now ready to execute the phase two of their mission.

Just in a few minutes, four 'soldiers' got down from the coast guard launch on the south east entry of the R&D facility of Wheeler Island. The badges on their shoulders invited an instant salute from Cpl Gurmeet at the check post. As he made an entry in the register, he curiously asked his supposedly senior officers about the purpose of their visit. Of course, he had no record of any prior information been sent about their visit. Abbaz cleared his throat and spoke with an air of authority, "This is an unofficial visit so no need to check in with the Central Command. With 3 days remaining for the trial launch of the missile, we suspect a potential threat from a group of terrorists. It is a direct order to re-plan

the security here and to send in more reinforcements. I want to discuss some security measures, and I want each and every soldier present here to assemble at the MODULE-14 central hall in fifteen minutes. Meanwhile, we would require the maps of the island to study the current security arrangements."

Trusting the ingeniously forged ID's of the fake officers, Cpl. Gurmeet handed the imposters some maps of the island which were enough for them to understand the security threats and sentry posts. The disguised terrorists split up in different directions and took care of the tower sentries and radio communication systems. After fifteen minutes, the only threats to the terrorists on the island were the soldiers who had now assembled in the central hall of MODULE-14.

****

Muhammed slowly adjusted his scope towards the Rashtrapati Bhawan. The evening Delhi skyline restricted his view of the target building. But he only had to see the smoke rising up in the sky to confirm the success of their mission.

He was waiting. The timer had been set for ten minutes and every passing minute was a test of his patience. It seemed like ages had passed by the time Muhammed heard a subdued blast at a distance.

"The bomb must have gone off. I can see the smoke. Proceed to plant the things in the Durbaar hall," he said. Hasib and Azar, disguised as the fire brigade crew, had got into a stolen water tanker and rushed on the streets of Delhi towards Rashtrapati Bhawan. They had a package wrapped in a brown paper to be placed in the Durbaar Hall. It was now time to hook the bait for the fish.

****

Wheeler Island had quite a few buildings on its southern side. Most of the northeastern area was unoccupied and was referred to as the 'woods'. Nearly all the houses were of the wooden chalet type, with great sweeping eaves and balconies running the full width of the front of the houses. These had served as the living quarters for the scientists that had worked on the earlier projects. A few were comparatively modern construction, with shingled walls, small double glazed windows and incomplete wrought iron grille-work, but most were very old and low, planked with rough adze-cut wood, and having the interlocking wall-beams projecting at the corners. The lab was centrally located in the southern building complex while MODULES 13 and 14 stretched across the southwestern part of the complex. The control tower was housed inside an old light house near

the southeastern shore. This entire facility was surrounded by a 20 feet wall on the southern side and by an electrified fence on the north.

MODULE 14's central hall was now occupied by soldiers who were the only remaining security of this island. With Abbaz making up some stories of a terrorist threat, the remaining three terrorists took positions behind the soldiers. Abbaz was so realistic while telling the new security arrangements that the engrossed soldiers never realised suppressed weapons being targeted on them. On Abbaz's signal, the bullets burst out of the barrels, tore through bodies and bones and skulls- a ruthless massacre happened. The three terrorists firing from behind had no expression of rage or ruthlessness on their faces. Their faces were stone cold and their hands steady as they handled their weapons with extreme proficiency. Before anyone could realise what was happening, Abbaz opened fire from the front. Sandwiched between the rain of bullets Cpl Gurmeet and his mates didn't have a chance to survive. Walking in the pool of blood, Abbaz relished their small victory for a few seconds. But he knew that this was nothing compared to the victory they were going to achieve tonight.

"We have to secure the control tower now. As soon as we do that, get me Mr. Kapoor on the phone."

Chapter 15

Location- The Rashtrapati Bhawan

Time - 20:32 hrs

By the time David and his team reached Rashtrapati Bhawan, the translucent screen of smoke had cleared out, returning the visibility to normal. The medics still crowded the grounds treating the injured and picking up the dead. David glanced around, spent a few seconds to register in his mind the impact of the attack and signalled a few from his task force to help the medics take care of the wounded. He then made his way straight to the man in charge, Raghav, hoping to learn more about the situation. "Any clue as to who was behind the blast?" David asked after Raghav had saluted him.

"Absolutely nothing, Sir. They left nothing behind. We have secured a perimeter of 1 km radius and check posts are being put up as we speak. After we got the information from the IB, we made our move to search..."

David gestured Raghav to stop momentarily at this point. "Wait! You said you got the information from the Intelligence Bureau. How did they get involved in this?"

"Actually, they had traced a threat call. That call was made was from this location and that is why Chief Prakash came over to investigate. He informed us as soon as he got the information."

"So the call was made from here. But who was on the receiving end of the call?" David was now getting a grip on the preceded happenings.

"IB keeps tabs on every important and powerful person in the country. It must be someone really important that the IB made such a rush to locate the caller. Do you want me to find out?" asked Raghav with a promptness.

"Yes, of course. That would help the investigation. Right now I am heading to the Durbaar Hall to have a look at that tape. Is it still there?"

"How did you know about that?" Raghav was surprised.

"Word spreads faster than fire around here, mister! HQ had filled me in about your findings in the Durbaar hall."

"We haven't checked out what's on the tape yet. Mr. President returned from his tour as soon as he heard about the blast. He is heading there too."

"So President Ajaysingh Chauhan is already here. I didn't get THIS news. Need to keep a strict check on his security," said David, making a mental note.

The commandos swiftly made their way to the Durbaar hall. On a couple of earlier occasions, David had interacted with the President during certain ceremonies. President Ajaysingh Chauhan was a very popular and a highly respected personality. The country had seen him earlier as a nuclear scientist and an inspirational writer. He had been a prime architect of the country's nuclear arsenal and now he was serving his nation by accepting the responsibility of being the first citizen of the country. He was one of those few who even after being called the nominal-head of the country, put in a lot of effort to serve his nation. Being in his seventies, he tried to be as brisk as he was back in his nuclear research days; although his age had slowed him down a lot. As David entered the Durbaar hall, he noticed three things almost instantaneously-

One: The beautiful chandelier hanging up on the ceiling.

Two: The majestic idol of Lord Buddha.

Three: A man with grey hair, wearing a light blue formal shirt with sleeves folded up to his elbow standing near the statue of Buddha inspecting a brown packet kept on the throne. There was glimpse of anger and despair on the President's face.

David asked his team to wait there and proceeded to salute the President. After an official salute, the President shook hands with David. "So Commander David D'costa, any idea how this happened?" asked the President wiping off the sweat off his brow with a handkerchief. Keeping his attire simple yet elegant, Ajaysingh still carried a charismatic aura with him: that of a man serious about his work- very serious. He had a freckled face, retro spectacles which looked a little broad on his slender build and narrow shoulders.

"No, Sir. I just returned from an operation near the border. An old colleague of mine, Ashraf, was in-charge of the security here. He recommended me to take over."

"He was a good soldier," there was a gloom in Ajaysingh's voice. "He used to handle all the security arrangements perfectly. I heard he couldn't make it. We also lost Chief Prakash Mehta. How is this suddenly happening? Why didn’t our

agencies see this coming? This is a VERY precisely planned terrorist attack."

"I think so too, Sir. Can't tell for sure until we get to know the details about the person to whom that threat call was addressed. My officer is working on it. Looking at the course of events, I sense something more is in the offing!" David replied with a rising concern.

"This is the first time a blast has occurred at the Rashtrapati Bhawan. It brings up many questions regarding our security systems. Media is going to set things on fire now. We need to prevent any further attacks."

"We also need to increase your security, Sir," David reminded.

But Ajaysingh thought differently. "I was hundreds of miles away when this happened. I don't think this attack was meant for me. I suppose they plan to blow up some other important buildings too. There is nothing to worry about me. Find out whom was that threat call meant for. He is the one who needs more security."

"And that again would be you, Sir!" Capt. Raghav remarked as he entered the hall.

Chapter 16

"We tracked the number to which that call was dialled. Turned out to be your office phone number. We also checked out the answering machine in your office. It played the same message. No doubt the phone call was meant for you, Sir!" Raghav reported.

"In that case we should arrange a tier 5 security for you. This is really strange. Someone made a threat call from here itself on another phone here- addressed to you," David remarked.

As hard as things were for the President to digest, his acquaintance with such threats was not new. He had received threats before: since the time he started working for certain defence projects. Some from the intelligence agencies beyond the borders, and some from the active terrorist organizations around the country. But this issue seemed suspicious and way too dangerous.

"Maybe that package there would give us some clue to what's going on." The package was brought under the spotlight by one of the President's personal bodyguards. All the eyes in the room rolled to the package wrapped in a brown paper placed on the throne and then to the other inventory lying at the feet of the statue of Buddha.

"That package was there in the room when I first reached here and so were these cylindrical device and cassette player. I had them X-rayed as soon as I found them. They do not contain any explosives. The X-ray displayed that the box holds an audio cassette. I replaced the package and the other items back to their original places after X-raying in case their locations in this hall would give us some clues," said Raghav. David unwrapped the brown paper around the package and emptied its contents on his palm. The small audio cassette had no markings, no text written on it. He walked over to the statue of Buddha, picked up the cassette player and inspected it carefully. He then glanced at the piece of paper lying beside. It was a plain piece of paper with some random sets of numbers written on it.

Is it some kind of password? A combination?

David decided to check it out later.

"The cassette player is clean. Let's see what this cassette has to say. And send

this device to the lab for inspection," he said, pointing to the electronic device. The device was a cylinder of almost thirty centimetres in diameter. It was heavy enough and took two commandos to lift it. After inspecting it for signs of explosives, the device was sent to the lab.

David did not like the idea of tampering with any evidence and he knew that the proper protocol would be to let the experts take the cassette and the paper to the lab and examine them. But some questions needed urgent answers. Taking a deep breath, David put the cassette in the player and hit the play button.

That very second something happened and it went completely unnoticed. In the anxiety to listen to what was on the tape, nobody saw a tiny green light on an explosive planted on the support joint of the chandelier above them change to red.

A computer screen on someone's table displayed- Explosives Armed.

Chapter 17

The tape played.

"Hello everyone!" The sound seemed jovial, almost like a person about to burst into laughter. "I expect that your Honourable President is hearing this. If not, stop the tape and please play it for him when he returns..." The voice varied over a range of pitches and moods. The serious tone at the beginning of the sentence jumped to a mild comic in the middle and then again to an admonitory whisper at the end of the sentence. "... because I want him to know this; his people are going to face the consequences of his wrongdoings tonight and all that blood is on his hands."

There was an absurd insanity in the voice; and yet a mysterious calm. A moment of silence followed.

"You probably must have already seen how I infiltrated one of your most secure buildings and, believe me that was just the beginning. Uhh...Oh! I apologise for not having introduced myself," an erratic giggling followed. "For now- just consider me as a lunatic. Whatever I am going to say next may sound very illogical to you. But then, no one tries to find logic in a lunatic's words. So don't be surprised when this lunatic says that he is going to perform an experiment. A chaotic experiment where all of you are my subjects. I know one blast isn't enough to persuade you to play my game, of course, so I have made some extra arrangements. Speaking about the experiment, it's pretty simple. My experiment. My rules. Thousands of lives of your people at stake...," the voice cracked a horrendous laugh.

"This experiment is a hunt for a lost object. I will extend all the help I can, give all the clues I have and you only need to follow them. I need that object, that artefact before tomorrow morning. How quickly you can find it will decide how many lives you can save. Get your best men, do anything your powers permit you to do, but I want my prize tomorrow. And now comes the part where I tell you what would happen if you fail to do as I say. I just... um... let's say 'hijacked' the most advanced missile from your arsenal at the Wheeler Island." The voice let the news sink in. A second passed by. Then another. The voice which then took over would have left anyone confused if it was the same person speaking. It floated the conviction of a man meaning business. "I can target it anywhere in the country. Imagine the destruction if I direct it towards the metropolitans," the

voice increasing its icy grip over the helpless listeners. "You break one rule and the missile goes airborne. So here are the rules of the experiment: Rule No. 1- Do not break any rules and follow my orders precisely. It's actually for your own safety. Rule No. 2- Any attempt to attack the Wheeler island facility will only invite trouble. Rule No. 3- You don't get any time extension. You have only 12.00 hrs."

The tone suddenly turned into an eerie whisper.

"Considering the fact that you have no other option, let's begin the experiment. I am going to tell you exactly where the first clue is hidden, but it's not going to be easy finding it. The first clue is written on a metal at 28° 31′ 27.68″ N, 77° 11′ 6.89″ E. Do not forget to have a look at the paper beside this cassette player. But it would only be helpful if you would know how to read those numbers on the paper. I suspect that you won't take me seriously, so do not hesitate to ask Mr. Kapoor- the head of the BRAHMOS project if you have any doubts about the level of mass destruction that missile is capable of. And the last thing- I will appreciate it if you do not try to deceive me with your usual tricks; the consequences, my friends, will be disastrous for all of you. I am not alone - I have my army - The Nine Unknown. I have my eyes on you every second of every passing minute. I know it will take more than just some threats to make you understand that you should be taking me seriously. So, I have decided to give you another demonstration of my capabilities, should there be any doubts left regarding my intentions and the extent to which I can go. There is a reason why I chose this room to keep this tape. There is a reason I placed the rigged cassette player right next to the cassette. The chandelier hanging over you will collapse in 20 seconds after this tape ends. Welcome to Operation Chaos."

For one second, maybe two, all movement in the room ceased: the silence was abrupt, so absolute that even the farthest standing commando could listen to the tape coming to a hasty end in the cassette player. No one spoke, no one even breathed: the shock, the utter unexpectedness of what had happened held them in thrall. But then, they had clearly heard the words- *will collapse in 20 seconds after this tape ends*. Recovering from the daze, the commandos quickly formed a circle around the President, huddled around him and made a dash for the corner of the hall. David and Raghav moved everyone out from underneath the glowing chandelier just as a series of 4 small blasts weakened the support points of the chandelier. The hanging chandelier, accelerated by gravity, fell to the ground with a resounding shatter of glass and metal. The room suddenly went dark and a momentary blindness hit each and every commando in the room. Nobody had

any idea what was going on in that chaotic darkness of the Durbaar Hall. As he was adjusting his eyes to the sudden darkness, that's when it hit Raghav- *The president was completely exposed.*

Chapter 18

Four minutes later...

The emergency lights in the corridor beamed to life and the commandos were on their way with a bomb squad to check for any other explosives.

Raghav was the first one to gather his wits and speak up. "I think we should check with the DRDO chief Mr. Kapoor. Whoever this was, he was right about one thing. He is one hell of a lunatic. Carry out an experiment? For which he blows a car, a bloody chandelier inside the Rashtrapati Bhawan to draw our attention and threatens us with our own missile! How he managed to rig that chandelier with explosives still baffles me!"

President Ajaysingh was utterly lost. Caught between two equally bewildering choices of taking the matter into his hands or leaving the situation to be completely handled by the Black Cats, his breaths became increasingly heavy. Another thing that kept pecking at him was that voice. It had sounded like he had heard it before. Somewhere. What did having to settle a score imply? Countless questions flocked his mind and he had to find answers. Fast.

David had caught a glimpse of recognition on the President's face when he had played the tape. It was a momentary lapse. Could have been his imagination. But he now had some doubts of his own. *"Does he know anything about the mysterious caller? Why target the President when there are many other politically powerful people? Is Dr. Ajaysingh not telling us something?"*

His thoughts were interrupted by Raghav's request for further orders. David shook his head dispiritedly, screwed his eyes shut, blocking the mental stream of questions flooding his mind and thought of a plan of action.

"Raghav, check out the story on Mr. Kapoor and then follow the lead on the cassette player and the phone call. I will see what I can get from those co-ordinates the psycho mentioned. If he really has what he claims to have, I am afraid we have no option but to comply. I don't think this is a mere game. This is a well-planned operation and I need to find out their primary objective."

"Sir, I think the President needs more security and should be moved to a safer location immediately. It would be better if I stayed with him. I will send my most efficient men to follow the leads," Raghav suggested.

But Ajaysingh had made a different decision. "I am coming with your team," he stated firmly. "Whatever this guy plans to do has something to do with me. He wants to settle a score, which means he is probably someone in my know or an acquaintance. I may be of some help in finding this guy."

"Or it may be a clever trick to draw you out! Sir, we don't know what awaits us at this location he has given. It may be a trap. We have absolutely no information on this lunatic yet. We need to initiate the protocol to shift you to the Panic room. I would also suggest calling an emergency meeting right now. I need a new set of orders to investigate this scenario. It would be helpful if we involve someone from the cabinet and RAW. We are going to need a lot of support on this," David tried to persuade Ajaysingh.

Ajaysingh Chauhan knew David was right- the reach of this lunatic was unpredictable. He was not a coward, but he realised that this situation needed to be handled delicately. It was for the best that he stayed at a classified location. *I would only be increasing the danger upon these soldiers*.

"I will stay in the bunker," he agreed, but hesitantly. "Let us call the emergency meeting at the bunker itself."

David sent two of his men to make the necessary arrangements while he stayed with the President to discuss an interim plan of action. The technicians from Raghav's team had finished inspecting the cylindrical device they had found earlier. "I would call it a call compiler. A device with a built-in jammer which is programmed to call a particular number and play a recorded message. It controls the outgoing frequency in such a way that the mechanism tracing that call can get only that amount of information about the location of the call as much as the programmer wants to give away. That is why the IB could not pinpoint the exact location of the call inside the Bhawan until the programmer wanted them to."

The technician looked at the blank faces around him and explained it the other way around. "It means that the IB was tricked to locate the call here so that someone could slip in a bomb on their way when the IB Officers came here to investigate. Prakash Mehta himself carried the bomb inside the premises for the terrorists unknowingly."

Bombing in the Rashtrapati Bhawan premises. Tape sneaked into the Durbaar hall. National security threatened by our own missile. A top intelligence officer tricked into transporting explosives for the terrorists! David was experiencing a complete detachment from his surroundings. He was just staring right at the idol

of Lord Buddha trying to find enlightenment. But he knew he would receive no help from the stone idol. A deep breath and David started sorting things out.

"Ask the Bureau to find out how the hell these things got here in the first place. Pull all the security tapes and entry records. I need to know who this lunatic is. Ask them to run a search through all our records and cross-check that voice with any international criminal databases we would be having access to." Raghav immediately got on the radio with the concerned IB officers.

David then dealt with Dr Ajaysingh's security. "Mr. President, you are going to come with us to the bunker. I don't want any of your personal security to accompany us. You are now under the protection of my squad. I am going to check with Mr. Kapoor. If the situation is as bad as I think, we better give that lunatic whatever he wants. He has given us twelve hours, which means we have time until 9.00 am tomorrow morning."

Twenty minutes later, President Ajaysingh Chauhan accompanied David and his team along with Raghav to a location only a select handful in the country knew about.

Chapter 19

Basement Level 3,

Classified Location,

Outskirts of New Delhi

Co-ordinates- ****** N, ******* E

Time - 21:15 hrs

Codenamed 'Panic Room', the third level basement was one of the four VIP safe houses built for emergencies. Many in the inner circle of the intelligence had heard of these safe houses, but their locations were known to only a select few. The Bureau had started using these locations to hold its confidential meetings once in a while just to ensure the taxpayers' money was not going down the drain.

This modern day fortress now had three important personnel discussing the action plan along with Black Cats commander David D'costa. Each of them had been updated about the events that had occurred at the Rashtrapati Bhawan. The bunker had walls with a metal plating six inches thick to sustain any hostile attacks. The walls sloped downward to a floor of stone, where an army of halogen lamps stood like sentinels around the perimeter, casting bleak light skyward and giving the whole chamber an ephemeral luminosity.

"Sir, Mr. Kapoor was admitted to the Apex hospital earlier this evening. He had a massive heart stroke, just after receiving a phone call about the missile facility being attacked. I checked with our security head and it seems that whatever the bastard said on the tape was true. We currently don't know what exactly they have done with the scientists and the security task force on the island. Wheeler Island is a level 5 security zone and it's almost impossible to infiltrate it without drawing attention. The security systems are designed in such a way that all intrusions can be detected. If they have taken control of the main server, they would be controlling all the cameras and alarm systems now. It's too risky to go in for an assault. I have asked a NSG team to remain outside the detection radius and stay on guard. IB is tracing the source of the tape in the cassette player and cross-checking the voice sample with the Interpol," David reported to the President.

"I think we should also announce a Red Alert. Send in NSG troops to important cities and the metropolitans, just in case! The terrorist did warn us of a missile attack," the Home Minister suggested.

"That might not be the right move presently. The blast at the Bhawan has already been exaggerated by the media and is in the prime focus of the public. If we announce a red alert and move in the NSG troops, the only response we will get from the media and from the public is panic. We have declared a High alert in Delhi owing to the blast at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, but we can't risk anything more," said David, expressing his worries.

"Can't we just cut off the power to Wheeler Island or bring their communications systems down?" asked David's commanding officer Col B.S Pathak. Pathak was the handler for RAW and IB undercover operations. He was the one who had come up with the idea for an emergency bunker a few years ago. David had a deeply rooted respect for his commanding officer.

"The place, fitted with solar panels, is designed to be energy sufficient. I think they are using satellite phones and the internet as a mode of communication. We can't simply shut down all the internal servers. We are going to need outside help from a hacker- A professional one. We need Ranjeet-"

"Wait... did you just say that we are going to depend on an outside source to get us into their system and stop that missile from launching? Why? Don't we have efficient hackers?" Ajaysingh cried out in alarm; consternation writ large on his face.

"Trust me, Sir. He is better than them. He is the guy we need at the moment," replied David, his voice calm and composed.

Spellbound as they were, the President and the Home Minister took half a minute to recover.

"I have seen this kid work. David knows what he is doing," Col Pathak added. "But David I need to know what exactly you are planning to do."

"A team at IB has been assigned to track the caller. We still have almost zero information about the mysterious caller. This seems to be a very carefully planned operation. I am quite sure that he has his ways to keep an eye on us. For now, we have to put up an act and show him that we are working as per his instructions. This will buy us some time to prepare to recapture the missile. Another team works on breaching the Wheeler Island facility undetected and

disarming the missile. As soon as we get any lead on the true location of our lunatic caller, we send in our assault team to check it out," David tried to explain the plan without giving out many details. He wanted nothing to leak out. Absolutely nothing.

"If you want me to handle it, I would like to do it my way. I want only the Black Cats to handle this scenario. No interference. No red tape on my team. No cross questions from any authorities. Can you arrange for that?" asked David with a look of determination.

"Some situations are exceptions. This is definitely one of those. I think I can handle that, David. Your team will handle the situation outside. I will arrange for another NSG team to look after President Ajaysingh's security here. We need to keep changing his bunker every three hours," Col Pathak responded.

As soon as the meeting concluded, Ajaysingh Chauhan came up to David and whispered in his ears. "I will maintain a contact with you throughout. We are not just going to act like puppets following someone's irrational orders." He paused.

"Find the bastard who started a fire in my house and bring him to me."

Chapter 20

David and his team set out in the direction of 28° 31′ 27.68″ N, 77° 11′ 6.89″ E - a place which their navigation system described as the 'Qutub Minar Complex'. David had made sure the President was totally secure and being monitored every second by his colleagues at the headquarters. Although, a strange thing had struck him when he was leaving the president's bunker.

"You have any idea why we are heading towards the Qutub Minar?" Raghav asked, shifting to make himself comfortable in his seat.

"I am as confused as you are. I don't understand what kind of game is this lunatic playing. As soon as we have that hacker, we are going for alternate plans to take over the Wheeler Island facility. Until then, we have no option but to stick to what he has asked us to do. He might be monitoring us," replied David doing a quick check of his ammunition. He made a mental note to ask for additional ammunition and medical supplies from the HQ after reaching the location given by their mysterious caller.

"Do we have enough backup in case of any emergency, David?" Raghav was not stressed, but this was the first time he was working with David.

"Yeah! That truck following us is carrying 20 NSG commandos with sophisticated weapons. I have also asked the local police near the Qutub Complex to seal off a 1 km perimeter. Besides, you can always count on my team riding in that vehicle ahead of us," David reassured with a playful punch on Raghav's arm.

It was almost 10.00 pm as they cruised through the quiet and serene streets of Southern Delhi. As they neared the oldest stone tower in the history of the capital, the magnificent Minar came into view, shining in the moonlight. Most of the tourists missed the beauty of this monument during the night time. Involuntarily neglecting the passing scenery, David's mind wandered back to the thing that had caught his eye when he was leaving the bunker. He had seen Ajaysingh slip a hand inside his pocket and quickly slide his mobile out. Typing a text hurriedly, the President had put the cell phone back in his pocket.

What was the mysterious look on the President's face back at the Rashtrapati Bhawan when he had heard the tape- that look of fleeting recognition? Doubts buffered in David's mind as their destination approached. He looked away from

the darkly opaque world beyond the windscreen where the wipers fought a useless battle with the oncoming droplets of mild rain. David did have a strong reason for doubting Ajaysingh Chauhan. It was an incident known only to a few people like David that had occurred 16 years ago.

A cracking voice from the radio cleared the cloud of doubts in David's mind.

"The local police just reported in, Sir. There is certainly something dangerous going on at the Qutub complex."

****

"Salam-Vale-Kum, Bhaijaan"

"Valeikum-As-Salam," came Muhammed's terse reply. On the other end of the satellite phone was Abbaz.

Abbaz had secured the entire Wheeler island perimeter and although he had only 4 men at his disposal, they were highly capable and extremely trained. "What's the situation in the capital?" asked Abbaz.

"So far so good. They have made their move and are heading towards the Qutub Minar. I am sure they must be working on how to recapture the Wheeler Island facility. But as long as they don't know the exact number of terrorists on the island, they won't make a move. They know we are keeping the scientists as hostages." Muhammed paused. After a moment's silence, he asked, "You got into the system?"

"Yes. The firewalls were a bit of a problem, but nothing that I couldn't handle."

"You know what to do with the missile. I have got the next set of instructions from the boss. Waiting for the puppets to arrive at Qutub Minar. You better keep an eye out and be ready to strike before they do. Over and out."

Chapter 21

Ranjeet had received a text which had left him confounded. He had no clue why Commander David needed him with such an urgency. As a secret helper of the intelligence, he had been of great assistance to the bureau in collecting evidence and following digital fingerprints. Ranjeet had also helped the defence facilities design stronger firewalls to withstand the expert level hacking. The savvy young lad had come to Chief Prakash's attention couple of years ago when he had cleverly eluded arrest several times for some serious hacking. The Chief, acknowledging the lad's genius, had converted him into an useful asset.

Almost a year later, Ranjeet also began solving cases for the RAW. It was during a RAW investigation that he had come in contact with David. It didn't take David long to deduce that if he ever needed a computer-genius, Ranjeet was the complete package.

A few minutes ago, Ranjeet had received a text from David.

Top priority situation. Need your help ASAP. Get in touch as soon as you get this.

Ranjeet dialled David's personal cell number. "Ranjeet here. Just got your text, Sir! What's the job?"

David gazed out at the mammoth structure in the distance. The tip of the stone tower was visible over the skyline.

Almost there, he told himself.

It only took a moment for David to answer Ranjeet's question, "Nothing much difficult. We just have to get inside one of the most secure missile development facilities in the country, take down some dangerous terrorists, hack through a level three firewall and stop a hypersonic missile before it destroys the lives of the country's citizens."

A moment's pause. Then in a completely tranquil tone, David asked, "So the question at the moment is- Are you interested to help?"

Chapter 22

The tires screeched to an abrupt halt. David stepped out of his vehicle, crossed the parking area and regrouped with his team at the front gates of the Qutub Minar Complex.

"We don't have any idea what we are up against this night. The local police just patrolled the area and found the night security guards knocked out cold. I want you to split up and scout the entire sector. Report to me anything that is unusual or out of order. Raghav, you take the NSG commandos and start sweeping the sectors ahead. Me and my team are right behind you."

Raghav left with the NSG troops to scout the perimeter while David decided to give a quick update of the scenario to the President. His headquarters instantly established a secure connection and David briefly explained the situation to Ajaysingh Chauhan.

"Hold up for a sec, David. Someone's going to join you. I texted her when you were leaving the bunker. She will be there any minute," Ajaysingh said, looking at his wristwatch.

"She?" David was totally taken aback.

"My daughter. The lunatic has asked us to find an ancient artefact. I figured that we might need an expert. When he directed us straight towards a national monument, I thought my daughter could help us. She has a degree in medieval history from Delhi University and may prove helpful in finding that artefact. She decided to move out a couple of years ago to carry on her research. I don't think it would be a problem to have one more member on your team, right?"

"Not at all. Actually, that was a good idea," replied David.

"Just keep her safe." David noticed Ajaysingh's voice cracked as he talked about his daughter, although he tried to say it rather casually.

A couple of minutes later, one white Hyundai Accent pulled over right next to the army truck. A woman in her early twenties got down and headed towards the nearest commando. Her long hair curled at the end and the geeky spectacles complimented the look of intelligence her face radiated. Her posture was straight, chin raised only a bit- not arrogant, just strong. Somebody you wouldn't enjoy messing with.

"Shonali Chauhan. I was asked to meet David D'costa," the girl said. She had a worried look on her face. The commando pointed her towards the entrance of the Qutub Minar complex. After the initial introductions, David asked the young woman to follow them.

"Miss Chauhan, this way," said David, making way for the new member of the team.

"You can call me Shonali." The daughter obviously did not like being addressed-*Miss Chauhan*. "Is dad alright? I heard about the blast. I tried to call him, but there is no response on his cell phone. I just got a text from his number a while ago asking me to come over here. It said that my assistance was required-" Shonali was speaking fast. Her resemblance to her father was quite evident. She had her father's penetrating eyes and refined carriage- that polished air of supple nobility.

*"*Shonali! Take a breath. Your dad's safe and sound. We are not going to let anything happen to him. He has been transported to an underground bunker and contact with him is restricted. We are in a bit of hurry and we may need your help here. But I will connect you with your dad and let him explain everything as we go in. You ready?*"* said David, passing her an earpiece.

Even before Shonali could grasp what was going on, the Black Cats formed a circular formation around her as they proceeded towards the Mughal Serai entrance. The headquarters patched her through to President Ajaysingh. The girl heaved a sigh of relief after hearing her dad's voice at the other end. But she did not hint any sign of happiness on the outside.

"Thanks for helping David. I know I am putting you in danger, but I hope you understand the threat we face," Ajaysingh also kept his tone formal. As the President started explaining Shonali the events that had occurred earlier that night, David began thinking about the blank piece of paper which he had in his pocket. *Take the paper beside this cassette player along. But it would only be helpful if you would know how to read those numbers on the paper.*

Unfortunately, David didn't have enough time to pull out the paper and read out its contents. His radio cracked and Raghav's voice full of panic became audible, "This is Raghav. Do you copy?"

"Yes. David here. Go on."

"Sir, we split to search the area quickly. I was with 2 NSGs and we were

scanning the area near the Alai Minar. I was leading them when I heard something fall behind me. I turned around and saw both of them were dead. They were shot- right through their brains!"

Chapter 23

"The Alai what?"

Shonali cleared that doubt of Commander David. "Alai Minar. It lies at the northwest corner of the complex. I can show you." She had a few parting words with her father and then passed the earpiece back to David.

"Avinash, Mohan, Ashish and Mahesh on me. The rest of the team stays here and secures the perimeter. Miss Shonali you can come with us, but be alert every second."

Shonali, David and the chosen commandos made their way towards the Alai Minar as quickly as they could.

"Stay sharp gentlemen, and keep scanning your sectors. Many things going wrong: our soldiers have been shot, the security guards working here were knocked out cold. What a strange name though- Alai Minar?"

"You can call it a failed plan of constructing another tower as big as the Qutub Minar. Had it been completed, we would be looking at two tall stone towers instead of just one," remarked Shonali.

"What do you mean two stone towers?" David asked curiously as they paced up to reach Raghav's location.

"I know this is no time for a history lesson, but in 1315 AD Alau-din khilji had ambitiously planned for a second tower of victory almost double in height and thickness of the Qutub Minar. The construction was however abandoned after the completion of the 24.5 meter high first-storey core soon after Khilji's death in 1316 AD, and was never taken up by the successors. That was the Alai Minar."

"And how come you know so much about this place?" David's vigilant eyes searched nook and corner for any lurking danger. His finger rested lightly on the trigger of his rifle ready to act at the first sign of trouble, his speeding steps firm as that of a panther.

"Studied a little bit during my medieval history course. The history of Delhi is quite fascinating and dates from the end of the 10th century..."

That very moment, David saw an unmistakable bright red dot on Shonali's

shoulder and the immediate next second three things happened almost simultaneously. David cried out to his team to lie down as he dived and shoved away Shonali behind a stone wall just as a bullet whizzed past Shonali's right ear missing her by inches, making a hard impact on the ground a few metres away.

"Where the hell did it come from?" Cpl Mahesh asked.

"Must be a sniper somewhere out there. That same bastard must have taken out our soldiers with a silenced rifle," deduced David. He checked on Shonali. She was alright, but her face was white with horror. The whizzing of a bullet going just past her was still ringing in her ears. Never in her life had she seen death so closely. David spoke into his radio, "Everyone be advised, there's a sniper somewhere out here. Better stay in cover until we take down that bastard."

Bullets started tearing through the wall that had them covered. The wall itself looked like the remains of an ancient Khilji Dynasty mosque and wasn't able to resist much.

"This wall's going to come down fast. We will try to move inside that building over to my left. Shonali- stay with me. On my mark just sprint with all your energy and be right ahead of me. Mahesh and Avinash, lay down some covering fire while we cross over."

David waited for the next shot from the sniper. Calculating on the earlier shot, he had noted that it took around three seconds for the next bullet to be loaded, fired and go through the wall.

"Three, two, one," David counted down.

Bang! Another bullet tore through the wall.

"Go! Go! Go!"

Shonali had never run so furiously in her life. A moment ago, a bullet had barely missed her and now she was trying to outrun a bullet. Mahesh and Avinash kept returning fire while David, Shonali, Sgt. Mohan and Capt. Ashish made a dash for an extension of the mosque to their left. David then provided covering fire until Avinash and Mahesh sprinted inside the mosque. By the time the sniper could realise what had happened, David and his team were already in safe cover.

From the eastern side the second team, which David had left to secure the perimeter, moved in towards the Alai Minar. Cpl. Ramesh was leading the troop, scanning the terrain in front of them. The night made it difficult for them to trace

the movements of the attacker. Another group of soldiers after securing the extreme southwest corner and the tomb of Allau-ud-din Khilji, took their positions near the Alai Darwaza.

"Sir, we now have the perimeter covered. Whoever the sniper is, he is boxed in. No visual confirmation yet," Cpl Ramesh reported.

David thoroughly checked the area in his sight. It was quite difficult to locate the sniper using a silencer. Raghav also came up with nothing. "I have no idea where he took the shot from. Although I am pretty sure that the bullets came from the southern part."

Suddenly David turned to Shonali. "Any places you know which would be ideal for shooting with a sniper rifle?"

Shonali was taken aback by the question. This wasn't something they were taught about the Mughal structures in their medieval history course. But to her surprise, a second later her brain was scanning the entire area looking for an ideal position to shoot. *The shooter may have taken position above the triple storied prayer houses, but there he was too exposed to counter fire. He would choose some sort of a bunker.*

"You can try the *Zanana*," replied Shonali after a moment.

David frowned, "English. Please."

"Those days separate mezzanine spaces were built in the mosque for women at both ends, which could be reached by staircases. The place was at an elevated level and had windows. A perfect location for shooting."

"And where are these *Zananas* located?"

"The Quwwat-Ul-Islam mosque at the centre of the complex has two on the either sides. You can..."

But Commander David wasn't listening anymore. He went crawling towards his team and explained the plan.

"Team B and NSG commandos, move in towards Quwwat mosque. It lies at the centre of the complex. The attacker is probably at a higher level. Standby to breach in. Raghav, do you have a grenade?"

"Affirmative, Sir."

Taking the grenade, David signalled his team. "I and Raghav will draw the sniper's attention with a blast. Since we don't know if he is on the left corner or right, you will have to check both of them. As soon as you get your window, breach in with the troops. Ready?"

"Ready when you are," the teams replied.

Things went precisely in accordance with the plan. David radioed in the NSG commandos to breach in and clear the area.

"Breaching now. Go."

The Commandos swiftly entered the corridors of the Quwwat mosque. Left and right corners. Ten seconds later, Cpl Ramesh spoke over the mouthpiece from the left *Zanana*. "You should see this sir. We were wrong. DEAD WRONG!!"

Chapter 24

The red blinking dot on the console in front of him had ceased blinking; which indicated he had lost his camera feed. Realising that the gun control chip had blown away, Muhammad decided to report to his boss. He took a puff from the cigarette, ran his finger over the scar on his left cheek and switched on his satellite phone.

Miles away, his master was glancing at his watch. A second glance at the watch and a heavy frown.

"Boy, your gross dereliction of duty is endangering the entire mission." The voice was bare, it carried vehemence.

"Sir?" Muhammad did not expect his master to open the conversation so sternly.

"I should have had received your call exactly three minutes ago." Silence.

"I am sorry, Sir. They have located it. They are moving and they are fast. I better know each and every step of the game we are playing or else they will turn all the tables upside down."

The voice on the other end switched to calm. "Muhammad, you worry too much. They don't have the slightest idea of what is going on. We already agreed on our conditions. Your destruction would be delivered to you. Just hang on a little. Let's play with them for a while. I expect everything is going as planned."

"Yes, Sir. So far so good". Muhammad had not completely understood his master till now, but there was one thing he was absolutely sure of: A reason existed behind every move his master played.

"Return to your base now. As soon as they figure out the next location, inform me and follow them. I want you to keep a close watch on them. Be their shadow, but don't let them sense your presence. You have been completely trained for this."

"Allah Hafis, Janab." Muhammad ended the call, shifted the gear and pressed hard on the accelerator, making his way into the heart of the city once again.

The mastermind knew that the moment was about to arrive. *These are the crossroads from where I couldn't move further. Tonight I will see where this path*

leads to. They will find that path for me.

Chapter 25

"There was never any shooter! It's just a gun mounted on this automated arrangement," Cpl Rakesh radioed in.

"What? You sure there wasn't anyone operating it?" David was perplexed. Although he was not new to the world of automated self targeting weapons, his surprise was obvious. He hadn't imagined this in his wildest dreams.

"Damn sure, Sir. We double-checked the area. No sign of anyone operating it. Looking at this mechanism, I think the operator was controlling it using a wireless connection, but can't say anything for sure. Send Capt. Ashish up here. He handles the tech."

"Did you disable the gun?" David questioned.

"Some kind of circuit automatically blew off and the gun now displays ***offline*** on its display panel. Looks busted," Rakesh answered.

10 minutes later when Ashish had checked the gun mechanism, he had a chat with Commander David.

"We don't have anything. The entire data burnt up. So now we don't have any information about who was operating this gun. Let me be clear on one point, Sir- whoever these people are, they are well equipped. I mean, nothing this big was ever used during any of the earlier terrorist attacks."

"How was the stored data destroyed?" asked David.

"The data chip must have been rigged to blow if someone came within a certain distance of the gun. Easily achieved using proximity sensors. The gun was attached to a wireless controller with a range, I would say, about a couple of kilometres. Anyone within that range could be our man, who must have vanished by now- so no point in sending a search team. The gun has a camera mounted on its upper end near the scope facilitating the operator to use the gun almost like a first person. Professionally done. No clues left."

David was trying to gather what Capt. Ashish had just said when Avinash jumped into the conversation. "I bet I saw one of these models earlier tonight at those bunkers in Thar desert. Do you think it's the work of the same terrorist organisation?"

David's brain started putting things together, one piece at a time.

"Okay. Here's what we are going to do. Now that we can't trace who operated this gun, there is no point in following that lead. Although, I will ask the Headquarters to send a team to the Rajasthan border to confirm if what Avinash said checks out. If it is the work of the same terrorist organisation, at least we have an idea who we are up against. Until then, the situation pretty much remains the same. They have that goddamn missile and we still need to work on why the hell did that lunatic give us the coordinates to this place. Raghav- check with the NSG team and call an ambulance."

President Ajaysingh Chauhan was filled in on the happenings at the Qutub Complex. He had been anxious as Shonali had ended their previous conversation rather abruptly.

"David, we NEED to end this," Ajaysingh said, with a profound concern. "I do not want any more of our soldiers to die. Let's get done with whatever this guy wants us to find for him."

"We are working on it, Sir. But I have no idea why we were asked to come here," David replied.

"Maybe we will have to hear the tape again. Carefully." Shonali suggested.

David took out the tape and played it. '... *The first clue is written in metal at 28° 31' 27.68" N, 77° 11' 6.89" E. Take the paper beside this cassette player along. Would be quite helpful if you would know how to read the numbers on the pape*r...'

"This place is full of inscriptions, ancient symbols and a lot of things made out of metal. How are we ever going to find out? We will have to turn the place upside down," David said, with a rising frustration.

"Maybe not!" Shonali hadn't missed hearing what everyone else had. "I think he meant a very specific inscription when he said- *written in the metal*. That inscription which was written on iron almost two thousand years ago and still remains intact- surviving almost two centuries without any sign of rust on it."

Chapter 26

Often regarded as a testament to the skill of ancient Indian blacksmiths, the 23 ft iron pillar at the Qutub Complex withstanding corrosion for about 1600 years was always in the limelight of archaeologists and corrosion technologists. Shonali briefly explained about the monument to David as they made their way towards the centre yard of the Quwwat-Ul-Islam mosque where the pillar was located.

"Believed to be erected by Chandragupta Vikramaditya of the Gupta dynasty, the pillar had initially been located at Vishnupadagiri or modern day Udayagiri in Madhya Pradesh where it supposedly served as a sundial. Vishnupadagiri is located on the Tropic of Cancer and, therefore, was a centre of astronomical studies during the Gupta period. Although the method used to prevent rusting or corrosion is now known, the pillar itself is the artefact which displays the knowledge and research of Indian metallurgists during the ancient times," remarked Shonali.

The contrast of the night sky and the white moon made the iron pillar shine to its fullest glory. The commandos and Shonali circled around the pillar looking at its metal inscription while David resumed inspecting the random combination of numbers he had copied down from the paper a few moments ago. It read out to be:

1-5-1, 1-7-5, 1-10-3, 3-7-4, 3-9-4, 3-10-6, 3-10-7, 3-10-8, 4-1-4, 4-2-6, 4-2-7, 4-3-2, 4-7-5, 4-7-6,
5-1-1, 5-2-4, 5-6-6, 6-7-1, 6-10-4, 7-6-1, 7-6-2, 7-7-1, 7-7-2, 7-7-3, 7-8-1, 7-8-2, 7-8-3, 7-8-4, 7-8-5,
9-6-1, 9-6-2, 9-6-6, 10-12-7, 10-13-1, 10-13-2, 11-3-2, 11-3-4, 11-6-1, 11-7-2, 11-7-3, 11-8-1,
11-9-4, 11-9-5, 12-2-3, 12-5-7, 12-8-1, 12-13-2, 12-14-6, 13-1-1, 14-4-3, 14-4-4, 14-4-5, 14-10-3,
15-8-2, 15-12-1, 16-5-6, 18-3-1, 18-3-2, 18-3-3, 18-3-7, 18-5-1, 18-9-1, 18-9-3, 18-12-2, 18-12-3,
18-13-1, 18-13-2, 18-13-3, 18-13-4.

The completely meaningless list of numbers now occupied David's thoughts. He was never good with numbers, but he knew what he had to do. He had the exact man for the job: one of the Intelligence Bureau's best crypto-analysts.

"We located the inscription, but I seriously don't know how we are supposed to read it," reported Raghav, bringing David back to the present. David went near the pillar and saw an inscription on the centre of the pillar which was almost

illegible. "Why would he send us here to read something which we don't understand? It's written in some ancient script."

"That is a Sanskrit inscription in Brahmi script," Shonali said, pointing a finger towards the left side wall. "Maybe that stone tablet on the adjacent wall will help you understand it. It is a translation of the script for tourists."

David thought about the situation for a moment.

"I think we are going to need Sameer's help. Get him on the line for me."

David inspected the stone tablets on the wall where the original Sanskrit text and the translation of the text in English were written. The text described the valour and the qualities of a king referred to simply as Chandra.

"Sir, we have Mr. Sameer on the line."

David took the call.

"Hey, Sameer. How's the night going for you?"

"Pretty good. How come you are calling me at this hour? Got some code to crack, I suppose."

"Sort of. I need your help right now. Would you please come over?"

"Sure. Where are you?"

"The Qutub Minar complex."

"What are you doing at... Never mind. I am coming. Give me half an hour."

"Actually, we are running out of time. Can we do it over the phone. I mean you can talk while you are driving, right?"

"Well, technically that would be against the law. But go on. Let's see what we have got here." Sandwiching the cell phone between his shoulder and his ear, Sameer put on his shoes, took his apartment and car keys, his laptop and set out for the Qutub complex.

"Let me explain to you the situation in brief. Earlier this evening, we got a message which led us here to an inscription and we were given random combinations of numbers on a blank paper which I don't know how to use. So it all sums up to this- I have a sheet full of numbers and an ancient Sanskrit inscription here."

Sameer got into his car and started the engine. "Go on. Read out the number list."

"Sure. The list goes like this 1-5-1, 1-7-5, 1-10-3, 3-7-4, 3-9-4, 3-10-6, 3-10-7, 3-10-8, 4-1-4, 4-2-6, 4-2-7, 4-3-2, 4-7-5, 4-7-6, 5-1-1, 5-2-4, 5-6-6, 6-7-1, 6-10-4...."

"You said you have some kind of inscription, right? I think I know what those numbers mean," replied Sameer, pressing down the accelerator of his automobile instantly.

Chapter 27

The agents at the Intelligence Bureau kept working hard to find any relevant information, mails, phone records that could give them a clue about the events that took place earlier that night. Chief Prakash Mehta's immediate junior- Roshan now handled all the affairs. Even after pairing up with the police and a long session of questioning the servants, drivers, officials and cooks, he wasn't able to extract even a single piece of useful information. All the video records of the CCTV cameras in the Rashrapati Bhawan had been erased. It was a perfect crime.

"Sir, I think we might have something here," an officer working on the desktop waved at Roshan to come over. "I was studying the circuitry of that cylindrical jammer which the team found near the tape. Although most of its components are untraceable, I traced one of the circuit boards to a standard electrical company. The circuit has a docket number printed on it. If we get access to the shipping company's records, it wouldn't be hard to find out where it was shipped to."

Minutes later, Roshan was holding a paper in his hand with the shipping address- 302, Hotel Sundial, 11/23-A Paharganj, New Delhi. He explained his next move to his subordinates.

"Listen up. Most of the police force in the city is busy at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, on check posts and watching public places. Nevertheless, find me at least 4 police officers in the vicinity of the Paharganj area to check out this address. I also need a team of our intelligence agents to follow up this lead along with me. So Alok, Nishant and Lalit- meet me downstairs. And thoroughly check the vehicles you are driving for explosives. I don't want to lose any more of my team."

In no time, Roshan was at Hotel Sundial, 11/23-A. Paharganj, the locality where the hotel was located, seemed completely lit up by the glow of the various hoardings and neon lights. The smell of bread *pakoda*s and chilli potatoes floated in the air, like the melodies of a flute in a classical concert. Nesting between the crisscrossed grid of small alleys, there seemed over a hundred hotels and guest-houses around that place. Hotel Sundial was also very much like a guest house in a small alley on the left side of the DB Gupta Road. A police constable walked to Roshan and greeted him with a salute. "I think our man is inside the building. Two of my colleagues have positioned themselves at the

back exit. We have been keeping an eye on all the exits for the last fifteen minutes and no one has left since. The hotel manager in the lobby told that only one man had reserved the room 302. This is an area near the New Delhi railway station and there are a lot of cheap motels around here. The managers are not much concerned about checking the ID proofs. The suspect checked in under the name Kartik yesterday night. The manager described him as a 6'2" hunk, carried with him just one big backpack and stated the purpose of visit as education."

"Of course. That bastard would be educated about a lot of things tonight. You secure all the exits. No one should be able to get away from here. Me and my team are going inside."

Roshan put on his bulletproof vest, loaded his handgun and climbed upstairs to the third floor. The lights in the hallway were dim and he could see only 4 rooms on the third floor. He gestured Alok and Nishant to go ahead and check the corners. Clearing the corners, three of them were in front of room 302 while Lalit covered the staircase. "On my count of three, kick the door simultaneously. Remember- Shoot if you have to, but we need this man alive. He may be our only source of information."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Alright... Do it!"

The door went down. The bullets went astray. But they were late. Late by just a couple of seconds.

Chapter 28

"Generally, when you have a set of numbers with a fraction of a text and if there is a code involved, the numbers correspond to some letters in the text. It's known as the Ottendorf cipher. It's the most basic one and easy to crack. What is the last sequence in the series?" Sameer, still stuck in the traffic, was trying to crack the cipher over the phone.

David and Shonali both looked down the list.

"18-13-4," they replied in unison.

"And how many lines does the text have?"

"Actually, there are two kinds of texts here. One in Sanskrit- which is the original one and the other in English which is the translation," said David, explaining the inscriptions on the stone tablets.



"Check the one which has more than or equal to 18 lines," Sameer replied.

David quickly did the calculation of the number of lines.

"The English one. The Sanskrit inscription has only twelve lines."

"Then this is how the code goes- each of the numbers in the sequence represents a line, a word and a letter. So 12-3-4 will represent the 12th line, 3rd word, 4th letter. Quite a simple code to break, but only when you have the code as well as the key text together. Try out this thing for the entire series of numbers. If it fits, we will have something meaningful out of it. Carry on. I am almost there."

Shonali took out her phone and started typing in the letters as per the sequence.

1-5-1: F

1-7-5: R

1-10-3: O

By the time she completed the sequence, her android screen displayed a text:

fromtherestingstupaofthegreatbuddhaattheoldestuniversitystartsthehill.

Shonali gasped in amazement, recognising some words in the text. She rewrote the text with proper spaces:

FROM THE RESTING STUPA OF THE GREAT BUDDHA AT THE OLDEST UNIVERSITY STARTS THE HILL.

Chapter 29

Muhammad had set up his small headquarters at Hotel Sundial; operating and monitoring the goings of the events from there. About five minutes earlier he had gone near the window to get some air when he had noticed two uniformed police officers near the end of the alley. Aroused by the presence of police constables for a few minutes at the same spot, he predicted something had gone wrong. Muhammad sent a message to his boss, packed all the essential things in his backpack, covered his tracks and burned the paperwork in a dustbin.

He was almost done with his 'cleaning up the trail' when he heard soft footsteps outside his room. His training had taught him to listen to silence, sniff danger from a distance and to always keep an escape route ready. The moment he had checked in the hotel, he had planned his escape route. Knowing that his position was compromised, he climbed out of the window, walked a metre to his right till the edge and then took the leap of faith. Four metres behind him, the door of 302-Hotel Sundial was burst open by two Indian intelligence agents who had missed their target by a couple of seconds. Muhammad landed on the second floor balcony of another motel opposite to the building he had just jumped off. Getting up, he smashed his way through the door of the balcony a split second before the agents started firing in his direction.

"Attention all units. We have a high priority suspect in the Paharganj area. Secure both the ends of D.B Gupta road and set up a 1 km radius perimeter ASAP." Roshan screamed into his mouthpiece.

He turned to Alok.

"What are the possible areas he may head to?"

"The New Delhi railway station. Just a few blocks away."

"Alert the security there. I am going after this guy. Tell the constables to intercept our target in the next alley. Lalit- you stay here and search for any evidence. Nishant, be right behind me."

Saying so Roshan climbed out of the window, onto the ledge and jumped to the balcony. He knew the fugitive had a one minute lead on him and in these criss-crossed alleys, even if he had him in sight, it would be difficult to catch the target in the cover of darkness.

Roshan sprinted down the staircase while Nishant headed for the terrace. Roshan

was in contact with the constables who were having a tough time figuring out their way through the confusing passageways. Every alley looked identical and the loudspeakers, the shouts of the roadside vendors made it almost impossible to listen over the radio. When Roshan reached downstairs, he saw the hotel guard on the floor and a fish aquarium near the reception counter shattered to pieces. Roshan flashed his badge at the receptionist who quietly pointed him to an alley on the left.

"He's heading towards the New Delhi railway station. I am in his pursuit. I want a unit waiting for him at the station. Seal all the exits. NOW. Nishant can you see him?" Roshan shouted on the mouthpiece.

From the terrace, Nishant had a clear view of the grid of alleys beneath him. "He just turned right a couple of seconds ago. I don't have him in my view now. He's wearing a red jacket for sure. I am asking for more assistance from the RPF."

Roshan ran straight and made a right. He just caught a glimpse of his target- a six feet hunk with red jacket running wildly about fifty metres ahead of him. Before Roshan could pull out his gun from the holster, Muhammed was gone- lost in the crowd. The people around Roshan started screaming as soon as they saw a gun out in the open. Roshan didn't waste a second explaining anything. He knew that the only thing which mattered to him was to catch that bastard running ahead of him- dead or alive. Roshan fought his way through the crowded narrow alley full of eateries, small general stores cum cyber-cafes and drunkards. He took a left, crossed the road ahead of him and there he was at the New Delhi railway station.

"Nishant, where the hell is your Railway Police Force backup?" Roshan was furious at his team. "We can't afford to lose this guy."

"Sir, they are arriving at the entrance on the other side of the station."

Nishant reported after confirming with the police. "They saw a guy matching our description taking off towards the front entrance. I have radioed the RPF to take positions."

"Good, let him come from the left or right. That bastard is going down now." Roshan was on one of the bridges connecting platforms, making his way through a crowd of people from each and every state of the nation. He again caught a glimpse of the red jacket fugitive running towards a dead end. The Railway Police Force was approaching from his either side. But nobody could tackle him down. He didn't take a left. Nor a right. He went down.

Down and out of sight.

And then like an oncoming truck it hit Capt. Roshan.

The bastard's going into the metro station.

Chapter 30

"This monument- the iron pillar is mentioned in the writings of Vibudh Shridhar who gave the first historical reference to the legend of the origin of the name Dhilli for Delhi," said Shonali, showing David a shloka on her android.

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Then, clearing her throat, she explained the meaning. "The translation of which would go as- There are countless villages in Haryana country. The villagers there work hard. They don't accept domination of others, and are experts in making the blood of their enemies flow. Indra himself praises this country. The capital of this country is Dhilli. The ruler Anangapal is famous; he can slay his enemies with his sword. The weight of the Iron pillar caused the Nagaraj to shake."

"So what is your point?" David asked her.

"This is a monument of importance. It has been standing there for decades, holding its secrets. If this clues lead to some kind of historic treasure, I wouldn't be surprised. I am guessing the psychopath is after some ancient treasure," replied Shonali sarcastically.

"I take it that you guys must have decoded the cipher by now." Sameer jumped into the discussion. "Sorry for the delay. You know the traffic." Taking out his handkerchief, Sameer wiped the sweat on his forehead. The run from the parking lot had been exhaustive.

"Everyone- This is Sameer. Intelligence Bureau's crypto analyst," David introduced the 36 year old mathematician to the group. Short and a little obese for a person of his height, Sameer seemed like someone who had dressed in a hurry. His half-sleeved formal shirt and jeans were a complete mismatch and his wrist displayed a light skin patch indicative of a missing wristwatch.

"How come we are having a civilian in an army investigation?" Sameer asked,

giving a polite smile to Shonali. Although Sameer had gone bald at a young age, his charming smile always impressed people.

David introduced him to Shonali and updated him on the situation. He was careful not to give out more information than required. Picking up David's cue, Shonali quickly came to the point. "So here is what we decoded from the inscription- FROM THE RESTING STUPA OF THE GREAT BUDDHA AT THE OLDEST UNIVERSITY STARTS THE HILL."

"It does seem like the correct decryption. Makes total sense and now we only need to think what it means so that we can act accordingly." Sameer was trying to fit meaning into the words. "I think it is just a marker- a guide to the next clue or marker. If we say we have to climb a hill, we have to start at some place which has been referred to as- RESTING STUPA OF THE GREAT BUDDHA AT THE OLDEST UNIVERSITY."

"It could be the Nalanda University. The oldest known university in the history of our country. Also Lord Mahavir and Gautam Buddha used to teach there around 6th-5th century B.C. Maybe the text points in that direction," Shonali inferred.

"She might be correct, Commander. This decryption does seem to point towards Nalanda." Sameer agreed.

"You really think an ancient treasure is what our lunatic is after? Because we have to get this right. We would be wasting a lot of time if we land up finding nothing at Nalanda," said David.

"I can't think of any other place that fits the description better. If this engraving is supposed to lead us somewhere, then Nalanda would be our best shot," Shonali explained.

David dedicated the next sixty seconds in making arrangements for their transport. About fifteen minutes later, two HAL Dhruv choppers lowered on a clearing near the Qutub Complex.

David, Shonali, Raghav and Sameer got into one while David's team of commandos got into another. Just as both the choppers were about to take off, David received a text.

Incoming message: Ranjeet

Your job description was quite amusing. Looks like my kind of thing. Almost reached the Qutub Complex. Where are you, Sir?

David chuckled and asked the pilot to hold the chopper down for some more

time.

"We have got one more passenger aboard," he said.

Chapter 31

Lalit searched the room of Hotel Sundial where their prime suspect had been staying. *That bastard has cleared everything neatly. No computer hard drives, no cell phones, no evidence. All I end up is with some half-burnt papers in the dustbin.*

He began pulling out the burnt papers from the dustbin searching for anything legible. Most of the papers were totally charred while the rest had partial texts making absolutely no sense. A piece of paper which didn't burn up had a description about something called- ASSIGNMENT 6.00

Lalit read and reread the text. He had no idea what any of that stuff meant.

We need to figure out what they were planning. I hope they track him down soon.

The Yellow line at the New Delhi Metro had a mild crowd that night. Muhammad dumped his gun to dodge the metal detector, took out a stolen 'metro entry card', placed it on the reader and entered the platform lobby. Roshan and his team rushed down the stairs with everyone barking orders at the Metro police in-charge. The station lobby was steadily becoming less crowded. A handful of passengers were down on the platforms waiting for the last metros to take them home. It was then that Alok saw a figure wearing a red jacket coming out of the toilet on the extreme corner of the lobby and heading towards the platforms below.

"There he is, Sir! The red jacket," Alok screamed.

Roshan caught a glimpse of the mysterious figure just before it started to climb down the stairs leading to the platforms. For a split second he got a clear view of the face of his target.

"Did you see the scar on his...?" Alok said turning towards Roshan.

"Left cheek. Yes, I saw it. Stay right behind me," said Roshan, dashing towards the stairs like a bullet.

Muhammad was at the end of the staircase and he had a decision to make- the two trains on his either sides. One heading uptown to Jahangirpuri on his left and the other downtown to Huda City Centre on his right. Losing his heavy backpack and the red jacket, he dashed towards a train and got in.

By the time Roshan and Alok descended to the platform, their fugitive was nowhere to be seen. There was nobody else on the platform either. The doors of

the trains were about to close and Roshan had a little time to decide. He saw a red jacket and a backpack on the ground near platform one.

He may have dropped it in a hurry to board the train on platform one. OR. It may be a trick to divert us.

"Let's Split." Roshan made the call. Giving a slight nod as a reply, Alok dashed towards platform 2 into the Huda city centre Metro while Roshan ran along platform 1 and dived into the Jahangirpuri heading Metro. The doors closed in behind him.

Roshan radioed Alok the further instructions.

"Now that he doesn't have his red jacket on, it is going to be difficult to find him. You know the procedure. I will inform the operators and tell them not to open the doors until we are done searching. He is in one of these trains and he is trapped. Ask our men to check the contents of his backpack. Keep me posted. Out."

Alok cleared his throat and flashed his badge.

"Everyone listen up. This is the police and we are doing an investigation. I need your assistance. Do not panic and just do as you are told and it will soon be over."

On the other train Roshan was also announcing something similar.

"We are searching for a man and he is somewhere on this train. I request you to remain seated and let us proceed with the investigation."

A couple of minutes later when the trains pulled into their respective stations, there was a metro police squad waiting right outside the trains.

Totally trapped. The bastard is not going anywhere. Roshan thought.

"Did you get him yet, Alok?" Roshan asked impatiently over the radio.

"Nope. My checking is not even halfway done. We can't miss him though. Only we both know how he looks like and that scar on his cheek, running from his ear to his chin, is not easy to miss. What's your status?"

Little did Roshan and Alok know that they were not going to find their target in either of the trains.

Chapter 32

Within no time, Ranjeet was escorted by two NSG guards to the chopper. As opposed to the other geeks he usually hung around with, Ranjeet did care about his attire. He was dressed in a black jacket over a grey t-shirt, wide-wale corduroys, and grey sports shoes. The rimless spectacles and his laptop backpack were in line with his geeky side, but did present him as a guy with etiquette. As soon he got on board, for the first few seconds, his eyes were locked on the beautiful girl in the chopper- Shonali. It required a tap on the shoulder from David to bring back Ranjeet's mind to the reality.

"This is Ranjeet. He helps us with ethical hacking." David then introduced his team to the hacker. "Captain Raghav- Deputy Security incharge at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, Sameer- our crypto analyst. That is President Ajaysingh's daughter- Shonali."

Someone tell her she is damn hot. Ranjeet shook hands with the team.

"So what's this about, Sir? Shouldn't you be at the Rashtrapati Bhawan. I just checked out the news on the net," Ranjeet asked, secretly glancing at Shonali between words.

"It is a long story...."

David began explaining things to Ranjeet as the chopper rose rather unsteadily facing the tall stone monument. Shonali decided to spark up a conversation with Sameer, still eyeing the message on the iron pillar she had decrypted.

"I always had an interest in cryptography and the codes. I am curious to know how exactly did you know that it was an Ottendorf cipher?" she asked.

"It's a common cipher. Perhaps one of the easiest to crack. Even in the 1993 Mumbai bombings, the local gangs used a type of Ottendorf cipher. They had to deliver the RDX to specific locations so they chose a book and used an Ottendorf cipher such as 45-6-3 referring to the page number, the line number and the word."

"And they passed the book along with the code?"

"NO. You never keep the lock and the key together. Every code basically has two parts- one is the cipher and another is the key. The book, in this case, being the key. The key must be easy to obtain, yet hard to identify. So they chose a pretty common book, but only the users of the code knew which book exactly it was. In

1993, since they had to cipher the addresses they used the Mumbai telephone directory. Choosing a location to deliver the explosives from the telephone directory, they used to send the coded numbers to their contemporaries."

An expression of awe appeared on Shonali's face. "Oh! So when did you become interested in cryptography?"

"I have been excited about codes since my school days. I used to send coded messages to my school time girlfriend," Sameer winked sheepishly. "You know, cryptography- the science of making and breaking codes has come a long way since the 1st century B.C, when Julius Caesar reportedly used a simple substitution cipher, in which each letter was replaced by a letter that followed it alphabetically by three places. Another cipher found in The Old Testament also uses simple substitution. In Jeremiah (25:26 and 51:41), the prophet wrote wrote *She-shach* for Babel. The second letter of the Hebrew alphabet (*B*) was replaced by the second-to-last letter (*Sh*), and the twelfth letter (*L*) was replaced by the twelfth-to-last letter (*ch*). The vowels are of secondary importance in Hebrew. This cipher is called Athbash, an acronym formed from the first Hebrew letter (a), the last letter (th), the second letter (b), and the second-to-last letter (sh)."

"Wow. I didn't know that there were codes even in The Old Testament. How do you decode these ciphers? The substitutions could be anything," Shonali asked.

"Um... there's one loophole in this method. In every language, the letters of a lengthy plaintext exhibit a predictable frequency. For example, E is the most common letter in English, showing up an eighth of the time. It is a good assumption that the most common symbol of a long ciphertext represents the letter E. The letters t, a, o, n, i, r, s and h follow 'e' in the frequency count. This helps crypto analysts to decipher almost 70 percent of the cipher. Many modern code-cracking algorithms use this technique of frequency analysis. Another point of interest would be that almost 40% of the English words start with t, a, o, s and w. These codes were used more often than weapons during wars. You may be surprised to hear that in World War I, the Germans transmitted two million enciphered words a month on the radio while in World War II, the Allied Supreme Headquarters often sent out more than two million enciphered words per day."

"My God! Do you guys still use these kind of ciphers?" asked Shonali, digesting all the information Sameer was throwing at her.

"No way. Today's state of the art technologies and advanced algorithms crack these codes in a matter of seconds. The world of cryptography has totally changed. Even the United States' best crypto analysts couldn't figure out the

cipher designed by Bin Laden. Although there are still some old time ciphers which work well on a small scale. In the fifteenth century, an Italian architect Leon Battista Alberti came up with a cipher- polyalphabetic cipher. That can be called the basis of modern cryptography," said Sameer.

"And what was it?" Shonali was now more interested in the science of codes.

Sameer took out his laptop and opened a diagram on it.

"Alberti's cipher uses this table for encryption and decryption of messages. The uppercase letters in the table are known as key letters and to the left are also uppercase letters which refer to the plaintext."

KEY LETTERS

PLAIN TEXT	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
A	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
B	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A
C	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B
D	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C
E	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D
F	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E
G	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F
H	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
I	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
J	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
K	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
L	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
M	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
N	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
O	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
P	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
Q	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
R	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q
S	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R
T	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
U	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
V	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U
W	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V
X	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W
Y	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X
Z	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y

"So suppose we choose the keyword as 'shonali' and we have to send a message- 'Bombs Delivery Done', we do this:

Keyword : S H O N A L I S H O N A L I S H O

Plain Text : B O M B S D E L I V E R Y D O N E

Now to design the cipher text, we take the alphabet which lies in the column of S in the Key Letters and the row of B in the Plain text. When we go down the column beginning with 'S' and the row starting with 'B', they intersect at 'U'. So doing the same thing we the entire message, it gets encrypted to:

Keyword : S H O N A L I S H O N A L I S H O

Plain Text : B O M B S D E L I V E R Y D O N E

Cipher text : U W B P T P N E Q K S S K M H V T

Finally, we send UWBPTPNEQKSSKMHVT as the cipher text and the other party who knows the keyword decodes it just using the opposite process which we used for encoding it."

"A genius invention-" Shonali words were interrupted when David passed his radio to her. It was her dad on the other side.

"Hello, Shonali?" The voice on the other end sounded worried. But for Shonali, the tone was cold. That was the cold voice she had lived with for her entire childhood. Her mother had passed away when she was three and her father didn't want to be her father.

"Yeah, Dad. I am fine. Flying to Nalanda. I suppose Commander David gave you an update of the situation," Shonali tried to sound calm.

"I am so sorry Shonali to drag you in the middle of this. I didn't know whom to ask for help and I... all these lost objects... these threats- so I asked for your help. This is a nightmare for me, Shonali."

"It is alright, Dad. I think we will get to the bottom of this soon. You stay safe," Shonali replied.

Chapter 33

Muhammad had cleverly planned his move while descending the stairs to the platforms. He got on the train towards Huda city centre and exited it just as the doors were closing. It was a risky move, but it was his only shot. He turned left and saw a man holding a handgun get into the train and that very second Muhammad knew his trick had worked.

Keep searching for me where I don't even exist.

The next part was easy. He emptied his pockets and walked upstairs. Muhammad entered the same toilet he had exited minutes ago. While getting into the toilet earlier, he had memorised the next metro timings and had waited for his chance to rush out. He had ensured to keep the red jacket in his hand and ran fast enough to gain some attention. Once he knew the agents were behind him, he dumped his bag and jacket to trick the agents to board the trains.

Now that he had thrown the intelligence agents off his trail, getting out of an already panicked metro station was not a difficult job. It was a job he was trained for. Fifteen minutes later, Muhammad walked out of the New Delhi metro station free as a bird.

Gulped a few pints of fresh air, took out his satellite phone and typed.

Out of the trouble. Going to the rendezvous point. Where are they now?

He soon got a reply:

Exactly where we wanted them to go- They are in a chopper to Nalanda. You know what to do next. Be careful henceforth. You may not get a second chance.

Muhammad didn't understand how his boss got the location of David's team every time.

There must be somebody else helping him.

Chapter 34

"We are flying over Patna right now. Should be landing at Nalanda in 15 minutes," the pilot announced over his microphone. The night was setting in and the weather was turning unpleasantly cold.

"What do you mean, you can't get it from here?" David asked Ranjeet with a big surprise on his face.

"Look, the firewalls on that system are military grade. I could have bypassed them using the old military key codes, but it appears they have changed those too. Moreover, as per your information, the system is on an island and it doesn't have any wires running from the land so probably it has a direct uplink to the satellite, which I can't establish in such a short time frame," said Ranjeet.

"I get that. So how do you plan on doing it?" asked David. He was clearly not happy with the turn of events.

"I don't have many options. In fact, I only have one, which requires me to be on the island and hardwire into their system to hack it. There must be some way of getting on that island without getting detected." Ranjeet looked at David hopefully. "Or maybe an aerial bombing would solve the entire problem."

"We have grade B sensors and radars monitoring the perimeter 24x7. Also, we can't risk an air-strike. They have some high priority hostages down there. We don't want to lose those scientists. And bombing that place would be equivalent to destroying our own technology. The government has spent billions on this project." David took a moment's pause. "We can't breach in because we are not sure about the exact number of terrorists on the island and what type of artillery they have. If we are delayed even by a few moments, they launch the missile. That is why we chose this third way- roaming around and solving puzzles for that lunatic. Believe me, if I lay hands on that bastard, I will bleed him to death"

"I will keep looking for a way to get their systems down, or at least disable the perimeter security. Then your team might have a chance to slip past the security systems on the island without tripping any alarms. Will keep you posted." Ranjeet dove into his laptop screen, typing furiously than ever.

As soon as the chopper made a landing in an open field, David and his co-passengers got out of the chopper and stretched their legs. The journey had been exhausting.

Back at the bunker, Ajaysingh had been racking his brain over the past hour, focussing on the voice he had heard on the tape. He had made a lot of enemies over the last few years, but the insanity in this tone was unique. He was staring at his shoes with a look of nothingness and then it hit him like a thunderbolt and left him stunned. His mind had drifted to his past.

I thought it all ended at Pokharan in 1998. I should have known- It was just the beginning.

Chapter 35

"Bravo! Now that we have reached here, does anybody have any clue what we are looking for?" Ranjeet was the first one to ask.

"I think we will figure it out when we reach that stupa." Sameer felt a dreamlike mist swirling around him as he entered the remains of the world's first international residential university, flanked by commandos following close behind.

"You know, almost two thousand years ago, it was very difficult to get entry into this place. Many of the scholars tried, but failed the entrance test," Shonali said.

"Wait! There was an entrance test at that time too?" Ranjeet asked with a giggle.

"Yes. For admission in Nalanda, you had to answer the questions asked by the guards standing right here at the gates. Only 2-3 out of ten made it into Nalanda," replied Shonali. "Many scholars from around Asia studied at Nalanda which was said to be the cradle of the Buddhist civilisation. The earliest references of this prestigious place can be traced back to Magadah- the time of Gautama Buddha in the 6th century B.C. It was devoted to Buddhist studies, but also trained students in fine arts, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, politics, architecture, philosophy."

As they walked through the ruins of the ancient city of knowledge, the commandos moved in a formation of 3 metres spread checking the corners ahead of them.

"Clear, Check the right passage," one of the commandos reported.

"Right passage clear."

They had to make sure there weren't any surprises lying ahead of them this time. Such ruins were always a possible ambush site. The place looked like a stone complex, mostly consisting of stone classrooms which appeared more like meditation areas.

After all introspection leads to true knowledge, Shonali thought inwardly.

Many dormitories appeared to be lined up at a corner near the south end of the excavation site. "The current excavation is just a fraction of the total university and many buildings are still buried under the current site. The site has a number of small monasteries where the monks had lived and studied and many of them were rebuilt over the centuries," Shonali told Sameer.

"How many students did this university have? It looks like a large place for a university of those times," asked Ranjeet, with an intention to start a conversation with Shonali.

"It was huge! This place was planned in a magnificent manner. It had a nine-storied library where the monks meticulously copied books and documents so that individual scholars could have their own collections. It had dormitories for students, and would you believe, 10,000 students resided in the university's heyday along with 2,000 professors. Nalanda University attracted pupils and scholars from Korea, Japan, China, Tibet, Indonesia, Persia and Turkey. Also, many of the students travelled to spread Buddhism, such as PadmaSambhav- a teacher of yoga who went to Tibet, where he established the 1st monastery and became the founder of Lamaism. Alas! All the teachings of those scholars and the literature, the knowledge stored here for centuries is now lost," Shonali said, trying to catch up with David's pacing feet.

Ranjeet was not going to give up so easily. "Lost? How was it lost?" continued Ranjeet in an attempt to extend the conversation.

"There was a fire which burnt down over 9 million manuscripts and we lost a big piece of our ancient wisdom. The university lost many important factions of our oldest manuscripts in that fire, besides some of the valuable knowledge on Vedic mathematics, medicinal properties of plants and several other topics. It was around 12th century, when the Muslim invader Bakhtiyar Khalji sacked the university and tried to uproot Buddhism and plant Islam with his sword. It is said that the burning of those 9 million manuscripts continued for several months...."

Ranjeet was slowly becoming detached from the surroundings. His eyes were glued to Shonali- the way she was explaining, the way her smile almost made him skip a beat, her beautiful purple kurti. Deep down, his heart was set on fire...
"... and the smoke hung for days like a dark pall," Shonali completed.

"We have enough information on this place now, but we still don't know which stupa does the message on the transcript refer to," David said, observing that there were quite a number of stupas around the place.

Ranjeet ran his quick fingers on the keypad and the next second came pouring out data from the internet- "This place has a strong link with Gautama Buddha as he often came here. There is a large stupa here where Sariputra- one of the chief disciples of the Buddha was supposedly born and his relics are entombed."

"No.... There is no link between Sariputra's birthplace and the stupa on the

transcript. It said - THE RESTING STUPA OF THE GREAT BUDDHA. There has to be a stronger connection of Lord Buddha to the stupa. Sariputra was a chief disciple, but not the first. Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon to Kondanna, Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahanama and Assaji- his first five disciples at Sarnath where he gave his first sermon on the Four Noble Truths and how to practice the Eightfold Path. That conversion of the five ascetics at the Deer Park at Sarnath led to the order of monks- The Sangha and hence-" Shonali was trying to find the correct logic.

"What's the Sangha?" Sameer queried.

"The Buddhist philosophy is based on three founding stones known as the Three Jewels- the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The Sangha has many definitions, but in general I would say Sangha are those groups of people who practice and follow the path of enlightenment shown by the Buddha."

"So you think Sariputra's stupa isn't the place that transcript was suggesting?" asked David.

"Maybe. But until we have something more credibly solid, we might as well explore the Sariputra's stupa," said Shonali with a sigh.

"So what should we be looking for in there?" David came to the point straight away.

"The earlier message did not give us any clues, but I recall it said- STARTS THE HILL which means that it is just the beginning of a road leading us to whatever artefact that psycho wants. So we should expect to find some more clues in here. Look for any ancient inscriptions, symbols, hidden passageways. Anything that stands out from the normal is worth checking out. But I think it is going to be a tedious task and we don't have enough time to explore a complete stupa."

"I know it's a tough task, but I have my task force and I have already asked for back-up. We also have two local guides coming to help us out, so we would know where to look," added David.

"That was pretty quick!" Shonali was taken aback.

"Somebody skipped your history lecture, I guess," replied David, with a chuckle.

David and his team spread out around the sector and started exploring while Ranjeet worked on getting access to the mainframe server. Shonali and Sameer worked on guiding the search teams.

But back in Delhi, one man was beginning to understand why that phone call was meant for him; why the bomb had blasted at the Rashtrapati Bhawan. The

words- *'I want you to suffer. You'll be hurt and you'll be put to pain.... EVERY. SECOND.'* floated around him. The man paced up and down in his bunker restlessly. President Ajaysingh Chauhan was now starting to get the picture of who had left that message for him.

Chapter 36

September, 1997

Somewhere near the Indian Army- PTS (Project Testing Site), Pokharan

Operation Shakti, District- Jaisalmer

Co-ordinates- 27.095°N 71.753°E

The last 48 hours of his life were the most mysterious ones. His mind was still figuring out the answer to *'What the hell am I doing in this desert?'* as the army truck trembled over a temporary road. Sitting next to him, was an Indian army soldier with the typical 3 V-shaped white stripes on his arm, which probably denoted his rank in the army. Dr. Ajay Chauhan tried to ask the soldier the same question for the second time.

"Would you please tell me where the hell are we going?"

"We have our orders, Sir. We cannot disclose anything."

The cold look on the soldier's face told him that he was not going to get any answers. The truck had two more passengers who had got in with him at Jaisalmer. Their faces clearly told that they were as tired as he was. Observing their heavy suitcases, Ajay guessed that they were coming along for the same project that he was sent for.

48 hours ago....

Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), Mumbai.

Dr. Ajaysingh Chauhan was working on his project in his private lab at BARC when he had received a phone call from the director of BARC. After a brief conversation, Ajay agreed to work on the project the director had mentioned.

"Sure, I am certainly interested, but you didn't tell me where my posting is. I mean, I am excited to work for the government, but I need to know where I am going," said Ajay.

The director had given him a strange reply, "Don't worry about that. The Indian Army will take care of it. I will send you the tickets. You would be travelling soon."

8 hours later, Dr. Ajay departed for Bangalore. He had changed two flights in Bangalore and Chennai after which he finally landed in Delhi, where he was personally picked up by a Government of India vehicle and sent to Jaisalmer. His journey in the army truck had started there.

The truck entered the project testing site which was well guarded with the highest level of security. The soldier accompanying them escorted the 3 personnel to the assistant co-ordinator's office. A couple of minutes later, co-ordinator Mr. A.K. Das was shaking hands with Dr. Ajay and his two companions.

"Dr. Ajay, Dr. Shashank and Dr. Jacob, welcome to Pokharan and welcome to Operation Shakti. I am A.K. Das- the assistant co-ordinator of this project. Sorry for the inconvenience caused due to your travel around almost half of the country, but we needed to make sure the spies don't trace our patterns. For the last three years, many scientists have joined our project and we have successfully deceived the CIA and a few other intelligence agencies until now. As soon as they detect a pattern of the country's top scientists heading towards Pokharan, we would be on their grid. They have already interfered with this project twice. This project, headed by Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam and Rajagopala Chidambaram, aims to develop India's best nuclear weapon."

He gave a quick glance towards his watch, gulped down his cup of tea and continued. "Of course we did conduct Project Smiling Buddha or Pokharan 1 in May 1974, but this is much bigger. All of you are our country's top thermonuclear physicists and we require your assistance. You would be briefed about your work tomorrow, but before that I need you to understand the gravity of the situation. We need to be careful about whatever information we pass on. We are under constant surveillance of enemy espionage and believe me, we have many enemies. Most of the local and radio communications are done in codes. I know it will take you some time to get comfortable with the situation. Maintain minimum contact with your family and relatives, and be careful not to pass on ANY information carelessly. Is it clear?"

The trio nodded in unison.

"I see you are very tired, so I suggest you go to your quarters and get some rest. Your luggage will be sent over after security clearance. Tomorrow morning you will be briefed about your work by Dr. Abdul Kalam. Good night, gentlemen."

Chapter 37

Almost half an hour had passed, but the search teams had come up with nothing. The Sariputra's stupa was a complete stone structure with a huge dome and stretching walls. The search for inscriptions and hidden passage ways was hindered by the impaling darkness. Some inscriptions found on the stupa walls were discarded by Shonali as a fraction of the text was missing and some of those were just random names.

David, Shonali and Sameer were standing right at the centre of the stupa inspecting the search. The sounds of the commandos' footsteps eerily bounced off the walls and echoed in the silence of the night.

"These stupas actually are a core part of Buddhism. Stupas generally represent the enlightened mind of the Buddha and were constructed since the early days of Buddhism," said Shonali. She wanted to break the unpleasant silence between the three of them. "One of the symbolic meanings that they represent are the five elements: the square base represents the earth, the round dome is for water, the cone-shape is fire, the canopy is air and the volume of the stupa is space."

"You sure we are going to find something here?" Raghav questioned Shonali.

"We will," Ranjeet shouted from the other end of the stupa. He had been doing his research on the internet and finally hit a jackpot.

He came running and showed his laptop screen to Shonali and David.

"I think we are searching the right place. It is believed that whenever Lord Buddha used to visit Nalanda, he resided in a mango grove. This stupa was built right over that mango grove."

"So? Is that what THE RESTING STUPA OF THE GREAT BUDDHA means? The mango grove?" Shonali asked.

"I think so," Ranjeet replied.

Sameer, who had been keenly observing the stupa for the past few minutes, had made a peculiar observation. "David, I think I have found something."

The sound reciprocated itself inside the stupa and everyone in the room was suddenly looking at Sameer.

"Err.. Sorry for disturbing everyone, but I think this stupa has a very special symmetry. Everything is absolutely symmetrical. The entry and exits, the

Sanskrit inscriptions, the designs, the carved sculptures and even the ventilation holes up there are exactly opposite to each other."

Everyone instantly gave a quick look around the room. Indeed! Everything was so perfectly symmetric. But David didn't see any logic there.

"Yes. So what?" he asked.

Shonali realised the point Sameer was trying to make and started explaining it to David

"Those monks did take a lot of pain to put everything exactly in a symmetrical pattern around the centre. They made it symmetric for a reason. To conceal something- to hide. Symmetry has always been a mystery to man. We expect everything to be symmetric because the concept of chaos, asymmetry and randomness is just not the type for humans. This stupa is symmetric about its centre so..."

"...centre of the floor is the place we should look for clues," Sameer completed Shonali's sentence.

Everyone's eyes were now on the floor of the stupa. Ranjeet walked to the centre, flashed a light from his cellphone on the stone floor. "There's a bit of dust on the floor, but I am pretty sure that is a picture of a human eye," he said.

There it was. Right at the centre- a human eye. Again a perfectly symmetrical carving at the centre of the floor enclosed in a circle. It had been there the whole time, but nobody had observed it. In an attempt to search the walls for inscriptions, they had neglected the floor!

"So what should we do now, Shonali?" asked David with a worried expression. It was a far fetched theory and they still had no clue how big the object they were looking for was. Shonali pondered upon the question for a minute. "If we are supposed to find something here, it must have been buried a long time ago. I think we should start digging in the centre," she said, biting her fingernails nervously. David decided to give it a shot.

The NSG commandos, using the rocks nearby as their shovels, started digging up the centre of the stupa. Ten minutes passed by. Twenty. Then thirty. Digging further seemed futile.

Shonali now had another theory in her mind. *There are many layers of construction beneath this stupa. So whatever they wanted to hide, they wouldn't have hidden it underground.*

"Maybe the eye is not where the next clue lies. It was just a marker. The eye was

keeping a watch over something. Something which those monks tried to conceal," Shonali conveyed her thoughts to Sameer.

"And where would that be concealed?" Sameer asked Shonali.

"Right where this eye is looking at. Up there," Shonali said, pointing the finger at the centre of the dome of the stupa.

At the exact centre of the dome was a design of another eye. An eye watching everybody beneath. An eye glaring right into the eye on the ground.

"I have a hunch that whatever we are be seeking is located at the centre of the dome."

Chapter 38

November, 1997

Indian Army- PTS (Project Testing Site), Pokharan

Operation Shakti, District- Jaisalmer

Co-ordinates- 27.095°N 71.753°E

After an introduction to the project, Ajay, Jacob and Shashank started working on it with full determination. Over a short period, they became very good friends.They each had a separate lab to work under the guidance of Dr. Sarinder Kumar- an expert on Thermonuclear Weapon Development. Each one of them knew that this project was going to change the future of this country forever. Spending many nights working hard and dodging the enemy satellites, the project advanced with an excellent pace, until a phone call changed everything.

Prime Minister's Office, Delhi.

"Hello, this is the Personal Assistant to the P.M. How may I help you? "

The voice on the other side of the line spoke with an American accent.

"This is the Defence Secretary talking on behalf of the Director of the C.I.A. I need to speak to Mr. Prime Minister. It is a matter of extreme urgency."

3 minutes later, the Prime Minister was speaking to the Defence Secretary of the United States.

"Good evening Mr. Prime Minister. I apologise for calling on such a short notice, but we have some immediate issues to discuss..."

"I understand that Mr. Secretary. What are the issues you want to discuss? I will be glad to help."

In a corner of his brain, the Prime Minister of India already knew what was going to come. *It must be that damn project again*, he thought inwardly.

The Defence Secretary took a deep breath and asked a single question.

"What is India's nuclear status?"

Prime Minister was not at all surprised by this question. He had his answer ready- written down on a notepad in front of him in the most diplomatic tone.

"Mr. Secretary, we have not yet decided to go nuclear or not. This year we

completed 50 years of our independence and we are still trying to focus on the development of agricultural and economic sectors rather than defence."

After a brief pause, the American voice replied, "That's fine. I was just asking because we picked up some signals of nuclear activity around your country on our satellites. Need to cross-check them now. Until then, have a pleasant evening."

"My pleasure helping you Mr. Secretary."

The prime minister put down his phone and heaved a sigh of relief.

Whenever that project has come up, these meddlers have always tried to poke their nose in between. Why can't they stand us being a nuclear power? Last time they forced us into shutting down Pokharan-1, but this time we won't bow down. If this project tastes success, we send a message to the rest of the world that Indians are capable of joining the elite class of the nuclear nations. The Prime Minister was determined to see the project as a success. He wired a message to the director of the Pokharan project.

'The C.I.A is already aware about the nuclear activity. Be careful and speed up the project.'

But the Director was neck deep in trouble already. There had been some strange activities going on around the project testing site. Many records, data and files were being misplaced- Some of them even lost without any trace. And then it happened!

On 21st November- All the prime data sheets went missing. The project was back to square one.

Chapter 39

The dome of the Sariputra's stupa was almost inaccessible. As high as a three storied building, the stupa had no path or passageway leading anywhere near the dome.

"This is quite strange. There are no carvings on the dome of the stupa while in reality it is the designs on their domes that make the stupa unique. A lot of Buddhist stupas have majestic carvings on the interior of their domes, but this one is different. Except for that eye at the centre, it is completely bare," Sameer said, noticing the unadorned dome.

"Maybe it was made so for a purpose. Maybe the monks or the artisans who built this stupa didn't want people following the trail, searching somewhere else. An eye to eye contact is the most basic form of communication. Even before you start speaking, you use an eye to eye contact communication. Even before you express your feelings with words, your eyes say it all. It is one of the oldest and the most natural instinct of the human nature. Maybe these artisans knew that someday, somebody will discover the clues and come searching for the path. Maybe they used this symbology to communicate, leaving the rest of the dome untouched- pure and away from the reach of any undeserving form of life," answered Shonali.

"Any idea how we are going up there?" Raghav asked David.

"I think it is time to put the fire rescue drill to use," David commanded his team and the NSG soldiers.

The soldiers immediately formed a circle. Making a human tower, the commandos stacked up levels and soon the dome was not very far.

"What can you see over there? Any sort of writing or inscription?" David asked Raghav, who was at the top of the human tower.

"No, Sir. Absolutely nothing," Raghav replied.

"Touch the eye. Feel the design. Maybe there is a hidden chamber or something." Shonali was not ready to give up.

It has to be there.

"No, Miss Chauhan. I can't see anything out of the usual here... Wait-" Raghav had just noticed something.

"What happened? What do you see?" Shonali's excited feet jumped in the air.

"From ground level, both the eyes- the one on the ground there and this one look alike, but I can spot a slight difference from this angle. The eye on the ground is plain, but this one is designed differently. The pupil of this eye is popping out a bit. It just looked odd, so..."

"Try pressing it inside." Shonali cut off Raghav in the middle.

"Press what? The pupil? It's made up of stone. I don't think it will work," saying so Raghav tried to push back the pupil inside and to his surprise- it moved. It took a lot of effort for Raghav and the movement was very slow- but it moved. Right up to the level of the dome.

A clicking sound followed by the starting of some kind of mechanism brought a small smile on Shonali's face. The eye was shutting; it was moving back and a hidden compartment steadily became visible. A very small one. None of the people on the ground could see it from below, but only Raghav could spot an object in that hidden compartment. The monument was centuries old and yet the object seemed to be intact.

"What do you see there?" David shouted.

"I don't know. It is dangling in between some ropes. A kind of scroll... or a letter," said Raghav.

"You sure you can take it out safely? We need that thing intact," David replied. His voice couldn't mask the momentary excitement he was feeling.

The pressure on the commandos below Raghav was increasing every second. The soldiers at the bottom could take it no more. The balance was not holding and Raghav was shaking terribly. He knew it would only be a waste of time if they all fell down and had to come up again by climbing over one another.

Maybe this secret compartment would be open for a specific time. This might be my only chance.

His hand was just able to reach the opening of the compartment and the scroll rested about 15 centimetres above the compartment lying amidst the trap of ropes. There was barely enough space to put a hand through the web of the ropes.

In a second, Raghav cleared all the doubts from his brain and focused on the opening. Taking a boost from his legs, he jumped in mid air; squeezing his fist to pass through the web, he caught the lower end of the scroll and tucked it down.

Raghav tried to maintain his balance after the jump, but was unable to do so. Losing his balance, he fell flat on the soldiers beneath him and then the entire human tower came tumbling down. When he finally made it to the ground level with the scroll, Raghav handed it over to David. Fortunately, no one had broken any bones in the mishap.

Gasping in awe, Shonali suddenly noticed- It was not a scroll.

"It looks pretty much like a scroll. However, it is in fact a rolled up *dhvaj* or simply a flag or a banner. Notice that it is made of cloth and not paper. In Buddhism, *dhvaj* symbolizes victory of the Dharma over fear, ignorance, and death. It was supposedly drawn from Hindu religious symbolism and is used even now in the eastern countries," said Shonali.

In the dim flashes of the torches, Shonali could read a Sanskrit text written down on the 'Dhvaj'.

,

,

,

"And what does that mean?" Ranjeet queried.

"As far as I know, this would go as: *O seeker of wisdom. The secret you seek is far simpler than you think, yet very hard to find. You will need to completely devote your soul to the purpose. You will need the courage to face all the obstacles which may come in your path. Beyond the darkness lies the light of wisdom. Continue your journey and you may find the answers you seek. But remember- you must surrender yourself to Lord Buddha*," said Shonali.

But that was not the only thing on the flag. Visible faintly below the Sanskrit writing were four pictures drawn in black ink.

A flame of fire, a horseshoe shaped figure, a cave and Reclining Buddha.

Chapter 40

Chief Co-ordinator's Office,

Project Testing Site,

Pokharan.

November, 1997

"I know it may be a little confusing for you, but I needed to call this meeting right now," assistant co-ordinator A.K. Das said, looking sternly at Ajaysingh, Jacob and Shashank.

"Last night we lost a valuable fragment of our data and some of our blueprints of the shaft designs. This was not the first reported loss of documents. We could have lost almost all the work we have done on this project had I not backed up all the data sheets on our main systems at Delhi. We are retrieving that data now and the project will proceed as planned. I don't know how any of this is happening in spite of the tight security. I believe it is the work of someone from the inside. I regret to say this, gentlemen, but there is a traitor amongst us. Until he is found, trust no one. I am going to ask our commandos to search the living quarters of each and every person residing here including you guys. Please co-operate with them and report any suspicious activity you see around the facility immediately."

The trio nodded their heads and left the co-ordinator's office. It was almost three months that Ajay, Jacob and Shashank had been working together. They didn't fully know about each other's projects and research, but the three months of togetherness had made them fine companions. The trio walked towards their bunks across the facility which had undergone a complete makeover in the past few months.

"If we do this right, this project would be remembered as one of CIA's biggest failures," said Ajay as they walked in the warm morning sand.

"Yeah. I heard that the agency has been keeping tabs on everyone linked with the project since the time of Pokharan 1. It also has a powerful human intelligence which constantly keeps an ear on every news, which passes through the corridors of the central command at Delhi. And yet we have successfully managed to keep this work going. Maybe the agency is involved in the mysterious disappearance of the designs," Shashank replied.

Jacob was quiet for a while. He was not the talking guy. He liked the silence and

tried to keep his conversation to a minimum. That had been irritating for Shashank and Ajay for the first month, but eventually both of them realised that they also needed a good listener like Jacob in their group. Little chats over the dinner, project presentations and discussions with their seniors were the only times when the three friends met. The rest of the time they were all busy in their respective labs. They lived in the same room and yet their sleeping schedules were different. Ajay used to work overnight and rest during daytime while Jacob utilised the daytime to work at his job.

"Why does the CIA have to poke its nose in every affair? They have interfered with this very project two times earlier. I suppose they will pressurize the government to stop the project yet again," Ajay was worried.

A messenger came running to Shashank with a chit in his hand.

"This message just came in for you," the messenger said, handing over the chit to Shashank.

The chit read-

THE CHARLIE HAS GONE TO EXAMINE KUMBHAKARAN.

Shashank chuckled.

"Guys, have to go. The team from DRDO is right now examining the third shaft. That's my sector," he said, waving his friends a goodbye.

Ajay and Jacob knew the code. Shafts were the holes dug to explode the bombs for testing. There were six shafts which were to be used for tests. The earlier team had made some mistakes which had alerted the US to the possibility of tests thrice in the earlier decade. But now learning from their mistakes, the scientists and the military men knew what to do and what not to. They had started using codes for all those words which might arouse suspicion to anyone overhearing the radio communications. All the shafts had their specific code names. The shaft which was reserved for the exploding hydrogen bomb was code named- The White House. The one reserved for the atomic bomb explosion was termed as- The Taj Mahal. The well in which the third shaft was sunk had been abandoned for many years. So it was named Kumbhakaran. Even the teams of scientists and DRDO members had code names like 'Sierra' and 'Bottle'. The DRDO team was popularly known as the 'CHARLIE' while the BARC team was called 'BRAVO'. The day to day radio communication would go as- 'The Taj Mahal and White House are all set for testing. Let the Charlie have a look at it.' Simple and effective way to stay off the radar.

The cold morning breeze hit them as Ajay and Jacob stopped to have a cup of

tea.

"You know Jacob, this place has an interesting history. It was not the same here a couple of years ago. The place was abandoned after Pokharan 1 was shut down. The 58th Army Engineering Corps had to dig two shafts of an average depth of 50 metres within a month. Moreover, efforts had to be made to shield it from the constant surveillance of espionage satellites. The regiment folded up their sleeves and took up the job. The officers first looked out for a new area to sink the two new wells. The nine disused wells at Navtala came in handy as they were fairly deep and the team had less to dig. They had learned from their earlier mistakes that one way those satellites could tell new activity was going on was because engineers usually erected a fence around the shaft to keep away both stray cattle and other military units. This time they tried a new trick. They didn't use the fence. Instead, they put up a sign: 'Danger. Mined Area. Keep Out' to dissuade others. And the trick worked. The sign didn't come up on the satellite scans. Everyone has given a lot to this project- the army, the government, DRDO, BARC. It took the last two decades to reach here. We are almost near the end and I think we would be honouring everyone who put their sweat in this project, the day we successfully do those tests," Ajay said, taking a sip of the hot tea.

"The stakes are too high." Jacob gave his typical one liners.

The month of November went by without any other documents going missing.

It was on the morning of 15th December 1997 that a new rumour broke out at the Pokharan facility.

Shashank asked about it during their tea session.

"You guys heard the rumour? The ISI is equally interested in our work as the CIA. RAW just sent in the Intel that they intercepted a radio communication which referred to Pokharan and nuclear blasts frequently. Why would Pakistan be interested in our research?"

Jacob sipped at his tea, remained silent as ever.

"Pakistan's nuclear program started in 1970's. Maybe they too are developing their own nuclear arsenal. Can't trust anyone these days. Even amateurs have started playing with big bombs," Ajay said, smiling sarcastically.

That instant, Ajay had no idea that one of the top espionage agents of the ISI was standing just a metre away from him.

Chapter 41

"Take us south. Near the city of Aurangabad, Maharashtra. Miss Shonali has a hunch that the next marker is the hidden somewhere in the Ajanta caves," David instructed the pilot.

"How can you be so sure that the Ajanta Caves is the place to look for that artefact?" Ranjeet asked, climbing aboard as the chopper set course towards its destination.

"It's our best shot. Three of the four things on that *dhvaja* directly point out to Ajanta caves," Shonali replied.

"And which are those?"

"The picture of the cave, the horseshoe shaped valley and more importantly a picture of the Reclining Buddha. Ajanta Caves were built over a horseshoe shaped terrain. That *dhvaja* might be one of the earlier designs of the caves. The sculpture of the Reclining Buddha, also known as the Sleeping Buddha, is considered to be one of the best artworks of these caves."

"So what about the lamp?" Ranjeet asked.

Sameer tucked in his head into the conversation."The lamp has always been the symbol of wisdom in the Buddhist literature. Maybe they have kept their wisdom hidden in the caves."

"And we haven't found that yet? The Ajanta Caves have been open for public viewing since a long time." Ranjeet looked suprised.

"The best secrets are the ones hidden in plain sight. I know these caves have been thoroughly inspected by many historians but there might be something they could have missed," quoted Shonali.

Meanwhile, David was busy contacting the headquarters for more updates about the happenings in Delhi.

"David to HQ, any clues from the IB about the blast incident?"

"This is HQ. Negative, David. The trace of jamming device is also proving a waste of time. What is your status?"

"Me and my team are heading towards the Ajanta Caves. I am not sure if that is the next marker or the location of the artefact or simply a dead end. It is Miss Shonali's prediction. You do not have ANY leads until now?"

"Well, we do have a lead, but it goes nowhere. Just complicates the case. We had a suspect who might be connected to tonight's events. We had his location in Paharganj but our officers lost him somewhere on the metro. The guy running this operation is one hell of a mastermind and he has chosen his men well. There are absolutely no loose threads. We just got one rough lead. It was found in the dustbin at the suspect's hotel room. It was burnt from one side and the only legible text was - ASSIGNMENT 6.00. Our cyber cell and intelligence are working on it right now. We will notify you in case of any updates. Right now our job is to keep the President safe and yours is to follow the trail. Will update you about the situation at Wheeler Island soon," the operator at the Headquarters instructed.

"Roger that."

"HQ out."

David instantly turned towards Ranjeet whose fingers were moving swiftly on the keypad of his laptop. He had to take down the security firewalls one at a time. Fortunately, the guys at the Wheeler Island were not veteran computer experts and they had left some glitches. Ranjeet had been trying to find some significant glitch for the last half hour and now he had found his window. He started to make his way past the firewalls.

"How are we doing? Any close to shutting off their security systems? Our NSG commandos are waiting on the coast guard boats. You take down the firewalls and they move in. They are trained for such hostage rescue scenarios," said David, taking a peek at Ranjeet's laptop screen. All David could see were meaningless sentences, illogical words, hyphens, slants and colons typed in by Ranjeet.

"It's not easy to break down the system. It is like a virtual safe with many layers of metals and I have to drill through it bit by bit. I am through the primary firewalls, but I have access to only 13% of their passkeys and data. I need the complete set of passkeys to override their system. I am working on the next bit. Will keep you posted," replied Ranjeet, without taking his eyes off the screen.

A minute later, David got another incoming message from the HQ.

"HQ to David. Do you copy?"

"Loud and Clear."

"David, this is Colonel Rana from HQ. We just got an update from the personal assistant of the President that he has a press conference to attend tomorrow morning. He was supposed to fly directly from Assam to Delhi for the press

conference"

David looked up at Raghav who nodded in agreement. Raghav and Ashraf had been there when Ajaysingh had scheduled that press conference about a month ago.

"I think we should cancel it, Sir. Tell the media that the President can't make a public appearance currently," David answered.

"David! Try to understand. We have our orders. The President has to make it to the conference in the morning. There are rumours going around already that the President was also killed in the blast. The media is spreading it like a wild fire. Unless Mr. Ajaysingh makes a public appearance and gives his statement, these rumours won't stop. Moreover the ruling party is requesting a statement from the President stating that the Government is doing its best to investigate and control the situation and that everyone involved would be apprehended by the law."

"But why don't they get it that if we do so and bring the President for a press conference, whoever is planning all this gets a pinpoint location of the President. The only reason why the President is safe is because currently nobody except us and the IB knows where the President is. When he goes public, we lose that advantage, Sir. I was promised by the Home Minister that he will let me carry out things as I wanted. He said there would be no interferences."

"David, I know that and I am aware that we are endangering President's life by doing this. But it's a protocol and needs to be done. I have my orders. Mr. Ajaysingh is currently being transported to the second bunker in Haryana. It is your responsibility to bring him back from that bunker by tomorrow dawn to the capital. Our special task force will take over from there. Is that clear?"

David knew something was not right. He figured that it was a play by the government to pacify the public and maintain the dignity of the ruling party. But he also knew that it was important for the President to go public considering the chaos that would be created if the President didn't show up.

"All right, Sir. I understand. When is the press conference?" David replied after a brief pause.

"Morning 6.00 am," replied Colonel Rana.

That instant everything blanked out before David.

6.00 am

He closed his eyes.

Six point zero zero a.m.

He was shuffling through his memory boxes trying to reconstruct what he had heard earlier.

And then he had it before his eyes-

one rough lead.... in the dustbin at the suspect's hotel room.... only legible text was- ASSIGNMENT 6.00.

Chapter 42

"But why do I have to be at a conference? I know it was scheduled a long time ago, but now the situation is different. We need to find that artefact. Returning back to Delhi would just be a waste of your time!" President Ajaysingh was not happy to hear the proposal of being at the conference. He had received persistent phone calls from the ministry pressurising him to be at the morning press conference. They had assured him total security.

In the last hour, the President had been shifted from his initial bunker to another. David's commandos were well trained and had carried out the task smoothly.

"Sir, they do have a point. You need to appear before the press. They are loaded with questions and if they are not answered, they will turn their rumours into news. And the result of all this will be more chaos and panic which we do not want. Don't worry about the security. I would be personally escorting you," David replied.

"It is not about security. We have a deadline to keep. That artefact has to reach him before 9.00 am tomorrow morning. Can't we postpone the press conference until then?" Ajaysingh suggested.

"Sir, I have a hunch that during the press conference, our secret caller is going to make a move. Earlier tonight I got a report from the HQ about something called Assignment 6.00. I think it has something to do with the conference," David explained.

The President pondered for a second and then spoke, "You have a plan or something?"

"I am working on it. But it is a bit risky. I was planning on using you as bait for the fish."

"I am not worried about the risk, David. Whatever you plan, I would help you in executing. I will go to the conference with you in the morning, but your team will keep looking for that artefact for now."

"Okay, Sir!" David agreed.

Chapter 43

Far away, the mastermind was thinking of unravelling his next move. The phase two of his 'Operation Chaos'.

He knew that there would be a hell lot of security at the conference hall as well as the airport where the President would land. He had predicted that Commander David D'costa would be accompanying the President. The only window he had to launch an attack on the President was the travel route between the airport and the conference hall.

Dr. Ajaysingh Chauhan, this is it. My final act - Assignment 6.00. Tomorrow you will see the sun rise. Maybe your last sunrise. I won't kill you fast. Nah - you are too precious for me. I WILL kill you. Slowly. I will make you feel the pain. Just like you made me feel 14 years ago. That night.

He called Muhammed on his satellite phone.

"Muhammed, are you ready to do what it takes to achieve your purpose?" The voice was soft and tender.

"I would be very pleased, Sir. I have made the necessary preparations," came a determined reply.

"Good. They would be expecting us. So when you attack, do it right. We won't get a second chance. *Allah Hafis*."

"*Allah Hafis."*

The mastermind rested on his wheelchair and chuckled.

Ajaysingh, breathe in your last pints of oxygen. At 6.00 am - you won't know what hit you.

Chapter 44

In his new bunker, President Ajaysingh grew restless every passing moment. He tried to keep avoiding his memories, focus his mind on something else but they just kept coming. He remembered the night when he had experienced the fear of death. The night he had narrowly missed death.

Operation Shakti

14th March, 1998

Time - 11.24 pm

Indian Army - PTS (Project Testing Site), Pokharan

The pressure from the bureaucrats in Delhi and the constant arousing suspicion from the CIA had speeded up the activities at Pokharan. The shifts stretched up to twelve hours and Ajay ended up working all night long every two or three days. But the only thing left on his checklist today was submitting his work report to the co-ordinator. He dashed to A.K. Das's cabin with his overcoat in the left hand and the report tightly clenched in the right.

A rush of freezing wind greeted him as he jerked the door wide open and stepped outside his lab. A miniature blizzard howled into the belly of the room. He locked the door, put on his overcoat and scarf, making himself ready for the chills of the desert. The night was quiet and so was the road. A group of army trucks had just come in and most of the guards were busy shifting the delivered consignments to the safe house. The regular night patrol was nowhere to be seen.

I hope A.K. Das has not left for his bunker, a little worry was gnawing at Ajay.

His stream of thought was broken when he saw there were no lights in the cabin of the assistant co-ordinator. The front door was locked. Surprisingly, Ajay could still see from a small light glowing in the darkness inside through the translucent window.

He must have left his desktop on by mistake.

Ajay was about to leave when he saw something move inside the cabin. As if a person had passed by the desktop screen. The window was translucent, making it impossible to predict anything going on inside the cabin. Ajay stood still for a moment. He knew he was tired and that he needed his sleep.

But his mind stirred some doubts. Doubts which needed clarification.

Maybe there is something fishy going on in here. Maybe someone else is operating the co-ordinator's computer. I must check out what is going on here.

But Ajay knew going inside alone involved a great risk. He ran to the nearest watchtower and waved his hands to the military men above. A couple of soldiers came down to investigate the situation. After he was done explaining what he had seen to the Indian army soldiers, Ajay led them to the co-ordinator's cabin.

The cabin was a L - shaped structure attached to the data room where all the recorded data saved on disks and floppies was stored. It had two exits - one was the cabin's front door and the other was the back door from the data room. One of the soldiers circled to the back door while Ajay and the other soldier knocked at the main door.

"Mr. Das, are you there inside?"

There was a sound of some quick movements, crashing of a chair and then suddenly there was silence. The soldiers signalled each other and decided to move in.

"I think something is wrong. You better stay close behind me, Mr. Ajay. If there is an intruder inside, we'll get him," the soldier ensured.

The other soldier at the back door was ready to tackle anyone coming out of that door. He gave a thumbs up to his partner at the front door who checked his pistol, clicked the safety off and kicked the front door. The door went down with a loud bang.

Ajay crouched and followed the soldier who was desperately trying to find the light switch in the dark of the cabin. Failing to find the switch, the soldier took out his cigar lighter and held it high to cover the maximum area. Clenching the pistol firmly in his other hand, he moved across the room towards the desktop which was now shut down. The chair in front of the desktop was lying down on the floor and somebody had left a notepad beside the keyboard. When the soldier was busy checking the notepad near the desktop, Ajay saw something move at the corner of the L-shaped cabin. He was about to alert the soldier when a small vase came flying and hit that soldier. Before the soldier could recover, two bullets hit him right on his chest and stomach. The man went down instantly.

Ajay did not hear the sound of bullets, but he saw the body of the soldier crashing on the floor. The lighter fell on the floor a few metres ahead enlightening a small portion of the cabin. Ajay now knew that there was an intruder in the room and that he was dangerous.

Is he using a silenced weapon? Ajay slowly began crawling. *Does he know I am*

here? Of course, his eyes must be better adjusted to the darkness. But I had maintained a low profile. There is no way he could have seen me.

He tried to figure out his next move. *Should I shout out to the soldier at the back door for help? He is my last chance. But shouting would expose my existence in the room and my position as well. If the soldier doesn't hear my cry, I would be a dead chicken.*

The lighter had now gone off. The room was completely dark. Ajay decided to play it silent. He knew that the intruder was somewhere near the opposite corner of the cabin. It was a safe move to escape out of the front door lying down on the stomach. Ajay retraced his steps back towards the front door slowly and trying to remain as silent as possible. But then suddenly he heard footsteps. The footsteps were coming towards him and the sound of the each footstep made his heart skip a beat. Ajay was sweating profusely, but he also had to think of something. He saw a desk exactly opposite to the A.K. Das's computer under which he could fit, so he quickly rolled over under the desk and waited for the inevitable to happen.

The footsteps kept coming closer. For a second, Ajay thought that he could jump the intruder and take him by surprise as he passed by. But then he ruled out the idea by logic.

He killed an army soldier. Intruder one. Me zero.

He might be physically stronger than me. Intruder two. Me zero.

He has a silenced weapon. Intruder ten. Me zero.

I should probably wait here until he leaves, thought Ajay.

The footsteps went towards the door and he could hear a distinct creaking as the intruder closed the broken door. Ajay was aware of a fear, a fear bordering on a reason-abdicating panic, such as he had never previously experienced.

After a couple of seconds the footsteps seemed to come closer again. Then Ajay saw the intruder move towards the desktop. He was wearing a dark dress and had wrapped cloth over his face to conceal his identity.

What is he trying to do now? Steal more secrets? And what is the guard at back door still doing? He should be suspicious by now and should have come in to check.

The mysterious figure picked up the chair, booted the computer, kept his silenced pistol on the table next to the mouse and started to jot down something on the notepad. The intruder had no idea that Ajay was watching him from behind. The bright light coming from the screen of the monitor made it

impossible for Ajay to recognise the intruder from behind. Ajay caught a glimpse of his hand and noticed that the intruder was using a pair of hand gloves to avoid leaving any fingerprints. In the light coming from the screen, Ajay could faintly make out the red colour of his hand gloves.

He has no idea there is another soldier waiting outside. That soldier might come in any time now. Patience, Ajay, Patience. Maintain your calm.

Ajay had too many things going on in his mind. He was breathing faster every second. Minutes seemed like hours.

Where is that damn guard, Ajay was now panic-stricken and restless. He decided to brave the inevitable and sneak out silently. Maintaining a low profile, he crawled out of the desk soundlessly.

Front door or the back door? Ajay had a choice to make. *That guy has a direct shot at the front door. One mistake and he would be putting bullets through me. Better take the back door.*

Ajay crawled at a snail's pace ducking between tables and cupboard. He was almost midway near the corner of the cabin when his path was blocked by a long wooden partition. The only way past it was a wooden door which was the entrance to the data room.

Okay. Almost there. I just have to swiftly open the door and make a dash for the back door.

Ajay took a deep breath. He was two metres away from the door. Checking on the intruder who was busy copying data, Ajay slowly started to rise up. He took a small step towards the door when his right foot accidently stepped on a paper weight lying on the floor.

The sound was sharp and the intruder didn't waste a second in picking up his gun. The only problem the intruder now faced was that his eyes had been focused on the bright screen for too long. As he turned towards the source of the sound, he couldn't clearly comprehend the outline of Ajay dashing for the door at the partition. Without wasting any time, the intruder fired four rounds randomly towards the wooden partition. Ajay had jumped towards the door knob and he was in mid air when the bullets went whizzing past him. One nearly missed the back of his head and Ajay could sense it going past his hair. The other two were fired quite a distance above him, but the last bullet tore through the fabric of his overcoat, sliced his skin and brushed past his right shoulder. Ajay, landing on the door, was about to open the doorknob when the other soldier rushed in through the front door. The mysterious intruder had now adjusted his eyes to the

darkness. Before the second soldier could get his pistol out of the holster, three bullets went right through his chest. Ajay watched his last ray of hope fall down dead as he closed the partition door behind him.

The data room was more like a server room with nine long cabinets arranged three by three in a very symmetrical distribution. All the data hard disks were classified and kept for records. The room was small and the cabinets stood like pillars in some Greek architecture. Ajay dodged the cabinets and made way through the piles of floppies and finally reached the back door. He was one step away from freedom.

He unbolted the door and pushed it outwards. The door wouldn't budge. Ajay gave it a hard push with his shoulder again and yet the door stood still. It was bolted from outside.

The door of the wooden partition opened and a figure armed with a gun stepped into the data room!

Chapter 45

The second soldier after a long time had grown suspicious of something fishy going on inside the cabin. He bolted the back door from outside so no one could come exit from behind. Then he entered from the front door to investigate and had taken three bullets in his chest. Ajay was now trapped. Totally. He knew there was absolutely no chance he was getting out of there alive. The room was absolutely dark and the only way out of the room now was the door in the wooden partition through which the intruder had just entered. The intruder moved slowly from cabinet to cabinet, checking every corner for signs of any survivor.

Ajay slithered quietly in the dark, guessing the movements of the armed intruder and trying to remain as far from him as possible. Ajay had made a mental note of the layout of the cabinets and stacks of floppies in the room when he had crossed the room. The sound of the attacker turning quickly or displacing a piled stack of floppies would give away his rough position to Ajay. He concentrated hard on listening to footsteps which were coming towards him from his left.

He will be on the other side of this cabinet any second now. This is my only chance. Either I do this or I die.

Ajay took out a pen from his pocket and tossed it over his head from above the cabinet so that it would fall on the opposite side of the cabinet. The sound of the falling pen reverberated throughout the room. The footsteps became quick and heavy. They approached the spot where the pen had landed and then suddenly stopped.

Got him just where I wanted.

The next moment, Ajay put all his power into his muscles and pushed the entire cabinet to his opposite side where the intruder was investigating. The entire stack of hard drives and unused electronic equipments came down, tumbling on the intruder. Ajay had made his window of escape. He dashed to the door in the partition, ran into the office room, and made it straight out of the main door. He didn't even care to look back for a couple of seconds. He just ran and ran to the nearest security check post. Never in his life had he run so furiously. After covering a considerable distance, Ajay glanced behind. There it was - the mysterious figure with its face covered, dark clothing and red hand gloves staring at him. Ajay quickly turned left and took cover behind the parked military trucks to avoid any bullets that might be fired upon him.

Gasping for breath, he ran to the watchtower.

"You need to come over right now! Shots were fired in the co-ordinator's cabin-"

Ajay, out of breath and in the verge of a collapse, managed to explain the guards the gravity of the situation and dragged them to the cabin. Twenty minutes later, the assistant co-ordinator's office was a buzzing centre of activity: Military officers were investigating the situation, Ajay had been cross-questioned three times by the authorities. Mr. A.K. Das was summoned immediately to check if any data was missing from his computer. The medics had cleaned and bandaged the wound on Ajay's right shoulder where the bullet had brushed past.

"So it was you who toppled that cabinet and broke those important hard drives?" An officer was questioning a terror stricken Ajaysingh Chauhan.

"Yes, I had no option. I couldn't think of anything else," Ajay responded in a resolute manner.

"Did you have a good look at his face?"

"No. He had his face covered."

"Did he see you?"

"I don't think so. We were never actually face to face. I am pretty sure he spotted me when I was running away, but he couldn't have seen my face. It was too dark," Ajay reasoned.

"Good," said the officer curtly. His manner was the most brisk and business-like and he did not mince words when he spoke next. "It is a good thing he did not see you. With you exposed all of us would have been in danger and judging by this mayhem, he will surely strike back and his next target will be you. He will try and get rid of you as soon as he gets a chance. That means he is one of us and is in the facility at this moment". Having said that, the Officer looked at Ajay and said with a quiet concern, "You better watch out Mr. Ajay, it could be anyone."

"Fine," Ajay spoke in a shaky tone. He saw the army men take away the bodies of the two soldiers on stretchers. Ajay was not feeling good at all.

"The floppy disk on which he was copying the data was plugged into the system even when we got there. Why do you think did he not take it with him?" the officer tossed another question at Ajay.

"Maybe he panicked. After I escaped, he must have known that I would bring back help. So he needed to disappear fast. He must have forgotten to retrieve the

floppy in all this chaos."

"I guess you are right. We got some footprints in the sand, but the late night wind blew the rest of the trail of footprints," the officer replied.

"How can there be a spy amongst us and we don't even have a clue about him or his activities?" Ajay questioned the officer interrogating him.

"For now, you are free to go. Don't speak about this incident or let anyone know you were involved. We will try to keep your name out of it. You seem pretty shaken up. Get some sleep now," the officer said, with a pat on Ajay's shoulder.

Ajay shook hands with the officer and was heading towards his bunk when Jacob came running towards him.

"Hey! Did you hear the story?" Jacob asked.

"What story?" Ajay replied, trying to act normal.

"I was working in my lab when I heard that something had happened at the co-ordinator's cabin. Some guys were saying that a couple of soldiers died. Is it true? I also heard there was a scientist in the cabin at the time of attack," Jacob blurted out hurriedly.

Ajay decided to tell his friend everything. He needed to take some load off his mind. He was about to start his story with '*That scientist guy was me'* when something that he saw, made him stop dead in his tracks. Ajay's eyes were fixed on Jacob's hands. They were gloved. His eyes widened and filled with terror when it dawned on him.

Jacob was wearing red hand gloves!

Chapter 46

"Sir, I have a flight scheduled at 4.45 am from Aurangabad airport. We will rendezvous at your bunker and fly you to Delhi for the press conference. Hope we find that artefact before 4.45 am."

David's words brought Ajaysingh Chauhan back to the present. He realised that he was on a conference call with David and the IB headquarters. Ajaysingh quickly checked his watch. It was 2.53 am.

"Yes. How far is your team from the Ajanta Caves?" President Ajaysingh asked, taking his time to absorb the ongoing events.

"Almost there. About fifteen minutes," David replied. In the de-synchronized roar of the rotors, David had to put in a lot of effort to be audible.

"You keep me updated about the progress on finding that artefact. What is the situation on the Island?" Ajaysingh Chauhan asked the headquarters.

"We have our troops ready to attack, Sir. We only need to disable or hack into their systems. David's guy is working on that," HQ replied. After another few minutes of conversation, Ajaysingh wished David luck and went off the line.

Fiddling with his keyboard, Ranjeet was still struggling to get past the security firewalls. The status on his screen now read '28% complete'. He was working on two laptops simultaneously: one of which was connected to the mainframe server at the IB headquarters, and the other one plugged into the host server at the Wheeler Island facility. David knew that Ranjeet was working as fast as he could, but things still needed to be speeded up. There was a special task force somewhere near the Wheeler Island facility waiting for his orders.

"How much more time, Mr. Hacker?" asked David.

"I have gone deep enough into their systems. Now I got to be a bit slow and extra careful. One wrong command and they will detect my intrusion. Just give me a couple of hours," Ranjeet replied without blinking his eyes. He was glued to the screen with total concentration.

Sameer was not present at the Rashtrapati Bhawan when others had listened to the tape sent by the lunatic. He decided to listen to what the original tape said.

"Maybe we can find some more clues which these people might have missed earlier," he told Shonali, who was stealing a look at Ranjeet out of the corner of her eye.

"Huh? Oh yeah, sure! You want to listen to the tape? I have the recording on my cell phone."

She turned to take out the cell phone from her purse when she glanced at Ranjeet again.

Looks like that guy does have some brains. Looking at the way he is typing I think the keys will pop out of that keyboard soon. I hope he breaks down that firewall.

"Here you go, Sameer," said Shonali- her eyes still glued to the hacker.

That same instant Ranjeet looked up at her. Shonali quickly shifted her gaze towards the window of the helicopter.

Ranjeet was stunned for a second. He stared quizzically at Shonali.

Was she looking at me? She definitely seemed to be doing so. Ranjeet smiled and out of the corner of his lips escaped a silent and elated grin.

As he went back to his work, he remembered why he had looked up at Shonali. He was awfully thirsty.

"Hey, would you pass that bottle of water?" he finally said, giving a dubious smile to Shonali.

Shonali turned around to fetch the bottle of water behind her.

He smiled at me! Should I smile back? No, that would be foolish. I should probably maintain my cold look and just give him the bottle. Matter closed.

She took the bottle and extended her hand to give it to Ranjeet. Ranjeet was looking intently at her face. He didn't see any smile.

Perhaps I was wrong. May be she wasn't looking at me at all. Was it the window behind me that she was staring at? Damn that lucky window.

Ranjeet reached out to grab the bottle from her hand, giving a subtle smile this time.

Shonali was trying to get a grip on herself. *Remember Shonali, no smile. Just the standard cold look.*

Ranjeet grabbed the bottled with his right hand. His fingers touched Shonali's. How soft were Shonali's hands, her fingers, like silk on his skin. He wanted to leave the bottle and grab her hand. But Shonali was already withdrawing her hand. He relaxed back in his seat, sipping the water. Never in his life had he realised that plain water had so much sweetness in it.

Shonali was silently congratulating herself for her composure. *It was that simple. No smile and the cold look always work. Now the matter is closed. You don't want to go out with a guy like that.*

And out of nowhere, she heard herself blurting out-

"Is the water too cold?" Shonali was smiling.

Chapter 47

"So let's begin the game. I am going to tell you where the first clue is hidden, but it's not going to be easy finding it. To make the game interesting, I have planned some surprises for you. The first clue is written in metal at 28° 31' 27.68" N, 77° 11' 6.89" E. Take the paper beside this cassette player along with you. It would be quite helpful if you would know how to read those numbers on the paper..."

Sameer was intently listening to each statement, trying to catch any clue which might have been missed. The tape continued.

"*... I suspect that you won't take me seriously, so do not hesitate to ask Mr. Kapoor - the head of the BRAHMOS project if you have any doubts about the level of mass destruction that the missile is capable of. And the last thing - do not try to deceive me. I am not alone. I have my army- The Nine Unknown. I have my eyes on you every second. I know it will take..."*

Suddenly Sameer paused the tape. "Did you note this?" he asked with his eyebrows raised. Everyone turned to him to hear what he had to say.

Sameer re-winded the tape and played it.

"....level of mass destruction that the missile is capable of. And the last thing - do not try to deceive me. I am not alone - I have my army - The Nine Unknown...."

Sameer paused the tape and looked up.

Ranjeet was first to ask the question. "The Nine Unknown? What does-"

"Exactly! How could you miss that?" Sameer asked.

"I did notice it when we heard the tape for the first time but couldn't make anything of it. I didn't pay attention to it later. Do you have any idea what does the 'Nine Unknown' signify?" asked David.

Sameer nodded affirmatively. He could vividly recall all that he had read about the Nine Unknown Men, from a randomly picked book a few years back.

"This guy is really into history, I tell you. He must have done a great deal of research to set us on the trail of whatever artefact he is referring to. Shonali, I guess you have an idea what the Nine Unknown means."

"Not much. It is some kind of legend, though. No proof of the existence of the Nine Unknown Men has ever been found and interestingly not many Buddhist

scripts mention about them. Those that do mention are so heavily riddled that deciphering them becomes a pain in the neck, literally. Scholars believe that the story of the Nine Unknown is just another religious hoax fit only for drawing room conversations," Shonali replied, quoting the information she had on the Nine Unknown Men.

"That's what a secret society should be like. Nobody should ever know that it exists!" Sameer exclaimed. Noticing the blank looks on everyone's faces, Sameer decided to give them a detailed account of the Nine Unknown.

"The myth of The Nine Unknown Men dates back to the time of Emperor Ashoka who converted to Buddhism after the massacre at Kalinga. Legends say that the Nine Unknown Men are a two millennia-old secret society founded by the Indian Emperor Ashoka around 273 B.C. The Emperor founded the society of the Nine to preserve and develop certain knowledge that besides being beneficial could also be detrimental to humanity if it fell into the wrong hands. During his reign natural science, past and present, was vowed to complete secrecy. He appointed nine able and apt men for the task of preserving and hiding the knowledge. Ashoka founded one of the most powerful secret societies: that of the Nine Unknown Men. Many of the old Vedic literature, the sacred manuscripts from Nalanda, the knowledge from experiments, studies and documents accumulated over a period of more than 2,000 years were handed over to the Nine Unknown." Sameer took a little pause to catch up his breath and continued.

"Each of the Nine is supposedly responsible for guarding and improving a single book. Traditionally, the books are said to cover atypical subjects such as Propaganda and Psychological Warfare which concerns a concerted set of messages aimed at influencing the opinions or behaviour of large number of people. Instead of impartially providing information, propaganda in its most basic form presents information in order to influence its audience. It is the most dangerous of all sciences, as it is capable of moulding mass opinion. Another book was on Physiology which was supposed to contain the instructions on how to perform the 'touch of death'- death being caused by a reversal of the nerve-impulse. One account suggests that Judo was a product of the material leaked from this book. The third book was on Microbiology and Bio-technology. There were also books on Advanced Alchemy, Communication, Sociology, Gravitation, Cosmology with one of the oldest references to the space time fabric, and light, and the idea to use it as a weapon by concentrating it in a certain direction like the modern LASER technology. There was no known or surviving legacy of the Nine, although some believe they are amongst us even

today. Believers in the Nine also point to the mysterious Delhi iron pillar, which is said to have been constructed at a time before the advent of the technology and is still considered a metallurgical marvel."

Shonali was at a loss by the barrage of information that Sameer was spewing at them.

The Iron Pillar is the very place where the trail started. After all it IS all connected.

"So where are those nine books now?" Shonali asked Sameer, her voice coated with escalated excitement.

"Lost in the abyss of time. The knowledge, the secrets... all gone. Nobody knows who the nine people assigned to safeguard the knowledge were. They remained Unknown forever," replied Sameer.

"Is this what our harebrained maestro is after? The forgotten and ancient knowledge which might give a new insight into how we see things today? Those nine books - is that what he wants?" David tossed his questions into the conversation.

"Maybe. Maybe not. After all, it was just a legend. The story of the Nine Unknown was made popular for the first time in 1927 through a book. That book talks about a secret society and all the secrets buried with it. But looking at the craze this guy has for the history- I think this lunatic still thinks that those nine books can be found. He has named his small army as the Nine Unknown Men," Sameer said.

"At least we now know that there are nine of them. Ten- including the bastard I am going to teach a lesson. It figures - when we were at the Thar desert camp, we had an intelligence report of around ten to fifteen people but we only found a half a dozen. When I heard the tape at Rashtrapati Bhawan, I didn't suspect there was a connection between both the cases. But now I can bet that those nine missing terrorists must be working for him," said David, giving Raghav a slight nod.

"Four minutes to destination," the pilot announced.

Chapter 48

The chopper hovered over the rock cut caves of Ajanta which nestled in a panoramic gorge, in the form of a gigantic horseshoe. David took out the dhvaj which they had found at the Sariputra's stupa.

"Now I understand why the first place which came to your mind when you saw this horseshoe shaped picture was Ajanta, Shonali. The caves are in the exact same formation as depicted in the drawing," David remarked.

"I just hope we are on the right track and find the artefact here," Shonali replied a little apprehensively.

The pilot made a smooth landing in a clearing near the parking spot of the eco-friendly government buses which transported passengers from the foothills of the mountain to the caves and back. Ranjeet stayed back in the chopper to continue with his hacking. The concerned local authorities were already informed about the situation and all the caves were made accessible to David and his team.

The commandos stuck to their formations protecting Shonali and Sameer, scouting the area for any trouble. A narrow entry passageway at the east side of the caves led them to the series of famous rock cut caves - the finest examples of some of the earliest Buddhist architecture, cave-paintings and sculptures.

"So where do we find the Reclining Buddha?" Sameer asked Shonali.

"There are a total of 29 caves around here and every cave has been assigned a number. I think the Reclining Buddha is in cave no. 26."

"That's right," one of the accompanying local authorities confirmed.

David and the commandos started to make their way to cave number 26 cautiously with Shonali, Sameer and a local expert following them.

"These caves are a unique representation of what artwork one could create with just a chisel and a hammer. You know, Sir, the caves were occupied for almost 700 years since around 2nd century A.D but were abandoned rather abruptly. They remained hidden, unknown to the world for almost a thousand years. It was in 1819 when John Smith, a British army officer accidently stumbled upon them, that the existence of caves came to be known," the local expert was giving out information even though no one paid much attention to him except Sameer and Shonali.

"How were these caved built?" He got a question from Shonali.

"With the simple instruments available for the cutting of rocks then. The entire work was done using only three instruments - pick axe for digging purposes, chisel and hammer for more delicate work. The excavation of the caves always started from the top- from the ceiling and then gradually came downwards. The perfection in carving, the excellence in designs, rich sculptures and exceptional paintings of Ajanta cannot be rivalled. The caves express the heights of Indian cultural traditions."

They were halfway to cave number 26 when Sameer noticed some caves were of a specific design. He turned and asked Shonali about it.

"These caves comprise of mainly two categories of architectures. The first are the Chaitya Halls, or the shrines, dedicated to Lord Buddha, and the others are Viharas, or the monasteries, used by the Buddhist monks for meditation and the study of Buddhist teachings," Shonali said, answering Sameer's doubt.

"And how did they make the paint for the paintings?" asked Sameer as they increased the pace and almost went into a jog.

"The technique of the painting was simple yet unique. The content of the paint mixture was mostly clay, cow dung, powered rock and sometimes mixed with rice husk," the local authority accompanying them answered. "Ajanta is famous for its three dimensional paintings and special colour effects in the paintings."

The group moved on stone pathway which curved as each cave passed by. David looked at the rock cut caves and the shrines built inside them, the Chaitya prayer halls and the sanctum with a small pavilion with numerous Buddha images and sculptures.

So much of history buried down in these caves. So much skill and knowledge passed down for centuries.

After crossing a couple of caves, they stood before cave number 26 which held the answers to their questions. Shonali stepped into the cave which was illuminated by a stream of small spotlights nested in the walls to enable the tourists to see each and every detail of the amazing sculptures in the caves. No streak of sunlight reached the caves even during the brightest hours. The local authority accompanying them was wise enough to bring a big flashlight and a couple of lanterns to lighten up the cave. Shonali was overwhelmed by a strange feeling as she entered the cave, a feeling that was familiarly unfamiliar. Everything about the cave was different. The calmness inside, the silence, the serenity in its atmosphere and small miniature Buddha Sculptures peacefully meditating. David followed closely with his team as they entered the cave with

extreme precaution. It was a Mahayana Prayer hall with a stupa containing image of Buddha in the pavilion. Along the whole length of the cave on the left wall was the rock cut sculpture of the Reclining Buddha, exuding a charm that enchanted everyone. All of them stood in a line just gazing at sculpture bathed in yellow spotlights. It seemed as if history had come alive.

"Why do they call it the 'Reclining' Buddha?" Sameer asked the local guide.

"The reclining Buddha represents Shakyamuni Buddha that is the historical Buddha at his death. It is said that the Buddha knew death was approaching, and asked his disciples to prepare a couch for him in a grove. He lay there, reclining on his right side, facing west, with his head supported by his hand, as he passed into nirvana- the supreme state where one becomes free from suffering and individual existence," the guide replied. "The statue of the Reclining Buddha is not supposed to evoke sadness, but rather encouragement that all beings have the potential to become enlightened and attain release from the sufferings which characterize the cycle of rebirth. The reclining Buddha has a serene and composed expression. You can observe that he is actually slightly smiling as a reminder of the serenity that comes with enlightenment"

David suddenly interrupted the guide's free knowledge session.

"We don't have much time. I suppose we must start looking for the clues to the artefact. Where do we start Miss Shonali?" David asked.

"I suspect that the clue must be somewhere around this sculpture. We should probably start looking for it the same way we tried to find the dhvaj - look for any transcripts, writings in the rock or hidden compartments. Let me have a look at the message that we translated from the dhvaj."

David had a strategy ready.

"Sgt Mohan, Capt. Ashish and Rakesh, take the left wall. Cpl Mahesh and Sgt. Harish take the right one. The rest will search the stupa for any unusual markings. You know we don't have time to waste boys. Move it fast." The Black Cats split to look for clues in the caves. The visibility was low, but the lanterns and spotlights made their work less tedious.

In the chopper, Ranjeet was trying hard to do his job. The web evolved into something more complex with every bit of firewall he broke into. A couple of times, his intrusion was almost detected by the main servers at the Wheeler Island facility. He was 36 % through and now he was facing trouble accessing the key codes from the I.B. headquarters. He called the headquarters to confirm his security clearance.

"You do not have the level four and above security clearance. We cannot grant you those pass keys Mr. Ranjeet," replied a lady at the other end in a polite tone.

"No. YOU try to understand, ma'am!" Never had Ranjeet felt so desperate. "I am in a middle of an important job here and I cannot afford to be detected. The moment they detect an intrusion into their systems, they launch that damn missile. So unless you give me the pass keys, I can't make it further. And there is no question of backing out now so I NEED you to give me the clearance at once". Pausing for a second, Ranjeet added, "Madam, if you want I can get a recommendation for clearance from Colonel David D'Costa."

The female operator considered Ranjeet's reasoning for a moment.

"Hold on for a second, I will see what I can do." Saying so, the operator got off the phone and went to her supervisor's office.

A minute passed by and then another.

On the screen of Ranjeet's laptop, a window appeared.

It was just a small window. Ranjeet didn't even realise it had come up on his screen when suddenly a timer started ticking on his console window.

What the hell is that? Ranjeet was aghast.

He started typing furiously, but nothing happened. There was nothing being typed in the command console. It was as if the console window was being locked down.

Oh shit! A Lockdown. They must be changing the pass key sequence at the Wheeler island facility. If I don't get the security access key now, I am screwed.

The servers at Wheeler Island were pre-programmed to rotate the pass key sequence every six hours. Ranjeet had successfully decoded the entire passkey sequence. It had taken all his knowledge and hacking prowess along with sweat dripping hard work of two hours. But now each and every pass key was going to be reset by the server.

If I don't get through all this firewall now, I will be back to square one and that means starting from scratch.

The timer on the screen read 72 seconds.

Why don't they just give me the damn clearance? It would be a waste of time if I had to start over again. Maybe too late to stop those missiles. Ranjeet was at his wit's end.

The marker on the screen blipped inside a small box and it was the only space on

the screen where something could be typed in.

60 seconds.

Ranjeet had a blank space for the 16 character access password on another window. He shouted over the phone, "Hey, is anybody there? We are running out of time!"

47 seconds.

"Damn it. I need that access key!!"

He kept on typing commands to somehow get his console window to work, but it was locked down. The timer was the only thing that moved. And it moved fast.

38 seconds.

There was a soft rustling heard as the operator picked up the phone and spoke on the mouthpiece, "Ranjeet, you there? I managed to get you the clearance-"

"Just give the access code. I need it right now." Ranjeet was losing his patience.

23 seconds.

"Alright, hold on. I am checking on the list. Tell me the firewall phrase."

"WHEELER-IKC_103!" was Ranjeet's immediate response.

14 seconds.

There was no reply.

12 seconds.

Silence.

9 seconds.

"Hello, you there?" Ranjeet shouted.

"I am unable to find it!"

6 seconds.

"Hold on. Here it is - the passkey for phrase: WHEELER-IKC_103 is..."

3 seconds.

The sixteen spaces still remained vacant.

Chapter 49

Ajanta Caves,

Outskirts of Aurangabad.

Time - 03:40 am

Almost twenty minutes had passed since they had started searching but nothing had come up yet. No sign of any hidden passage ways, no transcripts.

"It is of no use searching like this. We don't even know what we are searching for. We just got lucky at Nalanda and found the dhvaj, but this… the place is full of old sculptures and mysterious paintings. How are we supposed find the thing of which we know nothing!" exclaimed David.

"Yeah, we are just throwing darts in the dark here. There must be some more clues on that dhvaj. It was the thread between Nalanda and this place," said Sameer.

Shonali went through the writing on the dhvaj for the second time.

"The secret you seek is far simpler than you think yet very hard to find. You will need to completely devote your soul to the purpose. You will need the courage to face all the obstacles which may come in your path. Beyond the darkness is the light of wisdom. Continue your journey and you may find the answers you seek. Ah! Remember! You must surrender yourself to Lord Buddha."

What clue can be hidden in here? Everything looks normal-

..the secret you seek is far more simple than you think

But we have no idea what we are seeking. Shonali looked at the writing again.

You will need to completely devote your soul to the purpose... You must surrender yourself to Lord Buddha.

Surrender to Lord Buddha?

"The translation of the script from the dhvaj is almost clean except for this part," Shonali said to Sameer, pointing the finger at that line. "It translates as - Continue your journey and you may find the answers you seek and you must surrender yourself to Lord Buddha."

The line kept playing with Sameer's mind.

Surrender to Lord Buddha... Surrender to Lord Buddha... How to surrender to

this sculpture?

Suddenly, he had a hunch.

He explained his intuition to Shonali. "Maybe the surrender here refers to taking blessings, to devote oneself to the Buddha."

"Okay. But, how does that help?" Shonali asked.

"So how do you surrender to someone or seek blessings of someone?"

Shonali took a second to answer.

"Um... By bowing down or by touching his feet..."

And then it hit Shonali- *THE FEET! The feet of Lord Buddha- that's where the answer lies. Surrender yourself to Lord Buddha.*

Sameer saw the look of realisation on Shonali's face and smiled to himself. They dashed towards the feet of the sculpture!

****

"39GENJ3011AKINOM"

One second left.

It was the astounding speed at which Ranjeet typed the password as the operator spoke which filled up the 16 blank spaces just a few milliseconds before the window closed.

The screen went blank for a couple of seconds.

Ranjeet crossed his fingers as he went on to type a command in his console window.

Hope it works.

He a typed in a test command and it executed spot on! He heaved a sigh of relief as he realised that he had barely made it through this firewall. But now the work had to go faster. Disconnecting the call, he had a little celebration in his mind and then went back to his work. He was halfway through.

Chapter 50

"So you say we search around the feet? But we have already looked there. We got nothing," David said, looking at Shonali who was busy observing the area around the feet very carefully. She had checked for hidden compartments, but there was nothing there.

The Black Cats watched in bewilderment as Shonali and Sameer were searching around the feet of the sculpture hysterically.

"Ma'am, this place was discovered a long time ago and many historians have inspected the place since; searched for secret caves, passages or cryptic sculptures. It has also been open for the public. I don't think you will find anything new here," the local guide tried to convince Shonali.

But Shonali's mind was on fire as her intuition directed her to observe minutely, search for an opening or a mark, from every possible angle, impervious to what others were saying.

"You know what- there is never a timeline for history to be discovered. You cannot compartmentalise history. That is one thing that this night has taught me. I saw a script hidden in the midst of the one of the oldest stupas. And that changed my perspective of looking at history. Maybe we are looking over something, or missing something." There was a vehemence and a conviction in her voice that was unmistakable.

Sameer was flashing a light towards the bottom of the feet, when he saw a glare. A very small amount light was being reflected back into his eyes. Only he could observe it because the glare fell directly on his eyes.

What's that? A mirror?

Sameer cleared up his throat and announced to everyone in the cave.

"Everyone, I need everyone to switch off their flashlights. Can we get these spotlights out too? " he said, turning to the local guide.

"In a moment." The confused guide dialled a number from his phone.

"What did you find, Sameer?" Shonali asked excitedly.

"Just hang on a second. Need to confirm it first," Sameer said, clutching his flashlight tightly.

Everyone had turned off their flashlights and lanterns. A few seconds later, the spotlights went out. The cave was pitch black now.

David had kept on his night vision goggles just in case of any surprise attacks in the darkness.

Sameer switched on his flashlight and carefully directed it towards the spot from where he got the glare. After a couple of attempts, he hit the spot and observed a glare coming from an unknown spot.

"There!" said Sameer pointing at the feet of the Buddha. "Can you see a beam of light being reflected back from somewhere around the bottom of the feet of the carving?" Sameer asked, drawing Shonali's attention to a tiny section where the feet touched the back wall. But Shonali couldn't make out the source of the reflection in the blinding darkness. All she could see was the light from Sameer's flashlight.

"I can see it! A very thin beam. It goes and hits somewhere on the ceiling of the cave!" David observed.

Through his night visions, David had a clear picture of the light beam emerging and hitting the roof. He went and stood exactly below the point where the beam hit the ceiling. "This is where it hits the ceiling," David added, pointing upwards.

Sameer asked everyone to switch on their flashlights.

"Do you think there is some sort of arrangement of mirrors over there," Sameer asked, pointing to the compartment in the rock near the feet of Buddha from where the ray of light had emerged.

"Mirrors? In such a small compartment?" Raghav was confused.

Shonali was the one to reply. "Yes! It's possible and it makes sense too. While carving and excavation of these caves, mirrors or light reflecting surfaces such as pans filled with water were extensively used to disperse the light falling at the entrance of the cave inside the dark caves where the sculptures were being carved. Obviously they had no spotlights in those days, so they had to depend on reflecting surfaces to direct the light inside the caves which used to be dark even during broad daylight. So it can possibly be an arrangement of curved mirrors which must be focussing the light to that single point on the ceiling."

Sameer remembered the lines written on the dhvaj- *Beyond the darkness is the light of wisdom.*

Sameer took a deeper look at the small hole through which the light had shot out. In the darkness he could not see much, but was pretty sure of the presence of a hollow space somewhere inside that compartment where the entire mirror mechanism would be resting.

"I suppose we start looking at the spot on the ceiling of the cave where the beam touched," David said turning to Shonali.

"Of course it would be hidden in the roof... Again! Nobody looks for anything on the ceiling and that's where these Buddhist monks have hidden their stuff," Shonali quoted, with a little smile on her face.

The ceiling was not that high and this time they had some help from the local authorities who made arrangements for a ladder to be put up. Five minutes later, Commander David D'costa reached up to the ceiling and felt the cold stone roof against his palm. He moved his hand along the stone surface to search for any cracks or compartments. The ceiling was absolutely plain, without any sign of any hidden spaces. David switched on his night vision and tried to see the surface more clearly. After five minutes of fruitless investigation, a disappointed David was tired of searching.

"Miss Shonali, are you absolutely sure we are on the right track? This looks like a dead end to me. There's absolutely nothing up there," said David as he climbed down the ladder.

"I think this should be it. There's no other location I could infer from the *dhvaj*."

"Let me go and take a look," Raghav volunteered.

"Sure, go ahead. Give it a try. After all, you found that *dhvaj*," David said, stepping away from the ladder.

Raghav climbed up and switched on his night vision goggles. He could see the small stream of light directed from near the feet of Lord Buddha on the ceiling. He touched the spot on the ceiling where the stream of light hit. He tried searching for a button or lever, but the ceiling was plain and hard. Raghav pressed hard his finger on the spot again where the light hit and that's when he got some movement. The ceiling of the cave shifted up to a very little distance. Raghav smiled to himself.

Shonali and David were standing below watching him expectantly to come up with something.

"I think something just moved. I don't know what it-"

Raghav's words remained incomplete as a big mass of rock parted from the ceiling out of nowhere and fell right on Raghav. Losing his balance, Raghav dropped down. Shonali and David watched in horror as the huge slab of medieval rock accelerated right towards them!

Chapter 51

Muhammed had followed his master's orders to the word. Now it was time to get ready for his final task. Having narrowly escaped the intelligence officers at the metro station, he had managed to get a room in another hotel far away. He planned everything with extreme care and meant to make no mistakes this time.

Assignment 6.00 was not as easy as he had thought. It had been difficult to get a truck good enough to serve his purpose, but the next task was much more difficult. It was almost 4 am in the morning and he only had two hours before the President would make an appearance in the press conference.

On the desk in front of him were the maps of roadways in Delhi. His master had informed him that the President would be landing at Safdarjung Airport instead of Indira Gandhi International Airport. Muhammed had then scanned and searched for every possible route which David D'costa would take to reach the I.B. headquarters, where the conference was going to be held.

He cross-marked the positions on the road where he would have to set up the cameras for surveillance and park his truck. He knew he had to strike from a considerable distance as the impact had to be done with maximum possible velocity.

Muhammed only had one shot to kill the President of India.

Chapter 52

Shonali and David were under excruciating pain. The weight of the slab of rock from the ceiling was crushing them slowly. They tried desperately to hold their hands up against the slab, but it was too heavy for them. Raghav had already passed out after hitting the ground hard. Shonali was screaming in pain, her left elbow taking the entire weight of the slab and her right palm desperately trying to push back the slab. The black commandos teamed up into two teams and started to lift the rock from two ends. It took the muscle effort of ten strong hands to move that heavy slab up by inches. After a combined effort, Shonali and David were able to crawl out from under the rock, but Raghav was still trapped and unconscious.

David signalled his team to hold it for a bit longer and once again crawled in to drag out Raghav. It was a difficult task with the heavy weight pinning him down and Raghav's leg being caught under the rock. Sameer went over to the other side and helped the commandos lift the slab an inch more so David could slide out Raghav's leg.

Shonali, who was now resting near the entrance of the cave, asked for a bottle of water. As she pressed her handkerchief against the wound on her elbow, she knew it needed medical attention. One of the commandos swiftly attended to it and rested Shonali's left hand in a temporary sling.

David had some minor injuries to his shoulder and wrist, but Raghav was badly injured. His leg had been stuck under the rock for too long. Sgt Harish bandaged Raghav's leg while David sat silently drinking water. In one corner of the cave, he saw Shonali resting her head against the sculpture of Reclining Buddha, sitting quietly.

"I should have never asked you to help us. I didn't know I would be putting you in danger," David said as he walked towards her.

"Nothing that I can't handle. I am fine. Just the elbow hurts a little. Your medic said that it would recover soon. I was hoping that we don't mention about this incident to my dad. Let's just say I slipped somewhere. How is Capt. Raghav?" she asked.

"I think he is coming around," said David, pointing towards Raghav who was starting to regain consciousness.

"You feel alright, Capt. Raghav?" David asked in a concerned tone.

"Yes, just travelled back into the history after getting hit by a historic rock!" Raghav chuckled.

David heaved a sigh of relief.

"Let us hope that you don't suffer from any memory loss, Captain," joked David as he helped Raghav get up and handed over his rifle.

"Did my sacrifice do any good?" asked Raghav, adding to the light-hearted banter.

"We have not yet started looking for any clues that rock might offer us. Everything was so messed up after it fell down. Let's hope Sameer has something for us," said David, turning towards Sameer who had been closely inspecting the slab of rock.

The rock had fallen off a metre away from the feet of Lord Buddha. Sameer had asked the commandos to keep it vertical so he could observe both the sides of the slab. But there was nothing visible on the rock to the plain eye. No inscription, no map, no hidden scrolls. Sameer was at his wits' end now.

"I am not getting anything here. This rock is without a scratch from all the sides. I don't know why it fell off from the ceiling when Raghav applied pressure at that particular spot-" Sameer stopped dead in his tracks as he turned his head towards the spot on the ceiling of the cave from where the slab had fallen.

Once again Sameer saw why the ancient cult of monks had been successful in hiding their deepest secrets for centuries.

Chapter 53

It was done. The completion bar was static at 67 percent and Ranjeet knew he could go no further. He had used all his skill and knowledge to get across the firewalls as far as possible, but the progress bar now remained stagnant.

He dialled the Intelligence Bureau headquarters for confirming his doubt. A familiar lady picked up the call.

"Yes, this is Ranjeet again. I needed some information. Will you please connect me to your IT department?"

"Sure, just a second. I think Mr. Vishal might be working tonight. I will connect you to him."

After a few seconds, Ranjeet heard an irritating tone of a tired employee.

"Who is it? Why the hell do you need information from the IT at this hour?" The voice at the other end was not clearly pleased.

"Mr. Vishal? This is Ranjeet. I am trying to break into a military grade firewall on Grid 17 and I need to know something-"

"Breaking into a military firewall? What the hell do you think you are doing?" Vishal fumbled as he tried to find the right words. This was all very confusing and apprehensive for him. He knew about Ranjeet who had worked earlier on many cases for the Bureau but breaking a military firewall was completely out of line.

"Relax sir, I assure you that I have been granted the clearance to do so. It is a matter of extreme emergency. I just need to know something about the Grid 17 firewalls," Ranjeet said calmly.

After a couple of minutes of convincing, Ranjeet finally made the man talk.

"Fine, I will help you out, but firewalls are not my speciality. If you want some expert guidance, I suggest you call tomorrow morning," Vishal replied hesitantly.

"No, I just need some clarifications. It's very urgent. Do you know where is the main hub of Grid 17 located? Is it at the I.B. headquarters or any other place known to you?" Ranjeet asked with curiosity.

"Um... Grid 17? That's the east coast naval grid, I guess."

"Precisely," quoted Ranjeet.

"Most of the Grids have their hubs located at the nearest data centre in their area, but Grid 15, 17 and 18 are high security level Grids. My computer shows that the main hub of Grid 17 is at Wheeler Island missile launch facility itself."

"So if I have to disable the systems, I would have to hack into their main hub and for that I have to be AT the Wheeler Island facility, right?" asked Ranjeet, his heart was beating wildly.

"Tell me exactly for what kind of job do you have the clearance?" Vishal was not giving up information without raising questions.

"Sir, you can ask questions later. I just need to know where in the Wheeler Island facility is the main hub located?"

"It's in the main server room right behind the MODULE 12," Vishal said, checking the data on his screen.

"Thanks, Mr. Vishal. Now I need you to answer my next questions very carefully," said Ranjeet. "And I want you to keep the further conversation just between the two of us. Got that?"

Ranjeet's voice was harsh.

Chapter 54

Sameer, David, Shonali gathered around the fallen slab of stone as they looked up at the space in the ceiling which the slab had kept hidden for centuries. The slab of stone had been a cover- a perfect cover to hide one of the most brilliant paintings at Ajanta. Painted in Prussian blue and red, the painting encompassed the entire rectangular piece of canvas which the slab had covered.

"So I guess we are on the right track after all!" said Shonali glancing at David. She was beaming.

"I still don't get it why the slab fell down after putting pressure on that precise point," said Raghav who was experiencing a minor pain in the legs as he walked around the slab.

"Must have been engineered like that," replied Sameer, pointing at the corners of the canvas. "Check the corners, there are those hook like structures at each corner. You exerting pressure at those points must have released those hooks."

"And these four hooks have been holding that big mass of rock for centuries?" Shonali asked with a look of incredulity in her eyes.

"There might be something more to it than what appears, but if a metal pillar can't get rusted for two thousand years, I won't question the strength of those hooks," added Sameer, with a grin.

David knew the clock was ticking and that they needed to move fast. Real fast.

"So if this is where that message on the *dhvaj* leads to, what does this painting say?" David asked the experts.

Shonali was trying to figure out what the painting looked like. Even in the light from spotlights and searchlights, it was quite difficult to get a proper view of the painting. The painting was of Lord Buddha sitting under a tree and writing on something which looked like a bark of a tree. Above and below the painting were transcripts which were illegible.

"This is a different type of painting! The painting depicts Lord Buddha writing something. Most of the sketches, paintings or sculptures of Gautama Buddha depict him in a state of deep meditation, delivering sermons or attaining nirvana," Shonali responded.

"I am unable to make out the script written below the painting. Is it in Sanskrit?" enquired Sameer.

"I don't know. The script looks familiar, but many of the letters are reversed. I think maybe it is some kind of cryptogram," said Shonali as a chill raced down her spine. She was getting excited to delve deep into the ancient secrets.

"Or perhaps a mirror might help us here," said David.

"Mirror?" asked Shonali with a little rarity.

"Yes. I think it's a simple script in Sanskrit, but only inverted so that a mirror placed on the ground would give the perfect reflection and reveal the script. It was you who said that mirrors were extensively used during the painting of these caves. Can't you see it?"

David's sharp eye had observed what the others had failed to- each letter in the script was written reverse.

"That was a quick observation," appreciated Sameer.

"I suppose tonight's search might make me a treasure hunter!" commented David in jest.

Sameer spread some water on the floor of the cave and asked the commandos to direct their flashlights towards the painting.

Shonali remembered the lines written on the *dhvaj*.

The secret you seek is far more simple than you think yet very hard to find

The water acted as a mirror and clearly gave the reflection of the painting which was shining in the flashlights. Raghav's leg was now hurting badly and yet he stood there- staring at the secret kept hidden by the slab of stone which had crushed his leg under it.

You will need the courage to face all the obstacles which may come in your path.

Shonali watched in awe as the reflected transcript made complete sense. It was written in plain Sanskrit and yet had remained hidden from the eyes of man for such a long time.

The text above the painting was quite short. It read -

Below the painting was a bigger chunk of Sanskrit text.

,

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Its meaning was explained by Shonali: *The thing about wisdom is that, it is never enough. The thirst for wisdom grows ever more. That is what has been driving the world for ages- the thirst for knowledge. Rishis sat in penance, the priests travelled far and wide and yet a very few tasted the true wisdom. O traveller! You too have set out to find that source of truth and we will help you to find it for wisdom should be shared and not kept hidden. If you are worthy enough to seek it, you shall find your truth resting on a flower and guarded day and night by the faithful guards of the King of Magadha- Devanampriya.*

There was complete silence in the cave. The serenity in the air, the sculpture of Lord Buddha attaining nirvana had slowed down the time for everyone.

David and Raghav turned towards Shonali for further answers. Shonali could not make a head or tail of the message below the painting. She also could not figure out why Gautama Buddha was shown writing something in the painting. She kept looking at the painting from different angles while Sameer jotted down the Sanskrit transcript for further reference.

In the flashlights directed towards the painting, Shonali observed something out of place. She saw that in the upper left corner of the painting, there was a 3 by 3 grid which they had failed to spot earlier. It was so beautifully camouflaged that it appeared to be a part of the painting itself.

"Hey! Did you see that? Is that a part of the painting?" Shonali asked Sameer, pointing towards the empty grid. The grid was located at the exact spot where the stream of light from the feet of Lord Buddha now hit the painting.

Sameer looked up and observed closely. Some part of the grid was bulging out from the painting.

"It must be made to fit in a compartment. Maybe applying pressure on THAT

thing caused the rock to fall. Secret within a secret! Let me try to get it out," said Sameer, trying to guess the ancient mechanism designed to hide the painting.

He took the ladder and climbed up slowly. He gripped his fingers tightly around what seemed like a cube with the empty 3 by 3 grid on its face. The cube had been embedded into the painting for a long time in an exact cavity made to hold it and Sameer was finding it really difficult to extract the cube out of the cavity. Raghav passed Sameer his pen knife so that Sameer could scrape off any material in the space between the compartment holding the cube and the walls of the cube. Slowly and steadily, the cube started to come off the ceiling.

"It is a closed box. Some kind of chest to store things," said Sameer, as he descended down the ladder and put down the cube on the floor of the cave. It was around fifteen centimetres in length, breadth and depth; light in weight and carved out of stone. Sameer shook it near his ear to get a hint about the contents of the chest, but there wasn't any sound from inside the cube.

"Can't hear anything inside," he said passing the cube to Shonali.

Shonali focussed on observing the cube very carefully- feeling every face of the cube with her fingertips, looking for a way to open it. The cube was designed in a typical way. The empty 3 by 3 grid was the top face of the cube and on the opposite face there was a sliding window which perhaps was the only opening of the cube. Shonali somehow knew that the only way of knowing what was inside that cube was by sliding that window open.

What she held in her hands was the most secure safe designed by an ancient guild of the monks.

Chapter 55

His watch displayed 4.20 am. David knew that the President had to depart for Delhi soon. He asked Raghav to assemble his team in a corner.

"Everyone- I know this night has been a tough one. I know we are on the field for almost 12 continuous hours but this is a critical time and we should face the situation together."

David's voice brought encouragement and energy to his team.

"It's time that we split our tasks. Task 1- We need to extract President Ajaysingh from his bunker, take him safely to Delhi and ensure nothing happens to him. Task 2- We need to continue this trail until we find that artefact. I hope Ranjeet has been successful in hacking into their systems by now. I will have a chat with him in a moment," said David as he turned towards Raghav.

"Raghav, I need you to stay and help Sameer and Miss Shonali in the search. I will take half of my troop and head for the bunker."

"But wouldn't it be better if you were to stay here. I can go to be with the President."

"No, Raghav. You are injured and it's a risky task to be with the President. I know that the President's security is our top priority and I will handle it. You continue the search. Is it clear?" David asked.

"Yes, Sir," Raghav replied obediently.

David started explaining the situation and his plan to Dr. Ajaysingh over the radio, while Sameer and Shonali kept searching for any missing or overlooked clues on the painting. Shonali was utterly confused with the pattern of events that had happened so far. The stone cube in her hands provided no help.

"We know that this stone cube is not the final object. The script clearly says that what we seek is hidden with the four guards. But is this what our lunatic wants?" Sameer asked Raghav.

"I don't think so, Mr. Sameer. Of course, we can buy some time by telling the psycho that this cube is the final object we found, but if this is not the thing he expects, then it would be one big dangerous mistake," explained Raghav. "And it doesn't make any sense- We can't just give him a cube with a numeric grid on it," he added.

"Let us get some things straight then- Whatever clues we have found tonight have one thing in common- Buddhism. Nalanda university, the stupa, the *dhvaj*, these caves, the painting- all of them have something to do with Gautama Buddha. But what I don't understand is why the first clue was on the iron pillar which, I think, has nothing to do with Buddhism!" Shonali remarked.

Sameer nodded in agreement. "Whatever messages we have found until now indicate that those were hidden by a group of people- the extract in the message *'you too have set out to find that source of truth and we will help you to find it*' clearly indicates that. Let us suppose that this group of people belonged to a specific cult or legion. So the question is - what are they leading us to?" Sameer added.

Shonali looked at the cube in her hand. She had a strong gut feeling that the answers to some of her unanswered questions were inside that stone cube and she needed to get it open somehow. She carefully observed the locking system of the cube. The grid on the front face acted as the lock for the cube. The rest of the faces of the cube were just plain. Each of the nine tiles on the 3 by 3 grid had miniature rotating copper cylinders behind them, which displayed numbers from 1-9 on their curved faces. Rotating each of the nine cylinders would produce a different pattern of numbers on the grid face every time.

"It's like a magic square!" Sameer cried out with excitement.



Chapter 56

Ajaysingh realised he would have to leave for the conference as soon as David's team got to the bunker. He asked David to pass the radio to Shonali.

"Take care, Dad!" Shonali kept her conversation short. She knew her father's life was in danger. But that's how things were between the father and daughter. There always was a silent conversation. "I am very thankful that you are helping us. Stay safe," replied Ajaysingh. David and the handpicked commandos made their way towards the temporary helipad from where their chopper would take them to Aurangabad airport.

As they reached almost half of the distance, David received a call from Ranjeet.

"Sir, I think I have done whatever I can from the outside. I can turn off their warning systems for some period of time until your men can get inside..."

"Good job, Ranjeet. Let us give that bastard in his face. I will send my teams in as soon as you disable the security systems. Tell me, what is your time frame?"

"Sir, the job is not yet over. I cannot get through the firewall completely unless I access it from the island. I need to be there personally to disable the firewall. Now, I can get your team inside the facility without arousing their attention. But then, I cannot hack into their security camera feed. They might still catch your team members sneaking into the facility on the cameras. Also, the missile launch systems can only be hacked from the server room which means they could still launch the missiles even on the slightest suspicion."

"So what do you suggest Ranjeet?"

"I need to get into the facility to hack the missile launch systems. I can disable the securities for seven minutes without getting caught on their radar. Once we are inside the facility, I will try to loop the camera feeds to buy us some time. Then I need to access the server room, disable the hub and shut down all the ports transferring data from the island to the satellite. This way, they won't be able to launch the missile. In case we are late to stop the transmission and they have already launched the missile, they won't be able to control it. The secondary ports at the Delhi headquarters would take over the control of the missile systems from there." Ranjeet poured out all the information he had analysed after his long conversation with Vishal.

David took some time digesting the new set of information.

"I am on my way to you, Ranjeet. Just give me a couple of minutes," said David as he advanced towards the temporary helipad. David was trying to think of a plan so that his troops on the east coast could retake the Wheeler Island facility and he could protect the President as well. After a lot of thinking, he decided to play his best card- Capt. Pratap Shinde.

When David and the black commandos reached the helicopter waiting to take them to the airport, Ranjeet was standing near the door of the chopper looking at David with curious eyes. Ranjeet needed to know what David had planned next. David took a deep breath before he quickly explained his chalked out strategy to Ranjeet.

"Ranjeet, I would have accompanied you to Wheeler Island, but I need to be with President Ajaysingh right now. So here's what we do- You accompany us to Aurangabad airport. I will arrange for your flight to the eastern coast from there. Our military camp is located at Dhamara- the nearest port to the facility. Wheeler Island is approximately ten kilometres inside the waters from the shores of Dhamara. Go and meet Capt. Pratap as soon as you get to Dhamara base. He is my best man and he will lead the infiltration team into the facility..."

The pilot started the engines and the blades began to rotate.

"... Explain everything to him. I would be with Dr. Ajaysingh while Raghav and the rest half of my troop is going to be with Miss Shonali and Sameer until they figure out the clue on the painting. I know following that psychopath's orders is nothing but madness. Yet, until we totally recapture those missiles, I think we should keep all our options open..."

The blades rotated faster and it was becoming difficult for Ranjeet to hear David's voice.

"... Raghav will inform me as soon as Sameer or Shonali hit upon something," shouted David, trying to make himself heard. "You update me as soon as Capt. Pratap is ready to infiltrate the facility. I have given Pratap his set of instructions and will let him know you are coming..."

The chopper rose up slowly. They could see the rock cut caves and the valley below them becoming smaller and smaller.

"There is a special task force for his security. Why is it so important that you should be with the President in Delhi?" asked Ranjeet.

"I know. There is Colonel Rana to look over the President's transportation. But I am worried about a piece of information that we have recovered. I think this Assignment 6.00 can be something dangerous. Don't worry about your safety,

Ranjeet. The NSG commandos under Capt. Pratap are extremely skilled and trained. I am sure they will handle the situation at Wheeler Island without any hiccups," David assured Ranjeet.

Ranjeet looked out of the window. All he could see was darkness around him.

It's the darkness before the sunrise, he told himself.

Chapter 57

"A magic square?" Shonali was very curious to know.

"Yes. I mean magic squares aren't just any 3 by 3 or 4 by 4 grid of numbers. They have some special addition properties along the rows or columns. This grid looks almost the same way. If you rotate the copper cylinder in each tile of the grid, you get different combinations-"

"And you think a proper combination of 9 unique numbers- one in every tile would be the code to open this cube?" said Shonali guessing Sameer's line of thought.

"Absolutely! In cryptography, we come across many such devices designed by great minds to hold the untold secrets. It has been since the time of the Pharaohs of Egypt that man started to keep their prized possessions in boxes which could only be opened by solving a specific puzzle. This is a kind of portable safe, I guess."

"So now we need to select nine numbers and then we open the lock. That would be just a few million of combinations," Shonali frowned.

"No," said Sameer, "the clue for combination must be somewhere in this text. If they have provided the lock, they must also have given the key. There must be some deeper meaning to this text which we are not paying attention to," said Sameer as he started reading the transcript from the top once again, this time with diligent care.

There were a few seconds of silence as Sameer went through the script on the painting over and over again. Raghav fished out a pack of cigarettes and passed them around while the commandos sat back and watched Sameer and Shonali rack their brains.

"I think the monks are referring to King Ashoka here," Shonali said aloud.

"And why do you think so?" Sameer immediately shot back at her. "There were many kings of Magadha. They could be referring to the semi-mythical king Jarasandha- the king who likely established the very kingdom of Magadha!"

"No. They mentioned a very special name- *Devanampriya* which means loved by the Gods. This was another name of Ashoka- the Great," said Shonali showing the screen of her smart phone to Sameer. She had searched for the words 'Devanampriya, Buddhism' and King Ashoka's name popped up in every

search result.

"But why didn't they use a more common name like- *Samraat Chakravartin* instead of *Devanampriya?*" Shonali asked herself.

"Maybe they decided to use a rather uncommon name on the painting," Sameer reasoned.

"So even if we say that the name Devanampriya was used for King Ashoka, who were his guards that the painting refers to?" Shonali still had questions.

"Maybe they were some special guards who always protected King Ashoka or were entrusted to guard his precious object."

"No, Sameer," Shonali interrupted Sameer curtly. "I have a different theory. I think this object was passed down to King Ashoka. The object or the artefact must have existed long before it was handed down to Ashoka and that is why we found the *dhvaj* at Sariputra's stupa. Sariputra preceded King Ashoka by almost two centuries."

"But there is also the possibility that the artefact may have been hidden long after Sariputra's death. The stupa has been there since the time of Sariputra and the cult of monks could have hidden it any time since then," Sameer interjected.

"That is a possibility, yes. But this painting above us depicts Lord Buddha and not King Ashoka. If it was Ashoka who owned the artefact, then why would he write a message suggesting the artefact is guarded by his four guards on these caves? Anyway, it is not of importance who had the object or to whom it was passed down. The question we should focus on is who were the notable guards of King Ashoka and how are we going to unlock this damn cube?" Shonali came to the point.

"After the massacre at the battle of Kalinga, when King Ashoka embraced Buddhism, he was drawn deep into it. He understood the Buddhist principles and felt that it was his duty to make people know about Buddhism. So he sent his messengers and monks from his kingdom in all four directions, to advocate Buddhism and to preach the noble path shown by Gautama Buddha. He had ministers nominated for this task. Maybe those ministers are being referred to as the guards," said Shonali.

She tried to search the internet for any help on King Ashoka and his guards. Meanwhile, Sameer concentrated on finding any numbers or combination of numbers hidden in the painting or in the text above and below it.

Not very far away, Ranjeet had just got into a flight that was ready to take him to

Biju Pattnaik airport in Bhubaneswar from where a chopper would finally transport him to the Dhamara base of the NSG soldiers. The mission ahead involved a great deal of risk. Fear was mounting up in Ranjeet's mind as the flight passed through turbulence in the clouds. He had never handled a live situation on the field anytime before and he knew he would go nuts at the sight of cross-fire and blood. He felt a chill run through his spine and his hands shivered as he tried to imagine himself trying to hack the enemy servers as bullets passed by- just inches away from him. He shut his eyes tightly and locked down his brain. Ranjeet tried to think of something good, something soothing in his mind and only one thought crossed his mind- Shonali. He knew it was something more than just a crush.

Maybe before I left, I should have talked to her- At least I should have wished her a goodbye.

Shonali was the only thing that kept his hands from shivering.

6 kilometres east of his secret bunker, President Ajaysingh was waiting on a plane for David and his team to arrive. Their arrival was scheduled in forty minutes. The flight seat was comfortable, the cabin temperature was ambient and President Ajaysingh had not rested for a long time. It did not take him long to drift off into a deep sleep.

Chapter 58

Project Testing Site, Pokharan

Operation Shakti

18 April, 1998

Time: 6.30 am

It was the first combined meeting of all scientists at the Pokharan project site. After months of hard work, the project was finally nearing completion. The work had gone smoothly and no suspicious activity had been tracked, no documents were stolen after the incident at A.K. Das's office. That incident was covered up the same night and the Indian Army soldiers made sure that nothing was leaked out. Everyone believed that the spy had probably fled from the facility or was perhaps too shaken and afraid to do anything now. Assistant Project Co-ordinator A.K.Das addressed the audience in the hall.

"Good morning, Gentlemen. This program dates back to 1945 when Dr. Homi Bhabha established the Institute of Fundamental Research. Since then, this nuclear program has seen many ups and downs. Many times the governments in India decided to shelve and halt this program with the fear of inviting international criticism. But this time we had an unconditional support from our government. We have tentatively decided to carry out our tests in the first week of May."

The crowd applauded as the assistant project co-ordinator A.K. Das handed over the mike to the Chief Project Co-ordinator Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam.

"We overcame a lot of hurdles to reach this point. American satellites had detected our test preparations in 1995, hence these tests required complete secrecy to avoid detection by other countries. I appreciate this entire planning which was done just by a small group of scientists, military officers and politicians to ensure that the test preparations would remain behind the curtains. Even some of the senior members of the Indian cabinet are not yet informed of our ongoing preparations. On the diplomatic front, we have adopted a policy of nuclear ambiguity. To ensure that we are not internationally criticised or questioned, statements are being made by our politicians and diplomats which imply that our country's nuclear status is undecided as of now. This has bought us some time and I hope by the first week of May, we would be in a position to complete the tests. You will have put your sweat into this now. Only a final push is all that is left- I hope that we see India in the list of the countries with nuclear

arsenal in the coming millennia."

Dr. Kalam's words were like a moral boost to all the scientists present in the room. Everyone clapped and cheered but Ajay and Shashank. Sitting in one corner of the room, they donned a worried look on their faces. On the other corner of the meeting hall was the person who Ajay had thought of as his friend- Jacob. But since the incident at A.K. Das's office, Ajay had started to suspect Jacob of being involved in something dangerous. And slowly, it became evident to Ajay that what he knew about Jacob was totally wrong.

"Do you think he could be the mole amongst us? The spy?" asked Ajay one afternoon to Shashank in their room while Jacob was still working in his lab. He told Shashank about the incident that had happened in A.K. Das's cabin.

"No way. Jacob can't be..." Shashank stopped in the middle of his sentence as his face gave away an expression of awe. Shashank quickly rose up from the chair and walked towards Jacob's bed. He bent over and tried to feel the underside of the bed with his hand. A couple of seconds later, he found what he had been looking for. Shashank withdrew his hand from under Jacob's bed to reveal a small locked steel box to Ajay.

"I saw it about a couple of weeks ago when I returned from my shift an hour early. Jacob was on his bed working on his laptop, reading out something from this steel box next to him. He was perplexed when he saw me and hurriedly covered it up with his sleeping blanket. Also, I find him awake most of the times - even after his heavy work shifts!" Shashank recounted his experiences with Jacob to Ajay.

"So should we report it to Mr. Das or the security head?" Ajay asked Shashank.

"We don't have a solid proof against him except that glove story. I think we should search his baggage and office. We may find some proof there," Shashank suggested.

The next day Shashank and Ajay took a day off from their work and went through Jacob's belongings while Jacob was at work.

"He has a wide collection of books!" Shashank said, opening Jacob's cupboard with the key he had carefully slipped out of Jacob's key ring the earlier night.

"He doesn't read much. So why these many books?" Ajay questioned himself. Soon enough, Ajay found a map hidden under the books on the middle shelf. It was the map of the entire Pokharan Project Testing site with accurate locations of the shafts where the explosions would be carried out along with the security checkpoints and watchtowers. Only the security team of the facility had the

access to such maps. That day Ajay was almost convinced that he was living with a spy.

It was he who attempted to kill me that night. I have been living with him for so long. The only reason why I may still be alive is that he didn't see my face that night.

Since then, Ajay and Shashank had moved out from their combined room and had started living separately. Jacob didn't ask for any reasons or justifications.

The assistant co-ordinator A.K. Das took over the mike after the energetic speech made by Dr. Kalam. He decided to unveil the plan of action to the scientists.

"From today we work together, integrating all our work which was fragmented earlier. DRDO has set up three laboratories to manage designing, testing and producing components for the test, like advanced detonators, the implosion systems and high-voltage trigger systems. We would also have to look into weaponization, systems engineering, aerodynamics, safety interlocks and flight trials. You would be assigned your respective sections today. As soon as we are ready for the tests, the nuclear devices would be sent from BARC."

The work was distributed and it was decided that the first group would be tested on 11th May and the second group on 13th May. The first group consisted of the thermonuclear device - codenamed Shakti I, the fission device: Shakti II, and a sub-kiloton device: Shakti III. The second group consisted of the remaining two sub-kiloton devices Shakti IV & V.

Ajay and Shashank had decided to keep their eyes open for any sign of trouble from Jacob. They used to secretly search his room and office for more clues but found nothing solid.

That bastard is one hell of a spy. He sure knows how to hide his identity, thought Ajay.

The scheduled date for testing the first group of devices was approaching fast. There was barely a week left when Ajay found a note in Jacob's office. The note was typewritten and was cleverly hidden in Jacob's table drawer. It read- BE READY TO STRIKE ON 10TH.

That's one day before the day of the tests! Ajay was stunned. He knew he had to report this to his superiors. He took the note, closed the drawer and turned around to walk towards the door. He was about to grab the doorknob when the door opened from outside and Jacob stood before him staring right at the note in his hand.

Chapter 59

Ajanta Caves,

Outskirts of Aurangabad

Time: 5.09 hrs

"*Dhritarashtra, Virudhaka, Virupaksha, Vaishravana*!" cried out Shonali, hoping that she had the answer to the riddle on the painting. The NSG commandos were startled on Shonali's reaction.

"Do those names mean anything?" Sameer asked without looking up, intently working to open the curious puzzle box.

"The guards- The guards of the four directions. That might be the answer to the clue on the painting!"

Sameer still had a puzzled look on his face. He had no clue what Shonali was talking about.

"The Four Buddhist Guardian Kings: Dhritarashtra- King of the East, Virudhaka- King of the South, Virupaksha- King of the West, Vaishravana- King of the North are the protectors of the four cardinal directions and are almost always found at the entrance to monasteries and temples. They are dressed in the ornate armour, clothing of a warrior king and may be depicted either sitting or standing. I think these are the guards that the painting may be referring to!" said Shonali.

"But what does it have to do with King Ashoka? The painting refers to the guards of Ashoka - Not just any guards. And there is the flower- *go find your destiny resting on a flower*. Also, your theory of the guardian kings does not lead to any place," Sameer said.

The smile on Shonali's face faded as she realised that her interpretation was not a very good one. She looked at the paper where Sameer was working with some numbers.

"I will give it another try. What are those numbers, by the way?" Shonali asked.

"I am trying to see if the combination is some kind of magic square. The pattern of the cube gives me a hunch that the key must be some kind of magic square," Sameer said as he drew a 3 by 3 grid on the paper and filled some number in each cubicle.

4	9	2
3	5	7
8	1	6

Shonali was surprised to see Sameer precisely hitting upon a perfect magic square, whose sum of every row and column and even diagonal added up to 15.

"Why did you choose this particular magic square?" Shonali asked Sameer.

At least there are some things in History which the crypto-analysts know better. Sameer smiled as the thought crossed his mind.

"That would be the first magic square any crypto-analyst would check out! It is a very common yet unique magic square. It is related to ancient Vedic mathematics, even mentioned in Chinese philosophy as the Lo Shu's square. Sometimes, in Hinduism, you can also find it on the corners of pictures of the divine trio- Lord Ganesh, Goddess Laxmi and Goddess Saraswati!" said Sameer as he rotated the tiny copper cylinders to match the numbers in the magic square on his paper.

Shonali realised that it was indeed a very well-known magic square and that many *Yantras* of Gods and Goddesses in Hinduism were some or the other form of a magic square or a magic pyramid.

As soon as Sameer rotated the last cylinder to match 6, he turned the cube in excitement and tried to slide the panel. The panel did not budge even an inch. Sameer was ready for this- It was only a wild guess that he had made.

"Maybe we should concentrate upon the text above the painting. It may give us some clue," said Shonali

The text above the painting was only a sentence said by the Buddhists during their prayers - ' ' while the text below didn't happen to reveal anything.

Shonali tried to follow the lead.

"

These are the three sentences which the Buddhists say in their prayers, but why was only the first sentence written on the painting? The painting does depict Lord Buddha, but the text has no relevance here. Why would they put up something..."

Sameer suddenly realised that the sentence-
wasn't an unimportant part of the text. He counted the number of letters making up the statement. There were three characters in each word and the three words made up the sentence in devnagari script. *A total of nine characters! Nine boxes to fill...*

"Maybe it is not a magic square after all. It must be one of those Vedic numerical codes!" Sameer's face lightened up as he began to recollect his cryptography lectures.

"Vedic codes? Aren't we dealing with Buddhism and monks here? Why would they be using Vedic codes?" said Shonali as questions sprouted in her mind.

"These were the sort of codes passed down from one generation to the next. Some of the Vedic shlokas we recite even today are a form of code. Those existed much before the times of Lord Buddha and Ashoka. They may have gone down in Buddhism when people embraced Buddhism. Vedic literature merged with almost every civilisation which existed in India," stated Sameer, jotting down a Sanskrit shloka right from his memory.

"You mean to say that the intellectuals who composed Vedic shlokas were some kind of cryptologists? They embedded a code in their shloka and passed it down to generations? And for what? So that no-one could decode it?" Shonali's comment was sarcastic.

"I am not saying that they were cryptologists, but they did pass on some things down to the coming generations. During the early days, knowledge was passed on verbally in gurukuls. The pupils had to memorise the Shlokas which would be passed down by them to the future generations." Sameer was trying to explain it to Shonali unhurriedly, but Shonali had too many questions.

"Do you know any of the coded shlokas?"

"Actually, there's one based on what we call in modern terminology as the alphanumeric conversion. It goes as

" said Sameer.
"As per my knowledge of Sanskrit, this is a praise for Lord Krishna or Lord Shiva," said Shonali, finding nothing surprising about the Shloka.

"Yes. But if you decode it, you will get the value of the irrational constant Pi up to 31 decimals," said Sameer, triumphantly leaving Shonali dumbfounded.

Sameer took a deep breath before explaining the code to Shonali.
"It *is* a code after all. You can only decode it if you have the key to the code. The key is like this- all the Sanskrit Characters have been specified some number between 0-9 and the key itself is also narrated in a form of another Shloka. This is how it goes
: which means *Kaadi Nava* starting from 'ka', the sequence of 9 letters represent 1,2,..9. Similarly *Taadi Nava*, starting from 'ta', *Paadi panchaka* (1-5), starting from 'pa', *Yadyashtaka* (1-8) starting from 'ya'. 'ksha' represents 0. So the word to word code would go as-"
Sameer jotted down the key on the piece of paper.

- ka( )-1, kha( )-2, ga( )-3, gha( )-4, gna( )-5, cha( )-6, cha( )-7, ja( )-8, jha( )-9.
- ta( )-1, tha( )-2, da( )-3, dha( )-4, ~na( )-5, Ta( )-6, Tha( )-7, Da( )-8, Dha( )-9.
- pa( )-1, pha( )-2, ba( )-3, bha( )-4, ma( )-5.
- ya( )-1, ra( )-2, la( )-3, va( )-4, Sa( )-5, sha( )-6, sa ( )-7, ha( )-8.
- kshah( )-0.

He turned to Shonali who was already doing the replacements in the shloka which Sameer had told her earlier.

ga-3, pa-1, bha-4, ya -1, ma-5, Dha-9, ra-2, tha-6, shru-5, ga-3, sha-5, da-8, Dha -9, sa-7, Dha- 9, ga-3, kha-2, la-3, ja-8, va-4, tha-6, kha-2, tha-6, va-4, ga-3, la-3, ha-8, la-3, ra-2, sa-7, Dha-9, ra-2

3.14159265358979323846264338327 92

Shonali's eyes were wide open as she realised that it was the accurate value of pi up to 31 decimal places. She instantly shot her next question at Sameer.
"And you think this code is the key to the cube?"

"Yes. I think so. It's worth a try after all."

"And which is the text that is ciphered in the painti-"
She stopped in mid-sentence because she knew there was only one statement on the painting that was unaccounted for -

Sameer quickly worked out the replacements on the paper
ba( )-3, Da( )-8, ma( )-5
Sa( )-7, ra( )-2,~na( )-5
ga( )-3, cha( )-7,ma( )-5

3	8	5
7	2	5
3	7	5

Now Sameer had another 3 by 3 grid filled with numbers and he just hoped that this was the right one. Shonali began to roll the copper cylinders on the cube and adjusting the numbers to match the grid prepared by Sameer. After she was done, she closed her eyes shut and tried to slide the panel below.
This time- the panel slid. Very slowly!

Chapter 60

Safdarjung Airport, Delhi

Time: 5.43 am

Safdarjung was a lesser known airport since the government shut it down in the 90's. It was now reserved for quick getaways of the VIPs in case of emergencies. The airport provided helicopter services for the Prime Minister, the President and other VIPs. As soon as President Ajaysingh's flight touched down, the airport became abuzz with military activity. Soldiers were posted at every check post, every corner and every gate. The airport staff was thoroughly checked. Colonel Rana had left no stone unturned to illustrate that he had meticulously planned the security arrangements for the President. Military armoured vehicles at the main lobby entrance were ready to take the President to the conference.

David and his team escorted Dr. Ajaysingh from the aircraft to the main terminal. On the way, David had had a quick chat with his team at Dhamara base explaining Capt. Pratap the complete situation

"HQ is sending more backup to you ASAP. Ranjeet has partially hacked into the system, but he would need to get some work done at the servers down there. Protect him at all times and also take out as many bastards as you can. This is a full priority situation so hope for the best and plan for the worst," David had said.

Dr. Ajaysingh and David made their way towards the security checkpoint where Colonel Rana was busy smoking a cigar while talking on his walkie-talkie. As soon as he saw the President approaching, Rana hurriedly put out the cigar, tucked his belly in and gave a crisp military salute to Dr. Ajaysingh. Colonel Rana, in his late forties, was not as physically fit as David. His bulging belly and round face added a pleasantry to his character; in contrast to his voice which was hard and commanding.

Rana did not seem happy on seeing David with the President, but shook hands with him after the official salutes. Together they made their way towards the main lobby. David let the President walk a little ahead while he stayed back to discuss some things with Colonel Rana.

"So where is your special task force, Colonel? I brought a handful of my men, just in case," said David.

"That was unnecessary, David," Col. Rana replied, noticing David’s mounting

exasperation. "My men here are highly trained and extremely capable of protecting the President". Rana pointed to a group of soldiers standing at the main entrance. "Maybe I should have asked HQ to put me in-charge of the President's security instead of you," said Colonel Rana, icily. It was always cold war when it came to Rana and David.

"I did what was necessary at that moment," retorted David. "The President's life was at a risk. Those terrorists had somehow infiltrated the Rastrapati Bhawan which is, or should I say 'was', one of the most secure and military guarded locations. They even blasted the chandelier in one of the inner rooms. It is not possible to do such a thing without any support from the inside. It was necessary not to keep the President at one location- He would have been an easy target. I did what I thought was best for his safety and as you can see, he is safe and secure," David said with a raised voice. He spied a look of guilt in Rana's eyes. David could feel that something was not right.

Unaware of a cold war happening behind him, Dr. Ajaysingh had already climbed into the armoured military vehicle parked at the front entrance of the airport. The driver gave him a full smile.

"Okay. But the headquarters has asked ME to take over the charge of the President's security, so you can relax now and take a break. We will take him from this point onwards. Thank you for keeping him safe," replied Rana as he hurriedly walked towards the convoy of military vehicles at the entrance of the airport.

"That's a negative. I AM coming with you." David's voice was firm. His eyes had a fire as he looked right into Colonel Rana's eyes, waiting for Rana to challenge him. But Rana knew- It was David. There was no way he could hold David back and there was no point in holding him back.

"Fine David, let us not create a scene. We have to be at the press conference within ten minutes and I won't mind if you come along. Now, please hurry and just stay calm."

David signalled his troop of commandos to be near the convoy and keep a watch over the President.

"I need to know your security strategy, Colonel," asked David trying to remain calm. The night had been a tough experience for him. He could feel his stomach grumbling.

"I really don't think that would be necessary, David. We don't have much time for-"

"Won't take long! Just a couple of minutes." David cut Rana short and set about putting things in order. He sent Sgt. Harish to quickly grab sandwiches from the airport canteen for him and his team members who seemed famished after the night's work.

"Okay. Look there," said the irate Colonel, pointing towards the map of Delhi, which was framed on the wall of the main lobby. "We have five armoured armada vehicles for the inner circle. The President would be in the centre vehicle while the other four would guard him in a diamond formation. The outer perimeter will have six police vehicles: three in the front and three in the back. My soldiers will be in the armadas guarding the President while the police will take care of the traffic ahead. We won't run into much traffic as it is only 6.00 in the morning. We also have two helicopters for overhead watch and air support." Rana explained to David everything as fast as he could.

David finished the last bite of his sandwich and prepared to leave towards the main entrance when a thought crossed his mind.

"Did you have your vehicles checked? It was the SUV which was rigged to blow off at the Rashtrapati Bhawan. I don't think we should repeat the same mistake," David expressed his worries.

"YES. The vehicles are checked. Shall we go now?" Colonel Rana's blood was boiling with each of David's questions. Sitting in the vehicle, President Ajaysingh was still wondering what was taking David and Rana so long.

David got in the vehicle with the President, but he still had his doubts. He knew he was missing something and *Assignment 6.00* kept turning up in David's mind. The driver turned on the ignition and Colonel Rana gave orders for the convoy to proceed. The vehicle slowly began to make its way towards the main gate.

Six minutes later, through a camera he had positioned on the Tughlaq road, Muhammed could see six police vehicles and five armoured military vehicles racing towards him. A couple of choppers provided watch from above.

Muhammed looked up at the sky. The sun was just rising. He offered his prayers for the last time. Now, it was his time to act.

Chapter 61

The caves of Ajanta, Maharashtra

Time- 5:52 am

The lid, jammed by dust and particulates accumulated in the corner of the sliding plate, was a little difficult to slide. But after a couple of hard pulls by Sameer, it slid over the compartment and the content of the cube revealed itself. There was nothing stored inside the compartment of the cube indeed. Only a simple Sanskrit text was visible on the base to the opposite side of the lid. It looked ancient and a part of the engraving was not even clear. Shonali flashed a light on it as Sameer tried to read out the script.

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Shonali only took four minutes to work on the translation: *This may provide answers to many questions which you may have in your mind. The truth you are searching for, the wisdom you are seeking is nothing extra-ordinary. It is just a path- a path to enlightenment. That artefact will guide you towards your path. Our generous Samraat Chakravartin Ashoka entrusted us with that object. He ordered us to hide that artefact and keep it hidden from the eyes of the unworthy and the unholy. But we were also told to leave behind a trail- a road which would lead only the worthy and those who deserved that knowledge towards it. We are the legion of monks specially assigned to make a trail. There were many like us through all these centuries- protecting the artefact, passing it down into the safe hands of the next generation. Our forefathers were few of the first*

disciples of Lord Buddha. They experienced the privilege of attaining his sermons. The legend we used to hear when we were kids tells us that after attaining enlightenment, Lord Buddha travelled far and wide passing on the true wisdom he had gained. During his travels, he used to write down his experiences, his thoughts when he had been meditating to achieve enlightenment- the way he perceived the ultimate truth, how he became 'The Enlightened One'. It was written down on pieces of dry leaves. Years later, he passed it on to his first disciples who converted the collection of the dry leaves into a better form. And then the knowledge was passed on to the next generation who converted it to some other form keeping the core essence of the writings intact. Eventually, it was converted to a kind of artefact which was circulated amongst the monks .This went on for generations until one day that the artefact was lost in the mists of time! Nowhere to be found. Years later, it appeared in the court of Samraat Chakravartin. A young voyager had found it in one of his travels at a far off place and had decided to present it to our Samraat. Realising its true potential and fearing that it might get lost again, Samraat has decided to keep it safely hidden. We are permitted to say no more. We hope you would find the wisdom if you are worthy. Buddham Sharanam Gachaami.

Everyone gazed intently at the cube as it finally revealed what was it that the perpetrator behind the night's events was asking them to recover. Shonali reread the document. It was very surprising for her to know that such kind of artefact even existed! *It is like the personal diary of Lord Gautama himself- his accounts, his experiences after achieving enlightenment!*

"So at least this cube gave us some answers to our questions! Although I still don't know why one would go to such heights to recover this artefact," Sameer said. It was hard for him to believe how such an artefact was kept hidden for so many centuries!

The artefact had never found any mention in any of the Buddhist manuscripts; else today's experts would have known about it. It had been passed down by a secret cult of monks - it travelled to faraway places- crossed lands and seas and yet was the best kept secret, Sameer said to himself.

"Yes, it does! But this cube just answered a part of the puzzle we are trying to solve. I have really seen a lot of the undiscovered tonight - the message at the dome of Sariputra's stupa, the hidden painting, this cube and now the artefact. Our priority should be to find that artefact. And this cube doesn't tell us where it is," Shonali said, shaking the cube desperately.

"Maybe there's something else hidden!" Sameer suggested. They searched the cube inside out for any more clues, hidden partitions, but the effort seemed unfruitful after ten minutes. The cube had nothing more to offer.

"Looks like we have to figure it out ourselves from the resources and information we currently have. Let us glance back at all the information we have about the artefact," Sameer said, trying to take another approach to get some clue about the location of the artefact.

"From the text below the painting, we know that the artefact rests on a flower and is guarded day and night by some faithful guards of the King Ashoka." Shonali took a brief pause before continuing. "The artefact was hidden during the reign of Ashoka so I would guess that it was probably in some kind of a structure or a stupa he built. The flower may give us some clue here."

"The flower? I don't think it would be of much help. There are many inscriptions of flowers and paintings of flowers on the structures and monuments built by Samraat Chakravartin," Sameer replied.

"Obviously, this would be some kind of special flower because the monks took the pain of mentioning it on the painting. In Buddhism, the lotus has a special importance. Lotus is one of the eight auspicious symbols- also known in Sanskrit as *Asthamangala.* In brief, it refers to the complete purification of body, speech and mind, and the blossoming of wholesome deeds in a state of liberation. The lotus does not grow in Tibet and so Tibetan art has only stylized versions of it. Nevertheless, it is one of Buddhism's best recognized motifs since every important deity is associated in some manner with the lotus. The roots of a lotus are in the mud, the stem grows up through the water, and the heavily scented flower lies above the water, basking in the sunlight. This pattern of growth signifies the progress of the soul from the primeval mud of materialism, through the waters of experience, and into the bright sunshine of enlightenment..."

Shonali looked at Raghav's bored face and understood that there was no point in displaying her knowledge presently.

"So, the point I am trying to make is that even though lotus is frequently found in early Buddhist texts, the first appearance of the lotus in Buddhist art can be traced back to the columns built by Ashoka in the 3rd Century B.C." Shonali said with a glow in her eyes.

"You mean to say that the artefact is hidden somewhere in one of the columns built by Ashoka?" asked Raghav who had finally taken an interest in their riddle solving.

"I am just making a wild guess here, but- yes. I think it we should find the important columns and structures around what was the ancient kingdom of Magadha and start searching," Shonali replied.

... go find your destiny resting on a flower and guarded day and night by the faithful guards of the King of Magadha...

Sameer was silent. He knew there would be hundreds of columns and structures to be searched and they were running out of time. But something on Raghav's uniform had made a noticeable impression on his mind, suddenly. He did not blink his eyes for a couple of seconds and then with an impulsive realisation, turned towards Shonali.

"What did you say about the four guards?"

"They could be the guards of the four cardinal directions," replied Shonali.

"What if these guards which the monks have referred to were not actually guards but a metaphor for guards- a symbolism?" Sameer asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Raghav, getting uncomfortable with Sameer staring at his uniform.

"Lions." Sameer replied calmly.

He pointed to the National Emblem he had observed on Raghav's uniform!

Chapter 62

"This is mike alpha. Everyone head for Tughlaq road. Report to me immediately if you have a visual on anything suspicious. Our patrol teams did not have enough time to check all the routes so we should be on guard." Colonel Rana was giving out orders to other military vehicles which ran ahead. He himself was seated in the rear vehicle.

"This is mike delta to mike alpha. The sector is clear. Traffic is minimal. Should we go ahead and check?" A soldier responded back.

"No. Stay WITH the convoy and maintain the formation. Whatever happens- let nothing pass. I want no surprises ahead, so everyone be alert. Over and out."

The pilot of the chopper maintained an eye over the five vehicles moving in a diamond formation with the four outer vehicles protecting the one in the middle. The convoy had just passed Sri Aurobindo Marg and was moving towards Tughlaq road.

Colonel Rana and his team had no idea that Muhammed's cameras were watching them from every corner of the road. Muhammed had observed the formation and noted that he had to strike the vehicle in the centre. He was waiting inside a small alley adjoining Tughlaq road which was just wide enough for his truck. It was the rear end of the truck which Muhammed wanted to bang into the convoy to break their formation. The container attached to the truck was heavy. His camera feed showed him the exact position of the police vehicles and the military armadas as the convoy crossed the Aurangzeb road intersection and continued on Tughlaq road. Muhammed started the truck and put it in reverse gear.

President Ajaysingh looked out through the window pane watching the warm sunrise. He was quite tired from the travel. The ride was smooth, but the run through the night and his earlier trip had drained him of energy. *I will probably fall sleep during the press conference. Why do I even need to be here?*

He knew it was a complete waste of time. *The crooked politicians backing the conference just want to show the world that their country's security is well handled- And they needed to wriggle out those words from my mouth!* Ajaysingh sat helplessly in his seat and watched as the vehicles reached midway of Tughlaq road.

David, sitting next to President Ajaysingh, had other thoughts racing through his mind. With every passing second, he tried to step into the shoes of a terrorist and

imagine ways to harm the President. *Assignment 6.00- There must be something to it! He won't open fire on the vehicles. The vehicles are bulletproof. Maybe he would mingle with the crowd and the press at the hall and assassinate the President there.* At some point David thought that he had got it all wrong. *Maybe there wasn't anything like Assignment 6.00. Maybe it was just a piece of scrap in the dustbin. Or maybe they are planning to strike somewhere else at this time while I am sitting here waiting for something to happen. Did I interpret it all wrong?*

David's question was answered seconds later when a truck came out of nowhere and slammed right into the armoured vehicle on the left breaking the entire convoy formation . The driver of the rear vehicle quickly applied brakes, but couldn't avoid crashing into the vehicle in the centre. It took a couple of seconds for the soldiers and the Black Cat commandos to realise what was happening. The vehicle on the left was totally crushed between the truck and the central vehicle. Although taken aback by the ambush, the commandos responded quickly with their reflexes- aimed their weapons on the truck and started firing. They had no clue that this was exactly what Muhammed wanted.

As soon as the firing began, Muhammed pressed a button on the dashboard of the truck allowing the door of the container mounted on the truck to slide open. Sixteen barrels filled with kerosene and explosives, rolled down the container right near the door of the vehicle in the centre. Before David or Colonel Rana could order the soldiers to hold their fire, a few bullets had already done the job. The bullets penetrated into the kerosene containers leading to a colossal blast and setting off a chain of blasts. Muhammed closed his eyes as fire gulped him in along with everyone else near the vehicles.

There were no survivors.

Chapter 63

"The National Emblem?" Shonali initially was as perplexed as Raghav who could make no sense of what Sameer was trying to say. But slowly, Shonali started to figure it out. It all made complete sense.

"Of course! The Lion Capital of Ashoka would be a perfect match to the location mentioned in the text," Shonali cried out.

Shonali's mind began to fit every piece of the puzzle in its place- *'destiny resting on a flower'. The National Emblem adopted by the country was only a part of the Lion Capital of Ashoka. The complete structure consisted of four lions and the Ashoka Chakra resting on an inverted lotus. Guarded day and night by the faithful guards of the King of Magadha- That represented the four lions standing there for centuries!*

"So what would be our next step? Should we go and investigate the Lion Capital of Ashoka by ourselves?" Sameer asked Raghav.

"Are you sure about your... prediction? It could just be any other pillar," Raghav said with a doubtful look on his face.

"I think this is our best shot and it completely fits the description. There's no harm in checking it," Sameer responded.

"Right. Where do we have to go?" Raghav asked.

"The Lion Capital was originally placed atop the Ashoka pillar at Sarnath. Now, the pillar which is generally referred to as the Ashoka column is still at its original location, but the Lion Capital has been moved to the Sarnath Archaeological Museum. So that's where we should be heading," said Shonali.

"Give me some time to arrange for transport and to get my men ready. Both of you should have something to eat until then. We would be leaving in five minutes," said Raghav with a new enthusiasm in his voice. The hunt was on.

He went to the remaining Black Cat commandos and explained the further plan of action to them. The soldiers had a quick snack and geared up for the upcoming journey.

Shonali and Sameer sipped at their tea as they watched the sun come up and lighten up the caves. All the darkness in the cave was slowly washed away as they stepped into the morning sunlight. *Beyond the darkness lies the light of wisdom. Continue your journey and you may find the answers you seek.*

Sarnath was where their journey was going to end and they were about to find

out some truths. The only problem was- They had very little time left!

Chapter 64

Things were moving a lot quicker than Ranjeet had expected. He was on a raft along with ten NSG commandos which Capt. Pratap had handpicked to breach into the Wheeler Island facility. As soon as Ranjeet was transported to Dhamara base from Biju Pattnaik airport at Bhubaneswar, Capt. Pratap had not wasted a single minute to plan out their infiltration strategy. He had asked Ranjeet about the point of their entry.

"As far as I know- The red zone where the enemy has sensors is the 2 kilometre radius around the island. Upto that point, we are safe and sound. As soon as we get close to the red zone, I can hack and disable the nearby sensors for a period of time. We need to get to the island's command centre after that. The missiles can be taken back in our control from the command centre," Ranjeet had answered.

"So you disable the sensors in the radius and then we are done? Then the only job is to get control of the command centre?" Capt. Pratap had asked.

"Not exactly. Disabling the sensors would only get you till the shores of the island. From there, it's a whole new story. As per the data I got from your HQ, there are several monitoring cameras on the outer compound as well as inside the facility, various locked exit points to buildings and password protected doors inside the facility. We would have to be very careful once we get in there"

Ranjeet assured Capt. Pratap that he had gathered all the information- the codes, the maps, decryption keys from his new friend, Vishal, at the Intelligence Bureau HQ while he was on the flight to Bhubaneswar.

Capt. Pratap had been appointed by David to take care of the activities going around the Dhamara base and to plan an all out assault in case Ranjeet would have failed to breach into the systems. Although Pratap was a newcomer in David's squad, his swift moves, intellect and decision making abilities had managed to impress David and gain his trust.

"We will approach the island from the northwest side. We then move along the coast of Kanika Island and cover most of the route so that we would be shielded against any snipers they may have out there. A coast guard launch would take us to our infiltration point 2 kilometres away from the island. After you disable the sensors, we proceed in two rafts with ten of my best men. The last one mile we may have to go underwater. They might spot our raft and I can't risk that. We'll spread out and swim- try to remain below the water as much as you can. Our

intelligence reports suggest that there may be around 10-15 terrorists out there. We move in with ten men, but I will ensure that we have more troops on the coast guard launch as our backup. The coast guard will keep cruising around the 2 kilometre radius and the troops would move in as soon as we take over the command centre," Pratap had explained to Ranjeet on a map of the Wheeler Island and the nearby territory.

And there he was - working on his laptop beside Capt. Pratap with his team of ten NSG commandos on a military raft. His body felt numb wearing a full body diving gear with a special waterproof backpack for his laptop and apparatus. Never in his life had he been so tense. It was not the gear which was making him uncomfortable - it was the realization of the responsibility which burdened his shoulders. He did not feel like he was up for the job- he was terrified. The only reassurance he got was a tap on his shoulder from Capt. Pratap. Pratap knew what it was like to go on a mission for the first time and he had seen Ranjeet's fingers trembling on the keyboard.

"I know things would be a little tough for you. The firing and killing might get to your nerves. But I need you to stay focused. I need you to be swift and alert even if we are under fire. We will deal with all the messy part, but you need to get us to that damn command centre. Understood?" said Pratap, giving Ranjeet an assuring look.

Ranjeet was still shivering. He had no choice but to trust Capt. Pratap's words.

"But what about the diving?" Ranjeet asked. He had never dived underwater before.

"Don't worry about that. It's much like swimming. My team will help you out there. You just need to take long breaths from the oxygen mask and make your way ahead."

They were now approaching the red zone. Ranjeet was done with hacking into the router of the nearby sensors and disabling the output signals. On his go, the commandos rowed the raft into the red zone. Ranjeet crossed his fingers and prayed that everything had gone right. So far things looked good. There was no sudden activity detected on the island, no alarms went off and they were not fired upon. As they moved towards the island, they could see the sun coming up the ocean and rays of early sunlight hit them. They had lost the advantage of the darkness and now were easy targets to spot. They still had one mile to go, but going any further in the raft was risky. The NSGs got all their gear and weapons along with Ranjeet's equipment in a waterproof sacks. Ten seconds later- twelve men dived underwater to cover the last mile to their destination.

Chapter 65

Tughlaq Road, Delhi

Time- 6:18 hrs

The two helicopters providing air support had a tough time getting immediate help for the burning vehicles below them. The pilot of the chopper on the left radioed his partner.

"Hawk one to Hawk two. Do you copy?"

"Affirmative Hawk one!" the pilot of the second chopper replied. He could still feel the heat from the dying fire on the ground.

"I think help will be arriving soon. I leave you in-charge of the situation. Check for any survivors and provide immediate medical assistance. Copy?" commanded the pilot of Hawk one.

"Roger that. But where are you going? We both need to stay on the site until we get our further set of instructions."

"That's a negative, Hawk two! I have orders to take the precious cargo to a secure location. Out." Saying so, the pilot of Hawk one set the course of the chopper to an undisclosed location.

The other pilot needed no further explanation. Codename 'precious cargo' was used by the air force for a VIP aboard the chopper and today their 'precious cargo' was Dr. Ajaysingh Chauhan.

****

15 mins ago...

David knew something was not okay. Assignment 6.00 kept turning up in his mind. The driver turned on the ignition and Colonel Rana gave orders for the convoy to proceed. The vehicle slowly began to make its way towards the main gate. But then, David decided to make his move.

"I still feel we should be more careful this time, Colonel. I mean no disrespect, but I am going to ask HQ the permission to make some alterations to your security arrangements- If you don't mind Dr. Ajaysingh?" asked David as he reached for the radio.

Ajaysingh gave his consent and soon enough, David was in a conversation with the HQ. Colonel Rana could not fight David in front of the President. He only

maintained his jolly smile.

After a minute of conversation with the HQ, David asked Ajaysingh to get off the vehicle and make a dash for the chopper, which was supposedly tasked to provide a watch from above.

"Travelling by air would be much safer, I think," said David as he gave Colonel Rana a reassuring glance and ran along with the President towards the chopper codenamed Hawk one.

Six minutes later, through a camera he had positioned on the Tughlaq road, Muhammed could see two police vehicles and five armoured military vehicles racing towards him. A couple of choppers provided watch from the above.

****

"Those men down there... They didn't deserve to die like that." Ajaysingh was losing his nerve. His hands were trembling; his mind kept repeating the flashes of fire and smoke rising high up in the air as he watched from the chopper window the massacre that had happened. At his age, he couldn't bear the burden of being responsible for so many deaths.

David, on the other hand, had a lot of things to handle. He had managed to save the President, but he had lost some of his Black Cat commandos down there. They were not just his team- they were his brothers. He had handpicked them, trained them, fought beside them and had promised to protect them. But today he couldn't keep that promise. With a heavy heart, he called on the HQ and conveyed the news of the President being safe.

"This is David D'costa. There was an incident on Tughlaq road and I lost many members of my team, Colonel Rana and some NSG commandos there. But the President is safe and secure. I am currently with him and we are heading for the Black Cats HQ. I need some answers right NOW!"

"HQ copies all, David."

"And whatever happens, I don't want the news that the President is safe being leaked to the media. To cover up the incident is up to you. Keep me posted. Out."

David put down his mike and glanced at the man sitting beside him. That man was not the President he had seen earlier this evening. This man had fear in his eyes. He was shivering and mumbling. Ajaysingh stared through the reinforced glass window of the chopper at the parting clouds in the clear morning sky, his eyes bleak and remote as if he was playing a scene in front of his eyes.

Chapter 66

Project Testing Site, Pokharan

Operation Shakti

10 May, 1998

Time- 10:00am

29 hrs 43 minutes left for the tests.....

It was one of the hottest summers of Rajastan. The mercury levels were rising fast, even at 10.00 am in the morning. Sweat trickled down Jacob's neck. The increasing heat brought him back to consciousness. Almost three hours had passed since he had given up answering the questions fired at him by the military officials. Blood that had been dripping down from his forehead four hours ago had now dried up. His wrists had been bound for the last six hours and he had survived some severe punches in the stomach. Eyelids were heavy, but he put in effort to lift up his head and look around. He was in the same interrogation room- the room which was now empty and dark, but had been the centre of activity the night before and had also been visited by a few high ranked military officials. The interrogation room was at the far corner of the facility away from all the activities of the atomic program. Jacob closed his eyes shut and re-winded his memory to the day from where everything had gone wrong.

Things had moved fast at Pokharan base ever since Ajaysingh had discovered a solid proof against Jacob. That day Ajay did not stop at the door after Jacob had seen him with the note in his hand. He had dashed to the security office and reported his suspicions to the military authorities. Shashank joined Ajay and both of them narrated to the officer in charge every single detail they knew about Jacob's behaviour, his activities and odd work shifts.

"... and today I found this note on his desk. It was cleverly hidden in Jacob's table drawer," said Ajay, handing over the 'BE READY TO STRIKE ON 10th' note to Major Sinha- the officer incharge.

Sinha seemed quite convinced after Ajay described to him the red gloves incident and showed him the note. "It was a lucky thing that you reported your suspicions Dr. Ajaysingh and Dr. Shashank. This man could be a serious threat and may be here to sabotage the entire operation. We are going to take him in our custody right now," responded Major Sinha.

Jacob was dragged into the interrogation room by four officers and was made to

sit right in front of Major Sinha. Sinha was a man like Jacob himself- used to talk very little. But he had a habit of expressing himself with his fists. Jacob got a little lucky because Sinha had to wait until he reported the full incident to his higher authorities in Delhi. Sinha needed the clearance to interrogate a scientist who was involved in a high priority national project.

"Keep this man in the room until I come back. Don't be mean to him. Don't ask any questions. I want him all for me tonight during the investigation," said Sinha to his soldiers and walked out without even looking at Jacob. The four soldiers tied Jacob to a chair and waited outside the room awaiting further orders from Sinha. Ajay and Shashank had given their statements in writing and were off to complete their work.

An investigation team from Delhi arrived late at night. Sinha wanted Ajay to be present during the interrogation and had convinced the officers that Ajay would be of use during the interrogation.

"And what am I to do there?" Ajay asked. He was not comfortable interrogating an enemy spy. Asking questions was never the part of his job profile, but it felt right. He needed to get some answers from Jacob.

"You have been living with this guy for a long time. You will go in and talk to him. Make him comfortable, gain his trust and ask him why he did it. He may not speak initially, but you need to keep trying calmly. Ask him questions about the note, the red gloves and the map. My colleagues will take care of the rest," the officer said reassuringly.

Six minutes later, Ajay found himself facing the most mysterious guy he had ever met in his life. There was some unquantifiable tension mounting between the two scientists in the room as they sat staring at each other. Major Sinha was sitting in another room watching the feed from the CCTV in the interrogation catching Jacob's every expression. A military officer banged the weight of some files they had brought with them on the desk right in front of Jacob's face as he pulled back the chair and sat down shuffling through some papers in the files. He slowly pulled out his spectacles from the case in his coat pocket and wore them taking his own time. As the interrogation progressed, Jacob began to reject any charges the officers would press on him. After half an hour, the investigation by the military officials seemed a waste of time. Major Sinha asked Ajay to intervene.

Ajay, furious after the Jacob's denial of all the accusations, went for an all out assault.

"So let us say- you are not the one whom we accuse you to be. Then how come you were out late that night wearing red gloves?" asked Ajay.

"I just thought of taking a stroll around the facility, but I couldn't find my regular gloves. So I wore my spare pair of gloves and walked out of the room. The next thing I knew was you coming running to me."

Ajay was shocked to see the way Jacob gave his alibi so calmly. He forwarded the next question.

"What about the map we found in your cupboard?" Ajay thought he had trapped the rat now.

"What map? I had no map in my cupboard. Someone must have planted it there," replied Jacob.

Major Sinha was losing his temper every passing second. He got up, picked up his overcoat and began making his way towards the interrogation room.

Ajay knew there was something fishy about the story which Jacob had told him and so he decided to play his best card. He pulled out a small steel box from his pocket.

"Remember this box, Jacob? The soldiers found it while going through your room. You want to tell us about the contents of this box?" asked Ajay.

Jacob stayed calm and denied the accusation yet again. It was as if he had been thoroughly trained for such interrogations. The voice remained cold and the gaze was steady. No blinks of eyelids. "That does not belong to me. I don't know how it got into my room and..." Before Jacob could finish his statement, Sinha came marching in with the other four officials.

"I want the room all for myself," Sinha announced.

All the officers started clearing out the room. "Lies after lies! I am pretty sure you are a trained spy Mr. Jacob. You just don't give up. Want to know what's inside the steel box?" Sinha asked, opening the latch on the steel box. The soldiers had already broken a small lock which had held the box shut earlier when Ajay had seen it for the first time.

Jacob watched Major Sinha pulling out a revolver from the box and placing it in front of him.

"This," said Sinha, pointing to the revolver, "was in the box and I need to know why."

The session of questions and answers went on throughout the night with Jacob

defying every charge put on him. Sinha tried using his fists, but the answers didn't change.

Around 8.00 in the morning, Jacob passed out and Sinha gave up asking questions. He posted four guards outside the bunker and went on to carry out his daily tasks.

In the afternoon, Sinha decided to give Jacob another dose of his fists. He walked up to the far corner of the facility towards the interrogation room. He did not have any company, as most of the troops were busy working at the shafts for the final tests, now that only 25 hours were remaining. When he reached the room, he couldn't see any soldiers. *They must have gone for lunch. But at least one of them must be guarding.*

He froze in his tracks when he saw a pool of blood near the door. He realized that the lock on the door was tampered with and the door no longer remained shut. Taking a deep breath, he swung the door inside and levelled his pistol.

Lying at his feet were the dead bodies of four soldiers covered with blood and the man he had come to interrogate was nowhere to be seen. Jacob- the biggest threat to Operation Shakti was on the loose. Again.

Chapter 67

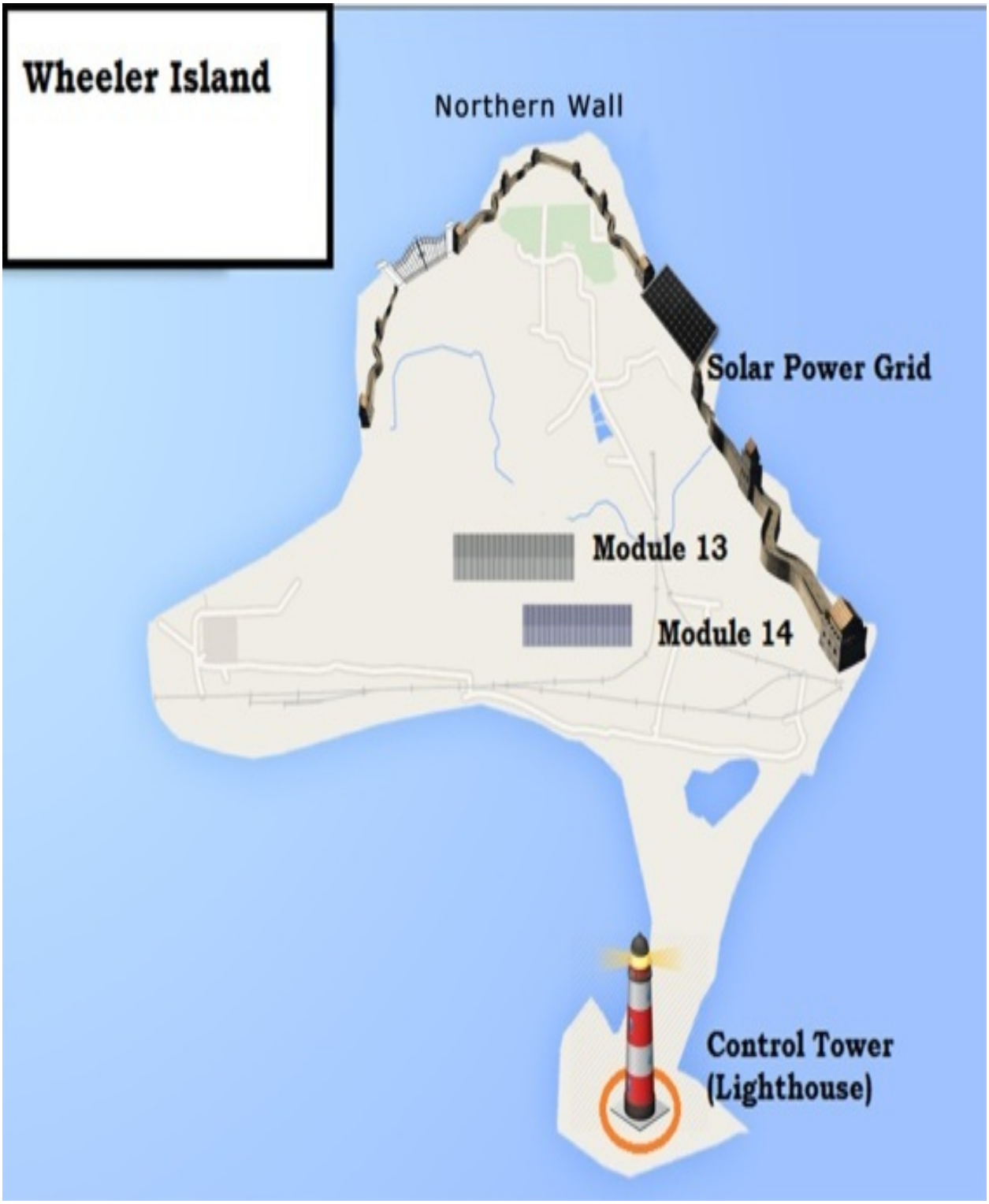
Wheeler Island, Bay of Bengal

Co-ordinates- 20° 45′ 28.94″ N, 87° 5′ 7.92″ E

Time- 6:32 am

The terrorists sitting inside the control room at the southern corner of the facility had no idea that a team of twelve personnel had reached the wall on the north side. The surveillance cameras on the outer wall had been placed a certain distance apart, which left some blind spots for Capt. Pratap and his team to slip through. Their next task was to get on the other side of the 20 feet tall wall standing right in front them. The ten commandos and Ranjeet assembled around him as Capt. Pratap as he began drawing a tentative map of Wheeler Island on the sand.

"You could use the tablet instead," Ranjeet offered.



Capt. Pratap took the map from Ranjeet and enlarged the satellite image of the island. His team could now clearly see the location where they were standing, the position and the distance of Modules and the control room. The Modules were in the central portion of the facility while the control tower was in the far

south. Capt. Pratap turned towards Ranjeet.

"The best place where they might have kept the scientists as their hostages would be the Modules on the island. Currently only two Modules are open and operational as per the information by HQ-Module 13 and Module 14. That's where we will be looking for the scientists. What are we going to do about the security camera feed?" Pratap asked.

"I would have tried looping the video, but for that we would need to locate the central cable of all the security cameras which may be half a meter below the ground level. Locating it and digging it up may consume a lot of time. Instead we can try something else. We can take down the power," Ranjeet suggested.

"How do you intend to do it?" Pratap asked.

"That won't be difficult, believe me. The entire facility runs on solar power and the main grid is located in the northeast corner- that is around 500 meters to our east. Although, taking down the power won't solve our problem completely. The system here has a backup generator located right at the base of the control tower, but we will get four minutes after we have taken down the main power grid until the power gets back on," said Ranjeet.

"Would four minutes be enough for us to retake the control tower?" asked Pratap.

"No. But after the power is back on, the system will take 8 minutes to reboot itself and feed from the security cameras would be displayed on the screen around 2 minutes later, which gives us a total of 14 minutes to clear out the Modules 13 and 14. Once we are there I can hack into the security camera feed easily. I hope your commandos will make a good use of those 14 minutes," said Ranjeet.

"I think 14 minutes would be enough time, Ranjeet". Pratap looked at the map of the island momentarily and figured out a way to get things done. "So here's what you will do- Divide yourselves into three teams. Two teams with four commandos each and a third team with two commandos. The third team of two commandos will scan around the perimeter of the facility and eliminate the patrolling terrorists while the other two teams will strike both the Modules simultaneously. I will stay with Ranjeet and we will disable the power," said Capt. Pratap, laying out his plan.

Cpl. Swaraj was to lead the team attacking Module 13 while Cpl. Abhinav was the head of the team attacking Module 14. Sgt. Parag and Lance Cpl. Nishant

were on the third team. Ranjeet knew the exact spot from where Pratap's team could infiltrate into the facility. Along the northwest corner of the facility, a certain section of the wall had been replaced by a steel fence recently. Pratap ordered his team to move west, avoiding the cameras and breach in through the fence while he and Ranjeet made their way towards the power grid on the east. It didn't take long for Ranjeet to locate the main switch and disable it, leaving the entire Wheeler Island facility drained of power.

Pratap spoke into his mouthpiece, giving his commandos a go-ahead.

"The power is down. We have around 14 minutes, soldiers. It's now or never. We don't want those missiles taking off from here and I want these bastards dead. Take them out."

Chapter 68

1995,

Karachi, Pakistan.

The interview had begun ten minutes ago and by now the panel had a fair idea about the qualifications of the applicant. The young aspirant sitting on the chair across them was an extremely well qualified scientist and an apt contender for the job. But the panel had something else in their mind.

"So Mr. Ayaaz Farid, tell us more about your family background," one of the panel members asked the candidate. Ayaaz closed his eyes and revisited his nightmares yet again. The late night chaos on the streets of Peshawar that night still rang in his ears... And then suddenly a loud screeching of brakes of a vehicle... Lying at the centre of the road, the ten year old Ayaaz could see his *ammi* covered in blood. The tyre of the bus had run over her wrist and a stream of blood now flowed towards the sidewalk. Ayaaz ran, his feet taking him as fast as the wind, but his mother had already breathed her last. Ayaaz screamed in agony and burst out crying. That day, he had lost his reason to smile.

Twenty days later Ayaaz's maternal uncle moved Ayaaz to his home. Aktar Sheik was the younger brother of Ayaaz's mother and had been a close friend to Ayaaz since he had lost his father the previous year. Although Aktar slowly began to understand that his orphaned nephew had locked down all the emotions inside him, he never realised an important fact. The fact that Ayaaz believed himself to be the reason for his *ammi*'s death. Ayaaz began punishing himself physically in order to make peace with his own conscience. He started peeling off his skin with a blade, pouring hot candle wax over his bare palms. It was the lowest degree of punishment he could give to himself.

Returning back to the present, Ayaaz slowly ran his hand over the wounds that blade had left on his wrist. Exhaling a long breath, he was ready to answer the question put forth by the jury.

"I belong to Peshawar, and so did my parents. I lost them many years ago." Ayaaz's reply was crisp and short. He never lost the eye contact with the person asking him the question.

"In your application form here, you have stated that you are an omnist. Why don't you believe in Islam?" Another panel member tossed a question.

"I believe that my religious beliefs have nothing to do with this interview, but if you insist for a clarification, I don't mind giving it to you." Ayaaz paused for a moment to gaze at the panel. Taking their silence as an assertion to continue, he said, "It is not true that I do not believe in Islam. In fact, I believe in all the religions. I feel that every religion has its own interpretation of God or a higher power and I respect all those interpretations. That does not diminish my belief in Islam". Again a short and direct reply.

"So why the military R and D?" asked the same person.

"Working for Pakistan's military Research and Development has been my passion for the last four- five years and I believe that I would serve my country well." Ayaaz's confidence was resolute.

The interview went on for another half an hour and the panel members did their job of learning everything they wanted to know about their candidate. "Thank you, Ayaaz. You may leave," said the head of the panel dressed in a white suit as the interview concluded.

As soon as Ayaaz was out of the room, the man in the white suit addressed to his team members. "He is the man we were looking for all these years. I think we now have the perfect asset for our job." He paused for a second to examine the looks on the faces of his colleagues. "Anybody in disagreement with this decision?", he asked raising his tone. But the only reply he got was a prolonged silence. They all knew that their job was done.

Half an hour later, the list of selected candidates was put up on a board outside the interview room. Ayaaz's name was nowhere on the list!

Chapter 69

Black Cats Headquarters,

Delhi

Co-ordinates- Classified

Time- 6:52 am

The President had been safely brought to the headquarters where the command was trying to figure out their next move. A large unit of the Delhi police force was now working on handling the situation at Tughlaq Road. It was not disclosed to the media where the convoy was heading or for whom was it arranged. David was sitting in his office, but his mind kept on reminding him that half of his team was dead now. He stared at an old photograph of his team whom he had recruited personally. A few minutes later, Dr. Ajaysingh walked in the room. David stood up and saluted the President.

"I know I shouldn't be disturbing you, David. I understand that it must be a difficult time for you. The officers here informed me that they just got a call from Sameer. They have figured out the final clue and are heading to Sarnath," said Ajaysingh, sitting next to David. Both of them sat there observing a mournful silence. Deep in his mind, Ajaysingh was really thankful to David for keeping him and Shonali safe.

A middle aged officer in a blue suit rushed in holding a tape in his hand. "You should listen to this, Sir! Another phone call- just like the one we received yesterday evening. We intercepted it couple of minutes ago. It was dialed to that same number- the one in the President's office. I have it taped in this," the officer said, passing on the tape to David.

Ajaysingh looked at the blue suited officer with surprise- *Another tape? God knows what trouble this one will bring now.*

David decided to hear the tape. He pressed the play button and kept the tape close to his ear.

"I hope these two blasts I caused have not shaken you people so much that you would miss an appointment with me. I expect that by now your dear President would be either burnt down or fighting for his life in some hospital and that's why I won't be addressing to him this time. So whoever is listening, tell your senior officers to get me that piece of artefact I demanded. The time I gave you is up. If I don't get that artefact in the next hour, I think you should worry about

arranging medical facilities for the casualties your own hypersonic missile would be causing soon." The same voice, the same heavy breathing was audible. The only change was that the speaker didn't speak slowly anymore- the voice was fast and loud.

"I know you would have triangulated my position by the time I end this call and that's where you would find me. Let me make my conditions clear - A chopper would be flying in from the northwest boundary of the country. It should not have any problem entering into Indian airspace. Any attempt to attack the chopper while it is in Indian airspace will invite destruction- trust me. I want the artefact to be delivered to me only by one unarmed personnel. If anything happens to me or if I think anything shady is going on, I give a go-ahead to my men at the Wheeler Island. You only have one hour. Don't keep me waiting... "

Chapter 70

Location: Sarnath,

Uttar Pradesh, India.

Co-ordinates: 25.3806°N 83.0245°E

Time: 7.18 am

"So the pillar here at Sarnath is not the only pillar with a Lion Capital on it?" asked Sameer curiously. Shonali and Sameer were in a military truck along with Raghav and the rest of David's team on their way to the Sarnath Archaeological Museum. They had been on a flight from Aurangabad airport to Lal Bahadur Shastri airport at Babatpur. The pilot along with Sgt. Harish had to stop at the airport to refuel the aircraft for their return journey. From there it was a half an hour drive to the city of Sarnath- the deer park where Gautama Buddha first taught the Dharma, and where the Buddhist Sangha came into existence.

They were nearing the museum where the Lion Capital, which was once atop the Ashoka pillar, was kept for display. Raghav, on his cell phone, was taking care of the permissions they would need to inspect the Capital from the concerned authorities while Shonali was telling Sameer about another Lion Capital.

"During his reign, Emperor Ashoka constructed a series of columns throughout the Indian sub-continent. Many of them were inscribed with edicts by Ashoka. Originally, there must have been many pillars, but today only nineteen of them survive with inscriptions and historians have preserved many of them in a fragmentary state. Out of these nineteen, which have different crowning animals such as a bull or an elephant, two of the pillars- one here at Sarnath and another one at Sanchi had similar Lion Capitals- the four lions as their crowning animals. The Ashokan pillar at Sarnath which was built around 250 B.C. is not present at its original location now, as it was broken during the Turk and Islamic invasions," said Shonali.

"So we could be totally wrong! The artefact might be hidden at Sanchi," interrupted Sameer expressing his fears.

"I won't deny that possibility, but the chances that we find that artefact here are high. There was a slight difference between the original Lion Capitals on the pillars at Sarnath and Sanchi. The Lion Capital here at Sarnath is said to have had a Wheel of Dharma or the Ashoka Chakra with 32 spokes which was placed over the four lions. That was said to be the complete Lion Capital. But the

Capital at Sanchi was an incomplete one without the Wheel of Dharma above the four lions. So who knows - there is a possibility that the Sanchi pillar was just made as a decoy! You know what- there's another of these Lion Capitals atop an Ashokan Pillar which stands in Thailand. It has a Wheel of Dharma above the four lions," Shonali remarked.

They were at the gates of the museum when they saw a stupa on their left side. Before Sameer could ask about it to Shonali, she was ready with a short answer. "It's the Dhamek stupa- it is said to mark the spot of the deer park where the Buddha gave his first sermon to his five disciples after attaining enlightenment and revealed his Eightfold Path leading to nirvana."

The truck abruptly made a halt at the gates of the museum. Raghav went in with a couple of his commandos to talk to the curator of the museum who had been summoned on the scene early this morning. Moments later, Sameer and Shonali were escorted by the remaining commandos inside the museum where Raghav and the curator of the museum were waiting for them in the hallway.

"The archaeological museum of Sarnath is the oldest site museum of Archaeological survey of India," said the curator as he led them to that gallery of the museum where the Lion Capital was kept for public display. "The five galleries and two verandas display antiquities ranging from 3rd century B.C. to 12th century A.D. found at Sarnath. The galleries have been named on the basis of their contents, the north most gallery is Tathagata while next one is Triatna. The main hall is known as Shakyasimha gallery and the adjacent to it on the south is named as Trimurti," added the curator as they approached the main hall which was the Shakyasimha gallery.

The Shakyasimha gallery displayed the most prized collections of the museum. Standing at the centre of the gallery was the 3rd century A.D. monument which they had been searching for the whole time. The majestic lions stood there on a circular abacus above the inverted lotus, and the Ashok chakra could be seen resting right at the centre of the platform. The abacus, adorned with the figures of a lion, an elephant, a bull and a horse each separated by a smaller wheel or Dharmachakra consisting of twenty-four spokes, completed the elegance of the sculpture. The curator stepped back, allowing Shonali and Sameer to step in and observe the Lion Capital. The Capital was more than two metres in height and was placed on a circular table in the centre of the gallery.



"This sculpture must have been examined by numerous historians. How could they have missed an inscription or a hidden compartment here? That is a sculpture of national importance. You sure this is where the painting pointed to?" asked Raghav.

"Those historians looked at the Capital just as a sculpture- not as something which King Ashoka designed to hide a possession of Lord Buddha. I can just HOPE that this is where that painting pointed to," replied Shonali.

"So where do we start looking?" Sameer put forth another question.

"I have a hunch. But for that I will need to bring this Capital to the ground level. It's difficult for me to examine the sculpture," said Shonali. The Capital extended up to almost a feet or two above her head.

Raghav suggested that it was best that they climbed up on some elevated platform to observe the sculpture rather than shifting it to ground level. He sent his team to arrange for some tables.

"And what's your hunch?" Sameer asked Shonali.

"Remember what the script on the painting said- *destiny resting on a flower and guarded day and night by the faithful guards of the King of Magadha*. So we know that whatever it is- it lies above the inverted lotus. Which leaves us with the circular abacus..." said Shonali, pointing to the side of the abacus where the four carved animals- lion, elephant, bull and horse moved in a clockwise fashion, "... and the four lions. These four lions are said to be guarding the artefact. So where would you hide something if you have these four lions as guards?"

"At the... centre?" replied Sameer with a hint of apprehension.

"Exactly!" said Shonali with excitement beaming in her eyes.

"How can you be so sure?" asked Raghav, arranging the tables with the help of his teammates.

"I did tell you that originally this Lion Capital had a Dharmachakra with 32 spokes resting upon the heads of the lions. Why was it placed there? The one at Sanchi didn't have any Dharmachakra over it! Don't you think it was an attempt to hide something in the centre so that it wouldn't be seen from the top?" asked Shonali.

"Okay. Let us assume that your hypothesis is correct. But where would it be hidden. There is no place in the centre of the lions, and the circular abacus below also doesn't look like it contains any hidden compartment. Also, this Lion Capital is carved out from a single block of sandstone- there are no joints. So where would it be possibly-" Sameer was interrupted by the curator.

"Actually, there IS a void in the centre," the curator said softly.

"Where?" asked Shonali, quickly climbing up the table to have a clear view of the space in the centre of the Capital where the four lions were back-to-back.

"When this Capital was being examined by experts, they reported that there was a small void somewhere around the centre, but it was just considered as a structural defect. They said it was common for many of the old artefacts and sculptures to develop such minute defects over a period of time," the curator answered.

"So that's where we should be focusing. Can I get a flashlight?" asked Shonali, keenly observing the space at the centre. The backs of the lions merged at one point and it was quite a distance above the circular abacus.

That's a lot of space. The void should be somewhere midway, thought Shonali. Sameer climbed up the table with a flashlight and focused the beam of light at the point where the backs merged. The bottom looked completely plain, without any hole or void. After a few moments of minutely focusing the flashlight on the rock, Shonali observed an abnormality! A tiny piece of stone was bulging out of the base. Even though the sculpture was carved out of a single block of sandstone, a part of the void was shut by another piece of sandstone. They had found the opening!

The next job didn't take much time. Raghav and his team expertly pulled out the tiny piece of sandstone covering the void with some help from the curator.

That's how the artefact remained hidden all these years. Placed in plain sight! Shonali was amazed. She flashed the light at the void and tried to view it from different angles. "I think I see something in there," Shonali said hesitantly.

"Whatever it is, it has been kept hidden from the world for almost 2000 years. I think it's time for the world to know about this missing artefact," quoted Sameer. The deepest secret of the cult of monks was about to be revealed!

Chapter 71

Wheeler Island, Bay of Bengal.

Co-ordinates- 20° 45′ 28.94″ N, 87° 5′ 7.92″ E

Time- 7:20 am

At the western end of the wall, the commandos had made a small gate by cutting out a portion of the steel grill. Everyone checked their ammunition, set a 13 minute timer on their wristwatches and split into three teams as decided. Cpl. Swaraj and Cpl. Abhinav took positions with their teams and got ready to pounce on the enemy at Capt. Pratap's orders.

In the control tower, Irfan was monitoring the feed from the security cameras all night. His eyes, heavily stressed from monitoring the activities at the facility, were drooping down. His teammates did a fine job watching over the scientists taken as hostages and taking them to the restroom after certain intervals of time. There had been no sign of any kind of attempts by the Indian army to infiltrate the facility. The sensor readings looked perfectly normal and the cameras showed no unusual activity.

As he was just about to go into a nap, Irfan's eyes caught a little activity on the cameras as if he had seen something move on a camera positioned at the north-west part of the facility. Shaking his head vigorously in an attempt to shake off the drowsiness, he leaned forward towards the screen to observe more closely. That very instant, there was a minute disturbance in the reception from the cameras and screens turned blank. Even the lights in the control room went out. The power to the entire facility had been turned off.

"We have about 14 minutes, soldiers. It is now or never- we don't want those missiles taking off from here. I want these bastards dead. Take them all out." Capt. Pratap's words rang on the radio of every commando.

The three teams, with their silenced rifles, moved cover to cover through the woods towards their destination- Modules 13 and 14. The northern part of the facility was a typical forested area which made Cpl. Swaraj's and Cpl. Abhinav's teams easy to push ahead in the ample cover of trees and rocks. Sgt. Parag and Lance Cpl. Nishant split their ways and decided to circle the perimeter on the cemented road running on the boundary of the facility. They had encountered a terrorist stationed at the northern watch tower. Before the terrorist could even

sense Indian commandos running into the woods behind him, Sgt. Parag had finished him with two shots from his silenced rifle. *There may be terrorists stationed at the eastern watch tower too,* Parag predicted. There was no watch tower at the western end; that section of the island being on an uneven terrain was left out from the core facility area. Parag decided to check out the eastern watch tower, while Nishant proceeded towards the southern part of the island along the boundary of the facility. He made a swift three sixty degree sweep of his horizon, but there was nothing to be seen, nobody to be seen. It never appeared to them as if the island was captured by terrorists. The entire woods were clear, the cemented roads showed no signs of terrorist activities and even the missile building workshops were filled with an eerie silence. Abhinav and Swaraj's teams, on reaching the central sector of the facility, were surprised to find that they hadn't seen encountered a single terrorist until then. Yet Cpl Abhinav and Cpl Swaraj decided to play it safe. One team moved towards the southern part of the facility maintaining a low profile while the other got in position to provide a covering fire in case of a surprise ambush. Their wristwatches displayed they had 9 minutes 47 seconds left...

The technical expert of the terrorists, Razak, sat perplexed figuring out the reason why the power had gone unexpectedly. He checked with Irfan and asked if any strange activities had been detected on the cameras. Irfan shook his head to indicate a negation although there were slight suspicions disturbing his mind. Azar, Hasib and Razak had arrived at the facility after completing their job with Muhammed at Dehli. Abbaz had been leading the operation on the island for the initial phase, but after Razak arrived, he took over the control from Abbaz. There were 30 seconds left for the power to come back when Razak thought of contacting his contemporaries at the watch towers. He hurriedly grabbed the mouthpiece and spoke into it.

"Sohail? Everything alright there at the northern end?"

There was no reply. "Sohail? Come in. Pick up the goddamn walkie-talkie." Razak kept on trying.

"He must have dozed off. Try the eastern watch tower," suggested Irfan.

"Parvez. Come in," Razak tried out Irfan's suggestion.

"Haan Janab," was the prompt reply on the radio.

"Everything alright there?" asked Razak.

"Yes. Everything is fine," replied Parvez.

"Keep an eye out. I suspect something is not right," Razak said, putting down the radio in a hurry as the computer screens in front of him came to life. The back-up generator was functioning and the missile systems started rebooting.

As soon as Parvez put down the radio and reached for his gun, a bullet from Sgt Parag's rifle tore right through his head. Parag had been waiting for his window of opportunity and as soon as the radio was off, he knew the coast was clear.

Cpl. Swaraj's team had checked the Module 13 and had come up with nothing. Now they knew one thing for certain - their hostages were in Module 14. Cpl. Abhinav advanced ahead with his team to the east side entrance of the Module 14 while Cpl. Swaraj and his team planned to breach in the Module through the western entrance. Meanwhile, Capt. Pratap and Ranjeet had doubled back to the western side of the facility where they found the hole cut out in the steel grill. They entered the facility and sprinted towards the Module 14 with just seven minutes left for the systems to boot up.

Abbaz and Hasib were keeping a watch over the hostages kept in two separate rooms on the second floor of Module 14 while Azar patrolled down the corridor on the first floor. Cpl. Swaraj found a window beside the western door and quietly cut out a portion of glass, unlatched the window and managed to get inside the Module. The module faintly resembled a shed with two floors where the scientists had their offices and research labs. Swaraj checked the ground floor for any signs of activity and then unlatched the door, letting his team inside the Module. The ground floor lobby had two reception desks and models of missiles kept at the centre. There were maps and plans scattered on a sofa at the other end of the Module. The teams scattered and searched the ground floor inch by inch. 5 minutes 14 seconds remaining. Swaraj slowly moved to the first floor, taking the staircase when he heard some footsteps approaching near him. By the sound of the approaching footsteps, Swaraj guessed there was just one man. Swaraj quickly crouched down and took cover behind the wall as he heard the footsteps come nearer. All of a sudden he sprung up from his cover and fired rounds at his target. Even before Azar could reach for his pistol, six bullets silently tore through him. His lifeless body made a soft impact on the ground. Swaraj signalled his team to move to the first floor and investigate the offices.

4 minutes 43 seconds remaining. Ranjeet and Capt. Pratap had now reached Module 14. Ranjeet's next move was to get into the central cable of the security cameras and loop the feed.

Abhinav and his team moved to the second floor. They could sense some murmur and footsteps coming from the adjoining rooms. After scanning the rooms with their thermal imaging cameras, Abhinav and Swaraj located the rooms where the hostages were being held.

"We have the locations of the hostages. Moving in to secure them now!" Abhinav reported to Pratap on radio.

"Cpl Abhinav, this is Ranjeet. I need you to stand down for about half a minute. Need some footage of the terrorists watching over the hostages to loop the video," Ranjeet spoke into the radio.

After exactly thirty seconds, both the teams simultaneously busted into the rooms, taking the terrorists completely by surprise. Swaraj's team fired at Abbaz. They were quick and efficient. But before Abhinav could pull a trigger on his rifle, Hasib pulled a scientist and leveled his gun on him. They now had a hostage situation. Every team member of Abhinav's team had his aim on Hasib but no one was sure if they had a clear shot. Capt. Pratap came in the room, aiming his pistol at Hasib. He saw Hasib taking small steps towards the walkie talkie. *If he alerts the control tower, then we are done! The missiles will b*e *launched!* Pratap decided to take the risk. He took the aim and fired four rounds from his pistol. Two bullets went passing by Hasib's left ear, but the third one found its mark. The fourth one tore through the neck, leaving Hasib disoriented. Taking the cue from Capt. Pratap, Abhinav jumped and tackled the scientist on the floor, making Hasib an easy target for his soldiers. The soldiers rained bullets into Hasib's chest, thighs and head. There was a minute left before the security cameras were going to be back on.

Ranjeet had looped the video feed from the first and second floor security cameras. The looped video was being uploaded to the system memory and that was taking more time than Ranjeet had expected.

"Sir, I don't think this is going to work. This video is taking too long to upload. Take your team and breach in the control tower. Now!" Ranjeet suggested Capt. Pratap.

"But they will be able to see the camera feed any moment now. If you don't loop those video feeds, how the hell are we going to reach the control tower undetected? Moreover, when they see that their teammates have been shot down and the hostages have been secured by us, those missiles are going to leave the island immediately." Pratap was annoyed with Ranjeet's failure.

"Trust me, sir. Those missiles won't be going anywhere for another seven minutes," Ranjeet said, remembering what Vishal had told him about the default countdown program.

Razak and Irfan intently held their breaths as they waited for the camera feeds to turn back on. Within seconds all the screens started coming back to life. For a moment, everything seemed to be alright, but then Razak suddenly realized that something had gone completely wrong. On the feed, he could make out the bodies of his colleagues lying on the floor with bullet holes on every inch of their body. The Indian army had made its move and was at their doorstep.

"Prepare the missile for launch. Let us show these bastards the price of breaking our rules," Razak said with a fire in his eyes. His fury was uncontrollable.

Irfan went ahead and booted up the Hypersonic missile launch program. "Sir, the program has started a seven minute default countdown before the launch. I am unable to override it," said Irfan. His hands were shaking.

Razak tried to override the program using his skills, but the algorithm was locked! A shrill countdown alarm rang throughout the facility. The quiet research facility had suddenly turned into a chaotic carnival of sirens. "This missile is going to take off in seven minutes, Irfan. And we are going to hold this tower for the next seven minutes!" said Razak, picking up the AK-74 next to him.

Chapter 72

Black Cats Headquarters,

Delhi

Co-ordinates- Classified

Time- 7:20 am

The call had terminated and the familiar hang-up beeps could be heard.

It is just one guy, with his handful of men, causing havoc throughout the nation. This operation must have been planned and perfected by him for years, thought David. Never in his career in the military had David faced such an ingenious monster. He knew that this man would be free as a bird six hours from now when the enemy chopper would take him safely across the border and then Indian Intelligence would again be a laughing stock for the rest of the world. There was blood boiling inside David, but he knew there was no other option. All he could hope was that Capt. Pratap and Ranjeet changed the game at Wheeler Island.

"Do we have the location from where the call was made?" David asked his subordinate.

"It must have been triangulated by now. I will get you the exact co-ordinates and the details in a minute," said the officer and left the room hastily.

After a few moments of complete silence, Ajaysingh finally took a decision.

"I am going there," he said firmly.

David, totally taken aback by the President's response, resisted. "No, Sir! You cannot do that. He thinks you are dead. Let it be so. Moreover, we don't have that artefact yet. There's no point in you going." David tried to explain Ajaysingh.

But Ajaysingh had made up his mind. "David, since how long do you know this madman? Last 12 hours, right? This guy had messed with my life 15 years ago and now he has come back again. That time he almost tried to kill me, tried to sabotage our project. Now he blasted a bomb inside my residence, killed the soldiers protecting me and you think I will let him get away with this? I should be the one putting a bullet in his head. He has made me lose a lot and this time- I am not backing out," said Ajaysingh looking in David's eyes. For the first time in the night, David saw a fire sparking up in the eyes of a seventy two year old

man.

"But Sir, we don't even have the artefact to deliver," stated David.

"And that is exactly why I need to stall for some time! I can engage him in a conversation and distract him which will give Ranjeet and your team some time. In case Ranjeet is not successful, it will also give Shonali some more time to find the artefact. We have to extend his one hour barrier in any case," said Ajaysingh, making his way towards the door.

"But there is danger out there and you would be risking your life!" David followed the President to the lift.

"I am aware of that. What is the point in being the President if I don't step forward during such kind of Exigency? We will also get an element of surprise when he realizes that I am not dead yet," said Ajaysingh.

In his mind, David felt it was a deja-vu. Around 12 hours earlier when his team had raided the bunkers in the Thar desert, he had said the same thing - *We will have the element of surprise*. But instead, the entire night had turned out totally surprising for him. So David was not sure how this 'element of surprise' would help them.

"Okay. We can try out your idea, but we need a plan to face that mastermind and also a back-up plan in case something goes wrong this time," said David, pressing the button of the lift. They were heading to the main command centre located in basement level 2.

"That's your department, David. I am the person who would be meeting the crazy guy. Get your soldiers ready. We will leave as soon as I get his location and make a call to Shonali. Got it?" Ajaysingh entered the command centre receiving instant salutes of all the military and intelligence officers present in the room.

"What is the location to which you triangulated the call?" asked Ajaysingh, coming straight to the point.

"It is a private airstrip in the outskirts of the city usually used by the planes carrying heavy cargo. Our troops are on their way. We are waiting for instructions to go in and get this man," an official responded.

"Your instructions are to stand down, officer! I am going there myself," retorted Ajaysingh. He asked David to explain the plan of action to his team.

About twenty minutes later, a chopper dropped Ajaysingh on the deserted airfield and took off. The sun now dazzled brightly and drops of sweat trickled down Ajaysingh's neck. David and some Black Cat commandos had taken

positions with sniper rifles quite a distance away, providing cover to President Ajaysingh from every possible direction. Ajaysingh felt heavy as he walked wearing a bulletproof jacket towards a figure sitting in a wheel chair right at the centre of the airfield. Ajaysingh had been given a small pistol for self protection and a concealable Bluetooth earpiece to be in constant contact with David.

The mastermind saw a figure approaching him. He couldn't make out the face at first, but as the figure neared him, the mastermind dropped his jaw open. Standing before him was Dr. Ajaysingh Chauhan, the President of India, without a scratch on his body. Half of his meticulously planned operation had been ruined. The mastermind looked with stone cold eyes towards Dr. Ajaysingh.

Ajaysingh had guessed it right. It was his old friend who was behind everything that had happened in the last fourteen hours!

"And after sixteen years- we meet again, Shashank," said Dr. Ajaysingh, returning the icy stare to the man in the wheelchair.

Chapter 73

Using a pair of tongs, Sameer carefully extracted what looked like an ancient cylindrical stone tube. The tube was carved out of the same sandstone as the Capital and had remained camouflaged inside the small cavity at the centre. "No wonder even the experts couldn't find it. They never looked for it! Who would expect something to be preserved inside an ancient sculpture!" exclaimed Shonali excitedly. The tube was around fifteen centimetres in length with less than a two centimetre diameter.

Sameer carefully placed the cylinder on a handkerchief that Shonali had laid down on the ground. Everyone gazed down at the unexplained cylinder placed at the centre of the Shakyasimha gallery fervent to know about its contents. Shonali ran her finger along the surface of the small cylinder searching for openings.

"There is a slit running at the centre of this cylinder. Maybe it opens up if pulled along its length," said Shonali as she applied a light pressure on the exterior of the cylinders, trying to pull the two ends apart. Just like a hollow pen, the cylinder parted in the middle and a papyrus scroll could be seen concealed inside.

Sameer carefully unrolled the scroll trying to be as careful as he could be while handling the delicate piece of paper. The script was written in Sanskrit and had almost the same font as that of the messages they had found earlier.

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It took longer for Shonali to translate this time. Almost fifteen minutes.

The following is only an abstract of Gautam Buddha's memoir. Most of the original record was lost in time. This is the recreated version of the true memoir.

For years man has been seeking one simple thing- He devotes his entire life for one single purpose. Liberation. Ancient scholars believed that we are nothing but souls trapped in the perishable vessels-our mortal body. Through his efforts, every single day man has been trying to be free- to be liberated. He turns towards religion for this purpose, believing that his religion may guide him to achieve liberation. I ran behind liberation for a long time and in the end, I learnt one thing- the path to liberation was right there in front of us all along. We just neglected the simplicity of it. We discarded the truth because it didn't make any sense.

Emptiness. That has been the truth all along. Once we are able to realise the nature of emptiness, we will be liberated. All things have the nature of emptiness. There is no law that is permanent and unchangeable. With continuously changing phenomenon, the existence of all things becomes a web of inter-relationships. Once you let go of the Dharma and the Non-Dharma, you will begin your journey towards Nirvana. Although people have now started calling me - The enlightened, I don't see myself any different from what I was earlier. I am the same me. Only now, I feel like I have realised the truth. I will try to spread the knowledge far and wide and hopefully one day everyone will be enlightened.

What this is, that is; this arising, that arises.

Before Sameer or Shonali could react to the contents of the scroll, Raghav rolled it up and replaced it back into the cylinder. "We don't have any time to waste. We should get moving and deliver this artefact to David - You people can discuss the deeper meaning of the text later," he said, taunting Shonali and Sameer.

"I just hope we aren't too late," he added.

Chapter 74

1995,

Karachi, Pakistan.

Ayaaz walked down the silent streets of Karachi holding a cigarette between his fingers. The smoke from his cigarette disappeared into the night's mist and the ashes dispersed with the blowing wind. He had quit smoking a long time ago, but he didn't care about anything now. The journey from the streets of Peshawar to Karachi had not been easy. His maternal uncle had struggled a lot to ensure that he got the best education. He himself had struggled day and night for the interview. But alas! It was all over now. His career, his passion-just snatched away from him.

As he walked along the pavement, he could see a dog eating the leftovers from a public dustbin. Ayaaz kicked a bottle of soft drink lying on the ground towards the dustbin in a state of frustration. The dog charged towards Ayaaz barking with anger. Ayaaz had faced enough that day and he was not going to stand up against any other torment. Picking up a fairly big piece of rock next to him, he waited for the creature to come close. As the dog sprinted up to him, Ayaaz jumped high and smashed the dog's head with the rock. The creature instantly fell on the ground, bleeding profusely. Ayaaz didn't stop there. He continued to smash the dog's head with repeated blows from the piece of rock. After a while when his anger melted down, Ayaaz threw away the rock, wiped his blood covered hands with his handkerchief and made his way towards the hotel he was staying in.

The receptionist greeted him with a fake smile as Ayaaz entered the lobby of the hotel. She signalled him to come over for a moment. "I have got a package for you, Sir. It was delivered about fifteen minutes ago," she said, handing over an A4 sized black envelope. Ayaaz checked the front and the backside of the envelope, but there was no sign of the sender. He decided to check it out in his room over a glass of whisky. After consuming a fair amount of alcohol, Ayaaz opened the mysterious envelope he had received. There was a blank cheque in the front and a note attached in the back- *If you want to work for your country, we can offer you a chance. Tomorrow morning a vehicle would be waiting for you at 8 am sharp in front of the hotel. We had a reason not to select you for that job in the interview. You have far better prospects.*

The note was not signed by anybody but a tiny watermark at the bottom was

faintly visible. As Ayaaz held it up against the light, he could clearly make out the words 'I.S.I' written at the centre of the watermark.

The next morning Ayaaz was taken to an underground command centre. There he was greeted by three people in uniforms and a fourth man who had been the head of the panel interviewing him the previous day. As they entered a conference room, all the soldiers and military officials left, leaving only three people in the conference hall- Ayaaz, the head of the interview panel and another man in a brown suit going through some files. After an uncomfortable silence of five minutes, the man in brown suit looked up at Ayaaz. "Mr. Ayaaz Farid, I am J. Mulla- deputy chief of the I.S.I," said the man, running his hand through his greying hair. "I had a glance at your personal file and I have also been told that you are a very qualified thermo physicist. We were looking for a person just like you. So tell me Mr. Ayaaz, did you ever dream of becoming a spy?"

Chapter 75

Wheeler Island, Bay of Bengal

Co-ordinates - 20° 45′ 28.94″ N, 87° 5′ 7.92″ E

Handling the terrorists defending the control tower was not too hard for the commandos. All it took was a couple of flashbangs to impair Irfan's and Razak's vision and put bullets in their heads. Ranjeet rushed up the tower and checked the systems.

"Sir, they have already initiated the launch program, but we still have four minutes before the missiles are launched," Ranjeet reported to Pratap.

"Can you do anything to stop them now?" asked Pratap with an expression of escalating fear.

"Our only option now is to shut down the system by cutting off the backup power supply of the control tower," Ranjeet responded back.

"And how do we do that? Is it possible to do it within the time frame?"

"I hope you brought along some explosives, Captain!" said Ranjeet, rushing down the stairs to the basement which served as the backup power station of the control tower.

Chapter 76

1996,

Peshawar, Pakistan.

After a couple of his espionage missions, Ayaaz was back at his home, packing bags for his next mission. It had taken him three sleepless nights to finally take that decision. The meeting at the I.S.I command centre had lasted for five long hours. What the deputy chief had proposed was a very good chance to develop the nuclear research sector of Pakistan, but was not in line with Ayaaz's principles. It was not an entirely wrong act from his point of view. He did believe in the idea of 'snatching things by wrong means if you can't get them the right way'. But this thing they were planning was a complete theft.

A soft knock on the door cleared the clouding thoughts and dragged him back to the present. He opened the door and saw another yellow envelope lying at his footsteps. There was nobody to be seen nearby. *Exactly as the deputy chief described. No direct contact.*

"How do you think I should contact you then?" Ayaaz had asked over the phone. The phone line was secured. "You will not be in contact with anybody from the I.S.I. Officially, we are not involved in this operation. We would set up a front-man from our side who will act as a messenger for us. We will give your orders to him and he will direct them to you. If you want any help from us, you are to contact him and he will make sure that your message reaches us". The deputy chief stopped short and exhaled a deep breath before continuing. What followed was not pleasant to hear, but it had to be said. "If your cover ever gets blown, it goes without saying that none of this should be traced back to us. I suppose you understand that in such a case, we will completely deny that you worked for us. You may have to face whatever consequences follow without disclosing our involvement in the project. It is a cost every espionage agent has to pay for the sake of his motherland." The deputy chief had chosen his words very carefully.

Ayaaz used a razor to cut open the envelope and emptied the contents on his study table. It contained all the items the deputy chief had promised along with his appointment letter for the post of Chief Thermo-Nuclear Scientist in the Pakistani military's Research and Development cell.

"You do this job and we will make you the head of our nuclear research division.

I know you have the right qualifications and will lead the research with utmost proficiency. This job will take only about 10-12 months. I know they have reached the last phase of their project and that is why we need to act quickly. We have made the necessary arrangements so that you will not face any difficulties during the operation. When you come back, you can use their research to develop a nuclear device here not as a mere scientist but as a head of the research wing. I will send you the appointment letter, along with the other documents you will be needing for the operation- your passport, background documents, the front-man's contact. Study everything to the last detail," said the I.S.I deputy chief when Ayaaz had finally agreed to work on this project for them.

Ayaaz checked his passport and his new alias. It was a name he did not like, but he had no option but to accept it. The documents seemed perfectly authentic and his background was well structured.

"Passports and the documents are fine. How do you intend to take me across the border and place me in the project?" Ayaaz had asked. A soft chuckle could be heard from the other side of the phone. "You worry too much, Ayaaz. Let us take care of that. We have our contacts and our methods to get things done."

Memorizing all the necessary details from the documents, Ayaaz picked up the contents of the envelope from the table and placed them in his bag. This was the biggest gamble of his life. He clearly remembered the cold blooded words of the deputy director right before the call got disconnected.

"Ayaaz, do not forget that your primary objective is not to steal their research but to sabotage it. Their tests should not be successful. Is that understood?"

Chapter 77

Project Testing Site, Pokharan

Operation Shakti

10 May, 1998

Time- 4:33 pm

23 hrs 10 minutes left for the tests...

The entire base was now on high alert with sirens ringing in each and every corner of the facility. Sinha had sent his soldiers to search every nook and corner for Jacob. "This man just killed four of my soldiers. I want this man - dead," he had instructed.

Ajay was working at his laboratory carrying out tests for the final launch when he heard something behind him. As he turned around, he grabbed a screwdriver lying on the table as a measure of precaution. But he realised there was no need to use the tool when he saw the condition of the intruder. It was Jacob- bleeding badly. He was barely able to stand up on his feet.

"Listen to me. I was... I was set up. You need to believe me..." Jacob could barely get the words out of his mouth. He crashed on a table spitting out blood from his mouth. Ajay took a step towards the door of the lab to inform the security.

"Ajay! Please. Just hear me out..." Jacob's feeble words expressed a lot of pain.

"You tried to kill me once, sabotaged this entire operation and stole secrets of national importance and you want me to trust you?" Ajay was furious.

"I told you yesterday night and I am telling you again now- That was not me. Someone set me up. Today when I was in that interrogation room, I heard gunshots... and then... then a masked guy comes in and cuts me loose. Now all the soldiers are searching for me outside. There is someone else here who is making you think that I am the traitor and while you all are wasting your time on me, he would be sabotaging up this project."

"I cannot trust you or talk to you right now. I am going to bring in Major Sinha here and you explain it to him. You lie down here. You seem to be in pretty bad shape." Ajay rushed toward Sinha's office to inform him.

A couple of minutes later, Sinha along with his troops and Ajay reached Ajay's

lab. Jacob was lying with his face down on the table. Ajay rushed towards him and turned him over. His face was calm and Ajay could not detect any breathing.

'I think we lost him', said Sinha after checking Jacob's pulse.

"I... I don't understand. He seemed fine just a while ago. I left him here for two minutes... and... I don't understand," said Ajay, in fright.

"You focus on your work Dr. Ajaysingh. We will take care of this," replied Sinha, exhaling out a deep breath.

`7.00 Hrs later...`

It was the last minute briefing of the scientists at the central hall of the facility. Ajay was trying hard to concentrate on the meeting, but his thoughts just diverted back to Jacob's last words- *There is someone else here who is making you think that I am the traitor and while you all are wasting your time on me, he would be screwing up this project.*

Ajay started looking at the story from a different angle. He glanced around the hall searching for faces - faces which might have tried to set up Jacob, kill him. But there were none that he could think of with a valid motive. *Let me consider for a moment that Jacob wasn't the spy. So, if the spy is still on the loose, he might attempt to sabotage the project tonight. I better inform Major Sinha.* Ajay directly headed to Sinha's office after the meeting and expressed his worries.

"Don't worry, Ajay. We have doubled the security measures and every single soldier here is on high alert. Nothing will go wrong till the nuclear tests are done with," Sinha ensured Ajay.

But Ajay just couldn't take his mind off the matter. He kept churning the thoughts on his way back to his room. He thought of the ways he would sabotage the operation in a quick, simple manner if he was a spy. It took him a minute to consider all the possibilities, but he finally had an answer.

Sabotaging the electronic circuitry used for triggering the bomb would be the perfect way. But the circuitry is scheduled to be installed tomorrow morning- which means it is still in the electronics lab and our spy friend has an easy target to sabotage! Ajay's mind was racing faster every passing second. He retraced his steps back to Sinha's office to warn him.

On reaching the security head's office, Ajay was informed by two NSG commandos that Major Sinha had just left to make arrangements for the night

patrol. Ajay explained the situation to them and asked them to come and inspect the electronics lab with him to which the commandos immediately agreed. The night was chilly and yet the scientists toiled in the shafts like labourers. There were soldiers stationed at every corner keeping an eye on every tiny detail. On his left hand side, Ajay could see an LED display countdown running on a big screen put up near the Taj Mahal shaft which read 15 hrs 30 minutes 24 seconds. Ajay remembered his near death experience in A.K. Das's cabin earlier and he decided not to make the same mistake again. He asked one of the soldiers accompanying him to let him keep a sidearm in case anything goes wrong.

"You need not fear anything Mr. Ajay. We will take care if there's any problem," said the soldier, denying to lend his sidearm to Ajay.

As they approached the lab, Ajay took out his magnetic ID card from his wallet which allowed him access to the laboratories around the facility and swiped it. The soldiers withdrew their pistols and walked in scanning the ground floor of the lab. Ajay was following them closely watching out for any suspicious tampering with the equipment. They never realised that a figure was approaching them from the shadows. A moment later, they heard a noise behind them. The trio turned around only to see an entire cabinet filled with electronic equipment falling right upon them. The cabinet crashed, taking down all three of them under it. It took a fair amount of struggle, but Ajay managed to slide out from under the cabinet quickly. The two commandos were still attempting to escape their entrapment. As he was about to give a hand to lift the cabinet, Ajay saw a figure step out of the lab into the misty darkness of the night. Ajaysingh picked up a pistol dropped by one of the soldiers and ran off in pursuit of the unknown attacker.

Opening the door, he stepped into the unpleasantly cold night. The entire place was full of activity and the flood lights facing him made it impossible to look for the mystery man in the dark. There were a few scientists and a few of uniformed soldiers in Ajay's vision, but none of them looked like the sharp, tall figure Ajay had seen slipping out of the lab. Suddenly, from the corner of his eye, Ajay saw the exact same figure slither towards the northern gate of the facility through the bushes. Ajay realised that his attacker was tactfully avoiding unwanted attention of the soldiers positioned at the check posts.

Is this the actual spy? Was Jacob really innocent? Questions crossed Ajay's minds like darts. He silently followed the figure further towards the northern gate. He had no time to halt at any nearby, check posts and explain the situation

and ask the soldiers to help him out. *I shouldn't lose his tail this time*, he had decided.

Slowly, they kept on heading north through the shadowy warehouses and silent bushes. The surroundings started to become eerie and quiet. There was almost nobody around within an earshot and Ajay was getting exhausted. *Should I pursue him further? Or should I go and get help?* Confused and afraid, Ajay moved ahead, nearing the compound of the facility. Far ahead of him around the corner of a warehouse, Ajay could notice that figure hiding in the shadows. Ajay went around the warehouse and quietly approached the man from behind.

"Turn around slowly. I want to see your face, you bastard," ordered Ajay.

The figure turned around to face Ajay.

"Shashank!" exclaimed Ajay in a total shock.

Shashank, with a sly smile on his face, grinned smugly.

"Dear Ajay, Are you surprised? Well, you should be. I did a pretty good job getting you to trust me and pouring your heart out to me. And Jacob- had to kill that poor thing."

"All this time- you betrayed me... killed Jacob. What had he done to deserve such death?" Ajay's grip over the pistol was loosening. A wave of mixed emotions- anger, shock and guilt were taking his focus down.

"Don't blame me. I am a spy and I steal secrets- that's my job. Jacob was the diversion I needed to keep you morons busy. So I told you some cooked up stories about him, showed you his steel box with some modifications of my own, hid a suspicious looking map in his cupboard to make you suspect that he is doing something fishy - and you believed it. He was of no use now- so I put an end to his miserable life. Anyways, don't waste my time now. There's a chopper waiting for me just beyond these walls in the desert. My colleagues are very interested in the research of your scientists. So if you want to pull the trigger, just get on with it," said Shashank, staring coldly in Ajay's eyes. From the look in his eyes Ajay could tell that the man standing in front of him did not fear death.

"Bastard..." Ajay was furious. "You think you will just walk away killing an innocent man, stealing our nation's secrets and sabotaging the entire project." Ajay was shouting out loud but there wasn't anyone except the ISI spy to hear it.

"Cut the boring lecture, Ajay. I know you are trying to attract the attention of your soldiers." Shashank was slowly getting up. "You don't have it in you to put a bullet in someone- to kill someone. So you better put down the gun and run to your Major Sinha for help," mocked Shashank. Ajay kept his gun levelled on Shashank desperately praying for some patrolling soldiers to pass by.

"And yeah! I completely forgot to mention that any moment now- a part of your electronic equipment would blow up to ashes. I actually planned on destroying the complete equipment, but you came marching right in with those puppets and I had to alter my sabotaging plans," said Shashank.

Ajay was just figuring out his next move when he heard a loud blast behind him. Ajay turned around to see flames rising up from the electronics lab. Shashank got the diversion he needed to escape. He pushed Ajay backwards and started running towards the wall. It took some time for Ajay to regain his balance and pick up the fallen pistol, but then he was back again chasing the ISI spy. Shashank, by then, had reached the wall and was trying desperately to scale it. Ajay knew he would not make in time to the wall and the only choice he had was to shoot down Shashank. Never having fired a gun in his life, shooting accurately at an escaping spy from a distance of hundred metres seemed an impossible task. And yet, Ajay levelled his gun and fired. He missed the first time. Shashank had almost reached the top of the wall when Ajay's second bullet hit him in the lower back. Ajay saw that his target was still not giving up. Shashank had somehow dragged himself up on the wall and prepared to jump on the other side. Ajay fired four shots in a row and three of them tore right through Shashank's left leg. The fourth one hit the wall. Ajay saw Shashank's body topple over the wall to the other side. He ran towards the wall and started climbing it. He needed to confirm that the bastard who had ruined the project was dead. But when he climbed over the wall, there was no sign of anybody on the other side. His spy friend had somehow managed to escape. Behind him, the project site was in absolute chaos; the blast in the lab had left everyone stunned. But above all the sirens and chaos in the facility, Ajay could distinctly hear the rotating blades of a chopper. He looked in the direction of the sound and he could faintly make out some light coming from a chopper. It was fairly dark outside the facility but he was pretty sure he saw a body being dragged into the helicopter by two men. That was the last Ajay saw of Shashank.

Chapter 78

15 May, 1998

Karachi, Pakistan.

His nose suffered a mild irritation owing to the scent of the disinfectant that typically floated around his hospital bed. Slowly his sense of hearing and vision was being restored. He didn't have the slightest idea of how he had landed there. The last thing he remembered was the unbearable pain caused by the bullets pierced in his left leg before he lost his consciousness in the helicopter. Turning his head to the left, he could see his uncle sleeping on the chair beside him. The sound of movement on the bed woke up Aktar Mamu. He was more than delighted to see his nephew had regained consciousness.

A week passed by and Ayaaz was making a steady recovery. He had no visitor except for his uncle who stood by him day and night. About a week later, Ayaaz woke up from a deep afternoon nap only to find himself facing the man who had assigned him the mission- the deputy chief of the I.S.I. Ayaaz tried to make an effort to sit up in his bed, but the man sitting in front of him gestured him to be relaxed.

"I know you gave everything you could to the mission. I know that you recovered some valuable data from that project, but this operation is seen as a failure by my boss. The main objective was to sabotage their project, which you failed to do. Last week India successfully carried out 2 nuclear tests and therefore joined the list of the countries possessing a nuclear arsenal. Your data and collected experiment results have been forwarded to our scientists at the Ras Koh Hills. The stolen data has indeed accelerated our research efforts." The deputy chief took a brief pause to remove his spectacles and adjust them back. "We may also be soon testing our nuclear devices and I can only hope that they turn out to be successful experiments. You cannot be a part of the project now, since your cover was blown during the operation. If the word gets out that the spy fleeing from India is working on Pakistan's nuclear research, it will trigger utter chaos. It is best for you to lay low for a while". Taking Ayaaz's hand into his, the deputy chief continued," Your efforts won't go overlooked. I will arrange for you to be given a desk job and a proper salary as soon as you recover and are ready to join us. You did a great job, Ayaaz. Alas! History will never know that it was you who made the Pakistan's nuclear program successful."

The man patted Ayaaz on his shoulder, picked up his cane and walked towards the door. As he turned the knob on the door, he partially turned around once. "If you need any help Ayaaz, don't forget that the I.S.I is with you". Saying so, the man disappeared into the busy corridor just as Aktar Mamu came in his room with a fresh batch of fruits.

"Who was that guy with the cane?" asked Aktar Mamu, placing the basket of fruits right next to the bed.

"Oh! That gentleman entered the wrong room. He must have come to visit someone else," replied Ayaaz without even looking up.

Chapter 79

December 2000,

Dharmarajika Stupa,

Taxila, Pakistan

"So tell me. What is your true purpose here?" the monk asked with an expression of awe on his face. The story narrated by the man sitting in a wheelchair was not an ordinary one. For several years, the monk had listened to people's confessions, their darkest secrets, their blunders and even their crimes. But this tale resembled no other.

"I don't know. I even don't know why I am telling this to you. Maybe there is no purpose to my life now. I am an aimless traveller unaware of his destination. Whatever purpose I had set my eyes on, has been snatched away from me. Every time." Ayaaz's frustration and anger were evident from his body language.

"What made you come here?" The monk asked with a distinguished calm.

Ayaaz looked at the ceiling of the stupa for a long time before answering the question. "I have told you. I was sent here by my uncle."

"And do you know why? You had forsaken the will to live. You had let go of all the good things you still have in your life." The monk was trying to make his point, but Ayaaz's abrupt fit of temper threw him off his guard.

"WHAT GOOD THINGS ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? My lost ability to walk? Or my failure to carry out an espionage mission for my country? Tell me what wrong did I do? Did I ask for too much? Did I dream too big? Or was I wrong to work for the sake of my country?" Ayaaz was seething in anger, screeching. His voice had lost control.

An angry and shrill shout echoed inside the peaceful monastery. Within a few seconds, a dozen monks had surrounded the man in the wheelchair who was on the verge of bursting into tears.

The monk in front of him asked everyone to leave them alone. Placing his hands on Ayaaz's shoulder, he said, "I know there is a lot of anger inside you. You are not free of vengeance. You are disappointed because you think that you have been wronged and you have accepted defeat just because you have lost your

ability to walk. No Ayaaz- you are not a failure. A guy who has gone through so much, been defeated so many times and still has that spark of struggle in his eyes can never be a failure. You are a warrior, Ayaaz. Maybe the destiny hasn't been your friend until now. But believe me- you have a higher purpose to achieve, lad," said the monk, driving Ayaaz's wheelchair towards a corner of the stupa bearing an inscription on a big slab of stone.

"This inscription bears a story of a monk who went through a lot of agony to discover his true purpose in life. One day you will know that there was a reason for everything that happened. You will evolve yourself into something totally new," said the monk, staring right into Ayaaz's eyes." Your uncle told me that you believe in all the religions but do not favour any. I am not asking you to adopt Buddhism. I am just saying that you will find your answers in the teachings of Lord Buddha". The monk left without saying another word and Ayaaz was left all alone in the silent stupa. He kept questioning his inner self about his intentions of staying at the monastery. He was confused, angry, frustrated, depressed and clueless about what to do next. But he had started to believe that there had to be a reason for all this to happen.

Chapter 80

From the scope of his sniper rifle, David had a clear view of the airstrip where the President was having a conversation with the man who was at the top of David's 'to kill' list. He had specifically instructed Ajaysingh Chauhan to maintain a distance from the psychopath so that David's team could open fire if things went bad. The hidden microphone inside Ajaysingh's vest enabled David to listen to every bit of conversation. Slowly, he was learning why Ajaysingh Chauhan was trapped in the middle of this vicious tornado.

"And yet again you managed to ruin my plans. You are a hard man to kill, I'll give you that, Dr. Ajaysingh," said the man in the wheelchair.

"I can see you are still in the state of shock. Not so happy seeing me alive, Shashank?" replied Ajay.

"Shashank?" The man on the wheelchair grinned. "You still believe that was my real name? Let me tell you a small version of my story. I have changed my identities so many times that sometimes it takes me a moment to remember that my real name is Ayaaz. After being offered a chance by the ISI to enter in the field of nuclear espionage, I did not look back. I knew that it was my chance to turn the tables." The sly smile turned into a wicked one as Ayaaz continued his story staring into nothingness. "They decided to turn me into an asset. They gave me a new identity. A new job- Espionage. They sent me to the middle-east research facilities in Iran for my initial assignments. My job took me many places, I was called by many names- the new job was exciting... It rushed adrenaline through my veins. Then one day they called me in for my biggest assignment. My cover ID was Shashank. But everything went wrong- thanks to you. You crippled me forever, bastard! You robbed me of my only purpose in my life," shouted the man in the wheelchair. Ajay could see the anger build up on his face.

"That was one of my good deeds. Should have put a bullet in your head when I had the chance. Were you even a real scientist?" asked Ajay, trying to stall for time.

"Of course! I began as a thermo-physicist and tried to enter Pakistan's nuclear research program for 3 years. But they gave me a better job. Do you think it was mere coincidence that just 15 days after India successfully conducted nuclear

tests that we carried out operation Chagai-1 and successfully detonated five nuclear devices in the Ras Koh Hills? Your tests completed on 13th May 1998 and on 28th May 1998, Pakistan became the 7th country in the world to successfully test and develop nuclear weapons. My colleagues got a lot of help from the data I stole from A.K. Das's office - the test results, the errors..."

David was quietly listening to Ayaaz's story when there was an incoming message on his radio. It was Sameer. "Sir," he sounded confident, "That artefact has been retrieved. We are on the way to the airbase now. Will stay in contact".

"Good job, Sameer. You and Shonali have done a really good job. I have got no news from Pratap yet. So our best shot is to give up that artefact. Bring it here as fast as possible." David tried to remain brief. He was missing out on the conversation happening at the middle of the airstrip.

"... Even though our nuclear program started in 1972 and we were as close to success as you were by 1998, it would not be appropriate if I don't mention that your data and research helped us in racing things up." Ayaaz continued with his story and Ajay popped up another question just in time to keep him occupied.

"And why does a spy like you suddenly develop an interest in this ancient artefact?" asked Ajay.

There was a silence. Abrupt and complete silence. Ayaaz just stared quietly at the ground. David suspected something shady going on. He tightened his grip on the concealed weapon. Ayaaz's face was completely blank. Almost a minute went by and a silent tension mounted up.

And then, breaking the silence, Ayaaz asked Ajay a question.

"What do you live for?" He was looking directly in Ajay's eyes.

Ajay was taken aback by the question. He kept guessing why the man in front of him switched to such an odd subject.

Seeing the puzzled look on Ajay's face, Ayaaz bit into his lower lip and continued, "What is it that held your life together? What kept you going for all these years?"

Ajay had no answer to that. There was an abrupt silence in the air and he needed to break it. So he decided to play along.

"Um... my job, my research, my responsibility as the President," said Ajay,

making up the answer in a confused state.

Ayaaz was now staring at him with a fire in his eyes. A rage like an erupting volcano. "You had something to cling to" The words were almost inaudible the first time. But the next words came flying out of his mouth like poisonous darts.

"YOU HAD SOMETHING THAT DEFINED YOU..." The voice was piercing. Ajay could see the stretched veins on Ayaaz's lower neck as he shouted in Ajay's face, "... I did not have that for a prolonged period in my life. Orphaned, alone and helpless I tried to work for my country. And finally when I got something I could cling to- a job which was something I could treasure, you took that away from me."

"Me?" Ajay asked.

"DO NOT TRY TO DENY IT." There was an inexorable rage in Ayaaz's eyes. "You took away from me my job, my passion- the thing that kept me ticking. The people who employed me did not take my failure as a good note. I was a failed, crippled spy who spent a year trying to get off a hospital bed. How would they expect someone crippled to work again as a spy for them? All I did for the next two years was some boring office job. You took away the PURPOSE from my life. They took away my identity and you were the reason for it..."

David was too busy listening to the man in the wheelchair that he did not feel his cellphone vibrating in his pocket. It was the fourth vibration that got his attention. He dived his hand into his pocket and hurriedly pressed the receive button.

It was Captain Pratap.

"I tried to reach you over the radio, but you didn't respond. We are done at Wheeler Island. The missile is no longer a threat. We blasted the power supply station of the control tower," said Pratap.

"Blasted what?" David asked in alarmed state.

"Just the basement of the control tower. It was necessary to kill the power of the missile launch systems. Nothing to be worried about. They were going to launch the missile towards Mumbai, but now it is not going anywhere."

"Well done, Pratap! Excellent job. I think we can go ahead and just kill this bastard. He has got no leverage on us now," said David, loading his sniper rifle.

"... I was lost. I was purposeless, defeated and that is when I found the true purpose of my life. Did you know how much trouble I had to go through to acquire the four out of those nine books hidden by the Nine Unknown Men? And then how much midnight oil I had to burn to find the clues to the path leading towards the artefact in those books? But it was all worth the trouble because I was finally doing the thing I was destined for. Alas! My disability restricted me to find the other five books and discover the complete path and I had to bother you to help me. You know what... I just wanted that zing back in my life- feel that rush of adrenaline through my veins again. So I arranged this little game for us. You can't imagine the preparation and planning it took to place every single piece of puzzle exactly where it should be. Although, I had explored the path upto the stupa at Nalanda, I didn't want it to be made too obvious. So I misguided you to Qutb Minar where you found the clue I had placed. I MADE you go towards the artefact that I needed. And believe me, I enjoyed every bit of it." Ayaaz was savouring his victory- his success to make the President, the Intelligence, the army of an entire nation give in to his demands.

"But why did you make US go for the artefact? You had the information leading towards the artefact and you clearly had the monetary resources. Why not go after it by yourself and keep it silent? You could have made me suffer or get me killed any other time," said Ajaysingh. It was a question he asked not for stalling time, but to quench his queries. There were some answers which were still in the dark.

"Don't you still get it? Are you really that naive?" Ayaaz flashed a sinister smile. "It was your resources which led me to the artefact. The information I had gathered only indicated me that the journey towards the artefact begins from Nalanda. From there, it was your team which made all of it happen. You people discovered the rest of the path for me. I USED YOU, you RETARDS! I had the information, but didn't have the expertise. I had the money, but not the manpower. I couldn't have gotten all those permissions, those clearances to search the areas. Moreover, my injury restricts me from carrying out heavy physical activity- so I decided to entrust the job to your people. You gave me the best of your commandos, your best crypto analyst- all of them were indirectly working for me. And now speaking of the job, tell me- Where is my artefact?" asked Ayaaz, looking at his watch. It was ten minutes past eight and the morning sun now shined brightly over the airstrip.

Ajay knew that his act for stalling time was over. He carefully chose his words attempted to stall for more time, "My team is working on that. But why are YOU

so interested in that particular artefact?"

"Don't you think I understand what you are trying to do? Enough of games and stalling for time. I need my artefact RIGHT NOW," Ayaaz screamed, banging his palm on the wheelchair.

David had double-checked with Ranjeet and his HQ that the missile situation was now completely under control. He was going for an all out assault and needed to confirm that all the threats had been neutralized.

"That bastard deserves a spiteful death, Commander. Make sure he gets one," Capt. Pratap added as he disconnected the call. Just as he ran out of words to keep the psychopath in front of him occupied, Ajaysingh heard Commander David's voice on his earpiece.

"Sir! We have secured the Wheeler Island facility. The missile is no longer a threat now."

"Are you sure? Have you checked..." asked Ajay doubtfully. He had hardly expected the tables to turn.

"Yes, Sir. Double checked it. We are going to take down that bastard," said David determinedly.

"NO," said Ajay, loud enough for Ayaaz to hear it. "You stand down. This was something I should have done years ago," he said it slowly- taking his time to withdraw the concealed weapon.

"But I am going to finish that job today," Ajaysingh said as he levelled his pistol at Ayaaz.

The sly grin on Ayaaz's face had disappeared. "What... What is the meaning of this, Ajay?" Ayaaz stammered as he spoke. There was a fear on his face.

"The game is up, you bastard," Ajay replied, looking in the eyes of his enemy.

"What? No! What are you talking about? You kill me and the missile gets launched," Ayaaz replied. His hands were trembling.

"The Black Cats have taken care of it. Wheeler Island facility has been secured-" Ajay did not complete his sentence. He stopped midway when he observed a sudden change in Ayaaz's expression. The expression of fear and dread had drained off. The big sinister smile was back again.

"You don't think I already know that," Ayaaz said, pointing his finger towards the tablet he had concealed beside his thighs. "You really think that someone like me wouldn't come prepared if something goes wrong? I told you it took months to plan this game and I took every measure to ensure that I won't lose," he said with an acute confidence in his voice. All the stammering had just evaporated into thin air.

David pressed his earpiece against his ears tightly. He tried to hear the conversation with utmost attention.

"I still have a card left to play Mr.Ajaysingh. Believe me- if you pull that trigger and shoot me here, another trigger would be pulled somewhere at your lovely daughter." Ayaaz completed his statement with a chuckle.

The words sent a chill down Ajay's spine. The mention of his daughter, Shonali, made him shiver. David knew it was not the time to hold back now. He signalled his three commandos to advance towards the airstrip along with him from all the directions. Ayaaz whistled calmly as he watched himself being surrounded by Black Cat commandos.

"Greetings, Commander David. Pleasure meeting you," he said to David, smugly.

"Shut up, you maniac. You are bluffing. Miss Shonali is perfectly fine and safe in the company of my team. I had a chat with our man, Sameer, just a few minutes ago," said David, keeping his rifle levelled at the psychopath.

"Did you? Try contacting him again. Chances are your men would be dead by now!"

"Sir, He has to be bluffing. My team has eliminated all of the terrorist threats. I don't think that your daughter is under any kind of threat, especially when my team is with her." David tried to assure Ajaysingh.

"Yeah. You are not wrong. Your team has indeed eliminated all the terrorists. But you forgot one important person. I had my nine soldiers- The Nine Unknown. Let us do a headcount of my soldiers whom your team eliminated. Azar, Hasib, Razak, Abbaz, Irfan, Sohail, Parvez and my favourite - Muhammed. That makes eight of them. The ninth unknown was my most powerful weapon. The one who has been making you dance on his fingers all along..."

Meanwhile, at Sarnath....

Shonali was being dragged amongst the fallen dead bodies of the Black Cat

commandos with a gun pointed at her head. She tried to resist hard, but could not outmatch the strength of the assailant. She could feel the pool of blood under her feet as she was being dragged towards the entrance of the museum. An injured Black Cat commando, lying on the ground, tried to get hold of the assailant's legs as he passed by. Raghav kicked him away and shot two bullets right in his head.

Chapter 81

March 2006,

Dharmarajika Stupa,

Taxila, Pakistan.

"Are you sure you want to pursue the search for the object?" asked the same monk who had inspired Ayaaz on the first day.

"Yes, I do. Didn't I tell you that I figured out the pattern in those manuscripts? They were buried here for a reason. Now that I know that this path leads to that artefact, I just can't stop myself from exploring further," answered Ayaaz, beaming with excitement. The monks had never seen him so excited ever since the time he had taken refuge in the monastery. He had been offered a desk job by his I.S.I contemporaries, but Ayaaz had respectfully denied it. After getting over his dejection and accepting the fact that he was permanently disabled for life, he had slowly developed a unique interest in the Buddhist scriptures. In the coming years, he had mastered Pali and Sanskrit, and had studied almost every important Buddhist scripture.

By the time he had spent three years in the monastery, he was reading for 14 hours straight. The more he explored, the more knowledge he obtained. He realised the versions of the truth and the different paths one can take to achieve the state of 'nirvana'. His respect for the enlightened one grew with every scripture he read.

"There is no pattern, son. It's just in your head. These stories, these writings were meant to enlighten people - to make them aware of the truth. They were written in a simple way so that everyone could follow the teachings of Buddhism. How could there be anything hidden in these scriptures?" the monk said.

"It was made simple so that no one would suspect anything hidden in it. They have hidden it in plain sight for all these years. I am not saying that it is true. But there is a slight possibility and I am not going to ignore it. I need to find those nine books." Ayaaz was determined. It was a reincarnated passion burning within him. After so many years, the push to go after something was reborn. He was welcoming the old Ayaaz back. It was a new dream he had seen all these years and now he was going to follow it.

"The nine books?" the monk asked, baffled by Ayaaz's sudden change in attitude.

"Very little information on these nine books hidden by King Ashoka is available today. But there are a few manuscripts which narrate some episodes from Ashokan times suggesting the existence of these books."

"And why is it so important for you to find them, Ayaaz?" The monk replied back with a questioning look on his face.

"I have to achieve what they had achieved. I need the respect which they had earned. I want to live as long as they did. After all these years, I finally found a purpose to my life. I found a goal to achieve and no one will take it away from me now," said Ayaaz with a tinge of insanity sparkling in his eyes. The monk knew nothing of the people Ayaaz was referring to. But he knew this- there was no stopping this man.

Chapter 82

For four continuous years, Ayaaz gathered all the manuscripts he could under one roof. Studying them and connecting the dots had become his obsession. He had taken up the job offered to him by I.S.I to finance his expeditions to find the books. He established contacts with other intelligence agencies and some operational terrorist organisations in India in the meantime. Using the available manpower and the money coming in from the research and the I.S.I, he had managed to secure four of the nine books from various parts of South East Asia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Nepal.

"So did you figure out the pattern in the books?" The monk casually asked Ayaaz after he had returned from his routine trip to Peshawar one day. His trips to Peshawar had been more frequent in the recent days owing to his involvement in the nuclear research.

"The more I dig into it, the deeper it draws me into the abyss. There are supposed to be nine of these books which hide a passage leading towards something buried away all these years. I don't know what that artefact exactly is, but I am going to find it." The same ruthless determination sparkled in Ayaaz's eyes that moment.

"This is madness, Ayaaz. You are going after something which may not be of any significance. All of this has to stop. Now!" the monk replied in a stern voice. Ayaaz had never heard any monk talk to someone in that tone.

"How can it not be significant? They were deemed learned and were highly respected. They live in our memories even today - all because they obtained that artefact!"

"And who are these people you keep talking about? These learned, respected people?" The monk finally asked the question he had been meaning to ask for a long time.

"The people who discovered the secret hidden in that artefact! Lord Buddha's disciples, Sariputra, Samraat Ashoka and many more. These are the men history remembers and I am going to be one of them. I want to know what set these people apart from the others, what made them great! There are traces about the artefact all over the manuscripts. I have also found out where the path originates. It may be madness, but I am not going to stop it and neither are you." Ayaaz

calmly challenged the monk's statement. That day, Ayaaz left the monastery with all his belongings and was never seen again.

Chapter 83

David was in a state of absolute shock. That name which Ayaaz had spat out, shook him to the very core- Raghav. How could he have missed it? He was the only NSG commando not in his team who had been following them everywhere all night. The perfect traitor to plant the calling device at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, to plant the bombs on the chandelier, to place the tape in the Ashoka Hall and to monitor their activities all along. He must have got enough help from the nine terrorists to arrange for all those mishaps. David needed to check with his team. He needed to warn them.

"Sameer, come in. This is David..." David anxiously spoke on his radio.

There was nothing but a static coming from the other end.

"Sameer? Shonali?" David burst out in anxiety. Every passing second he prayed that Ayaaz was wrong. He tried radioing each and every member of his team. But there was no reply. David had almost given up trying when he heard the radio crackle.

It was Raghav's voice.

"Stop calling out the dead, David. They aren't going to answer. They are all lying right at my feet like a heap of crap," Raghav spoke bluntly.

"You bastard," screamed David with inexorable wrath. David's hands were trembling in anger. His finger itched to pull the trigger on the fanatic lying in a wheelchair in front of him.

"You can save all the swearing for later, but I have to speak some important business with your honourable President. So just pass him the goddamn radio," said Raghav with a chuckle.

The confidence in Raghav's voice stunned David completely. He silently passed on the radio to Ajaysingh. Taking the radio, the President took a moment to pull himself together before speaking into the microphone.

"Ajaysingh Chauhan here," he said, trying to keep his voice audible.

"You sound tired, Mr. President. Let me put an end to your suffering. Until now you were running around to save the lives of people of your nation. But now- it

just became personal. You have our leader and I have your daughter. I suppose you want your daughter alive, so don't try to pull any tricks here. I will contact you again with the details of the location for exchange. But remember this, if anything happens to my man in wheelchair- I won't kill your daughter. I will put her through so much pain that you will beg me to kill her." Raghav's ghostly voice went off the radio.

David watched Ajaysingh going down on his knees. David put his gun aside and dashed to hold the President from falling on the ground.

"Just get me a glass of water." Ajaysingh spoke in an almost inaudible tone. David signalled his subordinate to immediately get some water. Ayaaz smiled as he watched Ajaysingh get back up on his feet.

"You asked me why that artefact was so important to me. I'll tell you an account I read in one of those nine books. After the battle of Kalinga, Samraat Ashoka also went down on his knees observing the massacre around him, just as you did a while ago. But do you think he was looking at the pile of dead bodies for the first time? Didn't he wage wars before? Didn't he see people die earlier? Then what melted his heart so much that he gave up his dear endeavour of capturing other kingdoms and embraced Buddhism? The truth is, it was during this period that he acquired an artefact. That artefact inspired such a change in him that he became the great emperor we know him as today. That was the power of this artefact. I have to achieve what he had achieved. I need to learn what he had learned. And your lovely daughter did a wonderful job of locating that artefact for me. So what will it be, Ajay? Do you hate me more than you love your daughter? You should have never involved her in this. It is your fault that she has to face all this brutality... your fault Ajay," Ayaaz spat out.

"Get this bastard out of my sight right. NOW." David signalled to his commandos. But those words had hit Ajay's conscience like a spear and a cloud of guilt slowly started to engulf Ajay.

Yes, it was my decision to get Shonali involved and now she is just facing the consequences of my actions. I must get her out of the danger.

But the other side of his brain simply refused to accept the decision. Sitting right in front of him was a dangerous terrorist who had almost succeeded in capturing a weapon of mass destruction.

He is responsible for the deaths of so many of my people in the last 24 hours. He needs to pay for what he has done. I can't let this bastard go. Again.

Ajay was battling against his own thoughts when a commando came rushing towards David.

"Sir, we have someone on the alternate emergency frequency who says that he needs to talk to you. I told him you were busy, but he said it was of utmost importance and that he would only be talking to you," whispered the commando in a haste.

David tuned to the alternate emergency frequency on his radio.

"David here."

"This is XM-0101 sir." The reply was absurd for the rest of the soldiers, but it was different for David. He could not believe his ears.

"Repeat again. Who is it?" David asked to confirm.

"This is XM-0101, Sir. I just heard what happened at Sarnath on the radio. I decided not to trust anyone else but you. XM-0203 is here with me. Awaiting further orders, Sir," the reply was confident.

"Hold on," said David. His face lit up knowing that two members of his team were still alive.

David hurriedly walked to Ajaysingh and told him the news.

"Sir, I was just contacted by one of my team members from Sarnath-"

"But they were all dead," Ajay interrupted.

"No, Sir. The pilot of the airplane that took my team and Shonali from Aurangabad to Sarnath is still alive. He is with Sgt. Harish and contacted me under his code name on an alternate emergency frequency. He is at Lal Bahadur Shastri airbase at Babatpur and if I had to guess- that's where Raghav would be heading right now."

"So what do you mean to say? Your soldiers can still get Shonali out of danger?" asked Ajay with a revived hope in his tone.

"Technically speaking- We only have one soldier. The other one is just a pilot. But I think we still stand a chance. Sgt. Harish is a phantom commando and my best sniper. They can get some help from the airport security," David replied.

"Get your soldier on the radio for me, please. I need to talk to him." Ajaysingh's voice had taken a sharp tone. He no longer looked weak. Something very

different was going on in his mind.

David turned on his radio and handed it to the President.

"Sgt. Harish? This is Ajaysingh Chauhan."

"Sir."

"I need to know for sure if you can stop that traitor and bring me back my daughter safely."

"I suppose we can, Sir."

"My daughter's life hangs in a balance there. I don't need what you 'suppose'. I need your assurance."

"Sir, we will try our best," replied Harish.

"Alright. Go ahead," said Ajaysingh, exhaling a deep breath.

Ajaysingh Chauhan passed back the radio to David as he walked towards Ayaaz who had been escorted to a far corner of the airstrip. David accompanied him suggesting the plan of action.

"We can only hope that Harish does his job. But if the things go wrong, we can still have that exchange. I think it's best for us to wait until-" But David's words were falling on deaf ears.

Ajaysing was no longer listening to anyone. His feet took him faster and faster. His mind projected him memories- his daughter: Shonali, the Pokharan project, his friend Jacob, the dead bodies of all the soldiers killed in the blasts. His fears tried to hold him back, but his mind was set. The soldiers around him had no idea what he was going to do next.

He stopped in front of Ayaaz. There was a light smile on Ayaaz's face and a stern determination on Ajay's. Ajay looked in the eyes of his enemy for a moment. David was still narrating Ajaysingh the plan of action when he saw the President slowly pull out the firearm he had been given for safety. Ajay withdrew the weapon and aimed it at Ayaaz. There was a moment of hesitation as memories of Shonali flashed in his mind again- his mind telling him to stand down, telling him to withdraw. But a split second later, the fire was back in his eyes. Before anyone could react, Ajay emptied the entire magazine of the pistol on Ayaaz's face.

"I have done what was needed to be done. I hope Sgt. Harish does too," said Ajay as he handed over the pistol to David and walked away with tears in his eyes.

Chapter 84

Lal Bahadur Shastri airport,

Babatpur, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Co-ordinates: 25°27'08"N 082°51'34"E

Time - 9:00 am

"I need a chopper from the nearest airport to the airstrip in Delhi, where our leader is being held. I hope that he is in a good condition or else nothing will stop me from putting a bullet in your daughter's head. I will give the further instructions there." Sgt Harish was listening to Raghav barking orders at David on his radio.

"We will have your helicopter arranged at Babatpur airport. Please bring no harm to Shonali," David replied in a helpless tone.

Give the enemy a feeling that he has the upper hand, let him slacken his defences and then strike when he is off his guard. Good going commander, Harish thought as he switched off his radio and turned towards his 'team'.

His team consisted of six airport security officers, the pilot and an airport maintenance guy. Harish had explained them everything and he hoped that they would play their parts well. He just had one shot to get Raghav.

About ten minutes later, a silver SUV came in sight of Harish's scope. In the rising dust, he could faintly see Raghav driving and Shonali gagged and tied to the seat next to him. He put his finger on the trigger and waited as the car slowly approached the airport gates. Raghav was very careful to check for any ambushes or surprise attempts to kill him. The airport security guards did just as they were instructed by Harish. As soon as they saw the vehicle approaching, they raised their weapons high up for Raghav to see and instantly put them on the ground.

Give the enemy a feeling that he has the upper hand. Check.

After Raghav entered into the airport premises, he did not stop until he was on the airstrip. He took his time to survey the area and then got out of the car with Shonali at his gunpoint. The pilot approached Raghav slowly with both his hands in the air. Raghav, not wasting a single moment, immediately signalled the

pilot to get on the wheel while he himself got in the rear seat of the vehicle along with Shonali.

"Drive to the chopper. Fast," ordered Raghav.

"It is at the helipad. We were about to fuel it up," replied the pilot, sounding frightened.

"Take me to it now!" roared Raghav, pointing another pistol at the pilot.

The pilot cruised on the runway towards the helipad giving a quick glance at the terrace of the control tower. Harish knew that he wouldn't get a clear shot so easily. Raghav, being a commando himself, was precisely trained for protecting himself. Every passing moment Harish prayed that the maintenance guy, Raja, had done his job by now. When he planned the attack, Harish had realised that Raghav would be too unpredictable. Raghav probably knew all the tricks in his book. The only exact position of Raghav that Harish could possibly predict was the rear seat in the helicopter.

Raja nodded slowly to the pilot just as Raghav was climbing in the chopper along with Shonali to indicate that the job had been done. The pilot heaved with a sigh of relief and got inside the chopper for the ride. He fired up the engines and gave a thumbs up to Raghav indicating that they were ready to go. So far things were going according to Raghav's instructions. He lowered the gun he had aimed on the pilot.

Let him slacken his defences. Check.

Harish saw the thumbs up given by the pilot. It was a signal to let him know that everything was in order. It was his turn now to play the cards right. The pilot slowly lifted the chopper off the ground and headed towards the airport control tower. From the terrace of the control tower building, Harish had already calibrated his scope according to the wind. He had instructed Raja to replace the side glasses of the window seats with low quality glass which would allow his bullet to penetrate easily and deflect less. As they approached the control tower, the pilot made a slow turn sideways so that Raghav's window side was exposed to Harish. Raghav was too occupied to notice the well hidden sniper on the terrace of the control tower. The pilot tried to curve the chopper slowly giving Harish just enough time to execute his shot. There was no mistake made: the bullet rushed out of the barrel of the gun, impacted on the rear window, tore through it and pierced right into Raghav's skull- blasting a pool of blood on Shonali's face.

That was the end of Ayaaz's Nine Unknown Men.

Epilogue

And so two months later you gather the courage to ask me out for a coffee?

Shonali replied to Ranjeet's text.

Well, it's not a date actually. I just wanted to know about the events that happened after...

Rajneet was about to finish typing his reply when he received another text from Shonali.

And now you are going to say that you are just curious about the stuff that happened after that night- as if I don't know that Commander David already gave you a detailed update about that. So if you are asking a girl out for a date, at least have the guts to accept it.

Shonali had attached a devilish smiley at the end of her text.

"What does this girl really think about me?" The ancestral question popped up in Ranjeet's mind.

Alright. I accept it. I wanted to take you out on a date since the day I met you. So if you are not in the middle of your 'running behind artefacts' thing. Could we meet- say tomorrow?

Ranjeet spiced up his text by sending a winking smiley. He waited for the delivery report and prayed. Almost half an hour past before he got any reply from Shonali. The reply was short-

Tomorrow afternoon. CCD? :-)

The next day, Ranjeet reached the decided meeting spot ten minutes early thinking of topics to converse on. He was about to complete his list of topics when Shonali walked up to his table and gave him a little smile. It was her striking beauty that made Ranjeet drop his jaw almost instantly. Ranjeet simply could not take his eyes off her purple kurti, the pretty small pink bindi on her head and her beautiful eyelashes.

"Stop staring at me like that. Makes you look bad," said Shonali as she signalled the attendant to bring the menu.

"Actually- you should stop looking so stunning," replied Ranjeet. Shonali giggled at the compliment.

"So you were saying you wanted to know what happened after that night?" asked Shonali while turning between the pages of the menu.

"Yes, actually wanted to know everything about what happened that night. What did you find at Sarnath?"

"We found a recreated version of Lord Buddha's memoirs. Something he wrote after he experienced enlightenment," Shonali explained.

"Such kind of document existed? I mean, if it existed, why wasn't it mentioned in any ancient manuscripts and why was it kept hidden?" asked Ranjeet.

"Originally the memoir was passed down the order of monks for centuries. They wanted to keep the secret of enlightenment hidden until the time was right for it to be exposed to the world. Many of such important documents had been lost or destroyed owing the invasions from the west. Hence, they kept it converting from one form to another keeping the core teachings intact. But eventually, it was lost in time. It reappeared rather mysteriously in King Ashoka's court. Ashoka then began his efforts to spread Buddhism far and wide. He introduced his scholars to the memoirs of Lord Buddha and asked them to base their teachings on the direct experiences and knowledge shared by Lord Buddha. However, he decided to keep this artefact hidden to preserve its sanctity. He ordered the object to be hidden and left a trail so that one seeking true enlightenment may find it. The details about the beginning of the trail were hidden in the nine books assigned to his Nine Unknown Men whom King Ashoka had chosen," said Shonali.

"And that is how the psychopath came to know about the trail?" Ranjeet was suddenly absorbed in the conversation.

"I think so. Dad said that Shashank- or whatever his true name was, had found a new spark, a new desire to search for ancient artefacts. He had found two of the nine books hidden by the Nine Unknown in the ruins of Ras Koh hills during the nuclear operation. They were recovered from his residence in Peshawar last month. How he obtained the other two books is still a mystery. He was a psychopath, but also a genius. He figured out most of the hidden clues all by himself-"

"And then planned a magnificent operation and used us and our resources to get

him the object he desired." Ranjeet completed Shonali's statement. "But was doing all this just for a simple scroll really worth it?"

"Maybe Shashank had expected something else at the end. He was a psychopath- attached to finding the artefact, following his unrealistic passion wildly. He didn't need a valid reason to go mad after finding it. Although there is a lot more to that 'simple scroll' than it meets to the eye," said Shonali, sipping her coffee.

Ranjeet realised for a brief moment that he had not even ordered anything. But he didn't care about it anymore. He was interested to know the contents of the scroll. "So what was written on the scroll?" he asked.

Shonali took out her phone and showed Ranjeet an image of the scroll.

"I started to study about the contents of the scroll since then. I borrowed that artefact for a couple of days for my research. There was no code it in, no hidden clues or such. It was the truth in plain sight." She then explained the translation of the script on the scroll.

"*What this is, that is; this arising, that arises.* Quite confusing," commented Ranjeet.

"It is the law of cause and effect. I investigated into some Buddhist manuscripts such as *Samyuktagama* to understand the deeper meaning of the transcript on the scroll. The concept of emptiness is the unique aspect about Buddhism. There was a great change in Indian thought and ideology around Buddha's time. Although the cycle of life and death, and the attainment of liberation in Nirvana were theories accepted by the Indian society at that time, there were still many questions about why there was a rebirth and how one could be liberated. Gautama Buddha then introduced the 'Middle Path'. He explained the process of human activity by the law of dependent origination and showed the way to uplift oneself by the noble eightfold path," said Shonali between her sips of the cold coffee.

"I know a little about the noble path- the righteous way to live. But what's this law of dependent origination?"

"People always try to find a way to end their sufferings. How does human suffering happen? Gautama Buddha said that it is not something that happens without any cause. All things exist in accordance with the law of cause and effect. When there is a cause, there will be an effect. When causes exist, effects exist. The rising and existence of things are determined by the causes and conditions. This is why the Buddha says- what this is (cause), that is (effect); this

arising, that arises . When a cause arises, an effect also arises. This is the circulation process of the law of dependent origination. It explains the creation, cessation and existence of the worldly phenomenon," explained Shonali.

"Okay. But what does it have to do with emptiness?" asked Ranjeet.

"The ultimate truth of emptiness was drawn from the empty nature of the law of dependent origination.

'If we can see the truth
of the causes of worldly sufferings,
we will not be attached to the view of nothingness.
If we can see the truth of cessation in the world,
we will not be attached to worldly existence.
By avoiding the two extremes,
the Tathagatha teaches us the Middle path.'

It is a verse from Chapter 12 of the Samyuktagama. When the cause ceases to exist, the effect will cease along with it. The Dharma is said to be alive. It can exist or cease, rise or fall. If it is something real that has a permanent identity, then it should not cease and become extinct. If it is nothing, then it should not rise and exist. The Dharma rises and ceases, it can exist and become extinct. If we investigate the core of all things, we will realise that everything is conditioned. Things have no permanent identity, existence, extinction, rise or fall. Their nature is empty and silent. The Buddha explained that all things are impermanent and in constant change. Emptiness also implies Nirvana, that is renunciation of the misrepresented view of permanency and ego, leading to the realisation of liberation.

'One who thinks of impermanence
will understand the truth of ego-lessness.
The Enlightened One
lives in the state of ego-lessness,
renounces attachment to the empty worldly phenomenon ,
and hence progresses towards liberation and Nirvana.'
This is another verse from Samyuktagama, Chapter 10," said Shonali.

"Interesting theories. Each one of them. I hope it brings about some change in the ideology of people when they learn about the contents of the scroll. Is it going on public display?" asked Ranjeet.

"I think so. Dad said that the blasts and all the chaos that happened was

successfully covered up without giving the media much details about what actually had happened. The scroll was told to be a recent archaeological finding," said Shonali, finishing up her coffee.

"By the way- you have a poor choice of topic to converse for a date," she added mischievously.

"I had a complete list of topics prepared. But your striking looks made me forget all about it. Maybe we can try it again. I deserve a second chance," said Ranjeet.

"I can't stop looking stunning, but I think we can go for a second date. How about a movie this weekend?"

Ranjeet nodded with a smile. "I think I am beginning to understand the law of dependent origination. That chaotic night was the cause. This date of ours is the effect."

The End

****

A Note from the Author

Thanks for reading Operation Chaos. I hope you enjoyed it. I have tried to be accurate in the physical description of the locations in the story, most of which I have been to in person. I'm a travel junkie and particularly love places of cultural significance.

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Thank you!

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