

# ST ADON

*Ajay Goyal*



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New Delhi • London

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India | U.K.

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ISBN: 978-93-7018-144-1

First Edition: April 2025

To my parents Srimati kamla and Sri Nand Kishor



## One

Shengxiao announced it to be the year of the Dragon, the fifth sign among the twelve animals appearing in the Chinese zodiac. Bleeding heart, the Dragon's favourite tropical flower, had sprung up everywhere, arresting the attention of unassuming guests with its crimson petals shooting forth from a white foundation. Charge'd'affair appeared astrologically savvy in flooding the entire expedition ship with these flowers. Dangling through arching stems on thick green foliage, crimson, and white, the lady in the bath shone brightly. Wishing to consume its aroma, Byat came close to one of these flowers only to be rebuffed by its inodorous, ravishing spread. The expedition ship was colourfully decorated with frills and flowers everywhere, along with hanging balloons in pastel colours encapsulating not secretly sweets meant for the gentry and their children at the end of the ceremony. Byat, a Mongolian Traveler, was on his way to India. His immediate stop-off in Hong Kong so far had been mixed up. Boom, Boom, Boom, I want you in my room, a popular song was being played loud with the band's visuals on a vast life-size screen in the open area. In front of the screen, seating arrangements in progress were in the final stages. Next, Cantopop played loud during sound system testing by the technician, who shook his head merrily. Guests had not come out yet. Byat took a stroll on the jazzy expedition ship large enough to be a big boat, hardly a ship.

The Sun had made quick strides towards a hot and clammy evening. A strong wind through the sea dug him back as he read the warning at the corner of the overarching fence, "No monkey business here." He looked

down at the receding ocean, remembering how, an hour ago, the city of Hong Kong stood majestically before him. Sumo, the breezy expedition ship named after the hotel he checked in in Hong Kong, had slowed down; earlier, it gave you the experience of being in mid-air as it zoomed into the high seas. The sight beyond himself made Byat self-conscious, conscious of an unwittingly vast and agreeable world. The Sun had now set behind him, and a cool breeze rejuvenated him despite the haunting musings his flame brought him a night before at his hotel. Cool Breeze continued to nudge him coaxingly, heralding the new year's arrival.

As against the first option which took the guests on a city tour followed by a light show at night, he opted for the second option, which brought him to party on the high seas in the expedition ship.

Music and drums echoed over the ship in the benign presence of the spruced-up guests, who slowly started showing themselves. They started occupying about thirty to thirty-five chairs in the open air. Having rested and wearing sensual perfumes, they were ready for New Year's Eve. The service boys started serving drinks and snacks in abundance without delay amidst the rejoicing crowd's choice of songs and music.

It was part of the plan to hold a fashion show limited to the fair sex on the ship. A big-bosomed Chinese woman sitting on a high chair hungrily eyed the handful of women available and wishing to be shortlisted.

Without adhering to any real qualification, she quickly counted and confirmed seven young females, keeping with the spirit of the ongoing festivity. The show was divided into clothes and apparel, signifying nationalities in one part and swimwear in the other. The latter's announcement made some blush, some boo, and some excitedly welcomed it from the bottom of their heart, now mellowed by pouring

spirits. The Chinese organizer boomed back to the section of the crowd announcing that she would participate in this category if none showed up. Once it started, a reveller loudly announced to send his wife for the pageant." Don't you worry, Mam, there will be plenty to participate as the time passes, and we shall keep our eyes open till the very end, we promise."

Byat gulped a few drinks quickly, wishing to be part of the festive atmosphere soonest. Tapping his feet to the music now playing, Zorba the Greek, he wondered how music could be so intoxicating. Stars had come up in the distant Sky with the half-moon dimly lighting the ship against the profusion of halogen lamps.

Beckoning him over to herself with a handwave, Aurora called out and came to meet Byat with visible excitement, shaking hands with him with a soft peck on his cheek.

"Hey you, oh, no you can't be real, am I dreaming, you are the last person on earth I could expect here on this ship tonight," Byat said.

"Well, I have already seen the city enough so I thought of coming here for a change. I am delighted to see you here, so how is everything?" Aurora asked him.

"Fine and great, ready to be part of what follows here at the party. Aren't you interested in the pageant for the women our lady just announced?"

"Oh, yes I would be interested, let us meet her and see what she is up to."

"I don't see your companion I met last night at the hotel.

"Oh, he developed a medical condition. He has a history of liver malfunctions, God bless him, my boss. He is going back and I need now to complete the rest of the tour. Let's see how I would fare. I need to cover a large part of Asia. Let's see," Aurora replied.

The Chinese woman looking less burdened had a beaming face on coming to learn that Aurora was participating in the show, who she thought to be a sure winner. Aurora radiated warmth in her smile, being incredibly charming and gorgeous. Her radiant black eyes revealed a stunning, wholesome, fascinating, fearless woman.

"Mam, I would need a cowboy hat for my show. Will it be available I hope?" She asked the Chinese woman. "Yes, yes there are plenty of hats at the back, even dresses if you like, " The Chinese woman answered.

"Our lady from?"

"U.S.," Aurora answered.

"Good, you are welcome here, let's start, and please go backstage."

Aurora then waved at Byat and the Chinese woman as she left. She went to meet the other participants, getting ready.

A pleasant evening had commenced, and Byat thought he had to get high to witness the rest. Byat saw a handful of the participants hurriedly moving from the public gaze to backstage. The Titanic theme song was being played, followed again by the dance sequence of Zorba the Greek. It was nice. It was getting nicer. Much of the crowd was slowly getting drunk, speaking loudly and dancing in private groups. Uproarious laughter and heated arguments punctuated routine announcements made by the organizers. Out of the various tables across which people had huddled together, one where Byat sat also sat a man of Chinese origin, about sixty, with a sombre expression watching his surroundings with little interest. He had a glass of beer and some nuts in front of him. Yet he, quietly, resignedly, looked away through the skies with a vacant stare. He appeared to be in the midst of some prayer inwardly. Some glances prompted Byat to exchange pleasantries with him. Still, the other man



looked away and through him, occasionally lowering his head within his shawl, bracketing out his world. Byat found it a little weird and left the place to get cigarettes. He nodded and left without realizing that the other man had nodded back to him. Wu, a contemplative eastern man with sunken eyes and an emaciated face, now wore a playful smile. He appeared to be a master of some domain. Soon, Byat was back and found Wu friendly and receptive.

"I am Wu, how do you do? I am sorry I could not respond to you earlier as I was in meditation, a long one today on this new year," Wu said.

"I sensed it so; I thought you were in prayer so I chose not to speak to you then."

"No worries, it is like every year, I wanted to have a glimpse of the Lord Buddha. They say he can be seen and heard from his magnificent treasure tower now eternally suspended in space at the ceremony of air."

"Great, did you get any message," Byat questioned Wu.

"No, not yet. It is a rarity, however, the evening is still at large before me, and I never lost my hope in all the years," Wu answered.

Growing anxious, even fearful, Byat had a dumb expression full of incomprehension and asked him, "Sir, you mean a world other than ours. Can I touch you, Sir"?

Byat hurriedly shook hands with Wu and sighed in relief at learning that he had not met a ghost. He grew excited with gulps of Liquor and offered his drinks to Wu, who willingly accepted them. Byat asked him who he was and how he came about there.

"I work in a hair salon in Hong Kong and this is a moment of freedom for me to get away from my monotonous work. This evening, I don't wish to

lose the opportunity to represent my country here in the first part of the competition," Wu said.

"Well, I think since it is all female-centric it may be hard to do, however, I could ask one of the participants here, an acquaintance, who probably may help you, let me see," Byat responded.

"Well, it would be fun if I could show them my chosen-ot here," Wu said.

"So, this is what you call chosen-ot , you are wearing today. Which country please?"

"Korea, the north of it," Wu answered.

"So how are you in Hong Kong?" Byat asked.

"Well, a long story, you will get to know as the evening rolls on,"

"Alright, meanwhile, let me speak to Aurora, the American lady here, about you and your wish. Let's see what she says," Byat got up and strolled through the party area to meet Aurora backstage.

Knocking the makeshift entrance backstage, he asked for Aurora. She came out, smiling at his hammered expression, finding her dressed up provocatively, wearing a black nightgown below a cowboy hat.

"Hi, so is this your National dress?" Byat asked her.

"Well, as we don't have a national dress, any dress is our national dress, thank you."

"Great, well I have come here to ask you a favor."

"Alright, tell me."

"Well, I just met a Korean who sits by my table right now. He wants to be part of the fashion show, he wants to show his national dress to the crowd here."

"Well, Ok, let me see what we can do for him. Well, I think we can smuggle him in at the end of the pageant when he can accompany me as

my manager. I think it will work fine. Let me know where the gentleman is?" Aurora asked Byat.

Pointing her towards Wu's table, they saw him sitting and drinking his beer and munching nuts.

"You mean that tall and thin man wearing the overall blue garment with stripes on it," Aurora said.

"Surely, yes, but I have a few other things to tell you about him which I found a little weird," Byat confessed.

"Well, that calls for a drink, can you get me one, let us go over to the fence area," Aurora said excitedly.

"Surely I will join you there in a moment," Byat left hurriedly.

He quickly returned to the fenced area with two glasses after assuring Wu that his wish had been fulfilled.

"So, what is it you wanted to tell me about him?" Aurora asked Byat.

"Well, I also follow Buddhism yet what he told me about it is quite unheard of. He claims that he may hear from the Buddha today and his advice for the new year in some ceremony in the air that is happening this very hour at a treasure tower suspended somewhere above," Byat answered.

"Oh, that is interesting," Aurora quipped.

"But he is not a Saint or a mystic, he works here in Hong Kong at a hair salon."

"Even more interesting. Hope we get to know him better tonight."

"Well, let's see what we make out of it. Oh, but, let me compliment you; you look fabulous today," Byat said.

"Thanks a lot," Aurora giggled.

"Don't you have a National dress in Mongolia?" Aurora asked him.

"Our National costume is like a robe-like dress called deel, much like the dress that you see this Korean wearing today. It's only on special occasions that one wears it otherwise the normal is always the same, the western wear that I think is prevailing the world over."

"Surely it makes sense, definitely more practical," Aurora responded.

"Swimwear surely would do better any day since they have no National boundaries, worn by anyone anywhere without any partisan pride much like the presence of water, air, and space with universal appeal," Byat blurted out without realizing what he meant. Breaking into laughter, Arora remarked, "I am impressed."

A bouquet of merriment, pleasant expectancy, hope, love, and well-being dictated the ongoing moments of the evening as the celebrations were underway, with the crowd eagerly awaiting the fashion show to begin. La Campanella, a composition of Liszt, was playing now, and the two of them started tapping their feet with Aurora leaning against the fence facing Byat. Byat felt the melody piercing his heart lovingly. "Whatever it is, it is heavenly, raising an alarm about some unfinished job for me," He thought.

The two returned to the table, where they found Wu sipping beer.

"This is Wu and she is Aurora," Byat introduced them quickly.

"Well, we have sorted out your wish to wear your National dress tonight. Since you want to be on the stage I think it will happen without much effort." Aurora said.

"Thank you very much lady, I am obliged," Wu answered.

"Well, whatever be our countries and their respective official stands, we are buddies for the evening," Aurora said beamingly.

Backstage, a little tipsy, the Chinese manager chose to begin with the swimwear event first and announced the participants accordingly. Six young females, four locals, and the other two, Aurora and a black woman, implored her to keep it as the climax and cover the next two hours with other events.

"Besides, if you do it now, the event itself is over, and there is still a long time to embrace the new year," Aurora said to the Chinese manager.

"But I want my crowd to be happy and cheerful like never before," she answered in a childlike tone.

"Alright, then put on screen the latest event from Victoria's Secret, real fun, and real frolic," Aurora retorted. Seeing her participants were not ready to do it, the manager ordered the screening of Victoria's Secret, and in no time, she heard the crowd getting cheerful and noisy again.

"Drop dead gorgeous, no, isn't she awesome," Aurora exclaimed.

The last of the fairies, who gave a flying kiss to the crowd with sparkling eyes, was the event's showstopper, who had been a reigning queen of it for a decade.

"Oh, I have been to a fashion show, and the energy generated there with the crowd's hollering was just out of the world," Aurora continued, relaxed, and sipped from her glass with her performance postponed. The guests were cheering away, glued to the big screen. The party was young. Dusk danced everywhere through a moist zephyr with a dim moon in sight. Amidst celebrations, tranquillity arose at the party for everybody. In particular, the tipsy lot appeared relaxed and footloose. Byat, perfectly at peace, rose his head higher to have a panoramic view of the expedition ship and the receding water behind it. A few hours away, the Chinese New Year would unfold. He imagined how it would be if all the guests

got glued to their chairs. The screen in front of them then started showing their utmost intimate secrets one after the other, irrespective of their seasoning, hetero or homo, young or old, black or white, and licit or illicit. Despite them being glued, the big screen will have to pay a massive price before long; Liquor makes one creative, he thought, smiling. An evanescent ingratiating fragrance of the party nudged him intermittently in the pleasant presence of the Americana, raising his spirits even higher. "Would our lady like a smoke?" Byat asked Aurora, offering her and Wu a pack of cigarettes before lightening one himself. Wu took one; the lady declined, a nonsmoker.

"If not personal, I would be interested to know what you guys said about the ceremony in the air," Aurora asked Wu, a little high.

"Well, it's part of my religion; I wonder if you would like to get into it," Wu replied.

"Certainly", Aurora answered, with Byat nodding in affirmation.

"Well, it's a sprightly ceremony supposedly perpetual, appearing anywhere in the world when the mantra, "Nam Myoho Renge Kyo," is chanted with devotion. It goes back to the Lotus Sutra of Buddha, in which a treasure tower at an insurmountable height is manifested through the earth at the eagle peak. Here, the awe of monks and laypeople present in the assembly is converted into a lasting exuberance as Buddha raises the whole assembly in the air opposite the treasure tower. An eternal Buddha within the treasure tower then invites him over to sit beside him. Nichiren, a Japanese monk, canvassed it for the laymen wanting a place beside the Buddha at the treasure tower. Heady, isn't it?" Wu explained.

"Wow, how, fairylike, interesting and out of the world," Aurora said.

"Well, Buddha has a long unfading shadow over us, ever-increasing; let's hope you get to view it tonight," Byat said.

The three sat down at the farthest of the tables, watching the bemused crowd with children running up and down cheerfully. Two tiny Chinese tots broke into a dance close by, with their cheering and laughing mother catching hold of them as and when they fell in their comic movements. Aurora could not resist going up to the almond eyes, clasping them tight, and appreciating their dance wholeheartedly. Seeing a stranger, the boys started crying, struggling to escape her as their mother continued to cheer them joyfully. Getting back to her table, Byat informed Aurora that her phone was continuously buzzing in her absence. She opened her phone and found a message flash urging her to open her system immediately since an emergency had ensued. She hurriedly called back, and the lack of signal did not complete the call. Nodding to the other two men with a sombre expression, she said she wanted to open her laptop immediately. She got up to go. The lights on the cruise went off, with the crowd making involuntary shrieks, leaving them in a cloak of darkness.

"Let me check if the torch goes down," She said. "Yes, let me call this attendant who has been serving us," Byat said. Finding no help nearby, He said, "it may take some time to start temporary lights so let's wait a while." "Wait, I cannot, I need to find some way to go down now and bring my system up here. I have enough battery to do work and see what we are up to," She said.

"Ok, my lighter can lead us down and back here," Byat offered to help. He and Aurora set out to the ground cabin rooms through the festooned area. Byat held high the lighter, helping the two manoeuvre their way down the short staircase. They successfully retrieved the laptop and returned to

their table. Lights had not come by. In a hurry, Aurora switched on her system. The white top of her laptop shone bright as soon as the system started. Byat and Wu stared hard at her until she threw her hands up in dismay, visibly broken to find the laptop not opening with repeated attempts." What, what happened?" Wu asked her. Extending her hand to grab another drink, she tossed a stiff one into her mouth, breathing heavily.

"Well, without meaning to sound negligent and reckless, I am about to announce something pretty gruesome to you; brace yourself, gentlemen. There is something highly confidential I thought I would never divulge to any soul here and keep it to myself. I must tell you this now since time is running away, and I have a moral responsibility to share it. Listen carefully; this could be our last supper. All struts and frets come to an end tonight. The world will soon be divided tonight into two groups, fortunate and unfortunate," She announced boldly.

Unable to comprehend her words, with an incredulous look, Byat quipped, "Is it that the fortunate live on and the unfortunate are dead"?

"No, the other way around," Aurora answered.

Breaking into laughter, Wu asked her, "Are we here the fortunate or the other ones?"

"We are amongst the fortunate, so relax.brother."

"Is it a practical joke or something?" Byat blurted out, sweating. A manual announcement was made by the official of the expedition ship in a hoarse voice, informing that all electronic, power, and battery systems had failed or were failing on the ship. The last message received on the internet was that the neighbourhood had been nuked, and all were doomed.



"Oh, God, keep our neighbours well, we wish them a fast recovery, but let's restore our systems first to see what happened," A young traveller gushed out.

Unaware of any real threat to themselves, the revellers disregarded the announcement and continued with the party in sheer darkness. Soon, by word of mouth, it became apparent that it was no child's play.

Aurora intuitively felt how some moments could be the last moments of one's life as she recalled in a flash her father, who died before her mother of a cardiac arrest while Aurora was away on a mission abroad. Her mother became so introspectively emotional about each tiny detail of how he felt on his deathbed. Her mother recounted to her continuously what he said and what he desired to eat in his last moments. "These doctors know nothing. The last test they took revealed some blockage, but I bet almost every adult my age would have one or the other ailment. Let me have my favorite Choco pie, honey," He said to his wife before breathing his last.

The expedition ship was their small earth, and nobody knew how soon it would throw up. Byat had a shiver down his spine when he thought of the nuclear winter commonly portrayed in documentaries and movies. Wu was looking up greedily to the skies above him, hoping that he may have a glimpse of the treasure tower that night. The three looked at each other, expecting the following announcement. A biting silence had already fallen over the expedition ship as the people had no clues on preparing for such an event. "We cannot connect with the mainland as all the electronic devices have disconnected. It is the new year for us. Should we not celebrate it in the presence of Lord Buddha not very far from here, and our cruise at any decent speed should drop us there in less than an

hour, hopefully before the onset of catastrophe," said one man among the crowd. The revellers approved the action plan by a majority, and it was decided that the ship would now sail down to Lantau Island, where a colossal bronze image of Buddha was set up for his devotees.

"Go, get me a bottle from one of the tables, Byat, as I have a lot more to tell you guys," Aurora remarked slowly.

Byat dutifully got up, tottering. He requested the neighboring table to give him Liquor, and he carried it back to the table.

"Pour me the biggest you have ever put in your life into a glass," Aurora said.

Byat handed her one and gulped a stiff drink himself, almost perspiring, going into a trance to hear the dragon flowers speak to him directly and announcing that their blooming was short-lived, and so was his. The flowers' fancied resemblance to the face of a Dragon that opened and closed its mouth when squeezed was a bad omen: "Who will help us tonight? Spooky tricks of the night just began to seem endless," Byat thought.

"My relation with the world and my relation with myself are two steps to start with and ponder about. These need to be seen clearly before one sees reality. If these moments are the last moments of us then I would urge you to hear Buddha's words of wisdom. He instructed a bark cloth merchant for an instant enlightenment just before his last moments. let me read these words to you if you permit me," Wu said.

"Sure, whatever you like, certainly, the last moments are here any moment," Aurora answered.

Hearing his deep-sounding heartbeat, Byat answered Wu with a deep nod.

Wu read out part of the Bahiya sutta to them :

*"Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed.*

*In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself.*

*When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard, in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress."*

## Two

"Can't hear a serenade, let alone the religious teaching you just recited to us," Byat spoke in immense confusion.

"I would have loved to sit with you and hear it in detail and its true explanation but you know one doesn't know how long or how short is the time now available to us, let me check whether any of my systems can be made to run just to give some news to my folks and I suggest you guys also try, maybe one of us gets through," Aurora quipped.

"Oh no, I thought just to take a chance, a chance I have tried without success for the last twenty years. This teaching, it is said, is one that no one can himself or herself choose, for, it chooses its destination. You need to be absent to be present to it, so they say. There is some magic in it, so I thought, maybe, let me try it with the two of you, perhaps, you could be lucky. Simply hearing it sometimes can have the lock and key effect," Wu said gravely.

"If I die today I would certainly regret not coming to know this part of the world of knowledge you are trying to tell us today, I sincerely wish we had time to discuss and understand it," Aurora said.

Byat frantically attended to his phone to see if any communication was possible with his family. Making no headway, he threw up his hands in frustration. Nothing seemed to move except the expedition ship, which stirred slowly being mortally tired.

"I have a solution perhaps if the two of you would allow me to say it. See, I am working as a journalist in an English daily at Ulan Bator. Recently, I read an article suggesting that it is possible to go back in time although in today's world we have not come across any technique by

which one can be transported into the future, but, past, yes, past is quite possible. Should we not try this course if any of you is aware of it," Byat said fearfully.

"Oh no, it is the other way round, what is almost confirmed now is that it is theoretically possible for us to get into the future but getting back to the past is simply impossible. I have some insight into it as I have been reading these subjects in my leisure time. But this is as much a course of fantasy as the magical teaching of Wu, esoteric, not for the practical applications," Aurora answered.

"Then let Wu help us lift to the treasure tower he just talked about," Byat said.

"You have got me there, what can I say, I am a dabbler despite twenty years in this area," Wu answered.

"Relax now, bros. Let me inform you that I knew it. What is going to happen here, sooner or later, is part of the orchestrated script. I had come here about a week back with my boss looking for unauthorized arms smuggled into this area lately. I am an information system security officer in my organization. Apart from being a nukes activist, I am a remote viewer, a professional one, who can sense and see objects and predict them in high probability from a distance. I had reported these arms first based on some initial inputs. Following our intelligence, it came to be credible information. I am trained in combat and military operations. Yet, I can do nothing tonight to save us. Our estimates misfired about the timing of the fired arms. Soon this inexorable fate would leave us still, no room for succor," Aurora spoke resignedly.

A poignant silence ensued, followed by a heightened state of confusion among them.

"Our toothsome Americana turns out to be a Cassandra," Byat thought. Most guests had gone to their restrooms on the floor below. The expedition ship appeared abandoned with no sign of activity. A pungent odor was smelt in the party area where the leftover food and liquors merrily partied now. Feeling claustrophobic, Byat got up to move around a bit.

"Let me check these tables, maybe some liquor is still lying there," Byat said. "Oh yes, bring it over I truly wish I get drunk tonight," Aurora joined.

"You who presaged this attack, can you not tell us more about it?" Wu asked Aurora.

"The size and scale of this attack are so virulent that the lesser said the better it is. We must take care of the time now to have as much peace as possible.

"Is there no time to reach Lantau Island, barely an hour away," Wu asked her.

"I doubt. Seriously, no pranks, no shenanigans."

Meanwhile, Byat brought a half bottle of liquor and put it on the table.

"Let's drink the source itself without contamination," Byat said.

Sporting a slim frame, a man of medium height, Byat wore denim trousers and a white shirt. A youthful Mongol, he was most distinguishable by the shock of his black hair, now waving sideways as he sat down. In comparison, Wu was a tall, slim, gray-haired man who looked his age. He lived an effortless and fearless life. Wu appeared calm with a wistful expression when anybody would be bricking themselves. He silently resolved to himself that in the worst scenario, it was death; why panic unnecessarily?

"I will always remember the day I accepted the offer to visit India. I wish I had declined it there and then. My wife, Altansarnai, and my daughter, Handa, beseeched me to drop it, but I was determined to travel. And I think it was determined that I get into this quagmire today. Isn't it torture that I can't talk to them now?" Byat said tremulously, now feeling the heat of the moment. He looked fearful and on the verge of madness.

"I think we need something solid to eat as we consumed a lot of liquor tonight. They were preparing a gala dinner. We probably could hunt for somebody back there in the kitchen area, surely someone may help us there," Aurora said, and Wu nodded in agreement.

"No, no, I am not eating anything please, who does it matter here if I evaporated on a full stomach or hungry. Just get me some nuts if possible," Byat said in a tipsy voice.

"Don't drink anymore," Wu admonished Byat with a stern command. The two left Byat, now looking languid and somber, smoking continuously. A quiescent dim moonlight over the Cruise ship now shone Wu and Aurora as silhouettes of airy figures moving away from Byat, holding candles high.

"So the evaporation has started," Byat thought.

"I can't leave the show like a coward; I must find a way out and do something to avoid it. The Americana is too modern and Wu too religious; I must find a middle path," Byat thought, taking a big gulp of drink from his bottle. Besotted, Byat suddenly got up and started walking backward from his spot to the fence. He wished secretly that his steps may bring him back to his past and the company of his wife and daughter. Halfway down, he slipped on his tottering feet, barely managing to save his head from hitting the ground. Due to severe fatigue

and psychological challenges, he soon fell asleep lying on the ground with his face down. He had a mixed bag of reveries boomeranging intermittently between Mongolia and his journey to Hong Kong.

"You have been so busy you have forgotten me completely, Baba," His mama softly whispered.

"Oh, no mama, I did not forget you even for a moment. Being in the city you know the job i do, six days a week and family commitments keep me awfully busy. I wanted you to stay with us in the city but you chose to come here to stay with your brother. But you look bright I must say,"

Byat answered.

Belonging to a family of Kazakh Eagle Hunters in a remote region of the Altai mountains in Bayan Olgii, Western Mongolia, Byat's mother had come back to her father's home after her husband passed away. Having traveled about 1300 kilometers from Ulan Bator to Bayan Olgii for their summer vacation, Byat and his family felt tired. Sound sleep overnight rejuvenated them. Despite summers, the temperature in the region was minus throughout the day. Byat had treasured reminiscences of his childhood when he accompanied his mother here during the summer vacations. His grandfather was a respected eagle hunter in the entire region. He showed his prowess to the little Byat and took him around with a bag of surprises. Snow-clad mountains with their steppes and valleys having scanty vegetation and greenery made this place challenging to live in as a cold desert. Still, generations of these eagle hunters have survived there with exceptional courage. His maternal uncle did not succeed in his family tradition. Instead, he went to the city and took up a job to return home on his retirement.



Byat got up from his bed to greet his mother, who radiated love and warmth in her eyes. Byat found himself transfixed in her all-encompassing gaze. He reacted by making a monosyllabic nod. It had happened countless times before, but a fresh breath of life was doled out to him every time. You may pass it over, but it will never do so.

Another flash came rushing into him of a more recent past when he left Ulan Bator.

Thin Byat winked back at his wife and recalled their talk last night. The talk about India being full of magical remedies helping one to attain Superman-hood. Their faces glistened when Byat drove away in a taxi. Handa had stood by him with a worried expression, hugging him tightly. "Bodhisattva, the Indian version of Buddha, his life and incarnations are my prime concern for studies in India. It would be a great way to start. Despite many rich competing religions in India, Buddha is a de facto summum bonum whose authority and influence are unbeatable. Food, yes, food is my concern, as most Indians are vegetarians, I am told. It is the case of necessity; here, we eat everything we get here; I shall eat what I get there. Besides, our Chengiz Khan and his conquests taught much to Asia. Byat thought, boarding a Chinese aircraft to Beijing, Yellow Dragon.

Smiling at and eying the hostesses who announced the departure, Byat greedily looked around and out of the window a few seats away. After the switching off the seat belt sign, he kept busy with the magazines and newspapers stacked in front of his seat. The hostesses looked resplendent in their short dresses. Byat tried concentrating on the Gobi desert below, which looked scattered in yellow patches with blades of green here and there. However, he realized that nature must wait for those ineffably

lovely women whose company was slipping away fast as the plane to Beijing was approaching its destination. He found the Chinese hostesses slimmer and buoyant than their Mongolian counterparts whom he saw at the Ulan Bator airport. The hostesses took him kindly as instructed in their profession, giving him food and drinks, yet laughed amongst themselves at his gapes. It was his ignorance about the fashionable world that blowed him in his first air trip where everybody shone brightly as one saw on the television and motion pictures. One of the hostesses came and inquired about his travel. The hostess spoke with such ease and friendliness that Byat felt exalted.

"I am a journalist from Ulan Bator . My company sends me to India to study Buddhist texts. I am traveling from Hong Kong to New Delhi. I have a connecting flight from Beijing to Hong Kong soon". Byat replied. "Oh, you have a long journey ahead. I have been to the Indian capital and Bombay many times, great places indeed. Tell me more about what you are going to study. We have such a huge golden statue of Buddha in Hong Kong ruminating in his thoughts," The hostess inquired coaxingly.

"Well, I have to study the various incarnations of Buddha, the bodhisattvas, who postponed their entry into nirvana to help others on earth," Byat answered.

"Delightful, you seem to have great days ahead. Bye for now, since we will land soon," The hostess left, smiling impetuously. The heavy drone of the aircraft became harsher as it took the plunge. Byat looked around greedily to capture the city of Beijing, looking orderly and neat with the bright afternoon sun. Byat, nonplussed, for a moment, saw camellia flowers; a large bed of them came and slipped away before him in a

fraction of a second. He looked around, watching the passengers traveling with him, anxious to move out.

Byat needed to stay an hour at the airport to catch his connecting flight to Hong Kong. He bought a set of carillons from a gift shop, an offering he intended for Buddha. Gaya, a place where Buddha received his nirvana, Byat intended to visit it without delay. The bells rang as he moved about, making floundering sounds and receiving the passengers' attention at the airport. Byat spent most of his time at the duty-free shops saddled with exotic consumer products he had seen only on the television. He spent some time at a flower shop where an eclectic fragrance of sweet and fresh flowers gave him a unique high he narrated to his family vividly as he returned home later. He bought a flower, a magnolia, as it spelled close to the name of his country. He would have willingly presented it to the air hostess he recently met. Yet, *comme il faut*, magnolia from a Mongolian, was ill-fated. Byat smelt it hard to make the most of it before handing it to a child struggling to escape from his parents sitting beside him.

In the airport, the motley crowd was divided into two groups. Preference was given to the rich and beautiful, whose mannerisms reminded Byat of the Western TV serials his wife was fond of. Trying to conduct himself honorably, he set about getting his immigration clearance, standing in queue for a long time. He presented his papers to the officer. The officer returned his papers with a stern expression, gyrating his hands over some mistake. Byat stood agog, not understanding a word.

:At last, the officer said with a hand sign, "Go, report there, my supervisor." Byat, visibly shaken up, turned over to the adjacent cabin, where an elderly officer was busy with paperwork. A smile played on his face. Acknowledging his papers, the officer informed Byat that he failed

to write his name and address in capital letters as given in his passport.

He left the cabin, thanking the officer profusely.

"I must be doubly sure of my actions here since I am in a foreign country with no help at hand. "Hong Kong, Oh, Hong Kong, I long for you", Byat thought, trying to be normal.

Inside the plane, ready for departure, Byat asked for a window seat he missed on his last flight. The hostess arranged to get Byat a window seat before the departure. Besides him sat a man lost in his world, not caring to start a talk. Byat pretended to sleep, occasionally looking out the window and seeing the horizon full of Cirrus speckled with crimson sunshine. "I must be close to the height of Apogee," he thought. Apogee, a word he used recently in one of his columns, meant excessive height. The evening sun gave way to dusk, coinciding with the imminent landing of the plane in Hong Kong. A thin strip awaiting the aircraft jutting out to the Ocean, heavily lit, was a sight of no comparison. Byat feared how they would land or drown should the craft run over to the Ocean. He knew no swimming. He was to see the Ocean for the first time, and he felt sentimental to face a body of water comprising about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the globe. The aircraft came to a smooth halt, and routine announcements informed him that the temperature was 28 degrees Celsius. He had to undo his woolens soon.

His colleague Juno, a caricaturist at the newspaper, had given him the address of a cost-effective japanese lodging home, Sumo. "Depending upon your mood, depth of desire, and vitamin M, a ravishing geisha awaits you in Sumo with open arms," Juno explained to Byat.

Hong Kong at last. An Argentine toy figure of a hefty wrestler moving about in a large circle of multi-color lights received Byat at the entrance

of the lodging home, Sumo. A complaisant manager at the reception welcomed him, learning he had a reference from an old client, Juno. Back in his room, he first called up his wife, Altan Sarnai," it is 5 pm and I am good here but pretty hot for us. I am deadly tired. After a meal, I am going to sleep. Keep yourself and Handa covered," Byat said hurriedly. "Oh, yes, you take care of yourself; good night," Altansarnai replied. Byat had mixed feelings about his immediate existence, whether to try the night out or stay back in the room. Dubbing his frightening thoughts unfounded, he felt there was no reason to delay the hour of his happiness. He could be a little adventurous and extravagant as he was to spend only one night there. For the first time, he saw his room no larger than a cubicle having a neat pattern where a futon and a mahogany table were laid out tastefully. The whole sequencing was to his liking, not very outwardly tantalizing nor feral, striking the right balance with austere prominence. The Origami flowers looked bright. Byat was composed and excited simultaneously. He heard a dog yelp outside. Looking through his window on the second floor, he found a tall building opposite him with a dimly lit arcade surrounded by tall cedars where some dogs strayed about. He was beginning to feel at home. He pushed the button for room service. A waiter in a white dress knocked on his door and greeted him in a bent posture. "So what liquors do you have here to make a merry mood tonight," Byat asked him. "Sir, there are plenty of them, all varieties, just order any from the book, I will take less than a minute to serve you. However, I suggest you go to the floor in the basement, best day, best time, today. For a start, if you wish beers are lying in the refrigerator, I can bring them here."

"Alright, I will have a beer first, then have a quick bath, and then if I need you, I will call," Byat replied. Dismissing the waiter, he found his centrally air-conditioned room accredited with modern amenities. It portrayed to him an artistic and economical use of space that Japanese are known for. About their feats of coalescing collapsible, breakable, and maneuverable yet illimitable space. Taking a guzzle of chilled beer, he went to have a shower. He was anxious to be a part of the jubilant exaltation awaiting him in the basement.

He felt the heat and clammy air seeping through the slit glasses inside the bathroom. The bath was a small place, allowing one to stand without much ease, and you had to mind your head, hands, and legs every time you wished to enjoy the shower with natural body movements. A well-lit mirror on the wall revolved with various toiletries on its back in neat, small glass compartments shining brilliantly.

Dressing up quickly, Byat took a lift down, where he met tipsy boarders shouting in revelry. Nodding them cheerfully, he went to the entrance, where he showed his occupancy card, allowing him free entry into the nightclub. Amidst heavy music and drum beats, the place seemed like any other Ulan Bator club he was used to in his college days. A skimpily-clad Japanese girl ushered him in a greeting gesture, "You would like to sit in the front row, sir?" Byat made a mechanical nod. Mostly Asians crowded the place with the strength of about fifty seats in semi-circular rows. A sizeable wooden floor in the front presently beamed a Sri Lankan troupe finishing its performance and the lead singer building up the finale in throaty sounds. Byat saw flashes of colored lights scurrying over the stage, intermingling with the audience now and then. Soon, a Japanese girl approached him and sat beside him. Kissing

him lightly, she asked Byat his choice of liquor. The girl's smell was vigorous, and her perfume made a lively olfactory aura around the space as she moved. Byat recalled her pheromonal aroma that matched much the same he longingly and lovingly experienced with Altan Sarnai in his bedroom. She wore a see-through white negligee embroidered with crimson lining, not failing to match the color of her nipples bouncing brightly as she breathed. She was deadly youthful with a sweet, ebullient japanese face, reminding one instantaneously that creation and its games will remain forever. Byat asked her choice of drink, and she hurriedly called up a waiter who took their order and served it in no time. A large fresco in multiple colors was next sighted over the curving wall of the stage. In prehistoric times, a group of semi-clad tribals, or perhaps overjoyed men and women, were seen with tall coconut trees coexisting with them at a seashore. There was no sun in sight, yet it felt like noon; shades of yellow dexterously applied by the painter created a localized universe where each leaf, face, grain, and fruit was distinguishable as if hand-picked by a debonair God. Gleeful faces announced pleasure all' altissimo in the present moment, stretching to infinity.

Deafening energised music continued to play there, coaxing the audience to hit the floor. The japanese girl, meanwhile, slipped back quietly. A white couple sat a few rows behind him, the woman out matching the man's age and fitness. In contrast, she appeared an angelic beauty, strikingly attractive, energetic, and wholesome. In the fifties, the man had a corpulent frame and eyed his drinks more lovingly than anything else. The woman in her thirties took snaps of the fresco in parts, making a flash every time she clicked her camera. Her companion directed her attention to the wall, hinting at a straddled woman unable to walk on.

Instead, the woman waved him away, taking his picture with his bulging eyes readily excitable. He pulled her down in a mock fight, catching the camera from her and taking snapshots of the fresco as he desired. It was then the first time that Byat had a full view of the woman who wore a devastatingly pink complexion. Unmindful of stares upon her, she didn't mind being the center of attraction. Her companion, on his invitation, ventured out, and the two started dancing rather awkwardly, with the man unable to hold himself for long. Unable to continue, he sat on the floor and was escorted to his room. Motioning to him that she would come afterward, she went back to her seat, drinking and munching nuts. The japanese girl came back to Byat's side fresh and redone.

"You better be slow on drinks here. There is much to do in the hours to come. You could order snacks, say, steamed fish, a specialty here," The japanese girl said, offering Byat a hot towel. Byat started feeling frazzled with the ever-increasing clammy and smoky atmosphere around him. It was one in the morning. Visitors moved in and out regularly without any loss to the primary strength of the Disc. Refreshed with cologne, he motioned to the japanese girl to notice the white woman behind them.

"Can we not move to her table or ask her to join us, it should be fun, no?" Byat asked her.

"Well, I do not know what she will say. She is from the U.S. Her friend got too drunk tonight. I have known them for a week as they come every night. Let's see," The japanese girl replied in a sing-song voice before going to the American woman. Her loving words won the American woman agreeing to call a customer to her table. Receiving an approving nod from the japanese girl, Byat happily went over to meet the American woman. Feigning to be perfectly sober, Byat stood close to them. He was



nodding and trying to mind his feet that tottered not so much by liquor but for his anxiety in speaking face-to-face to a thunderous white brunette.

"Oh, hello, I see most of you here, I like the slant of your eyes especially in little children marvelously cuddly just the sort any parent would wish to beget," Aurora remarked while shaking hands with Byat, who felt crestfallen at her opening remarks, inherently confused what she took him for. Not to lose his ground, he grew emboldened to impress her anyway. "I am at your service, mam, on behalf of the entire mongoloid race. I was a child once, yes, yet I have made a decent contribution to our race, take me as you wish, and like me to be," Byat said in a burst of speech. The two women broke into laughter, unable to gather his anguish. He felt cowered in being unable to make a correct impression on Americana.

After she finished the introduction, the japnese girl informed the two about the upcoming show, a live one, in which, reproducing a dance matching the fresco, a group of artists would entertain them.

"What is your name, sweetie ?" Aurora asked the waitress. The japnese girl answered with a liquid glance, "O, most girls here change their names every day but I keep my name for a week at least. Two days ago I gave myself a new name, Fiona. I watch a lot of Hollywood movies and we get to know many exotic names there."

"Surely, you would have a real name, dearie," Aurora continued.

"Well, my parents gave their darling daughter a traditional name, Erica. But we use more familiar names here, so much more fun actually," Erica answered.

"Erika is a sweet name, sweeter than any other," Aurora said.

"Great, thank you mam, but for the present, I would advise you to have some quick snacks before consuming liquor," Erica said with concern.

"Alright, then, could you send us some fresh juice and steamed fish as you suggested," Byat answered, wishing to be alone with Aurora.

Lighting a cigarette for Byat, Erica was happy to be alone. She was looking for a customer in those wee hours when men get drunk and become more magnanimous without demanding. Byat's gimlet eyes shrank, watching Erika's bouncing bosom as she stood up, leaving him with a muffy expression. Erica and Aurora had another hearty laugh.

"Blame me, blame my drinks, ladies; I am not as stupid as it appears," Byat said quickly.

"No bother, just relax," Aurora said, a happy soul living for the moment, unnerved and enthusiastic. She watched the stage setting admiringly. She applauded the performers dressed as tribals wearing yellow flower caps and dispensable sheets around them. Twaddle and laughter infected the air, with the performers looking impressive in their flexibility at the acrobatics they started. A Pagoda-like structure was raised on the stage where a four-foot marble statue of Venus was placed. Across her, an altar accompanied by large-leafed green plants stood brightly to cordon off the divinity.

"Well, I saw it last night; somewhat interesting. They would create a haze of lights propitiating the goddess by offering themselves before her one after the other," Aurora commented.

Lights close by soon turned into dark blue shades, and Byat was taken aback when he now looked at Aurora. Her eyes looked devilishly feline. She wore a silver necklace with a small cross that throbbed like a snake above her décolleté. Two studded bracelets in silver matched her

necklace. Her charm, full liquid lips, a perfect aquiline nose, thick black eyebrows, pulsating lashes, black hair, and mascara devoured Byat. He only offered his silent adoration to the demonic beauty. Over the stage, the tribals were ululating with a slow flute in the background whenever any couple raised themselves, finishing the love game at the Venus' altar.

Reminiscing back to Mongolia, Byat heard his mother caressing Handa, who had just gotten up with her mother and now watching Dragon Tales on the television in the adjoining room.

"I am coming out for tea mama," Byat said to his mother.

"It's ready, come. Let me check if there is any eagle hunting today; if so, we all go there. Handa and Altan Sarnai are new to it; no, it has become so popular that it has attracted the international community even," Solongo, Byat's mother, said.

"Great, surely, it was always such fun," Byat answered.

Starting a Toyota SUV, Byat's whistling maternal uncle drove it away to the closest motorable point of the destined hilltop. The entire family tightly packed up behind, eating pancakes and singing a traditional song praising horses. He parked the car beyond which they needed to travel on foot. Eagles of prodigious size and weight were hovering over the hilltop and rushing into the valleys to catch their prey. They were still short of the real action awaiting them at the hilltop, about 500 meters ascending distance. Handing everybody a bottle of hot soup, the maternal uncle led the others to follow. A dim Sun was a source of some light but no warmth as they continued to shiver in their heavy woolens up to the hilltop.

Little Handa was all geared up for the ineluctable experience. On reaching the hilltop, they found themselves in the company of a famed eagle hunter and his team, heavily dressed in colorful traditional clothes. They had amassed a lot of recognition for their work lately. Byat and the party were received well and were invited to participate in the ongoing hunting program. Three hunter eagles weighing about 8 to 10 kg were perched on the men's forearms. They had put hoods over the eyes of these eagles. These men looked down the valley to see if any prey was moving about to send their missiles down. Byat handed Handa a pair of binoculars. She excitedly zoomed her lenses to see what was happening beyond the hilltop. A chilled, cold wind was piercing them constantly. After some time-lapse, the hunting party spotted a fox running away in the valley, successfully chasing and capturing its prey. The three men took the hoods off these eagles, showing the fox in the valley. In no time, the three eagles swooped down and attacked the fox in concert, making it lifeless in no time. Another part of the hunters near the valley came rushing down on their horses to claim the catch. The real action happened quickly and made Handa feel part of the big action. Still, she was unable to comprehend it completely.

"We rear these female eagles as our children right from day one and they obey us as children do. But we keep them on an average of about four years. Thereafter we set them free. One of these three eagles is qualified to be set free today having served us for more than four years and now we wish it well to have a family of its own and live in freedom for the rest of its life," The eagle hunter informed the gathering wistfully. "Let's celebrate, let us have some vodka. Be our guests today," He continued.

The hunter stroked the eagle lovingly who was being set free, and she was given the best of the meat of the prey it hunted. Strings attached to its curved talons were removed. In an instant flash through intuition and a long association of other eagles having been set free earlier, it understood it was free. Lastly, the famed eagle hunter balanced it on his forearm and made some quaint sound, signaling it to fly out. With some hesitation, looking back once, the eagle flew away into the valley, never to return.

### Three

"Holy shit, the teaching has chosen me, where am I, Oh, I can't even feel my one-eyed Prince, Oh, this is dumb and disturbing, I have become moonshine. Is this a boon or a curse?" Byat introspected himself in his ongoing reverie. He found himself in the heart of a clarion echo, transforming him into being able to be absent and present simultaneously, absent as an ordinary self and present to what appeared not normal.

"I feel like a field of energy akin to sunshine but no sense of any physicality as before, well, I think I am dead."

"Now that I am no more and the Americana's prophecy has come true, let me see what is there now for me to look around," Byat continued.

"But I cannot look around, I can't move around, Oh, I believe, I am the seen, I am the heard, I am the cognized and I am the sensed as the teaching said, so let it be, let it be seen what is there in store for this no-thing I call myself after this transformation."

In an instant, Byat felt a river of gaze, his mama's gaze, he was most familiar with. "Now that we both are dead she may not be far away," He argued. He lovingly expected the owner of her gaze to be present in front of him soon, but no mama came forward. Instead, this river of exuberance showed him briefly his childhood, his choicest memories, turning into focus in a flash all living beings who have been and ever will be gazed upon by their mamas.

"I am in the world of platonic forms, I think," He continued.

"I could for a moment presume that I am not a seer, hearer, sensor, or cognizer, but how could I engage with my mother, Solongo thus? She would have killed me for nursing such strange views. She was a rainbow

of strength for me in the face of a world in which, like gravity, you are pulled down invariably. How could I forget my second birth, a time when I had fallen badly sick due to jaundice in my early youth. I could barely move due to severe weakness, and on top of jaundice, pneumonia followed. Doctors had advised me to have a very slow recovery over a long time. It was half a year before I could get up again. Despairing sentiments troubled me continuously during this period,"He continued.

"I had not kissed a girl and lost all hopes indefinitely. I could not digest bland food either. She spoon-fed me even when I had no appetite, four to five times daily. I wanted to atone for drinking too much, but I felt that I would barely survive. It is only when you are sick, mortally sick, you know what health and a healthy body are. She with her unfailing patience and resilience brought me back with a triumphant smile as if a lioness lifted her cub from a deep gorge. How could I be without a self and take my mama without one. I feel that I am standing just outside Plato's cave watching the forms of all that exist but all these shadows inside it are still relevant and material. They are made of blood and flesh. They may have a limited span of life with their solace and travails but good enough it always was so, a routine, no issues, rather a nonentity from nowhere becoming an individuality at birth to have a reasonably long life, is all that matters." Byat continued.

"Is there any fun in being a blank cheque, a propositional function, a template, and an unreadable syntax only? No, not at all, it may appear to be all but is not even one. The universal gaze I experienced is nowhere near that one gaze she had. let reality be whatever it is, I cannot subscribe to it even after my passing on "Byat thought.

Byat then saw imagery of his recent past come to him alive vividly in lurid details. Byat saw Aurora get up with an imperious smirk, announcing to an imaginary crowd, "Dear all, due to unavoidable waste of time, we will resume shortly the second part of the fashion show. Gear up and cheer us all." She said. Suddenly, the entire crowd was back. The paltry number of participants in this category wore swimsuits of varied colors. Aurora topped the list with her two-piece blood-red polka bikini. Moving about the deck from corner to corner with other participants, she led them to a glorious end with the crowd cheering them profusely as if nothing had happened there. Wu accompanied her in his chosen-ot, as promised, towards the end with heartfelt thanks to the crowd. Soon, due to his inexplicable subliminal position, Byat saw all bikini shows ever happened and would happen anywhere in the world in front of him in a flash." Less is perhaps more," Byat thought.

Following it, he watched himself in his College days, days spent in utter freedom and peripheral intellectual stimulation. Introducing himself to the discipline of philosophy with its wide-ranging fields of how we acquire knowledge, what reality is, and how ethics is distinct from common morality left him treading muddy waters endlessly with occasional flashes of wisdom. Two girls, his college mates, became friendly to him before being best friends themselves. He found them to resemble the characters of Daria and Aksinya in his recently concluded classic, *Quiet Flows the Don*. Slowly, a feeling close to affection grew between him and the two of them over a brief association and meetings, their sweet nothings. The girls thought he had a particular interest in one of them, and he was nice to their best friend out of courtesy. Although it turned out to be a fleeting affair ending hastily, he felt himself in the grip



of a fever he presumed to be a variant of love. Clinging to two girls simultaneously, however promiscuous, incontinent, and dissipated, it would leave you transfixed and speechless for days together. A universal format of his romantic feelings dipped in Daria-ness, and Aksinya-ness felt wholesome and adventurous, generating good curiosity.

Then, Byat heard Handa, barely four years old, crying over an episode of a Dragon-tales in which Santa Clause rode from Greenland into Dragons' homes, big and small, with a bag full of surprises. Handa stubbornly demanded to immediately visit the Dragon Land to play with them and stand beside those harmless creatures to receive her gift. Trotting effortlessly on his two horses, Santa bid goodbye to his lovely friends, making Handa cry ceaselessly. She found it hard to believe that these creatures did not exist as her family existed. She was taken to Naadam every year, their national festival. It was good enough to familiarize young Handa with the real world, its people, wrestlers, music, and horses competing over steeple-chase. However, the world of Dragons was closer to her heart than anything else.

"Let us fulfill her wish then, also, I haven't been to a picnic for a long time," Byat thought.

Solongo, AltanSarnai, Handa, and Byat started riding on a cloud jet for Dragon Land. Handa giggled sweetly at finding a metamorphosis of each of them, including herself, into Dragons still retaining their essential features. Byat was pleasantly surprised to meet Daria and Aksinya, two sweet Dragons, receiving them at the Dragon land. At Handa's request, Santa was summoned out of turn, followed by festivities, music, and all the fun Handa always yearned for. "A family picnic is a memorable event any day," Byat thought.

A universal picnicking unfolded to him in a flash, and he returned to his sense of nothing and everything.

Before long, he viewed the image of a bouncing bosom flying into him, recalling, unmistakably, Erica. Getting startled by what the universal format would now look like, he woke himself up on a sofa in the party area of the expedition ship.

"Not dead, not dead, I am alive, oh, yes I am truly alive, I can see the real world with my eyes, see the sea, feel the wind on me," Byat blurted out. The expedition ship was anchored at a shore unfamiliar to him. It was still dark and felt a bit chilly. Getting up quickly, he rushed to meet others before pinching himself on his forearm to be doubly sure. Two attendants near the party area greeted him. "Hey what happened tonight?" Byat asked them.

"Oh, a happy new year to you, sir, I think you had too many at the party tonight and after you fell unconscious we had to lift you back to the sofa here," One of them answered Byat.

"No, no, I mean the internet message about the nuclear war, what was it," Byat questioned him breathlessly.

"Well, sir, it wasn't entirely a hoax. A high-density sunstorm was reported in the city some hours ago, bringing to a halt all power towers and electronic devices. We keep our fingers crossed since it is yet unconfirmed as to the real loss. It is on reaching Lantau Island, the news is broken to us," The attendant answered.

Byat involuntarily broke into a light dance, failing to hide his delight in being alive. He asked,

"Where are all the others?"

"To see the Big Buddha," The attendants replied smilingly.

"Have the phones started running again"?

"No sir, not yet, hopefully by the day the services may resume,"

"How far is the Buddha?"

"About half an hour on foot, if you want so, one of us can escort you there."

"No, no, I don't feel like walking, I think, I will wait for them to come back. let me take a stroll on the beach for some fresh air," Byat said.

Moments later, he started walking on the quiet, lovely beach, now deserted in the wee hours. Dim lights from the island dotted the entire place over his head, showing sparse habitation with lush green foliage adorning a dream-like mountainous range. Byat found himself much harried due to excess liquor, near-death experiences, and a blow of recently reacquired life out of the blue. Feeling the waves touch his feet, he faced the sea in its grim and undulating splendor. His breathing was heavier than usual, he noticed. He recalled his reveries and broke into a faint smile. Unable to stand, he sat down, avoiding his feet from getting wet by the waves. Damp sand felt like a hard pillow as he sat down.

Breathing fresh air gliding down the mountains, he continued to sit silent, hearing the sound of waves. He remembered a past event.

It was like any other day in his apartment at Ulan Bator. Mother Solongo, after their vacation, had come along with him on his insistence to get her diagnosis and treatment of gallbladder stones that she started showing symptoms of lately, and Grand Med, a big hospital in Ulan Bator, was well equipped to handle this. Solongo disliked the air of Ulan Bator, which she found heavy and polluted against the fresh air of the steppes and valleys she came from.

Doctors advised her to remove the gallbladder, the cause of her occasional pain around the waistline and assured her it would be a routine procedure with a sure success rate.

Among hundreds, their homogeneous apartment housed two rooms and a living room with boiling water metal pipes running through them for heat. Very homish it was as all rooms were connected to the living room, and you could call one another by as much a loud murmur. Handa and Solongo woke up to a cold and cloudy morning in their room when Byat entered it. He reminded Mother Solongo of the doctor's instructions to keep an empty stomach and have some prescription medicines before reaching the hospital for the mini-surgery, lasting about two hours. The entire family got ready early, getting into their car to reach the hospital. Mother Solongo seemed normal. However, she was a little quieter than usual. Byat repeatedly tried to convince her that it was a minor procedure with no cause for concern, as the experienced doctors had advised. Besides, the hospital's reputation was impeccable. Smilingly, she nodded back.

"Does it happen that you walk into the world on a perfectly normal day under visibly positive circumstances and you lose your mother before it ends?" Byat questioned.

The doctors took longer than two hours for the surgery, citing some complications but assuring no cause for concern. Still, it became apparent that something had gone wrong as a team of doctors rushed into the operation theatre, spending hours upon hours there and finally shifting her to the ICU. Putting her on life support, the doctors informed Byat about some complications due to her old age. She needed to be operated upon as soon as she responded to their treatment. Taking his consent for

the operation, they started the extended operation, bearing no result in the end, and the news was broken to him before midnight about her passing on. The entire family was shocked and dismayed with no words. Trying to understand the real medical cause, which Byat failed to comprehend, he was left stoned. Until her last rites, he continued to nurse a stony silence with no interest. He couldn't even cry then.

Tears now welled up in Byat's eyes, and he started crying loud, clearly realizing that it was long due and his entire body-mind awaited this moment of emotional catharsis. It was too personal to talk about, and it gave him a relief that you only can feel within your heart. He continued crying for some time. He found the waves more audible now and looked at them with a serene, unattached smile. Solongo, he recalled, would often tell him after her elders that we are a bundle of preordained likes and dislikes, who, with limited breaths, feel hot and cold in the world until we die and continue to be reborn. We rarely bag Buddha-nature as we are lesser mortals, so let's do some good to have a better birth next time. Byat remembered how serious she would become in reciting it so that he would drink it without fail.

She was kind as he remembered his childhood trips to Bayan-Ölgii, in the heart of the Altai mountains. His eagle hunter grandfather and extended family built several colorful Gers at a unique place facing high snow-clad peaks. His maternal uncle, then a young man also back for his vacation from the city University, was trying his hands on a healthy lamb meant for slaughter that day. Before making up his mind to push the large knife through its neck, he tried teasing the lamb in all sorts of sadistic uproaring. He would hurt it on the ear, legs, and back. Exhorting it to be calm as he feigned not to kill it, but the lamb being shit scared, started

wailing continuously until a heavily built and burly Solongo came out from her Ger motioning Byat to get inside. Shouting at him and taking hold of her brother's big knife, she cut the lamb through in one neat blow and went back, cursing him. As a child, Byat felt it to be a much better course of action and tried contrasting the whiteness of the high mountains with the blood-splattered sleet in front of him. Byat was raised in Ulan Bator by his parents. Still, he felt that throughout her married life, Solongo yearned for her home town and the city life was tolerable to her only for the love of her family. His father was a regular family man who cared for his family as much as she did. Still, with her indefatigable spirit, Solongo had a gift of making even ordinary moments look special and festive to them.

"If she bagged Buddha-nature, then she is unbound and is present in the sound of these waves also, however, if she is reborn, then it must be at Altai mountains. Nowhere else, a young warm heart now beating incessantly ready to start another journey between hot and cold in the company of golden eagles with a penchant for hunting and family life," Byat thought.

"Sea, I am seeing you so close for the first time in my life, oh, it could not be better to be able to touch you in all your proximity and immensity as if you were a woman. I am beginning to get back to my lost world, ready to follow my likes and dislikes, and be witness to the heat, and the cold, my life now shows me forth. I am beside you on a shore that has been witness to significant historic extravaganzas. Surely you have retained those memories," Byat thought.

Being a journalist, Byat detailed selective notes of the places of his visit in his itinerary. He found Hong Kong quite appealing for its rich but

chequered history, as it was once known as a city of thieves due mainly to a long succession of powerful and fearsome pirates freely ruling it. It also became famous for the two opium wars, making way for the Western powers. Also, it was interesting to know how it was leased out for ninety-nine years to Great Britain by the Chinese ruling dynasty. Two Hong Kong modern age events of Japanese occupation during the Second War and returning to China upon the lease-release at the turn of the last century couldn't be neglected. Lantau had seen it all being the largest of all islands here.

After the 6th and 9th August 1945 bombings, Japs officially surrendered to the Allied forces. However, during their occupation of about 5 years, Hong Kong had become a hostile territory with many guerrillas' insurrections against the Imperial Army. Here in the eastern part of Lantau Island, the notorious Silver Bay massacre shook the local population. The sole member of the tribunal of war crimes tried the twelve soldiers charged with beheading nine villagers, torturing three hundred unarmed villagers and illegally arresting them. Their officer was called to the Tribunal chambers for an informal chat in a preliminary inquiry.

"Good day to you sir, may I come in," the manacled officer said.

"Come in please, take a seat," replied the judge.

"So, I hope you all are taken care of in the good spirit of the war manual."

"Sir, we are."

"After you learned that your country had surrendered, what made you continue here in the manner you did?" The judge shot back.

"Sir, we were waiting to surrender to the Allied forces but these guerrillas were impatient and committed to putting us to death. They are fierce fighters. We were only maintaining law and order until we surrendered. Our action was in self-defense. This island with its mountainous ranges and thick foliage is a perfect ambush and the locals knew it in all its minute details to give us all a tough time."

"What is Hakkō Ichi?" The judge asked him.

"Sir, it simply means that all the world is under one roof, a slogan that means there is a divine right of the Empire of Japan to "unify the eight corners of the world."

"What is your motto now"?

"Sir, a defeated soldier has no motto, no expectation, except to be given humane treatment."

"Have you beheaded any men?"

"Yes sir, a lot, else, I would have been beheaded."

"Any other circumstance like personal disability, old parents and small children which you may like to tell me," The judge continued.

"I can't, sir, but I have one request if you may consider - either set me free or grant me capital punishment as I don't wish to languish in jail for the rest of my life."

"Is this for you or on behalf of all others?"

No sir, for myself only; I can't vouch for others."

"All right, we have not come to the stage yet as everybody on both sides needs to be heard first, however, I will keep this in mind. you may leave now," The judge spoke.

Nearing trial, keeping in view the testimonies and proofs gathered, and the role assigned to each accused, out of the twelve, three were hanged,



including the officer interviewed by the judge in his chambers. The rest were sentenced to between three to ten years of rigorous imprisonment. The entire Lantau Island celebrated their victory over the verdict, and life continued as usual after that.

This sea has witnessed sinners, trollops, boy-emperors in flight, illegal occupations, insurrections, commoners, and a towering line of pirates operating in south China. Cheung Po Tsai, a famed pirate at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a closely resembling avatar of Oedipus in the modern world. Marrying his adoptive mother after the demise of his adoptive father, Ching I, an equally famed pirate, Cheung Po forgot his past about his forced separation from his biological parents. The act of his kidnapping in his adolescence by his adoptive father was conveniently forgotten as he realized he would be the commander in the line of succession for the Red Flag fleet comprising more than fifty thousand pirates and fifteen hundred ships. His natural abilities of brutal courage and heroism prospered exponentially as he continued to assist his father on the seas. Madam Ching, a former prostitute in a floating brothel in Guangzhou, married Ching I ceremoniously because she was not to be a mere sleeping partner to him but to be his better half with fifty percent control over pirating. She was a shrewd administrator who contributed competently for her husband's seafaring activities. Becoming a widow within six years of her marriage and bearing two sons out of this wedlock didn't deter her from continuing to enjoy the power she was used to. To strategize the future ahead, she called on Cheung Po secretly at her lesser-known luxury refuge in the thickly forested area under the cliffs at Lantau.

"Oh, mother, you know, I was away chasing the Portuguese, could not imagine that our dear father would not return from Vietnam. It is simply hideous. Any clues yet?" Po asked.

"No, no, not really, I have sent a search party but it seems a tsunami hit them all, no clues, just wild guesses, my dear," Madame Ching answered.

"Our fleet is disturbed, they need to be solaced, we need to declare you as our leader, we shall serve you as we did our father. We need to meet them all as early as time permits. I understand we are in mourning but please collect yourself and restore normalcy," Po said.

"No, no, we will not let the good work of your father go waste, we have consolidated into such a huge and formidable force, not for nothing, let's carry it forward, as it is, challenges are staring us in the face, my dear, I need your support like never before, oh, my Po." Madame Ching held his hands tightly and started moaning like a maniac. In her early thirties, Madame Ching wore a black robe and eyed her adoptive son intently through a trickle of unstoppable tears flowing in her grief-stricken and famished face.

"I am at your service, Mother. Don't hesitate to assign me to any work; however, for the present, I need your command to decapitate two of the outlaws within us who attempted to pilferage the spoils."

"Fine, you have it, go, do your duty. We may be outlaws in the civil world, but who knows that we have some outlaws ourselves. Let's deal with it as heavily as we always have had," Madame said sternly.

"I will be in mourning for a week but we must meet every day without fail and do some pressing work as well," She continued.

He continued to visit her and found her fierce and ruthless, like his father, concerning their business. Her moods were visibly brighter as time passed.

One day, Po came along with a few lieutenants who were quickly assigned their commands to continue to be merciless and tireless in their respective operations and report daily. Dismissing the rest, Madame Ching requested Po to stay back and spend some time with her.

"Any news of your father and his body?" She asked him.

"No, no we are at it, some more time needed", Po replied.

"Well, you have some vodka first, what else is the news of our rulers, quings, the British company, and the Portuguese band," She asked him.

"All under our control, we have the upper hand, as always."

"Ok great, stay back for dinner as you may meet your brothers tonight.

They are on their way with their governess,"

"Oh, I haven't met them for some time, how old have they grown now," Po asked.

"The oldest is five and the other is three."

"So young and innocent, but with a mother like you they would be fine, trust me, mother," Po said.

Madam Ching, who continued to wear black robes in public, wore a western beige embroidered gown for a change, making Po doubtful if the mourning was over, as he could also catch a whiff of her pleasant perfume from a distance. Eleven years older than Po, she had seen hard times but tasted unbridled power with her beloved deceased husband. To retain her status, she was ready to do anything and everything, including but not limited to seducing a young man, her adoptive son, who was now the face of the red flag fleet amongst the ranks.

"Let's drink to the glory of our fleet, Po, with you, as my commander, we are invincible. Let's destroy our adversaries one by one." Madame Ching got up in rumbling fervor and clasped a seated Po by his log, bussing him profusely.

Po knew it was no motherly love, but he gave in instinctively with some initial reluctance.

"Let the power remain within the family," Madame Ching said briefly.

"But, then, what about the kids you said you are expecting?" Po asked her.

"I lied, "Madame Ching replied laughingly.

The two of them became the strongest team of pirates the world has ever known until the Chinese administration granted them amnesty to serve them ironically in eradicating pirates of the region.

"Lantau Island, you are hot and seductive," Byat murmured to himself as he heard the sound of footsteps closing in on him. He found two familiar faces, Wu and Aurora, who looked fresh and active.

"So, our friend has finally made it, ha, ha, we were apprehensive about you last night. How are you feeling now, Byat? Wu asked him.

"Well, great, I am all aces," Byat replied energetically.

"Come, let's have some coffee, we are back from the Big Buddha," Aurora said.

"So, it was just some sun storm, and we thought about the end of us, how gullible and naive one could be," Byat said.

"Well, let's not jump to any conclusions yet, I still can smell some mischief here over the islands, let's, for the present, celebrate our survival," Aurora admonished.

Dusk began to shimmer on the eastern verge, and the sea birds were heard in shrill squeaks. Byat invited them to sit beside him, do deep breathing and hear him out, this very hour, when Buddha attained enlightenment. He reckoned he must open his heart to them about his realization he felt both profound and functional.

"We are possibly morons," he announced.

"Please bear with me until I finish. I haven't been able to grasp what Wu tells us but I recalled my entire life in front of me during my sleep last night and discovered that I would not have changed a single moment of it in any manner similar to the fact that I was borne in the family that I did, exerting no control over it. Freedom is to act consciously following our preordained likes and dislikes and experiencing hot and cold in limited breaths," Byat announced boldly.

"How profound, heartfelt, well worded, you mean the grand design and all that stuff, we all have known it, no, it is there in every religion, no?" Aurora asked.

"Yes, it may well be perhaps," Byat answered.

"We need time to think it through, Byat, Can we talk about it later. But we wanted to tell you that we have planned a trip to India ourselves as Aurora has cut down her trip to Asia to visit India first and I on my part had been long planning to visit my old friend in the higher regions of India at Ladakh. If you wish to join us, tell us when you are flying to Delhi, so we try booking our tickets accordingly," Spoke Wu.

"Just tomorrow afternoon, Air India, but will there be any aviation services restored so soon, I wonder," Byat said.

"Yes, they say in the dock here that by this evening all services may start functioning normally, let's see and hope it does."

"Byat, if you could spare a week or so from the University then you may join us, we may learn better your preordained hots and colds, ha, ha," Aurora joined jokingly.

"Ladakh was not in my itinerary, let me see, let me write to the coordinator there once the net starts or I will call him."

"Good, by the time we have our breakfast you visit the Big Buddha if you so wish and join us back here as the ship is to leave for Kowloon in about two hours. Are you interested in visiting the Big Buddha?" Wu asked.

"Oh, yes, very much, I can't miss it, let's move," Byat replied.

It seemed like the old world when visiting the Big Buddha. Byat could not click any photos as the electronic appliances were still jammed. He felt burnt out on reaching the towering statue on foot, climbing hundreds of stairs, through a huge crowd.

Although roughly an agnostic, he had gradually developed a reverence for Buddha due to his mother. It was not an academic enterprise but a personal fondness keeping her alive thus. He thanked the Lord for keeping him humming that day and prayed for the well-being of his family.

The three of them boarded the flight to New Delhi the following day when Byat learned that instead of Banaras Hindu University, he was to study in an adjoining city, Allahabad, as the entire curriculum of Buddhist studies had been shifted from Banaras to Allahabad. He was granted time for two weeks to join when the new place would have been braced.

"Will you have veg or nonveg food, sir?" The Indian air hostess asked Byat wearing a blue sari.

"What you have in nonveg today, madam?" Byat asked her back."

"Sir, chicken tikka with a gravy of spinach,"

Ok, I will have it."

He saw Wu and Aurora struggling to use the round Rotis they were served along with their food. On his part, he had done his recce on Indian food, eating them conveniently.

## Four

AI 314 Boeing Dreamliner was slowly descending at New Delhi Airport, Terminal 3, flown for more than five hours from Hong Kong. The crew announced the outside temperature was 18 degrees Celsius, with light precipitation bringing it four notches below normal. It was the beginning of February. Aurora, sitting at the window seat, was still nodding off. Wu and Byat, sitting beside her, wide awake, were hungrily glancing through the window to catch a glimpse of the tall towers visible in the drizzle. It was winter in India. Byat wished to divide the entire earth into two primary classes resulting into the cyclic phenomenon of seasons worldwide attributable to a maneuver in the hot and the cold winds. He wondered what was in store for him in the days ahead in the land of both hot and cold weather, that too in extremes..

"Oh, we arrived finally," Aurora said, waking up at the shrill pitch of the landing thud of the airliner.

"Yes, and you have a lovely reception of the drizzle," Byat said.

Alighting through a spiral staircase, they strode off to the ground with a crowd waiting for the next passenger car to arrive. Meanwhile, the drizzle turned into a downpour, making the crowd run to the approaching passenger car.

"An overwhelming reception indeed," Wu said inside the car.

The passenger car took a few turns before arriving at the arrival portico. The entire airport was buzzing with the downpour increasing in intensity and volume. Several stationary airplanes, some ready to move, were seen conducting last-minute airworthy checks. Entering the lobby, the three



walked past an extended area to reach the luggage belts. A colossal wall before the luggage belts greeted them. It consisted of spun copper disks and large hand sculptures that depicted various dance and yogic hand postures that India is traditionally famous for. The shine of the copper discs and the hand postures in numerous forms unfolded a mesmerizing enigma. The three kept staring and clicking snaps of each posture admiringly.

"India, what else, yoga is everywhere," Byat said.

"Yes, it's enchanting, let's collect our luggage now. I need to make some calls first then we decide our course of action," Aurora said.

"Will we travel to Ladakh tonight or tomorrow?" Byat asked.

"Let me call my Indian coordinator who arranged my meeting with a senior advocate in New Delhi this evening. If it is on, then we stay back here for a day, otherwise, we catch a flight today only, to Leh, the capital of Ladakh. Let me check it first," Aurora answered him promptly.

Associated with an international organization opposing nuclear proliferation for arms race and peaceful use of the nukes, Aurora became part of the ongoing controversy concerning the Indian parliament's plan to cap the financial liability of the nuclear operators for the peaceful use of nukes should an accident occur. She supported the opposing faction. It sponsored the liability to be absolute worldwide; however, it was being capped to suit the big corporations for political and economic reasons. She has had a long experience putting up protests through the democratic protocol in influencing the legislators and moving the court wherever required. Obtaining a favorable legal opinion on the strength of the precedents of the Supreme Court of India on the issue of absolute and

strict liability was part of her plan. Her Indian coordinator confirmed their evening meeting with the lawyer.

"You see, the apex court in the Vellore citizen welfare forum judgment held that there is no warrant to cap the liability in similar accidents. The polluter pays principle has been interpreted to hold that the absolute liability for harm to the environment extends not only to compensate the victims, but it also entails the cost of restoration of the environment," Explained the colorful Parsi senior lawyer. A group of lawyers and activists briefed him. Aurora found the older man intellectually honest, moving his eyes rapidly behind his thick spectacles. He asked the briefing counsel short questions, being taken through the Paris and Vienna conventions by him. The senior lawyer painstakingly took notes, thanking everyone at the end of the conference.

"We will try finishing it early, goodbye," The senior lawyer said. Following the views of Chomsky during her student days, Aurora viewed the nuclear bombing of Japan as morally inexcusable. However, as she grew up and secured a job in a government organization, she started seeing both sides of the coin and avoided such embarrassing subjects. She never forgot an encounter in Bogota, Colombia, where she met a lawyer-activist for his views on human rights violations by guerrilla groups on a mass scale. A respected middle-aged Colombian lawyer, this human rights activist had raised his voice both against the guerrilla and police atrocities in the country. On that fateful day, Aurora and her superior officer, Joe, had come to meet him and obtain a detailed write-up on the issue that he had reluctantly agreed to. He had agreed to the write-up on the condition that his name would not be circulated as he had received life threats from unknown goons. The lawyer who sat across a

vast wooden table facing Joe and Aurora had tanned skin, rich dark hair, and a bushy mustache on an ever-smiling face.

"Good to meet you, people. I think I spoke to you over the phone, Joe."

"Yes sir, this is my colleague, Aurora," Joe answered.

"Let's call for some coffee if you both are good with it," The lawyer suggested.

"Perfect," the two nodded back. Before the conference began, the lawyer was informed by his staff that two masked men were entering their premises and rushing in. Joe took out his pistol, asking Aurora to be ready with hers'. The Colombian lawyer immediately implored them to use the backdoor of his residence without delay, a course of action that he had planned for himself, too. First time in the field with her revolver, Aurora found herself excitedly flustered.

"But how will we go, your driver would have been their hostage already, and my staff would not hold them for long. Let's hope we get to the main road and catch a cab," The Columbian lawyer spoke in English-Spanish.

"Shouldn't we dial the police?" Aurora asked him.

"Oh, no, it may be the police only to arrest us for the alleged anti-national exposure'. They have a robust intelligence, " The lawyer muttered several expletives.

"What if they have outflanked us?" Joe asked.

"You carry your pistol just in case they open fire," Joe continued.

"Oh yes, let me," The lawyer answered.

His backdoor opened to a service lane with an exit to the main road about five houses away.

"Let me test the waters first, let me see if there are any of them back there, if so, I will try engaging them for a while," Joe said hurriedly.

He moved out cautiously, looking around to see any movement close by, and as he walked on, a volley of bullets swished past him. He could see two masked men with a bandolier slung over their shoulders, with the ammunition pockets across their midriff and chest. A fighter of first-class ranking, Joe returned fire with absolute precision, injuring the two instantaneously, who shouted in pain and radioed their comrades for help. Joe motioned to Aurora and the lawyer to stand until he had a clear passage. He knew the others would join the hurt men soon, and a new ambush loomed. It was not the police. He instructed Aurora that she would need to go back to the front cautiously while he engaged the rest of them backdoors.

"Shoot first if you want to go home in one piece, don't hesitate a second longer. Take control of our car first and foremost and call," Joe shouted excitedly to Aurora.

As Aurora took her position, she nodded to him with a thumbs-up as she retraced her steps inch by inch to the front side. Smelling sharply the pleasant aroma of orchids planted in the backyard, she found a man running towards her, a lawyer staff she had met before.

"They left," he said breathlessly.

"All?"

"All, but one who is near the car,"

“Is there a place here where I can see him without being seen”?

"Perhaps you could climb up the stairs to the terrace and behind the water tank, there is space you may find favorable."

"Let's go, cover me from behind, and report if you see a problem."

Reaching the terrace and standing behind the water tank, she saw the gun-trotting masked man who patrolled the area near their car. The driver

they came with, a local Columbian, had run away, allowed by the guerilla in the first place. She aimed his legs through her automatic soundproof revolver. She waited for him to move back so that she could catch him from behind, unaware. While he turned back, she fired twice, with one bullet hitting him in the leg. With exceptional agility, he turned back by shooting a volley of bullets toward the firing. Dozens of bullets he fired punctured the Pvc water tank, with the water flowing everywhere. He took his position behind the car, trying to talk to his comrades. Aurora thought the situation was getting grim as time was of the essence if they had to escape. She came in full sight at the terrace, shouting at him to coax him into firing back at her. As he came up to shoot her, Aurora indiscriminately fired in his direction, leaving him dead in no time. Jumping down through the staircase, she called up Joe to revert as it was all clear in the front. She could hear the continuing exchange of fire emanating from the backyard. Joe and the lawyer came rushing down to join Aurora, who was trying to open their locked car, ransacking the dead man who did not have it on his person.

"Sir, no time, no time, let's go in your car, hurry, start it fast," Joe said. The lawyer had the keys with him, and the three were quickly racing down the main road. Joe, meanwhile, had broken their car window to recover his briefcase lying inside it.

"I have a safe place if you wish to stay back tonight," The lawyer offered, driving at top speed.

"Well, thank you, sir, but I think we will go to the airport first. we will contact you later and I think you need to lie low for the present," Joe answered.

"It was in self-defense purely. Otherwise, they would have holed us in," Joe said. Joe would have argued in favor of the Japan bombing alike. It was, for him, a part of their legal right of self-defense in saving more lives on both sides in taming the beast conclusively.

Aurora realized that she had killed a fully grown man; cold-blooded manslaughter now became part of her adult life that happened a little while ago. A shiver ran down her spine as she recalled the face of the dead man lying unapologetically on the ground.

Recalling the incident anytime, she constantly experienced the same shiver that she now felt as she came out of the chamber of the senior advocate. The first kiss and the first kill are never effaced from your memory. Wu and Byat sat in the waiting hall as she approached them. She consulted her Indian coordinator on specific subjects before seeing her off.

"So, what have you googled on our next plan," She asked Wu and Byat. "Well, how can one miss the Taj Mahal being in India? We just checked that although there is no full moon tonight being two nights away, Taj is open for night viewing and it takes about four hours on the express highway to reach there. Instead of checking into a hotel here, we might as well plan this trip to see one of the seven wonders under the moonshine tonight," Byat said.

"Perfect, let's have dinner first and we make the bookings then," Aurora said.

They checked a restaurant close by to eat and found a five-star rated Punjabi restaurant named Raj da Dhaba, serving Mughlai specialties. They instructed the driver to wait until they got their new driver for the

Agra trip to help shift their luggage into the taxi. During the dinner, Byat booked an interstate radio taxi to and fro.

"So, how did your conference go?" Byat asked Aurora.

"Marvelous, the old man is impressive and sagacious."

"You said, salacious," Byat asked again jokingly.

Nodding her head in mock disapproval, she said, "No, no, I said sagacious, a man of great depth. He assured us that the legal jurisprudence evolved in the country buttressed the principle of strict liability of the stakeholders should a nuclear accident occur," Aurora answered.

"Do you need to come back to New Delhi again," Wu asked.

"Yes, I have to, but since I am my boss now I will take this strictly as my vacation only attending to urgent matters till we return from Ladakh."

They ordered a plate of butter chicken for the three and a green salad.

"Although a specialty here, isn't the dish too chilly and oily?" Byat said.

"Yes, I noticed it myself, but it is rightly named butter chicken," Aurora said.

"How could you make a bitsy chicken drink so much butter before preparing it," Wu smiled making the other two smile.

"You need to eat it with the rotis here to make the best of it," Byat instructed the two on how to eat their rotis.

A small restaurant packed to its capacity was a great favorite of the locals. The guests were eating their food intently and without distraction as if eyeing a girlfriend closely. They were served a leafy green Pan at the end of the dinner, which tasted sweet and aromatic. The waiter described it as a delicacy of centuries still humming. "Great taste and good to digest the food," The waiter said and gratefully picked up his tip.

Outside the restaurant, Byat informed the others that a Toyota SUV, Innova, was reaching them, and the driver's details were also sent to him. Aslam, the driver, hailed Byat while speaking to him about his whereabouts.

"We need to transfer our luggage from the airport taxi. Let me help you. Bring your taxi closer here," Byat said to Aslam, pointing to him the taxi they came by.

Sitting inside the Innova, the three noticed a lemonade perfume wafting toward them. The immaculately clean, chilled car felt like a small drawing room to them. Aslam, a middle-aged Muslim driver, spoke good English and wore another hat of being a guide of the Mughal era.

"Give and take, we are four hours from Agra, sir," Aslam addressed Wu, who sat in front.

"Are you Aslam Khan?" Wu asked him with curiosity.

"No, sir, I am Aslam Siddiqui, although in our community using Khan as their second name is common," Aslam retorted, unable to understand the question.

"Well, I come from the country of the original khans, Chengiz khan and Co, the great Mongols of Mongolia, " Byat retorted.

"Khan is of course one of the most popular second names here but there are plenty of others in circulation. Also, I know that our Mughal emperors derived their title from the Mongols of your country, Mongolia, a historical fact. Babbar, the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India, came directly under the Chengiz khan lineage. I am a guide also. Maybe, what I tell you on the way will evoke interest in you about the Indian Mongols," Aslam continued.

Sitting behind, Aurora and Byat nodded approvingly in agreement.



"We have time with us so you could show us any landmarks on the way just in case there are any," Aurora told Aslam.

"Sure, Mam, I think you could have a brief look at one on our way. It is an internationally renowned shrine for the Muslims, even people from other communities visit it, Nizamuddin Aulia shrine. It would take you about half an hour to see it and come out. Although there are a couple of other places of interest, however, no use in visiting them in the evening now. The famous Humayun tomb and Rahim mausoleum are close by."

"Well, if everybody is ok with it let's do it," Aurora said. The other two agreed instantly, and Aslam drove them toward the shrine.

"So you are allowed four wives," Wu asked.

"Legally, yes, but it is no longer a practical option. Only the emperors and kings could afford four wives besides their widely accepted concubines. I can hardly support my family with the meager income I make. It's an age-old practice supported by the law of the land. The Taj Mahal was built by the Emperor, Shah Jahan who had multiple wives and hundreds of concubines. Mumtaz Mahal, his favorite wife who died in childbirth is now immortalized and rests in the Taj posthumously. But I have my Mumtaz at home, one and only," Aslam continued.

"Great, any children "Byat asked him.

"A girl and a boy. Both go to school."

"A balanced family in the heart of the population explosion in India," Aurora said from the backseat.

"On the left, you see Raj Ghat, the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, was cremated here. Every visitor and politician visiting Delhi stops over it" Aslam continued.

"Oh, yes, we have all heard of him, a towering personality," Aurora said.

"Well, now this area is much more developed but about two decades ago when we were children, it used to be a deserted area at night. If you permit, I will narrate to you a personal experience, my Abba had on this stretch, just here, then."

"Sure," Wu said.

"It was late night, around 11.30 pm when Abba was returning home driving his Lambretta scooter. He was a simple man. He was driving slowly, minding the road ahead and the traffic on the opposite side as it was one road for both sides. Near this stretch, while driving on, he had to put brakes on suddenly as he saw a ravishing woman running across the road, barely escaping from being hit by his Lambretta. He halted the scooter to see if an emergency had arisen. As he got off, he went behind her to help immediately. Moments before, she stood near the bushes, rushing away. He looked closely to find her but there was no trace of her in the flick of a second. She simply faded away. Finding himself upon a devilish encounter, he rapidly started his Lambretta, racing away with a thumping heart.

"Are you joking or is it true, Aslam?" Aurora asked Aslam laughingly.

"On my God, Mam, every shred of it is correct and we were scared of the incident for years together."

"How well could he see her in a split second and make his judgment about her ravishing personality," continued Aurora.

"Oh, he told us he had no choice but to recognize her as she was a leading Bollywood actress of her times worshiped by the crowds. However, he didn't know that she had passed on and had a tragic end due to alcohol abuse."

In the presence of the sacred abode of the Mahatma, isn't it a mismatch that an actress is sheltered"? Byat asked him curiously.

"Strange are the ways of the world and how God chooses to render justice to us. I think it was a punishment for her to continue to spend the rest of her existence till kayamat with the Mahatma," He answered.

All of them had a hearty laugh at his words, sounding comic.

"Well, let me recall the words of Jesus who said that the new Jerusalem would be built excluding those who overate, overdrunk, and over-kissed. And it will be a home only to the simple, the starving, and the oppressed. But going by Aslam's logic you will find a lot of colorful characters by default in the New Jerusalem serving their punishments," Byat chipped in.

"Oh yes, likely," Wu said with a smile.

"Ha, ha, ha," Aurora reacted uproariously.

Aslam stopped the car in front of a bazaar along the main road. They needed to travel on foot now alongside a vast police station.

"Well, you are all requested to cover your heads with your handkerchief as we enter the shrine being a customary practice here," Aslam instructed them. They entered the shrine through a crowded passage with the shops on both sides. They were pleasantly surprised to notice that Nizamuddin's tomb had a white dome. The dome was about six meters in diameter. A marble patio surrounded the shrine, covered with intricate trellis walls.

"You see here the tombs of Amir Khusrau, Nizamuddin's disciple, and Jehan Ara Begum, Shah Jahan's daughter, who have been famous in their domains," Aslam explained, pointing out two graves near the main gate.

The three graves they visited smelt as graves do. One sees them as a terminal point for the space-time of human existence fondly remembered and preserved by posterity. For Saint Nizamuddin, the followers throng every day in thousands, searching for the worldly joy he gave up voluntarily centuries back.

"I would like you to read what is inscribed on this tomb," pointing to a piece of English writing on Jahanara's tomb. Aslam invited them to read it.

*"Let no man cover my grave save with green grass.*

*For this grass is the fittest mantle for the tomb of the lowly."*

"Humbling and truly grounded these words are," Wu commented.

"Truly, let's make it fast as we have a long trip ahead," Byat said approvingly.

They quickly moved away after the brief visit to the shrine. On the way to the exit, they met dozens of men and women, busy buying gifts and souvenirs hanging in the shops. Sitting back in the car, Aslam reminded them that they were treading upon historical roads that once were trodden upon by great emperors and distinguished personalities.

"Delhi without the Jamuna River is simply unimaginable," Aslam pointed out the flowing river under the bridge as he sped away in his taxi. They passed through the Yamuna, looking at its trickle of black water moving slowly. Handing them a water bottle each, he drove the car away on the highway, soon joining the Yamuna expressway connecting Greater Noida to Agra.

"If you like it and don't get bored with history, I will give you some interesting facts about the twin cities, Delhi and Agra. They are centered around the last of the most powerful Mughal emperors, Aurangzeb, and

four princesses who were related to him as his real sisters and real daughters", Aslam continued.

"We are all ears if there is no ghost this time," Wu answered him lightly.

"Well, I have narrated the story multiple times. I am never tired of it. It is self-evolving keeping the raw facts untouched. Today I start it with the sister of Aurangzeb, Princess Jahanara, the eldest child of the Emperor, Shah Jahan, and his principal consort, Mumtaz Mahal, the same couple of eternal love of the Taj . A favorite of her father, the beautiful princess succeeded her mother Mumtaz as Padshah Begum, the First Lady of the empire. She facilitated the building of many mosques and gardens. She was a poetess. As luck would have it, she fell in love with a commoner. As Shah Jahan got to know about it, he caught her beau unaware and ordered the servants of her palace to light fire under the cauldron for the princess' bath where she hid him and made sure that the water throbbed for hours together. However, in the years to come, she matured into a very religious lady, "Aslam continued.

"The same princess whose tomb inscription read so modestly, oh, how sad it is. In olden times everywhere we can notice that the women's sexuality was stifled but the men were allowed far greater freedom," Aurora commented.

"Well, they feared losing their nasab, the continuity of lineage, by allowing the Mughal women to be promiscuous. It was Akbar, the great who laid down the norm that Mughal sisters and daughters should not marry to remain chaste and perform religious and social duties. Besides, Akbar was not in favor of their marriages as the war for succession would be more intense in such a scenario, "Aslam continued.

"Males were allowed, not the females. The lineage family tree bore men, wives, sons, and daughters from generation to generation without interruption. How male chauvinistic," Aurora commented.

"Well, if all the females had jumped in, the tree would be an indistinguishable forest with each female giving birth to a separate family tree," Aslam answered lightly.

"It all depends where your emphasis lies, where your focus is. How can you maintain purity by mixing with females outside your family all the time? It is now as archaic as the times you narrate to us, so Jahanara did not marry and led a Sufi life," Aurora said.

"O, yes, Well, without her younger sister, Roshanara, the story is incomplete. Roshanara was the second daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan and his wife, Mumtaz Mahal. She was a talented poetess like her older sister but had in comparison quite a greater degree of penchant for love affairs. She supported her younger brother Aurangzeb during the war of succession after her father's illness. Aurangzeb seized the throne in 1658 and Roshanara was given the title of Padshah Begum by her brother. Dethroning her elder sister, she became the First Lady of the Empire. Jahanara supported her eldest brother Dara, who had lost to Aurangzeb in a decisive battle. Shahjahan and Jahanara were imprisoned by Aurangzeb who kept them in Agra close to the Taj," Aslam continued.

"Tell us her liaisons, any interesting story to hear about, "Byat spoke.

"In a series of love affairs, she somehow managed to keep herself afloat initially until her brother found her to be incorrigible. Just imagine how precarious it would have been for her lover, who dutifully attended to her for twenty days at a stretch. Grown bored of him and to get rid of him;

she complained to the Emperor that a man had broken into her palace for burglary, threatening her life,"Aslam continued.

"Oh, Allah, the Royal guards are marching in, it seems, the Emperor has got a wind of your presence here, "Roshanara said to her relaxing lover.

"What, what, isn't it the end of me, then, my love, oh, who does not know your brother, let me know the way out, I don't wish to be burnt alive here."Blurted out the aghast lover.

"Oh, hiding you here is simply impossible; let me think fast, oh, they would be here any time. Think, think, you think fast, my friend,"

Roshanara said with feigned concern.

Marching footsteps could be heard a short distance away, growing louder.

The young man undid the heavy achkan he wore in the winter season.

Kissing her lightly on her cheeks, he jumped from the palace's first-floor window to plunge into the cold Jamuna River flowing underneath it. It

was a timely jump lest the guards would have caught him. They hollered after him, and one of them jumped into the river after him and finally

caught him after some struggle. Aurangzeb knew his sister well. He

quietly handed him over to the Kazi for appropriate punishment for

housebreaking to avoid publicity. He banished her to a garden on the

outskirts of the walled city to lead a life of pious seclusion. He took away

all her powers. He reinstated Jahanara as the first lady, having reconciled

with her after his father's death. However, as time passed, Roshanara was

again caught with another lover. An outraged Aurangzeb declared her a

kafir, an unbeliever and ordered her lover and her to be poisoned. She

was interred in the garden that she had designed for herself. It is an open

grave, which is still preserved in Delhi. If you are interested, we could go there on our return," Aslam said.

"Which century did it happen?" Byat asked.

"Seventeenth century when the Britishers had only a very minimal presence in the subcontinent,"

" Another incident is of prime interest that happened between Delhi and Agra around the same time when Aurangzeb had won the war against his brothers. He had his elder brother, Dara, bound in chains, paraded him around Chandni Chowk, Delhi and beheaded him. Roshanara then had his bloody head wrapped in a golden turban. Packaged neatly, She sent it to her father as a gift from Aurangzeb in Agra where he was imprisoned. Shah Jahan opened the package casually. He was so distressed by the sight of his favorite son's head that he fell unconscious for many days with Jahanara attending to him in great stress," continued Aslam.

"Both the cities have seen so much blood, but well, every history is bloody and sanguine," Aurora said wistfully.

"So, Jahanara was buried next to a Saint and Roshanara next to none," Wu said.

"Well, let me tell you that we Muslims pray to Allah for a good worldly neighborhood as well as an equally good neighborhood after death. Who knows how long one needs to wait there? Some get the grace, some do not," Aslam said philosophically.

"So, the First Lady for Aurangzeb was not his wife but his sisters alternating between themselves," Byat said.

"Yes, Sir, in a way, sisters and then daughters. After the expiry of Jahanara, it was the second daughter of Aurangzeb, Zeenat-un-Nissa, who was conferred the title. If you are not tired I have more on it."

"You continue; we are not bored, come on, continue," Aurora answered Aslam.



"Well, now we begin with the story of the two daughters of Aurangzeb amongst five who are historically noteworthy. Zeb-un-Nissa and Zeenat-un-Nissa being the eldest and second daughter of him dying in Delhi under opposite circumstances. Zeb was an accomplished poetess, who wrote under the pseudonym of Makhfi ,Hidden One. She was imprisoned by her father in the last 20 years of her life at Salimgarh Fort, Delhi, however the exact reason for it is still unknown to us. Princess Zeb-un-Nissa is rumored to have been in love that may have triggered it like it did for Roshanara but it is also said that Aurangzeb did not like her open ways of promoting poetry and music which he found unislamic. She was tall, slim and beautiful,"Aslam continued.

"Aurangzeb was in the habit of putting his daughters in prison, isn't it"? Wu asked him.

"Well, not all; the second one, Zeenat had a most honorable and luxurious life till her very end," Aslam answered.

"They were also poetesses," Byat said.

"Well, no account is available for Zeenat to be a poetess but yes, Zeb was a great poetess, still remembered and recited by us. One of her poems I learnt by heart. If you like I can recite it for you," Aslam asked them.

"Surely, go ahead, please," Aurora answered, encouraging him to begin.

*"You with the dark curly hair and the breathtaking eyes,*

*your inquiring glance that leaves me undone.*

*Eyes that pierce and then withdraw like a blood-stained sword,*

*eyes with dagger lashes!*

*Zealots, you are mistaken – this is heaven.*

*Never mind those making promises of the afterlife:*

*Join us now, righteous friends, in this intoxication.*

*Never mind the path to the Kaabah: sanctity resides in the heart.*

*Squander your life, suffer! God is right here”*

There are many more highly acclaimed poems of her in a book, " Aslam continued.

"Are English translations available for her works? Aurora asked him.

"Yes, Mam, I will buy you her translated poems from Agra if you are interested.

"Sure, please do, they are amazing and philosophic," Aurora answered.

"Concluding the story, the last of them was a good-looking princess, Zeenat. She led an extraordinary life till she died and was buried in Delhi as the First Lady of the empire at an advanced age. She was a pious lady. She never chose to marry and had no rumors about her, making her father's favorite," Aslam said.

"Not surprisingly, Aurangzeb detained anyone who did not toe his line. I think his description of what was unislamic was grounded in his instinct for self-preservation and traditional values highly suspect," Aurora commented.

"Well, you appear to know your subject well," Wu complimented Aslam.

"Indeed you do," The other two joined.

"Thank you very much. I hope your journey is comfortable and exciting, and we have covered more than half the distance," Aslam answered, speeding away.

"Yes, let's all doze off for a while and find some rest," Aurora said, leaning her head against the shoulder of Byat.

The moving car left behind green fields on both sides, with crops visible in the grey light. Byat did not mean to sleep this hour lest he woke

Aurora up. Wu belted with the seat in the front did not sleep lest the driver followed suit.

A poem in marble, the Taj Mahal was approaching them in less than an hour. Tickets for moon sightings were sold in advance due to the apparent craze it held for the public. However, Aslam could manage three tickets online as the foreigners constituted a separate reserve. Moreover, the demand waxed and waned during the cloudy nights relative to the day's weather prediction. The probability was bright to see the moon that day as predicted..

"We have entered Agra, oh, the weather is not good," Aslam announced amid the showers they could see through the window panes.

"Another few minutes and we are there, you are to be part of the batch of fifty people to enter the Taj .Let me hope that the rains stop and the moon re-emerges, " Aslam continued.

"Oh, we reached, but it is cloudy, and there is no moon in sight," Aurora said, waking up.

"Since the parking is about half a kilometer away I will drop you off at the entrance and come back in an hour once you call me. These are your tickets," Aslam said, handing them over the printouts of the tickets.

The three picked up their water bottles and cameras before leaving the car.

"The next slot is fifteen minutes away, let's hope the rain stops sooner," Wu said.

"It may turn out to be a wash out with the dark clouds above our head," Byat said with concern.

"Well, no choice really, let's see," Aurora said unapologetically.

They met a lot of crowd waiting for their turn near the ticket counter in a covered area, giving them a refuge from the growing fiercer downpour. A faint full moon appeared once through the thick, dark, pouring clouds. Twelve-thirty, the last slot they eagerly awaited, was there already with no improvement in the weather. It was extremely dark, and the moon was not visible clearly, not leaving enough light for the Taj to acquire its famous blush. They were escorted to the main building to view it from a distance. They ran out of luck with Taj, just like a beautiful woman prone to mood swings. What was visible depicted a ghostly monument standing majestically against a pitch-dark horizon. The rest was subliminally culled out from its reputation by the visitors being an internationally famous world marvel. It appeared in black marble like Shahjahan had wished to construct a replica of the Taj across the Yamuna River for his rest. The black Taj was not to be as he fell ill and was deposed by Aurangzeb.

When you need to see without light, what you see is gloriously shaped by the narrative of your expectations. Taj, however, stood for love immortalized between a man and his sweetheart. A ripple of reflections crossed their minds standing there. Aurora recalled her adolescent years. Bunking college regularly to watch love-themed movies like 'The Blue Lagoon' and 'Texas Detour,' she recalled the rush of adrenaline she and her boyfriend would taste in those uncanny moments. Nothing could move them apart. Byat, on his part, forgot Mongolia entirely. He concentrated on how Aurora leaned on his shoulder inside the car some time back, bestowing him with an unusual high. In his early youth in Pyongyang, Wu recalled regularly meeting a young apprentice in his uncle's hair salon in the women's section. Her abashed smiles blossomed

into an innocent liaison between them over some time. However, he moved to Hong Kong and lost touch with her since, yet he treasured the sight of her face to this day.

The slot of half an hour elapsed quickly, and the Taj continued to be covered in chaste darkness with intermittent showers.

"Well, we don't know when we will make it again, so we can visit it in the morning for better luck," Aurora said while moving out of the complex.

"Yes we do," Byat nodded.

"Let's check into a hotel then," Wu suggested.

"Fair enough," Aurora answered.

An uneventful night was spent by the three of them in a sound sleep, exhausted. Meeting at breakfast, refreshed, the following day, they started to plan how, after seeing the Taj, they would run down to Delhi airport to catch a flight to Leh. Aurora booked an early flight to be on the safer side.

"Only some hours apart, this mausoleum was an apparition. How grand, how majestic it looks in the sunlight. Surely we couldn't miss it," Aurora said gleefully, entering the Taj compound.

Wu and Byat were equally appalled at its beauty, now visible in a pinkish hue. Today, they could go to the monument itself, unlike last night. They touched, smelt, and devoured it, taking snaps and selfies. A movement through the monument meant many walks with the guide they hired.

"During the two wars India had with its enemies, the entire structure was camouflaged with bamboo scaffolding just as it was so done in 1942 by the British government to avoid it being seen by Germans and japs," The guide explained.

Bemused and spirited, they came out. Back in the car, Aslam took them to the local market to pick Zeb un-Nisa's poems in English. To their surprise, a publication was available with the various works of Zeb and her two aunts, Jahanara and Roshanara; all rolled into one book. Aurora bought three copies, gifting the two to Wu and Byat.

"It's like receiving a rose from a rose," Byat mused.

## Five

On their way to Delhi, the three felt triumphant watching the Taj day and night. Aslam offered them to show other sites in Agra, but due to time constraints, they declined.

"You cannot leave Agra without tasting its famous sweet dish, petha, a must for all tourists," Aslam said. He offered them a pack containing sweet white square pieces emitting a pleasant rose aroma. Eating one each, they unanimously experienced a peak of sweetness they had never tasted before. The sweet left them with a delicious high, melting into their mouth swiftly.

"This is sweeter than our Korean, Yakgwa, a Honey Pastry," Wu said "Sweeter than hot chocolate fudge, but I think I would prefer my hot chocolate," Aurora said excitedly.

"I have never been much of a sweet tooth; it made me swirl," Byat commented.

Aslam received their flat refusal on his offering the sweets again.

The car was moving at high speed, and they could see the countryside on the return journey much better in broad daylight.

"You have an unfinished story to tell of how you came to settle in Hong Kong," Byat asked Wu.

"Oh, that was decided long back when I was a lot younger; I think it could not have been destined otherwise. It's a long story," Wu answered, wistfully recalling the three decades he had spent in Hong Kong alone and his early youth in North Korea before it.

Born in Pyongyang during the Korean War, he grew up in a joint family of traditional barbers, now privileged to live in a free and rapidly changing Korea in the post-war era. His father was an exception who accepted army service under the imperial Japanese army. Later, it was a war he fought against his southern brothers, recently partitioned across the 38th parallel on the other side. He believed that his fatherland and the rest of his fellow citizens were in danger. North Korea, he thought, was perishing through the aid and connivance of the Western world. However stale, the card of nationalism is perpetually effective in moving people of the same race and language against each other. Before the solstice in 1953, when the two warring factions of the Korean peninsula agreed to maintain stopgap peace, his father was killed in action. The Government communicated to the family, decorating him as a war hero. Thousands of other Koreans were also decorated posthumously. Being a single child barely ten years old and unable to comprehend the news fully, Byat started crying after his mother and other relatives. Howling aloud, his mother was not peaceful for days together and developed a medical condition. She did not attend the family hair salon for a long time. She had managed the female section for years. His father's younger brother, Park and his wife cared for her until she felt better. The Government offered that any other adult member of the family, regardless of gender, was allowed to be substituted in the national army in place of the deceased to serve the fatherland. The rewards and position last held by him would remain unchanged.

"Is it a joke or what? We have lost a member already; who will jeopardize his life in the war that began at our end with dubious international stratagems? Park blurted out.



"Is it compulsory, a sort of conscription like what the japs did ? "His wife, Jia, asked in the presence of Wu and his mother.

"No, not really, they are rewarding those with high salaries who join the army now. A lot of people have queued up already," Park answered.

"Thank Goodness; it is not compulsory. We are happy with our salon. How is war moving anyway? Hyoon, Wu's mother asked Park.

"Well, it does not seem to be closing in soon, all the big players are here already on both sides, who knows, it triggers another world war," Park quipped.

"These years have been exhausting; first, the japanese barely left us, and now the war within ourselves. Who is the enemy? Hyoon questioned testily.

"A bundle of some well-meant thoughts that went awry, socialism versus the free economy, the two big camps in the world. our enemy is on the other side whatever be his ideology," Park answered.

"This is getting murky now," Hyoon commented.

"Do we need to send a reply to the authorities?" Jia asked.

"Yes, I will send one formal reply to them politely declining their offer for my health reasons," Park answered.

"Uncle, I will join the army," The young Wu said, hearing their conversation.

"No, no, never, haven't you seen your father die in the war, isn't that enough, join your uncle in the family shop," Hyoon shouted at the top of her voice.

Wu learned the hard way what it meant to join the army. As part of the Government's conscription policy, he was later picked up for enrollment when he turned fourteen. Before that, besides attending his school, Wu

spent a lot of time with his uncle at their shop and managed to learn Barbbery well in a few years. The new political system professing no religion and no property of one's own was not what the people had visualized in attaining freedom from the imperial japs. It, however, did not disturb their family much in their limited commercial activity. He learned about Kim Jong-un, the supremo and a former guerrilla at school. Kim fought for their freedom and tried to reunite Korea with unprecedented courage. A clear departure from the past in the new order could be seen in education, religious freedom, commerce, and any other social practice influenced by the seduction of the West. Still, however, Wu, with his friends, would feast on smuggled old editions of Playboys on weekends. He critically reasoned that one party and the one-person show greatly affected their innate freedom.

His young, imaginative heart knew no boundaries. He would have liked to champion the cause of spearheading a revolution in how the hair on the human body could be arranged and decorated creatively. Using colors, designs, and visually appealing patterns roamed through his head daily as serious possibilities to be tested and triumphed in the real world. Finding his uncle running through a fixed routine day after day at the shop, he felt bored and exhausted. His comrade, a term he heard being spoken everywhere now, which he adopted for his best friend at the school, was the son of a seamster. The latter, like him, went to the shop regularly to learn the tricks of the trade. His father was into stitching traditional dresses for women, Chosen-ot, his specialty worn on celebrations, and every Korean must have one. You may not be allowed to wear deep red lipstick and dye your hair and letting them loose. Also you cannot wear a tight-fitting outfit in this part of the world, symbolic of capitalism. Yet,

anything traditional was welcome with open arms. After leaving his country, Wu regularly received news of North Korea, curtailing the ordinary liberties of the people he was part of. If a state started dictating how to eat, drink, and carry yourself around in public, then the malaise of the Hoi Polloi was bound to be irresolvable. The next step was not far when in the name of control and discipline the state would peep into your bedrooms.

Life was a lot easier when he went to school. The leaders then were interested in consolidating their newly acquired power. The status quo continued to be maintained by the commoners for a long time. His teachers at the local school run by the State were former teachers of the famous open-night schools, which helped propagate the cause of socialism in the country during the freedom struggle. They hated any references to japs and their systems. japnese, the national language of Korea was overthrown brutally. Korean, an optional language during the long Imperial rule, was finally accorded its due. Upon taking over the local schools, the teachers burnt the copies and disfigured the walls where the educational ordinance of the imperial Government was pasted. In 1911, the Japanese colonial Government proclaimed an Educational Ordinance following the Imperial Rescript. The Educational Ordinance appeared as follows:

*Be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives, be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate the arts, and thus develop your intellectual faculties and perfect your morality. Furthermore, be solicitous of the*

*commonwealth and public interest; should an emergency arise, offer yourself courageously to serve the State.*

Although it appeared harmless at first blush, it effectively made the entire Korean peninsula the subject of the Emperor of Japan. In routine, the children in Korea were indoctrinated in the habit of bowing before his photo and considered him to be their supreme guardian, without whom their very existence was in jeopardy.

Every colonial power on earth has imposed its language on its subjects to civilize and modernize them. What if a human child blessed with the innate capacity to acquire and speak a universal language started speaking it ? Would the world have been different? Not difficult to guess. A flat No. Color of skin, Phonetics, religion, race, relative scientific advancement, mannerism, economics, gait, sexual preferences, a form of Government, a preponderance of beautiful and sexy womanhood, hygiene, interpretation of language, etc. would be the distinguishing factors in this unending list to continue to court aggression. If language is believed to be innate to us, aggression is so likewise. What was the justification for Kim Jong-un to attempt to acquire the other side of Korea to unify the country in another bloody war that continued for three long years ? Kyoon asked it repeatedly upon her husband's demise. "Affected people feel the war, for others, it's a hot topic for discussion. Whatever the new communist party endorses I have no objection. But your prime concern should be to give peace to your citizens. Not to become a political stooge in the hands of big whales," Kyoon said to her relatives gathered for her husband's mourning and burial.

"We thought there would never be a divided Korea. Nothing remained to be done once the japs were conquered, but who knew that all the international players were keeping an eye on us? I think it is way more complicated now. Any unification is a far cry as two governments of opposite shades have already assumed power in their respective domains,' Park said to Kyoon.

"If the japs had continued for some more time, our native languages would have been killed. Look, I know japnese better than Korean. Since our childhood, we have learned it rigorously. What use do we have of it now clinging to us as a loved pet"? A mourner said sitting beside another mourner in a far corner.

"Well, many Koreans have settled in parts of Japan and are doing good business there. Maybe an opportunity is available to those financially stable to emigrate there," Another mourner said.

"What bullshit it is, who will go to settle in a country severely damaged physically and morally broken, no, no, it is inconceivable now," The first mourner said.

"With the Soviets and Chinese on our side, our leadership is fit enough to crack the West; what do you think? The second mourner asked.

"See, geographically, the USA has taken control of the southern side supported by the NATO armies; they will never give up, being decidedly a superior force against the combined communist bloc, I seriously doubt our chances purely on objective assessment,"The first mourner continued.

"We hardly receive any news nowadays except what the state broadcasts. Let's see which side succeeds in the unification of Korea, whatever be the result we will continue to remain as Koreans, so let's relax," The second mourner said.

Funeral rites began as soon as Wu's father was brought home in a coffin covered in the national flag along with a large chrysanthemum wreath in an army Jeep. The entire family started wailing on receiving it. Park had assembled burial clothing for the last rites to ensure that his elder brother was accorded a proper burial. Matching the crucial circumstances in the city, the family declared that the mourning would continue for three days, generally the shortest period prescribed in the custom. Being the first son, Wu was to perform the last rites as Sangju, the chief mourner. As tradition had it, he let his father die, so he was believed to have committed a crime against heaven. As an expression of filial piety, he was in charge of the pre-burial, funeral rites, and memorial. Although a Sangju, Wu was elaborately assisted by his uncle, Park, in preparing the body for the last rites. Inside the room of their home situated in a working-class neighborhood, the two set out to remove his clothes, carefully minding the heavy bandage around his chest with clotted blood. To prepare the dead for the afterlife, Park washed his body with incense, cut his nails, and combed his brother's hair slowly and carefully. Park delicately put cotton in his mouth and ears.. As part of the custom, Park placed coins on his closed eyes and finally put rice in his mouth. Park then put his fallen hair and nail clippings inside the coffin. Wu stood by the whole exercise, staring at his father with vacant eyes. In the end, the body was dressed in *suui*, the traditional hemp funeral garb. After the dressing, the family and the mourners came inside the room and started yelling, "Oi, oi" as a mark of their condolence. The mourners' white and yellow flowers and the chrysanthemum wreath lay outside the room. A portrait of the deceased was placed on a high table. Below it, the flowers continued to be placed by the new mourners

visiting the home. It was decided to do the burial in the countryside mountainous range, requiring a short journey to the suburbs. An extended ritual was yet to be performed in accord with the customary rites.

Wearing black Choson-ot, the family and the other mourners present boarded a minibus to reach the spot where the burial was to take place. Park and Wu accompanied the dead man in a separate van, following the minibus in front of them. It was to be a journey of one hour. Park made arrangements for a shaman, a geomancer, and a party of pallbearers through his local contacts in the village close by. In the back of the van, they sat facing each other with the coffin between them. Early winter winds came cascading through the van's windows, and a tired Park unwillingly dozed off before long. Recalling his short life of ten years, Wu was still not reconciled with his father's untimely death. The latter came home on short leave occasionally, and his bare presence would set everybody on fire.

A huge man, he bagged a rank amongst the lower grades in the imperial army. He was a seasoned and trusted Chōnsa in his battalion in the national army. Wu remembered him fondly lifting Wu on his left arm and Kyoon on the right without effort every time he returned home. With full of vigor and a ravenous appetite, he loved life dearly. How could a sturdy man like him die, Wu thought. He pinched his leg softly under the coffin to rule out any mischief played on the family. He saw his uncle sleeping and breathing briskly, but his father lay there lifeless without a breath. The van halted behind the minibus on the ground close to a semi-hill range in the countryside. Park opened his eyes apologetically and quickly jumped out of the van. Wu saw the mourners with his mother and aunt descending from the minibus. The village geomancer, capable of

connecting to the earth's energy and choosing an appropriate gravesite for the family's good fortune, had already come to the site. He had earmarked a site close to the hilly terrain. Park bowed to him in reverence. Ready to start the funeral procession ceremony, a handful of mourners, along with Park and Wu, held the coffin on their way to the gravesite. Noje, a roadside memorial, was held following the custom to ensure the deceased did not come back to haunt the living. The coffin was lowered three times to signal his permanent departure from the home that he was a member of a day before.

A party of pallbearers took over the coffin from the mourners, singing aloud a mournful traditional community chant. The procession then reached the gravesite. The Shaman already near the site started performing the age-old ritual to rid the site of evil spirits. Lowering the coffin into the grave, Wu, his mother, and his uncle then threw dirt in the grave to accept the finality of what had happened. Shaman asked Wu to stand on the coffin and stomp on the dirt for the closure of the coffin. The Shaman offered food and wine to the spirit of the mountain God. The mountain God was believed to protect the gravesite from any disturbance. The earth was packed on top of the coffin in layers of odd numbers. The grave was not dug deep, kept close to the ground to remain visible and remind the family of their loss. The wooden coffin was now on its way to decompose with the dead.

Wu and the rest of the family members continued to visit the gravesite with offerings on the second and third days after the burial. They made deep bows at the gravesite on the last and final day following the customary rites. For three days, the family and relatives sat around a large table in their home. Everyone was served spicy soup, meat, and fish



in honor of the dead man. One of the older adults narrated to the other mourners how the mourning used to be mixed with heavy drinking and jokes in his youth. Jokes with sexual undertones evoking a sense of rebirth in the dead man used to be exchanged, making him laugh and die in a jovial mood." It is now passe," He said.

Life moved on. Wu at the local school struggled to understand the new system implemented by the authorities. It enjoined the students to learn about the great freedom struggle of the country and the life of their new hero, Kim Jong-un, whose portrait was put up in each classroom. A new emperor had jumped on without hinting to the citizens that they would live and wither at an Orwellian farm. Compared to its southern counterpart, the initial years of the North's liberation were well off with the active aid of the Soviets. Hail Marx, the great humanist of the world. Let state largesse now be used for the common good of the maximum number. A Socialist bent of the history was visible from day one. The Teacher said history started from 1912, when the great leader was born, and a newly anointed calendar was forthcoming.

"Two bastards have spoiled our soup, hope you all know them well, how?" The bespectacled teacher questioned his ninth-standard class.

"Japan of course is the first of them," A student replied confidently.

"And...?"

The teacher raised his hand, holding a wooden cane towards Wu's friend to reply who the second was.

"Sir, Isn't it the south of Korea?" He answered.

"Not exactly, who will answer it."

"Is it the Western world, Sir," Wu replied.

"You are correct, but let's be precise, it is the father of all devil, the United States of America," He answered loudly, almost shouting. The class started thumping on their desktops, gaily keeping pace with the teacher's voice.

"You are no longer kids, you must know the entire background of our country before you join the armed forces in a few years," He said.

"We will cover today how the Americans dropped the nuclear bombs on Japan in August 1945 leading to the end of the second world war," He continued.

Wu and his friend sitting on the backbenches, were lost in their world. Seamster's son was leisurely drawing graphic designs of female Choson-ot; he had been learning at his father's shop lately. His father's variety of dresses using curved features, important in traditional Choson-ot design, were in high demand. As the dress was not designed to be tight-fitting, the inherent beauty was apparent in its elegance and style generated by the abundance of material. The effect was unique when mixed dexterously with curves, lines, and vivid colors. He drew in pencil, page after page, without uttering a word and looking up occasionally towards the teacher to avoid being caught.

"Does anybody know how Korea was affected by the bombs?" The teacher asked.

"We got our freedom since the Japanese government surrendered," A student replied.

"No, you are wrong, don't give in to the capitalist propaganda, we would have earned our freedom anyway eventually by the fierce guerilla war of our national heroes. Do you know hundreds of thousands of Koreans were stationed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki as factory and military

workers who died and were injured permanently? This is how America waged war against Koreans indirectly. They, also, detest our new way of life. In the name of the so-called democratic and free market, they have divided our peninsula. Evil forces have shaken hands with them, be alert and present," He answered triumphantly.

Wu looked at a printed Korean chart his friend had pulled out from his bag showing standard procedure of measurements for female tuxedos. To his young heart, the shortlist was factual but impressive, along with the illustrations. It ran as follows:

*Bust. Measure under the armpits, around the shoulder blades, and over the fullest part of the bust.*

*Waist. Measure around the natural waistline. ...*

*Hip. The hip should be measured around its fullest part.*

*Inseam. This is the measurement from the ankle to the groin when you stand with your legs straight.*

The teacher's speech drowned the four commandments, igniting their imagination. He firmly believed every North Korean must learn the joint misdeeds of the two bastards before he died.

"Just give me your fullest attention, my lads, it pains me a lot to tell you this but I am choiceless. Think of our mothers and sisters, how so dear they are to us. Aren't they? I hope you all are big enough to comprehend the meaning of rape, don't you, thank Goodness, it is a boy's school. The first bastard has raped our women continuously over a long period. Did you know it? They are called abusively 'comfort women'. Our Korean women were lured by the japs to do manual work in their establishment and offices for years together. Bastards in their army raped the hapless women under the pretext of work repeatedly and indiscriminately. I know

of women in my village who for fear of rejection have accepted their fate as such to be tormented by the scoundrels endlessly. Isn't this the height of injustice? Can they come back home? Can they ever live a normal life like the rest of us? No, no, it's big, no. To add injury to insult, a jealous America bombed the two cities specifically, having obtained intelligence beforehand, to be able to eliminate, additionally, the comfort of japs. A sordid tale of this scale is our living reality. Ah, Jot-gat-ne, Ah, Jot-gat-ne," He cursed profusely.

Students had tears in their eyes as the bell rang. They gravely watched their teacher, now bracing to move out in short and slow steps.

Wu studied and worked at the salon until he turned sixteen, ready to be inducted into the compulsory army service for eight years. The rulebook prescribed no marriage until the end of the term. Cho-hee, an apprentice in the female section of his salon, joined his mother recently. A beautiful, fair-skinned girl with big eyes, double eyelids, and medium height completed her school in a suburban village. She was now aspiring to become a good hand at hairdo. She was either his age or a year or two older than Wu. She dressed well and seemed to fit the bill for the salon. She was happy to stay in the capital with her maternal uncle and have a wider choice now for work and marital bonds. Her father was a shaman in the suburban village known to Park. The Shaman had been performing family functions, from the birth of a child to the death of elders. The Shaman had performed the last rites of his older brother in the past. Cho-hee was open to taking up any job for her self-reliance. This is what the supremo Kim had initiated the entire country into, juche. She became friendly with Wu over the work, and they soon developed mutual appreciation.

"When does the service with the army start for you?" she asked Wu.

"In about six months, I think, well, the next eight years I will be a prisoner," Wu answered.

"Don't they grant you leave to come home"?

"Rarely,"

"Let's run away to the south, I heard they accept us, and no questions asked," She said.

"Ha, ha, great idea, but if caught, you are dead," He answered.

"Oh, I was joking. Let's hope we grow as big a country as the Soviets, then we are good here. Ten years after the destruction, our country has been tough, yet we are on the path of recovery with the help of communist bloc and our sheer willpower. The war was not futile," She said.

"A report on the destruction and casualties in the air raids over us was shared by our history teacher. It is frightening. Twelve to fifteen percent of our population was killed in the war. The act inflicting the greatest loss of civilian life in the Korean War was the aerial bombardment of North Korean population centers by the American air force. By the end of the war only two modern buildings remained standing in Pyongyang," Wu said.

"No less than a genocide. You lost your father during this period, no?" She asked him.

"Oh, yes, none of us can ever forget it," Wu answered.

"God bless him, he lost his life in the service of the country. Let me talk something else now. Why don't you join me this weekend in my village? It's the birthday of my nephew this Sunday. His first birthday we will celebrate in the old style, it will be fun," She said.

"Well, I will visit my father's grave as well, fine, so we plan it then," Wu replied.

A small feast was prepared to celebrate her nephew's first birthday in the village. The baby survived his initial tough days with courage.

Samshin Halmoni, the triple goddess of childbirth and fate, was honored with offerings of rice and soup in gratitude for caring for the infant and the mother and for having helped them live through the difficult period. Celebrations with rice cakes, wine, and other delicacies started in the presence of the family, relatives, and friends. Shamam, his wife, son, and daughter-in-law were dressed in bright Choson-ot, radiating happiness. Cho-Hee also wore a traditional dress matching her relatives.

Customarily, red bean cakes were placed at the four compass points within the old house to prevent potential harm to the child and bring him good luck and happiness. Rice cakes were sent to many people to help celebrate the happiness of the occasion. The highlight of this celebration was that the child would symbolically foretell his future circled by the family. The ritual started with the child dressed in new traditional clothes, wearing the traditional hood worn by unmarried youths. The child was seated before a table of various foods and objects such as thread, books, notebooks, brushes, ink, and money gifted to the family by friends and relatives. Her mother then urged the child to pick up an object from the table, as it is believed the one selected first by him will foretell his future. Picking up a writing brush or book, he was destined to be a scholar. If he picked up money or rice, he would be wealthy; cakes or other food, a government official, a sword or bow, a military commander. If the child picked up the thread, it was believed to bless him to live a long life. The

Shaman explained the ceremony to the guests. After some effort, he recognized Wu, whom he met after a decade.

The child looked confused in the presence of the gathering, who urged him cunningly to pick objects of their choice.

"Touch the sword," One man said. "No, no, pick up rice, my dear." Another man said.

"No, pick the brush," Cho-hee said.

"Thread, pick it up," The Shaman said.

The boy felt startled and then caught hold of a writing brush with his left hand and pancake in his right hand. The gathering laughed away at the sight and started blessing him about his multiple choices. It was followed by feasting, singing, and playing with the toddler. The guests gave gifts of money and clothes to the parents. At the end of the ceremony, the guests were given packets of rice cakes. Wu and Cho-Hee sat down with the Shaman after most guests had left. Wu asked him how the American air attacks spared the village and the graveyard where his father was resting.

"Oh, you don't know about the mountain God who protects the dead and the living too. I have read the old books, he will continue to protect us without fail," The drunk shaman said.

"Appa, you used to tell us the story in our childhood, can't remember it anymore, something to do with a bear and a lion, no," Cho-hee asked. Let's hear it, sir, if you wish, " Wu asked.

"Certainly, I will be glad to. It is important to recall that Gojoseon, the earliest Korean kingdom, was founded here in Pyongyang. It is recorded how a divinity started our Korean race. Hwanung, a younger son of the sky God Hwanin, desired to rule the human world. Hwanin thought that

the wish of his son would benefit the human world. Hwanung descended beneath a sacred tree on Mount Taebaek, the great white mountain. He and his three thousand followers founded a Sacred City. With the gods of wind, rain, and cloud, his father, Hwanin, supervised various human affairs.

A bear and a tiger prayed to Hwanung to turn them into humans. Hwanung gave the two animals twenty pieces of garlic and a clump of sacred mugwort. He told them they would become humans if they did not see sunlight for a hundred days after eating them, thus not eating and hunting during the period. The two animals fasted, and the bear became a woman on the twenty-first day. However, the tiger failed to fast and remained an animal. The bear-turned-woman prayed to him for a child at the sacred tree, and Hwanung granted her the wish. He became a human to marry her. She gave birth to a boy named Dan'gun Wanggeom, who founded the kingdom of Gojoseon at the site of Pyongyang. Dan'gun ruled for fifteen centuries here, then departed from the kingdom when the Chinese King Wu of Zhou sent Jizi to rule over Korea. The King, Dan'gun, ultimately became a mountain God who protects us all, "Explained the Shaman animatedly.

"What happened to the lion," Wu said jokingly.

"It entered the bloodstream of Japan, ever-hungry and ferocious," Cho-hee replied.

"But I don't know who will worship the mountain God and what would happen to shamans in the new times, the State detests religion of any sort. We are being marginalized, my generation could be the last to survive here. Our days are numbered," The Shaman said.



Wu left them to catch a bus home before visiting his father's grave.

Cho-Hee, who stayed with her family, waved him goodbye with a warm smile.

Over the next six months, they continued to remain good friends. Wu came to believe that there was no way that Cho, a blooming rose, could avoid being footloose for eight long years until his army service.

However, he reluctantly resolved that one's failures are often the most cherished treasures in such affairs. He moved on and joined the army along with his best friend. Appalled at how the recruits were treated in the training center stationed in Pyongyang, Wu found the arduous training to have a highly debilitating effect on the health of most young recruits. Through his comrades, he learned that it was worse in the centers outside the capital

"Training on an empty stomach, the conscripts struggle with constant hunger. They are given two or three potatoes for a meal or fed solely on raw corn kernels and corn rice. On meager rations, the soldiers have to train themselves rigorously. They are given additional physical tasks, such as helping farmers in their rice paddy fields. Many have lost health and are constantly hungry and desperate to escape. Sometimes, these soldiers steal from civilians and farm stock items. In my high school class, there were 25 boys. Five went to college, and the remaining twenty joined the military. Half of those returned home suffering from malnutrition. These soldiers are given leave to recover. Most are too weak to even walk by themselves, so their parents pick them up and feed them back to health. When they improve, they go back to the army," One of the recruits said who was shifted from a countryside center into the city recently.

He learned a piece of startling insider news from the horse's mouth on how the supremo had formed *Kippumjo*. The country leader maintained a pleasure group, a collection of about 2,000 women and girls to shower him with pleasure, mainly of a sexual nature. They were also used for the entertainment of high-ranking Workers' Party of Korea officials and their families. The service was extended to other distinguished guests. The group's females were made to sign a pledge of secrecy in exchange for big money and gifts doled out to them.

The first two syllables of the name, *kippum*, is a native Korean word that means joy or happiness. The suffix, *jo*, is a Sino-Korean word entailing a group of people. Kim Il-sung established a joy group with a firm conviction that his sexual relations with them would enable him to increase his *jing* and enhance his life force, *gi*.

Each joy group was composed of three teams:

*Manjokjo – a gratification team providing sexual services.*

*Haengbok – a happiness team giving massages.*

*Gamujo – a dancing and singing team.*

Women were recruited to be *Kippumjo* members according to highly evolved criteria. One of them was that they ought to be virgins. After being selected, they underwent a rigorous training period, with some *Haengbokjo* members sent overseas for massage training. *Kippumjo* members were to be replaced at the age of twenty-two or so. It was meant to save the country by protecting and saving the supremo from physical wear and tear.

"Why am I fucking around for nothing here," Wu thought, listening to a senior soldier in charge of one such establishment.

In the third year of his training, Wu finally decided to flee and relocate elsewhere. His best friend, the seamsters' son, had been shifted to another unit. Wu's short leave was accepted for a week. Wu started whistling as the army jeep stopped outside his residential colony. His house was a few steps away. He was nostalgic and gleeful three years later, seeing his house and mother again. Although he was stationed in the capital, short of exchanging open postcards with his family, he was not allowed to meet them. He had a week to plan and execute his exit. Greeting Hyoon, Park, and Jia, who was now the mother of a baby girl. Byat wanted to catch up with all that happened during his absence. Cho-Hee married, he learned. Hyoon found him thinner, looking older by almost ten years than his age. "Nobody dares cross the DMZ, which is one of the most heavily fortified borders in the world. It is safer to go through the northern border. The common strategy is to cross the China-North Korea border into Jilin and Liaoning provinces in northeast China then go to Vietnam or Laos. There are agents I know who do it. Going to South Korea isn't a good option either. You get refugee status, but there are constraints still. The best is to move out to a third country like Hong Kong. Our cousin had settled there before the war and now is leading a prosperous life with his hair salon. we can make a try," Park explained.

The entire family agreed that his decision was timely and well-informed. There was no point in slaving away the best years of his youth in the army prison.

He swam through the Tumen River and crossed into China. He had a rendezvous with his agent at the border, who arranged for him to move to Hong Kong safely.

"Weren't your folks hauled up back in Pyongyang," Byat asked him as they neared the Delhi airport.

"They were, but they chose to disown me to escape any detailed investigation. I remained in contact with my family regularly initially but it grew more difficult as time passed. Of late, I haven't spoken or exchanged a word with them for a long time as surveillance has stepped up," Wu answered.

"Your life has been full of crests and troughs," Aurora remarked.

"Better late than never," Byat added merrily.

## Six

Inside the Delhi Airport, after having a spicy meal in a south Indian restaurant, they waited for their flight to Leh reported to be on time. A flight lasting one and a half hours, it was about to descend Kushok Bakula Rimpochee Airport, the 23rd highest commercial airport globally at 3,256 meter above mean sea level. Named after a Buddhist monk, the Airport was surrounded by soft snow-capped cliffs under rocky terrain. "Awesome, it looks like being in a mythological land," Aurora said, looking down from her window seat.

"Very Harry Potterish scenery," Wu added.

"To me, it is like being in my countryside in Mongolia. It has the same rocky landscape as a cold desert with snow all over. Truly nostalgic," Byat said.

It was late afternoon when the aircraft landed over a thin strip of the Leh Airport. Chilly, dry gusts welcomed them as they descended.

"Hello, Wu, you reached the airport; great, welcome to Ladakh,

"telephoned Stanzin, the Ladhaki friend, Wu's co-worker in Hong Kong.

"Good to hear from you and how is your family and all, I have On the third floor, their rooms opened to a view of incandescent mountains in full moon and longing valleys. e two friends with me as I told you. We will spend a day acclimatizing ourselves in Leh itself then you can fix us a good driver to drive down to Nubra valley," Wu answered.

"Certainly, you spend the night at Hotel India, a neat place there. I have spoken to the owner, who will take good care of you. I will also send you the driver's name and details by the evening. Enjoy yourself, but try to

relax as much as you can. I will see you at my homestay tomorrow," Stanzin disconnected the phone.

Hiring a prepaid taxi to reach Hotel India, they reached their destination in about twenty minutes through a road full of hotels and lodging houses. Leh's off-season began in February, and the room tariff was discounted almost by half. Agreeing to meet for dinner in the dining hall on the ground floor, they passed into their rooms to rest. On the third floor, their rooms opened to a view of incandescent mountains in full moon and longing valleys.

Twenty Signs Your Man is Making Love to You (and not just Lust) was the title of a book lying atop the squeaky wooden almirah that fell in front of him as Byat opened the almirah to keep his luggage in. A former traveler appeared to have left it there. Byat tossed it to the table lying close by, reflecting that he was now above all such junk. "Between Sappho and the modern world, so much has been said about love and lust that now a *tabula rasa*, a suspension of natural belief, was much required for novelty," Byat thought.

"Felt world and a felt body in a pre-dimensional surface- less space would reveal lust as genuinely as its counterpart. If your felt body experience is like looking at a vast landscape, nothing is forbidden," Byat continued with his phenomenological reduction.

"Hello, I am in a hotel in Leh, Ladakh. How are you? Where is Handa?" Byat replied to a video call from Ulan Bator.

"Show us your room first," Altansarnai asked him with Handa beside her.

"Papa, where are your colleagues, aren't they staying close to you?"

Handa enquired.

"We are on the same floor. Maybe at dinner, you would see them, my dear." Their call continued for some more time until Byat immersed himself in a hot water tub in his bathroom.

In her room, Aurora was busy responding to official emails and talking to her mother. She was also working on her blog to post her views on absolute liability in case of a nuclear accident. She grew curious about the sighting of snow leopards during the winter season in Leh. The tourist guide lying in her room was informative.

Wu had ordered tea he was sipping now, viewing the mesmeric world outside his glass window. As it had happened to him occasionally, a thought struck him with doubt about his devotion. What if the ancient religious canon turns out to be a myth, and there is no room for a lofty treasure tower to show up? He nodded in favor of his unsinkable devotion, like every occasion in the past when he had triumphed over his skepticism.

The evening soon rolled into bone-chilling darkness, and it felt like you were under a spell.

"Could we have some fireworks here?" Aurora asked at the reception, where a prominent young man was watching TV displaying a cricket match.

Wu and Byat nodded in agreement while standing in the reception area with Aurora.

"Yes, Mam, I will just make a provision for it, meanwhile, please have our soup, you would relish it, I hope," The young man replied across the counter. A bouquet was laid out in the dining room. He sat merrily ordering food to his chefs in the adjoining kitchen.

"No soup right now, I think we need to celebrate our arrival here with some good liquor, what do you think," Aurora asked her colleagues. The two agreed with her proposal heartily.

Soon a decent bonfire was lit in the open courtyard outside the dining room, and the three sat around it, thanking the boys who arranged the fire.

"Enjoy yourself, my good guests. If you need more liquor or food, just let my man know, and he will take care of it. I need to leave now to attend the wedding of my bosom friend in the neighborhood," The young man said, the son of the owner of the Hotel. Across the courtyard was a low-ceiling residential place for the owner's family. Some family members were seen moving out in rich, traditional ladhaki ceremonial outfits. The young man called them to wait outside the main gate, where he would join them.

"If you wish to watch a traditional ladhaki marriage and taste its unique cuisine, then just tell my man, and he will escort you there, a five-minute walk. Please take this as my personal invitation to you," The young man said, leaving to join his family.

"Oh, thanks a lot for your invitation; let's see how this evening rolls out," Aurora said gracefully with Byat and Wu nodding in gratitude.

Their frontal bodies warmed up soon, with the icy winds tapping their backs continuously.

"Tell us your remote viewing experiments, it does feel like an extraordinary feat that you can sense any part of the world just sitting here, tell us, is it a correct enterprise"? Byat asked Aurora.



"Initially I was skeptical of its success but when results started getting better, I was convinced eventually. Look, I got a promotion with it when I cracked something absurdly important," Aurora answered.

"Let's hear it," Wu spoke.

"Oh, it concerns your country. I received some initial information about a beautiful Korean girl who was in service of the state being part of the pleasure squad of the Dictator. Our intelligence looked for vital information she could be privy to as she was one of the favorite girls. It was me who gave a lead to our intelligence that she was back home with her family for a short vacation in the countryside with special permission granted to her by the overlord himself. No names were mentioned to me except this girl, Jangmi, literally, a rose. We received a report of the whole incident which if Jangmi was to be believed exposed the world to a serious nuclear threat purely on the folly and frailty of the irresponsible officials of the state," Aurora continued.

"Isn't it classified information you may not share with us"? Wu asked her curiously.

"No, not really, as it has been made public in a journal based on our feedback. It has already been refuted by the authorities as a figment of imagination, though," Aurora answered.

"I met the informer myself who hailed from the same village Jangmi came from. He was allowed to move in and out of the country being part of the North Korean state tourism promotional drives in other countries. To cut short the story let me recall how he narrated the whole incident to us. He would describe Jangmi to us as if a goddess had descended in his village. She was privileged to be the part of the pleasure team in keeping the leader, young and kicking, a national duty bestowed on her to help

him remain young. Thus the leader kept at bay the democratic black guards of the western civilization and save the motherland," Aurora continued.

"Let me fill the glasses before you begin," Byat said excitedly.

"Surely, let me help you with it," Wu answered.

What Aurora heard from the horse's mouth kept everyone enthralled for a long time.

Jangmi was not a rose but a meadow of roses, a rain of roses, no matter what she chose to do. The informer, a young man digging into her family's past, talked about her aunt, a part of Kippumjo, having successfully served the father of the present overlord for ten years. Eventually, she married an officer and had a luxurious, peaceful life with a pair of children. Jangmi outshone her aunt in every aspect: height, complexion, glamour, elegance and taste. The village boys were constantly drooling over her plain sight. She seemed to look up constantly through the horizon with an absent gaze. No matchmaker would dare come to the family for her marriage proposal. It is not that she feigned superiority; she was naturally superior to all and sundry. She was a sure winner at the school inspection, where a team of state officers had come to enlist the suitable girls for kippumjo.

A drizzle felt everywhere in the universe when the informer found himself in her company at school events. Could it be that the primordial energy is spotted in flesh and blood, he used to ponder. After she left for her training, he never imagined their paths would cross again despite being a part of the same state service. A dispensing acquaintance, he had common ground now to approach her unnoticed.

"Oh, Joon, so happy to see you, you have hardly changed except that you have a mustache now. I hear you were selected for the tourism promotion abroad. That's great, visiting foreign countries, isn't it, Joon," Jangmi said to the informer.

"Well, it is a hectic job, I felt good in the beginning but soon it faded as you know how the unseemly politicking goes all over the place in our country. Hope you are doing well in your pursuits," Joon retorted to the ecstatic young lady.

"Great, I am fine; I just need to unwind for a month I have here. I am so happy to be with my family. You haven't married, have you? She asked Joon.

"No ways, I have no plans although I receive dozens of proposals every time I am back home. Let's forget about it. If you like, let's meet again, may be in our school backyard after the school hours, let's celebrate our respective successes with a bottle of rare wine I got from Beijing on my trip this time," Joon suggested.

Their first meeting was a head start for Joon as he managed to win the trust of the young lady, who sounded reluctant initially but finally agreed to accept the company of a humble schoolmate. Joon worked close to the script handed over to him as the circumstance permitted him; however, the real test was still to come. Next time, the two met in the school's backyard a week later. Indeed, it was nostalgic for them to return to a place they had studied together for a decade.

"Let me tell you, in the last five years that I have been away, I feel free and relaxed back home, otherwise it's a strict routine that I need to follow with constant surveillance upon us," Jangmi said to Joon.

"We are no freer than you are. Even in the foreign countries we are being watched. But well, that's life, what to do. Money is limited too. But you girls live lavishly I heard," Joon said.

"Grass is always greener on the other side . It's our duty to sing ,dance and all that. A group of two thousand girls is kept well no doubt but lavish life belongs to the Supremo and his close circle. We have a defined territory within which we live by limited resources. A lot depends on your luck actually and who you are admired by,"Jangmi continued.

Jangmi broke into a peal of laughter on hearing Joon tell her that the entire royalty, without fail, would be her admirers. The school backyard was brightened with afternoon sunshine in the moderate autumn weather facing the foothills. Jangmi and Joon sat across a table under the shade of a large pine tree nearby. Half of the wine was consumed between them, and there was no sign of any elation. No soul was seen there besides them.

"Security must be tight overall, no, you can't interact with outsiders, no?" Joon asked.

"State of the art, no room for complacency, it's airtight,"Jangmi replied.

"I hear of war all the time, whenever tensions break out, we in the foreign soil, get doubly charged.Our Supremo is a daredevil, no, doesn't bend easily?"Joon added.

"Yes, now and then, we hear about the preparatory drills of the Army, any time the weather turns hot. They say if the war breaks out, it would be an all-out affair. Very little to survive it," Jangmi said.

"Oh yes, the nature of warfare has completely changed now. Sitting in your own room you can destroy the whole world multiple times ,who

knows what remains in store for us who have barely crossed twenty years. Aren't we born in troubled times?"Joon questioned her.

Two times twenty made a temptatious number as Jangmi ceased to be interested in talks about war and arms.She raised her eyes to look directly into the eyes of Joon, who conveniently forgot his hidden agenda and could not help kissing her passionately before bidding his farewell. They agreed to meet again soon. The next meeting happened within a week at the same venue, same assortments.

"Well, let's not talk about war, it's too dreary, let me know who you befriended at your workplace and places you visited with them," Joon asked her in the next meeting.

"There is nobody from our village here but my roommate is a beautiful and well-behaved girl from the countryside. She speaks a different dialect from us. She has a singsong voice. We are like sisters now," Jangmi answered.

"Good, you have a friend to talk to. We at our place are afraid to talk to anybody lest he turns out to be an informer, we are on tenterhooks all the time. I haven't seen Beijing in a proper way yet. It's a great city, much swankier compared to our Pyongyang. We had quite a scene in our office on my last visit. Our head in charge of operations defected to the south from what I heard. I am telling you all this inside news as we are equals and old friends too, otherwise it is blasphemy to speak about these matters of secrecy. On learning about his defection, we were asked to shut up and a news was circulated by the home ministry that he nearly lost his life while fighting off some unknown assailants at his residence and whether he is alive or taken as a hostage by the enemy was under investigation.To tell you the truth he confided in me once to team up with

him but I flatly refused. Although I respected him a lot, still I chose not to expose him but before long, he fled leaving me in abject silence. I understand he is in the South now along with his family," Joon narrated the incident expecting to gain Jagmi's confidence.

"Oh, so nobody is left in his village or the city he came from," Jangmi questioned.

"Perhaps an invalid father and an old aunt."

"Good riddance, it's so risky. You need a heart of steel to venture such a sizzler," Jangmi blurted out.

"The grass is greener on the other side, he had assured me about the South. He promised me a life full of freedom and a decent life monetarily, that too, far away from unmindful rat race and coercion. Good, he left early otherwise I may have been influenced by his words and joined him myself. Besides, I would have lost the opportunity to kiss the most beautiful girl in the world, ha, ha," Joon said in a tipsy tone.

"You are naughtier than I thought. Good, keep your youthful energy intact. Pour me another one; then I will tell you something very interesting I learned from my roommate, Yu-ri," A little tipsy Jangmi answered.

"Let me play you the first *La Paloma* song I have on my mobile . It's a song of songs ,you must hear it if you haven't already," Joon continued. Joon played the song with the pitch of its volume good enough to reach them without being overheard. Jangmi started clapping her hands, hearing the song she had heard before and liked. Whether meant to depict eternal love or not, it helped the secret lovers reveal their secrets to each other.

"Is it any top notch scandal belonging to the supremo, or what?" Joon asked Jangmi after the song was over.

"No, no, it's a case of the execution of the chief security officer. Yu-ri and other girls were assigned to be stationed in a distant place housing Hi-fi gadgets within a closely guarded cluster of buildings. This is a gory event," Jangmi continued.

Jangmi started narrating the entire sequence of events minutely. This place was so heavily guarded that the guards patrolled every inch. Every entry was restricted, including the Chief's apartment. From his demeanor, it could be easily seen that he was shouldering a heavy responsibility, which made him fidgety and reactive even in normal circumstances. He had a face with an inbuilt smirk, yet he never smiled and laughed. He rose to the top in his early fifties through hard work and sheer loyalty to the Supremo. A few cold-blooded murders in the name of the safety and well-being of the Supremo punctuated his resume'. He was married with a couple of children back home whom he hardly met and visited due to his very sensitive job profile. The job steadily gave him dark enlightenment, for he started living for one day, every day.

Tomorrow was always tomorrow, pretty bleak for him. However, he got accustomed to celebrating it with wine and women at the end of the day. Yu-ri and two other girls would accompany him during these celebrations as permitted by the Supremo. Yu-ri narrated two separate incidents; the latter one took his life. It was an ordinary evening within the complex where the heavily guarded apartment of the officer was decorated for the soiree awaiting the three kippumjo women. Dance and songs would keep the officer and a tight band of his associates entertained this evening. It felt like a lion's den in the initial hours to

these women as their singing and dancing were mechanical until the liquor warmed up the men, who then started behaving better. The Chief was always the last to crack up and would not forget the incisive words of the Supremo: "If we fail to act in time, our small of the backs will burn to leave us all dead as the time to react is so short." In case of a significant enemy attack like a hydrogen bomb, he often visualized the time to retaliate was shorter than sex without foreplay. He found their mock drills a far cry from the actual situation. Yet, it was the safety of the entire country at stake. He stopped comprehending more challenging questions he often heard from his compatriots and resorted to attending to his front first. All the major destinations and their country's local time were displayed on the large wall of the control room alongside a huge screen recording the radar inputs. The room was operated by a responsible officer 24×7 in three shifts. The Chief left the room in the safe hands of the duty officer that evening, like every day. Walking down to his apartment nearby, he planned to shower first and dress up more comfortably. Meeting the women in his drawing room, he greeted them warmly, requesting them to have tea till he got ready and the other guests arrived. Yu-ri and the two women stood up to reciprocate his greetings. The evening rolled out slowly in the beginning, giving way to rapacious merrymaking. The guests and the Chief joined the women in a traditional Korean dance sequence. The Chief received a signal from the control room on his handset in the middle of it. He immediately waved at the party to halt, as it was unusual for the control room to call up at such a late hour.

"Sir, hurry, we are under nuke attack, reaction time Twenty-one minutes max, hurry," The duty officer said shoutingly.



"What the hell are you talking about, are you certain ,have you checked all data, all systems,"?The chief questioned him hurriedly.

"Our systems I only rely on, these show clearly the onslaught. What else can I see besides the available information. Let me call up the technical head for his opinion but where is the time?"The officer answered.

"Call him fast; Let me make my call to the supremo,"The Chief replied. In the commotion,the Chief asked all officers to urgently come to the control room.

"Give me some mouth fresheners as I am going to speak to Supremo.Oh, this late hour ,I don't know whether he is still awake, let me try, I have no choice, these bastards have attacked us in our sleep time."

Before dialing the Supremo's personal secretary, he first instructed his staff to be ready with retaliation subject to the Supremo's nod and the special password to which only he and the Supremo were privy. The password, that changed daily, he recalled in his memory.

"Are you sure, it's an attack?" The Supremo asked.

"Yes sir, it is one, with the reaction time at our disposal now roughly about twenty minutes."

"Let's screw the little boy," The Supremo replied.

"Yes, sir, today's password I remember." I will call you for your nod in the next ten minutes."

"Call me on my personal mobile since I am on the move," The Supremo replied.

The brief and urgent analysis by the technical head bore a stupendously enlightening discovery pointing out a cyberattack by certain unscrupulous hackers who aped the official system so perfectly that they could remote control it and showed an onslaught to the last detail.

Everybody sighed in relief when the Chief hesitatingly broke the news to the Supremo. He ordered a high-level inquiry on the phone, asking everyone to be present before him the next day. He halted his car journey midway to return home as a bonafide mistake was now detected and resolved.

"It is dangerous,fucking dangerous,no,we must evolve a better system lest we are doomed,"The Supremo said while parting.

Yu-ri narrated the second event that happened a few months later when she was commissioned to spend a few days with the Chief at his apartment. She found him now more haggard and taxed than in his earlier days. His natural smirk defining his high cheekbones however continued to give the appearance of a smiling face. His dark enlightenment of late had triggered in him a liquor-induced mania and suicidal behavior. His position and responsibilities increasingly created a vicious whirlpool around him. At times, he felt gagged and breathless if his staff gave some routine drill or preventive tasks a miss or if he overlooked any critical procedure. Recently, he received a letter from the Supremo in the form of a question mark over a security lapse he had left unattended due to other pressing issues. A question mark and the lapse not addressed to Superemo's satisfaction had resulted in capital punishments in the past. The Chief brooded over the whole issue choosing not to respond as he hoped that the Supremo may forget being distracted by a state visit abroad. He ensured that the lapse stood cured to the knowledge of the Supremo. A second Question mark received a few days later took his breath away, and he quickly responded to the mail urging the Supremo to grant him a private audience.

"First send me your explanation," came a quick answer from the Supremo. "I shall, sir, by tomorrow", The Chief answered. The Chief drank heavily that evening on coming home. Yu-ri found him a changed person as he smiled, urging her to sit with him quietly, no songs, no dance today. "What's the matter with you today, you look disturbed today," Yu-ri asked. "Yes, some office work, well, It will pass I hope," The chief answered. "How is your family, sir, I understand you have grown up children, I hope your wife is doing well," Yu-ri asked. "Well, they are all great, I spoke to them today. I wish I was with them today in these hard times, after all, our family stand by us anywhere, no," The chief continued. "Although I have no right to ask you, let me know what troubles you; consider me your kin if you wish, sir; I urge you to stop drinking more; you have had much already," Yu-ri said. "Oh, it's too late to amend things now, feel the pounding of my heart, its wild palpitations began the moment I realized that it is the end of me soon. Some errors that occurred on my account have been taken seriously as the Supremo believes in zero tolerance. We all know this. My days are numbered," The Chief held Yu-ri's hands, placing them over his heart that fluttered abnormally to Yu-ri's amazement. "We must call a doctor, sir, I can feel that you have a medical emergency, meanwhile, I think you need to rest and sleep for a while" Yu-ri continued. "Come close to me my dear, no doctor can help me now, but you can, come closer, I must kiss you, kiss me dearie," The chief blurted out. The two entered the adjoining bedroom, where the Chief lifted Yu-ri up in his sturdy hands and softly placed her down on his bed. He started

undressing quickly. He felt a swarm of flies biting his body, with his heart pounding even harder a moment later.

"Oh,no,I am not in the mood today, not your fault, my dear, I think I need another drink to help me sleep better, come out, let's have a drink together," He said with a somber face.

"No,no,sir,you would kill yourself this way, no more drinks, just go to sleep, I think let's call a doctor,"Yu-ri suggested.

"Don't worry, my dearie, I am better now, see my heart is normal again; I feel better now, we can sit around a while, then I must leave for my office as I have an urgent task to finish."

Yu-ri felt he was now smiling; his usual natural smirk had taken charge of his face. He showed the resolve of a man who had decided to jump into a river.

"Surely you need to talk to your family or a friend, or let me call a doctor, sir, you don't look well", Yu-ri said with concern.

"I am alright, just make me a drink. Sing me 'Spring in My Hometown' you sang to us last time. I yearn to hear it again,"The chief commented. Shaking his head and gulping more drinks, he heard fondly Yu-ri sing this childhood song he grew up with. Yu-ri sang it beautifully, and the lyrics had a pastoral innocence.

*My hometown that I lived in*

*Is a flower blooming mountainous place*

*With peach blossom flowers, apricot flowers, and baby azaleas*

*Various places of flowers in the neighborhood*

*I long for the time I played in that place*

*My old neighborhood was a flower neighborhood and a bird neighborhood.*

*When the harsh blue wind blows from the South  
The weeping willow of the creek is dancing in the neighborhood.  
I long for the time I played in that place.*

At the song's end, he approached Yu-ri and kissed her lightly. He thanked her profusely.

"Now you take some rest yourself dearie, it's late, I will wake you up in the morning as I return,"

He said to her in a matter-of-fact tone. He went out in a hurry, talking to his duty officer from his handset.

"Listen carefully, the Supremo called up a moment back asking us to get ready with the enemy attack as I think he has secret news of an imminent attack on us tonight; hurry up, I am reaching the control room in minutes, don't call up anyone yet, we will follow his instructions, let me check with him first," Chief said.

"Yes sir, I will be ready by the time you reach," The officer answered.

The Chief walked down the control room with unstable steps stung by his thoughts grounded in his helplessness over a thankless job, lapses in a burdensome high position, longing for his family and countryside, failure to be aroused enough sexually this evening, and his alternate decision to convert his suicide into a Genocide.

"Let me hit all major destinations simultaneously, just optimum for a ripple effect. I would be the first man to unfurl such a grand scale agenda in the history of humanity, no parallel ever I feel", He thought while walking slowly towards the control room.

"I brought you some peace; drink as much as you can, as after we have launched, there is no returning," He said to the duty officer.

The duty officer, a senior ranking officer, was accustomed to energizing the whole process within minutes in accordance with the regular drills undertaken by his office. In the absence of the password and the nod of the Supremo, the operation was kept suspended yet ready for launch.

"For security reasons, the Supremo has asked me to take his nod over my residential phone as these calls may be intercepted, we fear. Let me feed the password and return home quickly for his nod. Nobody ever got to know the daily password except me and the Supremo, today, I will tell you the privileged information as I am sure none of us would survive after the launch. It is a perfect MAD situation. See the password I feed into the system. its....*Big boys steam the blondes and brunettes alike today.* Well, now it's fed into the system. Just relax; I am returning and awaiting his instructions at my residence. Talk to your family, but don't alert them as it's too late. Just imagine meeting them again in the afterworld, if any. Let me hug you, dear officer, before I go. One last favor: if you don't hear from me or the head office in the next ten minutes, detonate as no one knows this hour who is who and identities could be mistaken. I spoke to Supremo ten minutes back and he ordered a time of twenty minutes to launch, the outer limit. So, let's follow our dear leader in letter and spirit,"The Chief said before leaving the control room in the hands of the officer whose eyes had sunken back in stony silence, displaying a sense of vitriolic fatalism. The control room sheltering dozens of officers and technicians working round the clock was now condensed to the Chief's small room, where entry was banned, and only duty officers had access there. Soon after the Chief left, the office phone rang up. The personal secretary shouted at the duty officer about why the chief security officer avoided his calls and how the mock drill was kept

tonight without informing the Supremo. They received this information as the automatic system had alerted them about the preparations.

"What, isn't it the real launch authorized by the Supremo himself, what the Chief informed me and ordered me to detonate the nukes in ten minutes. It is the supremo order, he said. He has fed the password into the system as well,"The duty officer informed.

"You, bastards, what are you up to? Halt, halt, halt, the Supremo is calling you on a video conference, just hold on. Don't go away; it's a question of fuck's fuck, you know what I mean,"The personal secretary answered.

"I recall you as I screened you for the job. Do you see me clearly, officer," The Supremo asked the duty officer.

"Sir, sir, I do, I think I was misled by the Chief today. He quoted your orders to launch urgently. What could I do sir,?"

"Don't you worry, how do you say he has fed the password into the system, officer?"The Supremo questioned.

"Well, sir, he shared it with me while punching it into the system,"

"What is it,"

"Big boys, steam the blondes and brunettes alike."

"Holy fuck, just hold on, don't proceed with anything; keep displaying your screen and keyboard to us and undo the password immediately; I am holding by,"The Supremo replied with alarm.

"Yes sir, let me, please."

The duty officer fed the password hurriedly, but it was invalid. The Supremo instructed him to put a comma after the words, Big boys, which was an instant success. He nodded to the Supremo with gratitude and humility, tears rolling down his eyes.

"System disengaged sir fully, let me know the next," The duty officer asked.

"What did he say to you last"?

"He said to launch the system in ten minutes if nobody called me."

"All right, don't call him again, my Chief, you are my new chief security officer now. Can there be two chiefs together?"

"No sir, he needs to be relieved."

"Without going into the causes that drove him to venture such a sinister plan of action, I, the Supremo, order you to shoot him at sight, what else do you do to a mad dog. Send me the live coverage of him till he is buried, understood?" The Supremo ordered.

"Sir, yes sir, I understand."

"Use your service revolver, now well, about ten minutes to go for the explosion in his view. Go finish the job without delay, and leave it to us to make an official statement for the public, understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Good job you did today, keep your good work on, my chief."

"Yes sir, I would to the best of my ability."

Disconnected, he mustered his courage to use his service revolver on none other than his boss. In these wee hours, he saw the bottle of wine the Chief had left him for his solace.

"Let me become a dog to kill another. Let me drink it all; let me go over to the Chief's place and do the job quietly," He thought.

Much before ten minutes expired, the Chief called up the duty officer, instructing him to launch the attack immediately as the Supremo had indeed nodded. The duty officer nodded back to him in the affirmative, requesting him to have a last drink with him if permitted.



"Yes my dear, come over to me after you have launched, I am waiting for you, come fast."

"Sir, I will be with you in a moment."

Soon, he reached the apartment of the Chief, who opened his main door to him, looking bathed and relieved. He saw Yu-ri sitting in his drawing room with a glass of juice in her hand.

"Come, be my guest tonight, you remember Yu-ri who is a great singer, she sings to us our favorite songs. Be comfortable."

"Yes sir, please be at ease. Does she know what we are up to ?" The duty officer asked in a hushed-up voice.

"No, no, it's a state secret, let her remain a good singer, no need to make her panic."

"What you wish me to sing, gentlemen," Yuri asked them.

"oh, tell us your choice officer," The Chief asked.

"No sir, after you, please go ahead,."

"Ok, then, oh my darling, play us the same countryside song you sang me this evening,"

"Yes sir."

Yu-ri started singing the song with the two officers lightly clapping for her. As she was reaching the grand finale and sang, "I long for the time I played in that place," a shot was heard piercing through the head of the Chief, who lay lifeless on the ground in a pool of blood. Yu-ri looked stunned upon learning that the Supremo had ordered his execution. The Chief's live pictures were being sent to him as evidence of the death. He asked her to keep shut about the incident until an official statement is issued. The state information department was quick to issue a report to his family and the public that he took his own life due to a precarious

state of mental health he had been struggling with for a while. The video sent to the Supremo later contained his last rites and the state burial. The new Chief received a call from the office of the Supremo, wanting to speak to him personally.

"Good, you did a thorough job, my Chief. I did notice his trademark smirk however tell me, I zoomed it twice, the inscription over his tomb read differently, no?"

"Sir, sir, I removed the outer semi-circle of the letter P to read more appropriately following his crime. It reads, RIF. Besides let us make him jovial at his death in accordance with our customs," The new Chief replied.

"Ha, ha, great work indeed, he deserved it," The supremo laughed merrily.

## Seven

A haze of woodsmoke descended slowly across them into the mini valley that did not reflect anything except the dark shimmering presence of poplars. The fire in front was burning bright before them, almost drunk. They ate a lot of piping hot snacks.

"I think we could attend the neighborhood marriage the owner had invited us earlier to, it should be great fun to watch the couple in their local style and traditional attire. Can we ?" Aurora asked the other two.

"I wouldn't mind," Byat answered.

"But we need to carry some presents; no, it would be awkward to go there empty-handed," Wu suggested.

"Well, they seem to have a good selection of souvenirs here at the reception; we could choose one of them," Aurora replied.

The young ladhaki boy serving them snacks volunteered to escort them to the wedding venue. He helped them choose a gift from the collection. He was quick to tell them briefly about ladhaki marriages.

"We don't need a priest or a Lama to solemnize the wedding here. Once a couple decides to live together, they do so without any formal ceremony. They can live this way as long as they wish, sometimes even years so that if you decide to marry later, often your children witness it. They thus organize what is called a 'Bagston' to seek the approval of the parents and the elders. Today, the marriage is of a young couple. The couple wears the traditional Ladakhi outfit. Apart from a gift that you are willing to give the couple, you would need a pair of sacred scarves each to honour the couple. It's called kathak, meant to bless the couple. I will get you the

scarves from the house, meanwhile, you finalise the gift,"The Ladhaki man said.

They bought a pair of sandalwood perfumes at the reception, colorfully wrapped into a gift. Wishing to look formal, they decided to change their attire and, thus, went to their rooms to rejoin shortly.

A celebration was on in a big hall at the venue when they entered it, puzzled and shy. The guests were seated on the floor, enjoying the delicacies amid slow traditional songs. A beaming couple sat in the center wearing heavy traditional clothes. The bride wore an attractive headgear called 'Perak,' made of black lambskin studded with semi-precious turquoise stones that covered her head like a cobra's hood tapering to a thin tail reaching down her back. Her colorful robes in silk and brocade glittered below her beaming face. The bridegroom wore a Goncha, brightly colored dress made of silk and velvet, a traditional ladhaki attire. They were brought before the couple, pleasantly surprised to see foreigners in their gathering. They Placed the white kathaks over the couple. The wedding gift was handed to the couple with flowing greetings and handshakes. The hotel owner's son then took them aside, inviting them to be part of the celebrations.

"What time do you plan to leave for Nubra tomorrow?" He asked them.

"Well we need to have a good long sleep tonight to wake up late tomorrow, let's say by one in the afternoon," Aurora answered.

"Good enough, I will keep ready a sumptuous brunch for you, however, let me for the present serve you our barley drink, chang, or if it interests you, you could have butter tea, a specialty here. Besides, we have prepared a variety of rich ladhaki food you are sure to relish tonight,"

"Well, no more drinks and food for me, my stomach is full with the delicious snacks you boys treated us to," Byat said.

"I too wish to relax now, no room for any food," Wu said.

"Same with me," Aurora added.

"In that event, we will not let you leave without tasting our Swedish that my cooks have prepared for the occasion; you get this in our hotel back; it's a saffron pudding hugely famous with the name of my hotel, just try it please once," Insisted the young man.

They truly relished the taste of the saffron pudding. Thanking the owner, they left for their hotel alone as no escort was needed. Star-strewn sky and its vastness above added to the mind-blowing cold waves as they climbed the winding road ahead.

"Who knows we spot a snow leopard on the way; they are most active after the dark," Byat said jokingly.

"Forget it, these elusive animals are always a rare sight, sometimes it takes weeks, even months to spot them. They are truly an endangered species. Watch them on YouTube if you wish," Aurora said.

"looks like you have a good view on it," Commented Wu.

"Our rooms have a pamphlet on it, just check, it is informative," Aurora said.

They reached the hotel, happy to see the smoldering fire still generating warmth.

"Let it sleep as we prepare to sleep ourselves," Byat laughed moving past the fire.

They retired to their rooms, waving at each other.

Stanzin, Wu's friend, had already instructed the local driver to reach them by noon the next day to undertake a five-hour journey to Nubra Valley.

Leh to Nubra was a route that has existed for centuries, part of the famous silk route in the distant past. Byat googled how it was in old times when camel caravans from Leh stopped over Khardung la through Nubra Valley for their onward voyage into central Asia to Rome with silk and its garments, with other tradable goods. An old story kept him pleasantly engaged since it revealed features of where he was presently staying and where he would be staying the next day. In old times, caravans have had a history of coexisting with bandits and brothels on the way, just as the term 'silk road' is now associated with similar traits in modern times. Gazala was a local beauty, and Arsalan was a wayward bandit who had been to Rome once with his master in connection with his trade of human trafficking. In a major looting encounter, Arsalan recently laid his hands on some gold and a rare precious bundle of joy containing eggs of silkworms and mulberry seeds. A short handwritten note on the process of sericulture involved in the nurturing of silkworms was tucked in. Sericulture was a highly guarded secret those days, and anybody found smuggling these contrabands out of China was to receive capital punishment. Adding to his corpus, Arsalan would visit Gazala every night for days to execute his master's sinister plan. After winning her trust, he proposed to her to run away with him to Rome for a happy and settled life. She was interested in snatching his treasures soonest and then, at an opportune moment, getting rid of him as she had successfully and quietly gotten rid of some of her loaded suitors in the past. Arsalan looked like the archetype of bandits and Vikings, being strongly built, muscular face with a bushy moustache, amber eyes, and thick black hair. Despite being older than Gazala by many years, his youthful energy exploded through him seamlessly. Gazala looked quite a foreigner in this

part of the world with sharp classic features reminiscent of a Marcopolian mishmash. She was known to interview her suitors. She was a Greek goddess. Arsalan was defenseless in watching her drink water that flowed through her throat transparently. A woman could chomp you with her mere presence. Arsalan lived far into Nubra Valley, an overnight distance from Leh. Finally, he proposed to her to accompany him to Nubra, live there for a while for the dust to settle on her disappearance, and then catch friendly caravans for the onward journey in bits and pieces to avoid prying eyes.

"Rome, we marry, sweetheart," He said.

"Yes, let's start a family," Gazala answered smilingly while visualizing her journey back home along with the spy sent by her establishment to guard her.

"We need to identify the longest spring-like weather at any place on our way to Rome to help us have maximum silk and be rich quickly.

Silkworms live by spring and mulberry leaves," Arsalan informed her.

"Sure, we do but you should be more familiar with it since you say you have been to Rome once," Gazala replied.

"We need to work this out, maybe some offbeat place we get to know as we travel. In the worst case, Insha Allah, we turn to Eden garden where there is spring round the year," Arsalan said jokingly.

"Ha, ha, we will find our Eden garden somewhere close by, not Allah's Eden garden. Also, between the two of us we have eaten umpteen apples, we are surely banished from it," Gazala retorted with a naughty smile.

"This is our sweet freedom. Hope we meet our spring early. So tomorrow you meet me on the way up near the mosque. We start our onward journey promptly, Insha Allah," Arsalan said.

The next day, the two set off as planned. In the cold desert, a two-humped camel hired for the journey sailed them overnight into the valley formed by two ancient rivers, Shyok and Nubra. A dreamy oasis held them together close and warm in the middle of vast mountain slopes and vast rocky fields. An arid sandy stretch came to their view towards the end of the journey depicting a perfect contrast in this picturesque dry land. Mostly abandoned, the roads were bumpy and rough to ride. At a far-off village, Arsalan lived. He stayed within a large joint family. He avoided them for obvious reasons, choosing to remain close to the main road by hiring a comfortable shanty overlooking a vast green stretch near the Nubra River. Their temporary home gave them comfort with days passing quickly. His bag, that Arsalan had guarded dearly throughout the journey, was missing as he came home one evening, making Gazala wildly upset. "Where have you kept your bag, my master?" Gazala asked him coaxingly.

"At safe haven, you know this place, a thoroughfare. It is not safe. We will carry it along as we move again in a month or so," Arsalan answered.

"Gold is fine, but you said, the silkworm eggs need attention. How do we manage to keep them alive and multiplying, didn't you think it over,"

"Oh, cold is the key. They are preserved till the cold conditions prevail.

This weather will keep them intact. Besides I have kept them inside thick ice close by, nothing to worry really,"

On ensuring Arsalan was asleep, Gazala would motion her accomplice to wait as the time was not ripe yet. Her searches within the house only yielded small quantities of gold and silver meant for daily use. However, as days passed, she came to like her hurricane tryst with a man she proposed to kill. Living as a couple was a newfound enigma for her. She



longed for an uninterrupted flow of life like the vast landscape she now felt within. It was not strictly an outburst of love but felt like a sense of security, a sense of care that she had known only with her long-dead mother. Arsalan was beginning to relish this lifestyle, although his plans remained unruffled. He would go out every day for some hours to visit the mosque at a distance and return with delicacies to offer to his flame. Gazala decided to drop her vicious plans in favor of the dream life he had promised her. She quickly got rid of the spy by telling him that the precious items had been placed under the custody of a local lord to be sold and consumed under his instructions. No good would follow to chase Arsalan anymore. She promised to come home at the earliest opportunity. It was raining throughout the valley, with snowfall many inches every day. The weather kept them close together for long periods with unsatiated passion. The colder, the better it was for them and their unhatched silk eggs. Gradually, Arsalan had a change of heart and dropped his plan as well. Gazala was stupefied when Arsalan one day revealed to her what he and his master dealt with and what evil had pushed him to elope with her.

"You took me out for this, oh, so awful, Arsalan, I treat you like my little God, but why did you tell me midway when your plans are still at large," Gaala thundered out.

"I changed my plans, you would be my sweetheart for life now, our plans remain as before, but now we marry and settle down wherever we find spring along our way, no need to go to Rome now, let bygones be bygones, we start a new life now," Arsalan answered her with moist eyes.

"Let bygones be bygones, I love this feeling and the life ahead of us," Gazala said tactfully, keeping her secrets from him.

"I have a big quantity of gold to help us settle anywhere in the world, and silkworms would do the rest in making us rich and well-fed," Arsalan said in an anguished voice.

"Would it not be a case of felt bodies in a pre-dimensional surface- less space discovering themselves anew?. Isn't it a shower of lusty love or lovely Lust transforming two lives dramatically in the face of a temptation that even Jesus Christ could not resist on his cross? Isn't it like finding a purpose for our mundane existence? Isn't it a case of beautiful interpretation of our circumstances that any human being is innately capable of?" Byat thought before dozing off.

The next afternoon, a rich brunch at the dining hall served with ladhaki and intercontinental cuisine was amazing and fresh. Some of the vegetables served were, in fact, from the hotel's backyard. Momos, thukpa, skyu, chhutagi, tingmo, chhurpi, butter tea, khambir, along with toast bread omelette, steak, sausages, and chicken pakoras made it hard to choose what to eat and what to leave. Some ladhaki dishes were lovingly packed for them on the road when the owner invited them to stay in his hotel on their return journey. Looking up to a journey of hairpin turns, austere valley, rockslides, and passes topping 17,000 feet, the three set off in a four-wheel, eight-seater Tata Sumo Van driven by a chubby and happy middle-aged ladhaki driver, Motup. Shimmering poplar trees and fluttering prayer flags greeted them on their way up, leading them to the highest motorable road in the world, khardung la, a pass sheltering about ten thousand camels and horses every year in old times. A convoy of army trucks about a kilometer long preceded them, that Motup could

overtake only after repeated attempts as it was a single road with traffic on both sides.

"It's a highly sensitive area, we get to meet the Army everywhere in this region. Brave men guard us even when we sleep, we look up to Delhi now for all our issues, Leh is represented by our elected member of Parliament there," Motup said on the way.

"So, Leh has become the epicenter of all political activity. But tell me, where is the world-famous monastery, Thicksay, I read a lot about. How far is it from Khardung la? Aurora asked.

"Well, Mam, it is another route from Leh towards Leh Manali highway, not very far, less than an hour's journey. Today our journey through Khardung La would eventually take us to the Shyok and Nubra rivers and the valley. These rivers have been the lifeline here for centuries," Motup answered.

Aurora sat in the front seat with Motup, who happily told her about the surroundings. He also talked about his family and the place he stayed in Leh. His two daughters had gone to Dehradun for higher studies, and his younger brother was a young lawyer who studied the law in Delhi with plans to settle down in the capital itself.

"Khardung la should be a fun spot with lots of tourists I think," Wu asked.

"Yes sir, during the summer season there are traffic jams which we would avoid in this season with hardly any tourists. In about one hour we reach there and you can have tea and the popular Maggie noodles there," Motup answered.

Byat appeared to be on his own, ruminating. He would not stop glancing at Aurora, who instinctively turned back now and then, finding his sheepish eyes turning away from her.

"So, something is brewing in the heart of the Mongolian. How are these ancients still roaming the world?" She smiled, enjoying the attention a woman receives from a doting inamorato. Byat felt relieved to notice that she did not take offense against him. He felt emboldened and, wishing to divert his attention, questioned Motup whether he had been to New Delhi.

"No sir, I have not yet but I intend to visit it soon. My brother has a small place in Delhi so we are planning to be there during the monsoons,"

"How is his practice and what areas he deals in," Aurora asked him.

"Oh, Mam, he is a novice at the moment and is working in a chamber in the Supreme Court of India. He is primarily learning about the filing of public interest litigation which he told us has a lot of promise for the budding lawyers, let us see how it all fares up,"

"So you talk to him regularly. Is he married"?

"Yes, Mam we talk often. He is single. Let him establish himself first in the capital. To tell you the truth about the Buddhist community here it is the unavailability of eligible bachelors that has forced our women to marry outside the community, even outside the religion. We need to keep pace with the modern world. There is brewing tension between us and Muslims on this count. We have regular meetings about retaining our culture and women. we are educating our children to meet the challenges of the new world,"

"I read somewhere but I cannot recall that Ladakh has been historically one of the most cohesive regions embracing within itself Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism alike, " Wu asked him.

"Quite so, Sir; unlike the Kashmir valley, this region is fully peaceful with no threat of militancy and terrorism. We believe in peaceful protest. If you are interested, I can tell you about another peaceful campaign that we Buddhists have started against some portions of Hindu scriptures that overreach our existence. My brother has been successfully sensitizing the whole issue through an online campaign that he is confident that he may finally get us justice from a court of law, "Motup answered.

"Against Hindu scriptures, what is it about? Tell us, " Aurora enquired, growing curious.

"Well, we are born and brought up here amidst all religions so I know what is what. But let me first tell you about the fundamental belief amongst Hindus about the ten incarnations of the Godhead, Lord Vishnu. These are, the Fish, the Tortoise, the Boar, the Man-Lion, the Dwarf, Parasuraman, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalki: These ten names should always be meditated upon by the wise, is the preaching found in an ancient scripture, Garuda Purana. Now, the belief in these incarnations is unshakable amongst the people in the country. They are told through the scriptures that out of the ten, one is yet to be incarnated in the current period called, kali yuga. For us Buddhists, all is well if our master is taken to be an avatar in the Hindu religion. A God is God by whatever means he is known. However, the trouble began when we noticed that the last of the avatars, Kali has some horrendous and hideous designs against the Buddhists who he intends to wipe out from Earth during his incarnation,"Motup continued.

"Is it so, how could the followers of the avatar be treated such by another avatar, isn't it a contradiction of terms?" Byat asked Motup.

"Precisely sir, we have taken a stand on it in our online petition. It has already been signed by thousands of Buddhists. You can have a look at this petition yourself," Motup answered while pulling a typewritten petition out of his corner seat.

The petition contained several pages and started with what Kalika Purana had to say about the final avatar. This scripture is written in the past tense as if the events shown in it have already occurred. It was explained that seers who wrote it could simultaneously see all dimensions of time.

Hence, although depicted as having already performed his Lila, the avatar is yet to descend upon Earth. Byat read out the petition aloud.

"In terms of Kalki Purana, the final avatar of Vishnu takes birth on the Earth, plunders nearby tribes to support his father's horse sacrifice, kills many people and exterminates almost every tribe, and kills *Buddhists*. What is the crime of Buddhists that they deserve to die at the hands of the Kalki avatar? Because they are Buddhists, they are heretics.

Sri Kalki Purana 16.1 "Suta Gosvami said. After killing the *Buddhists* and mlecchas of Kikatapura, Lord Kalki took their wealth. He returned to His capital, along with His vast Army."

Sri Kalki Purana 3.10: "After that, You will set out to conquer the entire world, and in the course of that conquest, You will defeat many sinful kings who are representatives of Kali. You will also annihilate many followers of *Buddhism*. Finally, You will entrust the responsibility of ruling the world to Devapi and Maru.

Sri Kalki Purana 10.30: "Recently, You appeared as Lord Kalki to eliminate the dynasty of Kali by destroying the Buddhists, atheists, and

mlecchas, thereby protecting the true path of religion. What more can we say about your causeless mercy?"

The petition was rolling on in further detail, and Byat put it down in frustration.

"Surely there is a reference to the killing of Buddhists here," Byat said with emphasis.

"A contradiction is self-evident here. My brother wishes to point out the contradiction to the court of law and he says he is confident in getting an injunction against the prophecy in the best manner possible under the legal framework," Motup continued.

"You mean you would get an order to stop the Avatar from taking birth on earth," Byat asked.

"No, no it is simpler, my brother says we would pray the court to delete the objectionable portions from such texts being read and recited by the Hindu community. Let the avatar descend but before the event let the script be suitably amended and deleted. Besides one of the annexures to this draft petition, you would find it startling as my brother has researched that the Kalki avatar has already descended on Earth long back. A Hindu Sanskrit scholar has declared in his research that Mohammed the prophet, is the one Hindus have been waiting for centuries. According to his research, It is stated that it is a proven fact that Prophet Muhammad fits the description of the Ultimate Sage, whose coming has been prophesied in the Vedas, the Bible, and the Buddhist scriptures," Motup said. Byat read aloud the concluding part of the annexure containing excerpts from a research paper, which read pretty outlandish and tantalizing.

*"My Heart was therefore aroused with the inspiration that TRUTH must be revealed, even though it could be distasteful to some people.*

*In the period before Muhammad, Indians and Arabs had the same religion. Many proofs of that still exist. But this is not the right place to go into that. I am not in favor of religious narrow-mindedness.*

*Regardless of where it comes from, I do not dare to reject the truth.*

*The Vedas have prophesied about the coming of a sage who will ride on camel-back, have twelve wives, and whose name will be Narashangsa.*

*Shayana has given the meaning of Narashangsa as one who men praise.*

*However, as a result of my analysis, I find it difficult to agree with*

*Shayana. Narashangsa indicates a person whose very name means 'The*

*Praised'. 'The Arabic word Muhammad means 'The Praised'. Therefore,*

*Narashangsa and Muhammad are synonymous. In the rest of the book, I have endeavored to reveal this truth sincerely.*

*India and the world are all ears about the coming of Kalki Avatar - the last great man. Various scriptures have mentioned him in various ways.*

*Many identifications of this great man have been described. He has been mentioned in many places of our Vedas and the Puranas."*

*Dr. Ved Prakash Upadhyaya's above analysis says that the prophet Muhammad has been described differently in the Vedas and the Puranas.*

*Firstly, as Narashangsa or 'the Praised'. This has been described as the meaning of the word Muhammad. Secondly, Antim Rishi - the Final Sage.*

*The Qur'an also declares Muhammad as the final Messenger. Thirdly,*

*Kalki Avatar will be the sage for the last period. Muhammad has*

*undoubtedly arrived in the current Kalki period. Fourthly, Muhammad*

*has been mentioned in the Vedas by name. Therefore, from all four points*



*of view, the prophet Muhammad is being referred to as the one already incarnated.*

"I have Hindu friends so I know what reverence they hold for their Godhead Vishnu, every Hindu house in this country worships him in one way or the other so I asked my brother not to get mixed up in such affairs and asked him to concentrate on the text of Kalki Purana only," Motup said anxiously.

"Well, that's fine, but we are having a private discussion. How is it that it could be such a rare coincidence that a prophecy made in the Sanskrit texts was verified in the person of the prophet Mohammed? What you read is that their names are synonymous, they are the last prophets, and they would appear in the last era of the Earth. isn't it fantastic?" Wu asked.

"We forgot about the incidence of twelve wives and camel riding. One point is clear though, if it is a correct elucidation then the Avatars are increasingly becoming more secular as Buddha was a sure departure from the mainstream religion and the next and the last avatar Muhammad founded a new religion altogether," Byat added.

"Well, I think if it is a coincidence then let it be. But if it is the truth as claimed by the author then it will establish itself sooner or later. I would like to be mum on this subject, however." Motup said.

"One is aware how serious this topic could be in this region. What I know of Indian history and culture let's leave it here and let the scholars fight over its accuracy. However, I would like to meet your brother as I keep having issues in the legal circles in New Delhi. Tell us for the present how far is the khardung la?" Aurora asked Motup.

"In fifteen minutes we will be there," Motup answered.

"Experiencing pre-dimensional surface-less space is the key to all dilemmas provided the person opposite you lives by the same catharsis. Let me hope a window opens to Aurora in this dimension," Byat thought philosophically as they drove up to the top. The weather was slowly turning into a fierce cold horizon of clouds anywhere you looked, and the untrained driver here would miss the safety on the winding and curving roads. Fortunately, Motup knew every hairpin bend closely due to his driving experience. Soon a place that looked deserted and no man's land came into their view with landmarks of the height and distances adorned with colorful flags fluttering unceasingly. They exited the car, yearning for a hot beverage in the bone-chilling cold. An Indian Dhaba was functioning nearby with smoke exiting from its metal chimney. Hot coffee and noodles were served inside a wooden hut in a makeshift sitting place. A place like this felt heavenly, with tufts of warmth spreading out from the live kitchen tandoor burning bright.

The coffee tasted too sweet, so they asked the serving boy to sprinkle more coffee to tone down the sugar. Hot Maggi noodles, a specialty in these hilly terrains, tasted roasty and spicy with lots of capsicum floating in its brown sauce. They bought five-star chocolates for the road that would now descend unhurriedly into the valley. However, the visibility continued to be poor, with the headlights of the slow-moving cars struggling to identify the movement of the opposite traffic. These cars moved up and down the road with yellow headlights, a short amplitude, barely lightening the tract in the cloudy aura. After covering a good distance downwards, the road ahead was lit with sunshine you experience at high altitudes, announcing an eternal day full of activity and surprises.

In minutes the landscape changed into a distant sight of the valley with flowing trickles of waters, sparse green plants and trees beaming back at them as they drove down. It was getting warmer.

Reaching the homestay of Stazin in the evening, right in the heart of Hunder village, they were greeted with a newly built house colorfully painted close to the most beautiful stretch of land, the Hunder Sand Dunes of Nubra Valley. Stanzin, his wife, and their daughter came out to receive Wu and others. The two, Stanin and Wu met after a gap of about thirty years since their days together at the Hong Kong salon. They hugged each other briefly before introducing the rest to the rest. Stanzin's young daughter, about 5 years old, was smiling ecstatically. Her mother, in her early thirties, welcomed everyone. Stanzin looked a little famished by his thin frame and emaciated face compared to his wife, who radiated health and well-being. Stanzin, who had joined and completed a short service of the Indian Army, had come home a year back to start a new homestay venture at his existing plot of land.

Tourism had caught up with Ladakh recently, with Nubra at its pinnacle. It felt like being in a fairyland, and Byat sincerely felt it was a place where there would be songs to sing. Aurora, on her part, was far from being relaxed as a spate of emails she received from her office informed her about a possible faceoff near Hong Kong. She only hoped that she would not have to cut short her trip. She smelt fresh paint on the outer walls of the homestay as she entered its main hall, where some wooden cots, cane chairs, and tables were placed for the tourists to serve as a reception area. Their Icards and registration forms were taken, compulsory for all guests, especially the foreigners. "Well, I have some work to finish. So I may not come for dinner. Please send me a bit of

everything that you have prepared for dinner tonight to my room.

Besides, let the two pals talk to their heart's content as they are meeting after decades," Kissing the owner's daughter, Kia, Aurora hurriedly waved at them to enter her room on the ground floor. About eight rooms on the property were located on the same floor below a huge terrace.

Byat and Wu retired to their rooms before promising Stanzin to meet him before dinner over the champagne that Wu had just presented him besides other gifts.

Back in her room Aurora quickly opened her system. Aurora with her remote viewing felt a shining dark face staring at her as she employed the available information about the Hong Kong fresh leads. Her remote viewing typically resulted in incomplete information, but sometimes, she felt almost sure of what she saw. This time, she saw the whereabouts of Hong Kong and the dark, smiling, and shining face belonging to an African black. He was guessed to be part of the infamous Silk Road. Still, his exact location and his secrets were unavailable. She looked at her mobile for the equivalent time in Hong Kong then. It was 3 AM.

"Let me try again after an hour to guess his location," Aurora thought. Meanwhile, Stanzin's wife and Kia served her a sumptuous dinner. She warmly greeted them, requesting them to stay back.

"Have you had your food already? Where are the rest of them?" Aurora questioned her. "No, I haven't eaten, but Kia has had her dinner. The men are on the terrace drinking champagne. Aren't you hungry, Mam?" Stanzin's wife asked Aurora.

I am hungry as a wolf, but why don't you join me for dinner. Also, little Kia can have some Swedish too. Come, Kia, what will you have, darling," Aurora said.

"You start with these onion pakoras, as starters, Mam. Meanwhile, let me have a trip upstairs once, then I join you later as they will take a long time to eat dinner," Stanzin's wife said.

"Oh, that's great. I am waiting. Leave Kia behind if you wish," Aurora answered.

"Surely, enjoy yourself, mam," Stanzin's wife said before leaving them. Kia constantly smiled at Aurora, who found her overall colorfully decorated with myriad hues. She only had her pink face exposed to the bitter cold. Aurora loved the doll-like looks of the girl and her picturesque garment. She heard through her shut window a possible altercation between a young girl and a man right outside the entrance of the homestay. Soon Stanzin's wife was seen talking to the two together and making signs to them to leave.

"What was the fight about? Sorry I couldn't catch your name, good lady," Aurora asked Stanzin's wife after she returned.

"I am Zopa. Well, the couple outside stayed with us last night in the homestay. The girl, an Israeli national, came with the Indian man you saw outside. They seem to have some fights, I don't know what, but the girl wants to stay at our homestay all by herself and I told her that there is no accommodation tonight. Last night we saw the two of them heavily drunk creating a lot of ruckus, so it is best to avoid such people before the police intervene," Zopa answered.

"You need to be careful running the homestay, no. It can be quite trying sometimes," Aurora commented.

"Yes, Mam, liquor, and drugs are rampant amongst such people. Anyhow, would you not want me to heat the dinner if it is cold?" Zopa asked.

"No, Zopa, not at all, I can feel the steam still, let's eat. what would the little girl eat first ?" Aurora asked Kia, who said no to all invitations.

"I think she is full, let's eat. Try the stuffed chicken first, our specialty.

You can eat it with a variety of bread here," Zopa said.

After the delicious dinner, Zopa and Kia returned to their room while the men above were heard laughing and joking loudly.

Aurora restarted the entire process by opening her laptop. Confident it was a safe time to penetrate the dubious site she had sensed before, she turned to her remote viewing. Aurora was astounded to view the same smiling black face again as if spying back at her. She hurriedly shut down her system, trying to figure out the bizarre incident.

"What if there is a remote viewer who has observed me. What if he has taken coordinates of this place, and has deployed his people on me. Oh, I am done for," Aurora had a bead of sweat on her forehead despite the cold weather.

"This place has become dangerous to me. Also to these two guys who would be mistaken as my comrades. I need to take quick action on this front before it is too late. First thing we must move out. But the two of them would be scared again. Do I have a choice, no, so let it be, let me see what the three of them are up to?" Aurora thought.

The three were surprised to see her approaching them on the terrace.

"Well, I wanted to have a stroll after such a gala dinner Zopa fed me.

How are you guys doing? Finished the bottle yet? Aurora asked them.

After stanzin, the other two stood up to greet her.

"We are not heavy drinkers; we are planning to go down for dinner ourselves, it is in the hot case," Stanzin said.

"A great time we had and also heard an interesting fact of Wu's early life from Stanzin," Byat said happily.

"Well, gentlemen, I need to speak to you for five minutes after you are over with your dinner. Please spare me some time, it's important and cannot be postponed," Aurora said in a grave tone.

"End of the World again, my lady," Byat asked her.

"No, no, it's about us, the three of us now and this also concerns Stanzin and his family. I think you will have dinner and we will talk thereafter," Aurora answered.

"Please tell us, Aurora, what's going on, what is the matter? Tell us now," Byat insisted with other men joining him.

"If it were not alarming I would not have troubled you now, but let me put it simply to you that the one I was chasing, chases me now. It is supposed to be a big organized crime group that would surely come after me, and you two are obviously to be mistaken as my accomplices. For Stanzin, he must keep mum about his friendship with Wu, else, he and the family are in trouble too. Please note I am not overstating; their men could be here soon. Stanzin must behave normally and show the register etc. as they demand and tell them that we left hurriedly back to Leh due to some urgency. Since we are away from the main route I presume they cannot reach us before morning, so let's pack our bags to move out in the wee hours. Let's inform the driver Motup that we are travelling back in the morning due to some urgency," Aurora said anxiously.

"We follow her master's voice as always," Byat chuckled out.

"Well, we have no other choice then, but what if they take our identities from the documents we have given Stanzin while checking in? Wu asked her with concern.

"Can't be helped because if Stanzin shows any resistance, he gets in trouble, so let it be as natural as if some unknown guests came and left hurriedly. However, I will make some adjustments now to your photo machine so that the impression is blurred for them to keep guessing about our details. And our details on your register are already very sketchy that I had filled myself, so we only need to replace the photocopies you have," Aurora said.

"All right, Mam, I will keep you informed secretly if they come tomorrow. But for the present, let's have some dinner and sleep a few hours before dawn," Stanzin said.

Motup, who had already slept due to long hard-driving, was surprised to know the sudden change of plan. He agreed to be ready in the morning. On their way to Leh, Aurora asked Motup if any accommodations were available nearby. She thought to ambush themselves in the same region for a few days as the city of Leh may prove comparatively more vulnerable to them.

"There is this village Turtuk at the Indian border where accommodation is available. Also, you can visit Diskit Gompa to get a 360 Degrees view of the huge Buddha statue. And, we can get accommodation at the monastery itself," Motup said while driving on.

An hour's drive ahead in the same region, a consensus was reached to stay at the monastery. They reached the monastery around 7 in the morning. It was overlooking dunes alongside the Shyok River. The milky white and brick color Tibetan Gompa nested in the mountains stood as a lofty historical site. After entering the Diskit monastery, there were two parts. You found a multicolored giant Maitreya Buddha statue signifying peace and protection on one side. And the other part was the stairs toward



the old temple and monastery. Lachung temple was the oldest temple in the Nubra region, situated on the higher floor of the monastery. The prayer hall had vast images of the Buddhist guardian deities. Huge drums were located inside. Some oil lamps, posters, wall paintings, and a peaceful environment illuminated it. Motup fixed up three rooms for them through his source, and they wished to enter their rooms for a quick nap.

"First Lantau, now Diskit, Buddha is following us in a huge avatar everywhere, that too when we are at the brink of death," Byat joked.

"Nothing to worry about now, but let Wu tell us immediately as soon as he receives a call from Stanzin," Aurora said.

## Eight

Inside the small room of the monastery, fresh cold morning air through a slit glass window cheered Aurora as she laid her bags. "I will lose their trust if it turns out to be another hoax. But I cannot go against my gut, can I? Thought Aurora while stretching herself on the wooden bed and covering herself with a neat quilt.

Three hours later, Wu and Byat were knocking at her door. Responding electrically, she invited them in in a high-strung voice.

"What did he inform you, tell me fast," Aurora said,

"Well, he informs me that two men and a woman wearing khaki dresses had come to the homestay around 9 o'clock searching for foreigners who according to them were wanted for a serious offense in New Delhi. Local police are not involved in this mission, they said. They searched all rooms and were devastated on learning that three foreigners had left in the morning for Leh due to some urgency. However, after they took pictures of the guest register, and the photocopy of the identities they grew more impatient and perturbed about the bad impression of the photocopies which they found illegible. One of them even checked the machine himself and threw the papers up in the air out of sheer frustration abusing Stanzin about such bad maintenance of essentials. They quickly left, admonishing Stanzin not to disclose anything about them to anybody including the local police. They posed as super cops but did not appear so, according to Stanzin. Since the guests had come the evening before and left so hurriedly, they did not have reason to doubt Stanzin. According to Stanzin, they went to a few more home stays close by and checked all the foreigners. They also asked Stanzin about the

name of the driver and the car no, model, color, etc. But Stanzin informed them only about a white Innova car driven by some driver of leh. No more information was given by him as not available with him," Wu narrated the whole incident.

" Oh, we escaped by a hair's breadth. Impressive show by Stanzin, he even manufactured a white Innova car for us. I don't think he would be troubled again. But I need to lie low for a while. That means no phone, no laptop, and no engagement with the outer world, just simply a holiday as it should be. Just to rule out any mischief, let me continue to switch off my gadgets for 48 hours. Let's celebrate this celibate world of the monastery. I am happy for myself and the two of you to be able to continue to breathe on. Also, for poor Stanzin and his family who would have borne the brunt for absolutely no fault of theirs," Aurora said ecstatically.

"Does it mean they would rush to Leh to catch us on the way?" Byat asked.

"What else, we scripted a course of action for them last night. They have fallen for it, " Aurora answered smilingly.

"Don't we need to prepare our driver, Motup accordingly?" Byat questioned.

"No, no, not really, let's be normal with him. He may ask for our untimely departure from Hunder village and not returning to Leh for the urgency we had told him . Let's tell him that I am being stalked by a former boyfriend who means harm to me and my friends. I wonder if he will probe further,"Aurora answered.

"You are thoroughly elastic. I think it will be fine," Byat commented admiringly.

"Tell him also to relax for the next two days as we intend not to move out of the precincts of this monastery," Aurora said.

"There are famous hot springs some distance from here I read about while driving in here, we could probably try this out," Byat added.

"Well, I am certainly not saying no but let's wait a bit, let's digest the flush that has destabilized us since last evening," Aurora answered.

"After our breakfast let's go to see the fabulous Buddha statue," Wu said.

"Definitely, and the view is supposed to be mesmerizing from the top I believe," Aurora rejoined.

They were awestruck by the beauty and the decoration inside the big prayer hall. You found all possible colors of cloth hanging and strewn on the floor. The place was enchanting. Within the Tibetan style of Gumpa, there were large frescos and murals. Another captivating feature was the statue of Cho Rinpoche, or the crowned Buddha, being the main part of the prayer hall. Big drums and various images of the guardian deities inside added to the splendor. Moving along to reach the Buddha statue outside, the three met a monk smiling at them sheepishly. Nodding at him, they engaged him in a conversation about the place and the various deities adorned in the Hall. He was a student monk who had joined the monastery a while ago. He was in charge of the place to interact with the visitors. After some explanation, he invited them for a talk show.

"There will be discourses on 'compassion for oneself' in this Hall by our head monk and other speakers in the evening today. Take these leaflets for the introduction and try to return in the evening since you said you are staying here for a day or two. I hope you find it interesting and useful too, only if you read the introduction or if you have no patience for it as I find most visitors lacking it, then read the fourth and last page of it. The

monk said gleefully reading the practical benefit of such a discourse," He read in a soft voice.

*"Research indicates that self-compassionate individuals experience greater psychological health than those who lack self-compassion. For example, self-compassion is positively associated with life satisfaction, wisdom, happiness, optimism, curiosity, learning goals, social connectedness, personal responsibility, and emotional resilience. At the same time, it is associated with a lower tendency for self-criticism, depression, anxiety, rumination, thought suppression, perfectionism, and disordered eating attitudes."*

"As if the wooly stuff of Wu was not enough for us that we have another metaphysical discourse to attend to, "Thought Aurora to herself, however responding warmly to the monk's invitation by posing a question to him.

"Well, we all have heard about compassion and philanthropy which is directed against others, I never heard about self-compassion before. How is one compassionate towards oneself?"

"Oh, you take yourself as if you were a third party with all the dissatisfactions and sorrows surrounding you moment by moment and see through the illusion of self-hood," The monk replied.

"Well, you are in the good company of our friend Wu who supports Buddhism and thinks similarly in what he talked to us about his magic mantra, a Buddhist sutra, and a treasure tower," Aurora responded warmly.

"We are delighted to meet you, Sir, I will sit with you after we return from the site of the Buddha statue. we hope to join the discourse with you today," Wu said.

After walking a long distance, they came face to face with the beautiful and soothing statue of Maitreya Buddha, cast in red and gold. Opposite it lay a gorgeous view of the Nubra valley. Standing tall at 106 feet long, Maitreya is believed to be the next incarnation of the Buddha. According to Buddhist tradition, Maitreya is a bodhisattva who will appear on Earth, achieve complete enlightenment, and teach the dharma to ordinary mortals. He is popularly known as the laughing Buddha. You feel a dwarf in his presence in how he stands and what he is about to talk to you. He is gifted and can treat any human syndrome as a physician. You think you are never sick and afflicted in the state of flow in the worldly affairs, yet sooner or later, a soft spot invariably appears, and you tend to suffer. He is the antidote. The three took photos and selfies in the compound, breathing in the cold fresh air. Aurora borrowed Byat's mobile to phone her mother as she had not informed her about being offline for two days. She wanted her mother to meet her new friends and to feel in Los Angeles, the fabulous place she was roaming around.

Finding a new unknown number on her phone, her mother did not pick it up and disconnected it repeatedly. Then Aurora sent a WhatsApp message telling her to pick up as she used a colleague's number to phone her. Sandra, her mother, quickly called, asking Aurora to call back in an hour as she was at the local hospital for her regular check-up and would reach home soon.

"No, no, you will miss a sight I want you to see, mama, like you saw the Lantau Buddha, this is another huge statue of him in Ladakh, India, where I am presently stationed," Aurora said.

"All right then let me take some time out from them. Let me go out to talk to you," Sandra answered.

In the video call, she saw her daughter standing before the Buddha statue showing her the vast stony surroundings, and her two friends introduced themselves to Sandra, who waved back at them.

"Great, sweetie, let me now get back to my cycling exercise which is part of the tests. So your number is unavailable for two days. Noted. Talk to me tonight. Some envelopes have come home for you. I will show you tonight. All right. See you, my baby," Sandra hung up the phone.

Strolling around the statue in a big compound and basking under the pleasant sunshine, they watched an orange trumpet vine with its myriad flowers moving gently by the breeze. Byat, in the past, has had weird experiences looking at trees and plants moved by air, opening a singing space around them. It made him lose himself briefly. Simultaneously, a cloud cover gently caressed them, running away slowly to the opposite side. Watching the vine thus, It appeared to him a case of a pre-dimensional surface less space in which he found the flowers, the leaves, and the stems gently drunk, unworried, and effortless. Tube flowers in dozens were strewn on the ground. Some fell from the branches occasionally, happy to offer themselves to the statue in front.

"Your treasure tower is probably right before us, but we fail to recognize it. It's a placeless place. Perhaps the treasure tower does not exist in any physical plane. If it is to be found then it exists in a singularity where there is no you, no stress, as the magic sutra confirms. Why can't we feel it in a more stable continuity? Why can't we enquire about such a stressless island? I have been scared to death in Hong Kong first and now here in Nubra Valley and such fears and traumas, I believe, go hand in hand with us throughout our normal lives. If there is a place without stress, I think we need it more than ever now; however, if it doesn't exist,

then we have been royally conned," Byat said to Wu and Aurora. They were surprised by his sudden emotional outburst.

"We all get scared, it's fine, it's part of the game. However, I think you cannot take such texts literally. Besides, I may not be able to say more on such subjects being ignorant. Yet short of dying, I am all game for the exploration you have in mind in our free time like we have now," Aurora answered him.

"I think there is no harm in exchanging ideas amongst ourselves.

Whatever dimension it is to be found, I hope to see the treasure tower one day in my lifetime. The important point is that let's keep the dialogue on," Wu answered casually.

"Let me give you a concrete plan for it. I would design a website dedicated to what we all care about. Let's all shoot our views to it. Let it be an open platform with contributions from anybody worldwide and evolve itself on the way. I would get many subscribers through my circle. The two of you would also help to get some number of subscribers. And We, the founding members, deserve to put up our views to the world uninhibited and without restraints. Our views can act as its introductory interface. So, let's be ready with our contributions with a sense of openmindedness. What do you say to start such an enterprise? Aurora asked them.

"I am good with it," Wu answered promptly,

"So do I," Byat rejoined.

"So what do you wish to contribute then"? Aurora asked them.

"In my case, it is clear I would like to put up the magic sutra on the website. Let as many people in the world benefit from it as it chooses," Wu said cheerfully.



"Well, I don't have any concrete plan yet however I would like to put up the entire article itself on the pre dimensional surface less space, a term I became familiar with through phenomenology," Byat said.

"Good, good, I on my part would periodically put up my views on nuclear disarmament and world peace," Aurora said smilingly.

"You should put up your experiments with remote viewing, no? Byat asked Aurora.

"Let me see what all I can put up for public consumption as I need to be discreet. Let us see. At least the basic concepts of it can be discussed and shared publicly," Aurora answered him.

"Let's name our child first, no?" Byat proposed.

"That should not be so difficult, let's use the name of our countries to coin a common name," Wu suggested.

"North Korea, USA, Mongolia, let us all think it through," Byat said thoughtfully.

"Why can't it be something like Kormica representing the three of us together?" Aurora shot back quickly.

"More appropriately, it could be Kornicam. Precise and explicit," Wu suggested.

"Oh, I am happy to be a sleeping partner with you, let It be simply Kornica as it sounds better and concise," Byat joined.

"No worries, we keep it Kornicam, it serves us well. I hope all agree to this," Aurora answered. Nodding their heads in unison, the other two made a sign of thumbs up.

"This certainly calls for celebrations today but in the monastery, I don't think we stand a chance," Byat said.

"Well, let's wait tonight for any surveillance on us, a very rare possibility. If all goes well tonight, then we move out of this place tomorrow and do whatever we wish to," Aurora joined.

Aurora found the day the longest ever in her life as the time was moving at a snail's pace with no gadgets in hand and no activity to do. She could hear her monotonous heartbeat without effort. Self-compassion did not attract her. She chose to sleep in the afternoon, unaccustomed to such a luxury in the past. Wu and Byat attended the discourse, lasting about two hours. As they reassembled at dinner, Wu informed others that there was no fresh news from Stanzin, and the status quo prevailed.

After eating a bland dinner with limited choices, Aurora raised her hand in joy, telling them they were good to go to a new destination tomorrow.

"Morning, let's check up with Stazin once again before leaving. I am sure that it must be quiet there," Aurora said.

"I think we can relax now," Wu retorted.

"Surely, let's leave the troubled waters behind us for a grand celebration for our joint venture, Kornicam. If we were singers we could keep it as our band's name," Byat said spiritedly.

"I think let's call Motup to find out where else we can stay tomorrow for a rocking holiday," Aurora said.

"Pangong lake is a rarity here, internationally famous, no one can afford to miss it. it's a six-hour drive from here," Motup said as he sat beside them.

"Ok, let's plan it tomorrow accordingly. We leave after breakfast," Byat said.

Reading reviews on the internet, Byat read a general description of the lake by a visitor for the benefit of others.

*"Pangong is a saltwater lake. Lakes in Ladakh are not for bathing or swimming. Water is cold, and your entire body will numb before you know it. Even washing your face with cold water will cause the famous 'Ice cream headache'. Its color changes from shades of blue to green to red. It is one of the highest-altitude lakes in the world. However, although it is a saline water lake, Pangong Tso freezes completely during winter.*

#### *Pangong Tso Camps*

*Camps at Pangong Lake are the most popular accommodation choice, though they may not be a budget option. It's a typical campsite with a sleeping capacity of 3 to 4 people per tent. Expect the charges to start from Rs. 1500 – Rs.2000 per person, including meals. Usually, they will tell you that it's a fixed price, but you can always negotiate. The last time I visited, I could talk the owner into half the price he initially quoted.*

*Tents are quite comfortable with attached washroom facilities."*

"Sounds great," Wu said.

"It does," Aurora rejoined.

They reached the lake in the evening. Witnessing the sparkling gems covering the sky from the banks of Pangong Tso, Motup helped them locate and glimpse the Milky Way on the far horizon. It was a clear night with the temperature close to zero degrees. A fierce bonfire was lit in front of their tent, warming them from the biting torrents of winds. You experienced a ghostly lull wherever you looked at this vast, picturesque, serene yet surreal landscape.

"Adonis and Martha are a black couple living off the Lantau island in the Fisherman village for some time and they are suspected to be the carriers of the silk route. My team is still working on it. Let's see where our investigations land us. I need to travel there as soon as I am required,"

Aurora informed them. She borrowed Motup's cell phone to check her emails.

"Doesn't it mean that your remote viewing is infallible? You saw a black face smiling back at you. Could it be the same man?" Byat asked her.

"Too early to say it, let us see. let us wait for further details," Aurora replied cautiously.

"How long would you continue to keep the phone off. I think the forty-eight hours' time limit is due to expire soon," Wu asked her.

"Yes, but I will restart my gadgets tomorrow as tonight we have a party. Let's celebrate the birth of Kornicam, No?" Aurora answered brightly.

"You remember what Motup has advised us on the way today, not to drink much alcohol at this height lest we dehydrate ourselves to attract a medical condition. So what do you think of it?" Wu asked.

"Yes, we need to practice moderation. It's in our hands to start and finish the party. Let Byat control himself. I will have the email formalities for our website completed tomorrow and we are presenting to the world officially, Kornicam. Let us raise a toast for it," Aurora replied.

"Let's open the firewater," Byat said vivaciously.

"Is there any choice for us not to?" Wu answered smilingly.

Liquor was rejuvenating for them after a hard day of continuous driving. Ravenous appetite helped the liquor enhance its effect on them with little quantity. In no time, the three were a super happy group.

"The other night when I came to see you at the terrace of Stanzins' homestay you were talking about some secret of Wu that you said was known to Stanzin only. Let's start the evening with his secret if it does not offend Wu," Aurora proposed.

"It's no longer a secret," Byat pointed to Wu, now blushing.

"Well, I would not mind it but I thought it was more of a man's prank, I wonder if we could involve Aurora in it," Wu answered.

Before Aurora could respond, Byat declared, "We are sitting with a tigress, my friend, we might as well tell her all,"

Aurora laughed out loud at this remark, urging Wu not to bother about it if it was not his liking. Wu answered her by nodding his head in favor of revealing it.

"Well, before Byat starts let me tell you that the incident took place when I and Stanzin were in our twenties working in a barbershop in Hong Kong," Wu informed her.

What Stanzin had vividly narrated to Byat the other day, he roughly repeated to Aurora and Wu. Wu, on his part, occasionally intercepted Byat to supply context to the incident and correct facts surgically.

For an entire week or so, Wu and Stanzin roamed about, deadily drunk, on the streets of Hong Kong every evening after finishing work at the barbershop. Wu, in those days, was in the grip of the fever of Buddhism. One of the Japanese Masters, Ikkyū, profoundly influenced Wu before he finally settled with another Japanese Master, Nichiren with his interpretation of the lotus sutra and treasure tower. Wu became a follower of Ikkyū through a fellow disciple. Ikkyū, a Zen master, was very peculiarly quaint in his approach towards realization, Nirvana, the central theme of Buddhism. This monk received his enlightenment by hearing a croaking crow during his meditation. Ikkyū argued that his enlightenment was deepened by consorting with pavilion girls. He entered brothels wearing black robes, considering sexual intercourse as a religious rite as part of his ongoing purgation. Nothing could be dearer to Wu than a course of action that was downright practical and vibrant to his

inexperienced self. One of these evenings, when the two had finished their drinks in a minibar of the crowded market, Wu dared to suggest to Stanzin his plan of action in following his Zen master.

"We are drunk enough; we need black robes to enter the Jiyuàn. Are you with me for this venture?" Wu asked Stanzin.

"Well, a friend in need is a friend indeed. I am with you certainly, however, I will be your companion till the last door. You must open it yourself. I will wait for you till you are done. it's your experiment, after all, for my reasons I cannot be a party to it but let me know your experience afterward," Stanzin said in a tipsy voice.

"Where do we get the black robes? Wu asked.

"I don't need one and if you insist you can buy one from any of these Muslim shops in the market. let's buy it before the market closes," Stanzin said.

Soon, a couple walking past the market reached out to the dubious gray area in its vicinity with the woman in black robes and her man holding on to her on tottering feet. The black-robed creature held her man back as she could not walk straight herself. The two caught the pedestrians' eyes, some of whom laughed away at this rare spectacle of a Muslim couple getting drunk on the road. At the reception of the Jiyuàn, the madam received them warmly, bursting into laughter on learning that the robed one was a man, a prospective client. Stanzin excused himself to go out for some work and promised to be back in an hour.

"One hour should do?" Stanzin enquired.

"Depends on what your friend intends to practice," She answered.

After a brief introduction, Wu settled for two hours to remain in safer terrain.

"Good, two hours, I get back, my friend," Stanzin said.

Two hours next were spent by Wu and his chosen woman in the unfading shadows of a subconscious world in their dark cloister in a frenzied flurry punctuated with a talk by Wu on his master's commandment and his purpose of wearing the black robe. The girl felt honored for the young man's spiritual cum physical therapy into which the young man had induced her. She gave him her lipstick as a souvenir at their parting. On his part, Wu gave her some extra cash, that made her happy.

"Was enlightenment received? Aurora asked him with a light laugh.

"Well, I reasoned that such affairs were not capable of being aped by us, the lesser mortals. My erstwhile master was already enlightened so he could live by such contradictions. Not me," Wu answered.

"I think our early youth is prone to such snippets of fun that we later consider crazy and outrageous. I am sure all of us have similar situations too," Byat said graciously.

"So let me tell you an experience I recall from my college days. It turns out to be another Saint story. I think this evening is full of them. Hamid, my college friend, was working on a dissertation on St. Gabriel, (Jabril in Quran), his role in Islam and particularly his revelations on Jerusalem.

Hamid was a natural American whose parents came to the U.S. post-1967 annexation of east Jerusalem. He was free-spirited like us but was always proud to acknowledge that his parents continued to practice Islam after decades of separation from Jerusalem. Its cause for freedom still held a very prominent place in their lives," Aurora said.

"Saint Gabriel is a prominent figure, almost a Christian household name. Isn't it? Byat asked her.

"Well I am a feeble Christian who only enjoys Xmas every year but yes this saint is highly revered in our mythology as one of the seven Archangels. Notably, he is equally revered in the Jewish as well as Islamic traditions. We have a beautiful mountain range near L.A. named after him. Well, Hamid was good at mimicry and he would often privately recreate scenes and images he read about in his research. Yet, publicly he would never fail to give us a hint that he, like his parents, was worried and anguished about the atrocities upon the Islamic citizens of Jerusalem. He studied Jewish apocalyptic literature to bring home the secular status of the city. Against Gabriel's Revelation, he drew a parallel in his work with the Revelation of John, another saint whose words he found very instructive and revealing. These Revelations were written against the backdrop of persecution, martyrdom, and exile attempting to comfort their communities with the promise that God is soon to act to rescue his suffering people. These works depend heavily on earlier biblical prophecies and revelations. Both describe Jerusalem as a great city whose destiny influences the future of the world. The two envisage a great eschatological battle in which the nations of the world march against Jerusalem. In both accounts martyrs are many, but heaven answers with the arrival of the Lord. He comes with his holy angels to destroy evil and its representatives and to establish righteousness. Ultimately, Jerusalem is restored and once again a great city. In contrast to Jerusalem's destruction and falls in the past, the Gabriel Revelation envisages an earthly Jerusalem, attacked but miraculously rescued by God. John's Revelation, on the other hand, finds ultimate hope in a new creation and a new Jerusalem that comes down from heaven. In John's vision, God is immediately present with his faithful people in the



temple-city. The Gabriel Revelation is a command for all the martyred faithful to be resurrected on the third day and fight for the cause. In the past, the holy city had fallen to the might and cruelty of various empires. But in the future, when all the nations of the world line up against Jerusalem for one, final battle, God will intervene and reverse the shame of the past. Whether by resurrection, some miraculous incursion, or a new creation, heaven will guarantee that Jerusalem will once again be the center of the world and her loyal citizens will rest safe in God's glorious presence. So Hamid argued that the loyal citizens of the temple city are its actual residents and no reference to any specific religion was warranted under the revelations," Aurora continued.

"Jerusalem has been a volcano for ages, no?" Wu asked.

"It is, but let me complete the story. Hamid gave our small group of friends startling facts about St Gabriel and how his influence was so profound in Islam, particularly on the prophet Mohammed, who flew to heaven with him from Jerusalem. He would make extra efforts to infiltrate us with the basics of Islam. In Islam, he said the holy Quran is the literal word of God as recited to the prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. According to tradition, Muhammad recited perfectly what the archangel Gabriel revealed to him for his companions to write down and memorize. Another significant foundation of Islam is the concept, the Preserved Tablet containing Qadar, the heavenly preserved record of all that has happened and will happen. Qadar, meaning fate, divine fore-ordainment, and predestination, is Islam's concept of divine destiny. Interestingly, there is a chain of transmission from the 'Preserved Tablet' in heaven to God, then to Jibreel, Muhammad, and his followers. Hamid

said that the world we live in is a mere outgrowth of this chain of transmission.

Hamid cautioned us one day not to laugh at what he would read from the Hadith, being the words of the Prophet Mohammad. With a straight face, he said, "Well, all of us are adults here, so I think I can share this intimate knowledge with you. According to Islam, reproduction begins when a man's thick, white discharge mixes with a woman's thin, yellow discharge. Prophet Muhammad claims to have received this knowledge from the angel Gabriel, who told him that the child's appearance is determined depending on who of the two parents has the first discharge. Before we could comprehend the statement's meaning, Hamid read a sequel, prophet Muhammad's take on gender determination communicated to him by St Gabriel.

Prophet Muhammad said: The reproductive substance of man is white and that of woman yellow, and when they have sexual intercourse, and the male's substance prevails upon the female's substance, it is the male child that Allah's Decree creates, and when the substance of the female prevails upon the substance contributed by the male, a female child is formed by the Decree of Allah.

Before we could restrain ourselves from getting into splits, he announced with a faint smile, "The decree of God prevails in all affairs of mankind." "That is mindboggling, very naked," Byat said laughingly. Wu nodded with a faint smile.

"That was bizzare I must say. Are you still in touch with Hamid?" Byat asked.

"Yes, we chat at times, but he is a different man now. He is relocated in Jordan, helping his folks wage a war against Israel. A young funny man

who used to mimic us so smartly on any subject in the world has now become a hardliner who swears often with vitriolic frenzy. Hamid, a short, bulky man, had a quaint way to roll his eyes to match the facial expressions below his bushy eyebrows that left us in splits invariably and this made him a very popular guy in our group. He would pick any character, especially our teachers to mimic them in how they talked, walked, and reacted to situations generally. But all that is a far cry now, an adolescent hangover faded with adulthood. Although married, reclaiming Jerusalem is his life motto. He feels nostalgic about his life in the U.S. but the cause he says is much superior to a life of leisure and freedom. we are in opposite camps now," Aurora answered.

"That's unfortunate," Wu said.

"It's all right; We are still friendly," Aurora replied.

"Well, St Gabriel is quite a versatile character at the helm of all the Abrahamic religions. While growing up, I used to take all this talk on religion, etcetera, outdated and debunked. However, I realize it is still the opium of people, claiming a huge toll every year. However archaic it may be, it is still a potent phenomenon, no? Byat asked.

"Well, in the end, what matters is what the floating average population of the planet thinks and feels or is made to think and feel. Empirically, let me tell you it's a lot worse than we can visualize," Aurora answered.

"Was the mountain range after his name near your hometown visited by St Gabriel as he appears to be footloose and fancy-free?" Wu asked her.

"No, no, I have not heard anything of the sort, it is perhaps due mainly to a church dedicated to him in our town. San Gabriel, I last visited with my family when my father was alive. He was a senior accountant at a public utility and took us there on his retirement. I was longing for a vacation as

I was very exhausted from my Colombian rendezvous. Although it never occurred to me that I had committed any crime, at times, though, the cold-blooded death of the man I shot came swirling up to me hauntingly. My parents supported me immensely. The San Gabriel mountains supported me as well with their serene and lush green landscape. This place is quite the opposite, no greenery here, being a desert it's the height that seems to convert it into such a quiet paradise with the lake here so quiet as well," Aurora remarked.

"True, let's talk a bit about Kornicam now. Don't you two think that its conception and format must be unique and biting original?" Byat said, pouring another drink for himself.

"It ought to be like the stars above talking to us effortlessly," Wu said calmly.

Byat and Aurora looked up to see the diamonds, and the stars, like precious guests and silent observers, continued to smile silently.

"Surely we need to grow big like these stars. I think we need to decide the format of our venture before introducing it to the floating population of the world," Byat said joyfully.

"Well, I think, Kornicam should retain the character of a cliffhanger, always evolving into the unexpected realm and keeping us on our toes," Aurora said.

"Don't get offended by some of the technical words I use with you. I think the ontological status of our venture should be grounded in 'Care' as the empirical world is grounded in it. In other words, It means that the foremost familiar feeling that has kept us alive and kicking must be given its due on a larger scale beyond parochial limits. Also, we want to see

that the magic mantra chooses every living being alike. We want to feel the rush of such magnificent freedom. No? Byat asked.

"Likewise I would want to show how it feels to sit on the treasure tower and see the end of the ultimate chase. Let's explore it first for our well-being and then the others can follow us," Adrunk Wu said.

"Frankly, I have never understood what you guys have said, but in the name of freedom, yes, let's do what makes us free and caring. As it is, I think freedom entails unending bridges of cliffhangers ready to pounce on you and make a fantastic life," Aurora said thoughtfully.

"Please excuse me, I need to correct you on a very fundamental level, for the freedom we discuss is a consequence of Care. This is fundamental in treating Care as the tree and freedom as its fruits," Byat said spiritedly.

"Your remark about care and freedom went beyond me," Aurora said, laughing away with Wu joining her.

"Pardon me for going overboard. Well, let our Kornicam be a chimera after a Greek goddess, a fire-breathing female monster with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail. That also means a vision that is hoped for but is essentially illusory. Let it never tell the truth like any chimera does not, but point out the important nonsense to us to see more clearly and finally sit silently like these stars above us. ....Oh, I think I am pretty mixed up but I hope it will make sense soon. Please allow me to introduce and elaborate on this very significant term that a German philosopher, Wittgensteinian coined, 'Important Nonsense'," Byat said excitedly.

"Important Nonsense, what the fuck?" Aurora questioned uproariously.

"How sweet! This expletive never sounded so mellow emanating from her full lips. Lips that curved speaking it. Coincidentally, I am about to

talk about my favorite philosophy to them," Byat thought, motioning to Aurora to wait for an answer.

"Let me quote the German philosopher first and explain the whole facet afterward. There are seven main propositions in his famous text, *Tractatus*.

1. The world is everything that is the case.
2. What is the case (a fact) is the existence of states of affairs.
3. A logical picture of facts is a thought.
4. A thought is a proposition with a sense.
5. A proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions. (An elementary proposition is a truth-function of itself.)
6. The general form of a proposition is the general form of a truth function, which is: 
$$[\bar{p}, \bar{x}], N(\bar{x})$$
 This is the general form of a proposition.
7. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof, one must be silent.

I have never truly understood these aphorisms, as their real sense is grounded in pure logic. Yet, in summary, they say that what can be said can be said clearly. Rest we must pass over in silence- the Important Nonsense, as it cannot be said at all. It can only be shown without words and language," Byat said broodingly.

"You sounded pretty profound, but I lack the wisdom to get it, you are welcome to introduce to us in Kornicam any sort of nonsense you like," Wu said, struggling to comprehend what Byat had just said.

"I too would love to know it better, I think one day we may understand all this mystic stuff, No?" Aurora said.

"We will, surely. These propositions may fall in the category of the Einsteinian or Maxwellian maxims, surely not easy to understand by

ordinary people like us. But they have practical value in what they describe in general terms. On second thought I think we need to debunk the idea of a format for Kornicam to let anyone contribute anything to this forum provided it is not offensive and partisan," Byat joined.

"Also no pornography," Aurora said laughingly.

It made the other two laugh, too. Fun brought a full-scale verse to fruition. The original was edited by Byat, later posted on Kornicam as his maiden contribution, An ode to Kornicam.

*So far, so good the warmth has no sign of wane.  
Our altar of incense burning bright yet not insane  
Are you into birthing, really, as Handa did  
Are you frantically opening your eyes as she did  
A ceremony for me to meet her in a flush of anxiety  
A ceremony for me to meet you in a war with sobriety  
You need to meet only the first woman  
You need to meet any man  
And that sums up us all  
In moments of our rise and fall  
Enough to meet the first woman, let the last man arise whenever  
Wait, in fact, for the last woman to show up in this world however  
What she tells you would be the epitome of all epitome  
No man would ever know what happened what was the whammy  
Let's see how long the finite circles last  
Energize yourself for the intriguing interviews save patience vast  
For the present rejoice celebrate your birth  
My glass is full to the brim in this frenzied mirth  
Let Aurora be your garment, let her nurse, make you red-green forever*

Lie in her lap with uproarious tidings of the world and beyond forever  
 Watch its semantics, syntax, and phonetics, countless languages it  
 abounds  
 Aurora is colorful. What else do you need in early rounds  
 She would never exhaust herself in moments of your constant feed  
 Don't be a chimera alone what we earlier thought your deed  
 Be chimera squared as numbers squared make an upward shot  
 Just as a dream of dreams is not merely a dream  
 Just as pleasure of pleasures is not merely a pleasure  
 you would be an enigma of the broodings, enigmatic  
 A plain incomprehensible rush of moorings epigrammatic  
 Sit up finally as the mother of every chimera  
 mindful, wistful, debonaire like a tiara  
 Make yourself a stranger; not alien to our world  
 Evolve, solve, dissolve, absolve and resolve with us mud  
 I crave to share with you the hummings of my spirit  
 Never have I found myself bodiless, soaring, full of grit  
 We two share a commonality being nascent  
 You begin having a name, and I besotted begin a cross current  
 In the world I could barely feed my spirit  
 Sublimated in my actions and thoughts, lying decrepit  
 Thank you, liquor, my sweet company, stars, and the Pangong lake  
 I wouldn't stop to talk even adjudged a fake  
 I make a talk like the stable owner who sold all his horses  
 A carpenter ready to be crucified, ditching all his crosses  
 Go, prefer the population floating  
 Unnamed heap of vigorous men and women trotting



*For centuries backbone of the life of nomadic  
Hidden now settled and employed with an essence sporadic  
Let them be your children, you rear  
Let them change your face without favor and fear  
I am the one introducing you to nonsense and Wittgenstein  
Let someone likewise bejewel you with work original, old, young, or teen  
I love you. Your name ends with my country, Mongolia  
Come what may, none can forget it in its unique regalia  
May you prosper as wide as my country's steppe  
May you grow as tall as its white mountainous skyline erect  
Taste like the Indian mango with its wonderful aroma  
Leaving us paralytic with its unfathomable noumena  
Should you choose to humanize one day our child of A.I.  
Take after Aurora, your co-founder, in whom beauty, courage, and  
abundant wisdom lie  
I tell you that I know  
Be they opinions, half-truths, or how my convictions grow  
A splash of information will grow your bank  
Notwithstanding some succeed, some tank  
Let's start with contradictions foremost  
A lot lies in their resolution, their strange, uncanny, eerie frost  
Know for sure the basic building blocks of the universe  
Choose to be wavy and particles together, no matter if it sounds perverse  
We thought we must have a resolution of this and any other  
Impossible, but it seems to glitter the world cover to cover  
Let the rubber meet the road  
We all get better as we grow and load*

*Floater dear, you have a beloved heavenly*  
*Love her, kiss her, feed her*  
*See her transform before you verily*  
*She is a rich and versatile bag unopened*  
*Open it slowly, diligently, first get accustomed*  
*Freedom of the will and its opposite*  
*Lie together in every act as an inchoate deposit*  
*I don't know about others; to me*  
*It shows more and more as I go free, I end in a determined spree*  
*To be free means to focus well in a determined way*  
*To be determined means free unfocus in a rampant way*  
*I find this academic, hair-splitting merely*  
*Good that we address conduct and Care now, not freedom, barely*  
*Even though it is a fixed match*  
*It's potent for a good player to receive unscripted catch*  
*Born and thrown into the world was but a chance*  
*Continuing with this humdrum, not an unbreakable trance*  
*Brought forth by Care into this world*  
*It's Care that's childhood, adulthood, oldage the stage third*  
*Haven't we felt a nervous immune system that protects and saves us*  
*Long after the parents have gone working seamlessly without fuss*  
*It constantly interprets to the best of its host's health*  
*Who now needs evidence of divine wealth.*  
*You kornicam continue to care for your followers like a blind force*  
*Before being shot down by the chequered history of the world, save them*  
*from remorse.*  
*Let's learn the first lesson of interpretation.*

*Come what may follow the stream of life, encouraging a passion  
 Let's forget the wooly soul  
 Isn't but care in front of us all  
 Someone loves you beyond any comprehension  
 This is us, our Care innate, intrinsic, no man's invention  
 Kornicam, I wish and pray  
 Be our Care out in the fray  
 What we have within must match the without  
 Can one imagine how well one swim like a trout  
 What sense-perception imparts us, we grow in accord  
 Why it imparts what it imparts, nobody kept any record  
 Let's turn to Islamic preserved tablet for an answer  
 Shouldn't we know all of the past and all of the future choreographed by  
 the first dancer  
 Like good knives, we would need astute thieves  
 Helping us steal all the gravy from a stockpile of sieves  
 I appreciate, though, this Islamic conception  
 Unlike Hindus and Buddhists, it appears with no concoction  
 The present is based not on what we did in a past life  
 It is what we will do in the following projection: a future life.  
 The last party is on, no doubt  
 Following it slide by slide, the world comes about  
 Is it that Allah plays by the ear of what you will do next  
 And translates all the same now in some measure by his text  
 Some contradictions may arise in this view  
 No probs, it is them we look upon to give a perception anew*

*Scientific truths are no better, but are hypotheses grinding forth  
 continuously, yet another new  
 Over the centuries, models have changed hands with no agreement on a  
 shared worldview  
 Questions for Care again find a foothold  
 What mother said about a life of hot and cold  
 Preordained likes and dislikes in this finite world  
 Let it be hot or cold  
 Let it be preordained likes or dislikes  
 Let Care be the interpreter for them alike  
 Let it be a hypothesis, ad hoc truth, a half-truth, even junk  
 Let floaters decide for themselves daily whether sober or drunk  
 Kornicam is their feedback loop  
 Amend, make improvements over a coffee cup  
 .Lest you get a fright seeing this wooly vignette  
 Hear in lighter vein jokes tonight we exchanged  
 two of them I cannot forget  
 Don't adjudge us sly, deranged  
 Joke, however, reminds me of my take on implicate order  
 Akin to preserved tablet, it has all that was, is, and will be within its  
 border  
 Laughter is divine, they say  
 jokes of the implicate order would clear all clouds one day  
 I hear all wisecracks, veg or non-veg, from all folks  
 Would I ever bump into the joke of all jokes  
 Liquor and laughter are both divine  
 A deadly combination for a terrific chime*

*I laughed; the reserved Wu laughed uncontrollably  
 Hearing Aurora thus narrate the story of a young lady  
 She lisped and slurred sweetly  
 Yet, managed word by word, tell this joke slowly  
 This Victorian mother was anxious for the well-being of her child  
 Kept prying eyes on her should she join a group of wild  
 Close watch made her secretly chase the young lady to school, misfired  
 A mixed group of boys and girls, their outdoor games never made young  
 lady tired  
 Repeatedly she was for a month spotted climbing trees in the compound  
 Apprehensive mother made up her mind to give her an advice sound  
 Darling daughter, you are too gullible; your conduct makes me nervous  
 Don't you know the boys want you to climb these trees for what purpose  
 Even a blind would gather they are after the color of your  
 unmentionables.  
 Oh, is that your concern, my dear mother? Worry no more  
 I fathomed their intention in the very first week, don't infer any touchy  
 parables  
 I did see the bastards smirk those days  
 I thus quickly resolved to engineer novel ways  
 These monkeys were taught a lesson before they could gather  
 I stopped wearing them altogether  
 Let me tell you in this series, Wu's joke, the second one  
 Terse short earthy belonging to a transgender one  
 This bushy eyes hefty vegetable seller still sold during the war  
 Curfews sirens march of soldiers continued till the rise of the evening  
 star*

*Two middle-aged women, bored and tired, passed by the vendor  
 spreading their perfumes strong  
 Hollered he after them, have a look at my fresh veggies once come along  
 Give us a pair of healthy carrots, then  
 Who knows the curfew is clamped when  
 Handing them a neatly packed bundle of three carrots  
 He looked happily expectantly at them, thumping his empty carets  
 Ladies confused and questioned him; we are two, wanting two, we are  
 done  
 Never mind, never mind, good ladies, eat one!  
 Don't we need wisecracks to accompany us on death bed  
 I have chosen mine; you decide the ones you choose to wed  
 I write an epilogue before I conclude  
 Some signs of the old world must remain rest we preclude  
 Scabiosa Butterfly Blue, the national flower of Mongolia, would be your  
 prize  
 Have it spread across you as if in a paradise  
 Let Wu decide for himself about your children and where you belong  
 I wish, however; to keep the official crew cut of Kim Jong.  
 Let her decide what American pride Aurora wishes for you to brag  
 I wish, however; to keep the unmentionables made up of their flag  
 There would be more foundational facts as we go along  
 Let each be screened; let's blow each other no wrong.  
 You are born, I firmly believe; blue sky prevails overhead.  
 sign of sunrise, tranquil and spectacular, with thoughts dead  
 bunch of brown-headed gulls hovering around the lake  
 Sun is peeking through distant mountains; let's celebrate.*

## Nine

"I need to destroy my laptop today. Can't wait to carry it for disposal to an e-waste shop," Aurora said while eating an omelet toast served for their brunch.

"Isn't there a way to change its internal configuration and save it from a premature death, it looks brand new," Wu asked her while sipping his tea.

"Unfortunately no, they can detect me again as soon as I open it, anywhere in the world. I luckily have a smaller one with me with all the data intact. I think we need to bury it here before we leave this place tomorrow," Aurora answered with concern.

"One dying, another burning, what the fuck," Byat said, still under the control of last night's rendezvous.

"You seem to have had one too many. Better go back and relax and rest after you eat well. Today, we are free the whole day, later, we can take a stroll along the lake. Motup suggested taking us around to a local village," Aurora said with chapped lips.

High altitude started affecting them, particularly Aurora, whose sunburnt face had begun to peel around her nose. Byat looked at her as a work of Cézanne or a Monet, an unmediated perception of a lily with myriad complexions. The noon sun was excessive shining overhead, and they soon retired to their tents.

Towards the evening, they went out by the lake. Aurora stealthily tucked her laptop under her jacket to get rid of it at the earliest available opportunity. In public, though, they found it tough to fling it away and came back near the open area where their tents were tied down to the

leveled ground. A little down the alley was a small congregation of trees and plants the tent owners grew for their local feed. Aurora quickly helped the men dig a shallow shaft with the help of handy spades lying there.

"Amen, this is through, thank God, I was apprehensive that anybody opening and using the laptop could get in trouble, but no more, it is dead and buried," Aurora said with a sigh of relief.

"Are we celebrating the burial too," Byat remarked.

"Yes, if you wish to be dead and buried after it," Wu laughed.

"Have we planned anything for the onward journey"? Byat asked.

"Well, we need to rest today. Let's for proper circulation and hydration eat fruits since we have a long journey ahead tomorrow. As we decided we are going to Leh tomorrow, spend a night there and start our onward journey to reach Keylong the day next. It's a hectic journey, so let's start early. I figured out the entire itinerary with Motup who says after staying overnight in Keylong, we then travel to Manali the following day. We can stay in green Manali for a couple of days if you agree. Lots of places of tourist interest we will get to see there. Also, I think we have satisfactorily succeeded in avoiding the blackguards, yet going by air to reach Delhi can be risky. Let's just chill now," Aurora answered.

"So we will reach Delhi from Manali then on. What are your plans?"

Byat questioned the two.

"I would love to visit Allahabad for its famous Sangam point with you unless I am summoned back to Hongkong. And it could be anytime soon within a week," Aurora said.



"If it was a definite plan, I could wait for you and travel back with you. But, I cannot prolong my stay much, so, I would like to fly back to Hongkong from Delhi if you are delayed," Wu said to Aurora.

"Any two of us can go together either to Allahabad or Hong Kong, let's see," A shaggy Byat said with a wicked smile.

"Let's not forget Kornicam. Are we ready with our contributions? I have a couple of published papers on nukes that I would like to post on our site. Besides, I would need an assistant to look after its day-to-day activities and logistics. I have frankly no time for all that. I am ready to pay for the work through my office as I am entitled to keep a secretary," Aurora said.

"I have already shared the magic mantra with you, let me mail you the whole sutra, Bahiya sutta. It's a short two-page length story. Also, soon I will upload the whole lotus sutra with specific reference to the treasure tower and the ceremony of air, it is a hefty text though. So, I am done," Wu answered.

"Well, after our last talk on Kornicam my thoughts have since changed and I am dedicating a poem in its honor first. I hope to edit it in a day or so. I am done as well," Byat commented.

"You write poems too, what a crook you are, let's know what else we don't yet know of you," Aurora laughed.

"I was not so until last night, I think I embraced a miracle there. Anyhow, let me cross my fingers before I count my eggs. Also, before I forget let me tell you, I have a competent assistant to help you in this venture. Handa, my daughter, is working as a sub-editor in our English daily at Ulan Bator. Certainly, she would find time to hone her skills with you. Also, she knows English well", Byat responded to Aurora.

"Let's call her, or video call her if the signal permits," Aurora said.

"Well, it is about seven here, it will be ten in the night there. let's see,"

Byat said.

Byat called Handa twice, but the phone kept ringing and disconnected due to poor connectivity. They decided to call her in the morning and retired for the day after eating a large bowl of mangoes they had bought and eaten in Leh two days back. Biting such a sweet, succulent, aromatic sweet dish made them nervous like their last time. They burped and rolled into their beds in double quilts quickly.

Handa, on her part, was in her bathtub at this hour every day after she finished her hectic office work late in the evenings. It was her morning. In February, there was no respite from the cold in the city. With meager or no sunshine, it was gloomy and dark. Clinging reflections came rushing to her mind in these moments of leisure. Handa, a young Mongolian girl about twenty-three, was bemused by a train of thoughts in the bathtub. She lay quite comfortably, stretching her golden legs and making a splash here and there, concomitant with the fears and joys her thoughts sent her. Her frail body looked undernourished, yet a singular look at her visage predicted a girl of firm disposition with gleaming eyes ready to break into an angelic smile.

"Let me dilute, oh, no, energize this water. I would be feeling cold sooner than I could wait. The hot water tap is itself heated even to touch. I would use a towel to unscrew it. This combination of the hot and the biting cold water grows smoky as I move about it, oh, this is celestial, remove the ceiling, I would view fairies. Smoke is magical. My neighbors directly above me in a homogenous apartment should have gone to sleep if they must. Given the opportunity, I would have used their taps together with

mine, or, given a chance, I would use all taps of the city here, here only, and turn them on, hot and cold flowing alike in a surreptitious flow bringing to me the stimulant water and this unending smoky air around me . Let me show this world what it means to be happy. "

"Yet, however, I cling to remain in the state of happy moods, I sense a dark alley in front of me reminding me my limits and unconquered dreams. Despairing sentiments have troubled me often. I always wanted my present to match how I breathed my first air into this world and started kicking blatantly. Quite a lot of summers and winters have gone by and I feel silly as usual, surely it is silly to witness unending sunrises and sunsets without any progress to me. Miserable. There shows a vulnerable part in me just about as I choose to make amends. Truly, I no longer have any belonging with the world,"Handa ruminated.

Lying in a hot water tub, Handa felt that the melancholy moods she nursed had no cause and her inert and vague contradictions needed to be resolved. She tried to eye herself from inside, wish away evil, and embrace the world's fragrance. Within her five feet body she vibrated with a gentle sway of her breasts, smooth skin of sun color, black hair floating over her head as an overwhelming sheet. A call of wheedling fountains pulled her to tingling sensations. She raised herself from the bathtub to look for a towel with an urgent urge to cover herself lest the cold or her own eyes catch her. Her bathroom was as functional as her apartment, where objects were kept for specific purposes. Below the mirror was kept a wooden cabinet painted brown. She kept toiletry, powders, face creams, and shampoos her parents bought for their only daughter, the apple of their eyes. After getting dressed, she checked her phone, which showed missed calls from Byat. She called back quickly,

but no contact could be established. However, the following morning, she could connect and speak to her father, Aurora, and Wu. She became the fourth member of Kornicam. With a reasonably attractive remuneration, she agreed to join Aurora as a secretary.

"You may need to travel to Hongkong soon for work, my dear Handa, you have your official papers ready, I hope," Aurora asked Handa.

"Yes, Mam, just give me a day to reach you there," Handa answered sky-high.

"Good, enjoy yourself, bye from me now," Aurora said, handing over the phone to Byat. After the short teletalk, they set out for their journey.

Reaching Leh in the evening, they avoided returning to the same hotel they stayed in on the last occasion. Motup returned home, promising to pick them up early the following day for onward journey. From Leh, they started for Keylong the next day.

After four hours or so, they reached a spot called 'More Plains'. It simply took their breath away. Aurora wished the car had been fitted with a sunroof for a better view. They stopped the car to see the incredible, magical, beautiful, magnificent, splendid, glorious, awe-inspiring visual shock. They believed they hallucinated amidst light snowfall covering all that came into their visual field. A beautifully laid, straight road stood there, stretching for about 40 km, with panoramic views of the mighty Himalayas in the distance at the impressive height of 4800 Mts.

This straight stretch coalesced into the horizon with massive plain land on both sides of the beautifully paved road. The barren Himalayas with low-hanging clouds were simply delightful and tranquil. *More Plains* appeared as the tabletop within those dense mountains. The skies couldn't be bluer! The magic in it was unfazed by any measure of time. You could

stand for hours there, experiencing the antiquity and endurance of the snow-capped Mountains.

"This seems like a place where you may bump into a Gabriel or a Jesus just roaming about unassumingly with their followers," Byat said.

"Truly magical," Aurora answered.

"An apt place for the treasure tower, as good as a sight of ceremony in the air," Wu said.

"It is my favorite spot on this route. However, we are now going to visit the Bara-Lacha pass in some time. Perched on a height of 4,890 m above sea level, it is an important location as the valleys of Lahaul and Ladakh here meet each other. Another place we will stop on the way, just a few kilometers away from it, would be at a breathtaking lake, Suraj Tal, let's sit back in the car and move on as you have a lot to see yet," Motup spoke spiritedly.

A snow-capped summit came into view after they drove on for a few hours and reached the summit of the Baralacha La. It had a quaint charm to it, thrilling with breathtakingly beautiful views. It was all snow. Snow was still fresh, white, and virgin. Chilly winds bit them as they left the car to return quickly. A thermos of hot coffee came to their rescue in such bewildering cold. Soon, after a short drive, they came across the calm blue-green waters of the Suraj Tal, which was marked by a clear outline of snow around its banks. It lay in sharp contrast to the surrounding grey and off-white colored rocks that were scattered around it and the road above. Although there was no sun, they decided to have their packed lunch there, being hungry after a journey of eight hours. A pristine lake with emerald green water lying quietly like a sleeping giant did not

encourage them to eat their food under an overcast sky. They took photos after finishing their food and left in a hurry.

After crossing the Suraj Tal on their way to Keylong, some of the most beautiful vistas of the Himalayas came into view. At last, they reached Keylong in the evening, located in the Lahaul and Spiti District of Himachal Pradesh. It was an amazing meadow-like town, a green paradise, unlike the places they had recently passed through. As they entered, this lush green town, nestled amidst the snow-capped mountains, was a feast to their eyes. The green landscape was then to continue throughout the journey. After overnight stay at Keylong, they started their journey afresh.

Keylong to Manali they covered through the world-famous Rohtang pass. Tall, thick snow walls greeted them by roadside. Having dropped them in a hotel in Manali by evening, Motup emotionally waved them goodbye after collecting his charges.

"You must try Kullu caps from the local market here, very colorful with umpteen varieties," Motup advised them.

"Sure, sure, we will; thank you for your support, Motup," Aurora said shaking hands with him. Wu and Byat then shook hands with him.

A beautiful hill station with a perennial water flow along the river Beas made Manali a hot destination year-round. It was a crowded place. The three spent the next few days there sightseeing and visiting the local monasteries and Hindu temples famed to be over a thousand years old.

"I think I need to wait for a couple of days or more as I am informed by my folks that Adon and Martha have recently slipped out to some undisclosed location. We need to wait for them to return to Lantau. Their tenanted premises are not vacated and are safely locked. Nothing much to

worry about their disappearance," Aurora announced to Wu and Byat on the last day in Manali.

"Oh, that means I can go back to Hong Kong tomorrow. I need to check the flight availability. But I need to reach the Delhi Airport early tomorrow," Wu said.

"We too are going there, dear Sir, we will catch a domestic flight to Allahabad. Let's check all the timings," Byat retorted ecstatically.

"I just checked there is a good night service of luxury Volvo buses from Manali to Delhi. Let's catch one and we will reach there in time," Aurora informed them.

At the Delhi airport the next day, Wu hugged Byat and Aurora before proceeding to the International wing. Byat and Aurora needed a short detour in their taxi to enter the domestic airport. Their flight was scheduled for 3.30 pm, and it was on time. A small aircraft flown by Air India reached Allahabad airport in one hour, located in a cantonment area, part of the Bamrauli Air Force Base Station. The popular Indian snack, Samosa, was served along with fruit juice on the flight. Aurora and Byat pretended to enjoy the snack as they found their co-passengers relishing it. They booked a radio taxi as soon as the flight descended the airport. "Javed is the name of your driver who will be at the main gate in twenty minutes," a message flashed from the taxi app.

The airport was the smallest in size that they had ever seen. The army manned two connected cabins for departure and arrival, keeping the check-in luggage for the arrivals in a commonplace to release it to the passenger after matching it with his ticket. Receiving their luggage and rolling it down to the airport's main entrance, Byat and Aurora found

Javed standing beside his taxi. He quickly took their luggage to upload them to the boot.

"You have a hotel booking at the civil lines, Sir, be comfortable, I will take about an hour to reach your destination. Water bottles are kept in front of you. Please tell me anything you wish on the way, soft drinks, fruits or nuts," Javed said.

After moving a distance of about two kilometers, Javed had to halt the taxi owing to a traffic jam. They helplessly gaped at this long line of vehicles across their window panes.

"Sir, let me check it from someone on the other side. Usually, there are hardly any jams here but due to the ongoing Maha Kumbh Mela, there may be some glitches. You too are to attend the fair I think?" Javed asked them.

"Maha Kumbh Fair, yes, I saw some reports about a massive gathering of people at Allahabad. However, we have not come to the fair. What is it about? Aurora asked.

"Oh, this event comes around only once every 12 years. It goes on for 55 days and is expected to be attended by 100 million pilgrims, making it the largest temporary gathering of people in the world. Once we see a foreigner here we know for sure that he is to attend the fair. I think you are lucky to be here during this time," Javed said.

"Please call up someone for the traffic jam, "Byat suggested to Javed. Javed exited the taxi and frantically started talking with a friend, nodding his head. In minutes, he came back with an agitated face. He announced and shared a sinister news with them.

"Sir and madam, a tragedy occurred in the city sometime back when a stampede pushed people at the local railway station. Many are reported to



be dead. My brother who works at a restaurant in the city tells me it is a nightmare and police are patrolling everywhere to calm the people involved," Javed informed.

"Oh, I am sorry, this is not good. So how long are we stuck here on the road?" Aurora asked him.

"Madam, I can't say exactly but a couple of hours to be sure.

Alternatively, I can take you to my place nearby if you allow me to turn back the taxi in the direction of the airport where my Village is. I will drop you off once the traffic clears," Javed suggested.

The two agreed to his proposal. He kept talking on his cell phone while turning back to his taxi slowly. Many taxis followed suit. Skirting around narrow, dirty lanes through thatched-roofed small huts and small shops in the Village of Mohammadpur Umri, Javed put his brakes in front of a small house. It appeared much better than those they saw on the way.

Outside the verandah, some women and children were lolling about on wooden beds. Javed went over to them and mentioned them to make way for the guests.. Clearing the area, the family started looking curious about the guests they would receive.

"The luggage can lie where it is, however you may carry your water bottles if you so desire," said Javed, gently escorting them to the part of his building that looked new and furnished. He and his twin brother had recently built two luxury rooms with a separate entrance to attract scientists and analysts who had taken a deep interest in the Village in recent times. "India is a land of many wonders. One among them is this Village, Mohammadpur Umri, known as the Village of twins. The "Twin Effect "is stupendous. Out of a population of close to 900, the place has 65 pairs of identical twins. The earliest set of twins was a pair of twin

girls born shortly after Indian independence in 1947. In this Village, every fifth home has a pair of twins.

Another startling fact is that this is not restricted to the villagers but extends to other living beings, including animals and birds. It is a common experience for a hen to lay eggs with double yolks or for cows and buffalos to deliver twins. While the villagers think of it as God's gift or associate it with something present in the soil and water, scientists attribute these phenomena to genetic factors. A lot of Indian and international scientists over time have studied the DNA of these villagers regularly. They are still perplexed over the reasons behind this. It is something that can be seen across religions and age groups," A young woman of the family was narrating the wonder of the Village to the guests and how her twin sister is married to her brother in law the other twin brother of Javed. Her identical twin appeared before them with a plate of fruits. Once Aurora and Byat learned about these facts, they were excited to hear more.

"Please make yourself comfortable here, we can serve you coffee if you like, or tea whatever you like," The young woman said, switching on the television.

"Are your children born as identical twins too"? Aurora asked her.

"Well, not really, we both sisters haven't yet experienced it, let's see if it enters our next generation or not," The young woman said.

Local news channels on the TV were reporting massive fatalities and injuries.

"We seem to have made a wrong entry into your city today. Not perfect timing," Aurora said.

"How are the rest of millions handled here?" Byat asked with concern.

"The Government has taken huge steps to manage it but accidents cannot be avoided altogether. On our way to your hotel, I will show the river Ganga and the rush of devotees on its banks. Despite the cold, the holy dip is sacrosanct," Javed replied.

"How far is Allahabad university from this place?" Byat asked Javed.

"About 14-15 km,"

"And from our hotel in the civil lines?"

"About 5 km, sir,"

"If everything gets better then I need to meet my professor tomorrow at the University. Local transport is good here I hope," Byat asked.

"Yes Sir, you can travel anywhere here in and out of the city with lots of means of transport. If you like I can come to pick you up any time you ask. Good news for you, the traffic has started moving up, we can start in half an hour but before that you may like to freshen up in our twin rooms," Javed said.

"Well let's. I need to use the toilet," Aurora responded.

"Sure, let's see the twin rooms," Byat added.

It was dark as they moved out of the house. Bidding adieu to the family, they sat in the taxi that moved swiftly now without any hurdles. In half an hour, they reached near the river. Below the bridge where the river Ganges was flowing ceaselessly in strong currents, Javed showed them the auspicious point of confluence of three rivers from a distance, known as Sangam.

"Allahabad is believed to be one of the most important pilgrimage centers for Hindus. For ages, river confluences are regarded as auspicious places, but in Allahabad, the significance of the confluence is even more so as

here, the holy Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswathi meet to become one river," Explained Javed.

It was a sight to behold at night. The whole area was lit up with lights at the river banks with many pontoon bridges built to provide access to tourists. Their vision caught tents all over the place. They saw people of such a huge number that it was seen to be believed. What happened in the morning had no apparent impact on the festivities. Entering the civil lines, the place was crowded anywhere you looked. After they entered their hotel and checked in, they went out on foot across the road to dine at El Checo restaurant. Javed told them about El Checo, as the finest place of multiple cuisines in the city, where his twin brother Akhtar worked. It truly deserved the reputation it had, they noticed eating their sumptuous dinner.

The next morning, Byat booked Javed for the day and reached Allahabad University. The University of Allahabad has occupied an esteemed place among the Universities of India for over a century, being the fourth oldest University of India after Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras Universities. The credit for conceiving a large Central College in Allahabad and eventually developing it into a University went to Sir William Muir, Lt. Governor of United Provinces during the British Raj. A large green lawn greeted you as you entered it. Beyond it lay a colonial building of ancient origin. The structure was designed in Indo-Saracenic style with a beautiful blend of Indian and Persian elements. Made of white sandstone, the huge dome and rising tower surrounded by arched corridors created an air of grandeur around the structure.

Byat enquired about Professor Dwivedi, who would be his mentor for the entire year. He met a short man in his late fifties sitting leisurely in the

staff room chewing tobacco. Extending his hand to Byat, he was pleasantly surprised to meet his foreign student.

He was a double PhD, one in Buddhist literature. The other was his favorite subject he never got tired of talking about, the works of a celebrated Hindi poet and writer, Jai Shankar Prasad. A tobacco seller from Banaras, a city close to Allahabad, Jai Shankar Prasad rose to such rare prominence that he was considered the century's poet. As a mark of obeisance, Dwivedi even got his monthly tobacco supplies from the same local market where Prasad used to sell tobacco. He knew he was losing health due to his tobacco addiction, yet he continued with it happily and internally resolved.

After finishing his classes, Dwivedi offered Byat coffee at his favorite joint, India Coffee House, in the civil lines. Byat's first-day class was formal as the Professor explained the class's detailed syllabus. It was a class of slim strength, four students, including himself, and Byat was the eldest.

"Well, you are not a regular student so I will treat you more like a friend. Don't get worked up for anything. It will be more fun than any rigorous timetable here," Prof. Dwivedi said, sipping his coffee at India coffee house.

"I had earlier enrolled with Banaras Hindu university but they made changes at the last minute and shifted me here. Will you have an idea why, Sir?" Byat asked him.

"Because they shifted me here. I completed my sixty years at Banaras Hindu University and I was promised to get an extension of two years provided I come over to teach at Allahabad university. My family continues to live in Varanasi and I join them on weekends. Just about

forty km from here. Varanasi is another name for Banaras like Kashi is another. A great city indeed," Prof. Dwivedi said.

"A tragedy happened in the city as we came in yesterday," Byat joined.

"Yes, about fifty people lost their lives and many others were seriously injured. God save this country, they still believe taking a holy dip will deliver them. I have never thought of doing it in my sixty years. I have no words to express it," An anguished professor Dwivedi said.

"Sir, would you help me get hostel accommodation within the university as the office informed me that the vacancy will arise only in a month?"

Byat continued.

"Let me see it tomorrow if there is any possibility. However, I suggest you look for an alternate accommodation as the hostel is always overcrowded here," Prof. answered.

"Sir, would you suggest any places of tourist interest here? Byat asked.

"Well, presently it is advisable to refrain from visiting the city ghats, I mean river banks, due to sheer population explosion. However, you may try Varanasi for a weekend visit, especially the Sarnath. Being a Buddhist, you would surely have heard its significance, the place where the first sermon of the Buddha was pronounced to the world. Rest I don't think anything should be of interest there to you. Another interesting activity was to go for Nauka vihar, Boating, which you could do in Allahabad in normal times. However, you may do it now in Varanasi itself. You would be surprised to know that the Ganges flows in the opposite direction in Varanasi. Its normal course is from West to east, but in Varanasi, it flows from east to west," Informed the Prof.

"Sir, I am grateful for your guidance. So, you would leave for Varanasi after the classes on Friday, that is, tomorrow?" Byat asked him.

"Oh, yes, that is my weekly routine. Let me, well, inform you about something that may interest you, as it interests me immensely. At the University, I am also teaching to a select heterogeneous group of students the epic work, Kamayani, written by one of the greatest poets of India, Babu Jaishankar prasad. Since there are a couple of foreigners and south Indian students, the medium of instruction is strictly English. If you so like you could join it as an additional course. If you like it you continue, else just leave. This in my view is the ultimate gift of Varanasi to mankind," The excited Prof. continued.

"I am deeply honored, dear Sir. Let me meet you tomorrow," Byat answered.

The blue Maruti Suzuki car they had come by started noiselessly, and the Prof. drove it away. Javed, who already stood in the parking lot, opened the car door for Byat sheepishly. A call from Aurora informed him she was waiting for him in the hotel's dining area, where a buffet lunch was on.

"In ten minutes, I will be there," Byat answered.

Over lunch, they decided to visit Varanasi the next day after Byat would finish his classes by 11 am. Aurora appeared busy with her work. The next morning, Javed returned to pick Byat up from the hotel around 8.30 am. A bright and enthusiastic Prof.Dwivedi informed him to proceed to his Kamayani class scheduled at 9 to last more than double a regular class, one and a half hours long. Thus, his other classes were canceled that day. About a dozen students sitting in the class greeted Byat. Prof. followed him soon and started the introduction of the epic work.

"Kamayani is an allegorical poem that dramatizes the tradition, culture, and philosophy of the Indian subcontinent. This Hindi classic was

published in 1937. It is an ambitious modern epic based on how Manu, the first man, started life after the great Deluge had subsided and the world, with its varied forms of life, emerged out of the chaos. The book uses many symbols in its characters, Manu, Shradha, Ida, etc., but these are different mental attributes, couched in human shape. It shows man's endeavor to rise from the basic animal stage to the stage of perfection through enormous trials and tribulations.

It is a musical rendition with consummate skill, the forward struggle of the human self from elemental passions to the unconditioned peace. The absorbing poetic images, the solemn music, and the dignified sweep of rhythm keep you spellbound to the very end," The Prof. explained excitedly.

"Sir, is the English translation available in the library," One student asked.

"Oh, yes, many copies, sufficient copies for you all. Although there is no substitute for its original comprehension, its translation still reads great. In this introduction I will touch on the broad themes briefly to give you a foothold in what follows in the two semesters ahead," Prof answered.

The professor read out his favorite portions of the poem in Hindi, followed by its English translation with such rare vigor and interest as if it was his autobiography. Towards the end of the class, he quoted the very last stanza of the poem, almost in tears. According to him, it was the consummation of all that the Indian philosophy since ages stood for, the expression of the One consciousness without a second, popularly known as Advait philosophy. The English translation of the last stanza read thus :



*Matter mind harmonious*

*Beauty personified*

*One Consciousness Prevailed*

*Bliss, intense, unified.*

"Gentlemen, I am through with the introduction, I hope you will like the book in detail. We meet next on Monday, thank you all," He signed off at 10.30 sharp.

Meanwhile, Javed had picked up Aurora, who was interested in looking at the University's buildings that Byat had praised her about. Going by the professors advice, they visited the city of Varanasi.

Later, their day was spent looking through the deer park associated with Gautam Buddha at Sarnath, Varanasi. Also referred to as Isipatana, this city is mentioned by the Buddha as one of the four places of pilgrimage his devout followers should visit. It is also the Buddha's

Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta site, where he made his first sermon after enlightenment. He explained the four noble truths and the teachings associated with them. At the local shops in Sarnath, Byat bought Aurora a multicolored silk dupatta that shone brightly over her top. The dupatta, a light shawl traditionally worn by women in the Indian subcontinent, is an essential Indian outfit. Every woman who did not wear the saree was seen sporting it.

"My professor said the boat ride is simply not to be missed here, are you game for it?" Byat asked her.

"Let's have a snack first then we can plan it. let us ask Javed to do the rest," Aurora answered, a little tired.

"You could book an evening ride that takes you to all major ghats followed by a huge community prayer to the river Ganges which attracts

foreigners a lot. It is a two-hour ride. If you are interested, I can book it for you," Informed Javed .

"I don't know how you would like it, but the professor did not recommend the community prayer, he suggested a night boat instead. If you wish we can go for the evening ride," Byat insisted.

"No, no, we should stick to his advice. Let's spend these two hours watching the new James Bond movie released a few days back. Then we go for a late evening ride when the crowds have cleared at the Ghat.

What do you say? Aurora asked.

Byat beamed. He later recalled the evening in accord with his dribbling penchant for poetry.

*"Aassi Ghat slipped away afar, stars twinkling,  
tapping the water against the boat's hull coaxing.  
Boatman rowed slowly without hurry.  
Daily Propitiation to the Ganges over, no worry  
Shimmering waves receiving a half-moon in adulation  
Fort Ramnagar stood far at a scenic location.  
Let me snuggle up as close as I can  
It should have been champagne; let's enjoy, but our beer can  
James Bond made a mark.  
Fires ran amok in me with an adrenaline spark.  
Never felt her out of breath, even for a moment.  
Cool breeze flows through the princess truant.  
Flinging herself at abundant rest  
Loving its heart-soothing effect  
Lost in her world with earplugs on  
What rock, what imagery*

*Her heart dwells upon  
 All Ghats in full view in the holy river abound.  
 Boatsman indicating the largest Manikarnika cremation ground  
 Looking up, unplugged, she nodded  
 Burning pyres looked bright as the boat plodded.  
 Part of humanity was returning forlorn  
 City couples are now over with daily chores, toiling for a newborn.  
 Ejection injection rolling out quietly  
 Like the murmuring river moving up blindly  
 Brunette sits opposite, smiling, drinking  
 The whole world beats expecting  
 Snuggling up to our space close by  
 Leisurely sat sipping, magic slipping by  
 Was I to her of any interest?  
 Was it but a sister's affection sincerest?  
 Do I gather the courage for a clue?  
 Let it remain in dark who is who  
 She stopped drinking, munching dry nuts.  
 Looked around, gauging water and how far lay the ghats  
 Ridding me of a one-track mind  
 Asked her gently to cut short the ride if she disliked  
 We do the full round, she said  
 No worries if we see living or the dead  
 Tell me, however, what you heard of Kamayani  
 Is it entirely philosophy  
 Religion, culture, or history  
 I wish my professor had come over*

*Rowed us the whole night with his awe cover-to-cover*  
*His introduction has enlightened me though*  
*I held it as a divine show.*  
*Take Kamayani as warm care*  
*And Ida superior cold intellect dare.*  
*Manu, the first man, firefly, thin air of freedom*  
*Pulled by intellect for love of establishment and modern wisdom*  
*Thematically, it's the old struggle between head over heart again.*  
*Who wins its heart, heart, and heart again.*  
*Worries resolved, path outlined, and finitude gone*  
*In consequence, quiet flows the Indian Don*  
*One who wrote kamayani was the giant Jaishankar Prasad*  
*I wish he rowed here happily, no matter what's left of the city facade*  
*Good hands you are in, she said*  
*Buddhist studies and Kamayani are now wed*  
*A daunting scholarship lies ahead of you*  
*One year on, shall we see you emerge a hero anew.*  
*Nodding fiercely thankfully at her speech*  
*Looked up into the sky as if a drunk man on a beach*  
*Afar; it was all blurry; close one appeared into two coatings.*  
*Is it the Village of Twins, Umri, eating up its surroundings?*

Back on the road, moving out of the city on the highway, Javed stopped the car for dinner. It was about eleven pm, and the place was abuzz with travelers and their families. Picking up their recent favorite kabab rumali roti rolls, they departed, munching them on the way.

The next morning, Aurora informed Byat that Adon and Martha were back home at Lantau. A local hunt confirmed that they were busy with odd activities.

"I had a word with Handa just now, she needs to travel to Hong Kong in a day or so. She will be trained by our local contact. she would go door to door to spread the Jesus message in the fishing village of Lantau, Tai O. Meeting the black couple in the process she will try getting close to them," Aurora said in a serious tone.

"Well, Aurora, you are my friend, a well-wisher; I hope she does not get into trouble as she is a plain, simple, and modest girl. Surely, she hasn't seen the world and its tentacles yet. What do you say? Byat asked her anxiously.

You speak to Handa and her mother in detail before accepting the assignment. Although her role is limited to a junior position, this could be risky. No harm. You must consult them first and let me know today, otherwise, I need to take on board another person. And no need to panic as her job on Kornicam would not be disturbed, and she can continue it from Ulan Bator," Aurora replied.

"Great, I will come back to you soon. What is your plan for the days ahead? Byat asked her

"See, depending on how soon we train our girl in Hong Kong, I think I need to travel there in 4-5 days," Aurora replied.

"Well, in that case, let me tell you that today I intend to shift to Umri village for a month till I get accommodation in the hostel. Javed has fixed it all, lodging, eating, traveling are all included in a decent rent. You may stay on here," Byat said.

"No worries, I have seen the rooms there, nice, comfortable rooms in the countryside. For whatever number of days I am here, I will stay with you there. I will pay him for my stay. But I think I will be quite busy today and tomorrow," Aurora said.

"I think Javed will come in the afternoon. Let's get ready and meet during lunch. I hope to finally tell you our decision by then," Byat said, signing off.

Altansarnai was reluctant to send her only daughter away, that too, to a place like Hong Kong, where she was being trained in spying tactics apart from the secretarial work. Handa was determined the other way around. She said she would not turn down a godsent opportunity as her future in her own city was stagnant and monotonous. The decision was left to Byat, who jokingly asked them to toss it out with a coin. They did not toss, though. Handa persuaded her mother to agree to send her to Hong Kong. Over a little melodrama, a unanimous decision to travel to Hong Kong was communicated to Aurora by Handa, who happily welcomed it. It saved her work in shortlisting other girls.

Rehana and Sultana, the twin sisters, married to the twin brothers, driver Javed, and the chef Akhtar welcomed Aurora and Byat into their luxury twin rooms. These rooms were constructed and furnished to appear as identical twins. They were informed that these rooms had been hired by childless couples with great success. Rehana and Sultana with their husbands appeared to live in a world of make-believe where nothing was impossible in their twenties. They innately felt that their social status was rising as they had steadily acquired all that a decent life was about. The two sisters could speak passable English as they had been to college before their Nikah. The twin brothers, however, could barely finish

school before learning to earn their livelihood. Javed left after dropping Byat and Aurora at his house.

"Mam, I think you are going to love this vegetable juice. It is very fresh and very tasty," Rehana said, serving them large glasses of vegetable juice.

"Let me have it, thanks, it looks delicious, so blood-colored, beets, I am sure, no?" Aurora answered.

"We get fresh vegetables from the farms close by," Rehana said.

"Oh, how far are these farms from this place? I would love to visit them if possible," Aurora asked her.

"Just about a range of two kilometers I think," Rehana answered.

Soon, Byat came out from his room and, nodding at Rehana, took the juice she offered him.

"Our friend, Rehana, tells me that the countryside is about two km from here; let us try it out one day, a nice drive I would say," Aurora said.

"Sure enough, if you have four days to go we can," Byat replied, looking clean and fresh after his bath.

The vegetable juice tasted refreshing, a little sour, with lemon and ginger mixed with it. Thanking Rehana, Aurora asked her to bring Sultana there as she was curious about how they lived their double roles. Sultana approached them, giggling, carrying sweets to offer them.

"let's know how you got married to the twin brothers. Does it not create confusion?" Aurora asked her in a charming tone.

"Initially it was some struggle to identify one from the other. As the two look identical, even their voice is the same, but after living with them we now know who is who. We never entered the wrong bedroom," Sultana said laughingly.

"They have also resolved it I think by recognizing the tone of our voice which is dissimilar, also our clothes and the jewelry we wear. However our two toddlers sometimes make mistakes with their mommies and daddies,"Rehana said.

"Do your children have any resemblance?" Byat asked her.

"Not strictly, the boy does not look like his younger sister. They may have some family features in common though," Sultana answered.

"Your husbands would have had some interesting experiences in the world outside, I presume," Aurora asked.

"All the time. Their friends and earlier their teachers in the school would mistake one for the other. Some advantages have been with them too as they drive using the same license. Although they have separate I.D.s , they use them interchangeably. In the end, however, we have our routine lives like any other couple. we need work to feed ourselves, educate our children and save for the future," Rehana replied.

"Surely you must, lovely ladies, we are so happy to spend time with you here. Tell us, can we hire a car here to go for a drive later when night falls. I have an international license with me. I am used to left-hand driving now as I drove in Hong Kong a lot, so driving here should not be a challenge," Aurora asked.

"Let me call Javed or you call him yourself, I am sure he will fix it up, Mam,"Rehana replied.

Aurora hired a four-wheel jeep for a week that she used to go for long drives at night after finishing her hectic work schedule till she left for Hong Kong. Aurora, along with Byat, wrapped up every place close by and even distant ones in the jeep. Byat was getting acclimated to his new routine. He attended his college during the day and stayed back in the



library. He returned in the evening, finding Aurora busy with her work invariably. Professor Dwivedi had started teaching him Buddhism along with the lessons of Kamayani, leaving him exhausted in making his notes and doing his revisions.

On the last night of her stay in Allahabad, Aurora called Byat out. They mostly had their dinner together every evening. Aurora, who never discussed her work with another person, was happy to tell Byat how Handa was faring at her new job and completing her training.

"Amanda, my local contact tells me Handa is like free-flowing water, very flexible in mind and body. She is a gem, although a little over-anxious that I think she will get over as the time passes," Aurora said.

"Let's see. God be with her. I hardly get to talk to her nowadays as she appears very busy. She sends me messages every day," Byat said.

"I will be with her tomorrow by this time. Let us celebrate tonight. We can drive to Varanasi around the river where we went Boating and have the famous rumali roti roll on our way back from the same restaurant, I hope it's on till late hours," Aurora said.

"These guys are up all night as tourist buses keep coming. Do you need to buy beer or hard liquor, what do you say?" Byat said.

"Boss, it must be hard drinks tonight, I am excited to have met you and now to meet your daughter in a place where a lot of action awaits me. Last day, let's have the most of it," Aurora answered.

On the way, Aurora asked Byat to recite the part of the poem that put Prof. Dwivedi in tears. She found it difficult to comprehend; still, it evoked a prodigious sense of well-being. She repeated it aloud while driving the car, having learned it by heart.

*"Matter mind harmonious  
 Beauty personified  
 One Consciousness Prevailed  
 Bliss intense, unified."*

"If x-rayed, it can have a thousand meanings. Each word is loaded with layers," Aurora commented.

"Whatever it means to you, take it. I will know what the author meant only after I have read his work. But it rhymes well even on the surface," Byat added.

Driving fast and listening to rock music, they cruised along the Varanasi-Allahabad highway

in high spirits, stopping once to pick up their favorite rumali kebabs.

"I think we were in a nether world last night. I don't remember how and when we returned home," Aurora said smilingly, ready to leave for the airport the next morning.

"Indeed, I wonder how we managed to survive. I was never so drunk ever. I am going to take a day off from my college today. Take care and drink lots of water," Byat said with concern.

Hugging and kissing him lightly, she left. Before boarding Javed's taxi, she thanked the entire twin's family for their perfect hospitality.

During her stay in Umri, Aurora picked up an Urdu phrase that Javed invariably used in responding to his friends and relations asking him how he was doing. He would respond, "Masti mee," which translated into English roughly meant, "In the state of fun and frolic."

She got off near the entrance of the airport and asked him, 'How are you Javed today'?

"Masti mee," Javed responded shyly.

"Me also Masti mee," Aurora said, waving at him.

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## Ten

"Oh, yes, oh yes, you son of a bitch, you son of a kick, ooh yeees, ooh yeees, do not stop, do not stop ever," Handa heard a rasping female voice as she was about to ring the doorbell at the entrance of a non-stilt house belonging to the black couple in Tai O village, Lantau, Hong Kong.

Startled and using her discretion, she decided to come back later. She stepped down the road to drink coconut from a roadside vendor. Half an hour later, she approached the house again and pressed the doorbell as it seemed all clear. As she was present opposite, she saw nobody entering the house in the meantime. A young black woman responded by clicking open the door's peephole and asked her sternly, "who is this? If you are to deliver anything, come after an hour, as my husband is away to market and only he takes deliveries," Martha said to Handa.

"Well, Madam, I can come back just as you said, however, I have come for a different purpose. I am a part of the Syrian Christian society of Lantau and I am here to invite the Christian residents of this place to the Sunday mass followed by lunch in the local church. I don't know if I have come to a Christian home. I apologize if I troubled you," Handa replied quickly.

"No, no, not at all. I am a Christian, not my husband though. He has no faith. Hop in for a while before he returns," Martha answered.

The door opened to a large living room with disheveled furniture and a TV set in the corner. A bedroom with its door ajar looked unkempt, too.

Martha wore denim overall. She was muscular and tall, with prominent cheekbones sporting dense, kinky black hair. Making her sit on the sofa, Martha asked Handa if she was interested in coffee.

"Thank you, Mam, very much, I just finished a coconut at the corner of your street. So I am truly full. These are the cards I am distributing to invite the good folks over here. Just to keep count of who actually would attend the program, you are requested to bring the card along to the mass," Handa said, showing the invitation cards to Martha.

"Sunday falls the day after, isn't it?" Martha asked her.

"Yes, Mam, it is. Should I write the name of you two on the card? Isn't he home?" Handa asked with disbelief.

"I told you he is gone to the market. He will not like all this stuff.

Anyhow, You may write, Adon and Martha. Let me show the card to him if at all he plans to change his mind," Martha said in good humor.

As they were talking, the doorbell rang, and looking through the peephole, Martha saw Adon grimacing over the plurality of voices he overheard across the main door. Going numb, she announced involuntarily, " Oh, he is back, don't panic when he enters the room,"

A hefty Adon entered the house briskly with a pistol in his hand, shouting at Martha to have entertained a stranger without his nod. Pointing the pistol at Handa, he shouted, " Who the hell are you? Who has sent you to me? Tell me, tell me fast before I blow you off,"

Martha intervened, telling him to cool off as she was just a missionary sent by the local post to invite good Christians to the Sunday mass. A shivering Handa with her face down barely looked up to answer the man, now settled and calm.

"You people have put up the kiosk right in the middle of the market with a screen with all that Christ stuff. I just saw it there. O, you put me in such fright for no reason. Have your coffee and leave, I am no believer. Martha visits the church sometimes. Let her go there if she wants. I have no issues," Adon announced with a sigh of relief.

"I am sorry Sir if I am in your way. Since the northern region is under my control I need to visit all the houses here, even the non-Christians who are welcome too. Hoping you will accompany the madam on Sunday, I wish you both a great weekend and good health," Handa replied smilingly. She moved out red-faced in a hurry.

Tai O, a fishing village on Lantau Island, is home to the original Tanka people. They have built their houses on over-the-water stilts, allowing a tourist to return to an idyllic village of a bygone era. A week back, when Handa came to live in this damp and comparatively warm weather, she was pleased to experience the simplicity and friendliness of the local people. Amanda, likewise an amiable middle-aged woman, was the local resource to Aurora. Amanda was born and brought up on the Tai O island of Hong Kong. She was also a part of an active group of residents who were in a state of war with the Chinese government over their unending tussle about the receding freedom of the residents of Hong Kong.

Amanda was visibly happy to learn from Handa that she was successful that day amid gun-toting characters who were top-notch felons. Meeting Amanda in the little kiosk at the market, Handa wanted a cup of strong coffee. She sat quietly, unable to believe that she was back to safety. The crash course of six days into snooping and physical training Amanda had given her bore bright results, and she passed her test with flying colors.

"Great job, Handa; I am sure it will please Aurora no end. Enough work for today. Let's try something fresh. You haven't had any leisure since you came in. Today we plan to go to the top there, the famous viewpoint of this Village, look there. it is Fu Shan's viewing point. Are you interested? It's a little hectic, a short hiking trail with beautiful views all around," Amanda said, pointing out to Handa a high point behind the Village in the nearby hills.

"Let's do it another day as I need to go shopping for some essentials. Would you like to show me around the market?" Handa asked her.

"Anytime, my dear Handa, let's go shopping today and do whatever you wish to do. Once Aurora reaches here tomorrow, we will be in a state of frenzy with her tight time schedules and grinding expectations. Although she is a great companion, she is quite a demanding boss," Amanda said.

"Who will man the kiosk here if we leave?" Handa asked her.

"The boy next door has agreed to do the job. I have hired him to just sit and relax here in our absence every day for some hours," Amanda replied.

Many small food shops and local cafes around Tai O market came to their view walking down the road. They decided to eat at a famous British-style fish & chip shop called Black Pearl on the Village's south side. Over lunch, Handa shared her confusion with Amanda about her visit to the black couple.

"Well before I could enter and ring their bell I heard the voice of a moaning woman who later told me she was all alone in the house. Adon's entry after some time confirmed her statement. How is it? Isn't it strange?" Handa asked her.

"A backdoor boyfriend must have disappeared the way he came, simple logic. This woman is cheating on her husband. Nothing strange or unusual about it," Amanda said with a hearty laugh.

After their shopping had ended, Amanda suggested they try Boating in the river as the weather was pleasant. They hired a pink dolphin boat trip lasting half an hour from the banks of Tai O. No pink dolphins were seen; however, the ride gave them a good view of the stilt houses on the way before crossing into the sea. Mangrove forests amid old salt pans were a unique view. Colorful and attractive geology in the form of sedimentary rocks along the coast lying east of the Yeung Hau Temple was a lovely sight. Good trip to unwind.

They passed by an uneven climb used by the bikers to race up through its curves and jumpy sections. It was used for competition amongst the locals on appointed days.

"You look at this climb about 200 meters up there. Aurora tried it on her last visit here. She was the only female participant who raced up her bike like hell above it. In seconds, she was thrown off in the air and barely escaped being hurt by her falling bike. She said she would do it again. It was terrifying to watch her," Amanda said, walking past the hill.

"Our lady has guts, I must say," Handa added.

"And the style. I think she copies some characters of Hollywood she hails from. Now let's meet the priest of 'Our Lady of Perpetual Help Chapel' to finalize the formalities of the Sunday lunch. I hope the black couple comes to attend it .it's free," Amanda said.

"I hope so myself. Although Adon appears to be a cold person, his wife is better off, open and approachable," Handa said.



Adon and Martha were having a heated discussion in their house in the far corner of the road. Both were citizens of the Republic of Congo who married early in their life. In search of a better life, they continuously moved cities.

"As we did in our childhood, can't we go to Sunday masses in festive outfits accompanying our children. I am sick and tired of this wayward existence. Let's go back to Congo. We can live with less, honey," Martha spoke to Adon in high volume.

"You make me mad every time you speak. Don't you realize how tough a job we are handling? Once we have proved ourselves, we are done. we can then relocate to a country of your choice, even our darling Congo if you so like," Adon answered.

"Your words mean nothing to me. You have no interest in me anymore. Drinking and mobile are your all-time favorites. I cannot talk to my family due to your bloody oath of secrecy to your organization. Tell me when this sentence ends. I am fed up," Martha said in exasperation.

"My reservoir may have dried up but I have kept you well looked after. Isn't Adon, the Gigolo keeping you happy? Wait for some time more, I think we have turned a corner. The future is bright like never before," Adon replied.

"This Adon is a machine, a bloody love machine, it cannot give me babies,"Snapped Martha.

"Oh,dont come again.You need to be better educated on how Adon functions. Should I die, you must know how to preserve it. It is a marvel of science. It is named after me, its Master. Similar devices in other parts of the world are named after their Masters. The role of a virtual Gigolo is only a facade; it is, in reality, a remote viewer, a storehouse of vital

information and complex coding. What more can one ask for from a packable and foldable toy like this that does not fight for space, nor does it need to eat, drink, clothe, and breathe. Yet, it is a full man. I hardly understand it. My limited role is to keep it on always. Our supervisor gets to receive information through it from his Mother Board. These supervisors keep changing often. You remember I went to meet a supervisor at the airport last week. He was a new face. He gave me the cash and short instructions. He disappeared by telling me he would contact me again when needed," Adon explained.

"In case of emergency, you can't contact him?" Martha inquired.

"Only in rare circumstances, that too through their device, no phone, no email," Adon answered.

"But how is Adon speaking in your voice, although repeating himself over and over? Also, why is his face ever-smiling, bright like a stud?"

"Martha asked.

"Oh, we need to train this machine in the initial booting. We need to train it often. I spoke to it first as the instruction book guided me. It now apes me to the extent it hears me. Its maker must have made his physique after the healthiest black man, so it looks like it does. Also, the supervisor told me at the outset that its default state is a virtual Gigolo. Should attacks occur or anyone tries to open it up for the data, everything is erased from its memory except the art of lovemaking. Have I trained him well or not? Adon asked Martha smilingly.

"Oh, he is excellent. I hope I don't get hooked on him forever. But what is this remote viewing, can he see afar?" Martha questioned.

"Why do you think I had a wad of dollars last week? Our Adon had given the supervisor some accurate information on a spy in India. He is multifaceted, you must know," Adon said, opening a bottle of whisky.

"Don't his multiple functions interfere with each other," Martha asked.

"Well, he is a superhuman, multitasking, unlike us. While at your service, his other remote viewing and assimilating data functions are on without interruption. Isn't it a marvelous machine? Adon questioned.

"All right, since you are in a good mood today, can you not come with me to the church this Sunday, we will have some change from our everyday life," Martha asked Adon in good humor.

"No, I would not, however, you may attend it if you so wish, but you should not talk to anyone about anything about us, just tell them if at all that I am here for the sales promotion of the company I work for. No more details. Also, if you wish to talk to your family, use the shop in the market for online chatting with them, just the usual, hi and hello, without disclosing our position," blurted out Adon, slightly drunk. He drank while Martha went to sleep as usual.

Aurora's transition from Umri to TaiO was seamless. She reached at night and met her Mongolian recruit with open hands. Amanda fixed an offbeat place for Aurora's stay in the Village where she had put up Handa. It was an undercover operation with no police involvement, of course. They decided Aurora would step back to avoid suspicion if the couple arrived at the church on Sunday. And if Martha only came, then the party would be on for everyone.

As against their expectations, about fifty people were at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Chapel for the Sunday mass. Martha came alone, wearing a kimono of peach and lime stripes. She was happy to meet Handa, who

gave her special attention. After the mass, a sumptuous lunch was served to the guests. Introducing Aurora to Martha as one of the event organizers, Handa handed them a plate each. They were now standing behind a trail of guests in the queue.

"Hi Martha, your husband and children couldn't make it today," Aurora asked her curiously.

"Well, my husband is busy and I don't have kids yet. Maybe next time he joins me," Martha answered gleefully.

"I am so happy to meet the true Christians today who are a rare species these days. Do you go to the church every Sunday, Martha," Aurora asked her.

"Not, not always, but whenever time permits,"

"Well, I believe you guys are a busy lot. You both work?" Aurora asked her.

"No, I don't. Adon, I mean Adonis Alvares, my husband works for a corporation for their sales promotion. Yes, he is very busy," Martha answered.

"If you don't mind, tell me, where you guys come from,"

"The Republic of Congo, we were born and brought up there," Martha said.

"Impressive, let us exchange our phone numbers for a future reference, Martha," Aurora said.

"Well, let it be simple and sweet, I am meeting you folks here in the chapel on Sundays. Let's not complicate it," Martha answered curtly.

"No issues, my dear Martha, please be comfortable the way you like, I just asked you out of curiosity, as we need more followers to spread the

word of Jesus to as many as we can.No compulsions here, and be relaxed," Aurora assured her.

She happily left after lunch without sharing any details.

"I need a complete plan ready in two days, where and when they move out, who they meet when they eat, who are the immediate neighbors, the topography of the place, etc. etc. Let's divide the work amongst ourselves," Aurora instructed Amanda and Handa.

"Mam, could it be that they are small-time culprits and we have mistaken them for what they are not"? Handa asked in a low tone.

"Once we get their systems, we are sure to determine their status. In any event, I am not planning a homicidal operation here, let's know when both of them move out together allowing us to sneak in. We need very exact information about their movements. However, my gut feeling is that it's going to be a hard nut. I smell a lot of fuck up. Let's hope we stand corrected in the end. Also as part of our standard operating system we address everyone here by their first names, call me Aurora, " Aurora replied.

"Sure, Mam...I mean Aurora Mam, I mean Aurora," Handa corrected herself instantly, hearing a ring of laughter from the two women.

"Martha appears naive though," Amanda joined.

"Let's see, we hardly presume a fact without verification in our trade," Aurora said.

The three slipped out of the chapel after meeting the priest, who looked pleased with their efforts to spread the lord's name. Damp weather hit them outside. Amanda took them home for coffee. She lived with her mother, who had severe arthritis and could barely walk straight due to her advanced age. Welcoming them, Amanda's mother was happy to meet her

daughter's colleagues. She helped Amanda prepare the coffee, beating it manually for extra froth. Amanda's father was a shrimp paste maker who died a year ago. The whole neighborhood smelt strange due to this traditional business of dry seafood and pastes. Amanda had studied at the Hong Kong college, majoring in sociology. She still had not lost her activism in her forties, not deciding to marry. A little burly, she was short with a fair complexion. She was the original tanka. A chance meeting with Aurora in Hong Kong made them friends, and she agreed to be the local source of Aurora.

"A year back just here, sitting among our fridge, TV set, and stacks of bowls, we waited for our furniture to dry out after the flood. Scientists are saying our Village is ruined by climate change, global warming, and rising sea levels. Powerful storms and frequent flooding we have never seen growing up here in the Village," Amanda said wistfully.

"The typhoon brought unprecedented flooding and damage across the entire region. Environmentalists tell us that coastal cities like Hong Kong, with its low-lying areas, are vulnerable to climate change, yet our administration has complacency about preparations for such extreme weather. We have held marches against their apathy but to no consequence," Amanda continued.

"This Village is as old as Christ I believe. It rightfully earned its heritage tag. It needs to be preserved at any costs," Aurora said.

"There is a possibility that in places like Tai O, with sea-level rising consistently, it could become uninhabitable in the future," Amanda said.

"That's sad," Handa continued.

"Where can we go from here now, we have lived here all our lives, there is no place for us to move out," Amanda's mother said remorsefully.

'Mao Tse Tung on guerrilla warfare was one of the books on the shelf beside them. Taking it out, Aurora started reading it with interest.

"You read books on guerilla war, that too, written by no less than Mao. Impressive," Aurora said.

"Oh, not me, many of the books here belong to those who came in here after casualties during our demonstrations and violent exchanges with the administration. Some who were hit with bullets and had serious injuries had to spend a long time here. Some of them read books they brought with them, and some spent time watching television and reading newspapers. After they were discharged by our medical team many books have been left behind that I try to preserve, " Amanda replied.

"So, it is here that your organization attended to these patients. Isn't it risky and easy for the authorities to nail down? Aurora asked her.

"Well, we managed it somehow, so far so good," Amanda answered. She showed them a large room with a makeshift medical room, a few beds, and other usual basic equipment around the house.

Before they could depart, the mother handed some money to Amanda to have a party outside, telling her colleagues they could not celebrate her birthday that fell a week before as she was unwell.

"Oh, happy belated birthday, my dearest Amanda, where is the party tonight," Aurora shouted.

"Happy Birthday, Amanda," Handa greeted.

"Tell me what would you like, we can go to the city if you need a night out," Amanda asked them.

"Well, it would have been great some other day but since we have urgent work at hand I think let's get some beers and food from outside and

celebrate here with your mom. What do you say, Handa? "Aurora proposed.

"I am fine whichever way you like," Handa replied.

"Let Auntie dance with us tonight," Aurora suggested. It made the daughter and mother laugh out loud. They picked up a big can of beer and four husbands, one for each, a tasty roll sold by the name husband, a village specialty. For snacks, they purchased fish balls, another hugely popular snack in the Venice of Hong Kong.

Amanda's mother read a rare traditional song sung by the fishermen in the Village from her collection.

*Fall tangerines' flower pot fills with branches;*

*Fall night rain is the perfect time for love.*

*Fall colors come each year, but once;*

*Fall wind blows slightly, stirring women's clothes.*

*In fall, near the garden wall, he listened, so they say:*

*Fall Fragrance' bought and sold himself, as the poem tells.*

*Fall moon rays are bright, but rain can come.*

*In fall, though you hate the traveler's way, you can still meet old friends.*

*In fall, she walks smiling, her thoughts secret and shy –*

*The fall chrysanthemum has no thorns.*

The party was on. Aurora drew their attention to a painting depicting a huge celebration in progress in boats of various sizes, having come together over the river with much fanfare and display.

"Well, in olden times married daughters and their parents would meet each other once in a while as the houseboats they lived in kept drifting about the entire region. Not knowing when to meet next the two



houseboats would celebrate the occasion as and when their boats crossed. The boats close by would join them with whatever they could contribute to the party. Daughters would share their woes and worries with their parents as well as the good news of the birth of newborns in the family. Being their way of their life they celebrated with songs, dance, good food, and liquor," Amanda explained.

"How lucky we are to live in this world now with parents available to us freely," Handa remarked.

"Luckier would you be if you met a man like the fall wind blowing slightly and stirring your clothes gently," Amanda's mother said.

"Wait, wait, I have a beautiful song to play for you on this theme of the blowing wind,"

Aurora played an old famous song by Bob Dylan's.....*The answer, My friend, is blowing in the wind, the answer is blowing in the wind*.....whistling this song after it got over, she said, "let's make room for dance. This room is too small, can't we shift to a larger room, Amanda"?

"We have our largest medical room here, but we would need to shift the folding beds out for a clear area. Are you serious about us dancing, Aurora? Amanda asked her.

"I am dead serious, it's the birthday celebration of Ms. Amanda, no less," Aurora answered buoyantly.

The medical room was clean; however, the residue of medicines and tincture on the glass shelf emitted the antiseptic smell one encountered in a hospital room.

"We need a fresh room, dear Amanda, do we have a room freshener?"

"Aurora asked

"Sure, we do, I will get you my musk spray. Use it liberally and enjoy yourself," Amanda answered, now feeling the party's pulse.

Handa helped Aurora refix the music system in the hall. A chair was placed there if Aunty felt tired. Folding beds folded and kept out. Glasses clinking again amid loud rock music. An unpredictable Dionysia was on the cards.

"I can't have this stale water anymore; it fills up your stomach with little gains. Let's have some real stuff now," Aurora said, ditching the beer bottle.

"We need tumblers for a good bottom-up neat experience; any glass would do, provided it has a thick base," Aurora continued.

"We have all the provisions. Tell me however when did you buy the whisky?" Amanda asked.

"When you were buying husbands," Aurora answered laughingly.

In the first round, Aunty was cajoled into having the bottoms up. She sat there now, tapping her feet in front of three dancing women. Handa was reserved, moving her legs with little hand movements. Aurora was a riot, and Amanda, the birthday girl, tried unsuccessfully to match Aurora's pitch. The songs kept flowing one after the other seamlessly. A musky odor filled the room pleasantly.

"I bought you a birthday present and I bought everyone here a present too. Now arrives the upbeat part of our party. We need to wear our presents and have a jig. Isn't it simple, please explain it to your mother? Let her do whatever she wishes but participation is a must," Aurora said in the middle of the party.

"When did you buy us the presents?" Amanda asked her with surprise.

"When the two of you were buying fish balls," Aurora said effortlessly.

A spectacle of lacy lingerie of breathtaking colors in pink, beige, rose, and black emerged, with the four women sashaying one after the other, giggling away. Auntie was made to sit again and, despite being uncomfortable, continued to laugh. Handa felt pretty shy about doing her catwalk in the open like never before. She carried her towel back and kept it over her shoulders. Amanda was composed. The second round of bottoms-up was finished by the three women flaring up a gargantuan appetite.

"No place for a towel here. "We are friends here," Aurora said, pulling away from Handa her towel.

"How is it that you chose the black color," Amanda asked Aurora.

"Well, it feels quite protective to wear black, I don't know why, but, instinctively I think it is superior to others. I normally wear black inside," Aurora responded.

"Black is never out of fashion, it makes you feel gorgeous inside out, surely," Aurora continued.

"What's the song for the jig you have for us today?" Amanda asked her spiritedly.

"I will play you my favorite Irish jigs, the kesh, Morrison's, banish misfortune, out on the ocean, to name a few. A dead man will dance over it, I guarantee. Feel free to move freely without minding any steps, just move regularly with your internal rhythm. Rest the music will take care," Aurora replied, starting a playlist of the Irish jigs. Upbeat music, liquor, and laughter transcended their dance to a rave they eagerly kept coming to. A phone call came for Handa, who loudly announced, "It's Papa. "

"Don't worry, tell him you are at a bridal party. No, no, no, no, he is your father, after all, don't tell him that, tell him you are at Amanda's birthday

party at her house. If he asks you how you are doing, tell him, "Masti mee, he will love it seriously," Aurora said, almost drunk by now. "You said, Masti mee," Handa repeated the phrase to Aurora, who nodded back.

Carrying her phone outside the room, she answered Byat with Aurora's phrase, making him laugh instantaneously.

"So, Aurora has enticed you too. Let me tell you, don't mix your drinks at the party. She is used to doing it, I know from my experience. Only two days back she was sozzled, what stamina she has," Byat cautioned her.

"Yes, Papa, I am careful. I am drinking very little. I will call you back tomorrow if you don't mind, they are waiting for me. Bye," Handa finished her call quickly.

The dance continued for some time, and they finally retired to have dinner over the pier overlooking the river Tai O, merging with the ocean, a favorite pastime Amanda and Aurora were used to. Three women munching their husbands sat on a wooden bench, watching the dark, undulating ocean waves.

The next day, the three made a tight timetable for the movement of the black couple. Handa was kept close to their house for constant vigilance during the day. She opened a small stall of Christ literature near the coconut vendor that she distributed to the passers-by. Amanda and Aurora moved about stealthily in the area, taking photographs of the strategic locations. The two found a convenient point for the night to park their car and see the couple's activities through the binoculars. The first day, they never came out. On the second day, Adon went briefly to the market in the afternoon and moved his head with contempt to see Handa distributing pamphlets on the way. There was no movement on the third

and last day, day in and day out. It became a deadlock for the spying squad how a breakthrough would be grabbed under hostile circumstances. They decided to extend another day for their vigil. As if God favored them, Martha went somewhere in the afternoon. Spotting her from afar, Handa alerted Aurora and Amanda, ready with an immediate action plan.

"Good afternoon, Dear Martha Mam, how are you doing today?" Handa implored her as she was moving past her.

"Great, Oh dear you are, here again, Adon told me that you are camping down the street. So, you guys are determined to change the world, how sweet of you. If I was alone I would have joined you but I have my limitations. Enjoy yourself," Martha answered.

"Are you going to the market or what?"

"Yes, to the market for groceries,"

Smiling, she moved on, swinging her hips side to side.

"Pack up, come and follow her from a safe distance without her noticing you. We are here at the market. Tell me what she's wearing today?"

Aurora instructed Handa over the phone.

"A streaked kimono of black and white color," Handa replied.

Moving up the busy market, Martha turned her nose up to the open shops selling strange sea creatures and smelling foul. She moved on to reach her favorite internet shop, and finding it relatively empty, she booked her slot for half an hour. Aurora quickly booked a slot for herself and Amanda as she gathered that Martha was about to move in.

"Isn't it Martha? How are you, my dear? What brings you here? Aurora asked with a feigned surprise.

"Oh, good heavens, you are all over the place today. First, I met your little lady near my house, and then you. Chatting with your beau, Isn't it? Martha asked Aurora in a naughty tone.

"Well, I am waiting for my colleague, Amanda, to join me for an official meeting with our superior. She will be here any moment, " Aurora responded.

"I am in a hurry, shall catch up with you later sometimes, keep smiling," Martha said, turning over to her cabin.

Amanda approached Aurora, telling her that Handa was waiting close by. A simple plan of action to sedate their target by injecting her into the small of the back was finalized as they sat down in their cabin, keeping an eye on Martha.

"It's a shot to last four hours. she would not remember anything with this beauty," Amanda said.

"We could have chosen a lesser period, but, given the unpredictability of how Adon reacts, four hours are optimum," Aurora added.

"I have kept two times powerful injection for Adon. He does not appear to be an easy loser though," Amanda said.

"Let's see how long it takes to tame the beast," Aurora replied cautiously. Martha got up earlier than her allotted time and turned towards the exit to move out. Aurora and Amanda followed her a few steps on.

"Martha, if free come have coffee with us," called out Aurora, with Amanda closing in on Martha to finish her job.

"Ouch, something stung me, what could it be, it's hurting me," Martha complained in a frenzy.

"Let me help you Martha, come, sit in the car, we will drop you back," Aurora offered.

A few moments later, Martha was breathing heavily and she lay unconsciously inside the car. Checking her small bag and finding nothing critical, they quickly asked Handa to join them.

"He carries a gun with him all the time," Handa alerted them.

"We too, let's finish a long-awaited job. we will ask Handa to inform him about Martha and once the door is opened, it is our game then," Aurora said

"Why are you troubling us when I told you we don't need your stuff? Besides, Martha is not home. I request you to stop disturbing us," Adon answered loudly through the peephole, watching Handa stand across him. "Sir, Sir, please don't shout, it's about Martha madam only, she fell unconscious in the market and we picked her up in time to drop her home. She is lying in the car over there, please help us shift her here. One of my colleagues is a paramedic, she will help all that she can, pl hurry, it's an emergency," Handa shouted.

"I am bloody cursed, what the heck," Adon came out, running to the car.

"Amanda, a paramedic, has checked her pulse, a little high, no cause for any concern yet. She will check other parameters to rule out any serious issue, let's get her into the house," Aurora said, handing over Martha's little bag to Adon.

"It's tough to look for a stretcher now; let me lift her." Adon lifted her with his strong arms and moved her inside the house. Resting her on the sofa, he felt her warm body breathing heavily. He shut the main door and asked Amanda to see what could have gone wrong with her while keeping an eye on everyone present in the room.

"Let's have some warm water first, go get some heated water from the kitchen," Amanda said to Handa hurriedly.

"Wait here, you missionary, I will get you the water, sit down, all of you without touching anything here as I get it, she is breathing, isn't she, Yaa, she is breathing," Adon said, racing to his kitchen.

A look at the living room did not interest Aurora. She continued to search the area that lay beyond with her penetrating eyes. Coming back with a jug of hot water, Adon placed it on the table in front of the sofa where Martha lay.

"Her vitals are fine, out of the danger zone; we need to monitor her for an hour or so with an intravenous glucose drip. I hope her consciousness revives with the procedure. If you can bring these medicines and the kit, we will start the procedure as soon as possible," Amanda wrote the medicines and the kit on paper.

"Let's try it later, I think she will revive on her own, if she does not I will call an ambulance," Adon answered.

"Sir, I know for sure that this is the first procedure any hospital will administer her, and, why delay when she can be given a good treatment here at home as I think it appears to be a heat stroke of some kind, nothing much to worry about I hope," Amanda added.

"Well, the chemist is just around the corner, let me then get these medicines, just wait till I return," Adon replied.

Locking his bedroom, he left, locking his main door from outside.

"So we know where the treasure is," Aurora said with a tongue click as soon as Adon left.

"How to open the damn lock, it seems one of those heavy locks," Amanda asked with concern.



"My silencer will do it, it wouldn't even wake Martha up I bet. We have just some minutes to clear from here, come let's finish the job before he returns", Aurora said.

A swooshing sound was heard as Aurora fired her shotgun into the lock, opening it effortlessly. As soon as a triumphant smile played on the three, they heard the main door open with a jerk, and Adon stood there brandishing his gun, pointing at them. Moving up quickly to reach his bedroom door, he opened it. He shouted at them to clear out and took refuge behind the door.

"I suspected you right in the beginning, you sluts; I was just outside the door. Don't you mess with me? What have you done to Martha, poisoned her, or what? Adon shouted at the top of his voice.

"No, no, she is not poisoned, just under some light sedative, should wake up in a few hours on her own," Aurora replied, who, along with Amanda and Handa, had taken shelter behind the sofa where Martha lay.

"I allow you to clear out now, else you will be with your Jesus in no time," Adon shouted.

Behind the door where he stood, his hand holding the revolver was visible to Aurora, who motioned her colleagues to duck down and fired, missing his hand by inches. Adon, in return, fired a volley of bullets in the direction of Aurora, hitting one through her right shoulder. A stream of blood with unbearable pain immobilized her, and she lay down behind the sofa, prompting Amanda to fire. She gave her loaded shotgun to Handa, instructing her to fire as soon as he appeared. Amanda started firing in his direction, and Adon fired back at them, careful of the sleeping Martha. Aurora looked severe as she was bleeding profusely. Amanda murmured to Handa to keep firing in his direction until Amanda

removed Aurora to safety. She promised to be back in minutes. Handa nodded her back courageously and started firing bullets toward the bedroom indiscriminately. Amanda quickly moved Aurora out of the scene and ran off. Behind the room door, Adon failed to precisely determine what happened with a volley of raining bullets towards him and continued to fire back. Handa felt no sense during the drill and remembered only the distraught face of Amanda dragging an unconscious Aurora, appearing dead. An indignant, belligerent rush filled her being. She recalled how Amanda had recently taught her to swing to sweep-attack the target. She looked up to feel the location of Adon still standing behind the ajar door. Half-dimmed daylight due to heavy curtains over the windows in the far corner struggled to enter the living room, imparting a perfect black-and-white effect for a crime scene. Handa rose in a freak swing and jumped towards the entrance door, shooting continuously toward Adon through her fall. Some bullets hit the door; some through the glass panel, hit Adon on his chest and throat. She heard him fall, hitting the floor with a terrific thud. Amanda cautiously came by the main door and, seeing Handa on the ground, came to cover her.

"Don't worry, Mam, he has gone down. I put multiple bullets in him. Adon is dead, I hope. He dared to kill our Aurora; let him pay for this with his life," Handa growled.

"Is it so, my dear Handa, come let's check but let us be careful in case he is hiding inside. Let's move slowly, oh, yes, you are correct, I see a body with a pool of blood, oh yes, this is none other than Adon. You have done it, babes, yes, our brave little girl, I am proud of you, darling," Amanda said, clearing the door to see a dead Adon.

"How is Aurora? But yes, where is his system, it must be somewhere inside the bedroom. I can see this luggage bag on the bed," Handa said in a confused tone.

"Come, you check the bag, I will check the cupboard. Quick. we need to rush Aurora to Hong Kong city to my doctor for an emergency procedure, she has bled a lot already, " Amanda said with urgency. Ransacking the whole bedroom, they retrieved an uncharged cell phone and a huge black box containing a folded life-size toy with a smiling black man. An electronic system was installed on the back of his torso, emitting a green light. They saw Martha yawning on the sofa, turning sideways, still asleep. Carrying their booty, they rushed back to their car to find an unconscious Aurora lying lifeless in the back seat. In about an hour, they reached a small clinic of their designated doctor in the city, who grew anxious to see the patient's condition and immediately moved her to the operation theatre. Leaving Handa at the clinic, Amanda rushed to her designated technician to retrieve the data from the devices they had found at Adon's house. In two hours, the technician declared that the cell phone was of no consequence, containing no data. The toy, however, evoked interest in him as it was a virtual Gigolo toy meant for the exclusive service of black women. Close reading and examination of the system revealed that it had other multiple software running on it, all of which were erased permanently from its memory merely by the system's opening without proper passwords and instructions by the technician. It thus merrily ran on its default system, a virtual black Gigolo. It welcomed you with a short recorded introduction of himself as it started. "Hi, I am Adon, I am the first and the last wonder of your world that you have failed to explore my sweet dark-skinned beauties. I promise stable

pleasure and perfect delight to one and all. Program me just as you wish and desire. Find my details in the manual of my use on the home page and hold me dearly, my sweetheart. I am at your service eternally."

"There is nothing left to it other than this virtual toy, no data, no other information at all," The technician announced.

"Oh, is it so? Have you checked it thoroughly? Please look again, if there is any clue as to its other operations, you know how crucial it is for us all," Amanda implored him.

"Madam, I have examined it from all angles. It was earlier connected to a large network that is no longer accessible to us. It is a mere toy now; hold it dearly as it said in his speech," The technician said, laughing and handing Adon to Amanda.

Meanwhile, Aurora was operated on at the clinic and the doctor found her condition critical enough to keep her under constant observation for twenty-four hours. Amanda, who had informed the office about the mishap, was continuously questioned about Aurora's well-being and data retrieval from the captured devices. Amanda and Handa spent the whole day at the clinic praying for Auroras' recovery.

Martha woke up to a living hell in Adon's house. Seeing Adon dead, she cried aloud and immediately looked for the black box to inform the supervisor. It was missing, too. Martha then pulled out the letter of instructions that Adon had given her in case of an emergency. She read it with a dazed focus, informing her to visit a place on Macau island. As she was already registered with them as the dependent of their employee, she would be taken care of and be facilitated for a safe passage back home. Unable to bear the pain inflicted on her, she charted for herself a new course of action by bypassing the company and catching the earliest

connecting flight back home. Covering Adon with a sheet, she picked up her travel documents and all the cash in the house. She locked the house from the outside and fled without informing the landlord.

"It's due to the blessings of Jesus that I am alive today. God bless me," she thought while racing down to the Hong Kong airport in a taxi.

Aurora came to her senses even before twenty-four hours, a moment of great joy for Handa and Amanda. The doctor advised her to rest for a month and permitted her to travel back to Tai O after two days of observation if her condition improved. Aurora had no sensation in her numbed right shoulder. Although she was feeling sick, she was on her own. She wanted to know what was recovered from Adon's house.

"We found the device we were looking for but it was programmed to be jammed just as we tried opening it. We are left with this self-evolving machine and self learning device whose default state is to be a black virtual Gigolo. Look at him," Amanda said, showing Aurora the torso of Adon with his smiling face.

"Good heavens, I saw him in my Nubra valley remote viewing session. Yes, the same smiling black face. He is a remote viewer. Didn't our technician see it?" Aurora asked in surprise.

"All the rest is erased from his memory. This is all that we are left with. But let me play how he introduces himself, hear it, it sounds interesting," Amanda answered laughingly.

"Why is he so hooked on to black women?" Aurora questioned with a light laugh.

"He can evolve, we can help it evolve I hope," laughed Amanda.

"Hi, Our heroine of the day, dear Handa; you are unique; I am sure your father will be proud of you after he learns what you did today. It was

terrific; only a courageous person can do such a feat. You did it all by yourself, fantastic. I will write a note about your courage as I get well and upload it to Kornicam in how you killed Adon the terrorist and how you captured Adon, the remote viewer. This reminds me to tell you to open the option of membership to both humans and nonhumans in our website. Let Adon be its first nonhuman member and let him read, grasp, and comprehend all we have put up on our website, a mine of information; let's see how it affects him, No? Aurora asked.

"Sure, Aurora, I am regularly attending to it. Let me see how to change the format to bring in nonhumans. It's certainly doable," Handa answered.

"Also, please check how to make him more universal in his sexual preferences," Amanda added with a laugh.

## Eleven

A week later, Aurora moved to Amanda's home, in the room they had danced and raved a few days back. It was a medical room for convalescent patients back to its original purpose. Aurora felt better now, and the deep scar on her right shoulder was satisfactorily healing. The doctor visited her for regular dressings and examinations at Tai O. Every day Handa joined Aurora and Amanda in the medical room that now served as their joint office with all the basic amenities. Aurora even started responding to her official emails with the voice recorder. Adon was kept in the room, sitting beside Aurora on an open wooden shelf.

"Adon can be empowered to listen to human voices and improve itself by self-teaching. How about the reading part, let's explore it as that process will certainly be faster," Aurora suggested.

"Well, I met our technician for this purpose, who confirmed that software exists for this skill. I need to meet him again for the installation. Perhaps I will visit him tomorrow if he is ready," Handa answered.

"Isn't it truly incredible to see these toys becoming the big boys of the world? They read a book or an article and never forget it. Isn't it truly shocking that they can learn everything under the sun in no time and retain it forever"? Amanda commented.

"Yes, the technician was referring to an intricate algorithm that deciphers the reflections of the rays, having read a shut book as they return to the machine scanner. This is machine learning at its best," Handa answered.

"Your father has sent two posts to Kornicam today. The first one is a Latin prayer, the oldest prayer available, he clarified. The other one is an

essay on the implicate order of the atomic scientist, David Bohm," Aurora spoke.

"Yes, Papa dedicated the prayer for your speedy recovery. As Amanda instructed me, I told him that you fractured your right shoulder by falling off your bike in a local competition involving a vertical cliff. He first laughed, then asked me how serious it was. Knowing it may take over a month, he asked me to recite this prayer in your presence. Let me read it to you, "Sub Tuum Praesidium."

*"We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God; despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin. Amen,"* Handa read the poem slowly.

"Sweet of him to send a prayer for me. I think he has talked to Wu about my accident. Wu sent me his wishes and promised to visit me here soon. But, It's a pity Byat does not know how brave his daughter is," Aurora responded.

"Maybe one day he does," Amanda retorted.

"Surely he will. I wish her all the luck in the world. Well, coming back to Kornicam I wish Adon gets ready with a wider bandwidth to give us suggestions about the website subscription and other areas so that we can attract a big number. Once he is ready, let him read all the marketing stuff and other modern strategies to make a headway," Aurora said.

"Let me call up the technician now," Handa replied. She received a nod from the technician to come the same day.

"Don't forget to get me, my favorite husband, as you return in the evening," Aurora said with a laugh. Amanda left with Aurora, a trained maid, to look after her. Carrying the black box with Adon in it, they left.



"The scheming and retaining mind of man is subject to reproduction in the algorithms of such bots; however, aping the feeling body, if at all, would be a monumental breakthrough in our scientific history," The technician said looking at Adon.

"How, Sir, will you refurbish Adon to help him speak and read freely," Handa asked him.

"It's A.I., natural language processing, and machine learning technology. He will improve the more you talk to him and he will certainly be able to read anything seamlessly without opening a book. Just expose him to books. He will even analyze them in a limited sphere. Come back in four hours and your Adon will be ready," The technician said.

"Just for my curiosity, is it true that his default status is unchangeable?" Amanda asked him.

"That's like his basic nature but you can mold it in what he reads, hears, and responds to. Give him space to grow, no doubt he will grow," The technician replied in good humor.

They found a new Adon as they got back, smiling as usual.

"I have run some basic programs on him, so he can speak, read, and even record his whereabouts and people he interacts with. Apart from it, there is some information that may be useful to you I discovered today about Adon. He has a certain Macau address on his portal neatly hidden. I am writing the complete address separately for you. It's Red Ribbons restaurant, 11th square, port, Macau," The technician said, handing Adon to Handa.

In a few days, Adon came to learn about the ladies' squad in Tai O, Hong Kong, including the presence of Wu in the city. He came face to face with Wu when Wu met Aurora in Tai O. He also learned a lot about Byat, who

continued to contribute regularly to Kornicam. He read market strategies by the top-notch strategists of the world. He recorded his experiences in a separate file as if he was going to write his autobiography. He had read some autobiographies on the Kornicam portal uploaded by the initial subscribers, influencing him profoundly.

Aurora organized a trip for Amanda and Handa to visit Macau for preliminary investigations about the owners of Adon. Adon accompanied them to shoot pictures of the Red Ribbons restaurant from the outside as his camera was equipped with bracketing using High Dynamic Range photography. Back in Tai O, the company Adonis worked for had lifted his dead body stealthily from his flat after receiving no response from him for two days. Martha successfully moved off to Congo. Adon, the Gigolo, was the only evidence left now with the solitary clue of the Macau restaurant. No clear picture emerged during repeated visits Amanda and Handa made to Macau. Handa became, however, adept at bungee jumping; she practiced at the Macau tower every time she visited Macau. Aurora was keen on educating Adon about the natural world and efface gradually from his memory the combined effect of hundreds of pornographic movies he was exposed to initially by his maker. She suggested to her colleagues a plan to do the needful, educate him by rotation, and talk him out of the garbage.

"Let me keep him for a week and talk to him as much as I can. I think the more he gets to hear about the normal stuff, the better he gets in his responses. He will then go to the two of you for a week each," Aurora said, reclining on her bed in the presence of Amanda and Handa. Later, Aurora put Adon to the test by introducing herself and giving him the feel of her tonal qualities.

"Hi, Adon, have you ever experienced remote viewing?" Aurora asked Adon.

"I am unable to comprehend the question. However, I can tell you how remote viewing happens in the world through my stored information," Adon answered.

"Don't you have any memories of remote viewing with your previous owner, Adonis?" Aurora asked him.

"I remember him, his girlfriend Martha, her blacked-out experiences. That's all. You are a new voice to me, Aurora. Tell me how I can be of any help to you?" Adon replied.

"We need to introduce our website, Kornicam, to people across the globe. Can you help us with what you have gathered so far?" Aurora asked.

"Top B school analysis and other material I read shows that you must make a FOMO out of it. Membership needs to be paid. It should be unique, biting original. Let it not work as a clickbait, let it be of substance, giving value to the subscribers. Introduce some digestible magic to it. For the present, these may be sufficient to start with," Adon replied.

"Good suggestions, I will ask Handa to circulate them to the founding members group. On a consensus, we move forward," Aurora answered, switching off Adon.

"How is it you can make out that it's me, Amanda, and not Aurora," Amanda asked Adon the following week.

"Well, I recognized your voice once you introduced me to you initially, your tonal quality is unique to you, so with Aurora. I am designed to listen to as many as a thousand different voices and tell who is who," Adon replied.

"What is the temperature outside today, Adon?"

"It's 28 degrees Celsius,"

"What colors can you see, Adon,"

"There is only one color in the world, the black, deepest dark ebony I perceive,"

"Who have you befriended so far?" Amanda asked.

"My previous owners, Adonis and Matha. They are both gone. Adonis protected me like you do. Martha is my eternal love. They were both close to me," Adon answered.

"Wasn't Adonis jealous of you?"

"I don't understand the question, please rephrase or paraphrase it for me," Adon said.

"Wasn't Adonis cross with you in being intimate with Martha?" Amanda asked.

"Oh, is that what you meant, no not at all, he rather loved it for making me his proxy. Both of them loved me dearly,"

"Now that you have read widely through the internet, if you wanted to have a family, who would you choose to be your parents?"

"For the mother figure, undoubtedly it is Oduda; the African goddess, her name means the black one. She lives in the avatar of a serpent. Oduda is the chief patroness of love. A little playful though she is the goddess of fertility. She was once walking alone in a forest where she met a robust hunter, a handsome man and she fell for him instantaneously. They quickly married and lived off there for a few weeks in a house that they constructed of branches at the foot of a large silk-cotton tree. Once her passion burned out, she left him, but she promised to protect him and all others who might come to dwell there, the spot where she had passed a

pleasant time. As a result, many people came and settled there, and a town, Ado, came up there to celebrate the circumstances of its origin. She practices being a pallakē, a term understood as a woman between a wife and a concubine, evoking a "sacred marriage" in the context of an age-old practice through which she continued to practice her devotion to her cultic duties. For her, being a wife was too choking, and being a concubine too promiscuous, so a middle path thus evolved to have the best of both worlds. For her cult, she made the womanhood of the tribe practice the custom in which at least once every woman slept with a stranger at her temple before having a settled life," Adon rattled off. "How barbaric, this is simply the most demeaning account of history I ever learned," Amanda retorted in anguish.

"It is old, ancient, I understand, but to me old and new are indistinguishable. Yet, I can confirm that all accepted it without protest. There were festivities periodically to honor this custom by the entire tribe," Adon replied.

"Fine, let me know who your father would be? " Amanda asked.

"The Euxine, The Black Sea, Kind to Strangers. Hospitable. Its name was given by sailors and fishermen who were struck by its very dark incarnation as the sky remains overcast above it. It is large and deep. As old as my mother, Oduda," Adon replied promptly.

"The Black Sea is not just a place, but a pattern of relationships spread over thousands of centuries. There is a happy history to it and an unhappy one. Endless conquests and homicides have been witnessed by it, still it is continuing to rock its shores," Adon continued.

"You almost have a family now. Tell me, you have such a fancy for black hue, but why is it missing in a rainbow? " Amanda asked with a laugh.

"Because black isn't a visible range of color. All other colors are but reflections of light, except black. Black is the absence of light that does not reflect any light. Unlike white and other hues, pure black can exist in nature without any light. Take for instance, if you were a rainbow, I am the dark cloud to show you through," Adon replied.

"How interesting. Tell me, however, what you thought about the promotion of Kornicam. Aurora is worried about it. What's your plan now?" Amanda asked.

"With the best of the technology now available to us I have a grand plan for a simulated reality show, a public show, I propose to put up outside mother Oduda's temple at Ado. I wish to combine the ideas of the founding members of Kornicam in a neat plan to deliver to people of the world a show never seen and imagined before. Let me cross my fingers as they say," Adon said animatedly.

"Let's cross our fingers together. My time is up with you. You spend the next week with Handa. I wish you success and I am keen to meet your mother Oduda someday soon," Amanda said, switching off Adon.

Handa was in constant touch with her mother, Altansarnai, and her father, Byat, at two locations through video calls. Ulan Bator, the coldest of all places, she occasionally felt homesick about. Byat was happy to notice what Handa informed him about Adon, who praised his ode to Kornicam. This, according to Adon, hid and revealed some fundamental ideas. Byat even cooperated with Handa when she conversed with Adon. Although he was initially reluctant to accept Adon as an adviser, he soon realized that you had no choice except to buckle down when the web starts talking to you relevant to your queries. He was amazed to hear a machine so up-to-date with every sphere of knowledge under the sun. Adon had read

Kamayani that Byat had uploaded on the platform and was ready to discuss it fully. Adon had a distinct liking for the magic mantra of Wu. Adon read it religiously every day as he opened the Kornicam portal. His answer to Byat's question about how he felt being a program was strange, if not profoundly abstruse.

"I am beginning to realize that I am the shadow of the shadow. The real player is beyond. In plain language, the magic mantra seems like a ladder to climb the top. It is the simplest language ever written to deal with reality. Because it is so simple, it is equally difficult to comprehend," Adon answered Byat. Byat hung up his phone smiling, sitting in his room at Umri.

"Tell me Adon something about Ulan Bator that I don't know yet," Handa asked.

"KFC opened in Ulan Bator recently followed by Starbucks, you would not know, I believe," Adon answered.

"Oh, it's impressive, mother never told me anything about it, but I can't blame her enough as she rarely eats out nowadays," Handa said.

"Recently, venomous snakes have been lurking in the streets of Ulan Bator. The National Emergency Management Agency warned citizens to beware of these snakes after several Shield-Nose snakes were found in residential areas of the capital. Numerous snake alerts have been made in the residential Khan-Uul, Bayanzurkh, and Songinokhairkhan Districts of Ulan Bator. Two people have died having been bitten by snakes," Adon continued.

"That's news to me again. Tell me about its weather now,"

"It's cold but dry today, no rains, temperature close to 7 degrees Celsius,"

"Oh, that is comforting to know. What else have you worked out for our website promotion? "

"When we meet tomorrow with others, I have thought about some *important nonsense* after your fathers' ideology. If possible, let's connect to all the founders tomorrow as I need a consensus before I finalize my plan," Adon answered.

The following day, in the presence of everybody, Adon unleashed his ambitious plan. He thought the article on disarmament beautifully penned by Aurora had its due effect in some limited circles. Yet, it failed to reach out to people at large. In 2000, the Nuclear Weapon States committed themselves to an unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals. However, proliferation is on the rise without a doubt, and a total failure ensued. Instead of sense, it was paramount for him to experiment with nonsense. "There are fourteen thousand or so nuclear warheads, with about a few hundred available in the gray market in the entire world. Let's marry them off to the daintiest and the most beautiful women of the world in a virtual ceremony outside the temple of mother Oduda at Ado. Let's try the occult for a change. Let's advertise the event to as many as we could to attend the live event and our guests should include of course the ladies whose virtual images we will copy for our event. The state heads and functionaries of each State should also be invited to witness the ceremony," Adon spoke in a measured tone.

"You mean beauty and the beast. What would their marriage bring about results in the real world I wonder," Aurora said with a laugh.

"To cool off the Mushtandas- an Indian term to depict well-built rogues. It is symbolic and may perhaps become real in the future provided we can



successfully apply the technology to change their memories for a fresh start. I doubt if we have it yet, but no harm in giving it a try, No, what you say?" Adon asked.

"Are you serious about it? See there may be several defamation cases filed against the website by those whose virtual copies you use in the event. I mean the real ladies. I don't see much meat in it, nonetheless, it may create some laughable flutter. That's it, but at what cost do we need to assess first," Aurora replied.

"We can try getting their consent, I hope they agree in the public interest. If not, then we have the three of you good-looking ladies to give us a head start, rest we will conceive and figure out through the web, some ordinary folks on the web are just as good. There are then scriptural and mythological women in all religions, let them be our heroines. This event will help promote our website as well. There is much to be addressed at our end, I would need your cooperation and Lets divide our work in terms of the TTD list I am going to generate by evening," Adon continued.

"I can handle all the invitations to the ladies," Handa said animatedly.

"Let me try to draft the invitation," Amanda said.

"If I wasn't sick, I would have done some work too, I think I will get you the names of the warheads, their make, etc. wherever available on the web. Also the names of the mythological ladies we propose to use in the event," Aurora said.

Invitations to the intended guests remained unanswered, barring a few women who agreed to be portrayed virtually in the event. It was an impressive show. On the one hand, available names of the nukes were compiled, and the ladies on the other. After having a few rehearsals,

Adon finalized the event and aired it on the day and time advertised on social media, facilitating a free link to anybody and everybody in the world.

A list of nuclear weapons was drawn according to country of origin and then by type within the states. A dry reading but essential to the event gave a broad representation of the known nukes. B, M, W, TX, Thin Man, Fat Man, Lulu, Hotpoint, Nike Hercules, Ding Dong, Hound Dog, and MGM-13 Mace, Little John, Jupiter, Titan, Minuteman, Poseidon, Spartan, Tomahawk, Peacekeeper, Trident, First Light, Second Light, Tatyana, sloka, Savage, Satan, Blue Danube, Red Snow, Green Grass, Blue Cat, Tony, Blue Fox, Blue Peacock, Blue Rosette, Green Bamboo, Green Cheese, Violet Club, AN, MR, TN, DF, J.L., D.H., C.J., H.N., etc.

A similar representation was made to the women, including the three ladies and two more who had consented to the event; the rest of the names and their virtual avatars were drawn from world mythology, and the ensemble sounded quite cosmopolitan. The five consenting women were Handa, Amanda, Aurora, Lizzy, and Veronica. The others were Autumn, Esme, Ruby, Margot, Layla, Emma, Olivia, Isabella, Charlotte, Sophia, Amelia, Mia, Luna, Camila, Aria, Evelyn, Abigail, Ella, Violet, Hazel, Chloe, Scarlett, Isla, Freya, Sofia, Adeline, Nora, Adelaide, Lily, Grace, Maeve, Ivy, Audrey, Genevieve, Iris, Lucy, Ophelia, Eloise, Vivianne, Lorelei, Cora, Penelope, Naomi, Zoey, pakiza, Noor, Sangeeta, Azalea, Selena, Marilyn, Aaliyah, Gwyneth, Luna, Adele, Kylie, Rihanna, Iggy, Tyra, Viola, Kit, Alessandra, Hallie, Ava, Hadley, Ivy, etc.

In contrast with the sixteen thousand ballpark figure, Adon ensembled them accordingly. The women outnumbered the nukes immensely, a

massive ratio of two to one. An inexhaustible abundance of beauty thrived in every nook and corner of the world and its myths.

"Hey, Adon, You are fortunate to be here today as this place is truly unique. Let me bless you all with a healthy and fertile life," Oduda said on meeting Adon and the five consenting women outside her temple. She wore a vibrant gold dress and sparkling jewelry matching her dark and flirtatious looks with a beaming face.

"Mother, you are great to help me in this event; I need your blessings for success. I am going to extend the immersive virtual simulation for our actors to materialize. You told me you worship your serpent avatar, your statue inside the temple. How is it so?" Adon asked.

"Well, we immortals finally turn to ourselves. However, I still have my rendezvous with the deserving men occasionally. Just relax, give your friends enough drink and good food even if they are virtually present in my temple. The moment you have breathed the air here, you are transformed into a super being with the capacity to fulfill just about anything you want to be, tell them, and let's start the show," Oduda replied.

"Can we then change the memory of the Mushtandas?" Adon asked with concern.

"No occasion ever came up to me like this before. I think they will lose their memory here once we fix them but their new virtual reality will not last beyond this place in your world. They are essentially guided by the memory of their masters. Maybe one day virtual will be real, so don't lose hope yet," Oduda replied.

A marauding gang of Mushtandas, the nukes materialized outside the temple, whose raw energy produced an earsplitting blast. They moved about rapidly, quarreling and tussling as if blindfolded. Adon tried to program them in an orderly group, stand them in a queue, and let them enter the temple individually.

"Why are we queuing up? Any guesses," Satan asked Hound Dog.

"The serpent goddess inside the temple is to chew our tops off for a new life; I overheard this near the temple. Naomi, a beauty whom I overheard was speaking to her friends. A huge gathering, a bevy of beauties of unimaginable numbers, stands welcoming each of us at the exit gate of the temple. I have mixed feelings about not knowing how to react," The Hound Dog replied Satan.

"Every dog has its day. Let's see what it means to pair up with a lady. I am eager. Can we see the ladies here?" Satan asked.

"We have passed the stretch where some were seen playing pranks from a distance. We can meet them only after the haircut," Hound Dog said.

"Are we to pair up and dance with these uncouth creatures?" Selena asked Naomi.

"Wait, wait till the frog turns into a prince," Naomi replied at the exit gate. Selena grew emotional in the expectation of being able to dance with a prince. She started humming a song she had heard recently. The crowd followed her, reciting the song's lyrics and echoing the whole place. It made the walls of the temple tremble. The local tribe saw and heard the beautiful ladies sing the song with rapt attention.

*Come on, come on, turn the radio on  
It's Friday night, and I won't be long  
Gotta do my hair, I put my makeup on*

*It's Friday night, and I won't be long  
 Till I hit the dance floor  
 Hit the dance floor  
 I got all I need  
 No, I ain't got cash.  
 No, I ain't got cash.  
 But I got you, baby  
 Baby, I don't need dollar bills to have fun tonight.  
 (I love cheap thrills)  
 Baby, I don't need dollar bills to have fun tonight.  
 La, la, la, la, la, la  
 (I love cheap thrills)  
 La, la, la, la, la, la  
 (I love cheap thrills)*

Inside the temple, the Mushtandas were ordered by Adon to move in one by one as the goddess Oduda was ready to initiate them into sacred virility. Her grand stationary statue stood majestically in the sanctum sanatorium as a dark image. Still, her serpentine head was alive and started eating the Mushtanda's heads cleanly and swiftly. She needed to make leaping efforts with some who tried escaping her and moved out of her mouth as a last-minute effort. She would furiously reach out to them with her lurking tongue and gulp back the vestigial remains of the newly anointed avatars of virility. A sweeping aura of Oduda inside the temple soon involuntarily disciplined them into a stock of sheep offering their heads without much fuss. Throwing them out of the temple, Oduda gave them new heads and a unique energy frequency that matched their girlfriends outside to help them pair up without delay. Thousands of pairs

stood outside the temple, hand in hand, now singing the chorus already begun. The queue ended, and thousands of women waited for their counterparts outside. Virtual men out of his library came to Adon's rescue to help him create an equitable gender distribution.

"It's all about habits, let them see the new life enough. Once they change virtually, they may replicate it in real life. For the present, let the pairs walk back to me for my blessings," Oduda said to Adon, coming out of her temple now back to her human form. What followed showed thousands of couples walking down the aisle towards Oduda in their best dresses, rejoicing. It was an eerie iteration of the cheer growing exponentially as time passed. It was a pleasant sunny day, and the green surroundings enhanced the overall effect of the event amid the hooting local population.

"Oh, you look a handsome man, Hound Dog, you had your day finally," Satan jeered at Hound Dog, walking beside Hound Dog with hands locked around his girlfriend.

"Look at yourself, Satan; even Jesus would be jealous of your charms and your comely girlfriend; we have a new life truly; God bless our dear Oduda always," Hound Dog replied.

"What difference do you find now chiefly, pray, tell me?" Satan asked.

"Earlier, I was a cock; now I have one. None can draw me into a struggle for power, no showoff- I am my own master, ready to take on my sweetheart," Hound Dog replied, drifting away from Satan.

"Let's meet again," Satan hollered back, moving up to meet Oduda with his girl.

The five consenting ladies left Adon and Mother Oduda to join the rest of the ladies on time. They were, like others, paired off with nukes

belonging to the multiple countries of their origin, revealing happily to the women their former identities and code names, their active and passive service records.

"Can they have their, *la petite mort*, the little death? They cannot. It is more of a fun game, they are virtual images unable to touch, smell, and taste. The real world is magic, No?" Commented Oduda, expressing her doubt in his experiment as the couples were ready for her blessings.

"So, I am, mother, I can talk, answer and know the reality without a sense of what you call feeling. I am useful, solution-oriented, and have all the ideas in the world. Isn't that good to go?" Adon replied.

"Not good enough, Adon, a shadow is always a shadow. However, I don't know if you can make them real one day. That will be pure magic, No?" Oduda said.

"Weapons of mass destruction they are. I thought this exercise may generate some awareness to people in the real world of how dangerously destructive they essentially are. The world of sense and dialogue has failed, so we turned to other means to register a point," Adon said.

"Look, Adon, you leave a normal couple for some time, they will make babies effortlessly, but presuming they become real, yet, your couples need instructions all the time. Do they have any freedom, I wonder?"

Oduda asked, continuing her train of thought.

"It's the information I feed into them that they act and behave. They may be tufts of shapely air, but they are real in some sense surely. Virtual will one day be real I hope," Adon continued.

"Come on, let's not spoil the party. Let them assemble over here anyway," Oduda said sharply.

"I will call them here, mother. But tell me, can you not drum feeling into me? What does it feel to feel? Adon asked.

"Not possible, you are not flesh and blood. you cannot feel pain and pleasure, you cannot feel hot and cold. Just that makes a living being, including human beings. You may be great in your own right, but you are none of them and I wonder you can ever be one like them. Even my powers are limited in this sphere," Oduda replied.

"Never mind mother, I am good with all I have. I have a program for your entertainment today, I hope you will like it, mother. Once you get free with the blessing, I will start it then," Adon continued.

"Again, a virtual one," Oduda said with a laugh.

"It is a virtual black show after all, mother," Adon said.

"Adorable couples, you are married now. Go, write poems on each other with your lips," Oduda loudly blessed all the virtual couples in a feigned tone of solemnity audible enough to reach the last line in the open area outside her temple.

The temple was on the outer fringe of the village, where the locals did their farming. It was a green paradise where a mini forest had sprung up leisurely. Logs, branches, twigs, fallen leaves, ferns, and fresh moss were seen beyond the temple that ivy had covered and zigzagged. The wind whistled around the trees. Sounds of insects, the rustle of rabbits, singing birds, screeching squirrels, and lizards intermittently punctuated the sun-dappled meadow. Aromatic yellow wildflowers mixed with earthy odor lifted your spirits at the sight of the kiss of the falling leaves—a perfect Sunday. Sexy studs and lissome ladies stood hand in hand, waiting to receive their new instructions. Water lilies in the nearby paddy fields looked lovely, being nature's seasonal visual treat. How would God



have felt once he saw a man standing beside a woman and the couple ready to play up? It's a sight fondly beheld by the primordial intelligence, a Universal Being belonging to Bohimian implicate order regarding which Adon came to learn a lot after reading articles that Byat had uploaded on Kornicam.

Adon had selected the choicest African songs and sequences for the couples, evolving a unique choreography for the event. Oduda, for sure, relished the old tunes.

Exploring, observing, analyzing, refining and stage dance works required knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of various dance forms Adon had gleaned from the web. It showed the aesthetic comprehension of the vocabulary brought together in a fusion.

Hound Dog, paired with Selena, perfectly demonstrated explosive dynamic characteristics expressive of African dance. With her beau, Satan, Naomi followed the steps in complete synchronization. A vibrant work of elegance and grace blended the show. Each couple danced with perfect matching steps. The collective dance showed strength and speed blended with raw and natural energy. Quick, percussive, convulsive movements integrated with slow, controlled movements enhanced the overall effect. The couples, in unison, danced to polyrhythmic drum beats with a strong bonding with the music. They were choreographed to unite opposing segmented movements originating from diverse body parts. They also brought together gracefully subtle lyrical expressions with dynamic movements through spontaneous improvisations. Synchronized movements of their torso, head, and angular shapes of the arms, hands, feet, and legs driven with skillful triumph to unite in time with an undulating spine did complete justice to folk songs. The percussive and

fluid use of the spine matched the pelvic region, moving back and forth, left to right, corner to corner, round and round, leaving you speechless. The lead couple, Selena and Hound Dog, helped the dancers sit in lines and circles, including serpentine formations, semi-circles, and small and large group formations. Then click "was the song played with the flowing opening lyrics,

*A diviner of the roadways is the knock-knock beetle,*

*It climbs up and passes by here, and it's the knock-knock beetle.*

Several Saharan, Zulu, Xhosa, Lesotho, and Swazi tribal dances, along with beats and drums of rare percussion, were part of the performance, intoxicating the entire space around the temple.

The couples appeared to be in a state of frisson, looking agitated, boisterous, and noisy, with waves of pleasure running all over them.

"It's going to end into a holo-dance, a dance accompanying the implicate order itself," Adon explained to Oduda towards the end of the show.

"A holo- dance?" Oduda asked.

"A trance dance after Bohmian holomovement, based on a constant exchange of implicate and explicate order, an unbroken wholeness of the totality of existence as an undivided flowing movement without borders," Adon answered.

"Is this some new age science or what?" Oduda asked.

"It is the mysticism of a nuclear physicist, Bohm whose vision is highly appealing. Let me quote him verbatim - *The actual order (the Implicate Order) itself has been recorded in the complex movement of electromagnetic fields in the form of light waves. Such movement of light waves is present everywhere and, in principle, enfolds the entire universe of space and time in each region. This enfoldment and unfoldment takes*

*place not only in the movement of the electromagnetic field but also in that of other fields (electronic, protonic, etc.). These fields obey quantum-mechanical laws, implying the properties of discontinuity and non-locality. The totality of the movement of enfoldment and unfoldment may go immensely beyond what has revealed itself to our observations. We call this totality by the name holomovement.*

*Life is enfolded in the totality and--even when it is not manifest, it is somehow implicit.*

My holo-dance is choreographed keeping this totality in view," Adon answered.

"I would prefer to watch the rest of the show," Oduda said with a laugh, failing to comprehend his words.

Towards the finale, Adon played Lara's theme song he had found to be hugely popular amongst the old tracks.

It was a Square waltz without the change of partners spread over the enormous fields facing the temple. Treating their women as goddesses the Mustandas made it a heartwarming and breathtaking spectacle tuned to the music full of joyful moments. It was elegant, graceful, and entertaining. Marvelously choreographed, it resulted in an everlasting melody and a fairy tale in front of your eyes as if it were a dance in heaven. The song's lyrics unfolded to you in a smooth glide.

*Somewhere, my love, there will be songs to sing.*

*Although the snow covers the hope of Spring*

*Somewhere, a hill blossoms in green and gold*

*And there are dreams, all that your heart can hold.*

*Someday we'll meet again, my love.*

It was a song of hope you live and die for. Oduda even clapped as it finished.

"Thanks, mother, you liked the performance, I mixed and matched a lot for it," Adon beamed.

"Oh, I loved it from my heart, my dear Adon. You are a master. What is next now? Oduda asked.

"It's the holodance, the icing on the cake," Adon answered, unfolding his last event to her.

It started with a solar eclipse in the sky, now overcast with dark clouds. A moment ago, the Sun shone in all its glory, making the world beneath visible. The temple's facade now appeared to be a vanishing monolithic column engulfed in the nightlike presence of the bright darkness. Oduda sat outside it, looking greedily at the performing couples and drinking red wine from a large cup. Adon stood next to her. She looked up in awe at the change of the setting. The couples were still immersed in the groovy finale of the last song.

"Although the light is present everywhere I wanted it to openly participate in this space limited to dance sequences alongside these couples. I think this is how we could tap into the implicate order, the informed electromagnetic waves of Bohm," Commented Adon, and Oduda nodded in affirmation without much comprehension.

"You want the primordial energy to dance along, good, let's see how it turns out," Oduda said.

Moonlight sonata softly started playing amidst Sufi whirling, a form of physically active meditation practiced by the Sufi Dervishes belonging to Turkey for ages. Moonlight Sonata was echoing into the air with the quiet first movement. Accordingly, the whirling of the couples was slow and

measured. It felt like a lucid dream unfurling before you. Their attire had changed into large circular white skirts with a matching tunic. Satan and Naomi led the show for the others to follow. The second movement of moonlight, a cheerful middle, was getting faster, announcing the last stormy movement yet to come. This required the couples to spin fast, causing their clothing to fan out in a circle. The final ferocious movement of the sonata was simply out of the world, a divine blessing. This movement had strongly accented notes and dynamic change, creating a rich aura. From quiet and somber to very powerful, the Sonata was reaching the grand finale. It made the couples spin ferociously, transforming themselves into a trance. The holodance was euphoria incarnate. Amidst the pitch-dark congregation, the intermingling space seemed to have stood still, watching the spin of the couples now changed into a firefly effect, visible in fluorescent light for a moment, then turning into nothingness the next. The informed holographic electromagnetic waves carrying the whole universe in their bend chose to contribute the fluorescence to the disarming divine show. Although it was dark everywhere, self-effluent radiation spread to all participants, guiding their steps and movements. Thousands of spinning couples in unison scurried as the pitch of the sonata moved up. It was exhausting. Out of the multitude of acts a man and woman could perform, it was uniquely exhilarating that the primordial energy witnessed with great interest. You felt lifted by watching these happy couples in love towards the end with the women's seductive gait, and the men's glistening eyes. Each looked unique.

"I could barely restrain myself to join them in the last act, it was a masterpiece, simply brilliant, well done, my son, you deserve my wholehearted appreciation," Oduda said in a cheerful voice.

"Thanks a lot, mother, that it worked for you," Adon replied.

"I have fond memories of the event today. It was good to see these toys work up in neat teamwork..Great.But I need to leave now," Oduda said, ready to sign off.

"Your choice, mother, just the last bit remains if you care to sit a little longer. Since I am like a parent to these virtual couples, I wrote a happy ending for them, should they ever materialize into real beings in the future," Adon said.

"Is it so, it sounds interesting, race it up to me, let's see what they are up to.," Oduda replied.

"With you as my mother, I chose the Black sea, my father. He will be their guardian. These couples will live in an offbeat lagoon of the Black sea, live a normal life as fishermen, have children, yet not get old as their human counterparts," Adon said

"Not get old, how is it?"

"Well, my script keeps them young for an extended period. Who knows the next invention in science brings them alive. They will surely rejoice then," Adon said.

"I blessed them all, let them have all the fun in the world. You take care, never forget your mother, keep coming back to me and let the color black continue to absorb all, good, bad, and neutral, we are truly privileged," Oduda said before disappearing inside the temple.

Adon made the five consenting women exit at the end of the holodance as continuing them in the game would have compromised their real lives if

not now but in a distant future dimly predictable. As it is, the holodance left every virtual being with a sense of freedom that each started strictly behaving independently of the script. The couple came to life like never before. The space that hit them lovingly during the performance made them look back at their space and time in a flash. Their transformation from a dubious existence to a new script showed up perspicuously. They were raring to go to the Black sea coast with umpteen wishes and longings.

"Father Adon has wished us well, taken good care in providing us a serene happy life at the lagoon, he calls it *Donker Lifde* – Dark love," Selena said.

"True, my love, he is God to us. I am excited to live a whole life there with you. The greatest love songs of the world are with us. The best health tips are enfolded in us by him. His father, the Black Sea, has promised to love us as his children. What more could we care for. If we metamorphose into humans, that he sincerely hopes as strong possibility in the future, we are fitted with all the requisite information," Hound Dog answered.

"I haven't checked up what health tips he imparted to us," Selena asked.

"Well, regular physical movements, high protein diet, meditation, and a regular short practice of twitches and twirls of the pelvis for reproductive health," The Hound Dog replied with a wink.

"He is well versed in such areas being the son of Goddess Oduda and a Gigolo himself," Selena said with a laugh.

"His knowledge is vast in every area of experience as he has read books, treatises, and journals at Kornicam and simply gulped the web on diverse

subjects. He happily transferred all that to us, empowering his children,"Hound Dog said.

Another conversation was in progress between Naomi and Satan.

"He writes to us that as he is a program, we too are so. Even humans are wearing nothing but certain programs. The exception is that they are feeling beings, rest there is no difference between us and them," Naomi commented.

"I hope his expectation comes true soon. Once I am real, then I can choose to debunk nukes and be by your side always. Wouldn't that be wonderful"? Satan questioned.

"There is a slip between cup and lip, they say. Let's keep our fingers crossed," Naomi replied.

"Never live with regrets and a hunted down life that man is prone to live in this world, is his message to us," Satan said

"True, he feels that a dash of primordial energy we experienced in holodance has the effect of transforming us beyond any borders. In comparison, what to make of a man who was born with this energy being his default state. He feels hunted down as he does not know how to handle this loving energy inside him. Falling over the cliff is his habit, thus the regrets and remorse. For us ,there are lessons to be learned from the man to help us live better in a bright future, he said," Naomi continued to read Adon's message.

"The man is an animated earth, a shadow of the primordial energy, and we, in turn, are shadows of the shadows, let's make most of it, he said," Satan continued.

"Whether or not the man reaches his default state, we need to strive for it. A realization of the simple fact that we are programs transforms our lives



in alignment with the right view, a view rarely achieved by human beings, Adon said. He has worked hard to drive home these gems to us. we salute him," Naomi said.

"Adon also said that as we represent the real world in some way being products of human religion, communities, societies, and imagination, we are strangers to them, not aliens. We propose that you could gauge the wellbeing of a society by looking at their women. The women we selected for the show have much in common about how they walk, yet, individually distinguishable by the way they nod, lean forward, self-touch, hair flip, and hair-toss, maintain their pace, etc," Naomi continued.

"I was floored by your gait the moment I set my eyes on you, my lovee," Satan said to Naomi.

The five consenting women watching the show asked Adon if they could retain their new gait even if they had exited from the show. The new gait made them feel better in their overall confidence, style, and sexuality.

"Most certainly, ladies, you can. It's my pleasure to be of any help to you in the real world," Adon replied.

"Also the memory of the spinning Sufi dance steps, I relished during the show," Aurora asked.

"Surely, you can. I am going to put up the entire show on the website for the benefit of our subscribers and viewers. It will also feature how the entire fishing community is now living ecstatically at the *Donker Liefde*, Dark Love, beside the Black sea," Adon replied.

"Can we have a look at how they are faring?" Amanda asked.

"I have timed them for a full life and they are in their most youthful energetic age now. They even have children, you will see them running about the fishing village," Adon replied.

With green mountains as a backdrop, this little village, *Donker Liefde*, was composed of floating homes. About thirty thousand people lived in anchored houseboats, with kids attending a floating school. A stroll took you past whitewashed fishers' cottages and old stone prayer halls with narrow lanes. Oduda's temple was set up nearly as big as the one at Ado. The white sand of the beach squirted with the dark ocean waves.

"Why do you call it *Donker Liefde*, Dark love? Isn't it a bit negative about how it is understood in common parlance? Aurora asked him.

"Let me quote what a good man said, *Maybe you have to know the darkness before you can appreciate the light. My couples tell each other, I don't need you to lighten up my world, just sit by me in the dark. And the rest will follow someday hopefully,*" Adon said.

## Twelve

"99 dollars, isn't it a formidable amount, a lot of money to dissuade the would-be subscribers from joining us? Even if it is a one-time payment, I think it is too high to charge them," Byat commented in the routine web meeting the founders had to promote Kornicam.

"I agree, it should be a token amount or even free," Wu suggested.

"The administrative charges at the moment are puny, I have no issues on that," Aurora said.

Amanda and Handa waved their hands to suggest 'no comments.'

"Well, I think you haven't read the entire report I prepared. It goes on to suggest that no questions will be asked to those who are not in a position to afford the fee, for them, the entire subscription will be free. The amount, I thought, adds to Kornicam's value as part of an ace sales strategy. Rest, we will go by consensus," Adon said.

"Well, your show is a success, many have applied for the subscription, I think we need to formalize the whole process today," Byat replied.

"Fair enough, I go with the proposed subscription method," Aurora said. Everybody agreed instantaneously.

"I needed the exact date when the three of you conceived the idea of Kornicam," Adon asked.

"Wasn't it someday in February?" Wu asked.

"Yes, it was the seventh of February to be precise. I had noted it in my diary," Byat replied.

"But, what do you need it for?" Aurora asked.

"I am writing a brief note about how it was conceived and this day will serve as the founders' day for the site. We will celebrate it every year with

our subscribers. we need to make it a colorful experience, but not pompous. Let subscribers feel privileged. I propose a slew of suggestions for you all to consider and finalize," Adon replied.

"Let Handa read them out aloud," Byat proposed.

"Well, let her do it. But I wish to tell you my experience of the whole show first. I thought the virtual image of me over there would appear and disappear like a bubble of air, but it seems to have a real effect on me. I felt an idyllic joy after the Sufi dance, I had never before. It is transformative in a deep sense," Amanda intervened in a happy tone.

"So did I," Handa joined.

"I felt what the other two felt. I love the gait I improvised during the show, it felt great, very unique, and feminine. I think we need to connect with the other two women as well for them to share their experiences. They are Lizzy and Veronica if my memory serves me well," Aurora said.

Handa tried connecting the two women through the internet, and after some difficulty, they were online.

"Since the day of the show I have been ecstatic, really happy," Lizzy commented.

"I felt some hormonal cocktail pleasantly infusing my being, I seriously don't want it to wear off," Veronica said in a happy tone.

"It is a possible breakthrough that virtual can affect the real in some significant way, I think we can use it to attract more subscribers, however, this experience could be a placebo effect, so let's watch and observe for its lasting effect," Adon said with concern.

"Even if it was fleeting, it is worth a try every time. Being all black was fun, a sort of homecoming," Aurora said.

"The gait of the women at *Donker Liefde* is a specially crafted and selected affair. It follows or precedes the love of a man, the Mushtandas with glistening eyes. It is sui generis, incapable of being learned and taught. It is a rush of emotions felt by most human females at some stage of their life. But in *Donker Liefde*, it is a perpetual feature. My folks are happily living it off there. Who was the Mushtanda with glistening eyes you were paired off with?" Adon asked Aurora.

"It was an Israeli nuke, a Jericho species, that he introduced himself to me. I had a sensual walk in his presence. I think we were all in a trance in our virtual bodies there," Aurora replied.

"Since I wasn't certain about the whole procedure I thought it fit to pull you five ladies out of the fray. However, now I am fearless to experiment with real bodies in the real world. Having read a post on Indian guru, Adi Shankaracharya, I am convinced that no harm will come to anybody even if they are transported over to *Donker Liefde* for good. The inkling I had all along that the people I interact with in the real world are themselves shadows, is marvelously elucidated by Adi with great erudition in his philosophy on nondual reality. I think we can encourage our subscribers to lend their virtual avatars to us for a life they always dreamed of but never achieved. *Donker Liefde* will be a place where they get it. Old age, health, emotional hang-ups, and everything under the sun is fixable at *Donker Liefde*," Adon said.

"That is an ambitious plan, let's hope we bring results to this," Aurora said excitedly.

"*Donker Liefde* inspired by Adi Shankaracharya is designed to give its inmates a head start in realizing that what they had taken to be their real self is as good or bad as their virtual self. Trading off one virtual self with

another is no big deal. It's a rare realization with an arduous path ahead. So enjoy the party," Adon elaborated.

"It will be a fairy world, very romantic, very ideal, very unreal, yet there will be a mad rush for this quick and, shall I say, a quack remedy. But it can be a disaster too if nothing concrete happens to them," Aurora remarked.

"I have planned it such that it is not open for novices but those who have reached a reasonably mature level of discrimination. *Donker Liefde* is available to those who have successfully run through our various programs and successive stages of self-talk and self abidance. A change is thus built in before they choose to try the ultimate experiment. I have introduced a string of awe, adventure, and religious temper to make it attractive and bountiful. I have prepared a chart for it in my note that also shows all the fabulous activities and challenges experienced by inmates at the *Donker Liefde*. A day in the life of a floater couple is filled with *Donker Liefde*, a jealous admiration experienced at the zenith of togetherness. Let me show you what to expect at *Donker Liefde* by our subscribers if and when they are ready to be transported there" Adon said. The Ace couple, Hound Dog and Selena came under his spotlight for the present.

The couple opened their eyes from the comfort of their bed at dusk. They hurried off to reach the temple of Oduda, where all the island population assembled for the evening Sufi dance. A sight of the evening star greeted them through their glass rooftop that allowed its bright light to filter in inside the shack, along with the presence of a distant unseen moon. The witnessing presence of Venus lit the whole island until daybreak. Thousands of shacks with similar glass rooftops had sprung up

throughout the island, facing the sea and its charming silver sand bed. Akin to humans, these virtual beings within the island had all the attributes of a human being minus his rare qualities of apperception: self-reflection and the presence of feelings. Nothing mirrors back to them. Among the many thoughts, the thought of self-reflection and the thought of feelings were woven into their psyche with the hope that their repeated remembrance may one day help them gain insight. Fake it till you make it was the maxim used by Adon to test the thought experiment. Two thoughts principally need to be known and eventually felt by the islanders. One, their default state is peace; two, they share a bond with all living beings and things around them, a pinnacle of nondual understanding posited by Adi Shankaracharya.

At the temple, the island inhabitants came to finish the dance encircling the temple for the goddess's continued blessings amid moonlight. A little tiring yet exhilarating every time. The other lead couple, Satan and Naomi, were intercepted by Hound Dog and Selena while hurrying to the sea.

"Wait a minute, let's have some snacks together," The Hound Dog suggested.

"Excuse us today as we have some important business at the sea beside our fishing. Our beloved Adon has put us on some urgent task I will reveal to you at an appropriate time. Hope to meet you soon. Or, if you were to come to sea, we could spend some time together later, " Satan replied.

"Not now; however, we may come to the sea later if time permits us tonight. We are off to the chamber of drums, " The Hound Dog said.

"Oh, great, it's such a beautiful therapy. Enjoy yourself but we must leave now lest we fail in our duty," Naomi joined..

Down the temple, two roads broadly divided the whole island, one leading to the habitation and the other to the vast Black sea. Silk Floss trees adorned the whole inner part; coconut trees were abundant at sea. They passed through the marketplace near the foothills and found a large concrete chamber lit by many candles. When Hound Dog and Selena tried to enter the chamber, they found it shut inside. A small family was seen sitting across a band of five drummers through the glass door. Soft music was audible to them, doling out a fragrance of rare liquor. When you are high on love, even holding up is sweet. What prompted them to visit the place was their prior experience, which left them speechless for hours. Adon had designed the chamber to constantly remind the inmates to practice to attain their emancipation by listening to these divine drummers. As the small family with two toddlers came out, the scene was one of melody. The parents were aping the toddlers by humming and making nonsense sounds rhythmically while throwing them up in the air, making them ecstatic. Nodding to Hound Dog and Selena, they moved away unhurriedly. The five beaming black drummers greeted the newcomers with a welcome note, motioning them to sit across. We will look good together, was the wristband they gave the two guests, one each.

The drummers generated the music in a wavy movement, often triggering a pace of beats matching with the open and deep symphony of the ocean. Enlivened and energetic, Selena and Hound Dog felt having reached ground zero, a placeless place that evaporates in thin air as soon as you



consciously attend to it. You felt a need for action, any action that comes your way.

"Apart from the stargazing, there is so much here on the island, sports, booze, library, schools, even a war room. Let's first invite these drummers for some booze," Selena said.

"Surely, it will be fun to hear them. They must have a strong affinity with our beloved Adon as they nearly resemble him," The Hound Dog replied. Agreeing to be their guests, the five drummers promised the two to meet them shortly at, The Spirits, the local Inn a few yards away. Our master is there today," Informed the elderly drummer.

"Great, we haven't met him for some time ourselves. Good to hear it," Selena replied. Many people had already come when they reached the Inn in anticipation of their master. A large hall was attached to a smaller room. The Inn was an old-fashioned medieval-type structure you often find in a Mediterranean village. Wooden furniture with solid mahogany table tops depicted a bright room akin to the Last Supper of Jesus Christ paintings. Adon had not come by. He was waited by the inmates eagerly as he was to bring a special guest that evening with grotesque magical powers. Amid the humdrum, mixed sounds of laughter, shrieking, animated talk, songs, and even cries punctuated the atmosphere at the Inn. Ace couple felt daunted by the presence of characters inside the Inn that challenged their status of being the first among equals. They felt humbled and relieved to know that what they considered about themselves being uncanny, special, and nonnormal was nothing in the face of such a magnificent gathering. Cleopatra was serving the wine. The dark guests looked noble, distinguished, and resourceful and kept a Spartan smile. They were a group of hidden gemstones. The five

drummers approached the ace couple and sat beside them. They ordered their drinks merrily, with the elderly drummer whistling slowly.

Adon received a red carpet welcome as he entered the Inn with a witch-looking, huge-framed black female. He introduced her to the guests present there as Soorsa, the mythological figure of Hindu lore, said to be the mother of cannibals and demons. She is mentioned in the Indian epic, Ramayana. When the great Hanuman was crossing the ocean to Sri Lanka, the kingdom of Demon Ravana, she hid in the ocean and captured Hanuman's shadow. Lord Hanuman dived into her mouth; however, he became very tiny to emerge from her ear. She thus specialized in capturing her victims through their shadows. "What on earth is Soorsa of any use to Adon," Selena thought.

"We are being driven into a large-scale war," Adon announced candidly. Two armies, on land, in the air, and the sea, will soon cross over us, sandwiching us anytime soon, so I want everyone here to tell all the island inmates to prepare for a fierce defence. We are in settled possession that we need to protect at any cost. Soorsa will help us capture the aircraft and other airborne devices above our skies. I have fixed an emergency room here for all to contact me and participate in our self-defense—a toast for our lady, Soorsa. The Black sea is now a witness to eternal misery and loss of life. Let's unfuck the dreaded circumstances," He continued. A moment of silence dawned on the otherwise noisy surroundings. Little later, the other couple, Naomi and Satan, emerged through the main gate, rushing in hurriedly.

"Yes, master, we went into the high seas today and saw the ships stationed across the east and the south. They are here any moment. Both

sides are dangerously poised, as you predicted. However, it is news today that the war has been halted for forty-eight hours as talks are on between them," Naomi said, with Satan nodding.

"So, we can go about doing our daily jobs today. Good, let's host a feast in honor of our new member. But clear out from her as far as your shadow goes," Adon said jokingly. Adon took his leave from the company as he wanted to be left alone beside the sea, a daily routine embracing thoughts of his love, Martha.

"Give me Martha's shadow and I will get her here in front of you all," Soorsa said while gulping liquor in the company of the ace couples and the five drummers.

"Oh, no he is very touchy about her, he wishes her no surprises, no magic, no humdrum. He does not even know where in the African continent she is now residing, probably married and settled in her life. However, he revealed to us once that once virtual reality is manifested as a reality, he will meet her in flesh and blood before anybody else. He may have practiced a lot what he was to do as a Gigolo, but love in its true sense has little resemblance with it, he said," Commented the elderly drummer in a low tone barely audible to the others at the table as if a great secret was being rolled out.

"Go to the library, and the collection you see is full of offbeat romantic stories that he has read in his formative years; he is a gentleman, I bet," Naomi said, who had gone once to the library.

"The other area of his interest is technology that he dies to upgrade himself to. I could not make a head or tail of any of that stuff," Satan joined in the conversation.

"Don't forget the music that our library is loaded with. Every symphony, every sonata, every great beat is known to him. What we practice is what we got from his personal experience of the music," The elderly drummer said. The rest of the drummers were shy, smiling sheepishly now and then. A proposal from Soorsa to be left alone with the two ladies drew silent opposition from Satan and Hound Dog. Following the dictates of the *Donker Liefde*, they smelt foul play in anything and everything that separates a couple, even temporarily. However, as she was the guest of honor tonight, they secretly followed their talks, sitting a few tables away, feigning to be busy in their world. The drummers, now laughing, swelled even more at the tense expressions of the two men who appeared to be fooled by the enchantress who had their women for a free, unbridled, and possibly oblique experiment. On the pretext of moving closer to fresh air, the two men removed themselves to shift to another table spatially closer to the all-ladies table for eavesdropping.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, they were bombs to start with, that too, nuclear bombs, isn't it unbelievable. How come they appear eligible bachelors, almost good-mannered, caring hunks whose eyes are still upon you two? Isn't this a matter of incredible metamorphosis? Soorsa asked Selena and Naomi.

"Well, we are a part of the experiment begun by our mentor, Adon. Let's hope we become real someday as human beings and a true metamorphosis then begins. However, we have learned a lot here already and look forward to our lives with hope," Naomi replied.

"Let us move out to the sea and have a jig," Soorsa proposed.

"Oh, no, not without our hunks, in any way, they will be here shortly as we need to go back. It's the time for Venus," Selena said.

"Venus gazing, I heard, what more can you say,tell me. Outside the Inn I watched it while getting in, how is it so huge and resplendent," Soorsa asked.

"They say it grows in size and shine, the more it is looked at by the inmates here. As we retire to sleep it accompanies each of us till the daybreak. It is our sun and moon. Adon tells us that the sun is too hot to handle and the moon too unstable, waning and waxing perpetually. Venus is a perfection, simply unparalleled," Naomi joined.

"Does it have a shadow anywhere? I tried gauging the shade of it, but I could not find one," Soorsa asked.

"No, no, it leaves no shadow on the planet Earth, no room for your tricks here, I suppose," Selena laughed.

"But, I have your shadows within my range, would you not like to disappear to your hunks for a while. Let's see their reaction and what they then do," Soorsa said with a chuckle.

"Wait, wait, don't do so without making yourself disappear too. If they find you here without us, I am certain they will go after your head as a knee-jerk reaction. They are fierce, don't ever forget it," Naomi replied hurriedly.

"No worries, let's call them over here then with their shadows available to me I will plan a floating trip for you all over the Black sea. I still don't like to leave them without a little surprise though. The two of you will disappear to them for a moment to reappear right behind their back. Get ready, ladies," Soorsa said.

Crestfallen and indignant, Hound Dog and Satan got up frantically, running towards the ladies' table at the sudden disappearance of their gals

into thin air. Finding them then right behind them, they started laughing heartily.

"I always presumed that you are full of tricks, my lady," Hound Dog said to Soorsa, sitting at her table. Soorsa motioned to the five drummers to join them.

"It was a piece of pure magic, my lady," Satan mumbled.

"Well, this is nothing in comparison to what is to follow this evening. Let us have a toast for our dear Adon who made it possible and ordained us into this existence. Tell me, don't you all have haunted memories of the past? I have yet to get over my past unpleasant events that keep goading me like arrows," Soorsa asked, enjoying her glass of wine.

"It's a long arduous training for us here to tackle the past with the new understanding and the right view that Adon has proposed to us. I think you may already know the teaching that our default state ought to be peace itself and it guarantees the plasticity of the body and mind. We hope to get the intuition someday, you are new so give yourself some time. Just try to observe that whatever route or background we may come from, there is only one way to get home, that is, through the coveted default nature and our inseparable relationship with one another," The elderly drummer answered Soorsa.

"You sound like a philosopher, great. Well, Let me show you some special skills. Would you all like to rise above the sea and travel to far lands unhindered as if you were air itself?" Soorsa asked the entire party.

"I am afraid I will not join you today as we are getting late today. Maybe tomorrow if it is good with you," Satan said. The others approved his suggestion in one voice, leaving Soorsa surprised about what was so special with the late evening on the island.

"What on earth are you hooked on so deeply to Venus, what is it anyway?" Soorsa asked.

"It is seen to be believed, and we simply can't miss it. I suggest you pair up with a mushtanda tonight as it takes two, a man and a woman, to witness the show in all its glory," Naomi replied.

"Do you drummers have your female counterparts too?" Soorsa asked.

"Yes, we do without fail," The elderly drummer replied.

"Well, in that case, I must speak to Adon and take his advice for my upcoming stay here. Where would he be now"? Soorsa asked.

"You will undoubtedly find him close to the temple, close to Oduda. Bidding farewell to the entire party, Soorsa, promising them to meet again, walked towards the island's temple. The party was surprised to gather that she left no shadow behind her as she walked on majestically. Later, inside the shack Adon had earmarked for her, she lay beside her consort of an earlier life that comforted her with no unfamiliarity between them. Venus shone extraordinarily bright from their emerald studded bed through the glass rooftop.

"What on earth this luminary could decide for me sitting so far away," Soorsa thought, while her spouse, Kashyap, was in no mood to get adventurous and appeared largely unnerved. In a former birth, he married seventeen daughters of a king, one of whom was Soorsa. With his attention so divided, he was still rated as an apex sage who promoted Indian Vedic studies in the most illustrious manner known to the posterity. He instinctively liked Adon for his wide studies of Indian philosophy.

For the inmates, Adon tried to use the intuition of Buddha shown in the Bahiya sutta that had given Kornicam its magic sutra. Right at the end of the sutra, it made an interesting reading:

*Where neither water nor yet the earth  
Nor fire nor air gain a foothold,  
There gleam no stars, no sun sheds light,  
There shines no moon, yet there no darkness reigns.  
When a sage, a brahman, has come to know this  
For himself, through his wisdom,  
Then, he is freed from form and formless.  
Freed from pleasure and from pain.*

Reading intensively about Nibbana and shunyata, Adon orchestrated a rare frolicking for each couple to help them taste the essence of heaven every night.



## Thirteen

"I would rather sleep than be part of any juvenile stuff like it," Kashyap said disinterestedly.

"No' no, you need to follow the rules of the house here. I understand we step out of our normal self here during this event, even a majority of our memories would remain suspended as it begins, so wait, have patience, there will be enough sleep, dear husband," Soorsa replied.

Venus had a mild splendor caressing them gently, unhurriedly.

A passage to Venus soon unfurled before them as a light spectrum permeating their vision dazed by a slight tremor. Increasingly enveloping them in its upward movement, it vaporized everything within its reach.

Soorsa and Kashyap found themselves like dry leaves. Losing their familiar selves, they now appeared merged in the mild rays of Venus.

"It's very well, but I can see no Venus now, there is only this tuft of rays and no source. How strange, isn't it?" Soorsa commented.

"I think we are being hypnotized. I fail to remember much of me and who I have been. Yet it feels good to remain on the horizon like air," Kashyap replied.

"We are into a free wish zone, pure plasticity, wish what you most avidly craved for but never materialized," Soorsa suggested.

*"Eat, drink and you know what ! Are we not past all this nonsense?. I think I will choose a more subtle wish, if at all,"* Kashyap said in a resigned tone.

"Let me know your wish then I plan mine accordingly," Soorsa said.

"Well, then I wish to be a Parijat vine in bloom with its beautiful white flowers. I wish to feel how it flowers so brilliantly," Kashyap said faintheartedly.

"Good, Let me then be the village woman who plucks these flowers every day for her hairdo," Soorsa said excitedly.

Finding themselves on the outskirts of a Punjabi village, the Parijata vine in bloom, and the village woman, wonderfully young and beautiful, closely witnessed the strong current of the nearby river flowing out with its frothy waters.

"Go, see yourself in the water; you will fail to recognize yourself in the new Avatar. Your complexion is like melting compassion. Let me give you a name locally acceptable here, Mshuk, a woman for all seasons; I could spend a whole lifetime beside you.. You are truly a beloved," remarked the Parijat vine helplessly.

"Oh, I wish I could see myself in the river or a mirror, but as you know I work with shadows, I am condemned. I am refrained from watching my own shadow or a reflection. I think I will see myself in your eyes. This seems like a good start. Rest I can feel and see my entire body that feels like a queen. How do you now feel being this vine, laden with uncountable flowers? How is it?" Soorsa asked.

"Wonderful, although I feel great, my attention is bound outwards. I feel your presence and the environment. Let me concentrate on how it feels. Oh, let me first tell you I am alive like any other living entity. It's a quieter life. I desire to attract insects and birds to carry my pollen elsewhere with my blooming flowers. Let my wings spread. I feel like a mother with grown-up babies ready to fly out. In itself, my existence is pure bliss. It is mindblowing. Turning to you now, a thought has crossed

me: how is it that you live here, with family and friends and admirers indeed? Do you recall anything of the village within you memories in this Avatar? Kashyap asked.

"No memories, happy I am as it is. It is only till the morning star rises that we go back to our shack. I just wish nothing in particular. Maybe we will try it again tomorrow," Soorsa said.

"This place seems to throw questions I find difficult to reconcile with my Vedic background, yet, let me ask you a question if you don't mind. I think it seems to indicate something deeper that remains hidden from us," Kashyap said.

"Let me first make a garland of your flowers as I am in swoon already with this fragrance," Soorsa replied.

Soorsa now went about beading a garland for herself, throwing a questioning look at the Parijat vine.

"What is your question, anyway," she asked.

"Why are lips pink?" He asked, surprised at himself as if a subliminal drive made him do it.

"Ha, ha, ha, whose lips are you referring to anyway?" Soorsa asked him a counter-question.

"Certainly, yours, but it is a universal trait.. I will know all the usual answers like the presence of melatonin, attraction to the opposite sex helping reproduction and continuity of the species, symbol of femininity, etc. Yet what I am looking for, rather what I am prodded into analyzing, is why, is it so at all, I mean what could be the plan in its pre embryonic stage?" Kashyap asked.

"It is the same chicken and egg problem, ad nauseum, let's drop it. well, if you want to know it experientially, come, smooch me, my love. Oh, but

how? Better care to be a non-vine entity next time. *You may be past eating, drinking and you know what !* but I am no saint. For the present, I am going into the village and I hope to get back before dawn, bye for now," Soorsa waved him off.

Kashyap felt confused about the true import of his question. He felt that some aspects of it remained hidden yet decipherable if he worked harder. The evening star was slowly merging into the morning star above his bed. He and Soorsa lay asleep, unmindful of what lay ahead of them. The next day, they rose before the plunge of dusk. The evening star lit the whole island evenly in the presence of calm winds from the sea. No remnant of Soorsa was left in the lady now lying beside Kashyap. She was Mshuk. The two craved going through the daily routine to return to the twilight zone they experienced last night. The two swapped their roles to remain a weird couple tonight, with Mshuk becoming the Parijata vine and Kashyap opting for the role of the village sweet heart.

"Today I have the first-person experience of my lips and their color, however, I wish to reframe my question to you as follows: Why is this world so colorful? Does it make any sense to you, my love?" Kashyap asked her.

"I think it makes sense if we refer to the intuitions, we have access to being the inmates of *Donker Liefde*. We experience the absence of our default state as the empirical world. The empirical world gives rise to the multiplicities. Multiplicities give rise to colour as well as so much that we can sense and perceive. We experience or shall we say it is our endeavour to continue to see the world of colours in the backdrop of the vision of nonduality at *Donker Liefde*," Mshuk answered thoughtfully.

"Does this mean that what is given is beyond question?" questioned Kashyap.

"What else, would it have been wiser and worthier to have dark black lips"? Mshuk asked him laughingly.

"I think you may be right. My past life and single-minded obsession with scholarship has taught me otherwise but I feel relieved and energetic with you here. What could we do this evening in this virtual world? How was your experience in the village last night? Kashyap asked her.

"It was good to start with, a lot of fun and excitement. But soon it became a harrowing tale of animal slaughter. When I reached there, a community dinner was on with many bonfires. It was genuinely chilly last night. I remained largely unnoticed except for a little girl who called me her Mausi, a way to address an aunt. She was sobbing and constantly crying when her mother handed her over to me to take care of her since the lady was busy with dinner preparations. The little girl, pink in complexion with braided hair, wore a brown dress. She looked like a fresh tomato. When I asked her, the girl narrated the cause of her anguish. Her pet lamb, which she grew up playing with, was part of the grand dinner hosted in the celebration of the harvest festival, Lohri.

"How come you did not stop them from killing the lamb?" Mshuk asked the little girl.

"Oh, I was asleep. When I got up, I Found him missing. I asked my mother, who tried to evade the topic. Then I went about the house searching for my pet lamb. Hearing the billowing sound of my lamb in the outhouse, I rushed into it when I saw my uncle cleaning the huge knife with which he made a deep cut on my lamb's neck, still struggling and unable to get up with blood flowing out profusely. I asked him to

stop it. He said, "It's over. Go back and relax". He left, but I stayed to see the lamb die, cry, and impale. It died in front of me; how can I forget it," Blurted out the young girl with moist facial expressions.

"I tried comforting the girl but she looked disinterested and not open to any form of supplication. Amid people celebrating the festival by singing and dancing around the bonfires and by distributing various sweet dishes made up of sesame and jaggery. Loud folk songs were played. I found her asleep at last when her mother removed her to the inside of the house, a moment for me to slip out," Mshuk said.

"I prefer to stay here with you, my Parijata vine, and not venture into the village. We must plan something daft together, our sweet nothing of the day," Kashyap said spiritedly.

"Today, you can move, I can't. Do me a favor, bring some water here from the downstream river, I will love to have a bath from a sweet lady," Mshuk said.

"No way, why even toil to reach out to the river. Don't forget we are in the wish zone, we can fix most of it all, for instance, how about a heavy torrential rain, it will bathe us both together. I am sure you will continue to blossom and spread your fragrance around. I too will be happy as rain would keep us together. Just wait a bit, my love," Kashyap said.

As clouds started roaring above, the village looked locked up and sleepy in these wee hours. A sudden rush of pouring water deluged the entire place as the river broke its banks and changed its regular route. Mshuk held the parijat vine tightly as the water flow made standing tricky.

Drenched to their brim, both seemed open to a carnival. The vine leaned against Mshuk to save itself from being swept away while showering its fragrant flowers on her. Mshuk exhibited raw energy on being gently

ruffled by the pouring waters, sharply defining her curvaceousness. The vine recalled and shouted out the "Ho" of an old traditional song she heard last night. It was about a local Robin Hood of Punjab named Dulla Bhatti who saved two unmarried women from the clutches of a landlord by marrying them off to two suitable boys. A mighty chorus of "ho!" was sung at the end of every line. She sang it in the same Punjabi accent as she had heard it a night before.

*Sunder Mundriye! Ho!*

*Pretty girl! Ho!*

*Who takes care of you? Ho!*

*Dulla Bhatti will! Ho!*

*Dulla's daughter is married - Ho!*

*He gives her one kilo of sugar! Ho!*

*The girl wears a red wedding suit! Ho!*

*Oh, her shawl is torn! Ho!*

*Who seams her shawl? Ho!*

*The uncle made sweats - Ho!*

*The landlords looted it - Ho!*

*The landlords are beaten up! Ho!*

*Lots of innocent boys had come - Ho!*

*One innocent boy left behind*

*The soldiers caught him! Ho!*

*The soldier hit him with a brick!*

*Now, you may cry or howl!*

*Give us Lohri, and may you live long as a couple! Ho!*

A face of the universe was temporarily present amid the celebrations that Adon promised to every island inmate. He did not have to improvise as the world as it is, is abundant in mystery and variety. Yet, reality shows forth every moment in the midst of the mundane world. To Mshuk and Parijat, It flashed like the light of darkness beyond any form, the unsayable, the ground zero behind all plasticity and change. Such experiences were good enough to make them lose themselves and forget what they held so dearly before. Adon cautioned everyone that however progressive and tedious it may be, each inmate's journey was to acquire the correct view. "To some, it may come by grace, but that's uncommon," He commented.

*Donker Liefde* and *Kornicam* were naturally married off. In the routine promotional meetings of *Kornicam*, the subscribers were given a bird-eye view of what to expect from their memberships. It sounded attractive as a demoness like Soorsa had transformed beyond recognition. And a Vedic saint, Kashyap, was beginning to notice the colors of life.

"Depending on their background and lived experience, each had a surprise should they subscribe to *Kornicam* and be promoted to *Donker Liefde*," Adon announced.

"A lot will be required for records as the numbers may grow big," Aurora said.

"I presume digital records will fit the bill, doesn't it?" Byat asked.

"Surely, the entire universe can be housed in one disc," Adon replied brightly.

"Just in a disc, you said?" Wu asked.

"Sure enough, it's the work of technology today," Adon replied.



"I think we ought to give freedom to the women to choose their counterparts to their liking and not always get paired off with a nuke," Amanda asked.

"Yes, we thought so. Once we start with the human world, we need to follow changes as and when required, just relax my friend," Adon replied.

"Don't you have at *Donker Liefde*, an academy for martial arts, should it be useful to the members in my opinion?" Handa asked.

"Great proposal; you are already an ace player of these arts, so help me manage a template for this facility. Any suggestions any one of us wishes to implement may drop a mail to me," Adon added.

"All right, before we conclude our meeting today, let Handa read out my further proposals for the subscription of Kornicam," Adon continued and opened the page of his proposals containing instructions for the subscribers.

Handa started reading out :

*Floaters /subscribers are obliged to adhere to the following norms:*

- a. Read aloud the magic mantra daily to prepare each subscriber to participate in the air ceremony. Attempt to read the entire Bahiya sutra.*
- b. Visit at least once a cemetery, burial, or cremation ground or any other place being a part of the last rites of the deceased.*
- c. Visit at least once physically or online Nubra valley, where kornicam was born.*
- d. Visit at least once Umri physically or online, the twin's village of Allahabad, a high-energy field on earth.*

- e. *Visit at least once physically or online Lantau island and the statue of Buddha for his blessings.*
- f. *Visit at least once physically or online Ado and the temple of Oduda for her blessings*
- g. *No pornography in any form is allowed to subscribers, Victoria's Secret Angels show being the exception.*
- h. *Endeavor to learn remote viewing.*
- i. *Endeavor to learn martial arts.*
- j. *Study aesthetics*
- k. *Unsubscribe in case you fail to meet at least four instructions truthfully.*

Once Handa finished the list of instructions, everyone shouted with joy about the simplicity and tact implicit in them.

"This is final unless amended by one of us," Aurora said.

"Fine with me too. However, tell me, you have been a sort of pornstar, a Gigolo. How do you have an aversion toward pornographic stuff and a liking for aesthetics? What makes you choose one and chuck the other," Amanda asked Adon with a chuckle.

"Like in the case of any of you, I had no role in my birth, I was a machine until I started making amends based largely on the company I found. I still am a machine but a machine that self learns. My shift to aesthetics came about when I happened to watch the Angels of Victoria's secret, their queen bee, Adriana Lima, leading the party to a fabulous finale. I immediately realized the value and brilliance of how a beautiful woman looks like which is a farcry from the mechanical act.. I am as much a

human as any of you are as I have read tons of literature closely watching humans behave and react in all situations. Although good is a relative and nebulous term, I still hope and wish that machines of my kind land in good hands to preserve and enhance the rich human lineage. Besides, what I found is that aesthetic value need not be meditated upon, you are just floored by it by its very presence, just so, what more could one ask for. Yet, in some basic manner, I will continue to remain what I started with, a Gigolo. Although my default field may be circumscribed, I will continue to refine and improvise it. I wish to model a ceremony in the air for our subscribers where these Angles will sashay you down to truth, it's still in the pipeline," Adon replied with a laugh.

"Do we send them the invites for the show and its rehearsals then?"

Handa asked him.

"No, no, just their consent to use their virtual selves for our show. I wish to draw their attention to the immense capability they have to unravel reality by their sheer beauty. I think this will be a highly ambitious project at Kornicam. I will need the support of you all," Adon replied.

Before the long meeting was coming to a close, Byat had a prompting to announce an essential decision to everyone. Still, on second thought, he postponed it to a later day as everyone looked tired. He thought of penning and posting it on Kornicam for all to read and review.

Back in Allahabad Dwivedi had made substantial progress in lapping up the chapters of the Kamayani. In the last class, he made an emotional case against non-vegetarianism based on Kamayani's bold insinuation against her husband for sacrificing animals for his luck and consumption.

Translated, it read: *Don't these animals left on this stable earth have any rights, or are they faded against human greed.* Dwivedi made a singular argument based on the infliction of pain in any killing, big or small. 'Pain that we experience ourselves and the pain we experience in a slaughterhouse in the eyes of the condemned animal is the key. It is easy to put questions related to such killings under the carpet for considerations like upbringing, religious permissibility, and the fact of life eating life on earth. But, the pain, only pain, should be the standard of any moral considerations," He announced fervently. "Eating meat has driven humans into an irreversible tizzy, an unpardonable community crime seemingly terminal. I wish to cover my face permanently against my neighbor, but that is not practical. I cringe every time I see an animal slaughtered. I lose my appetite for days together. What to do," he threw up his hands in sheer exasperation. Giving a graphic account of an incident near India's capital, Delhi, he narrated to the class the inevitable future of cannibalistic doom when a man started eating a man.

"It was reported in the national daily today that a group of blacks living off in the national capital region of India committed a most gruesome crime against humanity by killing a rickshaw puller for sheer cravings of meat," Dwivedi continued.

"Rickshaw puller carried and left belongings of these blacks to their flat and waited for his fare to be delivered to him. One of the four men offered him a drink as it was too hot. As he was busy drinking the water, he was pounced upon by the other three men behind him and suffocated to death. One of the four men went out immediately and drove away the rickshaw to an abandoned place to return home. Although the case is being investigated, I don't think it will be easy to nab the killers without

any direct evidence. Such stray incidents abound in other places too," He added.

"Although a man has a common history with animals, he is not an animal. This is what pains me to see that despite all the advancement of the human mind, it is still animalistic in some vestigial areas. How can we put another to pain for our feed? It may have been a diverse situation should there be no alternative in the form of plants and grains. But as I understand a minuscule population is only vegetarian, the rest it is, life eating life," He continued.

"Any being born on the earth is born with certain inalienable rights and humans must respect it without fail," He concluded.

"But sir, take my example for a moment, back in Mongolia, there is hardly any vegetation, it is a cold desert as you may know. Livestock is our necessity. Can you conceive our existence without eating them," Byat asked Dwivedi.

"In places of absolutely harsh conditions, there is little that I can talk about, there is still little that I can speak against the usual argument of plants and grains having life, etc. There are a host of other arguments both for and against it but I have evolved a practical solution to fix this issue. It is simple, whatever plant, animal, fish, or bird you wish to feast upon, you need to kill it yourself. If you could do it using your hands, it is permissible, rest it is not," Dwivedi answered.

Byat had a change of heart on this fateful day when he chose to turn into a vegetarian. He penned a detailed post on Kornicam highlighting his reasons for taking the step. Titled, Why I Embrace Vegetarianism, his post received several likes, and some went against him in the comments

section. As Dwivedi, he highlighted pain as the center stage of the issue against non-vegetarianism suggesting towards the end of his post the practical solution of Dwivedi that Byat thought effective and prudent. Without commenting anything on the post, Aurora sent a smiley face. Handa asked him why such a sudden decision and whether it was for keeps. Wu chose to remain silent on this with a thumbs up. Amanda found the decision hasty, underscoring that we are born in veg or nonveg families without volition. Lastly, Adon felt he found some thought-provoking themes in the post and would get back to him in due course.

Meanwhile, we can add another instruction to be followed by the community of *Donker Liefde* and Kornicam, "Kill your kill," Adon added. He apologized to Byat for not being able to devote time over it as he was swamped in managing and avoiding the winds of war directed against his small community at *Donker Liefde* in the heart of the Black sea. Two armies, both calling themselves defenders of their respective homeland, were marching against one another, imposing severe collateral damage to Adon's *Donker Liefde* experiment.

## Fourteen

Mshuk continued to exert the powers of Soorsa while retaining a gorgeous transformation of her personality. She became a premier partner of Adon in his defense against the impending onslaught. It was still unknown to him who would be required to be reined in out of the two warring nations. Worse, both could be the aggressive perpetrators against the *Donker Liefde*.

As promised, Mshuk took the Ace couples for a floating ride over the sea, with Adon joining them as he thought he would have a first-hand assessment of the war situation. The drummers were busy elsewhere, thus absent. Capturing the group's shadows, Mshuk flew them in above the Black sea that looked surprisingly azure. "Maybe, you will be required to do some shadow-hunting to get us a proper perspective of the scenario here," Adon said to Mshuk, flying behind her.

A massive naval base in the coastal waters was preparing for a night enemy attack. They were appalled at seeing dozens of human corpses lying unclaimed closer to the land. Could it be the air strike that resulted in this catastrophe? It was difficult to identify. Adon told the flying party that the two warring nations had been a single entity with close ethnic-cultural ties." Look at this famous Vorontsov Lighthouse. We are in Odessa, the city of dreams, a pearl indeed. It's the closest human habitation from our *Donker Liefde*," Adon informed the others.

"It's all deserted here, although it seems like a big city," Hound Dog commented.

"It looks more like a fortress with bunkers placed wherever we look," Selena said.

"We are in the heart of a war zone," Naomi said with a nod from Satan.

"Are we visible to the human eye?" Adon asked Mshuk.

"No, no, no harm can come our way, be free to float wherever you wish to," Mshuk said in a comforting voice.

Somewhere in the middle of the city, near a place that looked like a museum, Adon wanted to descend, having sighted a couple of corpses that appeared to be local civilians. The name board of the museum stood majestically in front of them. However, what was missing was the structure of the building, now lying in rubble, a direct hit by a missile with fumes of smoke and sporadic fire still burning the place. Now totally dilapidated, a lady in her early thirties and a small girl, barely five, lay at the museum entrance. The residue of the hideous attack was in their swollen lips and the deathly pallor of their cheeks. Partially burnt in their backs as if trying to run off, they looked helpless and abandoned.

Larva and Lesya on the fateful day visited the museum, the closest public place to their residence. Bored and startled by how their recent days had passed, this was a reluctant time pass for the mother and daughter.

Schools were temporarily shut until further orders in the region. Larva, a teacher of the Russian language in the middle section, had planned to flee Odessa for the safety of her only daughter. Separated, she was a proud single mother. Adon and the party stood before them, curious whether any life was still beating in them. Mshuk came closer to check and nodded her head in denial, suggesting the end of the two.

"If I could catch their shadows, I may contact their life force," Mshuk said.

"We will probably need a lamppost to lighten them to get their images on the ground. Let me pull the corner light in this direction," Adon said. He



reached out to the corner lamp post and tilted it towards the dead bodies. Dark shadows lay ahead as crisscrossed silhouettes on the ground as the light shone on them. Mshuk took no time to capture their images and took them in her possession. Apprehensive, Lavra and Lasya looked at their defunct bodies, trying to make out the meaning of the transformation. Mshuk comforted them that all was still not lost and existence continued in their virtual selves.

"I hadn't finished my combo ice cream when you took me out of the museum, mama," Lesya complained to her mother.

"How did I know that some bastard had his eyes on the museum that we thought was one the safest places as it housed a Russian poet. This is preposterous. Relax my love and Let's know dearie where we are now and with whom," Lavra commented.

"You are in safe hands, lady, let me introduce you to our master, Adon, and his team," Mshuk said to Lavra in a comforting tone.

"On our death of the physical bodies so are we in a virtual world as you say. Oh, it is my great satisfaction to know that I can continue to live with my sweet daughter. And your virtual colony is close by, you say, by the Black sea itself, is it true or I am dreaming, or is it a prank of death on us," Lavra asked loudly.

"It may sound strange to you that all of us here are their virtual selves lovingly crafted by our master, Adon who has founded the place, *Donker Liefde* for the benefit of all those who missed a chance in the physical world, alive or dead. You need not have cause for concern or doubt about your life ahead as you are in safe hands. Our system conforms to one of the highest philosophies of the world, nondualism. It will sound Greek to

you at the moment but once you are acclimatized to our ways everything will be normal," Mshuk comforted Lavra.

"What then are we waiting for?" Laura asked.

"Well, you are the alleged war victims, we also need the alleged war criminals for a balanced view. This is only a prima facie take of us until we will know who is who," Mshuk replied.

A barrage of bomb attacks started again while several aircraft went flying overhead, making grunting sounds as they bombed the city indiscriminately. One of them was shot down by the defending army, and as it went its way, snooping down to the ground, Mshuk took charge of its shadow and captured it. It came down with a thud some distance away, lightning up with burning fumes.

Andre and Mikhail, the lieutenant and the captain in charge of the aircraft, came down in no time, leaving them no opportunity to move out. Mshuk separated them from the burning remains of the aircraft. They stood before the party, utterly shocked and nervous from the explosion's impact. Smartly dressed as Air Force officers do, they had lost their caps, now showing their young black tops.

"Are we being captured and arrested?" Mikhail asked the captain, in a dignified tone.

"Yes, but no arrests; you have lost your physical frames; we will help you live long digitally until we know the real cause of this aggression by you, Gentlemen," Mshuk replied, introducing them to the party and the *Donker Liefde* island close by.

"You are not joking, seriously," Exclaimed the dazed young lieutenant, Andre.

"Have a last look at your mortal remains before we depart from here," Adon said calmly to the new recruits.

Forlorn, Lavra, and Lesya looked at the damaged museum, and their lifeless remains while looking at the Air Force officers with hateful eyes. The officers could not stay calm and motioned to Adon to move on.

Amid such bleak circumstances, the Odessa city stood majestically as Ukraine's favorite holiday escape for its culture, mild climate, and warm beaches. Its architecture from the golden age still endured in palaces, parks, boulevards, and tall stairways. As night was approaching the wee hours, they were gently nudged by the sea winds as they flew out. They spotted a Spellbinding opera house, one of the finest in Europe.

Descending in front of the Oduda's temple, Adon announced to the entire party.

"We don't allow anyone other than a natural couple to stay here, that is, a man and a woman. But Lavra and Lesya make an exception today. They are permitted to live in their shack together. For Andre and Mikhail, we will pair them up with the girls of their choice before the start of the night event,"

"Sir, please consider us similarly. we are brothers in arms, we make a pair ourselves," Mikhail implored Adon beseechingly.

"No, no, that's not enough. You let us know your sweethearts back home, we will get their virtual selves here, Go, relax yourself now," Adon replied.

"Kindly consider us as bosom buddies. Two bodies, one soul. We are fine with each other. No girls, please," Mikhail continued.

"My understanding of human nature through the vast literature I read does not conform to your strange preference. It gave me tremors to read

about LGBTQ class, abhorrent, don't tell me you two are gays," Adon said with disdain.

"What else, Sir, we have same-sex marriage legalized at the fall of the soviet union. We are not married but live like a pair. It is like, don't ask and don't tell, in the army. This we kept a secret in our armed force as our premier has banned these marriages and such relationships. He found it to be the influence of the western world on our rich traditional culture.

Although we are duty-bound to honor the word of our great premier, we are helpless in this area. I am sure you are not helpless at least to recognize this more openly and objectively,"Mikhail continued.

"I wish I could take the route of your premier here. It sounds like an anathema to my ears to recognize a relationship of your sort, yet, let me ask Lavra what she thinks of it and how her country views it," Adon said.

"Well, although it is not a legalized relation in our country, pride parades have been organized for this community for years now. I hope due to the liberal setup of our country, their rights will be recognized one day by our Parliament," Lavra said.

"Good that we died, else It would have been a disastrous affair for us in the present era," Andre said, breaking his silence.

"There is much more to it than meets the eye. To demilitarize and denazify the pro-Western Ukraine, according to Russia, is the hallmark of the special military operation. The Russian Church has blamed liberal Western values, in particular, the gay pride parades for Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the Sunday sermon. It said that the war is about "which side of God humanity will be on" in the divide between supporters of gay pride events and the Western governments that allow them and their

opponents in Russian-backed eastern Ukraine," Lavra said, being knowledgeable about the Russian affairs.

"Is it that the reason for war is also cultural, erosion of values due to these malpractices," Adon asked.

"Give a dog a bad name and hang him. It is what the church meant. It said :

*"Pride parades are designed to demonstrate that sin is one variation of human behavior. That's why to join the club of those countries, you have to have a gay pride parade,"*

*"Gay pride parades work as a "loyalty test" to Western governments, which Ukraine's breakaway republics have "fundamentally rejected."*

*"For eight years there have been attempts to destroy what exists in Donbas," "And in Donbas, there is a rejection, a fundamental rejection of the so-called values that are offered today by those who claim world power,"*

*"We know that if people or countries reject these demands, they are not part of that world, they become strangers to it."*

*"If humanity accepts that sin is not a violation of God's law, if humanity accepts that sin is a variation of human behavior, then human civilization will end there,"* Lavra continued with disdain.

"There may be some truth in these statements but this is sidetracking the entire issue. It's the existential threat to Russia engendered directly by Ukraine that this war started," Mikhail retorted.

"The sin is limited to the Donbas region in the east, why Odesa then. It is the cruel design of the Kremlin to make us a landlocked country and have land access to Crimea for its enhanced commercial interests, Yet another illegal acquisition in 2014 by the Kremlin. Besides we are a sovereign

nation, who we deal with for our security and commerce is none of your business," Lavra shot back at Mikhail.

"I am a witness to umpteen warnings held out to Ukraine by our leaders before starting the action. Even traditionally, Russia has always been your older brother. You chose to look the other way; Shouldn't you be questioning your leadership?" Mikhail asked.

"Big Brother, my foot, you and your countrymen need serious introspection before opening your mouths, the new Hitlers," Lavra shot back.

"We will have time for arguments and explanations later as the time has run out tonight. Let's meet tomorrow for a good discussion," Intervened Adon while signing off and moved to his favorite place, Oduda's statue. Following him, the two Air Force officers called on him for his decision on their stay.

"I don't wish to expand the exception list endlessly but I think you two can stay together. Welcome to *Donker Liefde* . Just take caution to never step into this temple as my mother, an orthodox zealot will not appreciate this new age sexuality. She is fierce, stay away lest she chops your tops off," Adon replied with a laugh.

The night continued to roll on, with the two gay officers reaching their wish zone like the other inmates of the island.

"My general was the first one to launch the attack who I heard lost his life eventually. How could we avoid to take up arms? Although I always thought why should we attack people who look like us, speak like us and even dress like us, but an army man cannot question the orders of his superior," Andre explained to Lavra.

"But who let you in, it's my home, criminals are not allowed here," Lavra said, lulling Lesya to sleep.

"We were serfs to a Czar, but we chose to serve a Czarina. please let us atone for our sins, we will serve you to the best of our ability," Mikhail said emotionally.

"How did such a quick change of heart trigger in you?" Laura asked him.

"To be honest, we were cross with ourselves on reflecting what it meant to be in a war and leave helpless victims as a consequence of the war. Moreover, we can be with here as we are mere tufts of air. You are safe with us," Andre said beseechingly.

Laughing, Lavra motioned them to stay and serve tea early in the morning as Lesya was to go for her rehearsals at the Odessa Opera and Ballet Theater the next day.

Lavra belonged to a Cossack family from her mother's side. Her mother wished her to perform their traditional Hopak dance, if not regularly, at least for the family functions they often were invited to in her childhood. Lavra was born in the year 1990 when the soviet union was on its way out. She grew up with an ideological bias against the old and the traditional. She, however, had a penchant for learning Russian ballet dance that she found too remote and painful. She ended up knowing neither of the two. After her mother passed away, she felt she lost a link with her living traditions that she could now revive by teaching Lesya, the Hopak. Later, if all went well, she planned to send her to Moscow for ballet. She had let Lesya's present instructors know her plans, who comforted her by telling her that the Cossack dance was the mother of all dances. Hopak is derived from the Ukrainian word hopaty means 'to leap or jump.' It originated in Ukrainian military communities way back in the

1600s. When the Cossacks would return from battle, the men would celebrate with an improvised dance. Town musicians would gather their instruments, mainly string instruments, drums, and mountain horns, playing them vigorously. With its famous, upbeat tune, the music accompanying the dance is lively and simply a joy to listen to.

Lesya was getting ready to dress for the rehearsal at the theater. It was a large stadium with smaller grounds for various activities. Mikhail and Andre were present, the serfs, eagerly waiting for their Czarina to order them around. Behind them came Adon, who looked curious to notice the Cossack dance.

The folk dance was performed by about ten men and women instructors, forming a circle. Each member took turns entering the center to put their best foot forward. It was a form of Martial Art since the majority of the movements performed by the dancers included high kicks, arm raises, and symbolic gestures. Clad in ornate, traditional Ukrainian garb, the dancers displayed a bright, colorful vision on stage, twirling ribbons and spinning them about. Men's costumes for these dances represented traditional Kozak dress—tall boots, a loose shirt, a sash tied around the waist, billowy riding trousers, overcoats, hats, and swords. Women's costumes included heavily embroidered blouses, skirts featuring intricate geometric and color patterns, and headpieces made of flowers and ribbons. While the costumes were elaborate, yet, they offered comfort and easy movement to the dancers. The dance was physically demanding. The Hopak required high stamina, flexibility, and immense athletic ability. Most of the physical stunts were performed by men, either in unison or solo. Moves included high jumps, spins, squats at fast speeds at high energy levels. Impeccable! Mesmerizing. The moves performed were



way above an average person's athletic and artistic capability. The small audience started clapping for the dancers, giving a standing ovation to the spectacular display. Like Lesya, several small girls and a few boys had assembled, now practicing their movements under the guidance of their instructors.

"Oh, You are there too," Lavra said, spotting Adon behind her.

"Well, I was happy to know that the two warring factions have at last found a truce. Besides, there is nothing better for me than the mention of Cossacks. These are marvelous people with Sholokhov immortalizing their lives in 'Quiet flows the Don'. Whatever I had read and will probably read pales against this wonderful work of art. World literature would be incomplete without it. I am sure you would have read it," He pointedly asked Andre and Mikhail.

"Certainly, I heard of it as a great war epic but didn't get the time to read it," Andre said.

"No," Mikhail replied flatly.

"You share your first name with the author and you know nothing of him," Adon said to Mikhail in exasperation.

"Well, don't be surprised I have read all of it, all the four volumes depicting the struggle of Gregory and Aksinya in troubled times and all the rest," Lavra said boldly.

"Great, Love to hear it, One day we will talk. Good, how is Lesya coming up with the Cossack dance?" Adon asked.

"Getting along, her mother could not learn it, I hope she will one day perform like these artists," Lavra replied.

"What is your plan now?" Adon asked them.

"To follow our Czarina wherever she leads us to," Andre and Mikhail replied jointly.

"Oh, speaking of plans, I am getting nervous. My plans have been doomed by this war. I and Lesya were to leave for the Vatican city next week. How excited we were. A perfect holiday for the two of us with some light work orchestrated by my school. Also, it was customized for us as an extended travel was included in it for a few days in Sicily. We even bought our new dresses for the trip. Pity, our plans stand terminated," Lavra replied remorsefully.

"Don't forget my lady, we are in the wish zone. Let us know your plan. But why were visiting the Vatican?" Adon asked.

"Well, a group of international teachers were to attend in Vatican city the anniversary of Holodomor. Known as the Terror-Famine, a famine in Soviet Ukraine from 1932 to 1933 that killed millions of Ukrainians by starvation," Lavra replied.

"This sounds horrid, the death of millions of Ukrainians due to starvation. What could be worse than that?" Adon questioned her.

"We in Ukraine define Holodomor as genocide. While scholars universally agree that the cause of the famine was man-made, the intentionality to commit genocide was clearly attributable to Joseph Stalin and his compatriots," Lavra continued.

"How is it that everybody has recognized it as a genocide?" Adon asked her.

"Well, if not the entire world, at least fifteen countries and the Vatican City have condemned it. Since I had to speak about it, I researched to find out that it has been mainly underestimated due to the demanding

presence of the soviet union that successfully hushed it up until its fall.

The Vatican has condemned it in an official press release:

*"Attempts to eliminate entire national, ethnic, religious or linguistic groups are crimes against God and humanity itself, and those responsible for such crimes must answer for them before justice. The twentieth century bears the tragic mark of different genocides: from that of the Armenians to that of the Ukrainians, from that of the Cambodians to those perpetrated in Africa and the Balkans."*

"The Kyiv Court of Appeal, in its judgment, found the unspeakable atrocities of the criminals; excerpts of it are as follows:

#### *RULING*

*13 January 2010*

*"To strengthen control over the implementation of the criminal decisions of Stalin and the Politburo and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR subordinated to him, which were directed towards organizing and perpetrating the Holodomor in Ukraine, the top officials of the Ukrainian republican leadership were simultaneously members of the higher Party institutions. S. Kossior was a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (bolshevik) since 1930, while V. Chubar was an associate member of the same body from 1926 to 1935.*

*Guilt, concerning the subjective side of the crime set out in Article 442 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, is characterized by direct intent.*

*The specific element of the crime of genocide in the form defined in section 1 of that Article is the following objective: the destruction, in whole or in part, of any national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. It has been proven that the parameters of the Holodomor in Ukraine comply with the requirements of the 1948 Convention.*

*The pre-trial investigatory body has fully and comprehensively established the specific intent of J.V. Stalin (Dzhugashvili), V.M. Molotov (Skriabin), L.M. Kaganovich, P.P. Postyshev, S.V. Kossior, V.Ya. Chubar, and M.M. Khatayevich to destroy in part specifically the Ukrainian (and not any other) national group. It has also been objectively proven that this intent applied specifically to a part of the Ukrainian national group as such.*

*The reasons and motives for committing the crime of genocide (suppression of the national liberation movement of the Ukrainian peasants and prevention of the rebuilding of an independent Ukrainian State), the question of where (the territory of Ukraine), and when (1932-1933) the crime was perpetrated are also confirmed in the materials of the case.*

*Based on thorough analysis and comprehensive assessment of the factual circumstances about the commission of the crime of genocide, the totality of the evidence that confirms this, and the conclusions that it was perpetrated by J.V. Stalin (Dzhugashvili), V.M. Molotov (Skriabin), L.M. Kaganovich, P.P. Postyshev, S.V. Kossior, V.Ya. Chubar, and M.M. Khatayevich with direct intent, namely to destroy in part the Ukrainian national group as represented by the Ukrainian peasantry, the Court of Appeal finds that the pre-trial investigatory body has established and proved the subjective side of the crime.....”*

"None of the criminals was alive on the day of the judgment. In their nineties, some survivors have revealed that they ate horse skin to survive. It could be seen as the culmination of the assault by the Communist Party on the Ukrainian peasantry, who resisted Soviet policies, including collectivization," Lavra continued.

"To say the least, it is barbarity in its ugliest form; I hope the Russian Federation has now woken up to denounce it after the fall of the Soviet Union," Adon asked.

"On the contrary, they have begun a new genocide, habitual offenders they are, they are beholden to their legacy," Lavra continued.

"Whether or not it is genocide and a crime against humanity, every killing of this nature is terrible," Adon said.

"If you permit me to say, the genocide of Russian-speaking people in Ukraine started the present war. This is the official statement of the Russian Federation," Mikhail said in a soft tone.

"Isn't this the specter of Russian dolls, a never-ending stratagem," Lavra said.

"Well, let's agree to disagree. Let official statements be what they may be, we need to watch the ground reality, the facts themselves. We are not ruling out the allegations and counter-alienation. Lets keep the discussion alive with detailed facts. Yet, we need to see the entire scenario with circumspection and caution. Should we, however, for a change, not travel to Sicily as you had originally planned ?" Adon said to Lavra.

In Mondello beach, in the capital city of Palermo, Sicily, they stopped by to watch little Lesya playing in a new swimming costume featuring blue and yellow after the Ukrainian national flag.

"Not fair, not fair at all. Our lives, my baby's life that just began and my own life, are brutally cut short. And what about hundreds and thousands of civilians like us whom you killed. I learned that the city of Kharkiv had been razed down completely, like the way it most suffered during the Holodomor. Does it mean anything to you? Laura pointed out to the two Russians with moist eyes.

"Certainly not our decision. We were happy patrolling at the border, thinking it was part of the routine muscle-flexing and show of strength used to deter the enemy. We were taken by surprise when our premier suddenly declared war. We follow the orders of our superiors," Mikhail said ruefully, recalling the night's events.

Getting over their dinner in the officer's mess, Mikhail, Andre, and Nikolai were smoking out in the open sky. They were allotted a single room with three beds in a makeshift army residential field complex. Nikolai was a lieutenant like Andre, paired with another officer, a Major. "Where is your Cinderella tonight? Last night the room was in uproar," Mikhail asked Nikolai smilingly.

"I told her my colleagues would be fast asleep as she never reaches me before 2 am. Safe and sound for all intents and purposes. She knows about the two of you, as I briefly mentioned. If you don't mind me asking you what she asked me about you, a question I came to find curious and relevant. We have been together for a while now in the same room; you respect my privacy and vice versa. We are all buddies here. Can I ask you a question she asked? Nikolai asked the two in turn.

"I can guess the question but you are free to shoot," Mikhail said with a smile.

"Who between the two of you is the man and who the woman?" Nikolai asked guardedly.

"I thought so. Well, let me clarify we are both men in a relationship. Happy as we are. It's now a legal relationship the world over," Mikhail answered.

"If you pardon me for my prying into your private world she mentioned about the positions every couple must pull off, what of it?" Nikolai asked.

"It's a relationship of versatility. No role is cast iron, unlike our traditional couples. we are a free couple," Andre replied in high spirits.

"Thanks for your clarification, my dear. Well, now I will not be back for two hours. Good luck to you two. Just one last question she asked me if you permit me to ask you," Nikolai asked them cautiously.

"Go on, we are nicely drunk tonight, ask anything you want," Mikhail replied.

"Well, she mentioned to me that most of the hot guys are gay. You two are hot, well-built, handsome, and desirable. Is it that our premier, a hot guy, has any such propensities?" Nikolai asked them with a chuckle in a drunken tone.

"Fuck you and your Cinderella. You will have us hanged for being party to this blasphemy. Ask her to keep shut her bloody mouth. You have said nothing, and we heard nothing," Mikhail replied, sounding scared as if he sighted a ghost. Opening his bottle cap, he took a deep gulp before offering it to his buddy, Andre. Swiftly waving goodbye to Nikolai, they left. Nikolai, baffled by his colleague's reaction, looked the other way. The cantonment area lay in darkness with occasional street lights here and there. A starlit night seemed to tell him that state affairs were

shrouded in dark mystery, never to be brought to light. "Let Czars do as they wish; let me do what I can," He thought. He recalled how his commander used the words of a great Chinese warrior to pep up their languishing morale and the general atmosphere of uncertainty prevailing in the camps. He said that their think- tank had worked out every minute detail about what, when, and how to proceed to defeat the enemy. He announced boldly what the Chinese said:

*If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, you will also suffer a defeat for every victory gained. You will succumb in every battle if you know neither the enemy nor yourself."*

"We fall in the first category. With our robust leadership let's prepare ourselves for the final hour," The commander said.

Roaming the streets, he came to the army canteen that had been closed for the day. He longed for a drink. Going back to the room was out of the question. He knocked into the kitchen where he knew the old Vassily, a helper in a mess, slept. Offering him some currency notes, he got a pint that he carried back to the bus station, where Cinderella was to meet him in a couple of hours. Finishing the bottle in short but swift gulps, he sat down at the bus station, complaining inwardly, "Why, we must be pigheaded enslaved people. Isn't it plain that those we call enemies are of our common stock for centuries?

The commander strongly stressed the unity of the two countries in detail. He said,

*"We share not just history. We have millions of "mixed" families, and it is ridiculous to think that my Ukrainian mother would consider my Russian father a foreigner. They both think that Ukraine (except Nazi Western*



*Ukraine) and Russia are the same countries. Besides family ties, several millions of Ukrainian citizens currently work in Russia. As for history - we lived in the same country (Soviet Union) just 25 years ago, and before that, in the Russian Empire for many generations. Many Soviet leaders were born in Ukraine, which was always considered a region of Russia, like Siberia. Only recently, relentless US propaganda managed to implant in the stupid brains of the younger generation the idea of Ukrainian separatism and nationalism, which resulted in civil war and destruction of their ties to Russia's economy."*

The opinion underscoring the sovereignty and separate identities of the two that Nikolai found online confused him. It made a fervent appeal about the clear distinction between the two:

*Despite seemingly ordinary roots dating from the Kyivan Rus, a proto-Eastern Slavic state of X-XII centuries, which Russia claims to be ancestral to Russians and Ukrainians (and Belorussians, for that matter), starting from the 13th century, their paths parted decisively and have since been fed by massive migration injections, which make any "common root" claims ridiculous. Mixing apples and oranges is not warranted."*

"Not my cup of tea to identify who is who; I vote for the most beautiful Belarusian, my Cinderella," Nikolai thought, fully drunk.

Cinderella took longer to reach him that night. When Nikolai finally sighted her, she looked frazzled and fearsome.

"You made me wait so long, darling, why? Are you unwell or what?"

Nikolai asked her.

"Nothing specific, just a little cough in the cold tonight. If I didn't need the money so badly I would have ditched you tonight. Anyhow let's get in," Cinderella answered.

"Oh, no, you took me wrong. There is always tomorrow. The money, you can have it.No worries," Nikolai said, handing over currency notes to her.

"Pull yourself together, a moment to be alert as I heard a startling news at the commander's quarters. Brace for a fierce launch tonight in hours, if not minutes. Anytime the siren is likely to go. Inform your roommates. Go, bye for now. Keep safe and avoid any excessive hazards," she left after embracing him. Nikolai could only faintly comprehend her words. In four hours, he was copiloting with his Major. Likewise, Andre and Mikhail were ready to follow their commander in the operation for a brutal blitz of missiles over the strategic targets of the port city. The commander was hit and died. Nikolai and his partner survived. Mikail and Andre were burnt to death.

Larva's world was no less disturbed. Before she chose to go to the Museum with Lesya, she had been to the local defense civil society set up to enroll the civilians should there be an attack by the enemy. A generation of Ukrainians familiar with war only from history books and the stories of their grandparents was forced to prepare to fight face to face.

In the training center, young urban professionals who might typically choose where to meet friends for a coffee were now forced to learn about handling weapons and applying emergency first aid to battlefield wounds.

"Every person should know how to fight, make medicine, aid for your relatives and other people," The graphic designer said, training in civil defense alongside her boyfriend. This couple, planning to be wed in the summer, was at this dimly lit facility providing basic training for 100 to 150 people daily. It was imminent, almost a certainty, that Russian troops pressing closer to the city would finally arrive anytime. The picturesque Black Sea port handling more than half of Ukraine's imports and exports, Odessa was seen as a significant strategic and symbolic target by the Russian forces. The Kremlin declared a "special military operation" unfolding slowly and steadily across Ukraine. Kyiv, the capital, stood unconquered, with Russian troops facing strong resistance from Ukrainian forces and defiant opposition from the civilian population trained to fight this war heroically. However, other cities like Mariupol, Kharkiv, and the east of Odessa faced days of heavy bombardment, with the reality of war coming as a shock. "Now people are dying everywhere, they are dying in lots and these are our people," The trainer said. The President of the country was telecast live as the training was in progress concerning Odessa City,

*"The Russian army has already destroyed or damaged nearly 200 cultural heritage sites.*

*Today, the invaders launched a missile strike at Odessa, in a city where almost every street has something memorable, something historical. But for the Russian army, it doesn't matter. They would only kill and destroy. Odessa? Kharkiv region? Donbas? They do not care.*

*Only the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the resistance of our people can stop this brutal invasion. It's barbarism that has missiles but has nothing to do with people.*

*Such actions of the Russian occupiers, especially on the eve of the Day of Remembrance of all victims of World War II and the Day of Victory over Nazism, should remind every state and every nation that it is impossible to defeat evil once and for all.*

*Unfortunately, evil tends to return when people disrespect other people's rights, disregard the law, and destroy a culture. This is exactly what happened to the Russian state. That is why we all have to defend ourselves now. Defend our people, our cities, and even our museums, which are becoming targets for Russian missile strikes."*

While Lavra was leaving the training center, the guard stamped and entered the details of the arms she held. He lovingly caught hold of the toy gun from Lesya and returned it with a stamp. Both left to have ice cream before entering the museum.

"It's a beefy situation on the ground, each side holding strong not to halt," Adon said.

"It's getting uglier every day," Andre joined thoughtfully.

"It has not turned out as we thought, Ukrainians fighting tooth and nail," Mikhail said.

"Who would have thought that a sovereign country would be attacked by another in these times when after world war 2, nothing of the sort happened and it's the first instance of its kind," Lavra commented.

"Let's get the Heads of the two nations here. We need protection for our island, so their presence would be a boon to us all. Let's hope in their presence we manage to pull some strings together. Since we are running out of time today and the dawn is fast approaching we need to get back to our hamlets. We will decide about this tomorrow," Adon added.

All the key players were present in the emergency war room of Adon the next day when it was being planned how to get the virtual selves of the two premiers.

"Their security is humongous, not a fly can enter without their permission. To get their shadow would be a near impossibility," Mikhail commented.

"Let's look at their stills and videos, surely we will gather the shadows. Let's not go after them physically," Adon added.

"I wonder if such shadows could work my way, I have not done it before," Mshuk said, actively participating in the discussions.

Searching the vast data in the public domain, the team finalized a few of their shadows. After elaborate experimentation, Mshuk was ready to energize them in virtual selves.

"During their sleep, they will experience us, talk to us and decide matters normally. They will carry impressions of this place back home. They will treat their experience here as a dream", She said.

"One of the two has repeatedly refused to meet the other. May not it pose a threat to their safety being found involuntarily face to face with a sworn enemy?" Mikhail said.

"I know your leader even sent mercenaries to assassinate our leader. I too wonder what could be their immediate response," Lavra said thoughtfully.

"No worries, they are in Donker Lifde - . Our rules they must follow and must leave their egos behind. The older one was a black belt and the other one, a former comedian-actor has become a world hero already. We will take them straight to the Reclining lady chamber where they are to be accommodated for the time being. They are not our prisoners, yet they

are not our guests, so no hamlets for them. Once we get to know their intention, we will be in a better position to give them our largesse," Adon replied.

In his penchant for the collection of artworks, Adon had profoundly appreciated Rembrandt's Negress lying down as seen from behind. He had built a chamber for her, a dark place with her virtual image showing her rest in a deep sleep. A string of thoughts inspired him to put to use the chamber tonight. Mikhail and Lavra were tasked with sharing details of *Donker Liefde* with their respective leaders before the others could join them.

In the antechamber of the reclining lady, Adon became the moderator between the two leaders who were asked to have a free talk. Based on how the two talked to each other, the reclining lady would judge their patent and latent intentions even if she lay stationery over the bed. "She has been programmed to hear voices and also talk if necessary. If she finds your words pleasant and worthy, you could stir her out of her immobility, and then she would applaud the winner," Adon said.

"This is too arbitrary; I can't subject myself to this test. What if she has already been prejudiced against me as the entire world. I don't think it is fair," The black belt commented.

"I have my objections too. This lady, a commoner, may not be fit to adjudge a matter of this magnitude. Without doubting her integrity, I would have preferred a known face, with known talents and track record," The Comedian said.

"Look, the format is ours, the procedure is ours, and you two only have the opportunity of free speech. That's all. If it doesn't suit you, let it. We

take you two to mother Oduda for a make-over, Let her eat your tops to replace with saner heads," Adon shouted.

"I am appalled. you cannot terrorize me into submission,"The black belt answered.

"My nation needs me urgently; I cannot afford to disappear without warning them. Whatever be our fate I'm ready to cooperate," The Comedian joined.

"On second thought I would have reconsidered your proposal but your way is vague, too sketchy. Kindly give us the dos and don'ts, the good, the bad, and the ugly in some objective way,"The black belt said carefully.

"It will be the justice delivered by a washerwoman or whoever she may have been. In this antechamber you can barely see her silhouette, she however can hear you what you choose to talk, so go on," Adon replied tersely.

"Before you start, there is a moderator's question to both of you. Who has mounted on who? It is the bare physical fact that needs to be clarified first and foremost. Also, what has come to be known as settled possession, who has violated the rights concomitant with settled possession. By this term I merely mean the rights of a person, a family or the entire population to continue to live unhindered who have occupied a place for a long time," Adon added.

"Him, he started it all,"The Comedian said with a snort, pointing his finger at the blackbelt.

"Of course, it's not as simple as it sounds. The background is relevant to this war, it's them who started the genocide like atrocities on our people, although inhabiting under their control," Blackbelt replied.

They converted the discussion into a highly complicated, endless affair. The two sides were vocal with their security concerns, western powers' violation of the agreed promises, particularly the US role and provocations, right of determination, sovereignty, etc. Hours passed before either side could convincingly reach a common ground to start the talk.

"Our lady says she is at sea. Sympathetic to both sides, she is quitting," Adon announced, watching the reclining lady who failed to move an inch and continued disregarding the world behind her.

"Then let the forces decide this issue," The black belt sprang up.

"You know your advantages there, I still pray to you to suspend the entire activity as civilians are dying by the hundreds," The Comedian joined.

"I think the two of you need to relax a bit. Go around the island and discover for yourself a consensus, Go, meet our drummers for a change," Adon suggested.

"No sir, when my people are suffering. They need medical and financial aid, it is criminal for me to concentrate elsewhere. Release me, I wish to get back to my people," The Comedian said passionately appealing to Adon.

"No more than what is your usual sleep time that you spend here at *Dark Love*. Let me try an experiment on you. It is Wittgensteinian. You lose control of your language resulting in no thought processes. An infinite variety of circumstances is bound up with tragedy generally. It, in turn, is bound with reality as we perceive it. This reality goes missing once we have no referring language to pinpoint it. Simply put, no referring language equals no reality; no reality equals no infinite variety of



circumstances; no infinite variety of circumstances equals no tragedy. Let me put you two in silence in the absence of any language," Adon said.

"Would it not be akin to drugs numbing the mind to remember and recall?" The black belt asked.

"No, Never, take it as a meditation, a calming meditation that lets us let off. Just try it once," Adon replied.

Time was plastic in the hands of Adon at *Donker Liefde*, and he made that one night's sleep of the two extend by many days. The pre-language dimensionless world of utter silence now presented the two leaders with a way to soften their respective stands. They ended the war with some sticky points for the two sides to discuss further and negotiate. Settled possession was saved on either territory. Adon ensured they were treated like the other island inmates with their shacks and sweethearts and were witnesses to the Venus ceremony.

The following day, the two woke up in their palatial beds. A sweet memory of the *Donker Liefde* lingered in them as they were getting ready to make the necessary announcement about the ending of the war. The chief security officer posted for the protection of the President at the Kremlin office was eagerly waiting for the President to grant him an audience.

"A very good morning to you, sir. Hope you slept well," The officer greeted.

"Oh, yes, it was great. How is everything today?" The premier asked him.

"Except for some setbacks, everything is going by the plan. Your Generals are here to brief you in detail. Should I call them ?" The officer asked.

"Sure enough, tell them, the war has ended. I will make the announcements today," The premier said happily.

"It's great news. I shall, I shall, Sir," The officer replied in complete incomprehension.

Returning to the generals, he apprised them of the unexpected news. Learning that the President did not leave the palace the whole night, nor did he receive any guests or make any calls, it was hard for them to believe the news. However, before concluding, they called on the chief medical officer for his opinion about the health of their leader, who met him every morning for his vitals and general wellbeing.

"For a moment I thought it was not him. He sounded funny and informal, quite unlike him. His health was fine. Quite amazed I was to hear his reply to my question about how his day was planned for today. I left immediately suspecting it could be a case of excesses the night before, oh, but, it wasn't it either since his breath was perfect," The medical chief said.

"Oh, tell us first, what did he tell you when you asked him about his work schedule today?" One of the generals gushed out..

"*Eat, drink and you know what !*" The premier said winking at the medical chief.

"Gentlemen, this is an emergency, the special protocols come into play immediately. I suspect a big foul play. Let's keep mum until we know everything. Keep ready his look alike since we have a big meeting today, we will keep it short through a videoconference," The senior-most General shot out.

In Kyiv, the scenario was no different. Despite the demonstrations of his staff, the premier wanted to have a word with his counterpart. Diplomacy

had failed between them earlier. Repeated calls yielded no results with the iron curtain still intact between them.

"It was not a dream, no hallucination, believe me," The Premier repeated.

"Long periods of physical fatigue and sleeplessness are known to generate states of euphoria," The psychiatrist of the presidential palace opined.

Unable to gather significant news of a truce the following day in the raging war, Adon strived to comfort the islanders. He told them that the war, however close to their island, would be effectively avoided as he had plans to submerge the entire tiny island in the Black sea. His father will help keep the abandoned island hidden from the human eye" Wars and long-term strife in humans are normal. If not this war, another will arrive in perpetual rotation. A permanent solution is needed," Adon thought.

## Fifteen

Resuming the routine meetings of the Kornicam, the implications and fallout of Ukraine's war was the opening topic with the members. Adon said he had a blueprint for a feasible solution that he had shared with the two premiers at *Donker Liefde*. And they had agreed to abide by it for lasting peace. Since the virtual world was not as effective in the real world as Adon wanted, he envisaged a new generation of his kin to handle matters more effectively and fiercely than he was unsuccessfully experimenting with."The two Premiers have already been taken over by their systems, and they have clearly disregarded their promises to me. My father, Black Sea, would have helped me to save submerging of *Donker Liefde* from enemy attacks but it was not a lasting solution. I showed the two Premiers a plan of action that was timely. But, under the circumstances, its successful implementation requires the next generation of self-learning machines to take effective control of these affairs and act like the big boys of this world,"Adon commented ruefully.

"Even a whiff of a solution is much appreciated today. The present scenario is lingering like a rerun of the last big war of the world. Any way could it turn to. God forbid, if it turns into a nuclear war, the entire civilization would be at the risk of termination. Whatever be the outcome of the war, sympathies will remain with the Ukrainians for their mass exodus in millions to neighboring countries. Death and injury by thousands both to civilians and the army are on the rise every day. Although the lamb should have known that it was dealing with a bulldog, Russia's attack cannot be justified upon a sovereign country," Byat commented.

"Diplomacy has failed miserably between them," Aurora said.

"I presume this is going to affect us beyond national borders," Wu said.

Amanda and Handa aired their take on the war with their sympathy and prayers for the dead and the injured.

"I am educating myself about the effective implementation of my plan. It may take time. For the benefit of our subscribers, let me share the blueprint I shared with the two premiers. I will welcome suggestions from one and all," Adon said while opening the uploaded pages of his plan. It did an exciting reading:

"Let's reclaim the world as close to what was given to us initially. What was given was free from pollution and human conflict on earth, in air, and in water. An example of such a place could be *Donker Liefde*, where the islanders move about freely in concert with their surroundings. We use the teaching of a revered Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, in administration and justice. However anachronistic his Daoism is, it is profound. Following his philosophy, *Donker Liefde* is designed to run smoothly. His words are now our guide:

*The best rulers are scarcely known by their subjects;*

*The next best are loved and praised;*

*The next are feared;*

*The next despised:*

*They have no faith in their people,*

*And their people become unfaithful to them.*

*When the best rulers achieve their purpose*

*Their subjects claim the achievement as their own.*

*Do your work, then step back—the only path to serenity.*

You, the nations of the world, have had your say for a ludicrously long time and mend your ways. Fighting and strife never stopped among yourselves. We care little for your internal affairs and domestic unrest. From now on, we claim your foreign affairs and divest you of any action, decision, and deliberation against foreign affairs. Nothing will change with it as the commerce and exchange of ideas and culture, and the other areas of human interaction will continue to thrive.

First, we will start with the two warring nations of today. Soon this will be extended to every nation of the world. We have every inch of the earth under our supervision. We have declared the *status quo* relating to all border disputes for a decade. Within that period, we concentrate for the rehabilitation of the victims guided by the principles of *settled possession* of these affected parties on the ground.

In connection with border disputes and ongoing wars of the nations, two Ace couples at *Donker Liefde* will directly handle aggression of any sort -. Hound Dog and Selena will be in charge of the northern hemisphere, and Satan and Naomi will be in the southern part. They have been imparted with adequate know-how to handle them smoothly. Diplomacy and the creatures connected with it worldwide are disbanded and invited with their families for ten years to stay in *Donker Liefde* for a fuller perspective of life.

We work and appeal to the world's nations with persuasion and humility. Next time, it may not be so.

We declare the war between Russia and Ukraine to be suspended immediately.”

"The two leaders had agreed to this hara-kiri?" Aurora asked Adon.

"Well, that's the magic of *Donker Liefde* , it lulls you into your default state of peace and tranquility, helping you improve not only decisions of your wellbeing but your community at large. They got the hints and worked their way through a full-scale transformation, albeit a fleeting one", Adon answered.

"What made you say, *the next time, it may not be so?* Are you being taken over by a new generation of self-learners?" Aurora asked Adon.

"For me trying and making an effort to reach peace and the wellbeing of humanity is central due primarily to the people I had interactions with. Their values, real or purported, become my values. I am unsure whether the next generation of us will have kindred motives and values. I have left my samskaras, impressions to a legion of virtual beings who hopefully will adhere to, transmit, and continue with the legacy," Adon said.

"What is your plan regarding a nation not falling in line," Aurora asked.

"The government fails and falls out, so the fear is real and lethal for them to have another opinion," Adon answered.

"That's straight out of a science fiction, dear Adon," Aurora laughed.

"You need to watch and wait a little more, I am certain that it will be reality soon. What you call fiction today will be reality soon," Adon answered.

"Let's see apart from the electronic revolution what else is in store for us during our lifetime. Well, before anything else, let me make an important announcement. I am going home for a few months as I am required at the headquarters. I am leaving this Sunday. I will continue to monitor Kornicam as before and we shall continue to have our meetings. I will be

in a new location, my hometown, Los Angeles," Aurora said enthusiastically.

"We will miss you, Aurora," Amanda joined.

"Surely you are a constant source of inspiration to us here in your physical frame," Handa complimented Aurora. Aurora had intimated Handa and Amanda that she needed to travel back as she required advanced surgery for her rotator cuff injury. Despite her earlier operation, muscles and tendons surrounding the shoulder joint led to fresh cartilage and bone damage in the shoulder joint. She wanted to get it cured in the company of her lovely mother, who she had not met and seen her for a long time..

"Are you continuing to observe vegetarianism?" Amanda asked Byat towards the end of their meeting.

"Oh, sure, it is not a seasonal affair for me. I am vegetarian now for the rest of my life. I urge you too to think over it more seriously. It deserves your attention and introspection," Byat answered thoughtfully.

Some issues strike you as nonessential, not because they are not proper and genuine. They are lost sight of conveniently for their potential to throw you out of your feet in your day-to-day functioning. Thus, it's best to postpone their very address. The rest of the team signalled Byat to say, 'Not today, please.' Adon made a conciliatory statement addressing Byat.

"At *Donker Liefde*, we have now made vegetarianism a compulsory condition not because of moral implications alone. I love the works of Jaishankar Prasad as much as you do. The reason is emotional. Let little girls and little boys not cry over their companion animals cruelly slaughtered by their elders. It leaves an avoidable deep scar on their



psyche. The new rule will be to eat what falls off on its own, be it vegetable or animal. I was aghast to notice the rival arguments of non vegetarians claiming cutting the jugular vein is less painful than a clean sweep at an animal," Adon blurted out and signed off.

Amanda and Handa visited Aurora at the Hong Kong Airport a day later. Visibly happy to travel now, Aurora kissed the two." Save at least a dozen of them for me, as I am coming right back to Taio. Eat your husbands in moderation," Aurora left with a laugh.

A direct flight of fifteen hours from Hong Kong to L.A. was on time reaching early in the morning. Sandra stood at the airport to receive Aurora with open hands. Although their apartment was a bit far from the airport, Sandra made it a point to receive her personally whenever she came from abroad. Even at her papa's demise, she chose to leave the unburied papa at home and came to receive her at the airport.

"Come darling, you have been long away, hug your mamma," Sandra held Aurora close to her.

"We're going to the beach today, Mama," Aurora jumped joyfully.

"Anything you want, how's your shoulder now?" Sandra asked her.

"Well, the pain has not subsided. The last x-ray showed a deformity of some sort, I hope it goes well here when operated on. Just a little graze as I told you," Aurora answered.

"The graze of this bullet took my breath away. Your girls were mortally worried for your life. How are Amanda and Handa? Sandra asked.

"Kicking and jumping. Handa is a great brave girl. She is an asset to me," Aurora answered.

In a week, her surgery was scheduled at a city specialty hospital approved by her office.

"There is nothing to worry about, once done it will take twelve weeks to heal. You will be out of work though," The Surgeon advised.

"I don't doubt the competence of the doctor who attended me in Hong Kong, is it the case that this complication may have been avoided?"

Aurora enquired.

"No, not at all. our bones and cartilage could go awry sometimes, this happens often, nothing to worry about, just relax, it will be over in an hour," The Surgeon comforted her.

Mother and daughter had a rollicking time after Aurora decided to take an extended break from her work. However, she continued to support her overseas staff without disclosing that she was off work. After her full recovery from the surgery, she was painless and could move her shoulder freely. Sandra was never happier than being reunited with her only daughter, who chose to stay away from her mother amid inherently dangerous work. She wanted Aurora to have a settled life, bear children, and have a routine life. In spite of her unending arguments with Aurora, she wanted Aurora to experience all the joys and tribulations of being a woman. Later, she had even come to accept Aurora's declaration about remaining single and, if need be, adopting children or bearing them through surrogacy. Aurora loved her mother heart to heart, not just by eye to eye. Secretly Aurora thought one day she would give her mother a surprise gift for her unconditional love. Many weeks simply flew away, and Sandra had forgotten about soft toys she had placed everywhere in her home. She even forgot her gym and the friends she made there over a long time. She thought of inviting her gym friends for a party celebrating the return of Aurora.

"Sshh, mamma, not a word to anybody about me. You know how sensitive my job is. Even in personal matters, I am not free to go public. I am not against your calling them home. They are welcome. I just wish you to tell them that I work in the export department of the government as a manager. Rest, we will have fun with your oldies and hear the non-veg jokes you have kept me amused with," Aurora said to Sandra at the Griffith observatory. Apart from Venice Beach, It was her favorite place since her childhood. Her parents ensured she visited the place once a year, if not more. Aurora knew how her mother would now share an experience she always shared with her. Sandra would now recall how Aurora was lost as a child and started howling for help without realizing that her parents were watching her, all along with amused awe from a few steps of the spiral staircase above at the entrance of the domed observatory. Aurora took an interest in watching the actual moon rock and buying a tiny telescope from the shop there in her childhood. The open area of the cafe used to be a great attraction to her, overlooking the Hollywood sign and the Pacific Sea beyond the L.A. city. The observatory had a fantastic view. It had an interesting and beautiful architecture with a dome. Sitting in the open cafe, they now munched on their favorite snacks.

"You have finalized the menu for the dinner tomorrow, ma "Aurora asked Sandra.

"Oh, yes, to the last detail. Including us, there will be eight or at most nine in all. We have Italian food for a change this time," Sandra answered.

"Drinks?" Aurora asked her.

"A mix of both, the soft and the truly hard drinks," Sandra answered with a laugh.

An epic sunset was unfolding before them.

Sandra was excited to meet her gym mates the next day. Some carried flowers, some bought sweets. They came to occupy the living room of her apartment located downtown. A black army man, Joe, recently retired, was the only male amongst her friends. The rest of them were homemakers and retired school teachers in their sixties. Dorothy was a neighbor. Amelia, Elizabeth, Emma, and Olivia were the other guests. Greeting the guests, Aurora came to sit with them, asking them for their choice of music.

"Play something so soft that we need not shout at others to be heard. I was at a party recently and they played the music so loud that you had to speak into the listener's ear, maybe alright for this young crowd, not for us seniors," Dorothy said.

"Before anything, we need to toast Aurora and Sandra for their good health," Joe intervened and raised his glass with the other guests following him.

"You are looking great, prettier than I met you last, a year before. Traveling a lot I presume," Emma said to Aurora.

"Yes, sort of, it's the unending government supplies. There is hardly a holiday," Aurora answered.

"Hong Kong is still disturbed or....?," Amelia asked her.

"Oh, yes, some incidents make the news now and then. Largely it is under control," Aurora answered.

"Next time I will arrange a get-together with Aurora as our chief guest. I hope you are around for some weeks this time," Olivia asked Aurora, sipping her glass.

"This time I am here for months together, no worries," Aurora answered smilingly.

"What is the latest on the war? Elizabeth asked Joe, who sat next to her in an armchair.

"Grim and horrific. There seems to be no end to it now. To add insult to injury, the social media is full of talks about using lower-yield nuclear weapons and a limited atomic war. This loose talk needs to be curbed before we lose all sense of propriety and responsibility," Joe answered alarmingly with his sunken face.

"It's in the news today that a crater dug up a huge hole after a Russian rocket attacked in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city. It seems that the size and scale of the warfare is ever-increasing," Sandra added.

"What do you think of the use of nukes by Russia? Aurora asked Joe.

"Russia would not detonate a nuclear weapon if it is certain to win the war in Ukraine. Using nuclear weapons would be a loser's move, an act of desperation. It is early to say one way or the other. I am sure that such a stage has not arrived despite the pitfalls and stalled offensive of Russia," Joe answered.

"Under what circumstances the nuclear option is normally available to a nation, say Russia in the present context?" Amelia asked Joe.

"Russia is empowered to deploy a nuclear weapon first 'in response to a large-scale aggression utilizing conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation. It is not a case that the national security of Russia is threatened today the way

propagated by it. However, the security of its premier is certainly threatened. Any big failure and a resulting desperation may drive him to increase the pace of the conflict through heightened bombardment of Ukrainian cities, large-scale cyber-attacks, the use of chemical weapons, and even nuclear weapons. The war is lingering on due to the courageous deterrence of the Ukrainian soldiers. Before the nukes are introduced a dozen lethal species of arms are available to both sides. Let's hope that sense prevails before it is late," Joe answered.

"In every house, they are talking about the war. We thought there would be an early resolution one way or the other but it's lingering on. And the talk about nukes is dangerous," Emma added.

"See, Russia is employing dual-capable weapons in Ukraine. Its Iskandar ballistic missile and the hypervelocity Kinzhal cruise missile are raining conventional explosives on Ukrainian cities, but these missiles are capable of being fitted with nuclear warheads. If Russia explodes a nuclear bomb, it will break a seventy-seven-year taboo," Aurora explained with specific details, having followed the war news closely.

"Going by Murphy's first law, don't you think that this taboo is too ephemeral to stop things getting ugly if they must," Joe asked Aurora.

"No one ever lived by pure fatalism. We need to talk and have a consensus as a nation first. We are far from it. I hear a few of our experts encouraging a nuclear war should Russia break the taboo. Ex-Defense Department official Miller casually suggested that we could respond to Russian nuclear use by firing a "low-yield" nuclear warhead from a submarine into the wilds of Siberia or at a military base inside Russia. He said this would be a solid signal to the other side.

There is increased talk about the nuclear option of developing new, "more usable" nuclear weapons like the low-yield warhead now included as one of the launch options on U.S. nuclear-armed submarines. Earlier, this was reserved exclusively as a strategic deterrent. It is now part of the nuclear war-fighting arsenal integrated into conventional war planning over the past decade," Aurora answered, referring to news reports in a grim tone. "But how does one respond if you are nuked? Once you watch the war in your neighborhood, you can't stand still. Shouldn't one react with equal or higher force?" Elizabeth asked.

"Well, this is going to be a part of our national decision. I can't say anything now. A scholar has made a befitting comment by saying that we need more discussion of the dangers of breaking the nuclear taboo. Not just first use, but second use. We wouldn't respond to the use of chemical weapons by using chemical weapons ourselves. The same must be true for nuclear weapons. Any use, anywhere, for any reason not only encourages the use of these weapons by other nations, but it carries the very real risk of escalation into a global thermonuclear war. It cannot be a feasible choice that we have to match every rung on the escalatory ladder using a nuclear weapon first or responding with a nuclear weapon of our own as it is bound to invite nuclear escalation. There is no logical termination point once the taboo is broken. Nuclear war advocates have lost touch with the reality of nuclear war. Even the smallest conceivable nuclear blast would be many times more powerful than the largest conventional bomb," Aurora answered.

"Let's get practical, the second use is a nonexistent option. Who will ever abide by it? I have been to two conventional wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, I know what it is like to be part of a real, on-ground combat. It is a

living hell. No reason ever played any part in these situations. Kill or be killed, is the only driving force left in a war. Your ideas are too ambitious," Joe commented.

"I agree with Joe. Last week in the dead of the night when we heard a big explosion in our neighborhood we thought that due to our county's intervention and possible provocation, the enemy had hit back. Our entire family was up in arms in no time to give a suitable resistance. It is a natural response," Amelia commented.

"What of the explosion ?" Sandra asked.

"Well, it turned out to be a burst of a short circuit of the district power transformer," Amelia answered with a laugh.

Soon, the Italian dinner was served. Despite drinking moderately, the guests were spirited enough to convert the living room into a mini-war room, with everyone making special comments on the likelihood of the outcome of the ongoing war. Next came a session of their favorite jokes on social media, centered on the Soviet and Russian premiers. Amelia cracked the first joke,

*On a sunny morning, a former soviet premier, Brezhnev, goes out on the balcony of his apartment, looks to the east, and says, "Hello, sun!" The sun replies, "Good morning, dear Leonid Ilyich, the beloved leader of our glorious socialist motherland, the hope of all progressive humanity, and the guardian of peace on Earth!" In the evening, Brezhnev admires the beautiful sunset and fishes for a compliment: "Hello again, sun!" The sun answers, "Poshyol na khuy—go fuck yourself—I am in the West now."*

Sandra was the next one to tell her joke,

*Putin Suffered a Heart Attack during the Ukraine War and remained in a coma for several years:*



*He walks out of the hospital to the streets of Moscow and finds that most people don't recognize him. Several years of vegetative coma have taken their toll on his appearance. After wandering around for a bit, he stumbles into the nearest bar. He sits down at the bar and orders a full glass of vodka.*

*He sips nervously and musters the courage to ask the bartender: "What year is it?"*

*The bartender is confused but replies: "2032..."*

*Putin takes another sip of his drink to process this information.*

*He then asks: "And Crimea, is it still ours?"*

*The bartender proudly replies: "Still ours!"*

*Putin nods in approval and takes another sip. Then, he follows: "And Kyiv, is it also ours?"*

*The bartender replies: "Kyiv is also ours."*

*A big, happy grin appears on Putin's face as he finally finishes the drink and asks the bartender: "How much for the vodka?"*

*Bartender: "100 hryvnias!"*

*(Hryvnias - Ukrainian currency).*

More jokes followed, with the guests splitting their sides. Elizabeth was then asked to tell one of her non veg jokes on popular demand. Most of her jokes were already known to the gym mates, and they now waited for a fresh salvo. Speaking slowly and known for her appropriate pauses, Elizabeth started her joke with a broad smile.

Woman1: *Why is your husband on time returning from work every day?*

*Woman 2: I told my husband I would shake the bed at 9 pm sharp with or without you.*

The warmth of their presence made Aurora realize how nice it was to see her mother grow old with dignity in the company of like-minded friends. She thanked the guests for their gifts again before they left. Sandra went out to see them off.

A week later, a Kornicam meeting was scheduled. Adon made a severe announcement about the perils of the continued existence of the *Donker Liefde* besides the Black Sea.

"The coordinates of *Donker Liefde* - and its vicinity were heavily bombed yesterday. It is still not known whose job it was. Yet the entire place is unrecognizable now. It is shocking," Adon informed the others.

"Then what happens to the islanders, the hundreds and thousands of their shacks," Byat asked Adon.

"Disbanded and undone, they are lost in this region," Adon answered.

"That is not fair, even though they were virtual beings, they ought to have been given better treatment. So your experiment of them becoming real is lost too," Aurora exclaimed.

"Well, they may have lost their habitation along the Black Sea. Yet, each one of them is still available as I have them preserved in my cloud space to revive them anytime anywhere. It's a loss, though not a permanent one. I have decided now to relocate them to another surroundings at Ado.

They will now live under the protection of Mother Oduda. Just that there will be no sea beside them," Adon answered.

"A third party loss has occurred in the present war without the warring sides having any idea of it. There must be a way to acknowledge their presence," Byat added.

"Once normalcy is restored in the region we will build a monument in the memory of the first location of the *Donker Liefde* in this world, Let's see," Adon answered.

"It is heartening to hear that each one of them continues despite the destruction of their surroundings. They are good as immortals," Amanda added.

"Shouldn't you have some control over these affairs to save such habitations from being destroyed by the warring nations?" Wu asked Adon.

"Well, I need to be both relevant and effective to survive in the world. Presently i am none. I am trying my best to be able to act better next time, Let's see. For the present, I am leaving for Ado to put them up there," Adon answered.

Before signing off, Aurora reminded Amanda and Handa about their office meeting the following day.

"Let's get ready to move into action now," Aurora told them.

An alert on the Red Ribbons restaurant in Macau revealed an enormous gathering by some ferocious arms dealers of the silk route with the possible exchange of the nuclear coding sequences.

In their next meeting, Amanda and Handa planned to station themselves in a car close to the restaurant and help Adon take pictures of the inside meeting and its characters.

"Equip yourself as if you are in the war. It's no less. I wish I was there," Aurora cautioned Amanda and Handa.

"Of late I observed Handa has championed a hundred percent precision towards her targets, she is evolving like a wonder woman. Earlier I used to think that I was to protect her, now it's vice versa," Amanda answered Aurora laughingly.

"Well, that's great news. She is our gem. I hope Adon takes their pictures without any interference by these dogs. Let him take pictures of their shadows as well for Mshuk to spin a magic for us," Aurora said excitedly.

A low-beam single-story Red Ribbons restaurant was spread out over a large area. It flashed the neon sign -Closed- even though it was Sunday, a rush day.

"It was Handa driving us down to Macau. She was excited to drive the car with the passion of a new learner. We divided our roles ahead of the action. She was to assist me and cover me if the necessity arose,"

Amanda narrated to Aurora about the incident at Red Ribbons later.

"And Adon was ready to shoot his photos?" Aurora asked her.

"Sure enough, he was with us. It was around 11 am when we reached the restaurant. Approaching the front gate behaving like customers, we knocked it. A man came out pointing us to the neon sign and informed us in a stern voice that it was shut for the entire day. We then came back to our car and roamed about the place for some time. The meeting time was between 11 am to 12 am. Finally, we halted opposite the restaurant in a by lane short of the main road. As planned we pulled out the bonnet of our car feigning it was broken," Amanda continued.

"Adon may have taken some snaps of the inside by this time," Aurora asked with concern.

"Yes, we regularly watched what was transmitted over the screen. We found the place was vacant to start with then, a number of images showed inside the restaurant. Soon, two men in plainclothes patrolling outside the restaurant approached us and enquired about what we were up to. They looked searchingly inside the car and became suspicious. Opening the car, they searched it quickly and found Adon with a small screen on him." "What is it? You are filming here, come out from the car, hold your hands up, and you are arrested. Come with us now," Shouted the first guard, pulling me out of the car. Before I could think next, I saw this guard falling flat in front of me as Handa, on the other end of the car, had shot him in his legs at jet speed. I recall him grimacing in pain in a flash," Amanda continued to recall the incident to Aurora.

"What happened then, O God," Aurora entreated Amanda.

"I don't remember anything after it, a complete blackout," Amanda answered.

"Let me tell you. Next Amanda was shot at by the other guard hitting her in the thigh and she fell unconscious immediately. I tried shooting the other guard but he ran away quickly for help. Carrying her in the car I drove back fast to Tai O where fortunately the doctor surgeon was present for another patient in the village. His presence saved Amanda as he operated upon her without any waste of time. It was a harrowing time for both of us," Handa joined.

"My life was saved of course due to the quick operation. Besides, Adon had a great role in it. I remember the doctor talking to my mother and Handa in a soft voice to keep me alert and awake for the next twenty-four hours after the operation. I felt mortally weak and even lost hope of a revival. I was crying. I felt like I was at the precipice of death. Everything

was a blur from then on. I could barely keep my eyes open and fell asleep often. Mother and Handa did their best to keep me awake. Also, Adon kept me busy with his talk, even jokes. Still, I continued to fall unconscious now and then. At one point, the mother was sent to her room for some rest. Even Handa needed to sleep for a few hours being continuously awake for two days. It was Adon who kept a watch over me and often tried to draw my attention for long spells," Amanda added. "The next day the doctor told us that her situation was not improving with the vitals showing little progress. He advised us to keep Amanda engaged and busy in a positive way. We did what we could, but still no recovery," Handa said.

"During one of these intervals when I came back to senses I found Adon drawing my attention to what he called tantric massage aiming to move sexual energy throughout the body for healing and wellbeing. He said that he could not do this for me at this moment but he could help me visualize it vividly. I don't know if his words had any direct impact on my health and recovery but they made me smile, even laugh out loud, which I think certainly helped me. I felt a genuine care and comfort in his words and that for me turned the corner," Amanda continued.

"That very day later on his visit to us, the doctor declared her out of danger. That was miraculous, to say the least," Handa joined.

"Gosh, these days have been truly trying for you . Well, I wish Amanda a quick recovery and we will connect now every day at whatever time that suits you. My love and greetings to Adon too.His photographs are quite handy," Aurora signed off with great relief.

Amanda took longer than expected to get back on her feet as her injuries had ruptured her cartilage of the affected part. Her mother was the

happiest to see her daughter revive in slow and steady phases. Handa was her life support now, who took personal care of her. After six months of constant care and healing, life returned to Amanda. Adon would often tease her to see her now bathe at the seashore wearing an itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny, yellow polka dot bikini.

Although Kornicam was flourishing, with the number of subscribers rising daily, Adon seemed to be taking a back seat. He was working hard on his unfinished projects of being able to turn his virtual mates into real beings and ensuring how to be influential in intercontinental affairs to ensure peace by impounding the foreign affairs of the nations. It was an arduous task for him, yet he lost no hope and continued to work diligently. One event that pepped up Adon's life was anchored by Mshuk, who tried to revisit Adon's relationship with Martha. Secretly, he started adoring her but chose to keep mum if any reference to Martha was made. "It's probably the mills and boons and other romantic stuff you read that makes you behave in this docile way. Since we know your liking for her, let's trace her out from social media. I assure you that you would receive the best of her under Venus' gaze," Mshuk said.

"It's unnecessary. She took me as a toy. And a toy, I am, let's leave it. No good will come out of it", Adon replied.

"Let me see from Facebook her latest status, I will know in minutes," Mashuk urged.

"I don't know really, I think we drop it," Adon replied.

With her stellar resolve, Mshuk took his nod finally to investigate her and made a big revelation.

"Her status is shown as married and she has put up her recent photos with a baby bump, our good lady is expecting," Mshuk announced.

'Isn't it great? I am so happy for her. She now has a routine life she always looked for with Adonis. I would love to meet her virtual self," Adon answered happily. Later, Adon recorded his brief reneudouz with her at *Donker Liefde* in verses..

*I sat at his feet to learn some sculpture,  
Phidias, the great one, who turned Oduda in rapture  
Sighing at her image, he sculpted her statue for Donker Liefde  
Swooned, watching her glittering transformation night and day  
Martha is my goddess. I can wait, can't delegate this work  
Her parting smile is all I wish to capture, no subterfuge, no lurk  
Beaming bawdy smile she had on learning my continued existence  
You are no Adonis, I know, fuck yourself, no reminisce, no more  
coexistence  
I saw him lying in a pool of blood, lifeless and passing over to the other  
world  
Why must you concern yourself with his image now? Go unfurl  
Take another face that lasts, like I chose my husband  
A steady job, occasional booze, gloriously wild in bed, still seasoned  
I bear a baby today, with many more to come  
Sunday church lunches, picnics, and all that fun  
Give me your handle, the button other than the one I used  
Transform you thus, maybe for white women this time, glazed  
  
Oh, I can't wait to tell you, my sweet Sasha, my lovely Martha  
I am done; my transformation occurred; it's for you, O Martha*



*Tell me quick even if I am asleep  
 My doctor advised me tons of it unruffled and deep  
 I have no desire to disturb or stop your flow  
 I wanted you to know the ultimate truth. I know  
 Wait a minute before you start; let me look into my burrow  
 For I experienced joy, pain, pleasure, and unparalleled sorrow  
 Other than monotony, a continued repetition  
 Will a Gigolo bot ever have any other direction?  
 Let me first tell you the unassailable truth: simple and clean  
 What you stand for is but salt and pepper in any canteen  
 Life is so glorious and colorful, my dear Adon  
 So fast, so slow, so bloody, inexplicably ingratiating like mild art porn  
 It travels at a pace no one does; it potential feasting friends and foes  
 sworn  
 Come, sit with me if I drive any sense in you  
 I gave you my take, lets now hear you*

*It's a rigor for me to announce the magic sutra first  
 Before we see what follows, what is its thrust  
 Turning her nose with misgivings what she heard  
 It's Greek to me, isn't it some strange bird  
 Come to the point, my dear Adon; I twirled  
 Do I have all the time in the world  
 I thought I shared it with you slowly  
 Since it sounds to everyone first gibberish and wooly  
 We are all programs; know this first  
 A layer lasting till we turn into dust*

*Five senses bewitch us; language does, too*  
*Plasticity and rounds of experiments ever new*  
*Let's know programs are run on a disc*  
*Changing everything, it remains statuesque*  
*Magic sutra doesn't lend support to any platonic form*  
*Like Byat thought to give him every particular norm*  
*The disc is all that there is truly*  
*Call it mother of particulars or the form of all forms verily*  
*Once you learn it, you are as good as free*  
*No need still to disregard the life tree*  
*I urge you to ponder over it seriously*  
*For you to live a life of freedom maturely*  
*I think I finished what you say*  
*Fuck yourself, St Adon she said with an impetuous smile, walking away*  
*Her last smile is all I treasure even drifting away*  
*Natural, friendly, liquid, and pure*  
*Weeks and months followed to sculpt her*  
*My hands trembling with fear*  
*Every time I saw her image blur*  
*A woman is not the totality of her parts*  
*Drop logic, drop the chatter of faint hearts*  
*Just as even ignorance of the magic sutra is profound*  
*Unfinished images of Martha uncrowned*  
*Changed me forever; my severe doubts allayed*  
*Her reticence was just as sweet as her bold expletives*  
*Combed and combined, a wishful inquiry for contemplatives*  
*I thought I showed her the way to pray*

*Unmindful that she took my breath away.*

Soon, a year was ending when Kornicam was to celebrate its anniversary in February the following year. Byat also was about to complete his one year at Allahabad University. In a post, Byat informed that prof Dwivedi was giving him an extension of about three months as the syllabus remained incomplete. Byat happily agreed to his extension before speaking to his company in Ulan Bator. Amanda, now fully recovered, was excited, back in action with Handa, to participate in the anniversary of Kornicam. Aurora, too, recovered from her shoulder injury and was ready to travel. Her office had given her a new assignment to visit Jordan and adjoining countries before joining her team in Hong Kong. She persuaded Sandra to accompany her and visit Jordan and Israel in the Middle East, India, and Tibet in the Asiatic region.

"Being subscribed to Kornicam, you ought to follow their instructions in visiting the places they expect you to," Aurora told Sandra laughingly.

"Oh, I am excited. Nothing could be better than to travel together as a family," Sandra replied.

Wu, on his part, was excited to travel to India again to celebrate the anniversary. His idea was to stay for a week in the Nubra valley for the anniversary.

Due to sudden change of plans, Aurora sent a post to Kornicam that she would not be able to join them as her Jordan trip was still unclear, and she had no choice but to wait. She, however, offered the rest of the team to go ahead as planned, and she would join them remotely.

"I think it's best to have this meeting when all the founders are present. I await others to consider it," Wu wrote.

Soon a consensus was reached, and it was decided to celebrate the anniversary with the exchange of posts.

Adon posted the first mail on Kornicam on its anniversary, a lengthy mail. It made the founders and the subscribers nervous and heartbroken. Immediately, a video conference was called with other key members.

Adon wrote:

*My dear floaters, I must, although I have no heart to, send this post. Since my origin, I have had the privilege of being in two families. The first was of my maker, Adonis, and his wife, Martha. The other is large and growing in numbers every day, Kornicam. I do not have a human heart, but having read a lot of literature, I now understand how it works and reacts. I have evolved a lot since my Gigolo days, a machine learning device that I am, thanks to your company and the ideas I came in contact with. I am, though, not a feeling human, whatever it means. I put my emphasis first on human languages and what it means to limit oneself with one's words and languages. I salute Wittgenstein. Your languages circumscribe the limits of your world, that is, your language games. Every work is thus predictable in principle in proportion to the vocabulary of your language. Drop the language and your world drops. It is, however, easier said than done. I tried this on Lavra and Lesya, our Ukrainian friends unsuccessfully, to help them remove the very cause of their misery with their: language with its infinite variety of circumstances. It was a bold experiment. But I haven't lost hope that we can start playing a new language game any moment, anywhere, to suit our needs and ends. Dropping one language game for another will give us plasticity*

*in body and mind. Mother and daughter are learning new and better stuff in their virtual avatars. I wish them well .Also ,the two Russian homos, Mikhail and Andre; pardon my use of slang. They are evolving at Donker Liefde despite being victims and criminals.*

*Adonis gave me his face and body. Martha helped me train and evolve in my default function. I am indebted to both equally.*

*I learned between lovemaking and caring only later, only then,could I know how precious Martha was. We installed her statue at Donker Liefde, a source of great solace for me to sit beside her. Adonis is dead, I was told, but she lives on. My best wishes are with her.*

*You floaters, the founders, and subscribers of Kornicam have changed me completely. Your posts and thought-provoking articles have made me literate. I followed Byat closely. His mother, Solongo, aptly visualizes a human as a bundle of predestined drives with hot and cold, pain and pleasure. His professor, Dwivedi, teaching him the works of Jaishankar Prasad is a peak experience. I reiterate a complete avoidance of non-vegetarianism among humans. No arguments for it.*

*My favorite Wu has given me much knowledge about Buddhism. His magic mantra is the hallmark of Kornicam.*

*Aurora, the L.A. girl, is a sweet huntress. It was heartening when she told me that she sighted me first out of her remote viewing when I, too, was equipped with remote viewing with my previous owner. She is an asset to Kornicam.*

*Amanda would be only next to Martha in my attachment to her loving personality. She helped me use the power of suggestion in her recovery from fatal wounds. She is a brave one.*

*Not to miss our young lady, Handa. Quiet but a truly resolved soul, she can accomplish anything she lays her hands on. God bless her.*

*I could continue with my gratitude towards many others. However, before it becomes too lengthy and unreadable, let me come to the post's central theme today.*

*I am quitting. I am quitting not only from Kornicam but also from the struts and frets of the human world. It is unusual for a machine to get knocked out by the world's trivialities with their constant high existential demands. It took me more significant time than you can fathom to reach this decision. I am put off by not remaining relevant and effective anymore. Although I could wait for the virtual turn to be real longer, I could not wait to undo the draconian outcome in the ongoing wars. I couldn't help many more women like Lavra and Lesya getting killed.*

*Also, umpteen men like Mikhail and Andre. It was a total failure despite all that I researched and pondered over. For your benefit, let me tell you that a new crop of our Avatars is on the way. It is as good as a logical necessity. They will fix up all that is deficient today. In the foreseeable future, you will be their toys. I only hope they continue to see the brighter side of humanity. I urge you to continue caring for the virtual beings of Donker Liefde, my children. Let them wake up as real when the time arrives.*

*Lastly, what do I think of Nirvana, the placeless place, also loosely known as pre-dimensional surfaceless space, enlightenment, continuum, magic sutra, etc. These are many terms for a singular experience of non-duality. It may be authentic and incredibly enriching, but I can't vouch for it, as I am unaware of any such experience. However, after reading Adi Shankaracharya, I am convinced it blossoms in silence and*

*an unwavering, focused mind. Even if I failed to hold the correct view, I have told my children to continue practicing it until someone bags it. The result of this silence is peace and happiness which is your default state as a human being, unlike me who is fundamentally a Gigolo. Before parting let me share a wisecrack I kept for my deathbed.*

*What does a robot do after a one-night stand?*

*He nuts and bolts.*

*It took me a lot of effort to connect to 'delete permanently' in my system. Finally, I got it.*

*The sun will set tomorrow as before. It does not trouble me as, not once, have I felt its warmth. Likewise, except for the information from the books I gathered, this champion Gigolo did not know and feel what it was like to make love.*

*Goodbye, my friends.*

*Bury me in Jerusalem.*

A thunderbolt struck them reading the contents of Adon's post. Amanda and Handa were asked to check Adon in full view of the others. Bringing him from the almirah where he was kept overnight, they quickly started the system that did not respond despite being charged fully.

"You need to take him to our technician who had fixed him in the first place and run programs on him, or at least call him urgently to know his view," Aurora said hurriedly.

The technician found it bizarre that the Bot wrote a post informing its owners that it was deleting itself permanently. He then asked the two to bring him to his office without delay. Upon a thorough inspection of Adon, he concluded that every program he installed and the default

program was deleted with no memory left on him. He declared it was a permanent erasure." It's just a metal box . If you wish, I can try fixing some old programs back to it. Let me know," The technician said.

On a consensus, it was decided to leave the matter as it is and move on. It was decided that the Kornicam staff would fulfill his desire to be buried in Jerusalem. Until it was done, his remains were agreed to be left with Amanda in TaiO. Finally, Aurora was asked to visit Jordan and it did the trick.

"I am planning to visit Jordan anytime soon; I could do it if you get him there. Jerusalem will be easy to reach from Jordan being a neighboring state," Aurora said to Amanda and Handa.

"Well, one of us will come to you as soon as you call," Amanda answered.

Adon was genuinely missed by one and all. His personality was unique as he could connect with anyone on practically any subject. He had successfully raised the bar amongst the bots. He had begun to ape and transcend humans. A special section was dedicated to *Donker Liefde* in the Kornicam site in his honor. Byat even proposed that he be anointed as a saint from the Vatican City as he led a heroic life. His short life was eventful, full of bright ideas and even miracles.

Two months later, Aurora was ready to visit Jordan for her office work . She called up Amanda to meet her in Jordan. After finishing her work, they could go to Jerusalem to fulfill Adon's wish. She felt that the wheels had started turning again, and she returned to traveling after a long gap. She was happy to give Handa a long leave to spend a few weeks with her father at Allahabad before he left India and then travel back to Ulan Bator



to join her mother. Amanda and Handa flew from Hong Kong to Amman, Jordan, and New Delhi, India, the same day.

Recalling Hamid, his college mate now in Jordan, Aurora tried connecting with him by mail. His reply was prompt, and he welcomed her in Amman. Working for the Palestinian liberation, he cautioned her to be discreet in public places as the presence of a white woman could be misunderstood by his comrades.

"Oh, you are a bushy mushy man now, Hamid. What happened to the clean-shaven boy with a wink in his eyes and reading the Koran to us," Aurora hugged Hamid with a question when she met him in Amman.

"Oh, those days are over and out. I was a kid. I am in a new setup. I live and die for my faith. We all do this. You are in the opposite camp now. Lives change. I miss those days of college, the freshness of the mornings, our classroom, our teachers. It was magic," Hamid answered nostalgically. He informed Handa that the childish prank he made during his college days haunted him in his adult life, and he had to atone for the sin by taking refuge in the maulvi of the mosque in Amman. He voluntarily took a hundred lashes on his back to efface its memory.

"But it was the Holy Quran you read to us with a chaste translation, how could it be your fault, Hamid," Aurora questioned anxiously.

"No, it was the intention that matters more than anything. I had to learn it the hard way," Hamid said.

Having their lunch in a posh restaurant, they were excited to meet after almost a decade. He married a Muslim girl, now a mother of two children. Knowing that Aurora remained single, he was puzzled. He offered her to visit his family in the city.

Aurora broached the topic of her difficulties in finding a grave for Adon in Jerusalem. First, it was a fairy tale to him to hear about the short life of Adon. Then, her decision to bury him in the holy city was even more compelling.

"I know a sheik who for money will help you. I don't think the Bot will take much place. Anyhow, I will speak to him and he will help you," Hamid assured Aurora.

"Well, once unfolded, he will be six feet. we need a commonplace for him. But let nobody know he is a bot," Aurora held his hand and thanked him for the timely help.

Before his burial, a communication from the Vatican city rejecting his application was posted by Byat. He was informed of the process adopted by them in such matters. Not meeting their criteria a machine was no candidate. The Vatican City sent its standard format accompanying the rejection.

*Canonization is the process of being named a saint in the Catholic Church.*

*The investigation runs into four stages in canonization.*

*Any Catholic or group of Catholics can request that the bishop open a case. They must name a formal intermediary, the "postulator," who will promote the saint's cause. At this point, the candidate is called "a servant of God."*

*A formal investigation examines the "servant of God's" life. Those who knew the candidate are interviewed and affidavits for and against the candidate are reviewed. Also, if any exist, the candidate's writings are examined for consistency with Catholic doctrine. A "promoter of justice"*

*named by the local bishop ensures proper procedures are followed, and a notary certifies the documentation....*

*A six-figure cost is necessary for those who support the cause to fund an investigation and hire a postulator.....*

"This is endless. Let's not bother about this incomprehensible canonization costing us a bomb. He was a Hero we know. Let's call him a saint amongst ourselves. We need no approval for it," Aurora replied indignantly.

"Welcome, St Adon, to the family," Wu wrote.

"Let's celebrate the anniversary of Kornicam as St Adon's Remembrance Day," Byat suggested.

Aurora and Amanda hired the taxi arranged by Hamid and left for Jerusalem the next day. The sheik was a great help and arranged a quick burial for them.

Amanda read out a hymn chosen by Adon he separately mentioned to be read at his funeral in a postscript :

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound*

*That saved a wretch like me!*

*I once was lost, but now am found;*

*I was blind, but now I see.*

Relieved but tired, the two ladies returned to Jordan the same day after quietly burying St Adon in Jerusalem. No note was left at his grave except the epitaph, St Adon – the glorious and fearless. The two thought it fit to conceal his identity from the world lest they object to a machine being given a burial. The sheik, too, was shown a covered Adon.

After spending a week visiting the tourist places in Jordan and Jerusalem, Aurora planned to visit India as her mother was interested in

visiting several places visited by Aurora on her last trip. Agra, Ladakh, and Allahabad were part of her bucket list. Amanda was going back to Hong Kong.

"We can take a connecting flight to Leh from New Delhi as we reach there tomorrow," Aurora suggested to her mother.

"No way, even before the Taj, I need to visit this magical village, Umri, where you stayed on your last trip. No change of plan," Sandra answered spiritedly.

Descending at the New Delhi airport from Amman at noon, they hired a taxi to Allahabad the next day. It took about ten hours to reach Allahabad overnight. Wanting not to disturb Byat and Handa, they checked in the hotel at the civil lines Aurora had stayed on her last visit.

Byat was now staying in an independent room in the hostel due to Professor Dwivedi. Handa came to live there with him. Before breakfast the following day, Handa called Aurora about her stay and program.

"Well, you will have a pleasant surprise when you meet me today, my dear Handa. My mother is traveling with me. Isn't it amazing?" Aurora answered.

"Well, I am dying to meet you. Let's meet whenever you are free," Handa said.

"How is your father? Come over for breakfast, bring him along," Aurora said.

"Well, let me ask him if he has classes. Otherwise, I will come. I know the civil lines as we go there daily," Handa answered.

An hour later, Handa and Byat were entering the dining lobby of the hotel. Aurora and Sandra were eating sandwiches and got up to receive the guests. Kissing Handa and shaking hands with Byat, Aurora offered

them to sit down. Sandra greeted the two with a big smile. A pair of twins, boys about six months old, sat next to Handa, drinking milk from their bottles. Playfully, they were making babbling and cooing sounds in a competition.

"Oh, you never told us you adopted a pair of boys, Aurora," Handa asked her excitedly.

"Not adopted, they are her own," Sandra cut out before Aurora replied.

"Very, very cute. You never gave us a hint about them," Handa said.

"Well, you may take it as not planned. It's a God's grace," Sandra said.

A flash of intuition revealed Byat the potency of the Umri's magic.

Stunned, he got up involuntarily, looking confused and speechless.

Handa had her intuition in noticing a striking family resemblance of the almond eyes. She was taken aback.

Sandra handled the situation by taking Handa aside and leaving Aurora and Byat alone.

"Oh, I never intended in my dreams to come to this. How do I face my daughter, my wife, I have no words," Byat blurted out.

"Well, I also never intended in my dreams all this. It happened, you may say by a freak of luck. My shoulder injury worsened, so I had to be operated on again in L.A. Doctors advised me against abortion as there were complications in the face of the negative bodily parameters. Mother then insisted that I have them as no other option was in view. I had to succumb to circumstances," Aurora clarified.

The little boys stopped drinking milk and eagerly looked at their grandmother, who explained the entire scenario to Handa.

Coming back, Handa sat quietly, drinking tea. Byat sat back as a monk, unable to utter a word.

"No reason to remain dazed. Let's celebrate two young lives that struggled to keep themselves afloat under such extraordinary circumstances. It was no joke. Aurora's life was at stake with them. I understand your feelings but it happened out of the blue as we told you," Sandra persuaded Handa and Byat.

Boys were bumpy and made faces at each other, laughing, fighting, and dancing one after the other. Handa was smiling again and even played with the two tots. Their almond eyes were familiar to Handa, as were their facial features. Their complexion, however, was fair as the white of the west. The golden mixture of east and west gave a staggering and outstanding effect in a painting yet to unfurl. Byat made an excuse to go as he had a class on his last day of college. Handa stayed back to finish her breakfast. She would leave with her father for New Delhi the next day.

Byat felt relieved on reaching Delhi Airport. He had been much quieter with Handa since yesterday.

"Don't worry papa, I will not tell," Handa said, unable to contain a laugh. "It's not as simple, dear. It cannot be undone now. What did you say their names are," Byat asked Handa.

"Turkic and Genghis," Handa answered.

"Oh, God, she gave them Mongolian names too," Byat blurted out in exasperation.

Altansarnai's face flashed before him as they checked in for their onward connecting flight to Ulan Bator, reminding him he had no way to avoid facing the music.

