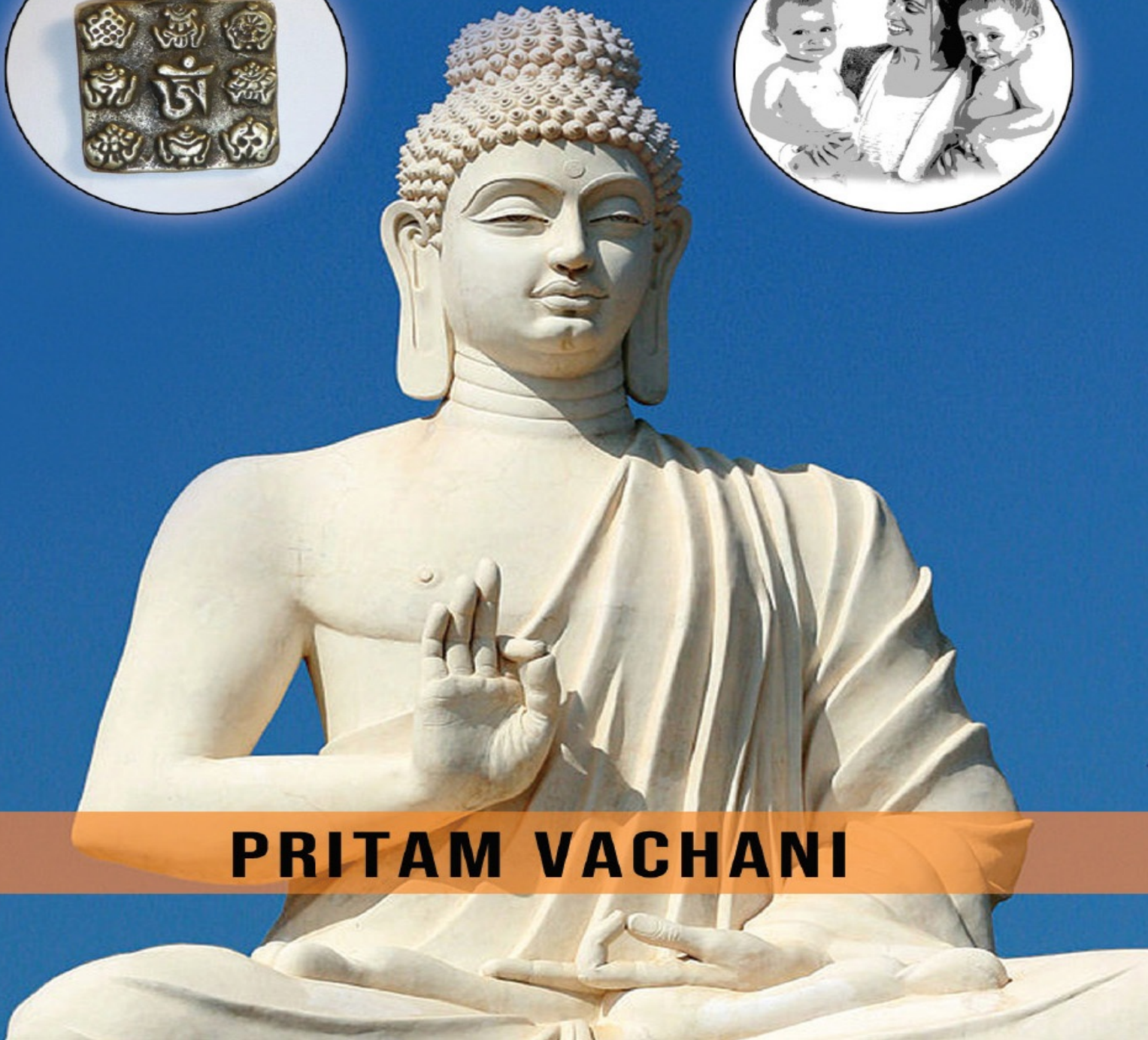


# The **THOGCHAG** VIGIL



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# THE THOGCHAG VIGIL



by

*Pritam Vachani*

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# CHAPTER 1



**I**t was Friday the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 2057. Anand Jadeja, Head of the Artificial Intelligence Division of The Joint International Information Systems Research Centre (JIISREC), based in Pune, stepped out of his spacious teak panelled office onto the adjoining open terrace. It was his thirtieth birthday but there were no greeting cards on his table for he never celebrated his birthday and even kept the date secret from the general staff, which was not easy. It was not easy as it was the tradition in the Pune Division of the International Research Centre to celebrate all staff birthdays. There would be a giant greeting card signed by everyone, a colossal eight-kilo chocolate cake cut neatly into four hundred and thirty two rectangular pieces that were distributed to all staff. When he joined three years back as their youngest-ever divisional head, he was informed of this tradition. He advised the in-charge of human resources that while his birthday was indeed on the twenty-third of February, it was on this day twenty-two years back that his father Parmanand died from a violent fit of asthma, and his heart-broken mother passed away three months later.

The department head, knowing that Anand intended to leave office two hours earlier to visit the family *Pujari* for prayers, saw to it that a simple ceramic vase containing yellow carnations, which were Parmanand's favoured flowers, was placed at one corner of the large executive teak desk. There would be no cards or other mementoes. The office staff had also been informed that every 23<sup>rd</sup> February was Anand's 'very private day' and that he was not to be disturbed. Only very urgent and important phone calls were to be forwarded to him. Head office was also aware of this and had even sanctioned special leave with pay whenever his birthday came around. However, Anand declined this generous offer stating he preferred to attend office for at least six hours. All he requested

was to be left alone with his thoughts, which, on this occasion, included reviewing his Division's overall strategy for the coming financial year.

Standing on the office terrace in Kalyani Nagar, looking across the river at Koregaon Park, he recalled the fateful day when he lost his father. He had been very excited at the prospect of his birthday party later that evening especially since, for the very first time, he had invited three girls to his party. He had been wondering what would be the best giveaways for the girls when his father generously suggested the latest but rather expensive Barbie dolls that had arrived only the previous week at the local Mall. His father looked at his watch and remarked, "The store should be opening soon. Shall we go right now?"

Anand and his indulgent father eagerly stepped out to purchase three such dolls. It was an unusually murky day and he noticed his father wheezing and coughing in spite of the car air-conditioning. They had to take the steps to the fourth floor, as the escalator was temporarily out of order. Anand ran ahead excitedly urging his father to hurry. By the time they reached the floor where toys were sold, Parmanand had a major asthmatic attack from which he never recovered.

The scene of his father writhing on the floor holding his reddening neck and gasping for breath, surrounded by curious shoppers, was indelibly etched in the young boy's memory. He remembered persons, in the Mall's brown uniform, loosening his father's clothes while others asked the curious crowd to move back. He recalled shaking the broad brown embroidered sleeve of the large man who seemed to be in charge. "Please do something for my Dad. He has lots of money. He will pay very well for the best doctors. I know—I promise you—please do something quick," he had pleaded.

The Manager had looked down at the trembling teary-eyed fellow at his side. "I have informed the house-doctor—he is on his way. I've also rung up for an ambulance. They will be here very soon and save your father. Don't worry. Go and sit down on that sofa," directed the manager pointing to a light grey sofa near the landing.

Anand had continued to stare at his ailing father as brown-attired assistants, under the Manager's directions, moved the writhing body on to one of the showroom beds. They tried to make him comfortable but it was not helping for he could see his father thrashing about in agony. By the time the ambulance arrived, his father was sprawled motionless on the bed with legs wide apart and hands still clutching the base of his neck. His mouth and eyes were wide open.



Resuscitation efforts by the paramedics as well as Anand's desperate pleas were not able to instil any movement in the motionless body.

Five months later, Anand had been taken to a gourmet fish restaurant in Koregaon Park by the banks of the river. He had been served fresh trout. The fish had its mouth wide open as if gasping for air. It looked as if it had been severely clobbered and its eyes were about to pop out from their sockets. The sight reminded Anand of his father's last moments.

Anand stared at the garnished fish with the gaping mouth that lay on the large glossy plate in front of him. He grimaced and let out a shrill scream. He couldn't stop screaming. Many guests, immaculately attired in formal wear, shocked at the disturbance, cast disdainful looks, clearly questioning the propriety of bringing a young child to the up-market restaurant. The screaming little lad could make out a large man with a heavily embroidered sleeve and waiters in brown uniforms approaching him menacingly. He now became hysterical and started thrashing around, pitching the white glossy plate with the revolting trout on to the carpeted floor. Venkatraman and Shobha had no choice but to take him out to the spacious car park. There, in an open space amongst tall peaceful trees, Shobha held the young boy close to her bosom while patting his trembling back. When Anand was no longer hysterical, she wiped his eyes dry and asked him what had happened. Between heart-rending sobs, he told her about his father's last moments at the Mall surrounded by many persons dressed in brown uniforms.

Anand believed his father's death was due to his desire to invite girls to his birthday party. He became an introvert and his psychiatrist claimed that the incident had also influenced his sexual preferences. On the other hand, Anand studied very diligently because his father had urged him to study harder and he felt that if he could achieve academic excellence, he would somehow atone for his sins and please his father in heaven. It took years of counselling before Anand finally came to terms with his father's death and stopped blaming himself.

He continued looking across the river at Koregaon Park and beyond. The morning air was clean and crisp, and one could see motor vehicles going up the Katraj Ghats in the far distance. It was vastly different from the times his father was alive, when every day was so burdened by air-borne muck that it became difficult to even recognise adjacent buildings. If only the aliens, with their non-

polluting technology, had come to Earth a decade earlier, his father would have been alive and well. He recalled the joyful times he had with his father, wishing that their happy relationship had never ended. His father was a tall man and would habitually go for a walk every night with young Anand aloft on his broad shoulders. He would walk amongst the magnificent trees in the side lanes of Koregaon Park and tell him a new story on every occasion. The stories invariably dealt with success being achieved through perseverance. His favourite was Aesop's on the hare and tortoise. He would have his father repeat this fable ever so often. This way, he also had him to take an extra round. His father used to teach him French and hence the poem 'le lièvre et la tortue' by Jean de la Fontaine also became an all-time favourite. They both recited the poem, tuneless but with great gusto. His father would do a jig while walking and he on his father's shoulders would pummel the grubby night air with clenched fists.

They were a great team. His father was his eternal hero and Anand wanted to be so much like him. His mother often assured him that his dreams would come true and that his imposing height even as a child of eight years, his large ears, and squeaky voice were very much like his father's.

"But will the large ears and squeaky voice look good on me?" he asked apprehensively. His mother had reassured him, gently kissing him on both cheeks and telling him about the famed Sophia Loren. She made him sit in front of a large poster of the famous actress in her early thirties "Now look at this woman. First, take each part at a time. One might say her lips are swollen, her jaw is far too square like that of a man, and that her forehead is exceedingly broad. Do you see what I am saying to you?"

Anand nodded his head.

"Now forget the individual parts. Look at the picture of her as a whole—in the elegant dress, make-up, and dark glasses. Would you say that there could be a more beautiful woman than this one?"

Anand looked up at his mother and replied. "Other than you, she is the most beautiful."

"You're too cute," his mother responded, giving him another warm hug.

"What about my voice?"

"Don't worry, there is nothing wrong with your voice. If you still don't like it, you can work on it."

Now as a full-grown six-foot-one adult, Anand was the splitting image of his father and although each component of his face, as such, could by no means be regarded as handsome, the total ensemble of the confidence and the upright manner in which he carried himself drew respect and awe. Besides, he was internationally acknowledged as a genius and a master in his chosen field, which however was very different from his father's.

His father was a well-known investment banker. Anand recalled the number of visitors who would call on his father, after office-hours, to take his advice. They would sit on benches adjacent to the study and patiently wait for hours. His father was financially astute and had invested family funds wisely. He had built a four-bedroom house in Koregaon Park, across the river, which had been fully paid for. He had created a trust of which Anand was the sole beneficiary and which met all of Anand's subsequent financial needs. He had also taken out substantial insurance for the family. With Anand as the only surviving member of the family, the insurance, including bonuses coming to over ten crores, also accrued to him personally. His father's friend Dr. Venkatraman was the Chief Trustee. The Trustee had ensured that Anand was sent to the best schools. He graduated in Computer Engineering winning the Dean's award for the best student for three consecutive years, and completed his MBA from Symbiosis. He then did his Doctorate in Computer Sciences from Pune University and the subject of his thesis was 'Advancing Computer and Robotic Artificial Intelligence through Human Brain Mapping, Simulation, and Cyber Manipulation.'

Anand was never a big spender so his substantial earnings also added to his growing bank balance. Many financial advisors and bank personnel came to him with schemes for investing his liquid funds but he rarely followed their advice with the result that barring monies in sundry fixed deposits, he continued to have several crores in savings accounts earning nominal rates of interest.

He returned to his office to look at papers received from the Head Office that proposed a radically revised strategy for his Division. It suggested that senior members consider a sabbatical or study leave and conduct in-depth studies to ascertain and meet the needs of the new emerging markets. The new markets, referred to in the note, were the thirty-seven inhabited planets, besides Earth, in the galaxy.

The proposal was interesting and he decided to give it a serious thought over the weekend and respond.

At precisely three thirty in the afternoon, Anand picked up the vase with the yellow carnations and drove to the Pujari's house for his annual appointment. The entrance to the basement, the marble steps with insets of purple motifs, had just been washed and was still very wet. He gingerly made his way down the narrow steps and announced his presence by energetically thumping the oversize bronze bell hanging from the low ceiling. The basement area was hemmed in by gold-painted statues of Indian gods and goddesses. He could hear the Pujari, in the anteroom, still chanting self-purification *shlokas*. He remembered his parents telling him that Pundit Shivshanker was a great Pujari who took his work seriously. For important *pujas*, he would bathe and cleanse himself for as long as four hours to ensure that the Gods considered him worthy of conducting the *puja*.

Pundit Shivshanker finally appeared clad in a sparkling white dhoti, his clean-shaven chest bearing the usual multi-coloured sacred thread. On this occasion however, his chest was also adorned by an ornate golden necklace. The Pujari saw Anand eyeing the necklace.

"I had to bathe two additional times and recite many more shlokas, before I was allowed to borrow this one," declared the Pujari. "Today very special Puja—you are thirty today," he remarked.

Anand had learnt a lot about religion from Pundit Shivshanker. He now knew the Ganesha trunk when turned to the left, signified spiritual blessings, bliss and tranquillity. When turned to the right, it denoted prosperity and health. He had also learnt why there was always a Cobra depicted along with Shiva. The serpent represented *Jiva* or the individual soul, which takes its sustenance from *Paramatman*, or the Supreme Soul. The five hoods represented the five senses. The entire concept of praying to Siva, the Destroyer, was to gain control of the senses and the mind, and thereby attain unison with the Supreme Soul. Hence, around four years back, when the Pujari's smooth and bare body evoked salacious thoughts in Anand's youthful mind, he had promptly checked and chastised himself. He had prayed earnestly for an extra hour seeking divine forgiveness.

He also learnt the Pujari used cowrie shells as they were the most receptive of objects. "The sea is fed by many rivers, good and bad, all with stories to tell. These shells are nurtured in this environment for many years. They develop ears and talk in whispers. They are washed onto the beaches. They have returned to land to relate these stories to the world so all can listen and absorb. One has only

to learn how to listen and interpret correctly.”

Anand, with hands folded and eyes closed, quietly sat in his assigned corner engaged in earnest prayer seeking forgiveness from his father. At the end of the twenty-five-minute prayer, the Pujari vigorously blew into the conch shell for an unusually long time—most persons would have been breathless. He then jiggled the cowrie shells and threw them onto the board as one would throw dice in a casino. He carefully studied the pattern created by the scattered shells and transferred six onto a silver *thali* which had on it a coconut, dotted with vermilion powder, and as many grains of rice as Anand’s age. The Pujari repeated the exercise twice until he had eighteen shells on the hallowed *thali*. He put vermilion on each of the cowrie shells, shuffled them once more, and tossed them onto the wooden board. He then read them again, closed his eyes, listened, and finally turned to Anand to tell him what the coming year held for him.

“Before you start, tell me why did you place the shells on the silver *thali* and then back to the board.”

“I saw and heard something very unusual and I needed divine blessing and guidance for confirmation.”

So far, the Pujari’s predictions had been very accurate. “Tell me what you saw.”

“Something very strange. You are going to travel very far.”

“Well, I’m supposed to go to a high level meeting in Washington next month.”

“Not the US. This is very far—more than million times farther.”

“You mean into the galaxy?”

“Not only the galaxy but the other end of the galaxy. You will be going very, very far.”

“What else did you see?”

“They need you there. They will pay you very well—far more than you will ever earn here.”

“So it’s good.”

“Not all. I see great wealth and happiness but I also see tremendous tragedy.”

“You mean I could have an accident and die?”

“I see no death but extreme trauma,” replied the Pujari.

“Is there anything that might help me?”

“Not really, but before you go I could do a very special puja.”

“How come there is a Puja which will work in the farthest end of the galaxy?” Anand asked disbelievingly.

“Believe me there is, my son. I know of a rare plant that can influence events in outer space. If I did a Puja using that plant, it will reduce the trauma and bring you back safe and sound. You will definitely come through the trauma a richer and wiser man.”

Anand was listening spellbound, “Tell me more about this plant. How large is it and does it grow in plenty?”

“It is a tiny plant and difficult to find. In the Himalayas, there is a temple on top of a hill near Mukteswar in the Kumaon region, just west of Nepal. The temple is at a height of two thousand three hundred metres. In a nearby place called Shitla, lives a clever botanist who owns four hundred acres of land—all forested except for a large clearing where nothing grows except this tiny plant. The Pujari at the Mukteswar temple tells me his botanist friend has seen only fourteen such plants—in that clearing and nowhere else.”

“You said there was a clearing. Who made this clearing and why does not anything else grow there?” asked Anand.

“The clearing has always been there ever since his great grandfather bought the place. The place is remote with no easy access.”

“But who could have made the clearing?”

“There are folk songs in the area which say that aliens landed there and the clearing was caused by heat of the ship on landing. The heat was so intense that the ground there cannot support plant life.”

“What about the fourteen plants?”

“As per the same folk song, the aliens lodged the plants on one side, and the plants communicate with their masters to this day.”

Anand, with his scientific curiosity aroused, asked, “What do the plants look like?”

The Pujari brought a notepad and made some sketches.

“This looks like a rubbery plant with three dish antennas.”

“So it is—the skin is thick and rubbery.”

“But one only gets that in areas with very little rain, whereas in the Kumaon region...”

“Yes, we know—that’s what makes the plant so strange. According to folk songs, the plants store and convey information to their masters.”

“So I guess the plants would be expensive.”

“He has priced each plant at fifty thousand but he is an old friend of mine and I am sure he will give me good discount.”

Anand felt fifty thousand would be a small price for coming back alive.

“Tell me son, why are you looking so worried?” asked the Pujari.

“Well, Punditji, just before coming here, I had a phone call from the Galactic Council Secretary General offering me a very lucrative six-month assignment. Should I take up the job?”

“Son, that’s for you to decide. I can only tell what I see and what I can do to protect you. The decision whether to go or not is entirely yours.”

“Any advice?”

“None except to think it over—talk to some of your learned friends. When would you be going, if you did go?”

“In five days. The assignment is apparently very urgent.”

“In five days! Then I better have my friend in Shitla pack one tiny plant carefully and dispatch it by urgent courier,” exclaimed Pundit Shivshanker.

“What if I decide not to go?”

“Never mind—he old friend. He’ll take the plant back.”

The Pujari gave Anand the coconut from the silver plate, who broke the coconut in one swift blow and sprayed the contents all over the watchful gods and goddesses and his father’s representative—the simple vase containing the yellow

carnations. The proceedings ended with a traditional *Aarti* invoking blessings of the family's favourite God—the Lord Ganesha. Anand left after paying the Pujari his 20K but feeling very anxious about the future.

The call he had received, before coming to Pundit Shivshanker, was from Mr. Natzi, the Secretary General of the Supreme Galactic Council. Mr. Natzi wanted him for an assignment in Tsygres and offered to pay him, for the six months work, more than what he would earn in the next ten years. The offer was valid for a week and the Secretary General would ring back personally to know his decision. He received a detailed dossier by galactic e-mail. The dossier was on Tsygres and the scope of the assignment. Anand had now to ensure that the Trustees of JIISREC, the Group he worked for, approved the assignment and released him. He needed to submit a proposal summarising details of the assignment using the right words—the words had to be chosen carefully.

JIISREC was a research initiative financed by five leading IT Companies on Earth. There were five international research centres and the one in Pune, headed by Dr. Anand Jadeja, was dedicated to the development of Artificial Intelligence. The definition of Artificial Intelligence had been extended recently—it was not just bringing common sense, expert knowledge, and superhuman reasoning to computers and robots but even aiding the human brain in rapid assimilation of knowledge.

He had been made Head of the Division three years back when he was only 27 years of age. It was universally acknowledged that he had the finest IT brains in the business and such cutting-edge research was best entrusted to him. He had lived up to the faith reposed in his abilities. Seventeen of his team's research results had been granted patents and the five IT companies were reaping huge profits from his team's endeavours.

However, very recently some influential groups had wanted research done on modifying the thinking of soldiers employed by various armed services but such research had been categorically banned by JIISREC. It had been brought to the Trustees attention that some experts within JIISREC had ignored the ban and were obliging the said groups by moonlighting and earning huge sums of money in return. The Trustees were now wary and scrutinised all proposals in considerable detail.

Anand, of late, had the feeling that his team also looked more concerned with monetary benefits rather than intellectual challenge. Not a single original idea



had emerged in the last three months. He needed to put an end to this intellectual drought and extricate the team from the growing web of monetary greed. An assignment in far Tsygres was bound to be challenging and productive as he would come back with useful pointers for future research.

The Trustees were encouraging sabbaticals amongst senior personnel for, if well utilised, they broadened vision and brought fresh ideas to the table. It was up to Anand to convince the Trustees that here was one such assignment that could lead to new research initiatives and increased prosperity for the Group.

He had no doubt that his trip to Tsygres would have whole-hearted support from the Trustees, if only he could find the right words—words that would show that the nature of the assignment was not in the banned list. That the Leaders of the entire Galaxy, who were way advanced in Information Systems, should have requested his services was a clear indication that the assignment challenged the frontiers of IT technology. He just had to make doubly sure there were no last minute glitches. He accordingly re-drafted the proposal changing the heading to ‘Basic Research on Strategic Use of Cyber Communications for Promoting Social Interaction amongst the Inhabitants of Tsygres.’ He was now certain that given his earlier record, they would give their unqualified assent. The Trustees were all for Basic Research—it was in certain areas of Applied Research that, of late, they had some qualms.

He planned to forward the proposal once he was convinced that long distance galactic travel was safe. He had heard that Tsygres was the farthest from Earth—probably many millions of light years away. He had also heard that in order to cover such large systems one was disintegrated into pixels and reassembled at the destination. The very thought of such a process made him nervous. He thought he would consult Dr. Venkatraman, his senior by around twenty years.

Dr Venkatraman, or Venkat to Anand, was amongst the first to be contacted by the Galactic Council before their Team came to Earth. The Team invited the Governments on Earth to join the Galactic Union. They made several presentations with persuasive arguments on advantages of joining the Union. There were three arguments that finally convinced the Governments to join. The first was the offer to install, at a very competitive price, high-density renewable solar energy titanium-cased modules for resolving the massive energy crisis. The second was combating AIDS and mutant versions of the HIV virus, which were rampant and threatening to destroy the entire population. The third was to combat the immense pollution and address problems related to global warming.

Dr. Venkatraman had started life as a scientist at the Vainu Bappu Observatories of the Indian Institute of Astrophysics just outside Bangalore. Known for his diligent and painstaking research, he was now an acknowledged leader in the field, having been credited with the discovery of several stars and two black holes. He had also made several useful contributions to the concept of time during space travel. He was now Operations Director of The National Centre for Radio Astrophysics at Narayangaon.

Narayangaon had been a sleepy old village in the nineteen eighties. Following a universal impetus for study of the galaxy through wave radio telescopes, the largest on Earth, was commissioned in 1998 in a nearby area. The presence of several dignitaries and the din on that day permanently woke up the village from its centuries old slumber. Narayangaon never went back to sleep again.

Today not only the Astrophysics centre has been upgraded but Narayangaon produces some of the best-known wines in the world. It also boasts some of the finest technical institutions in the country turning out doctors and trained nurses besides highly prized physicists.

Venkat had an attractive wife Shobha who was thirteen years younger to him. The match had been finalised by her uncles when she was only sixteen. She was told that she should consider herself lucky, as Doctor Venkatraman was a 'prize catch.' What Anand loved most about Shobha was her roundness and vivaciousness. Everything about her was round—her face was round and bubbly. Her eyes were large and round with a perpetually mischievous twinkle. Her lips were sensuous, full and rounded like the images in Ajanta. Her blouses bore promise of breasts that were large, soft, and round. Her hips were firm and rounded and her calves more rounded than most. When she lay back with one leg playfully hoisted over the other, dancing to some tune humming in her round head, one could not miss the well-rounded curves and arch of her foot. Anand was certain that her mons veneris was also full and rounded and would love to see her without her clothes.

In his list of persons, 'he would like to bed,' she was an exception—the only woman in a long list of young men. He saw Shobha as a plumper and sexier version of a famed light-skinned but figure-conscious Bollywood siren and accordingly called her 'his round Bebo.' By whichever name one referred to her, Shobha or Bebo, it had to be admitted that she was an intelligent and vivacious creature whose charms as well as Appams, served with fish stew, were the most titillating in the world.

Although both husband and wife were brilliant, Bebo was very unlike her husband in many ways. Whereas Venkat's command of the English language was at best passable, she had done her Masters in Fine Arts from Cambridge with English and Mass Behaviour & Communication as the major subjects. She went on to become a sought after free-lance reporter.

Venkat and Shobha were already engaged, when invited to Nagqu, Xizang Province in the People's Republic of China, better known to many on Earth as The Dalai Lama's Tibet. The world was looking forward to the 'Joint exercises between the Security Forces of the Supreme Galactic Council and the People's Republic of China.' Venkat was the official representative of the Indian Institute of Astrophysics and she was a specially invited free-lance correspondent. They appeared very comfortable with each other and decided to have a civil marriage in Nagqu. This was to be followed by elaborate ceremonies back in Pune.

Anand and Bebo got on like a house on fire. They could keep chatting until the wee hours of the morning. Venkat would often retire earlier. He was probably comfortable in the knowledge that Anand's sexual preference was for youthful males.

Anand's cell-phone had been switched off during the Puja. He noted that he had had a missed call from Venkat. He rang back.

"Arré, my boy, where have you been? Have been trying to contact you all day. Your Secretary just not passing my calls to you."

"You know on this day..."

"Off course we know and your special puja. But have you forgotten young man, you spend this evening every year with us? Why have you not called us? Your Bebo asking all day where you are."

"Listen Doc. I've always loved talking to you and you know, I just adore Shobha's Appams. Sorry for not having called you earlier—have been unusually busy," said Anand apologetically.

Venkat continued in his monotone. "She made Appams and asking for you very, very much. Bebo waiting for your call all day. She right now in Pune, looking for you."

"I had meant to call you. In fact, I was about to call you right now. I need to talk to you both. I need some advice urgently."

“Good, we talk when you are here. Just call Shobha on her mobile—she has a driver and will pick you up from home. Come quick—we have lots to talk about. Seriously, you now live for thousand years.”

“Who wants to live for a thousand years? And how could one even if one wanted to,” queried Anand.

“Arré, you don’t know? No problem these days with new galactic know-how. I just had my blood circulation system flushed and cleaned. I can run hundred-metre dash now—almost as fast as college days. You can even change your voice.”

Anand hated reference to his squeaky voice. “I do not mind my voice. In fact I like it and will stay with my voice, as it is, till the day I die.”

“That Okay, my boy—but you can do many good things for your big body. You see latest brochure, Bebo carrying for you.”

Anand gave Venkatraman a gist of the offer made by the Galactic Council and spoke of his quandary. He needed to know more about the galaxy and in particular the hazards of long-distance galactic travel.

“You ring up right time. Tomorrow we start our new connection with latest telescope at Kavalur—one of the most powerful in the world—built in collaboration with SKA. We can now use telescope for eight hours every Saturday, from here in Narayangaon.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Arré, off course you won’t remember—you just born then. Kavalur in Javadi Hills, Vellore District, just few hours from Bangalore. I work there long time. SKA stand for Square Kilometre Array. First one set up outside India with European funding in 2025.”

“Is it a big project?”

“Arré, you don’t know. Collecting area more than hundred cricket stadiums—much bigger than Lovell Telescope in Manchester. New one five times that size. So good, you can see teeth of cat on Mars—that is if we first find cat on Mars,” Dr. Venkatraman burst forth with his usual guffaw.

“Would we able to see planets, say a million light years away?”

“Certainly my boy, most certainly, except I cannot guarantee you see cat’s teeth so far away.” The guffaw roared into Anand’s ear-piece again almost splitting his left ear-drum.

“I’m worried about the process where they convert you into pixels.”

“Nothing to worry about, my boy. Easier than general anaesthesia before operation. All you do is total relax. They show you how before travel. It be very easy for you. You do far more relax exercise in Yoga. You yoga freak. You expert by now.”

“What happens if one is not able to relax?” asked Anand apprehensively.

“Don’t know for sure. Maybe you wake up more cuckoo at other end,” Venkat guffawed. “But we talk later—right now Bebo pick you up.”

Anand was still freaking out at the thought of being converted into pixels when he saw Bebo. She was looking as fresh and charming as ever. Her plump roundish face, her large dark eyes and her ample body were full of vivacious energy and exuded warmth, health and happiness. On seeing Anand, she gave him a tight hug and looked up to be kissed which he did as always with a small peck on her large rounded lips.

In the car, she handed a brochure to Anand. “Venkat wanted you to see this first before anything else.” The document, Galactic World Brochure Number 23 Version 4.0 bearing the title ‘Achieving Immortality’ was quoting from an official website namely Premierparts.org:

*“It started in the primitive era with transplants from cadavers or, as in the case of kidneys and livers, from living donors who contributed for saving dear ones. Some were so financially desperate, they even did it for money—just imagine that. Fortunately, all this is behind us. Thankfully, since then, our advanced civilisations, unique technology, and special materials have taken over. No more hassles—neither financial nor technical. And what’s more—no bodies needed.*

*Now we can select parts from websites like this one. Hearts, valves, kidneys, livers, lungs; eyes, entire assembly or components; ears, inner or middle; complete digestive systems, name it—it’s all available at a click of a button.*

*Want to think young again?—We can rejuvenate your brain.*

*Do you want to recapture your athletic days?—We can flush and cleanse your blood circulation system.*

*Do you want a change of complexion? No problem. Don't like the sound of your voice?—find it too jarring or squeaky? No problem.*

*Just fill up the shopping basket with your wish list, click acceptance of our terms and conditions, and place your wrist on the scanner.*

*Our safe and secure system will make a note of your social security number and credit meter reading and our mobile unit will be at your doorstep in a matter of hours. 100% reliability and privacy guaranteed.”*

“I suppose he wants me to read about the squeaky bit. Why is he after me to change my voice? I'm not interested in being an Amitabh. Does it sound bad to you too?”

“To me, my dear boy, your great body can carry anything you want, the way you want.”

“Then why is everyone after me?”

“Forget the voice bit. Look at the many ways of improving one's health. I've gone through a general cleansing and feel rejuvenated—feel like an eighteen-year-old.”

“Good for you. However, I think this is carrying it too far. What's so great about immortality? Can't imagine we continue to yearn for it, generation after generation,” said Anand.

“We've spent zillions trying to find ways and means for extending life. Do you remember the story of Gilgamesh?” asked Shobha.

“My mother told me that once but I've forgotten. Tell me again.”

“A king by the name of Gilgamesh was devastated by the death of his friend Enkidu and, not wanting the same end for himself, sought the secret of immortality. He set out on a long and arduous journey to seek out Utanapishtim, hailed as the sole survivor of the Great Flood, and hence presumed privy to the elusive secret. During his journey, Gilgamesh faced many obstacles—he had to defeat two enormous lions and walk through sixty kilometres in complete darkness.”

“That's when Utanapishtim told him something of considerable significance” interjected Anand.

“Precisely! Utanapishtim told him not to lament what the Gods had not given him. Instead, he was asked to rejoice in what had been bestowed on him, his might, heroism, power and the ability to be a leader. Gilgamesh finally accepted his mortality and returned to his people. He ruled wisely for many more years and grew old gracefully.”

“This is exactly what I am trying to say. In spite of many such lessons, the advice given has not sunk in. The quest for immortality continues,” asserted Anand.

“But there is nothing basically wrong with all this rejuvenation stuff.”

“How can you say that?”

“Well our whole practice of medical care has been based on the objective of prolonging life. This program does exactly the same. The problem lies when we do not know how to utilise the additional time we gain. It is evil when it is used for gaining power for self-gratification at the expense of others. That is what happens when we mortals seek to be what we are not entitled to be. The *Bhagvad Gita* clearly tells us that we always were, are and shall be and questions the very concept of death. On the other hand, the galactic view continues to be myopic. It survives on the premise that it extends opportunity for humans to satisfy their desires.”

“And what does that lead to?” asked Anand.

“This premise being considered legitimate, the quest for achieving immortality for the sake of immortality carries on, and no meaningful progress in spiritual understanding or evolution is ever really made.”

“How did you know about the way persons in the galaxy think?”

“Read galactic history and you will realise why the dreadful two hundred year war came about and why the laws in the galaxy are what they are today,” replied Shobha.

“Tell me more.”

“Venkat will tell you—it was all very technical and he has the details.”

Anand turned to Shobha and gently turned her face towards him. “You mentioned both you and Venkat have had your blood circulation systems cleansed and both of you are feeling rejuvenated.”

“Yes, I’m glad we went through with it. It brings new life into you. You must try it sometimes too,” suggested Shobha.

“How has it affected your love life?”

Shobha looked at Anand quizzically wondering what prompted the question and whether she should answer it. She decided to go along. “It’s great. We do it twice a week now—Wednesdays at 10 p.m. and Sundays at 9 p.m.”

“That precise?”

“You know how Venkat is. Likes to plan to the minutest detail.”

“How is the sex?”

Shobha paused and then replied, “Great—not much foreplay but on the other hand as Venkat says his ‘engine is strong and can carry on for a long time without breaking down.’” She chuckled and continued, “It lasts longer than ten minutes and leaves us both very satisfied.”

She looked at Anand’s face and asked, “Are you jealous?”

Anand did not answer.

“I know you are. Just keep it that way. I want you to be jealous—always.”

Anand and Shobha did not speak much. They were absorbed in their own thoughts. Shobha was thinking of her relationship with Anand from the time his mother passed away. He was eight and a half years old. She was yet to turn eighteen when called upon to assume the mother’s role. Just a few weeks after the Venkatramans moved into the spacious house in Koregaon, built by Anand’s father, the little boy insisted that Shobha give him a bath. It became a regular routine, which Anand looked forward to before being put to bed. With Anand there, Shobha always bathed with her panties on.

One evening when under the shower, Anand asked “Don’t you ever wash your panties?” Shobha took off her panties, soaped them, rubbing vigorously and hung them on the curtain rod. She noticed Anand staring at her nakedness. The little boy reached out to her mons veneris touching it quizzically as if something was missing. She smiled and picked up Anand in her arms. “I don’t have this thing of yours,” holding his penis and shaking it. “Only boys have it. I’m a girl.”

Every time they bathed, he would examine her inquisitively. He loved it when



she washed him around the crotch, holding his penis and retracting the foreskin. “You’ll have to do this soon by yourself, when you grow up.”

“I don’t want to grow up—I want you to do this always,” was his answer. A few years later, when she washed his penis, she felt it grow in her hand. A few evenings later, in the bath, his penis was erect.

She decided that it was time for Anand to be sent to boarding school. He complained at first but finally agreed.

Anand was sent to a well-known boy’s boarding school in the hills. The boys lived in dormitories. Those who paid substantially more were housed in spacious rooms that had three beds. Anand lived in one such spacious room with two other boys. Two years later Venkat received a frantic phone call from one of the parents. Venkat and Shobha rushed over to the house of the parent who had made the call. “Your lad has been up to no-good. He has been seducing our boy,” said the irate parents giving details received from their son. They threatened to inform the Principal and have Anand rusticated.

“Give us time to look into it and we’ll get back to you.”

“I am giving you five days to do what you have to do, but right now we’re pulling out our boy from the boarding house. We’ll put him up with his aunt who lives nearby.”

Venkat and Shobha went to the school and spoke to the third boy who had shared the room with Anand. The third boy confirmed that the three of them would occasionally have sex mainly by masturbating each other and that Anand was the initiator in most cases.

“Did he do anything else?” Venkat asked.

“Yes, once he held my penis and pushed his into by back side. When it hurt, he stopped immediately.”

“After that—any time?”

“Yes, twice but he used a lot of Vaseline and was very gentle.”

The boys had never complained earlier for it appeared that Anand used to give them constant treats at his expense. Of late he had been taking them for granted.

The Venkatramans pulled Anand out from boarding and paid the parents of the

boy who had complained a large undisclosed sum to keep quiet. The entire episode never came to the attention of the school authorities nor became public.

They however realised that Anand was gay. Shobha recalled the therapist telling them that Anand's mental makeup, including his sexual preferences, had been influenced by the circumstances of his parents' demise.

"He still associates the cause of their death to his inviting girls to the birthday party. He feels responsible for their deaths. Once he realises that, he could move away from homosexuality especially if he meets a girl he really likes."

The car reached the outskirts of Narayangaon. Shobha turned to Anand and said, "We're close to Lenyadri. There's a famous Ashtavinayak temple here. I'd like to go there. One has to climb three hundred steps to reach it. You could sit in the car or come up with me. It's interesting—the temple is amidst a cave complex of Buddhist origin. But, it could take more than an hour."

"I don't get you—do you want me to come up with you or are you discouraging me?"

"Off course, I would like you to join me, but I don't want to impose on you. You may have had an overdose of temples today."

"I am here to spend time with you beautiful people. A little exercise will do me no harm—let's go."

Shobha instructed the driver who took a left turn before Hotel Poonam and drove to Lenyadri. He stopped in front of a faded sign reading 'Visitors Car Park' at the base of the long climb up the mountainside. Anand held Shobha's hand and they climbed the steps with gusto like two excited children. They sometimes took two steps at a time. They were constantly stopping, sharing jokes, mimicking Bollywood actors and many times ended up lying on the pathway doubled up in raucous laughter.

"Come on, at this rate we'll never reach the top," said Shobha.

The climb was tedious while the desire for tender togetherness and uninhibited flirting was overwhelming.

They had barely walked up another twenty steps when they came across a tree, which to Anand looked like Parvati in a dance pose. "Look at this tree—it's like Parvati with her arms and legs extended."

Shobha turned to look at the tree quizzically. The tree had a thick branch, which extended outwards to the right defying logic and gravity. “What do you know about figures and dance poses? The only figures you are familiar with are numbers Zero and One. You have as much artistic sense as a common toad.”

“I resent that—surely you could find a better comparison.”

“Sorry—toad doesn’t suit you. It’s too small—how about ox?” said Shobha laughing out loud. “Coming to think of it, it is not even a dance pose—it’s more like the *Ardha Chandrasana*—the half-moon pose in Yoga.”

“Come on you’re making up,” Anand stated vociferously.

“No, I’m not. Come, let me show you. Help me up and get me that brick from there.” Taking Anand’s help, she clambered onto the thick horizontal branch. Pulling up her salwar, she straightened her right leg and raised her left until it was parallel to the horizontal trunk. She placed the palm of her right hand on the brick, aligned her two arms until they were vertical, and looked like the main trunk of the tree. Her round face with long dangling hair resembled its lush leaves. She looked straight at Anand and said, “See, what I mean.”

Anand stared trying to see the resemblance to the famous yoga pose, which enhanced concentration and improved body coordination. Shobha was tottering. “Tell me—is it not the *Ardha Chandrasana*?”

“I’m still deciding.”

“Help! I’m falling.”

She fell into Anand’s arms and her weight pulled him to the ground. There they lay with her tousled head resting on his chest.

“You did that purposely,” Anand said.

“And why not—I have found my knight in shining armour,” said she looking up to him. She kissed him on the lips—a long lingering kiss. She suddenly went quiet and they started climbing the remaining steps. The climb was getting arduous and they stopped to catch their breath. They sat on the granite wall adjoining the steps overlooking the green valley and the dancing tree they had just passed.

“So what is this temple about? There do not seem to be many devotees here,” observed Anand.

“It’s not the most visited of Ganesha temples, in spite of the fact it is believed that Parvati performed penance here to beget Ganesha. Ganesha lived his early years here. He had his thread ceremony at this temple. I come here when I want something for my husband.”

“What does Venkat need now? He seems to have it all.”

“I don’t think he’s very happy in his job.”

“Come on. He’s Director Operations of one of the most advanced observatories in the world—that too with latest technology in electro-magnetic communications. I’d have thought it’s his dream job.”

“The title sounds great but he says operations have been reduced to a virtual video gallery for children and that he feels like a circus clown showing them around.”

“Really?”

“He quips ‘Who wants to look at stars through telescopes when you can get live close up videos through the galactic TV network?’”

“If that’s the changing reality, how will prayers help?”

“I pray that he is happy. We have all the money we need. He’s saved well and we could easily retire, but he doesn’t want to do that either—says he needs to keep himself busy.”

“Surely he could switch to something he enjoys.”

“That’s his problem. He loves his work too much. He could play bridge or golf. He enjoys both. Why don’t you talk to him this time?”

They climbed up the remaining steps to the Girijatmaj Vinayak temple which was the eighth of eighteen Buddhist caves and was known as the *Ganesh Gufa*. They passed stone pillars with carvings of cows and elephants to come to the Girijatmaj idol. The idol was painted red and had been carved out of the stone wall of the cave. Only one of its eyes was visible. The Pujari was not there. ‘He does not live here’—they were told. Shobha was not deterred. She opened her backpack and emptied its contents. She had all the ingredients for an instant Ganesh Puja—haldi, gulal, kumkum, sindoor, sandal paste and rangoli. She had elaichi, twelve suparis, and a red cloth. She even had a small silver plate with three silver coins, dhoop and a box of matches. She arranged all the items

putting haldi and gulal on the suparis, lit the dhoop and conducted an Aarti singing praises to Lord Ganesha and invoking his blessings.

Shobha was unusually quiet all the way to their house in Narayangaon.

“What’s the matter?” asked Anand.

“I had a premonition that all is not going to be well.”

“With whom?”

“My husband.”

“What does one do under such circumstances?”

“Pray and pray even more. Would your chap conduct a special prayer for Venkat?”

“Yes he would, but Venkat would have to attend.”

“You know that will never happen. Venkat doesn’t believe in these things.”

“Then what will you do?”

“I guess nothing except resign to the Will of the Divine.”

They reached the Narayangaon house a little after sunset and Dr. Venkatraman arrived soon thereafter. Venkat gave Anand a warm hug and said. “Don’t ever stay away for so long. We really miss you.”

They all moved to the porch, with the large swing, and sat around in white plastic chairs under a clear starry sky and the intriguing band of the *Milky Way*. The subject veered to Anand’s new assignment and the changing attitudes in the galactic world.

“I’m told this has a lot to do with the war. Shobha said you could give me all the details,” said Anand.

Venkat replied, “Not all but I’ll tell you what I know.”

Over the next one hour, Anand learnt that the horrendous two-hundred-year-old war was due to the unquenchable quest for absolute power. Splinter groups, with diverse ideas on what governance should be, fought amongst each other. They first bickered with words, the arguments becoming louder, more incriminating

and vicious. When words didn't work, they resorted to indiscriminate use of awesome weapons of mass destruction. Atom and hydrogen bombs were regarded as obsolete and ineffective. Supersonic delivery systems with multiple nuclear warheads were passé—they could be easily intercepted and destroyed. At the start of the war, minimum requirement was for supersonic fighter aircraft that could rapidly accelerate to 100,000 kph, have exceptional manoeuvrability, be preferably invisible and have laser-based capability to destroy all matter in a ten-kilometre radius. Later even this specification was considered inadequate and technology devised heinous and devilish ways to strike at the very core of civilisations. Special viruses were released into cyber space that attacked and controlled the mind, encouraging enemy personnel to self-destruct or create dissention and revolt in their ranks.

The war was not getting anywhere and factions started amalgamating for increasing collective strength and destructive capability, until there were only two groups left. The conflict however had lasted so long and with so little common in the ideology of coalition partners, that original motives were forgotten. It degenerated into a meaningless endeavour leading to mass mutual attrition with no tangible outcome. The battles became more furious, with many more systematically annihilated.

Over twenty billion lives were lost, and yet no side had gained any meaningful advantage. There was still no end in sight. Then one day, the enemy, while desperately experimenting in its own camp with what was regarded as the ultimate destructive weapon, accidentally set off a terrible explosion.

The explosion was the equivalent of several giant stars blowing up at the same time and it lit up the eastern skies for two months in a brazen red that threatened to engulf the entire galaxy. The threat mercifully subsided to the relief of those that remained. The subsequent quiet signalled the end of the enemy. All the surviving galactic supreme council had to do was conduct mopping-up operations to ensure that no traces of the enemy remained.

The next priority was to ensure that such a conflict would never occur again. The Supreme Galactic Council was firm in its belief that this could be achieved by having a strict civil code, which was unilaterally enforced. The code was named the Supreme Galactic Council Formula for Sensible Living.

“Appam time. Time to celebrate,” yelled Shobha from inside the house.

“Where?” Anand asked for they often snacked on the porch.

“In the formal dining room this time. Shobha has gone to town with her Appams, quite a few north Indian delicacies and a number of choice wines,” said Venkat, standing up and leading the way.

The table had been laid out for a very special occasion. Anand could see Noritake tableware, engraved silver knives, forks and spoons, embroidered serviettes neatly rolled into silver holders and wine glasses made from Czechoslovakian crystal. Cooling in three champagne buckets were two bottles of Californian Merlot and the third, Anand could make out, was a local Indage White Chantilly.

“Three bottles for just us?” Anand asked.

“Don’t worry—there is more in the fridge,” said Bebo as she triumphantly entered the dining room with three plates containing Appams delicately balanced on two hands and forearms.

After having consumed four bottles of wine between them, all three were high and chattering away animatedly like soul-mates when Venkat suddenly stood up and said. “It’s past twelve. I better go to sleep. I’ve got any early start. You two take your time.”

Turning to Bebo, he added, “Anand wanted to look at the galaxy which has Tsygres. Bring him around ten—we’ll be ready by then. Then you two go to the Indage Wine festival. We have VVIP passes.”

“Pity you have to work this particular Saturday,” remarked Bebo.

“We are commissioning our new link with Kavalur. There’s a lot to be completed even after commissioning. I’ll only be finished by late evening. But you two have a good time there.”

Venkat walked off leaving the two of them still lying side-by-side on the large swing. Shobha turned to Anand and whispered, “I’ll go and change into something more comfortable.” She returned wearing a sheer nightie. She wore no bra underneath and Anand could make out the black patch of pubic hair through her skin-coloured panty. The nightie had buttons all down the front but the top three were still to be buttoned. He could see her white rounded left breast. It had a large areola which was dark with the nipple tantalisingly erect. Shobha came and lay down next to Anand, snuggling up to him.

“You are an enigma,” whispered Anand.

“In what way?”

“You’re either the angel or the downright devil.”

“What am I right now?”

“The downright devil!”

“Downright devil is nice. Being an angel can be very boring. Let me see what my man can come up with,” she said reaching out for the bulge under his thick denim trousers. It was growing but still not hard. She held on and felt the throbbing.

“Getting there, I guess.”

“Tell me why are you doing this?”

“To save you from the powers that be in the galaxy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Venkat didn’t give you all the details when he mentioned the Galactic Formula for Sensible Living.”

“What details did he miss?”

“It’s a bad, bad world out there. With war having wiped out majority of the population, the few that survived inherited thirty-seven planets with tonnes of valuable resources and unpaid robots to do all the work. They are floating in money. If you’re only a millionaire, and I am talking dollars not rupees, you’re poor. They’re all billionaires with precious little to keep them occupied. Now with rejuvenated long lives the entire emphasis is on sex, more sex and power.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“The only place which is still civilised is Tsygres.” Looking at him she asked suspiciously. “Hope they’re not using you to assist in the corruption of Tsygres as well.”

“Come on, of course not. I’ve been asked to help understand relationships and help improve on them. You know me. I wouldn’t get involved in anything that was remotely sinister.”

“Sometimes I feel I don’t know you—neither myself. Sincerely speaking, I get very apprehensive,” confided Shobha.



Anand felt it was time for another bottle. He got up and picked a mature red wine this time. He filled her glass. “Drink up—we were celebrating, if you remember.”

“So we were,” Shobha said cuddling up close.

“Come on what were you telling me about the bad, bad world out there?” urged Anand.

“It may be fun for some but it could spell danger for you. You see, homosexuality is a strict no-no under this code and I believe the penalties, if one is caught, are quite severe.”

“I do not see why this is being imposed on us?”

“It is not imposed here on Earth. We get to manage our planet the way we want, but out there, it is what they dictate, that prevails.”

“So you are teaching me the ways of heterosexuals.”

“No harm trying, would you say?”

“And what if you succeed and I turned on you, ripped off your clothes and started forcing myself on you?”

“I’d be scared. Wouldn’t know what to do. Couldn’t be unfaithful to my darling Venkat.”

“Then stop playing with fire.”

“I know what I would do,” muttered Shobha after a pause.

“What’s that?”

“I’d hand you over to Mrs. Braganza.”

“The maid next door?”

“Not a maid but an educated widow. She is a qualified teacher and gives private tuition to three children there. She would love to go to bed with you. I have seen the way she looks at you and the last time she asked a lot about when you were coming next.”

“No, never with her,” retorted Anand.

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