From Somewhere Out There
Karthika Dass
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Prologue

Almost a thousand light years away, in a far away planet, a meeting was held. It was silent, and the communication took place through thoughts.

"Is it ready?"
"Yes."

"Will it work?"
"Yes, most certainly!"

"It has to! Has the target been chosen?"
"Yes."

"Do they suspect anything?"
"No, nothing."

"That is as it should be! When is the launch?"
"Almost immediately."

"Why has it taken so long? The plan was approved a long time ago!"

"The delay was in producing the proper equipment."

"Was it difficult?"
"Yes, a little. We had to go backwards in time to produce their technology."

"Are you ready now?"
"Yes, absolutely."

"Then let us launch."

After a few moments of final preparations, the group of eight watched the launch sequence of the machine they had struggled very hard to produce. The success of their mission depended on it. They looked at it with silent satisfaction as the machine streaked towards the third planet from a star called the Sun.
Sowmya sat intensely staring at the computer screen in front of her. Her twin brother, Siddharth, sat watching another screen, gazing at the wavy lines that danced across it. Both of them were not aware of the light blinking just above the screen for quite sometime. And then the flashing light slowly intruded into their concentration and they both jolted upright at the same moment. Siddharth hurriedly pressed a button beneath the light and switched off the flashing bulb. It was time for dinner. Their mother had just informed them that.

They started cleaning the things and switching off the screens silently. They had no need to talk to each other since they could read each other's minds. They took one last look at their den before turning off the lights. It looked like a surreal scene from a science fiction movie. Monitors and display units of computers and other scientific instruments stood lined up on long tables. Cables and wires ran along the ground connecting the instruments to the power source and to each other. A big table lined one of the walls and a huge bookshelf occupied another. The curtains were drawn across the two windows and
the light from the display units bathed the room in a ghostly fluorescent green. It didn't quite look like a den of fourteen-year-old kids. They turned and Sowmya locked the door behind her and took the key.

Sowmya was almost as tall as Siddharth but a little fairer than he was. Her long hair hung in two neatly braided plaits that came down to her waist. She had a cherubic face and had dimples which appeared when she smiled, making her look much younger than fourteen. Siddharth was elder to her by three minutes but he felt much older than her and felt responsible towards her. Unlike his sister, Siddharth had a face that looked matured beyond his fourteen years. The thoughtful look in his eyes gave the impression that he was always deeply pondering about something as grave as the mysteries of the universe. But it was always Sowmya who took up any responsibility that came their way. Siddharth was happy to follow her lead.

The twins stepped out into the cold night air. They were born in the hill station of Paalaadi, a few kilometres from Munnar and were used to the cold. The chilly breeze that was blowing freshened them up instantly. The smell of the tea leaves from the plantation that stretched around them was soothing as always. It made them feel safe. It was a smell that had become an integral part of Siddharth and Sowmya's lives since their birth.

They started walking on the narrow path that led from their den to the house.

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'Den' perhaps was not the right word to describe the place because it was more like a study-cum-laboratory. Their parents built it for them as per their requirements and had installed everything they had asked for in it. They had known from a very early stage that Siddharth and Sowmya were very different from other non-identical twins. They were as communicative with each other and as close to each other as identical twins. They were inseparable and had an IQ bordering on genius. Noticing this, their parents had admitted the two at the Kodai International School, an internationally renowned school at Kodaikanal. But after studying for a year they had refused to go back to the school. They had told their parents that the education they would get at the school in Munnar was sufficient for them. Though Paalaadi was in the state of Tamil Nadu but Munnar in Kerala was more easily accessible than Kodaikanal. So they had chosen the school at Munnar. They didn't want more of academics. They wanted challenges. Their parents couldn't deny the logic behind this reasoning.

And so, they had given their parents a list of things they wanted. Their father had almost collapsed with shock when he had looked at it. It contained an inventory that was more than enough to put up an astronomical observatory in their backyard. And that was exactly what Siddharth and Sowmya proposed to do.

"From where am I to get these things? And how much are they going to cost me?" Their father had
asked them disbelievingly. He failed to understand how two school-going adolescents, however bright they might be, could set up and maintain an observatory that was in the realm of astronomers.

"Just get us a computer, the latest, and an Internet connection, Daddy. We will do the shopping ourselves," Sowmya had said, grinning with pleasure seeing the shocked look on her father's face.

"And as for the cost, it would be only a little more than what it would cost you to send us both to Kodai International School for three years. This is a better investment than that," Siddharth had said in his inimitable style.

"I need time to think about this one," their father had said. And then he had finally decided that his children were right and that it was worth the investment. It would eat into his profits for a few years. But he never did bother much about profits anyway.

The computer arrived first, and later an Internet connection, the first in the town of Paalaadi. The twins had asked their father to spare them one of his telephones, which he did. A few weeks later, letters from companies in the United States of America and the United Kingdom began to arrive. They informed their father that he better be ready to make payments for the goods that would be arriving at their doorstep soon. A few calls came to him from customs clearance. And after that huge crates and big boxes started arriving with regular interval. The entire town of Paalaadi watched in awe, as the crates were unloaded and taken to their study.
When their study was being built, the twins had not planned for an observatory. To make it into an observatory they had to modify a few things in the study. After days of concerted effort, they finally announced that their observatory was ready. Siddharth and Sowmya spent all their spare time in the study. This was their first functioning day in their observatory after it had been completely set up.

The warm smell of their mother's cooking greeted them at the dinner table. The table was set and their parents were already seated, waiting for them so that they could start their daily dinner ritual. Siddharth and Sowmya quickly washed their hands and joined them. The prayers were done and the conversation started flowing freely.

"Is everything up to your satisfaction?" started Mr. Murali, their father.

"Yes, Daddy. We have even started our work," said Sowmya, always the first one to answer.

"What have you actually got in that study of yours?" asked Mrs. Saritha, their mother, half mockingly and half seriously.

"Would you like a list, Mom?" asked Sowmya.

"Not just a list, Sowmya, but also what each thing does. I am curious to know," added her mother.

"Oh! I am not sure you will understand, but I will explain anyway. Let us first finish dinner. I am famished," Sowmya said.

They agreed and the conversation turned to other things. After Siddharth helped his mother clear the
table, Sowmya helped her wash the dishes and they settled down in front of a warm, crackling fire, eager to listen to what Sowmya had to say.

"Okay, Mummy, here goes," Sowmya started. "A full scale observatory would contain observatory domes, CCDs, optical filters, spectrometers, photon detectors, computers, signal processing hardware, data storage mechanisms, processing software, the necessary accessories, ETI laser beacon simulators, video/audio photon noise converters and much more. We have got only the essential ones."

"Phew! That is quite a list. And everything is Greek and Latin to me, especially that ETI stuff. What is it anyway?" asked her mother.

"Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence," said Sowmya matter-of-factly.

It had a devastating effect on her parents.

"Extra-Terrestrial as in 'outside earth'?" asked her incredulous father.

Sowmya just nodded. The shock of her parents was almost palpable.

"Oh Daddy! Did you think we were getting all these fancy equipment just to look at the stars?" asked Sowmya in mock disbelief.

Incredible as it sounded, her parents had thought exactly that. They had believed that their children were getting deeper into astronomy. Secretly, both of them were thrilled with the choice of their children's subject. They both loved astronomy and were very disheartened that they could not devote more time to it other than an occasional longing look
at the bejewelled sky. But Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence? This was right over their heads.

"Will you explain what you are up to?" asked their father, a little worriedly.

Sowmya almost laughed at her father's alarm.

"Nothing much, Daddy. We are just looking for possible signals from ETI," said Siddharth in a soothing voice.

"And that isn't much?" asked his mother shaking her head.

"No, Mom, it actually isn't," he said.

Sowmya let him continue because she knew that Siddharth had a way of stating things that calmed his listeners and made them feel that what he was saying was not only plausible, but also commonplace.

Siddharth continued in the same calm voice.

"What we have planned to do is actually a fraction of what is being done all over the world, Daddy. There is even an organization purely devoted to this. It is called SETI—Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence. We have only volunteered to do some of the analysis for SETI," said Siddharth and paused. He wanted to allow his parents some time, so that the full importance of his words would sink in.

"What does this 'analysis' mean?" asked his father.

"To understand that you have to first understand the modus operandi of SETI. This may take quite a while. And it includes a lot of jargon. Do you think you are up to it?" asked Siddharth. He knew that his parents were up to anything he said to them. But he just wanted them to get ready for all the scientific
jargon he was going to set forth to educate them.

His parents settled down a little more comfortably and just nodded their readiness.

"The SETI program is situated at UC Berkeley, USA. They have made arrangements with the Arecibo telescope, (the largest, single-dish, most sensitive radio telescope, with the largest curved focusing antenna in the world) in Puerto Rico to watch the skies for signals. The data from Arecibo are recorded on high-density tapes which fill a 35-gigabyte tape per day. The data is then divided into 0.25-megabyte chunks called work units. These work units are then transmitted to people all over the world who have volunteered to do the individual analysis. And this is what we will be getting," Siddharth looked at his parents, expecting them to question him for further clarification. He had purposely kept his explanation short.

"Let me see if I have understood you so far," said his father. "SETI is the organization that is looking for evidence of ETI and you are helping them in a way, right?"

"Yes. That is the gist of it," agreed Siddharth.

"So far, so good," said his father and continued, "what is this data you are talking about?" he asked.

"That is the most important thing, Daddy. You see there are a lot of spectra, which could contain the ETI signal. It could be in any of the visible light, infrared, far infra, ultra violet or near infra spectrum; that is, assuming that the signal is in the optical spectrum. But SETI is looking for radio signals and
this is what they send out to us. The data is in the form of continuous waves or pulsed radio signals. This is because we humans have assumed that they would be sending us a signal in the most efficient manner for them that would allow us to easily detect the message. Since sending a message over a broadband (spread over many frequencies) signal takes a lot of power, we expect it to be in a very narrow frequency range. There is a particular frequency range that is naturally a very quiet area where the Radio Frequency Interference (RFI) is less. Any ET who is technologically advanced would know this and would choose this band to send a signal. That is the logical assumption on which the whole search is based. The Arecibo is not a moving telescope. Since it is fixed in position, it takes about 12 seconds for a target to cross the target beam of the Arecibo's dish. So we expect an ETI signal to get louder and then softer over a 12-second period, a Gaussian signal. This Gaussian signal is the one we are looking for in all the mass of data," concluded Siddharth.

Silence reigned, while his parents tried to digest the extraordinary information that was being given to them.

"And it is not just a Gaussian signal we are looking for, but also a chirped signal," said Siddharth, breaking the silence.

"And what is a chirped signal?" asked his mother in an almost exhausted tone.

"Let us say that the ETI signal is originating from their planet," said Siddharth. "We must keep in mind
that it could also originate from a signal beacon launched by them into space. But for now, let us just say that the signal is originating from their planet. In that case, the motions of both our planet and theirs would cause a slight change in the frequency of the signal. This is scientifically known as Doppler shifting. This Doppler shifting might cause the signal to rise or fall in frequency slightly over the 12-second period. This signal is known as a chirped signal. Our analysis will also be checking for a chirped signal that contains pulses too."

"Cutting out all the jargon, what you are trying to say is that you are looking for signals that grow louder and softer over a 12-second period. Have I understood you correctly?" asked his father.

"Perfectly," said Sowmya.

"And how do you propose to find such a signal?" asked her mother.

"It is very simple, Mom. We are lending our computer to SETI so that they can use our system to do some of the analysis on the raw data delivered to them from Arecibo," explained Siddharth.

"And what does your computer do?" asked his mother again.

"Please don't ask us all that, Mom" said Siddharth. "It would be only too confusing. All you need to know is that our computer performs a little over 175 billion calculations on 107 seconds of data to find out if there is a possible ETI signal in it somewhere. And that is all there is to it," Siddharth said reassuringly.
"What! 175 billion calculations on 107 seconds of data!" exclaimed his mother.

"At this rate when will your computer finish? Looks like it may take weeks and weeks to complete one work unit!" wondered his father.

"Actually no, Daddy. It takes our system just twenty-four hours to finish one work unit, provided it isn't doing anything else," said Siddharth.

"Just one day for 175 billion calculations!" exclaimed his father and shook his head in disbelief.

He watched the fire, lost in the deluge of information his children had smothered him in. Mrs. Saritha stared with sightless eyes outside the window into the dark night, thinking and digesting, and trying to follow the thread of the events to their conclusion.

Siddharth and Sowmya just smiled. They were both thrilled that they had impressed their parents so much. And they also found it a joy to share their sense of adventure and excitement with such keen listeners. They both didn't know why they had chosen this enormous, expensive, enchanting and intriguing field for their study. There had been no discussion between them as to the choice of their subject. Somehow they had just known that this was what they wanted to do. They just knew, in their heart of hearts, that the question was not about the existence of Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence but about the possibility of making contact with them.

"And what happens if you do find an ETI signal?" asked Mrs. Saritha softly, still staring out of the
window. She was speaking almost to herself.

"What? What did you say?" asked her husband, sitting up with a jolt.

"And what happens if they do find an ETI signal?" she said, coming out of her reverie.

Siddharth smiled, ready with the answer. He had expected the question as he watched his mother arrange her thoughts in order.

"A lot of things, Mom," he said. "First the data has to be sent back to Berkeley. They have a database of known RFI. Almost 99.9999% of all signals will be RFI. The remaining unresolved signal will be checked against another observation in the same part of the sky. And if SETI uses Arecibo to check the data, then this could take up to six months because SETI@home is not the only assignment Arecibo has. But they can also use other means and other groups to check the data. If the same signal is observed again a few more times and it is confirmed not to be RFI, then a different group will be asked to make observations. This group will use different equipment and after this group confirms the signals, interferometry measurements (two observations separated by a big distance) will be taken. If this too confirms the signal then an International Astronomical Union (IAU) telegram, containing information like the frequency, bandwidth and the location in the sky will be sent all over the world. This is to enable observation and confirmation by various other groups around the world. The person or persons, in this case, Sowmya and me, whose computer made the detection, will
be named as co-discoverers. This is what happens if we find an ETI signal/' Siddharth concluded.

"And what happens after that, Siddharth?" asked his mother.

"It is anybody's guess, Mom. If it really is an ETI signal, then we will have to figure out a way to decipher it. We wouldn't know what language or even what mode of communication they will use. Once we find a way to decipher it, we will have to find a way to decode it because we are almost sure that it will be in code. And once it is decoded, we have to find a way to be sure that we have decoded it correctly and that we have in our hands what was originally sent by them. And then...and then everything depends on what the message says," paused Siddharth.

"What could the message say?" asked his mother with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation.

"Anything, Mom, it could say anything. Anything from a friendly hello to a possibility of an invasion. It could say anything," said Siddharth in a gentle whisper letting his mother absorb the information.

Silence fell on the family heavily. The imagined implications of Siddharth's words could almost be heard amidst the soothing crackling of the fire and the gentle rush of a winter breeze outside the cosy confines of their home.

One by one they whispered their 'goodnights' and went to bed, leaving Mr. Murali, still lost in his thoughts, seated by a dying fire. The smell of pinewood slowly dissolved and the room began to
grow dark and cold. Mr. Murali roused himself from his reverie and looked around his comfortable home. He sighed deeply with contentment and a vague uneasiness, and left to lock the front door. He stood at the open door, looking at the clear, cold sky and the sparkling stars and wondered what sort of message would come out of such peaceful beauty. He locked the door and went to bed, unaware of the target his planet had become, to a machine invented almost a thousand light years away.
Days turned into weeks with Siddharth and Sowmya deeply immersed in their observatory. They spent all their waking hours, other than the time spent in school, in studying the results of the analysis of the work unit sent in by SETI@home.

Their computer functioned in the same way as the master computer at SETI. SETI@home was a software that was capable of performing the billions of calculations necessary to identify a possible ETI signal. Whenever their computer was free, the SETI@home screensaver logged on. The screensaver was divided into four areas. The User Info area gave the details about the person or persons running that particular block of data, the total number of work units that person has analyzed so far and the total time that computer has spent in analyzing the data from SETI. The second area, the Data Info area contained the information regarding the block of data that was being analyzed by that computer. It provided information regarding the location of the sky the data was collected from, the time it was recorded, the telescope that collected the data, namely, the Arecibo, and finally, the frequency of the data that was being
analyzed. The Data Analysis area gave the information about what the computer was doing on the work unit, and the last area, the Frequency-Time-Power graph gave the graphical representation of the calculations that were being done by the computer.

And when this screensaver logged on the computer happened, the computer instantly connected to the SETI server. The data was then transferred automatically to the computer and the system did the analysis on the transferred data. Once they used the computer for another purpose, the connection was logged off. Siddharth and Sowmya were planning to use their system only for SETI analysis and for the analysis of the data collected from their backyard telescope.

They had programmed their computer so that it would on its own back up the results of the analysis. They studied them at length and tried to find a 12-second pulse that would give them some hope of it being from an ETI.

They were also involved in their own search for an ETI signal. Since they had set up a small radio telescope, they were hoping that they would be able to detect a continuous wave or a pulsed signal. Their telescope was a very basic one and they weren’t so sure that they would detect any signals from it. They had set it up to satisfy their curiosity and thirst for knowledge. They wanted the satisfaction of doing something other than lending their computer for SETI's analysis.

Sowmya was the computer wizard and so she sat
monitoring the SETI@home. Siddharth had a taste and aptitude for the astronomical and the physical sciences. He understood the various complicated instruments and how to work them as if he had been working with them for all of his fourteen years. He kept checking the display unit to see if any potential target passed along the target beam of the telescope.

"Maybe it wasn't such a good idea, after all," Sowmya said softly, looking at the monitor.

Siddharth glanced at her and turned away instantly. He knew what she was feeling. He was feeling the same. But he couldn't let her know that.

"Maybe it wasn't," said Siddharth and paused. "But then again, maybe it was. Who can say?" he said. Siddharth was the more philosophical of the twins. He had reassured his sister many a time with his philosophic thinking.

"We shouldn't have let Daddy invest so much in this hare-brained scheme of ours," said Sowmya after a pause. Her brother didn't reassure her this time. "I am sure he has lost much of the profit from the plantation on this," she continued, unable to keep the guilt out of her voice.

"He would have thought about all that, Sowmya. He is not the one to sink so much money into this if he didn't think it was worth it," Siddharth reasoned. He knew his sister. If he didn't stop her early, she would get out of hand with her self-derision.

"Do you think so?" Sowmya asked hopefully. "Do you really think Daddy thinks all this is worth it?" she asked again.
"Yes, I do, Sowmya. Otherwise he wouldn't be asking us every day how we are coming along, would he?" asked Siddharth.

And that was exactly what their father had been doing every day. He asked them their progress even if he knew that there wasn't any. Somehow it seemed that their father was more interested in finding something than they were. Probably he too wanted to make sure that he had made a worthwhile investment.

"We have been doing this only for a few weeks, Sowmya, and already we are beginning to have doubts. Imagine what the people at SETI must be feeling. They have been at this for more than 40 years," said Siddharth gently, trying to soothe his sister.

Sowmya fell silent, thinking about what her brother had said. There was truth in his words, Sowmya knew. It was true that SETI had been searching the skies for more than 40 years and they had instruments and telescopes worth millions of dollars. And here she was worried about the relatively meagre investment they had made.

Sowmya looked at her brother and smiled inwardly. She felt relieved. She knew that she could always depend on him when she felt a little lost. Though she appeared to be the more dominant of the two, when they were alone and in their moments of private doubts, both of them knew that it was Siddharth who was the real leader between them.

The computer screen was scrolling the results of
the data that was fed to it. She gazed at it with sightless eyes, her thoughts far away. Suddenly her eyes focused on something that was being displayed on the screen. She leaned forward, instantly alert and scrolled the display back by a few lines.

"Which data are we analyzing right now?" she asked Siddharth.

Siddharth snapped to the peculiar tone in his sister's voice. He knew what it meant. She was on to something. "The data from our telescopic readings," he said, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Oh!" said Sowmya. "When was this recorded?" she asked further.

Siddharth went up to the screen and looked at a series of numbers on the top left-hand corner. He then went back and consulted a few notes and said, "Three days back, and that should be Tuesday. And that particular data was recorded from..." he consulted his notes once again and said, "...from 2142 hrs. to 2146 hrs."

Sowmya was now intently looking at the screen and noting down something from it.

Siddharth watched her. He knew that she would call out to him at the right time when she was ready.

Sowmya was scrolling backwards and forwards, fiercely concentrating.

"Give me the data for Wednesday," she told Siddharth without turning.

Siddharth handed it to her instantly. He had already guessed that she might need the data for the next three days and had them ready.
Sowmya fed the data and quickly ignored almost all of it and concentrated on one particular segment. When she saw the results on the screen, she tensed visibly and drew in her breath.

Siddharth handed her the data for Thursday without her asking, and again Sowmya concentrated on one particular segment. When the results appeared, her eyes narrowed to slits and she gripped the armrests of her chair until her knuckles turned white. She then suddenly took a deep breath and proceeded to print certain segments of the analyzed results of the data of three days.

She tore the sheets out of the printer impatiently and turned to Siddharth. She glanced at the clock on the wall and it showed exactly 9.30 p.m.

"Just enough time. Siddharth, come and have a look at these. We don't have much time, 12 minutes to be exact," she said with urgency.

Siddharth walked over to her and took the printed sheets. He examined them and the surprise showed on his face which turned to a silent excitement when he glanced at all the sheets. He went up to the computer and silently scrolled through pages and pages of the analysis. He chose particular segments and copied them to a different file. He then opened this file and looked at the screen with a look of anticipation, hope and uncertainty.

He too, then suddenly glanced at the clock. It showed 9.41 p.m. He looked at Sowmya for a silent moment. They both then walked over to the display unit and stood looking at it with intense excitement.
After exactly four minutes, they hurried to the computer and fed in the raw data. The results started appearing after what seemed to be an interminable wait. A segment of it matched perfectly with the printed results they had in hand.

Siddharth and Sowmya sank into their chairs with silent sighs.

"What does this mean?" asked Sowmya, breaking the silence.

"I don't know, Sowmya. I guess we can't come to any conclusion until and unless we get confirmation from higher authorities," he said.

"And who do we go to?" asked Sowmya.

"SETI, who else?" answered Siddharth.

"But it will take them six months to verify all this," she said, pointing to the printed results.

"No, it will not. They are not going to verify Arecibo's readings. Only if they have to use Arecibo will it take that long. This is just a check against known RFI. If that can be verified then I think we can be fifty per cent sure," said Siddharth.

"When can we be a hundred per cent sure?" asked Sowmya impatiently.

"I wish I could answer that," said Siddharth and fell silent thinking about the possibilities that the printed sheets and the computer screen had opened.

He looked at the sheets again. Sowmya joined him, looking over his shoulder. The pages showed a particular pattern of a signal at exactly the same time every day for the past three days. If they included today, that made it four days. There was
a pulsed signal between 2142 hrs. and 2146 hrs. every
day. It was quite strong and it lasted for nearly
a minute. It started out suddenly and stopped
suddenly and it was visible against the atmospheric
radio wave clutter. It came through undoubtedly
and registered clearly on the recordings.

They had come across many signals in their
recordings. But what made them pay attention to this
one was the regularity and the repetitiveness of the
signal. The other signals they had noted in their
earlier recordings were not so regular and they were
almost never repeated. They recorded once and were
almost never recorded again. But what they couldn't
understand was the total absence of Doppler shifting.
The signal came through clearly and it was not
a Gaussian signal either. It appeared as if the signal
was coming from a relatively close source that wasn't
subjected to the Gaussian signal principle and the
Doppler shifting effect.

"What do we do now?" asked Sowmya.
"I don't know. But I think we should wait for
a few more days and see if the signal is repeated,
before going to SETI," said Siddharth.
"That sounds reasonable," agreed Sowmya. "Do
we say anything to Daddy?" she asked.
"Absolutely not. Not until we can also tell him that
it is an ETI signal and not some RFI," replied
Siddharth vehemently.

Sowmya fell silent again. She knew the tone of her
brother's voice. Moreover, she couldn't find fault
with the reasoning behind Siddharth's decision.

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Sowmya looked at the clock.
"Time to lock up, Siddharth. Do we keep the telescope operational?" she asked.
"I don't think that will be necessary. We can be sure that there won't be any more signals tonight," he replied.
Sowmya understood the logic behind his thinking. They could safely lock up their study until the next night because they knew that they wouldn't be receiving any more signals until 2142 hrs. They took a lingering look at their amateur observatory. Almost identical thoughts ran through their minds. They could both feel a sense of bewildered excitement at the thought that their little study had become an unlikely venue for an unknown adventure.
They locked up silently and stepped outside into the night. Sowmya looked up at the clear sky, almost searching for the source of their secret signal among the cold stars. Siddharth touched her gently, as they walked towards their home, little suspecting that a satellite, sent from a thousand light years away, has been put into the orbit around the earth.
Lt. Colonel Lionel Nash looked up eagerly as a polite knock sounded at his door. He was bored and he welcomed any intrusion at the most difficult part of the day, late afternoon, when nothing seemed to happen. His secretary, Cynthia, walked in. She did not wait to take his permission because she knew that he didn't like formalities.

"This just came in from NASA, sir," she said, handing over a brown envelope.

Nash reached out eagerly and almost snatched it from her. He was glad that at last there was something to do. He hurriedly glanced at the sheets inside and his brows knitted together in a surprised frown. He went through the papers again, this time slowly, sometimes re-reading passages so that he was sure that he did not miss out anything. When he finished he sat back in his chair, deeply immersed in his thoughts.

"Do you need anything else, sir?" Cynthia asked.

She knew that he could sit like that for hours, oblivious to the world around him. Unless she interrupted his thoughts she would be standing there for the rest of the day.
"Oh! I am sorry, Cynthia. Could you please send for Captain Hawthorne?" he asked her with an apologetic smile.

"Right away, sir," said Cynthia and hurried away, closing the door gently behind her.

Nash looked at the sheets in front of him once again. He had received hundreds of reports in the months he had taken over this assignment. However, the one on his table really intrigued him. His gut feeling was that this was something different. There was a vague sense of premonition, and an uneasy feeling slowly churned his stomach.

Project Blue book was one of a series of systematic studies of Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) conducted by the United States Air Force (U.S.A.F.). This project was dropped in 1969. In 1977, the US Congress directed the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to examine the possibility of resuming this study. But the idea was rejected. Again in October 1992, the US Congress asked NASA to undertake a project named Towards Other Planetary Systems' (TOPS) under the High Resolution Microwave Survey (HRMS). This too was stopped due to financial constraints. The HRMS programme was also known as the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI). And now the SETI Institute, located at Mountain View, California, was carrying on this work, having borrowed the signal processing system from NASA. This SETI Institute was not related to the SETI organization that was carrying out its own search using the Arecibo
telescope. And all the records and documentation regarding Project Blue Book were declassified and transferred to the National Archives and Records Administration. And now all that anyone interested in finding out about it had to do was to go to the National Archives and ask for the records.

NASA and the U.S.A.F. put up notices saying that they were not engaged in day-to-day UFO research and that they were not reviewing any articles or drawings and investigating any sightings reported to either of them. And that was the official version of the story. Unofficially, the Air Force decided that they couldn't just leave things like that as the Project Blue Book, when it was operational, was under the Air Force with its headquarters at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. Of the 12,618 sightings that were reported to then, and investigated, 701 were classified under the heading 'unidentified'.

So the Air Force maintained a token presence in the field. There was no official department or project but an Air Force officer in the rank of Lieutenant Colonel was delegated to deal with any sightings that were reported, both by Air Force pilots and by civilians who didn't know who else to call when they sighted something.

Lt. Colonel Lionel Nash seemed to be the automatic choice to oversee the project. He was a graduate in Physics, from the Berry College, Georgia, and had done a 10-week internship with SETI Institute before joining the U.S.A.F. He was the sole person who
constituted the 'department' and didn't even have a separate secretary but shared one from the secretarial pool at the Pentagon. His major duty was to go through the numerous reports that came in from all over the country and analyze them and give his opinion as to whether the report merited further investigation. Though there were hundreds of reports that came in, most of them were nothing that could not be explained. It was so easy to mistake a weather balloon to be a UFO in the fading light of dusk or dawn or in the darkness of the night skies. Most of his work was tedious and sometimes downright boring. He had asked for a transfer from the department twice and had been refused both times. There were days when he cursed himself for opting Physics as his subject of undergraduate study.

And so it had been a shock to both himself and his superiors when Captain Hawthorne, of the Snow Hawk Brigade, 172nd Infantry Brigade, Fort Wainwright, Alaska, specifically asked to be posted to this department on a permanent basis. He had declined to give his reasons for such a request and had only said that he would like to be attached to the project. It was a highly unusual request and it was after a real long debate between the Army and the Air Force top brass that he was given the posting, but on an eight months' probation. If he proved himself in this period, then he would be stationed on a permanent basis. And he had proved himself to be a diligent researcher, never tiring of chasing down even the most mundane calls of sightings. He filed
exhaustive reports and stated his reasons concisely and clearly as to why he either approved or rejected a particular sighting as worth pursuing or not.

After a few weeks of observing him and watching him work, Nash began to feel that Hawthorne might be the one good thing to have happened to him and to the 'department'. And he had argued vociferously for posting him permanently when his probation was up and he was called to offer his assessment of the Captain. There had been no long debates when his eight months were up and he was posted permanently as the Assistant Investigator in the project. Lt. Colonel Nash would be his superior and Hawthorne didn't seem to be perturbed about that.

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Nash remembered the day he had first met Captain Hawthorne. He had liked him from the moment he had seen him. There was an air of a relaxed purposefulness about him even as he had spoken to Nash.

'Sit down, Captain. Let us keep this informal,' Nash had said.

Hawthorne had nodded and had taken the only other chair in the cramped cubicle.

Nash's office was a small room with only a single window with no view. It opened out to face a corner wall of the Pentagon and so Nash never opened it. The only other furniture in his office was two large filing cabinets brimming with files. Only recently he had asked for and had been given a computer. He didn't have a separate table to put it, so he kept it on his table. That left almost no room for his papers.
'I must get another table/ Nash had thought as he saw Hawthorne pulling his chair a little to the right so that he could see Nash's face clearly.

The afternoon light that filtered in silhouetted him against the closed window, leaving his face in the shadow. Nash remembered looking at the man closely. He had read Hawthorne's file many times and almost knew the contents by heart. But he wanted to hear him talk. That way he could get a personal glimpse of the man.

"I am a little curious about something, Captain Hawthorne. Would you answer me if I asked you a question?" Nash had asked.

"Of course yes, sir."

"How did you know about this department, if you can call this a department?"

"I have my own sources, sir," Hawthorne had replied, with a hint of a smile.

"Did you by any chance choose this assignment because you expected it to be an easy one?" Nash had asked that question, knowing fully well the answer would be no.

"I think you know the answer to that one, sir," Hawthorne had a mischievous smile on his face.

Nash could not have helped liking the man sitting in front of him as he had talked to him. The smile was an added incentive to like him. It burst on him like a sudden summer shower from a passing cloud and the effect lingered on even after he stopped smiling. The dark hair and the square jaw gave him a regal and remote look that was transformed into
an open and warm one the moment he smiled. But Nash was most taken in with his eyes. They had looked straight at him from the moment he had walked in and saluted him and hadn't left his face even for a moment. Unlike most of the people he had met, Hawthorne's eyes never shifted their focus and never looked anywhere else other than right into the eyes of the person he was speaking to. Yet Nash hadn't felt uncomfortable under his gaze. He had felt very relaxed and unthreatened, and that told him everything about the calibre of the man sitting in front of him.

"Actually, I do," Nash had said, returning the smile. He had paused for a moment, looking at Hawthorne. "I know this is not part of the routine, but I would like to know, Captain, why did you choose this assignment? What is there in it for a man like you?" Nash had further asked.

Hawthorne had topped his class when he had passed out of the Military Academy, West Point and his rise to the rank of Captain was meteoric. Nash couldn't understand the logic behind Hawthorne's desire to be posted to a dead-end posting. His career would not have gone anywhere from there.

Hawthorne had suddenly become serious and uncertain.

"Let us just say I have my own reasons and leave it at that, sir," he had replied after a long pause. His relaxed yet firm tone left no further room for questions.

Nash had looked at Hawthorne and marvelled at
the man's ability to keep others comfortable even while telling them to mind their own business.

Strangely, Nash hadn't felt offended by Hawthorne's reply. 'Maybe it has something to do with that incident,' thought Nash, thinking about a special incident that had been mentioned in Hawthorne's personal record.

Hawthorne had been based at Fort Wainwright, Alaska. His platoon had been called to perform a rescue operation during one severe winter. He had led his soldiers in a search and rescue mission to the site where a lone trekker was reported to have been lost. The trekker had had his Geo Positioning System (GPS) locator switched on and so locating him did not appear to be too much of a problem.

What looked like a simple locate and gather mission turned out to be a life altering experience for Hawthorne.

The trekker had fallen into a deep crevasse. At the height of winter temperatures routinely touched -50°F in Alaska. Locating the trekker had not been a problem but reaching him had been. Hawthorne had climbed down the crevasse alone and had brought up the injured and deeply delirious man. He had been gone down the crevasse for so long that his lieutenant had thought that they had lost him, too and had radioed for more help. But Hawthorne had come up and more importantly, he had brought the trekker up. It should have been a routine mission by Army standards except for the fact that Hawthorne
appeared to have changed after that incident.

The man he had rescued was Gregory Perkins, a well-known multimillionaire who had a passion for trekking solo in places unexplored by others.

Perkins was a popular figure in the country, both with the people and with the media. His was a classic rags-to-riches story. He had lost his parents when he was very young and had grown up in various orphanages and childcare institutions. He had come up the hard way and he had made his millions by designing and building what he called to be 'envomes'—homes that functioned with energy derived from the environment, mostly the sun and the wind.

The homes (he didn't call them apartments) he designed and built were constructed of environmentally safe material found easily and used the local technology and labour to build them. And, as a matter of principle, he didn't build huge homes or mansions. He built one- or at the most two-storey buildings that had four or six homes. He allotted one bedroom for a couple and one for the child. If there were both girls and boys in the family then he allotted one room for the girl and one for the boy. The number of rooms would not increase even if there were more than two children in the family. Instead he would make the rooms larger. There was one kitchen and one living room and each bedroom had an attached bathroom. His buildings typically had a garden running around it and the families who lived there were obliged under the purchase contract to
maintain it by turns. He installed solar panels on the
terrace and each home was allotted an amount of
power that they can use. They could use less than
their allotted share but they cannot, under any
circumstances, use more. The only exception to this
rule was if a family had a sick person. Even then the
other families had to make sure that there really was
a sick person in the family before letting them use
a little more of the allotted power.

Initially when he started out on this business and
spelt out his plans and rules, he had become the
laughing stock of the country. Papers took pleasure
in calling him names. Papers and television stations
wanted to interview the weird guy who had cropped
up. He refused none of the invitations and patiently
answered even the most absurd of questions put to
him. And as his views came to be known among the
people, he began to gather support.

Surprisingly, there were a lot of people who were
sick and tired of the mindless consumerism of
a lifestyle they and their country seemed to have
become trapped in. And they understood what
Gregory Perkins was trying to do. And slowly his
ideas began to gain ground and as they did, his
business began to flourish. His business and his ideas
really took off after the power grid blackout of August
2003. A major power grid failed in North America
and almost all of America and Canada were plunged
in absolute darkness for at least two days. Even
Washington, D.C. came to a standstill. The homes
designed and built by Perkins were literally the only
places which were totally unaffected as they drew their power from photovoltaic cells. Perkins became a millionaire within five years of launching his ideas and his lifestyle showed that his words were not empty of meaning. From being the weird guy, he became the darling of the media, without anybody realizing it.

And his solo treks to strange places were well publicized and the media kept track of his various movements throughout the year. And so a media avalanche had descended on Fort Wainwright when the news of his rescue came to be known. Since it was a military installation, the Commander kept the publicity to a minimum and gave the option of choosing the papers Gregory Perkins wanted to talk to. Perkins chose not to speak to the media at all and instead issued a statement. When Perkins was not available for an interview, the media attention naturally turned to Captain Hawthorne. However, he too declined to speak to the media, and finally, Commander had to issue a statement on his behalf.

Hawthorne did not visit Perkins even once during his recuperation at the base hospital. But he did have a long and private talk with him the day he was being discharged.

Perkins had recovered remarkably and left with almost no damage done to his physique. It had been noted in the records that Hawthorne had been a vivacious man, full of fun and energy. But he became quiet and withdrawn, often lost in thoughts. He was often found looking up at the sky in deep
thought and wandering the icy fields alone at night. It was not long after this that he had asked for his transfer to this project.

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Nash was still thinking about that report and about Hawthorne when a polite knock interrupted him for the second time that day.

"Come in/" he said.

"Captain Hawthorne reporting, sir," said Hawthorne and saluted smartly. He was in civilian clothes, as the project didn't insist on being in uniform.

"At ease, Captain. And have a seat," Nash said indicating the only other chair in his office.

"Take a look at these," said Nash and pushed the sheets towards him.

Hawthorne gathered them up and began reading. A strange look descended on his face and remained long enough for Nash to notice it. Nash, intrigued by the look, waited till Hawthorne neatly stacked the papers back on the table. He knew that Hawthorne wouldn't need them anymore. He had recorded everything in his mind. Hawthorne looked at Nash.

"What would you like me to do, sir?" he asked.

"A lot of things. But first let us talk about this," he said, nodding at the sheets from NASA. "What do you think?" asked Nash openly. He respected Hawthorne's judgement, which turned out to be almost always correct.

The sheets contained exactly the same data as that of the readings of Siddharth and Sowmya's amateur
telescope. They too were recorded for almost a minute. The time of the recording was not given but they had been recorded for the past four days.

"There are certain characteristics that make these a potentially promising investigation," said Hawthorne without waiting for further encouragement. "First among these is the regularity of the signals. They have been recorded at precisely the same instant during a period of four days. And then there is the absence of any variation or deviation in the signal. It is exactly the same on all four days of the recording. No RFI would be this regular and exact."

"So you think this is a possible candidate?" asked Nash, almost eagerly.

"Potential, yes, but possible, I can't say," said Hawthorne.

"Why not?" asked Nash. "You just pointed out the arguments in favour," said Nash.

"Let me also point out the arguments against it being a possibility," said Hawthorne. "The first and foremost would be the absence of the Doppler shifting effect which means it is not coming from any moving source. That itself should be enough to suspect its authenticity. And then there is the problem of the Gaussian signal. From where were these signals recorded?"

"I don't know. Let me find out," said Nash and picked up the phone. He dialled a number from memory and spoke softly. He listened for a few minutes, thanked the person and replaced the receiver.
"They were sent over from SETI. It seems they waited to see if the signal was repeated before sending it over. They too are doing their analysis/" he said.

The telephone shrilled as soon as Nash replaced it. Nash grabbed the receiver and listened.
"What?" he yelled and jumped up from his chair. His face showed his utter astonishment and he fell into stunned speechlessness. He slowly replaced the receiver and looked at Hawthorne.
"They have made visual contact with the source of the signal/" he said in a whisper.
Nash and Hawthorne picked up the sheets sent over from NASA and rushed to what Hawthorne privately called the 'faux pas room' in the Pentagon. He had begun to call it so after the rescue mission and in the light of that experience he had begun to feel that many decisions taken there were blunders. On their way Nash told Hawthorne what he had heard over the telephone:

The shuttle Colombia had been sent up with a satellite payload. On its return, the crew of Colombia had seen a strange looking satellite orbiting the earth. They had checked its position and reported it to their control centre at the Kennedy Space Center, Cape Canaveral. The Flight Controller had reported that there shouldn't be anything orbiting the earth in that stated position. They had made a quick and thorough check and had found that no country on earth with satellite launching capacity had a satellite in that orbit. They had asked Colombia to be extremely cautious and film the satellite as much as possible. They were also asked to check for any signs of life on it.

Colombia had landed a few hours ago and the film
was being processed. Someone in NASA had a brainwave to check the point of origin of the signal against the position of the satellite and had come up trumps. They matched perfectly and now there was an emergency session being called by the top brass in the military.

Hawthorne listened to all this in silence. They had reached the meeting room and entered it. People were assembling and all eyes were turned to the giant screen that covered one entire wall of the room. Dr. William Cohen, the director of NASA, stood in front of it and waited for a few moments before he began to speak.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said, "I don't think we have ever assembled here to discuss anything like what we are going to now. Let me get straight to the point. In a few moments, we shall be witnessing pictures of an unidentified object in space that is orbiting our planet, that doesn't belong, to the best of our knowledge and belief, to any country on earth. But before that you need to know a few more things. A few days back, four days to be precise, the Arecibo picked up a signal. SETI studied the signal and has determined that it is not Radio Frequency Interference. They have sent it over to us for our analysis. This signal was picked up at 1612 hrs. GMT for four days continuously at exactly the same time. We have analyzed it and our finding matches that of SETI's. It is a very strong signal in a very narrow band of frequency. And by pure luck, we have a visual sighting of the source of this signal. And this
is what we are going to see now,' he concluded. The lights dimmed and the screen showed the pictures taken from Colombia. It showed a strange looking satellite, moving in a synchronous orbit so that it always looked over the same area of the planet earth. It didn't look like any of the satellites man had ever sent up to space, yet it looked strangely familiar.

Nash got the impression that someone had tried to design the thing along similar lines of man-made satellites. He turned to point this out to Hawthorne who was seated next to him and stopped short. A strange smile was playing on Hawthorne's lips. His eyes never left the unidentified object on the screen and they had a strange look, as if he was talking to someone, in his thoughts. Nash kept watching him and grew more and more surprised that Hawthorne showed no signs of being aware of Nash watching him.

The lights came back on as the tape ran out. A stunned silence reigned in the room.

"Are you sure it isn't one of ours?" a voice asked softly, with unspoken hope.

"Yes, we are," answered Dr. Cohen.

Silence descended once again. No one knew what to say. They had never encountered a situation like this in all their collective careers. Though they had a plan for just such an eventuality, they were overwhelmed and felt helpless all of a sudden.

"How did it get through without being detected? Don't we have enough technology to detect a satellite in synchronous orbit with our planet?" asked a voice.
"We don't know. The point is it has got through to the earth and that should make it obvious that our technology is not sufficiently developed to detect such intrusions," answered Dr. Cohen glumly.

"The object seems to be focusing on one particular place. Can we find out its target?" asked someone.

Dr. Cohen simply nodded. Before he could issue instructions, the specialists got down to work. After a painful wait, the screen showed, what appeared to be a three-dimensional map of the earth. But it was in fact a satellite image of the earth that was being beamed live from one of the country's surveillance satellites. It showed the northern hemisphere and then zoomed in to Asia and then, again zoomed in to India. A palpable tension enveloped the room. Nash stole a glance at Hawthorne and was surprised by his reaction. He was sitting on the edge of his chair, peering closely at the screen with a look that reminded Nash of his excited son eager to open the box of a promised gift on Christmas.

The image got closer and closer until it finally stopped, clearly showing the dish of the amateur telescope Siddharth and Sowmya had set up outside their study. The picture encompassed the home and the surrounding plantation. Individual tea leaves could be seen wafting in the breeze. The early morning sun drenched the green expanse and Nash felt the taste of coffee he was sipping go stale in his mouth. 'It's like watching an advertisement for a holiday spot,' thought Nash, 'not like the target of some satellite from God knows where!'
As the stunned room watched, the image showed Siddharth and Sowmya coming out of a house and going up to the telescope. They seemed to make some observation and then go inside a smaller structure.

"Teenagers!" someone whispered incredulously.

Nash turned instinctively and was stunned to see Hawthorne laughing silently in the darkness. Tears of laughter streamed down his face, being reflected by the illumination from the giant screen. He was still not aware that Nash was watching him.

Nash turned away, thoroughly confused by Hawthorne's reaction. He didn't know what to make of it, and slowly and unwillingly he began to entertain doubts about Hawthorne's sanity. He suddenly thought of the incident mentioned in Hawthorne's report. He didn't know why he thought about that at that instant, but he did.

The lights were switched on and before anybody could say anything, Dr. Cohen said, "We are trying to identify the location. This may take a while. We break for fifteen minutes. Kindly reassemble here at quarter past five. In the meantime, please don't discuss this with anybody outside this room," he requested.

Chairs were pushed back and people stood around in groups, whispering amongst themselves. Some stretched and some went to get fresh cups of coffee. But whatever people did, the tension didn't leave their face.

Hawthorne touched Nash gently and guided him to a secluded corner.
"Sir, you have got to make them handle this quietly. Barging in and bombarding those two kids with questions or snatching them won't work. This is not the usual military operation. You have got to let me handle this," he said with urgency.

Nash couldn't believe the transformation in Hawthorne. There was no trace of laughter and there was an earnest appeal in his eyes.

"That won't be so easy, Hawthorne," said Nash, still doubting him.

"I know that, sir. But you have got to do it somehow. Pull a few strings, a lot of strings, if you have to," he said again.

Nash looked at him silently. He couldn't believe that this was the same man who was laughing till tears streamed down his face, a few moments back. Nash slowly began to doubt himself. Maybe Hawthorne wasn't laughing at all. Probably it was just an illusion. Nash decided to lock away that image of a laughing Hawthorne in a corner of his brain, to be examined later. At the moment, he would trust Hawthorne and try to do as he said. But he didn't know if he could do it because he didn't know if he had any strings to pull.

"Even then, it won't be easy, Hawthorne. And it is a huge responsibility, you know," he said. He didn't want to think how huge. But then he wanted to put things in perspective for Hawthorne. He didn't want him to get too enthusiastic and mess up things.

"Yes, sir, I know," said Hawthorne simply.

"And if you mess up, it will be my head that will
be on the block, not yours," Nash said again, making sure he got everything clear.

"And that is why I will be extra careful, sir," said Hawthorne.

Nash looked at him to see if there was even a hint of mockery in Hawthorne's face. But his eyes remained sincere as ever and Nash decided that he had really meant what he had said.

"Let me see what I can do. But I can't promise you anything," he said.

Hawthorne nodded his head understanding Nash's point of view. Nash walked away. He approached a group that was talking in whispers and saluted and joined them. And when it was time for them to reassemble, Nash chose to sit next to the Air Chief Marshal.

Dr. Cohen took control immediately. "We have identified the location. I need not go into the details of how we did it because everyone present here knows about it. The location is a small place called Paalaadi, situated on a range of hills known as the Western Ghats, in Southern India, in the State of Tamil Nadu. It is a sleepy little place and its main industry seems to be tea. Unfortunately, that is all we could find out," he paused.

When he continued he seemed to be almost speaking to himself. "And I would give my right arm to know what that telescope is doing out there and what those two kids are doing with it!" he said.

Hawthorne got up silently and went to Nash. He whispered in his ear for a brief moment. Nash looked
at him with the are-you-sure look in his eyes. Hawthorne nodded silently and with conviction.

Nash got up and went up to Dr. Cohen. He whispered in his ear and Dr. Cohen nodded silently.

"I have been informed by Lt. Colonel Nash that the particulars of the family and especially of those two kids will be supplied by him by tomorrow morning at 1000 hrs. Please direct further questions to Lt. Colonel Nash/" he said, nodding towards Nash.

A slight commotion arose in the room. Nash was targeted by almost everybody for questioning. When he looked around desperately for Hawthorne, he saw that he was already slipping out of the room, unnoticed by anyone except himself. Desperation rose within Nash and died out as suddenly as it appeared. He settled down to answer the questions as best as he could, confident that Hawthorne would come up with the real answers by 10 o'clock the next morning.
Hawthorne had the same confidence as he walked out of the room at the Pentagon. He had brought the data sheets with him. He knew how he was going to trace those two kids with the telescope.

Hawthorne went straight to a pay phone and dialled a number from memory. It answered after the first ring.

"Hello, Greg! This is Dan. I need a favour," said Hawthorne without any preamble.

"You always do, Dan. What is it this time?" asked Gregory Perkins with a laugh. Only a handful of people called Hawthorne Dan, short for Daniel, his first name. Gregory was one of them.

"I need to check out something. Could I drop by?" he asked Greg.

"Anytime, Dan," said Greg in a pleasant voice.

"Fine then, I will be there in twenty minutes," said Hawthorne and replaced the receiver. He called a taxi, gave the driver the address and immediately fell asleep in the back seat.

When the driver awoke him at the address he had given, he thanked him, got out and tipped him generously. He walked up the driveway, looking
around and admiring the superbly manicured garden and rang the bell on the simple door. It opened immediately as if someone had been waiting for him. A casually dressed old man ushered him in.

"The master is expecting you, sir," he said with a genuine smile of welcome. "I do hope you are doing fine, sir," he added.

"Oh! thank you, John. And yes, I am doing very well. You look as young as ever," Hawthorne said, smiling with warmth.

"Master Hawthorne, please don't start teasing again. My old bones are creaking more and more every day. But they will carry me to my grave all right," replied John, Gregory's live-in help. Hawthorne was reminded of how John came to be living with Gregory.

Gregory had found John weeding his garden one day and had asked him if he wanted to look after it permanently. John had nodded and Gregory had simply asked him to move in if he didn't mind using the living room as his bedroom in the night. A few days later John asked Gregory if he could build a small room in the garden. Gregory had hesitated at first but had agreed after watching him work in the garden for a few more weeks. He was satisfied that John would not do anything against his principles. But to be sure he stated them to him anyway.

John had agreed and when Gregory came back after a fortnight from a business trip, there was a quaint little structure standing in the garden. It looked perfect and seemed as if it had always stood
there and the garden looked as if it had grown around it.

Gregory was so delighted that he asked him to assume the duties in his house as well apart from being a gardener. When he asked him from where he had procured the building materials, John had stated that he had collected everything, right down to the nails, from various local junkyards. Gregory was indeed very happy. 'A man after my own heart/ Gregory had thought.

"The master is at his computer, as usual," said John.

John's statement brought Hawthorne back to present. "Thank you, John," he said and walked towards Gregory's study. He knew the place well, almost as well as his home. Hawthorne was smiling to himself as he entered Gregory's study. Old John would never stop calling him 'master'.

He knocked softly on the door and he heard Gregory's voice call out, "Come in, Dan. Must you always knock? You disturb my concentration," said Gregory, with mock anger.

Hawthorne pulled a chair and sat next to him. Gregory was looking at his computer crunching numbers from a SETI work unit.

"Don't you have a business to look after?" asked Hawthorne playfully. But he was secretly glad that Gregory was keeping in touch with SETI.

"You didn't come all this way just to ask me this, did you?" asked Gregory.

"That I didn't," said Hawthorne. "I came to use your computer," he said.
"You must need it for a special purpose then," said Gregory, winking at him.

He knew that Hawthorne used his computer only when he needed to do something that was considered to be outside the law by some.

"I need to get some information on something," Said Hawthorne and handed him the sheets of paper.

As Gregory started to glance at the sheets, his expression changed and he whistled. "Phew!"

"And before you ask me, I will tell you don't ask me anything about those sheets of paper. I just need to know if this data has been sent to SETI for verification. And if so, the user details of that person or persons," he said.

"Wait a minute, Dan. The first part of your request is nothing. But, as for the user details, aren't you assuming that the person or persons are volunteers for SETI@home?" asked Gregory.

"Yes, I am, Greg. And I know that it is a long shot. But do try anyway," said Hawthorne.

Gregory just shrugged his shoulders and turned to his computer. He worked for a while and then turned to Hawthorne.

"Sorry, Dan. This data has not been logged in so far to be checked with SETI," he said. "But SETI has this data in its possession," he added.

"I know. Those sheets came to NASA from SETI," said Hawthorne. "Just do me a favour, Greg. Keep checking from now on. The moment this data comes in, call me. And do get their user details. And their e-mail address," he added.

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"You don't want a lot, do you?" asked Gregory with an indulgent smile.

Hawthorne just smiled. "You know where to reach me if you need me, Greg," he said as he walked out of the room.

He let himself out and called a taxi. He asked the driver to take him to any all-night cyber cafe and promptly fell asleep.

It was dark when he entered the cyber cafe. He had expected it to be crowded with students and teenagers and was pleasantly surprised to find it half-empty. He liked the ambience immediately and walked over to an empty booth. A waitress appeared even before he sat down and he placed his order, suddenly realizing that he was ravenous. He asked her to keep his supply of strong, hot coffee running and settled down to work.

He first looked up the SETI website and noted that they offered details about what to buy and where to buy the equipment needed to set up an amateur SETI observatory. He noted the list of companies and started visiting each of their website. He selected those companies that he felt held the most promise and started hacking effortlessly into their databases. All of them, without exception, had no elaborate security for their databases and getting what he wanted was as easy as stealing a candy from a child. He struck gold with the fourth company he had chosen. They had sold their equipment recently to someone in southern India. He copied the address and printed it.
He tore the sheet from the printer and read the address:

Mr. K. Siddharth  
s/o Mr. R. Murali  
#22, Periasamy Road  
Paalaadi, Theni District  
TAMIL NADU, INDIA

His cellphone rang as he read the address. He picked it up and said, "What is it, Greg?"

"Get back here immediately. The request for verification has just come through. By the way, where are you?" asked Gregory.

"In a cyber cafe, doing some electronic digging," replied Hawthorne. "I will be there in ten minutes," he said and shut down the system. He noticed soiled, empty plates on the side table and assumed that he must have eaten something. He had no memory of it. He settled the bill and asked the barman to call him a taxi. He knew he wouldn't find one outside at that time of the night. He had another hot cup of coffee as he waited for the taxi and thought about his next move.

When he entered Gregory's room, Gregory was still seated as he was a few hours earlier. He was looking at what appeared to be an e-mail message.

"Take a look at this, Dan. Whoever sent this is pretty smart," said Gregory as he nodded at the screen.

Hawthorne said nothing but looked at the screen eagerly. An e-mail message said that they were sending a piece of data to be checked against known RFI. It also gave the details about when the data was
recorded. The attachment file gave the scanned copy of the data.

Gregory took the sheets Hawthorne had given him and held them beside the screen. The data that scrolled through matched perfectly with that on the sheets.

"Greg, when you registered with SETI, did you fill up a form of some kind?" asked Hawthorne.

"Yes, I did. It is a standard procedure. Anybody and everybody, who wishes to register, have to. They send you the form via e-mail and you send back the filled up form via e-mail, too. I don't think those people believe in paperwork," answered Greg.

Hawthorne thanked his stars that they didn't. "Do you have a copy?" he asked.

"I think I do. I never let anything go out of my hands without having a copy of it. You know that," said Gregory and switched over to his Windows Explorer. He searched through his files until he found the file with the copy of the registration form.

"Here it is," he said.

"When they sent this to you, did they authorize this in any way?" asked Hawthorne.

"I don't remember, Dan. It was such a long time ago. At least it seems so long," said Gregory softly. Hawthorne remained silent. He knew that he would have to take the risk.

"I want you to leave this room, Greg. I don't want you to be involved in what I am going to do," said Hawthorne.

"Hey! If you want me to get out, say so plainly,"
said Gregory with a smile and left the room.

Hawthorne sat in front of the computer and first copied the registration form to another file. He then deleted all Gregory’s particulars until he was left only with the empty form. He added a few more questions until he was satisfied. He then electronically impersonated a worker from SETI and sent e-mail to Siddharth and Sowmya. In it he said that their registration form had been accidentally deleted from their database and so they were sending them another form to be filled in and sent back immediately. He said that they luckily had their e-mail address because that had been stored in a different file. He added that they were sending them a few additional questions to be answered, for the sake of records. Hawthorne added the last sentence in case they had a copy of their form and checked this against it.

Hawthorne checked the time and calculated the time in India—it would be Saturday morning. He hoped that the two kids were sitting in front of their computer, waiting for some response from SETI.

Hawthorne’s hope wasn’t in vain. The screen showed an incoming message and Hawthorne logged on immediately.

Siddharth and Sowmya had obliged without question and had filled up all the details in the fake registration form. They enquired about the data they had sent.

Hawthorne sent a reply, thanking them for their prompt response and also assuring them that their
data was being analyzed and that it would take some time before a definite conclusion could be arrived at.

He then proceeded to delete all the files he had created and checked whether the system had automatically made back-up copies. It had. He deleted those, too. He then deleted all the e-mail messages. When he finished, there was no trace that anybody, other than Gregory, had been using the system.

Hawthorne left the study and closed the door behind him. He went to the kitchen where he knew he would find Gregory. And he did find him there, munching a sandwich.

Gregory offered a plate to Hawthorne and he took it gratefully. They ate in silence.

"Is it what we have been waiting for?" he asked suddenly.

"Looks like it," answered Hawthorne.

"Does NASA know?" asked Gregory.

"They sent the sheets over to Nash," replied Hawthorne.

"Those two kids must be pretty smart," said Gregory softly. "As soon as the data came through to SETI I looked them up," he explained.

Hawthorne said nothing.

"What is the plan now?" Gregory asked.

"I have to get to the kids before anybody else," said Hawthorne. "The Pentagon is already on their trail."

"So is SETI," said Gregory. "It seems they are planning to send someone to visit those two kids," he added.
"To be expected," answered Hawthorne.
"When are you leaving?" asked Gregory.
"As soon as possible," answered Hawthorne finishing his sandwich. "Keep yourself available," he added.

Gregory just nodded. He let him out and locked up after him.

Hawthorne didn't go to his apartment but took a taxi to a cyber cafe, a different one from the one he had already visited. It was totally empty except for the owner. And he looked happy to have some company. Hawthorne ordered a pot of coffee and chose a corner away from the entrance. He waited till the coffee was served and plunged straight in.

He hoped that Siddharth and Sowmya had left their study but had left their system on. He wanted to visit them but without their knowledge. From the registration form, he had come to know that Siddharth and Sowmya were twins and that they were both registered together with SETI. He had the basic details but he wanted to know more. He wanted to know the kind of kids they were. But this time it seemed Hawthorne's luck had run out. He couldn't gain access and it seemed that they had shut down their system and switched off.

Hawthorne kept trying every half an hour until he knew he could wait no more. He had to brief Lt. Colonel Nash about the information he had gathered. He just had enough time to go to his apartment, shower and change and report to duty. Given a choice, Hawthorne would have been happy
to wait right there and keep trying but the owner of the cyber cafe had indicated that it was time for him to close. Hawthorne left reluctantly and when he reported at 9 o'clock the next morning to Nash, he showed no signs of having spent a sleepless night.

"Do you have anything?" asked Nash anxiously, without even returning Hawthorne's greeting.

Hawthorne gave him the details about Siddharth and Sowmya.

The speed and clarity of Hawthorne's action stunned Nash. There had been many instances where Hawthorne had produced speedy results. But they had all been in countries where they had contacts and had their own people placed in certain sensitive positions. This was different because this was the first time Nash had come across an incident in this particular country, and he knew that they had no known source there. The Indian government had resolutely refused to allow them to set up a branch of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) office there even after years of persistent requests that nearly amounted to nagging. And that was reason why Hawthorne's report evoked such surprise in Nash. However, he controlled his reaction and listened to Hawthorne. He had to brief the council in an hour's time and he wanted all the information he could get.

"Okay, Hawthorne, I think I can face the music. Come on, let us go," said Nash when he was satisfied he had all that he wanted.

"No, sir, I would rather wait here. I don't want to come in there," said Hawthorne.
"Why not?" asked Nash, astonished.
"If I do, I might be questioned about how I got all that information, even if it is only to confirm and verify its authenticity. And I don't think you would want me to reveal my methods to them," explained Hawthorne.
"Oh!" said Nash. 'He must have cut a few corners,' thought Nash.
"Okay. In that case, you stay here. I will call the moment I get a chance," said Nash and left his office.
Hawthorne sat alone in the room, waiting patiently, thinking and planning for the course of action he knew he must take. He lost all sense of time and was jolted back to reality when the phone rang.
It was Nash. Nash started speaking even before Hawthorne said 'hello'.
"Things are way out of hand, Hawthorne. I could not persuade anybody to let us handle the matter. And I can't blame them, too. Too much is at stake. They are planning a major operation."
"To snatch the kids?" interrupted Hawthorne.
"Most probably yes," replied Nash.
When Hawthorne didn't answer, Nash asked, "So what are you going to do?"
"I don't think you want to know, sir," answered Hawthorne.
And this time Nash fell silent. He knew that Hawthorne would try to reach the kids before his government. He was almost sure that whatever method Hawthorne adopted, they would not meet the approval of his government and even if it did,
the Pentagon would demand that Hawthorne hand over the kids to them. And that, Nash was sure, was not what Hawthorne wanted and in fact was trying to prevent. Somehow he was sure that Hawthorne would not do anything to endanger humankind from what was perceived to be a potential and probable threat from outer space. Yet he didn't know why Hawthorne wanted to reach the kids first and what he wanted to do, once he reached them. Whatever it was that he wanted to do, Nash knew that he would definitely handle them better than anybody else who got to them.

"Whatever it is that you are planning, Hawthorne, I order you not to go ahead with it unless it is authorized by me," said Nash in a tone of voice that was at variance with the words he had uttered.

"Yes, sir. I understand, sir. But I am afraid I cannot obey your orders, sir," said Hawthorne politely.

"I do hope you are clear about that, Captain Hawthorne," said Nash.

"Yes, sir, I am," replied Hawthorne.

"In that case, I will have to report you, Captain," said Nash in a voice that lacked the seriousness of his words.

"Yes, sir, I understand," replied Hawthorne.

"I shall probably have to place you under custody and temporarily relieve you of your duties if you are there when I come to my office," said Nash, knowing fully well that Hawthorne would take the hint.

"I have not officially reported to duty this morning, sir. You can consider me AWOL (Absent
Without Leave)" said Hawthorne and put down the receiver.

'Bless you, Hawthorne, and good luck/ thought Nash as he replaced the receiver slowly. He knew that he had taken a terrible risk, but he knew that he had done the right thing.

Hawthorne left the office and called the airport from a public phone booth and said to the voice that answered, "Please confirm the ticket to Mumbai, India, I had booked earlier. The name is Hawthorne, Daniel Hawthorne."

But before he could leave he had to get a few things done. He always had a suitcase ready, packed to leave at a moment's notice. So that wasn't going to take time. He knew what would. So he planned to keep that as the last thing to be done.

He first went to his apartment and wrote a single page letter. To anyone who read it, as he suspected someone would, it was an innocuous letter written to his uncle. He sealed the letter in an envelope and wrote the address on it. It was a postbox and it was registered in the name of Thompson. Hawthorne indeed had a distant uncle by that name. But the contents would be collected, not by his uncle, but by Nash.

This was the standard arrangement he had set up with Nash when he had been transferred to the project. Such an arrangement was to be used in cases that had to be dealt with extreme caution and care. And this case rated as one among those. The letter contained an outline of Hawthorne's plans and
instructions to Nash as to what needed to be done by him.

Hawthorne then called Gregory from his cellphone and said softly, "Put the wheels in motion, Greg!" and disconnected without waiting for a response. He knew that Gregory would understand what he was referring to. They had planned just for this kind of situation, a long time ago.

He opened his table drawer and took it out of the table. He inverted it and removed a small packet he had stuck to its bottom. Though it was an obvious hiding place, he had found it to be ideal as all things obvious were. He replaced the drawer and opened the packet. An instrument that looked like a cellphone was wrapped in cellophane paper. He took this out and checked whether the battery was strong and fresh. Indeed it was in good working condition as he had expected it to be.

And that left only the last thing on his list to be done. He picked up his suitcase, locked his apartment, gave the key to the apartment manager and told him that he was going on a much-needed vacation. The manager promised to keep things as he had left them and wished him a safe journey. He did not ask him where he was going. He knew he would not get an answer.

Hawthorne walked out and hailed a taxi. He gave the address and asked to be dropped off at the corner of the block. He was sure that he would not be followed because he knew that he had a head start. It would take at least a few hours before the plan the
top brass had hatched up could be put to work. He neither knew nor cared what that plan was. He didn't have to. It was enough that he knew what he was going to do.

He got out at the corner of the block and walked the rest of the distance. He knocked on a door and was let in with a warm smile of welcome by a young man of striking appearance. He could have been an actor had he wanted to. Instead, he had chosen to work behind the camera. He delighted in making the already handsome faces of actors look even more attractive. There was not a man to beat him in the whole of Hollywood at the art of make-up. He chose not to reside in Los Angeles, as he didn't like the atmosphere there. He preferred to stay in Washington, D.C. and his clients flew him to the shooting spot whenever he was required. Hawthorne had found out about him from a mutual friend and had used his expertise from time to time when his job demanded it.

Hawthorne wondered about the job he had for him. Though he knew that what he was about to ask was possible, he didn't know whether it was possible at such a short notice. When Hawthorne explained what he wanted to the make-up artist, the man laughed loudly. He told Hawthorne that now there were many ways available to do what he wanted. And it wouldn't take long either, just a couple of hours. Hawthorne relaxed as he settled into a chair.

When he came out of the house after an hour and a half, Hawthorne looked like a piece of a crispy-
brown toast. The style of his hair had changed and even the structure of his face had altered a little, to make him look like an Indian. His square jaw helped in making the appearance more suitable. When he boarded the flight to Mumbai, he looked like a Non-Resident Indian, going back home for a nostalgic visit. He only hoped that the absence of luggage, other than a single suitcase that fitted in the cabin compartment, wouldn't be too conspicuous. As he settled in his seat, he thought about the two kids and what they were doing right then.
Siddharth and Sowmya were looking at their e-mail messages right then. There were two messages from SETI saying almost the same thing. The only difference was that one thanked them for sending the filled in registration form so promptly and the other didn't make a mention of it. But both said that their data was being analyzed and that it might take a few days before anything definite could be said about it. The twins didn't notice the difference in the messages and neither did they wonder why SETI should send them two messages to say the same thing.

Siddharth stared at the computer screen. They were receiving the signal regularly at exactly the same time every day. The initial excitement had given way to a dull anxiety and restlessness. They had to do something other than just sit around and wait for the results to arrive from SETI.

He looked at Sowmya. He knew that she was feeling exactly the same way as he was.

"Isn't there something, anything, we can do, Siddharth?" asked Sowmya with a hint of desperation in her voice.

Their school had closed the day before for winter
holidays and the inactivity and tension were eating into them.

"I don't know, Sowmya. I just don't know what we can do," replied Siddharth, trying to hide his despair. He didn't want to add to his sister's worries.

"Why don't we do some theorizing?" asked Sowmya, suddenly enthusiastic. "At least it would keep our minds occupied."

"Theorizing? What sort of theorizing?" asked Siddharth, a little suspiciously. Though he knew his sister's ability and intelligence to think through things, sometimes she took off on great flights of fancy. Even that would be welcome, felt Siddharth.

"Help me clear this table first," said Sowmya and started placing the things of the table on the floor. She then took the huge map of the world that was covering almost half of one of the walls and placed it on the table. When half of it hung down the sides, they moved the table and placed the map on the floor.

Sowmya took a ruler, a pencil and a piece of paper and knelt beside the map. Siddharth knelt beside her, intensely curious by then.

"Look, Siddharth, let us say that this is where we are," she said, pointing to Munnar. Their place Paalaadi wasn't big enough to find a mention on the world map. "We are getting our signal right here. And ours is a fixed telescope. So the source of the signal has to be almost directly in line with our telescope for it to be able to send us the signal. Taking into account the width of our telescope..." she did some rapid calculations and measured a few things
on the map and drew a shape of a wedge originating from a point she labelled Paalaadi. "Take a look at this, Siddharth. Imagine this to be three-dimensional, extending into space. This point is our telescope and this wedge is the range within which the source of the signal has to be for us to receive it," she explained breathlessly.

Siddharth looked at her diagram silently, biting his lip. Though he understood how amateur and how thoroughly error-filled her calculations were, he couldn't help getting excited about what Sowmya was saying.

"Okay, Sowmya, but what are you getting at?" he asked.

"Don't you see? We can try to find out where the signal is coming from," she said excitedly, like a magician suddenly revealing his hand to uncover a dazzling trick.

Siddharth burst out laughing.

"Come on, Siddharth. Consider the possibility seriously," she said sternly, admonishing her brother.

"Okay, Sowmya, what do you want me to do?" Siddharth asked without laughing. He knew when to take his sister seriously.

"Do you understand what I am trying to say?" she asked.

"Of course, I do," said Siddharth.

"Don't you think that it could be possible?" she asked again.

"There are a lot of questions to be answered before I can answer you," said Siddharth. "What if your
calculations are wrong? How can we possibly look for the source without any means, without knowing what we are looking for and without knowing whether it actually exists? And even if it does, what happens if it is far away, beyond our ability to search for it? And finally, even if all these can somehow be answered, how in the world are we to look and search in space? It is not as if we can use a searchlight, you know," Siddharth said, mocking his sister, jokingly.

"You don't have faith, Siddharth. That is your problem," Sowmya said, folding her hands across her chest and pursing her lips.

Siddharth knew he had lost. There was no use in arguing with her when she spoke in that tone. Secretly, Siddharth was getting more and more excited as he thought about what Sowmya had said. He had even thought of a way to make her idea feasible. He was in great doubt about her calculations but he decided that there would be no harm in trying. They had nothing else to do anyway.

"Okay, Sowmya, let us see if we can do something," said Siddharth.

"You have thought of something, haven't you?" asked Sowmya.

Siddharth didn't need to feel surprised at how Sowmya knew.

"I don't know if it is possible, Sowmya. I will have to talk to Mr. Parthasarathy before I can say anything," Siddharth said with a thoughtful frown.

"Of course! Mr. Parthasarathy! Why didn't I think of him?" exclaimed Sowmya, slapping her forehead.
"That is why I am a genius," said Siddharth with a teasing smile.

"That you are!" said Sowmya and impulsively threw her arms around him.

"Aw! Come on, Sowmya, don't start getting mushy," said Siddharth but made no attempt to free himself. He enjoyed these expressions of affection from his sister. These moments were special as they occurred rarely.

Sowmya let him go, knowing fully well that he didn't mean what he said. She thought about Mr. Parthasarathy and chided herself for not thinking of him herself.

Mr. Parthasarathy was the supervisor at the observatory in Kodaikanal. When they were studying at Kodaikanal, their school had once taken them on a study tour to the observatory. Mr. Parthasarathy had conducted the tour as he had done so many others in the past. He was nearing his retirement and wasn't keen on taking along a bunch of giggling teenagers through a tour of the place he considered almost sacred.

The Kodaikanal Solar Observatory was set up on April 1, 1899. It was one among the only three solar observatories in the world over 75 years old, the other two being situated in Paris and the United States of America. It also had the distinction of having one of the world's extant telescopes. And, it was while working here that the British astronomer, John Evershed in 1909 first detected the 'Evershed effect,' the phenomenon of the radial motion of
sunspots. The observatory had been studying the sun and its various phenomena for the last hundred years. The place was a scientific landmark in the history of astronomy and that was why Mr. Parthasarathy almost resented allowing the teenagers to set foot inside the premises.

However, Mr. Parthasarathy could not help noticing the twins when they had come with their school, silent and sincere, keenly observing and listening to his explanations. When they asked questions, he was surprised even more because they were knowledgeable ones, not of the type asked by teenagers on a one-time visit to the observatory. By the time the tour was over, Mr. Parthasarathy was thoroughly impressed by the twins. He had asked them to drop by whenever they wished, which Siddharth and Sowmya did.

They had become friends in spite of the difference in their ages. Hours and hours would be spent discussing things but Mr. Parthasarathy wouldn't allow them to handle any of the equipment in the observatory without prior permission from his superiors.

And that was why Siddharth was a little worried whether he would help them. And more importantly, he didn't know if the observatory had the kind of equipment that was needed for their requirement. It was a solar observatory and he didn't know if the telescope used to study the sun's spots could be used for their purpose.

But he decided to give it a try anyway since there
were no other options available to them. Probably Mr. Parthasarathy could throw some light and give suggestions. And maybe, just this once, he would loosen his restrictions a little.

"Come on, Sowmya, let us go home. We have to make plans," he said and started rearranging their study. When they finished, they saw that it was time for lunch and hurried home.

A warm sun shone down on the plantation around them, turning the hillside into a golden-green carpet. Siddharth and Sowmya stood and admired the visual spread around them. Suddenly, everything seemed to come into clear focus and they felt as if they had descended on the place, enclosed in a clear cocoon and were witnesses on a strange planet. They exchanged looks. They were sure that both of them were having the same feeling.

They started walking towards their home, in silence, still aware of the strange feeling. It dissolved the moment they stepped inside their home.

They saw that their father was home for lunch and hurried to meet him.

"Hello, Daddy! Will you be going to Kodaikanal today or tomorrow?" asked Siddharth.

"Why Siddharth? Do you need anything from there?" asked his father.

"No, Daddy. We need to do some reference at the observatory. So I just wondered whether we could accompany you if you were planning on taking a trip," explained Sowmya.

"Oh, I see! Unfortunately I don't have anything to
do in Kodai at present. But..." he continued, seeing the disappointed look on his children's faces, "we can make a trip if you really want to go," he finished with a smile.

“Oh! Thank you, Daddy!” yelled Sowmya and hugged her father.

“Perhaps I should do this more often. It has a lot of unspoken benefits," said their father winking at Siddharth and hugging back his daughter.

“Oh, Daddy! Don't be such a tease," said Sowmya in mock seriousness. "When can we go?" she asked.

"Mmm... let me see. We can't start today. I have to make a few arrangements here and that will take all of today and most of tomorrow. We can start after lunch tomorrow. We should be at Kodaikanal before it is too dark. How many days do you kids need?" asked Mr. Murali.

"A day or two at the most," replied Siddharth.

"What is for a day or two at the most?" asked his mother bringing in the lunch from the kitchen.

Sowmya ran inside to help her as Siddharth said, "A trip to Kodaikanal, Mom."

"And who is going to Kodai?" she asked, glaring at Siddharth in mock anger.

"All of us, Mom," said Siddharth.

"All of us? Oh, good! I needed a break, too," she said with a joyous smile. She desperately wanted to go on a holiday as things were beginning to get a little claustrophobic, what with her hectic schedule at home and the tea plantation. She kept the books for the plantation as it served the dual purpose of cutting
down on labour and helping to keep things under control. "When are we leaving?" she asked eagerly.

"After lunch, tomorrow," answered her husband.

"Great! I will be packed and ready. How long will we be staying?" she asked him.

"I don't know, Saritha. Perhaps three or four days," said Mr. Murali.

"Even a couple of days will be a boon. Let us finish lunch first," she said and started serving.

They started after lunch the next day as planned. Mr. Murali had booked them a cottage at the Holiday Home, their favourite hotel. They always stayed there whenever they visited Kodaikanal and it had almost become a second home for them.

Siddharth had called Mr. Parthasarathy and had asked him if they could meet him. Mr. Parthasarathy was very happy to know about their proposed trip and had said that he eagerly awaited their visit. He missed them, he had said.

Siddharth and Sowmya had packed for a few extra days in case they needed to stay longer. They left in their Maruti Gypsy which was in superb condition and they covered the distance with speed and comfort. They were settled in their cottage by late evening. They had dinner at the hotel's restaurant.

Siddharth and Sowmya declined an after-dinner walk with their parents, as they wanted to be up early the next day. They wished their parents good night and went to bed, little suspecting the adventures they would face the next day.
They went for an early breakfast the next morning, leaving their parents still in bed. It was a cold, chilly and wet morning as it had rained during the night. They found that they were the only ones in the restaurant other than another early riser. He was there before them and it looked as if he had already placed his order and was waiting it to be served.

Siddharth and Sowmya took the table across him and he smiled warmly at them when they glanced at him. 'He must be feeling pretty lonely,' thought Sowmya. She smiled back as Siddharth placed their orders. Siddharth sat silently, looking outside the window at the dull, gray morning. He knew it would rain later in the day. He sat immersed in his thoughts, thinking about Mr. Parthasarathy and what to tell him without revealing too much.

Sowmya's sudden laugh burst into his thoughts. He looked at her, startled by the laughter in the still, silent morning.

"Oh Siddharth! I am sorry! I just could not help it," said Sowmya trying to control herself. "It is that man," she said, nodding surreptitiously towards the only other occupant of the restaurant. "He is so
funny! Look at him eating," she said again.

Siddharth turned impulsively and looked at the man. He had apparently ordered *pongal* (a dish made of raw rice and moong dal, seasoned with peppercorns and jeera in ghee) and sambar for breakfast. But he seemed totally lost as to how to eat it. He tried to scoop a spoonful and somehow it kept falling back on the plate. He was trying again and again but could not get more than a few grains of rice on his spoon. Then he started again with two spoons and this time met with some success. But he didn't know what to do with the sambar and the chutney that were provided with the *pongal*. He ate a spoonful of *pongal* and then sipped a spoonful of sambar, like eating soup.

Siddharth too started smiling and right at that moment the man looked straight at them and caught them laughing at him. Siddharth blushed with embarrassment and Sowmya giggled a little more behind a covered mouth.

The man grinned and shrugged his shoulders as if to say that he was doing his best.

Siddharth turned away even more embarrassed than before. He knew that they couldn't walk away from the place without saying or doing something.

"Do something, Sowmya," he whispered to his sister between clenched teeth.

Sowmya got up without replying and walked towards the man.

"I am sorry, Mr..."

"Hawthorne, Daniel Hawthorne."

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"Mr. Hawthorne. I am really very sorry. I just couldn't help laughing. You looked so funny trying to eat your breakfast," Sowmya apologized.

"I will accept your apology if you will show me how to eat this delicious stuff, Ms..."

"Sowmya."

"...Ms. Sowmya," he said with a warm smile.

Sowmya was taken in by his smile. It was so warm, open and friendly.

"Done," she said and sat on an empty chair opposite to him.

"Is he your brother, Ms. Sowmya?" asked Hawthorne, pointing to Siddharth.

"Yes, Mr. Hawthorne, he is. And I am Sowmya, not Ms. Sowmya," she said with a smile.

"Then I will be Hawthorne to you," he said, returning the smile. "Why don't you ask your brother to join us? He looks as lonely as I did a few moments ago," he remarked.

Sowmya turned to Siddharth and gestured to him to come and join them.

Siddharth got up reluctantly and went to them.

"Hawthorne, this is my brother, Siddharth. And Siddharth, this is Hawthorne, Daniel Hawthorne," Sowmya did the introductions.

Hawthorne shook hands with Siddharth and invited him to join him.

However, Siddharth was feeling more and more uncomfortable as each moment passed by. He wanted to get Sowmya out of the man's sight. He worried about the troubles she would cause further
if she stayed there because Sowmya had used exactly the same tone of voice that Bond used in his movies to introduce himself, as Bond, James Bond. Siddharth caught the tone immediately and looked at his sister with a frown.

Sowmya winked at him mischievously and turned back to Hawthorne. Siddharth glanced worriedly at Hawthorne. If he had caught the joke, he showed no sign of it. He continued to eat his breakfast, as shown by his new tutor, Sowmya. He looked like a man whose only concern right then was the 'delicious stuff' on his plate.

Much to Siddharth's discomfort, Hawthorne continued to concentrate on his breakfast. He told Siddharth and Sowmya to order breakfast for them.

"The bill is on me," he said smilingly.

"Are you a tourist?" Sowmya asked him, unable to contain her curiosity. He didn't look like a tourist, especially a white one. He looked as brown as a nut and yet his name was totally Western. His accent showed him to be distinctly American. 'What is such a man doing here?' thought Sowmya.

"Not exactly, Sowmya. I am on a business trip. But this place is so quaint that I wouldn't mind staying a few more days for pleasure," replied Hawthorne. So far he had spoken the truth and that pleased him. Though he could lie consummately as sometimes required by his job, he distinctly felt restless deep down, having to deceive people and misguiding them to place their trust on him.

"Have you come a long way?" asked Sowmya in
between taking bites from the breakfast they had ordered. This man intrigued her and she wanted to find out as much as possible about him somehow.

"Not very far. Just from the USA/" he said.

"Oh! And that isn't far? It is half way around the world!" exclaimed Sowmya. "But you don't look American," she added.

"That is because I am not totally American. My father is an American and my mother is an Indian. I guess I take after my mother," Hawthorne said.

"Oh! Now I understand, though it is a bit unusual," said Sowmya.

"What is unusual?" asked Hawthorne, a little perplexed. He had prepared his background quite thoroughly and didn't think he had slipped anywhere so far. But then here was this girl saying that something was unusual. He had tried very hard to keep his story as normal and as mundane as possible.

"Usually it is an Indian father and an American mother," said Sowmya. "But you have an Indian mother and an American father. That is what is unusual," she said.

Hawthorne inwardly heaved a sigh of relief. He could handle that.

"Oh, that? Well, my parents met at the University of Texas where they were enrolled in the same course. They fell in love and eventually got married," explained Hawthorne effectively.

"I have heard so much about this country from my mother," he continued wistfully, "that I have grown up wanting to visit here at least once in my
lifetime. And now that I am actually here, I don't think I would like to leave in a hurry," he said.

Moments passed in silence. Hawthorne had ordered tea and a waiter served them a pot. Hawthorne served his guests and poured himself a cup.

"This tea is disappointing," he said after taking a sip. "I had expected better tea than this in the land of tea," he said.

"Oh! Then you should come to our place, Paalaadi. Our Dad has a tea plantation and our Mom makes the best tea in the world," said Sowmya proudly.

"That is just great! I would love to visit a tea plantation. I have never been to one," he said, "though I am a lover of tea. I don't think much of coffee," Hawthorne added.

"Then you should definitely visit our place," said Sowmya again.

"I will, provided your parents wouldn't mind," said Hawthorne.

"Their parents wouldn't mind what?" asked Mr. Murali, as he and his wife, approached their table.

Sowmya jumped up and made the introductions. Hawthorne invited them to join them but Mr. Murali declined saying that they had eaten breakfast in their room. Sowmya told her father about the invitation she had extended to Hawthorne and her father gladly agreed that she had done the right thing. So, it was arranged that Hawthorne would accompany them when they returned to Paalaadi, as his business too would be over in a day or two.
They thanked each other and the family left promising to meet soon. Hawthorne was once again alone in the restaurant. He ordered a pot of coffee with relief. He hated tea.

He took a grateful sip of the hot liquid and considered the events of the last two days. He had landed at Bombay, Mumbai as they called it now and then had taken a connecting flight to Madras. That too was called Chennai now and Hawthorne couldn't understand the logic behind changing the old, well-established names. From there he had considered his options. He could either take the train or another flight to a southern city called Madurai. He had to reach that place in order to get to Kodaikanal. There was no other way of getting to Palalaadi, other than to get to Kodaikanal and take a bus from there.

Hawthorne again decided to take a flight to Madurai. He couldn't waste almost a whole day travelling by train, as the place was nearly 300 kms away from Chennai. It would serve no purpose. When he landed at Madurai, he had made a quiet call to an overseas number and had listened as Nash informed him of the latest developments in his country. He knew he had to get to Kodaikanal as soon as possible because Nash had just told him that the subjects of his study appeared to be heading there and so were a few other characters.

He had called each hotel at Kodaikanal, disguised his accent as best as he could and asked if a Mr. Murali was booked there. He was usually given the
information without any questions. But to the one or two who asked who he was, he told them that he was a business associate who was supposed to meet Mr. Murali at his hotel but had forgotten which one. The explanation appeared to satisfy the enquirers.

He had booked a cottage at the Holiday Home, having confirmed that Mr. Murali from Paalaadi was indeed booked there. He had stopped his efforts there and had waited to see what sort of events would develop and his wait was appropriately rewarded. Things were better than he had expected them to be. He had accomplished half of what he had set out to do—get inside the twins' household.

Hawthorne drank his coffee and watched the people coming into the restaurant. It was beginning to get busy. Hawthorne's eyes fell on two men entering the restaurant. Though their manner looked casual, their eyes roamed over the tables, covertly searching for someone.

Hawthorne stiffened inside. His senses were on full alert and he watched them without being too obvious. They left, apparently not finding those they were looking for. Hawthorne paid his bill and walked out, keeping the two men in sight. Their faces and appearances were imprinted on his mind. They were not too hard to remember. Both were Indians and were of medium height. One had thick, curly hair and a thick moustache to match. He had sunken eyes and they darted restlessly. Hawthorne promptly named him Moustache. The other man looked a little older though he must have been almost the same age.
as Moustache. He was very fair and had a receding hairline. He was round and plump and looked as if he were playing a secret game and was thoroughly thrilled by it. Hawthorne named him Mr. Plump. He followed the two men outside the restaurant. They went to the car park and stood by a blue car. Hawthorne noted the number. He saw Moustache open the door and get into the driver's seat while, Mr. Plump leaned on the car, trying to pretend reading a newspaper.

Hawthorne took out a small, empty wallet from his pocket and approached the reception desk.

"Excuse me, two men dropped this in the restaurant. They left before I could give it to them. One was very fair and the other man had a thick moustache. Could you tell me who they were?" he asked the girl with an engaging smile.

"Oh! That must be Mr. Kurup and Mr. D'Souza," the girl replied.

"Thank you. May I know their room number, please? I am going to my room and I would like to give it to them on the way," he said, marvelling at how such a simple trick always worked and got him the results he wanted.

"They are at Cottage 12, sir. But they are not there at the moment. I saw them walk out to the car park a few moments ago," said the girl. "Would you like to leave the wallet with the reception?" she asked.

"No, thank you. I would like to return it to them myself," he said. "I had asked for a car. Is it ready?" he asked the girl.
"Yes, sir. It is a white Ambassador with the number TCA 2268. The driver is waiting," she said.

Hawthorne thanked the girl and walked towards his room. The moment he was out of sight of the girl at the reception, he tucked the wallet back into his pocket and went to the car park. Mr. Plump must be Kurup and Moustache must be D'Souza, Hawthorne surmised. He didn't know what an Ambassador looked like, so he looked for a white car with the number the receptionist had given him. He located it easily. The driver, a young chap, was waiting by it.

Hawthorne saw Siddharth and Sowmya walking towards a white vehicle. They were dressed warmly in windcheaters and jeans. Seeing them Kurup immediately got into the car and D'Souza started the engine.

"Good Morning," Hawthorne said to his driver.
"Good Morning, sir," he said and opened the back door for him.

Hawthorne shook his head and got into the front passenger seat. The driver ran to his side, got in and started the engine. It caught instantly. 'He must have warmed it already,' thought Hawthorne.

"Where to, sir?" asked the driver.
"I will tell you as you go. For the moment, just follow that blue car," he said pointing to the blue Ambassador. "And what is your name?" he asked.
"Chetan, sir," replied the driver.
"Well, Chetan, you speak good English. How did you learn?" Hawthorne asked keeping his eyes on the blue car. It was following the twins' vehicle.
"I am a graduate in Physics, sir. I decided to take up this job after graduation instead of blaming the government for my unemployment," replied Chetan, concentrating on his driving. The day was a typical winter day, dull, cold and gray. The roads were wet with the overnight rain and he suspected that it would rain again later that day.

The fellow is smart/ thought Hawthorne and appreciated him. "Tell me, Chetan," he asked, "what is that white vehicle that is travelling ahead of us?"

"That is a Maruti Gypsy, sir. And a good one, too. Next to the Ambassador, that is the best vehicle for this terrain," explained Chetan.

"And this is an Ambassador, right?" asked Hawthorne.

"Yes, sir, and the one we are following," replied Chetan. "A few years back, there were only two makes of cars available in India, the Ambassador and the Fiat. But now almost all the cars of the world are available, if one has the money," reasoned Chetan.

Hawthorne looked out of the window. He recognized the road as that leading to the town. 'Where could they be going?' he thought. He could not guess the purpose of the twins' visit to Kodaikanal. 'And who are those two following them?' Hawthorne wondered. 'So, the juggernaut has started rolling/ he concluded.

The three vehicles drove in convoy towards the town which was a good five kilometres away.

The tortuous road appeared to be longer than five kilometres. Hawthorne didn't worry about being
spotted. He knew that he wouldn't be suspected till they reached the town because like all hotels around the world it wasn't unusual for two or three vehicles to leave the hotel at the same time. And if the destination of all the vehicles was the town, then they had to take the same road to get there. So he knew that he was safe until he reached town.

"Can I hire a vehicle I can drive myself?" he asked Chetan suddenly. He didn't want to depend on a driver to get to where he wanted to go. And he didn't want anybody to know where he was going.

"You can't hire a car, sir. But you can rent a motorcycle, if you can ride one," said Chetan.

Hawthorne inwardly sighed with relief. In fact, a motorcycle would suit his purpose better than a car.

"Where can I rent one?" he asked.

"I will take you there, sir," said Chetan as they entered the town.

They were still travelling in convoy and Hawthorne saw that the Gypsy had stopped at a departmental store. The blue Ambassador too stopped there and D'Souza followed the family inside. Chetan proceeded towards the lake where a motorcycle could be rented.

Hawthorne prayed that the people he was following would still be there when he returned with the bike. He didn't want to get out of the car there in case they noticed him.

He allowed Chetan to choose the bike and strike the deal. He handed over Rs. 500, as advance payment. Hawthorne asked for a helmet, the type
that had a visor. He dismissed Chetan and asked him to go back to the hotel. When Chetan drove away, he got on the bike, and quickly drove to the depart-
mental store. He was thankful to find the Ambassador and the Gypsy still parked there. He waited outside, out of sight of those who came out of the store.

After a brief but cold wait, Kurup and D'Souza appeared first. Mr. Murali's family followed and they all got into their vehicles once again.

Hawthorne started the engine and rode out in front of them keeping them in view in his rear view mirror. He rode slowly where roads branched off, as he didn't know which one they would take. He didn't want to miss them. He let them overtake him a few times so that he looked like any other casual rider. Fortunately, the two guys didn't appear to be thorough professionals and so, following them was relatively easy for Hawthorne.

The Gypsy stopped at a lonely intersection, where a road branched off towards their right. Siddharth and Sowmya got down and waved goodbye to their parents. Hawthorne knew that he couldn't stop. He would be obvious if he did. As he crossed the intersection, he saw that Siddharth and Sowmya had started walking along the road. He rode past them and glanced in his rear view mirror. A jab of apprehension stabbed at him when he saw the blue Ambassador turning into the same road.

Hawthorne knew that he couldn't be worried about being cautious anymore. He turned his bike
around and drove towards the intersection. As he turned into it, his apprehension slowly turned into a cold grip of fear. The road was very lonely with hardly any other vehicle or person, or even buildings in sight. He could see Siddharth and Sowmya walking in the distance and the Ambassador following them at a creeping pace.

The twins, however, didn't seem to be aware of the car that was following them, as they appeared to be deep in conversation.

A cold drizzle began to fall and Hawthorne lifted his visor to get a better view. Siddharth and Sowmya were looking around to see if they could find shelter from the rain and saw the car that had almost crawled to a stop a few meters from them. A sudden realization seemed to dawn on them as they looked at the car. They turned around and started running, desperately trying to find safety in a house or a building.

The car almost leapt forward and started following them again. Hawthorne kicked himself for not having been more watchful as he desperately drove his bike in an effort to get to Siddharth and Sowmya. He had almost reached the car, when it suddenly appeared to hit something on the road. It careened out of control as the steering wheel was ripped away from D'Souza's hands and before Hawthorne's horrified eyes, crashed right into the backs of Siddharth and Sowmya.
Hawthorne dropped the bike and ran towards the fallen figures. He was blind to everything else except Siddharth and Sowmya. They were both flat on their faces and Hawthorne was almost scared to look at them. He felt for their pulse in the carotid artery and found to his joy that they were still alive. He knelt beside them and first examined Siddharth and then Sowmya, to see if anything was broken. There were no fractures. He slowly turned them over and helped them to sit up.

They both sat up with dazed eyes that suddenly focused on something behind Hawthorne's back. Their faces registered uncomprehending shock. Hawthorne swivelled around and sat stunned, oblivious to the cold rain now falling in sheets.

The Ambassador lay in a heap, its front end mangled into a metal pulp. Kurup and D'Souza lay unconscious inside. Hawthorne ran to the car and tried to open the door. It was jammed shut and he realized that it couldn't be opened without a crowbar. He took a stone and broke open the cracked window on the driver's side and looked inside. D'Souza lay in the driver's seat, his head thrown back. His foot
seemed to have been jammed against the floorboard. He was still breathing, though feebly. Kurup was lying on the front passenger seat on D'Souza's lap. He was bleeding slightly from a cut on his temple and there were a few more cuts on his face from broken glass. His right hand was twisted at an unnatural angle at the elbow and it hung down limply from the seat. He too was alive, but just barely. Hawthorne didn't know if they had any internal injuries but he suspected that they would. They needed immediate medical attention. But he had to do something before summoning medical help for the two men. First things first.

Hawthorne pulled back his head from the car and took a deep breath. He had to act immediately. He looked at the road and was thankful to find no other traffic. The loneliness of the road he had cursed only moments earlier proved a boon right then.

He went over to Siddharth and Sowmya. They were now standing, looking at the car first and then at themselves. They couldn't comprehend what had happened. They should have been. Instead, there they were, standing without a scratch, while the car that should have gone by without scraping its paint, was a mass of twisted metal.

"Are you two okay?" asked Hawthorne. He knew that they were perfectly all right physically but he had to know their mental state. He needed their help for what he was about to do.

Siddharth and Sowmya nodded.

"Good. Now listen carefully to what I am going to
say because I don't have the time to repeat myself. We need to make this look like an accident. Sowmya, you go around that bend," he said, pointing to a curve in the road, "and keep a watch. Whistle if you hear any vehicle approaching," he told her. Inwardly he doubted whether she would be able to hear anything over the sound of the rain. "Siddharth, give me a hand with this," he said nodding at the car. "We have to push it against that tree," he said, choosing a strong looking tree by the side of the road. It was situated down the slope that fell away to the right of the road. There was a small gap in the avenue of trees that lined the road. Hawthorne had chosen the spot well.

Siddharth caught on to what Hawthorne was planning. Sowmya was still looking dazedly around.

"You don't need a lookout, Mr. Hawthorne. This is the road to the observatory. Visitors to the observatory in this weather?" Siddharth shrugged at the rain driving down in cold needles.

The observatory was situated on the top of the Nadingapuram hill. Even on sunny, clear days the road was deserted and lonely. There were very few residences on that road and whoever lived in those few houses didn't need to use that stretch of the road to get to the main town. And so Siddharth was absolutely sure that they didn't need to post Sowmya as a lookout.

He had recognized Hawthorne even through his dazed state and a vague uneasiness had stabbed at the back of his mind. How did he get to be where he
was at that time and why were they doing what they were about to do? Siddharth pushed it to the back of his mind and concentrated on doing what had to be done. He would have time for questions later on. 'Mr. Hawthorne wasn't going anywhere, not without answering some very hard questions,' he thought.

"Snap out of it, Sowmya. We have work to do," he said, patting her on the cheek. Sowmya did, at her brother's touch, as if a bulb just went on inside her and illuminated everything. She shook her head and glanced at Hawthorne. A look of surprise came on her face as she realized who it was standing next to her brother. She glanced at her brother and when he shook his head and gestured to her to keep silent, she shrugged mentally and joined the two of them, ready to do whatever was necessary. Explanations could wait.

Hawthorne noticed the silent communication between the twins. He was grateful to them for not throwing questions at him straightaway. The kids were smart. They knew their priorities. He also knew that he would have to face them later on. He couldn't worry about that now. He had work to do.

They took hold of the car and tried to push it towards the tree. But it didn't budge an inch. Its front axle was broken and no steering could be done. The front wheels too had been smashed in and it looked like an impossible task to accomplish what they had set out to do.

Hawthorne looked around to see if he could find anything that he could use. He looked at the bike
lying sideways on the road and smiled. Maybe he could do it, after all. He asked Sowmya to find two very strong and long fallen branches. He then opened the trunk of the car and was grateful to find a length of rope coiled inside the spare tyre. He lifted his bike and tied one end of the rope to it. Siddharth helped him tie the other end to the car.

Sowmya appeared, dragging two hefty branches behind her. Hawthorne explained to them what they had to do. Sowmya and Siddharth took a branch each and positioned themselves on either side of the car. Sowmya turned away from looking at D'Souza. Hawthorne got on the bike and started it. At his signal, Siddharth and Sowmya heaved with all their might at the branches they had stuck beneath the front end of the car. The front end lifted an inch from the ground and that proved enough for Hawthorne. He slowly steered the bike towards the spot he had chosen. The car rolled forward a few inches on its back wheels. Siddharth and Sowmya couldn't hold on any longer and they let the car down with a thud. They flexed their hands and again lifted the front a few inches. Hawthorne inched ahead.

The three of them lost track of time as they concentrated their body and soul on pushing the mangled car. Perspiration mingled with rain ran down their bodies, soaking and chilling them to their bones. They continued till they reached the edge of the slope. Hawthorne motioned them to stop. Siddharth and Sowmya came to a halt, heaving and taking in gulps of cold air. Hawthorne undid the
towline and wheeled the bike back on to the road. The car was so positioned that all they had to do was to give it a mighty heave for it to roll on to the tree.

Hawthorne stood at the back and Siddharth and Sowmya stood by the back doors. They gripped the frame tightly and began to push when suddenly Sowmya froze to the spot. D'Souza started moaning and he began to shake his head from side to side.

Hawthorne rushed to her side and looked at him. D'Souza was still unconscious.

"He is going into shock. He needs medical attention immediately. Come on, let us get going," he urged and got back to pushing the car. The car tilted over gently and as they continued to push, began to slide sideways down the slope. The slope was covered with wet, dead leaves. And they provided no traction for the smashed in front tyres. So the car slid sideways and came to rest gently against the tree Hawthorne had chosen. The back of the car was touching the tree and the front end was pointing away from the tree. The scene didn't look like an accident. But Hawthorne decided that it would have to do, as he had no time to rearrange the scene. He suspected that there would be no major investigation into the accident. And he would prove to be right. The police would dismiss it as a case of drunken driving which happened almost every day at Kodaikanal.

Siddharth and Sowmya watched as Hawthorne scrambled down the slope to check the two injured men in the car. D'Souza had stopped moaning and
both of them had become cold and clammy.

Hawthorne hurried back up the slope and motioned to Siddharth and Sowmya to get on the bike. He started the engine and rode back the way he had come, almost blinded by the rain. He knew he had seen a telephone booth somewhere on the road to the hotel but he couldn't see it until he was almost upon it. He stopped a few meters away from it and asked Siddharth to call the police and inform them about an accident on the observatory road. He warned him not to give them any other details other than the exact location of the accident and that there were two critically injured, but still alive people in the car.

Siddharth did exactly as he was told and they got back to the hotel. Hawthorne asked them to meet him at the restaurant after changing into dry clothes. They got the key from the reception and were there in the restaurant in less than fifteen minutes.

Hawthorne was already there, fresh and dry, waiting for them. So was a pot of piping hot coffee. They joined him and gratefully accepted the hot coffee. Sowmya's eyes shot up with a questioning glance as soon as she realized that both she and Hawthorne were drinking coffee and not tea.

"Maybe you better start explaining," said Sowmya, looking at Hawthorne. She didn't feel like being polite to him. But she was puzzled by his manner. He didn't look like a man caught out by his lie. He looked relaxed and composed, as if a great weight was lifted off his shoulders.
"Where would you like me to start?" asked Hawthorne, smiling.

"Perhaps from what happened out there on that road and who those two people were?"

"One of them, the darker one with the moustache, was D'Souza and the other was Kurup. They have been following you since this morning. And as to what happened on that road, I honestly cannot say," said Hawthorne.

"How come you happened to be there?" asked Siddharth.

"Because I was following you and those two guys," replied Hawthorne.

"Just who are you? And where are you from?" asked Sowmya, a little frustrated with the indirect answers that clarified nothing and only made everything seem more mysterious. She felt as if she was playing a cloak and dagger game. Only it appeared far more serious and dangerous than a game.

"Perhaps you can understand better if I say that I am from SETI," said Hawthorne.

"SETI? Why should you be from SETI? And even if you are, why didn't you say so earlier when we met in the morning? And why should you and those two guys follow us?" asked Sowmya, getting more and more suspicious by the minute.

"Perhaps a detailed explanation will help you understand the situation you are in," said Hawthorne and started. "Remember the data of the signal you had sent to SETI for analysis?"
Sowmya and Siddharth nodded.
"That is where everything started. We have confirmed that the signal does not have an earthly origin. And it is not any RFI (Radio Frequency Interference) either. We have even found out its source and it is, at this moment orbiting our planet." Hawthorne paused to let the information sink in.

The twins felt a chill run down their spines and they shivered involuntarily. They waited with bated breath as they felt that there was more to come.

"NASA has made a visual sighting of the signal's source and has informed the US government and the US military. They have used their resources to trace the target of the signal. It is your home at Paalaadi." Hawthorne paused again.

Siddharth and Sowmya froze in their chairs. A numbing disbelief seemed to envelop them and suddenly made everything so distant and weightless. They were there and yet they weren't there and that this was happening to them and yet this wasn't happening to them.

"The US government has authorized the military and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to take whatever steps necessary to find out all about you and your connection to the source of the signal. There are plans to go even further if necessary. We wanted to get to you first, for two reasons. First, we wanted to get whatever information you had and second, we wanted to protect you," Hawthorne stopped.

"You could have told us all this in the morning when we met. Then perhaps all this wouldn't have
happened/’ said Siddharth in an accusing tone.

"I was going to, when I saw those two looking for you," Hawthorne lied. "So I decided to wait a while before disclosing my identity," he said.

Silence reigned for a while. The sound of the rain felt like a lullaby and Siddharth and Sowmya seemed to give themselves up to its soothing effect.

"How do you explain the fact that we are still alive? We should have been dead on that road," said Siddharth, breaking the silence with his question.

"Honestly, I am as much in the dark as you are about that. If I had an explanation, do you think I wouldn't have given it to you by now?" he asked Siddharth.

That felt fair and Siddharth said nothing further.

"Were those two trying to kill us? Was that their plan?" asked Sowmya in an intense whisper, looking right into Hawthorne's eyes.

"No, that wasn't their plan. I think they were trying to kidnap you. You two are no use to them dead. They hit something on the road and the wheel must have jumped out of D'Souza's hands making him lose control. I saw it happen. So killing you wasn't their plan," Hawthorne said, without trying to sugarcoat his words. He knew that these two kids needed to know the truth, the brutal truth. He also knew that they could handle it. They had to. It would help them to be prepared to face what was still to come.

"Where were you two going on that lonely road?" asked Hawthorne.

"To the observatory," said Siddharth.
"What for?" asked Hawthorne again.

Siddharth explained a little sheepishly Sowmya's surmises and theories to Hawthorne. He felt foolish, talking about trying to locate the source from an observatory after hearing that NASA had become involved. His voice petered out into silence by the end of his explanation.

Hawthorne listened with growing admiration for these two kids. Their theories and reasoning didn't seem amateur to him. Though it seemed far-fetched, it probably would have brought them results if they had the correct equipment and if they had made accurate calculations.

"So, what do we do now?" asked Siddharth.

"First, we keep our mouths shut. Not a word about anything to anybody, not even to your parents. Anything includes who I am too. We stick to the events that happened in the restaurant before you left for town. Tell your parents that you didn't go to the observatory as it had started to rain and that I had given you a lift on my bike. And then we go back to your place as soon as possible," said Hawthorne. The authority and confidence in his voice stemmed the need for further questions and discussions on the subject.

"I suggest you push everything out of your mind immediately," he said with clenched teeth. He had glanced at the entrance and had seen Mr. Murali and his wife searching for them. "Your parents are approaching us and you better behave normally," he said again.
Siddharth and Sowmya brought a smile on their faces as Hawthorne got up to greet their parents. They then turned around and invited them to join them.

"Hey! What is this? You kids seem to have a plan to bankrupt Mr. Hawthorne!" exclaimed Mr. Murali with a teasing smile.

"Oh, no, Mr. Murali! I invited them to join me and we have had nothing but a pot of coffee," reassured Hawthorne.

"Well, it is lunchtime and this one is on us," said Mr. Murali.

"I will take up that offer if you promise to show me how to eat all the wonderful dishes that are sure to be served," said Hawthorne, winking imperceptibly at Sowmya.

Sowmya burst out laughing and that seemed to break her out of the stunned state she had been in.

"Oh, Mr. Hawthorne! If you think these dishes are wonderful, you should try tasting my Mom's cooking. I bet you will resign your job in the US and take up one with my father," said Sowmya as she joined in.

They ordered and ate a hot meal. Siddharth and Sowmya showed no signs of having been through anything but an ordinary day and Hawthorne was thankful for it. Mr. Murali asked his children whether they have been able to complete their reference work. They replied in the affirmative.

So it was decided that they would start back home after breakfast the next morning and that Hawthorne would accompany them and stay with them as a guest for as long as he liked. Hawthorne
thanked them for their hospitality and for the lunch and excused himself. He told them that he had to attend to some business. He promised to join them again in the restaurant for breakfast next morning.

Hawthorne went over to the reception and requested to meet Chetan, the driver of the car he had hired in the morning. No, he would not need the car, he said, just the driver. He assured the worried girl that the driver hadn't done anything but that he wanted to thank him for his help in the morning.

When Chetan arrived, he requested him to return the rented bike and compensated him more than adequately for his trouble. He then went to his room, took out his toilet bag and shook out its contents on to the bed. He then undid a hidden clasp and removed the false bottom. He took out what looked like a cellphone, but was in fact a satellite phone. It had a built-in scrambler and anybody intercepting the call, which was a possibility these days, would only hear jumbled nonsense. He replaced the false bottom and the contents and pocketed the phone. It had stopped raining and he walked out, locking his room, searching for a secluded spot, free from interference, to make a quiet call to his superior.
They reached Paalaadi before lunch. Hawthorne was shown to the guest room and was asked to join for lunch in an hour's time. Siddharth and Sowmya went to their rooms and dumped their bags before rushing over to their study. They picked up Hawthorne on their way. They had kept the telescope operative and quickly went through the data for the two days they had not been there. The signal was there, as usual. A strange feeling rippled through them as they looked at it with their new-found knowledge.

Hawthorne had stopped in amazement as he had stepped inside the study. He couldn't believe the sight that greeted his eyes. He had seen many amateur SETI observers, and an amateur observatory was no surprise to him. What amazed him was, the fact that these two, who had set up this remarkable observatory, were not yet fifteen years old. In any case, he hadn't underestimated their intelligence. In fact, he had made all his plans based on the fact that these two were superbly intelligent.

Siddharth showed Hawthorne around and quickly saw that he needn't have bothered. Hawthorne
handled the equipment with confidence and familiarity. Siddharth quietly kicked himself for forgetting that he was, after all, from SETI where they handled much more complex equipment than what was in his study.

Hawthorne explained to them that both SETI and NASA were doing an in-depth analysis on the signal. They would know something pretty soon from either of them. Till then there would be nothing else to do but wait.

Siddharth offered to show Hawthorne around their plantation and Hawthorne accepted it without hesitation. He needed to familiarize himself with the territory if what he was expecting indeed happened. He was in no doubt that it would. Sowmya declined to go with them and Hawthorne asked her not to leave the house under any circumstances.

Siddharth took Hawthorne around and watched him closely. He seemed to be more interested in the lay of the land rather than how a plantation worked. His questions too were directed at knowing more about the surrounding hills and what lay beyond them rather than how tea was planted.

Siddharth began to get suspicious about Hawthorne. In the shock of the events that had happened the previous day, Siddharth had accepted all that Hawthorne had told them without question. But now, as he thought about it, he found that there were many things that didn't tally. Foremost among them was the excuse Hawthorne had given them about not revealing his identity earlier because
he had seen the two men looking for them.

Siddharth distinctly remembered that no one had come into the restaurant while they were there. And even if they had, how did Hawthorne know that they were looking for them? He wished he had stayed at Kodaikanal for a day or two more. He would have somehow found a way to know more about Hawthorne.

They went back and the rest of the day passed off uneventfully. They all had an early dinner and went to bed, giving a final check to the signal that came in without fail.

Siddharth woke up in the middle of the night with an uneasy feeling. He looked at the clock on the side table by his bed. It showed 2.34 a.m. He had a sudden urge to look out of his window, at their study. His heart skipped a beat when he saw a sliver of light around the edge of the window facing his room. Someone was in their den!

He went to Sowmya's room, silently shook her awake and pointed out the study to her. Sowmya rubbed her eyes sleepily and sat up with a jolt when the realization sank in. Siddharth motioned for his sister to follow him as he pulled on his sweater and took out his searchlight. Sowmya picked up hers as well and they tiptoed noiselessly out of the room. On their way to the front door, Siddharth stopped in front of Hawthorne's door and tried the handle silently. It was locked. He bent down and peered into the keyhole. He could see nothing. Either the key was in the lock or the room was totally dark. 'Even if the
key was in the lock it proved nothing/ thought Siddharth. There were ways to get out of a locked room. They proceeded to the front door and silently closed it behind them.

They went around the back of the house so that they could approach the study from the side. They walked on the grass in the dark. They didn't want to risk switching on their torches. They came up against the wall of the study and slowly looked into the window. They could see nothing as the curtains were drawn. Siddharth motioned Sowmya to wait where she was and he went around the study, trying the other window. He came back and shook his head to his sister, indicating that he couldn't see anything. Their eyes had become accustomed to the dark by then and they decided to wait and see who came out of the study.

A cold wind bit through their sweater and their nightshirts and they shivered. The night was dark, with the waxing moon obscured by the dark clouds. They lost track of how long they had been waiting and their feet became numb with the cold.

Suddenly Sowmya nudged her brother and he stiffened as the front door of the study opened. Hawthorne stepped out. He was clearly visible against the light from the study. They saw him only for a moment as he switched off the light and closed the door behind him. He looked around and Siddharth and Sowmya pressed closer against the wall. He appeared satisfied as he walked away, towards their home. Siddharth and Sowmya didn't
dare to move a muscle till he was well out of sight. They waited a little longer to give Hawthorne time to get back inside his room. They moved only when they were absolutely sure that he would be back in his room.

They walked home silently, questions and doubts plagued their minds. They changed to warmer clothes when they got back to their rooms. Sowmya joined her brother in his room and they sat on his bed, each wrapped in a warm blanket.

"I am going to Kodaikanal tomorrow, Sowmya. Meanwhile, keep a close eye on him. Don't let him out of your sight. And if possible, try to find out what he was doing in our study," he said.

"What are you going to do there?" she asked.

"I am going to try to find out who Hawthorne really is," answered Siddharth.

"Couldn't you try to find it out through the Internet? I think there is a US government site that lets you find out about a person," suggested Sowmya.

"And how am I going to use the Internet? With Hawthorne looking over my shoulder?" asked Siddharth.

Sowmya realized the uselessness of her suggestion. They had the only Internet connection in Paalaadi.

"You better go to Kodaikanal then," she agreed and left for her room.

She lay on her bed and thought about the events of the night. She wondered who Hawthorne really was. A sudden fear gripped her as she thought about the possibility of Hawthorne being from the US
military or from the CIA. If that was true, then why did he tell them about the plans to kidnap them? It was all so confusing as she thought about the various possibilities. She didn't know how or when she slept the rest of the night.

The next morning Siddharth got up early and asked his father if the plantation jeep was going to Kodaikanal that morning. He sighed with relief when his father told him that it was and gave him permission to go to Kodaikanal in it. The jeep would be returning in the afternoon and Siddharth could come back in it. He told his father that he was going to visit a friend and that it was very important that he went. No, he couldn't have met him on the earlier trip. He asked his father and mother not to say anything about his trip to Hawthorne and asked them to give him some other excuse for his absence. He grabbed a bite of breakfast and ran out before Hawthorne came down for breakfast.

On his way to Kodaikanal he thought about how he was going to find out about Hawthorne. He could use the Internet, as Sowmya had suggested last night. But he realized that if he came up with nothing on the Internet, then he would have wasted his time. Anyway he wasn't sure if he could find out about a person working for the military from the Internet. He decided that he would take a chance with his friend, Peter Hawkins, at his old school. He was an American and he probably had some ideas about tracing a person.

When he reached Kodaikanal, he asked to be
dropped off at his old school. He went straight to his friend Peter Hawkins' room. Siddharth was thankful that his school still had a week of working days before closing for the winter vacation. After exchanging warm and excited greetings, Siddharth got straight to the point.

"Peter, I need your advice on something very important," he started.

"That as a first, Siddharth. It had always been the other way round when you were here, remember?" laughed Peter.

"That shows I am not such a genius you portray me to be, doesn't it?" answered Siddharth with a smile.

Peter laughed and said, "Anything, pal. Just shoot."

"If I had to find out the details of a person from your country, what would I need to do?" he asked.

"That depends on whether he is a civilian or in government service," answered Peter.

"Let us say he was either in the military or in government service."

"Military would be no problem, because I have an uncle in the army. He could perhaps get us the details, provided he isn't in some highly classified division. Government service might be a little bit more difficult. There are all sorts of semi-, quasi- and total government organizations in America. What sort are you talking about?" Peter asked.

"What sort would you consider CIA to be?" Siddharth asked back.

Peter was shocked. His mouth fell open and he sat
there blinking disbelievingly at Siddharth.
"This isn't some kind of a joke, is it?" he asked Siddharth.
"Peter, I have got up early in the morning and have come all the way from my place without even having a proper breakfast just to ask you this. Would I do this for a joke?" said Siddharth.
"What sort of trouble have you got yourself into? And is Sowmya involved in all this?" he asked worriedly. Peter liked the twins. They had been more than helpful and had done so much to make him comfortable in his first year in the school. He didn't want anything to happen to them. Siddharth was talking about the CIA, the CIA for God's sake! What was happening?
"Trust me, Peter. We are not in any trouble. That is all I can tell you right now. Perhaps someday I may be able to tell you more. Then perhaps, I may not be. But for now, you have got to trust me and help me," said Siddharth in a tone Peter hadn't heard before. He sounded so grown up and mysterious. Whatever it was, he would help them. Perhaps this was his chance to repay the kindness and affection they had showered on him.
"Okay, Siddharth, no more questions. What do you want me to do?" he asked with determination. If he could be of assistance to them then he would be.
"I need to find out about a person named Daniel Hawthorne. Let us first try the military because you said you have an uncle in the army."
"Okay, let us go. I need to get to a phone with ISD
(International Subscriber Trunk Dialling) facility. You can tell me more on the way, right?” he said and picked up his jacket.

They walked over to a telephone booth, a little distance from the school. It offered ISD facility, as there were many foreign students in the school. It had recently added a fax machine, too.

Siddharth told Peter that he virtually knew nothing other than the name. He wasn't even sure whether that was his real name. Peter lost whatever hope he had of helping Siddharth. There was no way he could find out anything about this person Hawthorne. But he wasn't going to tell his friend that.

He went to the booth and beckoned to Siddharth to stand near him in the sound proof cubicle. It became immediately cramped as Siddharth stepped in but both of them didn't notice it.

Peter dialled a number and waited for the connection to go through. Siddharth could hear only one side of the conversation:

"Hello, Grandpa! This is Peter, from India... Yes, I am fine. Is Uncle John there?... Could you please put him on? I need to ask him something. Yes, I will hold."

Peter covered the mouthpiece and whispered to Siddharth, "We are in luck, Siddharth. My uncle is home on furlough."

"Hello, Uncle!" Peter said. "How are you? I am excellent. Say, I need to ask you something. Would you happen to know anybody by the name of Daniel Hawthorne?... You do?" Peter yelled and continued to listen, showing the thumbs up sign to Siddharth.
"Just a minute, Uncle. Let me find out," he said and spoke to Siddharth urgently, covering the mouthpiece. "Find out the fax number of this joint." He uncovered his hand and continued to listen.

Siddharth hurried back with the number and handed it to Peter. Peter read out the number into the telephone.

"Oh! Don't ask me, Uncle. I don't know anything. I am doing a favour for a friend. Maybe someday I might be able to explain everything to you," he said, glancing at Siddharth. "Yes, Uncle, I will tell him that. Bye and thanks a million."

Peter put down the phone and let out a long sigh. "Phew! Lady Luck must have been grinning at you. I didn't expect to hit such pay dirt," he said to Siddharth.

"What is he sending through fax?" asked Siddharth eagerly.

"A photo of Captain Hawthorne." Peter said.

"Captain Hawthorne? Is he a Captain?" Siddharth was incredulous.

"Yes he is and a great one at that. My uncle says that he had the privilege of being in his unit for about a year before he was transferred to some other department. Any man would have taken a bullet for him, he said."

Siddharth fell silent, trying to take in the information about Hawthorne. He didn't know what to make of it and he felt more confused than ever.

"And yes, he also told me to tell you that if you were dealing with Hawthorne, you could trust him with your life, and then some more," Peter added.
Siddharth bit his lip. This was getting more and more confusing by the minute. They were waiting by the fax machine to receive the photograph that Peter's uncle was sending. It began to arrive with a slow buzz.

Siddharth snatched it off the machine and his eyes fell on the figure standing in the middle of a group. It was, unmistakably, Daniel Hawthorne. It appeared to be an army unit and the men were dressed in arctic gear. It looked as if the snap was taken right after they had been through either an exercise or a mission. Siddharth suspected that it was more likely a mission because of the expression on the faces of the men. There was joy and satisfaction and a proud look of accomplishment written on all the faces except that of Hawthorne. He looked tired and Siddharth got the feeling that he hadn't particularly liked the trip. The photo was a black and white one and Hawthorne looked as white as any of the men around him. 'He must have somehow got himself tanned to look like an Indian,' thought Siddharth. He looked at the other men in the group and their body language confirmed what Peter's uncle had said: 'any man would take a bullet for him'. Peter pointed out his uncle to Siddharth.

"Mind if I keep this?" he asked Peter.

"Of course not, Siddharth. What would I do with it?" said Peter.

"It is better you forget that this meeting ever took place, Peter. And you better call up your uncle later and tell him not to say a word to anyone about the
conversation you had with him. It would be better for him and for you/' said Siddharth in a serious and slightly frightened voice.

Peter simply nodded.

"Take care, Siddharth," he said and walked away towards his school.

Siddharth pocketed the photograph and started walking. He needed to think through a few things before deciding upon the next course of action. He started walking towards the boat club where his jeep would be picking him up.

His mind was still in a tizzy, trying to find out who Hawthorne really was. He couldn't believe that Hawthorne was stupid enough to use his real name with them. Had he given a false name, there was no way they could have found out anything about him. And then, why did he say he was from SETI? If he wasn't, how could he handle the equipment in their study with such ease and confidence? Maybe there was a department in the US military that was devoted to investigate any UFO sightings reported to them. If there was such a department and if Hawthorne was somehow connected with it, then that would explain his familiarity with SETI equipment. Suddenly Siddharth felt things falling into their place. If Hawthorne were from the military, then that would explain how he knew about the plans to approach them. Siddharth kicked himself for not thinking of this earlier. 'I should have asked him how he knew about the plans of the US military/ he thought.
Siddharth began to feel confident. Now that he knew who Hawthorne really was, he would find a way to handle him. But first he had to alert Sowmya. Siddharth walked over to another booth near the boat club and called home. His sister answered at the first ring.

"Sowmya, Hawthorne is not from SETI," he said.
"Siddharth, Hawthorne is not from SETI," she said at the same instant.

"What? What did you say?" asked Siddharth, unable to believe that he had heard right.

"Hawthorne is not from SETI," Sowmya repeated excitedly.

"How did you know?" asked Siddharth.

"Because the real SETI man is right here beside me," said Sowmya triumphantly.

"Sowmya, don't say a word to him and don't take him to our study. I am coming right home," he said and slammed down the receiver.
The phone outside the Oval office in the White House rang.

The secretary to the President of the United States of America picked it up. "Good Morning, President's office... Yes, sir. He is at an important meeting with Mr. Jensen at the moment... Just a moment, sir. I will check with him. Will you please hold?"

The secretary knocked on the door and entered when she heard the President's voice, asking her to enter.

"Excuse me, Mr. President. Mr. Simpson is on the line. He says it is urgent and that it cannot wait. He requests a meeting immediately. And he requested Mr. Jensen to be there, too," she said.

Donald Simpson was the Secretary of State and Will Jensen was the President's Chief of Staff.

The President looked at the clock and then at his diary. He liked to keep a note of his engagements himself.

"I guess I can fit him in. Please ask him to join us," said the President.

The secretary hurried out and informed Simpson who was on the line.

Simpson arrived within five minutes. He had
Dr. Cohen with him and they entered the President's office after knocking.

After fifteen minutes the President buzzed his secretary on the intercom and asked her to cancel all his engagements for the day. He told her not to let anybody in and not to put through any calls to his office. The President then went through the sheaf of papers that Dr. Cohen had produced, once again. It was surprisingly thin for a matter that was so momentous.

"For how long have you known about this?" he asked no one in particular.

"For exactly three days, Mr. President," answered Simpson. He knew that this President wouldn't ask what should naturally be the next question: 'Why wasn't I told earlier?'

This President left the slogging to his efficient staff and didn't make a fuss about keeping him informed about things from the very beginning. But he could turn into a tiger if he found any inadequacies in the workings of his staff.

"Are you sure it is genuine?" he asked Dr. Cohen.

"Yes, Mr. President," he said, finding it unnecessary to add anything more.

"Our attempts to talk with those two kids have met with failure, right?" he asked Simpson.

"Yes, Mr. President. There was an unexplained incident that set us back in our efforts," Simpson said.

"And we don't have time to try anything else, according to what you have out here," he said, pointing to a printed sheet.
Silence greeted him.

"How would those kids get this?" the President asked showing the sheet. "Unless they do, they can't do anything, can they?"

"A copy of that sheet would be with them by tomorrow afternoon, Mr. President. Gregory Perkins has obtained a copy and is taking it to them," answered Dr. Cohen.

"And as soon as it reaches them they will certainly do something about it because Hawthorne is with the kids," added Simpson.

"Not Gregory Perkins of the 'envome' business and Captain Daniel Hawthorne?" asked the President, looking questioningly at Simpson.

Simpson nodded his head in answer.

The President looked a little puzzled. He knew Daniel Hawthorne personally and Gregory Perkins by reputation. But he didn't know how those two were connected in this matter and how they knew each other. He made a mental note of it to ask Jensen later. He didn't have time for it now.

The President fell silent. He got up from his chair and walked over to the window and looked out. The view of the Potomac river that usually refreshed him didn't even register with him that day as he looked out with unseeing eyes.

He suddenly turned around and walked back to his desk as if his mind was made up.

"Get me the Indian Prime Minister on the hot line," he directed Simpson. "And, be prepared to fly out to New Delhi. Take whomever you want with you. It is
up to you to convince him to do what is perhaps the only course of action available to us," he said. And then he told him what he had to tell the Prime Minister. He knew the Prime Minister would listen and eventually accept. He was a wise man and a reasonable one, too, a combination that was becoming rare among the politicians of the world.
Siddharth reached home before sundown. He didn't pause to refresh himself as he went straight in search of Sowmya. She was in the guest room where Hawthorne was put up. Siddharth entered and his eyes fell on the man who was sitting on the bed. And before he could say a word, Hawthorne entered the room.

"Hello, Dan!" said the man on the bed, looking at Hawthorne.

"What took you so long?" asked Hawthorne without bothering to return his greeting.

"I got here as fast as I could. It took me a while to get hold of the transcript. I used my private jet and then chartered a copter to this place," explained the man.

"Would you two stop and explain what all this is about?" asked Siddharth, frustrated with the hide-and-seek game of identities.

"Please, sit down, Siddharth, and make yourself comfortable. This may take a while," said Hawthorne and pulled a chair for him while he sat on the bed facing him. Sowmya was already seated in a chair.

"Where would you like me to start?" Hawthorne asked them both.
"From who this man is and then who you are, and what is happening?" said Siddharth in an icy tone. Hawthorne did not seem to be affected by his coldness. "This is Gregory Perkins, and I am Daniel Hawthorne. You know that already," he said.

"And then some," said Siddharth as he threw the photograph on the bed between the two men. Hawthorne didn't make any effort to pick it up, but said, "How did you contact John?"

"I didn't. A friend did," replied Siddharth. "And which department are you with now?"

"With the one that investigates UFO sightings and reports," replied Hawthorne.

'So I was right after all,' thought Siddharth. There was such a department.

"What is it known as now? Project Blue Book was stopped a long time ago," said Sowmya.

"It doesn't have a name. Officially it doesn't exist," he said.

"And what about all those other things you told us?" Siddharth demanded.

"They are all true. Greg can vouch for that," he said, nodding at Gregory.

Siddharth glanced at Gregory and turned back to Hawthorne. He wasn't finished with him yet.

"Why didn't you say who you were in the beginning? Why did you lie to us?" he asked, still unwilling to let him off the hook.

"Would you have believed me if I had told you?" Hawthorne asked Siddharth with a challenging look.

Siddharth's face told him that he wouldn't have.
"And, moreover, I had to keep you safe till Greg could get here with the transcript," he said again.

"Transcript? What transcript?" asked Siddharth and Sowmya together.

"This one," said Gregory. "The signal you have been receiving was deciphered into binary code and then the binary code was again deciphered," explained Greg simply. If he explained the actual process of decoding the signal they would be there all day long.

"What does it say?" asked Sowmya eagerly.

"I think it would be better if we went to your study before discussing anything further," said Gregory.

Hawthorne nodded his agreement and they silently filed out of the room and left for the study.

Gregory gave a low whistle as he stepped inside and saw all the equipment. He went straight to the computer and inserted a disk in the drive.

"Get ready, kids. This is big," he said and rubbed his hands together in glee and punched the 'Enter' button. The screen went blank for an instant and then suddenly fluorescent letters appeared on it.

GREETINGS SIDDHARTH AND SOWMYA! GREETINGS FROM FAR AWAY PEOPLE! THIS MESSAGE IS TO INFORM YOU ABOUT A MEETING. A REPRESENTATIVE OF OUR PEOPLE WILL MEET YOU AT A PLACE YOU CALL ELEPHANT RAVINE AT 0400 HRS. YOUR TIME, THE DAY YOU READ THIS!

The message stopped. Siddharth and Sowmya stared at the computer screen with their mouths
open. Their breath came in short gasps. They looked as if they were about to fall. They had been standing behind Gregory and looking over his shoulder at the screen. Hawthorne dragged two chairs and gently pushed them into it. They sat down with a thud.

"This isn't some kind of a joke, is it?" Sowmya was the first to recover.

"Trust me, Sowmya, it isn't," said Hawthorne.

"How do you know?" asked Siddharth. He still wasn't going to trust Hawthorne that easily.

"Because he has already been contacted," said Gregory softly.

Siddharth stared at him blankly.

"What do you mean he has already been contacted?" asked Sowmya, afraid to understand what Gregory had said.

"He has already been told that this moment would arrive, Sowmya. And that is why he got himself into the UFO department. He has been waiting for a while now. And his job was to protect whomsoever it was that was chosen by them. And it happened to be you two, though we honestly don't understand why," explained Gregory.

"How do you know all this?" asked Siddharth.

"Because he was there with me when it happened," said Hawthorne.

"Take me to be a dunce, but I still don't understand what is happening here," said Siddharth.

"It is a long story, Siddharth," said Gregory and told him about his rescue in the snowfields of Alaska.

"I had been on a hiking trip to Alaska. A sudden storm
came over and I lost my way and fell into a ravine. I had my GPS switched on and I managed to send a radio message before momentarily losing consciousness. Hawthorne and his unit, posted at Fort Wainwright, were sent on the rescue mission. They were given my position and so it wasn't very difficult for them to locate me. However, someone had to climb down into the ravine to reach me and it was Hawthorne who came down.

"When he came down to rescue me, I had regained my consciousness and was already being attended to by a person. Hawthorne asked the person who he was. He assumed that it was a man because he couldn't see his face or any other features. He was totally covered from head to foot in thick winter clothing. The man pointed out what looked like a vehicle. A strange noise was coming from that vehicle. The figure suggested that they carry me to the vehicle to shelter me from the fierce wind that was blowing.

"Hawthorne agreed and carried me to the vehicle. Only when we were inside did we see that it was like no other vehicle we had ever seen. In fact, we knew that it wasn't from this planet. The man removed his hooded parka he was wearing and it was then that Hawthorne saw that it was a woman and not a man, as he had assumed. She ministered to me and did something that revived me instantly. I felt like a new man. I couldn't believe that I was near death only a few moments ago.

"When we ascended the ravine, Hawthorne
actually exposed me to the cold for a while to make me cold and miserable so that my body would show the signs of being almost frozen to death. As for the woman, we asked her who she was and she told us that she was from a planet far away and that she had come to earth on a reconnaissance mission. She was happy that she found us because it was one of her objectives to find some humans who would be of assistance to her. She told us that she and her people had no malicious intent towards humans and that she was here only to help us. But that would come later, she told us. For now she needed our help in keeping her visit quiet. She would be back as soon as her people decided on further course of action. She would need us then. Till then we were to keep this to ourselves. She also told us to get enrolled in an activity that would keep us in touch with the activities of humans regarding UFO sightings and alien visitations. And that was why Hawthorne had chosen that department and I got into SETI. We had to be on the inside of both the organizations."

Gregory finally finished his explanation and cast a look at Siddharth and Sowmya to see if they believed him.

"Did you believe her just by her words?" asked Siddharth. "Didn't you demand more proof?"

"You wouldn't have asked me this question if you had seen her, Siddharth. There was no reason to doubt her words. Strange as it may sound, we did believe her. We wouldn't have been here if we didn't, would we?" asked Gregory.
"You still don't trust me, do you?" Hawthorne asked Siddharth.

Something in his voice made Siddharth feel ashamed of himself. 'What else did he need to do to prove his trustworthiness?' Siddharth asked himself.

"Stop it, Siddharth. You are behaving like an idiot," said Sowmya sternly.

"Am I?" asked Siddharth, grinning sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Hawthorne. I have been such a fool. Do forgive me. What do we do now?" he asked, apologizing to Hawthorne.

"First, we have a good dinner. And then we wait for everyone to fall asleep. I assume you know this place, Elephant Ravine?" asked Hawthorne.

"Yes," said Siddharth.

"That is settled then. Now how about something to eat? I'm famished," said Gregory, rubbing his stomach.

They locked the study and went home for dinner, Siddharth and Sowmya tried very hard to conceal their excitement that coursed through them.
They left the house a little after 1 o'clock. They were equipped with torches and a length of strong rope. All of them were dressed warmly as they knew it would be bitterly cold down in the ravine.

The Elephant Ravine was a deep gully situated in the nook between two hills. Nobody knew how the place got that name since there was no known record of elephants having been sighted there. To get to the gully, they had to descend a slope of thick forest. Siddharth and Sowmya knew the place well but they had never been down the slope. They had roamed about and explored the ridge but had never actually got down to the ravine.

The going was tough and slow. They had to pick their way carefully lest someone slipped and got injured. Hawthorne led the group with Siddharth and Sowmya following and Gregory bringing up the rear. They tied themselves together with the rope and proceeded watching their step with care.

Suddenly, Hawthorne halted and signalled everyone to stop. They had reached the bottom. They stopped and looked around. They were standing on the bank of what appeared to be a dried-up stream.
Hawthorne told them to stay there and he went forward, looking for a safe place to wait till the appointed hour. The rest of them switched off their lights and waited in the darkness.

Hawthorne came back silently and motioned to them to follow him. He led them downstream until he came to a place where the bank appeared to have widened out. He didn't stop there but proceeded to climb up a gentle slope that rose from the bank.

They stopped at what appeared to be a small ledge. The vegetation was sparse there and Hawthorne stamped on the small plants and weeds that covered the ground. He asked Siddharth and Sowmya to sit down. He and Gregory followed and the four of them sat on the cold, damp floor.

Hawthorne looked at his watch. The glowing numbers showed the time to be 2.58 a.m. They had a wait of an hour.

"Hawthorne, did you plan your meeting with us at Kodaikanal?" Siddharth asked softly. There were a few things he had to get cleared up.

"No, Siddharth, not exactly. But I knew that you were headed there. You have been under satellite surveillance ever since the signal was traced to you," he explained.

Siddharth thought about that silently.

"What were you doing in our study last night?" asked Sowmya. It was only the night before they had found Hawthorne snooping around in their study, yet it felt as if a lifetime had passed between then and now.
"I was sending an e-mail to my superior, Lt. Colonel Nash. I had to so that I could know what was being planned by my government," he said.

"Forgive me for asking, Hawthorne, but I have to know," said Sowmya and continued, "you are in the employ of your government, aren't you? But you seem to be working against them. Aren't you being disloyal?"

"My first loyalty is to humanity, Sowmya. My government comes next," said Hawthorne and paused. "I don't think I am working against my government on anything. I think I am only making the work easier for them," he added.

Sowmya fell silent. These were grave issues and she felt that she wasn't old enough to be getting involved in such things. But she had grown so much in the past few days!

"We seem to have been chosen, don't we?" she asked softly.

"That appears to be the case," said Hawthorne. "Though I can't tell you why. You will have to ask her when she comes," he said.

"How do you know it will be a 'She'?" asked Sowmya with an innocent look.

"I don't know how, Sowmya. I just know," answered Hawthorne.

Sowmya too fell silent, trying to digest the thought.

"How does Gregory come into all this?" asked Siddharth.

Hawthorne explained in detail about contacting Greg and using his code to elicit information from
them and then later alerting him to put their already devised plan into action through a coded phone call. They had planned it so that as soon as something happened that they had been anticipating for, Gregory would use his contacts and his money to get all the information that was available. He had been the one who had risked a lot to get a copy of the decoded transcript.

"How did she look?" Sowmya asked suddenly. She appeared not to have heard a word of what Hawthorne had been saying till then.

"You will have to find that out for yourself, Sowmya," said Hawthorne and fell silent. His voice sounded as if he was unwilling to talk about anything anymore.

Minutes moved in silence and then suddenly the atmosphere seemed to change. Everything went still and a total silence descended on the ravine. The night insects stopped their chirping and the leaves stopped moving. The air seemed to grow still and they found themselves feeling a little difficult to breathe.

The air seemed to shimmer and pulsate around them and they stiffened in anticipation. A vague blob of diffused light seemed to slowly materialize in the air and it gradually turned into a shimmering golden orb that hung in the air, suspended by invisible threads. Suddenly it flashed brightly, forcing them to shut their eyes. When they opened them again, the golden sphere had disappeared and in its place stood, what looked like an Angel. Her hair flowed down her form in dark waves and she seemed to be
dressed in mist that moved and flowed around her in soft eddies. Only her face was clearly visible and a warm glowing aura emanated from her.

The group watched transfixed as she floated in the air. Siddharth felt that if he held out his hand he could touch her, yet he somehow knew that he wouldn't be able to do that. Something about her made her feel like an illusion.

"Hello, Hawthorne! Hello, Gregory! I trust you are doing fine!" she said. Her voice sounded like a delicious concoction of all the musical instruments in the world.

"Yes, we are. Thank you!" answered Hawthorne.

"I sincerely hope we did not put you through any inconvenience," she said again.

"No, it was no trouble at all," said Hawthorne.

"It was a pleasure!" said Gregory.

"Greetings, Siddharth and Sowmya! I bring warm wishes to you from my people," she said turning to Siddharth and Sowmya.

"Hello!" they said together, dazedly.

"Do you come as a friend?" asked Siddharth.

"Of course, Siddharth! Did not Hawthorne tell you that?" She asked with a radiant smile that seemed to light up the whole ravine.

"He did. But we want to know it from you," said Siddharth.

"What do we call you?" asked Sowmya.

"Maya. Call me Maya," she said.

"Is that what you are called on your planet?" Sowmya asked.
"Does that matter?" Maya asked.
Sowmya knew that it didn't. So she said nothing.
"Where do you come from?" asked Siddharth.
"From somewhere out there!" she said pointing to the star-studded sky.
"That must be a long way off. You wouldn't have come all this way if you didn't have something to say to us, would you?" asked Sowmya.
"Yes, you are right. We do have something to say to you people on this planet you call Earth."
"Before you go into that... why did you choose us? It is obvious that you chose us," asked Sowmya.
"Yes, Sowmya, you are right again. You were chosen. Firstly, because you are from this land, the country you call India, a land where wise men have spoken of things that we have learned the hard way. And then because you are still children, not yet adults and given to their compromises and vested interests. You will gain or lose nothing by conveying our message. There are a few more reasons I am not at liberty to divulge," she said.
"Are you technologically more advanced than we are?" asked Siddharth.
"No, Siddharth. We have given up on technology a long time ago. We have no need for it," she said.
"Then how could you send us the signal?"
"That was why it took us so long to contact you. You see we had to go back in our development, almost reverse our growth, in order to put that satellite together. Though the principles and concepts were easy, it was the building of the actual machine
that took us a while. We have done with all these rudimentary forms of communications almost a century ago."

"Rudimentary? You call satellite communication rudimentary?" asked Siddharth incredulously.

"Yes, Siddharth, it is primitive. When we have been communicating through thoughts, without having to speak aloud our thoughts, why cannot we call your satellite communication rudimentary?" she asked him.

Siddharth gaped at her, unable to comprehend what she was saying.

"If you can communicate through thoughts then I guess you wouldn't need to travel anywhere, do you?" asked Sowmya. Somehow she was able to grasp what Maya was saying better and faster than her brother.

"We do, Sowmya, but on very rare occasions like this," she said. "And yes, I know what your next question is... How do we travel, isn't it? Well, can you comprehend what Thought speed is? If you can, then you can understand it when I say that we travel at Thought speed." She stopped, as if waiting to see if Sowmya understood.

"Then that means you wouldn't need any means of transport. And if you do, do you use a transponder to transfer your molecules from one place to another?" Sowmya asked, following her thread more closely than Siddharth. She was thinking of Star Trek.

"No, Sowmya, we do not use transponder to transfer our molecules. And that is because we do
not need to transfer anything other than our minds/' Maya said.

"You mean something like Astral Projection?" asked Sowmya.

"Yes, something like Astral Projection. But more like what one of your human minds puts forth in a book. I believe it was called Jonathan Livingston Seagull. That was a mind that had grasped the possibilities," Maya said.

"How do you know about that book? How do you know about any book of ours?" asked Sowmya, finding it difficult to comprehend.

"Our research about you people on this planet included everything, Sowmya. We needed to know if you had the possibility of redemption," she said.

Sowmya tried to assimilate what Maya had said. But she found that things were coming at her at such a rush that it was not possible to think coherently. She decided that she would think about all these things later. First she had to get her questions answered and her doubts cleared.

"Let us get back to your mode of travel," she said.

"Would I be right if I assumed that your body is out there on your planet and that you have projected yourself over here?" asked Sowmya again.

"You have got it absolutely right. But we use it only when we have to travel for a short while. If we have to be out for a longer duration, we use our space vehicles. And that was what Hawthorne and Gregory saw on the mountain that day," Maya said with the same brilliant smile.
Silence reigned while everybody tried to assimilate what was happening.

"How is that you have space vehicles? You said that you have done with technology a long time ago," asked Siddharth, realizing the contradiction.

"We are done with technology for the purpose of communication and for a few other things, Siddharth. But we have retained and improved our space travel a great deal. I do not have leave to say anything more," she explained.

"Does your body look like you do now?" asked Sowmya suddenly. She was still thinking about what Maya had said about their mode of travel.

"It does not matter much, Sowmya. Because we can take any form we like once we are out of our bodies," Maya said, and in an instant she was gone. Forms of animals, plants, birds, insects, rivers, forests, rain, thunder, lightning, waterfalls, boats, ships, cars, planes, humans and all things imaginable stood at the spot Maya had been only a moment ago. And then suddenly she was back, in an instant, as she had vanished earlier.

"Now do you understand?" she asked Sowmya.

Sowmya was dumbfounded. She stood rooted to the spot, staring at Maya in a hypnotic gaze.

"Then there is nothing we can offer you, is there?" asked Siddharth in a voice filled with awe.

"Oh, Siddharth! Did you think we wanted anything from you? No, we do not want anything from you. That was not the purpose of this visit. The purpose was to warn you."
"Warn us? But why? Are we in any danger from somebody?" asked Siddharth, alarmed.

"Yes, you are, from yourselves. You see, we were once at the crossroads you people are at now. We were technologically advancing in leaps and bounds, and before we knew it, the technology had brought us to the very brink of extinction. We had developed weapons of such awesome power that we perpetually stood on the threshold of an all-out war that would destroy our very existence and our planet. We too were divided into different zones, what you people call countries. We had become so paranoid of each other that we physically built fences and walls around the perimeter of our zones. And then there came a moment when we were just a breath away from extinguishing ourselves. A few wise ones realized the gravity of the situation and pulled us back from the disaster. And now you people are marching furiously towards the very same precipice we once stood at. I was sent to warn you to turn back or face extinction. The threat is not from anywhere else but from within you," Maya said.

"What should we do?" asked Siddharth.

"That is not for us to say. As I had said, wise people in your land have already shown you the way. All you need is the courage to follow it," she said.

"Why would anybody believe us? What if we are dismissed as two boisterous kids who have dreamed up the whole thing?" asked Siddharth worriedly.

"You will not be. It was for precisely that reason that we went to such lengths to put together the
satellite. The signals are real and so is the satellite. Your people dare not disbelieve the technology that so closely resembles theirs. You will have this too, as final proof," she said with a slight smile and handed over a black box, a little larger than a shoebox.

"Just plug this in and ask the leaders of your land to watch with their eyes closed. They shall not need any more persuasion," she said. "Nobody can take this away from you unless you hand it over yourself," she explained.

Siddharth took it with trembling hands. He looked at it for a brief moment and was suddenly struck by a doubt, 'How could Maya bring such a thing over if she was only projecting herself? Was it possible to carry over solid objects through thoughts?' He didn't know the answer and he didn't want to ask Maya. He wasn't particularly interested in knowing how the box got there, only what was in it.

"What is in it?" he asked.

"The future of your planet if you go the way you are going on," she said.

"Future? How far away into the future?" he asked.

"Within a few decades," she said.

"Can't you tell us what it is?" he asked again. He didn't want to wait till he could look at what the box had to offer.

"I can, but I shall not. See it for yourselves," she said. Siddharth fell silent wondering what future the box would unfold.

"Was it you that we saw?" asked Hawthorne.

He had waited till Siddharth and Sowmya had been
satisfied to ask his questions. Both of them had now fallen silent.

"No, it wasn't me. But I have been here after that," she said.

"Have you been here many times before?" asked Gregory.

"Yes, Gregory, we had to come. We had to come, to study your people and the way you abuse your planet, then to study your technology so that we could manufacture a machine that you would believe and then finally, to choose our target. It was on one of the visits to study your planet that you two saw us," she said.

"If it wasn't you that we saw, then how do you know Hawthorne and me?" asked Gregory.

"All of us who have visited this planet know about you two, Gregory," she answered.

Now Hawthorne and Gregory too lapsed into silence.

Sowmya suddenly appeared to snap out of the daze she had fallen into.

"Would you please explain how is it that we are alive now?" she asked Maya. "We should have been dead days ago as a car ran right over us. But instead, it lay smashed up, while here we are, standing without a scratch. Did you have something to do with it?"

"Yes, we did. Do you remember a moment when you two felt distant and weightless and everything seemed so clear yet distant, as if enclosed in a cocoon? It was at that moment that we threw an energy shield
around you. And it is still there surrounding you. It will automatically disappear the moment you hand over the box we have given you. We could not let anything happen to you till you did that, could we?" she asked with a hint of a wink in her eyes.

"Take a look over that hill top/" she said, pointing to the ridge they had descended from a few hours earlier. Figures carrying automatic weapons were silhouetted against the sky.

"It is time for me to leave," she said.
"Will you be back?" asked Hawthorne.
"I hope not, Hawthorne. I certainly hope not," she said.

"Take good care of your planet. It is the only one you have," she said and was gone, as suddenly as she had appeared.

The group stood stunned not only by the experience but also by the dire warning they had received, unable to worry about the armed figures who were only a few metres from them. They put up their hands, without the slightest hint of resistance and marched away, surrounded by the troops of the 19th Battalion, Madras Regiment of the Indian Army.
Epilogue

A few days later, an emergency session of the General Assembly of the United Nations was called at its headquarters, New York. All the Heads of States were asked to attend the meeting without fail. Dr. Cohen, Lt. Colonel Nash, Captain Hawthorne, Gregory Perkins, Siddharth and Sowmya were also called. The President of the United States had briefed the Secretary-General earlier and he thoroughly knew the events that had led to the meeting.

At the session, Dr. Cohen reported the events of the past days and also gave the additional information that the satellite that had been sending out the signal had disintegrated suddenly in space. No debris was found. Lt. Colonel Nash handed over the floor to Captain Hawthorne who reported the events accurately. He was questioned extensively and he answered the questions patiently and with clarity. Siddharth and Sowmya were the last ones to be called in and they handed over the box to the Secretary-General and explained what needed to be done. They declined to say anything further. The box would
say everything, they said. They just endorsed that what Captain Hawthorne and Gregory Perkins had reported was true to the last word. They were invited to join in the viewing of the box.

The lights dimmed as the box was plugged into a power source. It was a simple apparatus that looked very much like a VCD player. It was, in fact, one but with a small difference. Unlike the VCD player, the pictures produced by this box could not be seen by the naked eye; it could be seen only in the mind’s eye. The apparatus somehow projected the images directly onto the brain, bypassing the visual organ, the eye. So it was not essential to keep the eyes open. Strangely, the pictures seen by everybody at the session were the same. There was no variance either in the pictures or in the messages they sent across.

And the message was straight and clear.

The first image was that of a fishing community in Japan. It showed the fishermen returning home with not a single catch in their nets. And even in the days that followed, the situation remained much the same. Similar incidents began to be reported from all over the world. The fishing industry came to a standstill and so did the other industries connected with it. The world slowly started waking up to this reality. And then when the news started trickling in about the failure of the agro-industry, the alarm began to spread fast.

The governments tried to hush up the matter but nobody could stop it from spreading through the Internet. It was found that the seas had virtually dried up, almost empty of life that could sustain mankind. And the lands were
drying up too, unable to produce anything other than toxic wild plants and weeds, finally, giving up after decades of misuse and abuse. Man turned to eating even those animals he wasn't used to eating, to survive, without realizing that one day this supply too would stop due to absence of food.

The developed countries tried to use their military might to take over and hoard what little food that was left in the world. Water wars erupted even within countries, between the states that had rivers and the ones that did not have. Charity and aid stopped and millions who were dependent on these died without even creating a murmur. A mighty elite group was formed in every country and this group took over the little resources that were available, leaving the rest to fend for themselves. And, when they couldn't, they let them starve to death without a second thought. And when the food and water of their own countries appeared to get exhausted, they looked towards other countries that still had some and used all their strength to covet them.

The climate changed and the normal seasons were disrupted, causing total havoc with everything from normal lifestyle to communication and travel. Fires raged, volcanoes erupted, storms lashed and typhoons twisted in a savage dance of destruction. Pollution soared and man invented different types of masks to protect himself from the fetid air that seemed to envelop the whole planet. One day, within a few months of the first observance of the failure in fishing, everything came tumbling down, in a classic domino effect. Governments, where they were still in existence, struggled to hold the panic but failed as mankind,
sitting surrounded by the latest developments in science, technology and communication, slowly starved to extinction.

The images stopped abruptly. There was a stunned silence in the hall.

The Secretary-General was the first to recover and he quickly called a thirty-minute recess. When they assembled again, Siddharth and Sowmya were asked just a single question: ‘When was all this supposed to happen?’ When they answered that it was to be within a few decades, a panic-stricken look could be seen on the faces of all the leaders.

Everybody thanked Siddharth and Sowmya profusely. They bid their goodbyes to Hawthorne and Gregory and left for their home in Gregory’s private jet. They both said that they hadn’t decided about their future. However, they promised to keep in touch.

When they got home, they told their parents about all that had happened in New York.

A few days later, they read about the declaration issued by the United Nations and by the Security Council in the newspapers. The declaration talked of the need to change the way things were being run and of the need to shift the emphasis from technology that stripped the earth of her resources to technology that enhanced and utilized the resources in a sustainable manner. A White Paper that talked of the methods and means, through which this could be achieved, was also issued. The Security Council issued a separate statement detailing the timeframe and the measure of reduction of arms by then. Each of the member states issued a separate statement detailing their reduction of
arms. The cost saved through this measure was to be utilized to develop and promote ecologically sustainable agricultural and farming methods.

Siddharth and Sowmya smiled as they read these developments in the newspapers and decided to help their father make plans to transform their tea plantation into an orchard. It would take a lot of time, effort and money. But their family had decided that they would do it at any cost.

However, the twins could not come to an agreement about what to do with their observatory. Sowmya wanted to keep it and Siddharth wanted to dismantle it. They decided to lock it up till both of them came to a unanimous decision.

And almost a thousand light years away, in a far, faraway planet, a meeting took place.

"Did you achieve the slated objective?"
"Yes, I did."
"Will they listen to what we have said?"
"They have to! Well, they have nowhere else to go!"
Siddharth and Sowmya, fourteen-year-old twins, are amateur SETI volunteers. They are unable to understand a signal their observatory receives at a particular time every day. NASA too is perplexed at the focus of the unknown satellite moving in synchronous orbit with the earth. However, Gregory Perkins and Daniel Hawthorne have long been waiting for this. They must thwart the Pentagon’s plans to kidnap the twins and ensure that the message being beamed from somewhere outside earth is conveyed to the world through the ‘chosen two’. A racy science fiction for teenagers.