



The Mystery of the Secret Base

Akanksh was excited about the school trip that they were going on. They had reached the base camp from where the trek was about to start. The trip instructor, Mr. Kaushik Chaudhary, had instructed the students to remain in a group and told them to blow the whistle if they were in trouble. Everybody was scurrying around, getting ready for the long hike ahead. Everyone was equipped with a small, but sharp, pocket knife, a water bottle, a map, a small camera, a flashlight, a pair of good hiking boots, among other things.

Akanksh's team consisted of several people, each one skilled in their own field. Anya was well-versed in the different kinds of plants found in the jungle they were going to trek through. Then there was Sahil, who was the best tracker in the whole class. Akanksh himself had the qualities of a leader, and everyone looked up to him for guidance. He was sure that he and his team were going to be the first one to reach the destination camp.

The trek started at 10 in the morning. All the teams were sent off into the forest, with the aim of reaching the destination by 7 in the evening.

Right before the trio set off, Mr. Chaudhary, who was also the security head for this forest and an accomplished police officer, came up to him. He was wearing a camo t-shirt with khaki shorts. His glasses were perched right on the tip of his nose. The students liked to joke that they would fall off any second. "Akanksh, the way you and your teammates performed in the training, I'm expecting you guys to be the first one there," he said "Don't disappoint me." "Yes sir!" they all said in unison.

Akanksh's team had navigated half the forest, when they struck upon something unusual. Tire tracks. In the middle of the forest. They were confused. This was a sanctuary. Nobody was allowed in it, without permission from the authorities. Even after that, only items permitted by them were allowed. Akanksh's school had to do a lot of paperwork and go through many legal procedures to get the permission to organize a trek here. It was weird that a car had found its way in here.

"It's fresh. Not older than 2 days," said Sahil. "How is this possible?" Akanksh asked the most obvious question "Something doesn't feel right. Sahil, we are going to follow it."

"But, the trek?"

"This is more important than the trek. We might be on the threshold of a huge conspiracy. Let's go."

Sahil did as told, knowing that Akanksh's decision must be right. At the end of the tracks, they found a camouflaged jeep, with shoeprints leading off into the jungle. But they quickly started getting few and distanced. Suddenly, Anya exclaimed, "These saplings are not right"

"Not right?" asked Akanksh

“These are not native of this jungle. They are not natural. Somebody deliberately planted them here.”

“You’re right. And look, these form a straight trail, in the direction of the steps. I bet the two are related.”

They followed the saplings, and indeed the two were connected. They lead to a poacher camp in the middle of the jungle. Endangered species of animals were being illegally transported out of the forest.

The base was vaguely circular in shape. The northern part had the parking for all the trucks, cars, SUVs, and other vehicles. The animal cages, which were kept in the east wing, were being loaded onto the trucks with the help of forklifts. The south wing had small huts where the workers and the drivers were resting. The western part had better and bigger huts. It looked as if the main office was located there, and the real puppeteers were inside.

The team took several photos of the area as proof. “Well, what now?” Anya asked, keeping her camera back in her backpack. Akanksh, taking the role of the leader as always, said, “We need more proof. Sahil, you’ll map the whole area. We need everything – important landmarks, routes used by the vehicles, exact position of the camp, everything. Anya, you will take note of all the fauna being poached. Both of you, walk around the perimeter only, and try not to be seen. The camp wouldn’t have been set up without someone inside the legal system. I’ll try to collect as much information as possible. Everybody align your watches’ time to mine. It’s 11:30 now. Be at this exact same spot by 12:15. Let’s go.”

Akanksh was astounded by what they had found, although he did not let it show. He was still uncertain about the decisions that he had made. Was it right on his part to put in danger the lives of his friends? Or was it for the greater good? Only time will tell. As for now, he was heading towards the west wing.

Sahil broke away from the team and took out the map he had been previously provided with. His keen eyes took notice of every little landmark and his nimble fingers drew them carefully on the map. He had only seen in movies that even ordinary kids could be part of something this big. His dream was coming true, and he wanted to live every moment of it to the fullest.

Anya headed straight to the eastern part. She carefully looked inside each cage, and using her remarkable memory, wrote down all the species of animals that were being poached. “Those scoundrels,” she mumbled to herself, “Keeping these animals in such inhumane conditions. Let’s see. That’s an Indian Peafowl, I think, *Pavo cristatus*. And that is – ”

“Hey you!! What are you doing behind those cages?”

Akanksh had been thinking of a way to get into the building when he heard Anya scream. He knew immediately that they were caught. He prayed that Anya won’t point the boys out to the poachers. He started running towards the rendezvous point. Sahil was already there. “What do we do now?”

“How much of the area have you mapped?”

“But, cap’n, they got Anya!”

“I asked something, Sahil”

“Almost all of it”

“Is it enough to reach this place from the camp?”

“If I am with them, then, yeah”

“Ok. Listen, I’ve got a plan”

The girl was noting down all the names of the animals that Kartik and his team had captured. He couldn’t just allow her to walk off with that information. He grabbed her by the hair, and asked, once again, “What are you doing?”

She spat on him.

That was it. He dragged her towards the Office, so that his seniors could have a look at her and decide what to do with her. She resisted, scratching his hands, biting his arms, but he was just too strong. At that precise moment, he saw a boy, about the same age as the girl, come charging at him.

“UNHAND HER, YOU FOUL, BRUTISH BEAST!!”

Kartik, without hesitation, swung his arm at the boy and knocked him unconscious.

Sahil took a sip from his water bottle, without decreasing his speed. He was sprinting towards the destination camp as fast as possible. He had to reach it before nightfall. God knows what those thugs would do to his friends, if he was late.

Suddenly, he saw a hut peeking through the trees. He was almost there.

Anya was feeling guilty. Akanksh had run into the camp, just so he could ensure her safety. She blamed herself for everything. She should have been more careful.

“It’s not your fault, you know.” came Akanksh’s soothing voice. His voice had a certain tone about it that calmed the brain even when they were in the direst of situations.

They had been thrown into one of the back rooms of the Office, with their limbs tie.

“I know what you’re thinking. It’s not your fault.” Akanksh repeated

The door opened, and light flooded the room. The guy who had caught Anya was standing in the doorway. Kartik, his seniors had called him. He briskly walked in, grabbed the pair by the nape of their necks, and brought them out into the main office room.

What Akanksh saw, left him dumbfounded. The man who was at the center of it all, the Hitler of this Reichstag, the Queen Elizabeth of this British Empire, the Mahatma Gandhi of this India, the puppeteer of this whole establishment, was sitting right in front of him, wearing a camo t-shirt with khaki shirts, with glasses right on the tip of his nose.

Seated comfortably on the sofa, was Mr. Kaushik Chaudhary himself.

“Well, well, well” he drawled “Look what we have here. Of all the teams sent out on the trek, your team was the last one I expected which could possibly end up here. I guess I was wrong. I should have been stricter with all of you. I hated this idea of the trek

from the start. I knew something would happen. I tried everything legally possible to stop it. But, as we all can see, I couldn't. And here we are."

"Now, now, wait a second. Weren't there three of you? What was his name? Ah, Sahil. Brilliant tracker. But not so courageous, I suppose. I'm guessing he fled at the first sign of danger. HA! What a coward. I hate those kind of people. I'm guessing you feel the same about them now, don't you?"

Anya looked at Akanksh. If there was one thing that Akanksh hated in this world, it was someone insulting his friends. Especially his close ones.

"Sir, I'll tell you one thing" he hissed "My friends are not cowards. They'd not flee in the face of Satan himself, if it is for the greater good. Unlike you, they'd stay and keep fighting. You, on the other hand..... well, we can see where you ended up, can't we? Resorting to illegal businesses, when you discovered that you were worth absolutely nothing in the real world."

"Akanksh, be careful of what you're saying!" Chaudhary warned.

"I've said it once, sir, and I'll say it again. Unlike you, my friends are not cowards"

"AND ABSOLUTELY RIGHT THAT IS!!" yelled Sahil as he stormed into the office, with a dozen armed police officers.

Everybody sprang into action. As Mr. Chaudhary, Kartik, and the guards took out their guns, Sahil, Akanksh, and Anya hit the ground. A fight ensued, where multiple guards were killed. All the others were handcuffed. One officer was injured, but not too gravely. The brilliance of Akanksh's plan was appreciated. Sahil had ran back to the camp, and, without trusting anyone with the information, had used the landline there to call the police station. The police had duly responded. He had himself led them back to the poacher base, using the map he had made earlier. Reaching there, they had first disarmed and handcuffed the all the guards that were outside, and then had entered the office. Everything else had played out.

The trio were awarded for their bravery and wit by the authorities. They were also declared the winners of the trek.

-Soham Dafadar

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POACHING FACTS

Truths from the front-line



THE FACTS:

ELEPHANTS

- One elephant is slaughtered **every 15 minutes**.
- Africa has lost **90%** of its elephant population in the last 50 years.
- Fewer than 400,000 remain in the wild.
- The largest market for illegal ivory is China, where it is considered a status symbol.
- Profits from the sale of poached ivory are used to fund terrorist groups.

RHINOS

- One rhino is brutally murdered **every 8 hours**.
- Rhino poaching has escalated **9,000%** in the last 9 years in South Africa alone.
- Fewer than 25,000 remain in the wild.
- The largest markets for illegal rhino horn are China and Vietnam, where it is mistakenly thought to have medicinal value.

LIONS

- **93%** of wild lion populations have been killed or died in the last 50 years.
- The African lion is in critical danger, with some predicting **extinction by 2020**.
- Once a population of 100,000 lions worldwide, now number less than **21,000**.
- Habitat loss and conflict with humans, such as trophy hunting, captive breeding, and "canned hunts" are to blame.



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