

"Yes."

"Thanks, Hari. See I am going to use it right now," she said.

I watched Neha's face as she applied her lipstick with the same concentration as Alok had when doing quanti problems. Girls are beautiful, let's face it, and life is quite, quite worthless without them.

"What time you got to go home?" I said.

"Say by nine," Neha said. "I told them I'm meeting girlfriends for dinner."

"Wow, pretty liberal of them," I said sarcastically.

"They know I was feeling down. Thinking of Samir again."

"Hey, you want me to take you to a secret place?" I said.

"Where?"

"The insti roof."

"What? Are you crazy. Right on top of the insti, as if there could be a worse place for going public!"

"There is no one there. Ryan and I have gone dozens of times. And the view from the bell tower is beautiful."

I could see Neha was excited about the roof. It took me a few minutes of persuasion, convincing her that no one would find out, as we could follow her standard 'five minutes apart' policy to walk up there.

"I'll go. But not today. It's close to nine. How about next time, and I'll cry for Samir the whole day so they let me go out until eleven."

I didn't really dig her idea of using her brother as a weapon to stay out late but her parents were certified weirdos and probably deserved such tactics.

"Next time meet me on the roof directly, at eight-thirty."

"Sure," she said, "you said it is safe, right?"

"Yes, trust me," I winked.

## 10

# Cooperate to Dominate

"HERE, ONE COPY FOR EACH OF YOU." RYAN HANDED OUT papers to us with the title: THE C2D PLAN.

I had forgotten about the C2D theory, but obviously Ryan hadn't. He had in fact been working on the official document. We were sitting at Sasi's and Alok was busy with his second plate of paranthas, when Ryan dished out his plan for the rest of our IIT stay.

"Whassit?" Alok's greasy fingertips left marks on the sheet, obviously needing a tissue more than an IIT plan. There was something about Alok with his food that was too intimate to be watched.

I read out the contents.

Cooperate to Dominate. The IIT system is unfair because:

1. It suppresses talent and individual spirit.
2. It extracts the best years of one's life from the country's brightest minds.



3. It judges you with a draconian GPA system that destroys relationships.
4. The profs don't care for the students.
5. IITs have hardly contributed to the country.

"You have the time to do all this?" was Alok's response, which was stupid because Ryan had all the time in the world.

I read on: So, the only way to take on the unfair system is through unfair means – which is Cooperate to Dominate or C2D. And this is the plan that Ryan, Hari and Alok agree to for the rest of their stay at the insti. The key tenets are:

1. *All assignments to be shared – one person will do each assignment by turn. The others will simply copy it. Saves time, saves duplication of effort.*
2. *We will divide up the course responsibilities. For instance, if there are six courses in the semester, we will take care of only two each. One must attend all classes that one is responsible for, but can skip all others. (note: Ryan gets all Prof Veera courses) In each class you attend for your course – take copious notes. The rest will merely copy them.*
3. *We share lab experiment observations.*
4. *Our friendship is above GPAs. With all the new spare time, we live our lives to the fullest.*
5. *We combine our hostel rooms into one living unit – one common bedroom, one study room and one fun party room.*
6. *We split the cost of vodka regardless of how many drinks each person has had.*

Ryan looked at us as if he was expecting us to break into applause. We kept silent, hoping he would explain where he was going with this.

"So, what do you guys think?" he asked.

"What is this? Some kind of teenage club thing?"

"If you agree, sign it. Sign it with your blood."

"Yeah right," I said, "How old are we, like twelve?"

"I am serious man," Ryan said and then before we could say anything, he flicked out a razor blade from his pocket. In one nick, his thumb sprouted a dot of red.

"Ryan, are you crazy?" Alok squeaked, almost losing his breakfast at this gross act.

"No. Just want to drive the point home. You decide what you want to do," Ryan said, signing the document with a toothpick dipped in his blood.

"Can we discuss this first?" I said.

"What is there to discuss? I am not forcing anyone."

"Like this whole sharing assignments and observations. Isn't that cheating?" Alok said.

I agreed with Alok, though I was more concerned about the vodka costs, given that Ryan out-drunk us every single time.

"It is not cheating, it is cooperation. They have divided us with their GPAs, we are just pulling together to fight back."

"I don't see it that way," I insisted.

"Are you signing or not?" Ryan put his hands on his hips.

I thought about the C2D one last time. "Well. I can sign it, though I am not cutting myself or anything."

"It just takes a second," Ryan said and flicked the blade on my forefinger and blood spouted out of me before I could form my denial.



"Fuck you."

Ryan laughed and said, "Sorry man, look at your face. C'mon man, get into the spirit. Just sign it."

I looked at Ryan in disgust and signed the sheet.

Alok sat there, petrified like a chicken in a butcher shop. The old Alok would have vociferously stood up to Ryan, but the new, improved version, just back with us, did not want to fight again. "I'll make the cut myself," he said finally.

And soon he did get some blood from his little finger and we signed the C2D document like primitive tribesmen. I have to say, the whole blood thing made this feel important. I was not sure of what I had done, but somehow it sounded exciting. We converted our three single rooms into one apartment the same day. Ryan's room became the party room, Alok's was the study room with three tables and my room had the three beds.

"So you friends moved in together," Neha said.

We were en route to the insti roof as per plan. She met me at eight p.m., her parents blissfully ignorant about her real whereabouts, picturing her by a cake at a non-existent friend's birthday party.

"Yes, sort of. We combined our rooms to one living unit," I said, panting as we climbed the back stairs to the building.

"Sounds exciting," she said, blowing the fringe out of her eye.

It was already dark when we reached the roof. As always, there was no one there.

"Wow, look at all the stars," Neha said.

"Yes," I said, proud as if I had finger-painted the sky myself. "And it's all ours. Check out the campus view. See — that's where you live," I pointed.

We couldn't see much, apart from the lights in the living room.

"Wow. We are so near to them, yet so far," Neha said dreamily, flopping on the concrete floor. "So?"

"So what?" I said.

"Where is the vodka? Don't you guys drink here?"

"Yes. But you don't drink, do you?"

"Says who? I'll have one if you have some."

"We do hide a bottle under the bell. Let me look," I said, surprised at Neha's request. She was a nice girl, I thought. Nice girls do not drink. But I kind of could do with a drink myself, so I came back with the bottle.

"Nice," she said, as she lay back against the dish antenna, "look at the stars above, just so beautiful. I wish I were a bird."

When people want to be birds, they are normally getting drunk. But she was getting trippy just from the idea of drinking on the insti roof.

"Oh, I could lie here forever. Give me another drink," she said.

"Don't have too much," I had to caution.

"I won't. My dad will kill me if he smells it."

"Of course you'll smell of it."

"Not much, check this out."

She opened her purse. Ten items later, she took out a pack of cardamom pods.

"See, one of these and I go home minty fresh."



"Really? Then have one now, be minty for me."

"What? Do I have bad breath?" she sat up straighter.

"I did not say that."

She held my arm and pulled me toward her. "Look me in the eye and tell me if I have bad breath."

"I don't know. I have never been that close to your mouth," I said honestly, even as the millimeters between our mouths lessened.

"Go to hell," she laughed and pushed me away.

"See, you are chicken. Just so chicken," I said.

"No, I am not. Look at me, a professor's daughter, getting drunk on the insti roof with a five point something loafer."

If she had not been laughing, I would have resented that, but I decided to milk the opportunity anyway.

"Loafer? So I am a loafer," I said.

"Yes, but..."

"But what?"

"But I love my loafer," she said and pulled me toward her again. Again, our mouths were millimeters away. She tilted her head sideways. Was she going to kiss me? Or rather, was she-plus-two-glasses-of-vodka going to kiss me?

"We don't need no ejju-kay-shion..." a hoarse singing voice startled us from our embrace. Someone had just come to the insti roof.

"What the..." Neha said, "I thought you said no one was here."

"I don't know. Shh...quiet," I said as we tried to hide behind the antenna.

I finally recognized Ryan's voice through all that bad singing and saw him heading for our vodka hiding place.

"It's Ryan!" I said in a voice mixed with relief and irritation at losing my moment.

"Ryan," I shouted.

"Hari," he shouted back, walking over. "Bastard, you are here and I was looking all over for you. Is there someone with you?"

"Ryan, I want you to meet..."

"It's a girl!" Ryan exclaimed as if he had spotted me with a dead rabbit. Neha continued to cower behind me, attempting anonymity.

"It's Neha," I said. "Neha, meet Ryan. Ryan, be nice and say hello to Neha."

Ryan's voice mellowed down instantly. What is it with men; they become another person in female company. So predictable!

"Hi Neha," Ryan said, trying to avoid staring too much at someone he had heard so much about.

"Hi," Neha said, still unsure if Ryan could be trusted.

"I was just looking for Hari to do an assignment," Ryan said.

"Drop it Ryan. We're having a drink," I said.

"Really?" Ryan said as if he expected Neha to be winged and haloed or something. "But I thought Neha was not like that."

"Like what?" she asked immediately.

"Uh, nothing," Ryan said and sat down on the warm concrete.

"So what have you heard about me?" Neha said.

"Lots," Ryan said and started telling her sacred details about all our past dates. They kept talking for like ten hours



or something and I just kept getting more drunk. Ryan has a computer memory or something, and he told her about the times even I had forgotten about.

"He told you about the family planning documentary?" Neha giggled.

"Of course, he tells me everything," he said with considerable pride.

I wondered if Neha and I would have kissed and managed more if bloody Ryan had not dragged himself up here. I considered pushing him off the insti roof, but thought it would kind of spoil the mood anyway.

"So why did you say I wasn't that type of girl?" Neha said.

"You know, the whole vodka thing. You are supposed to be well...forget it," Ryan said.

"What? Tell me," Neha said with a firmness only good-looking women possess.

"You are like this good girl. Like why else won't you let him do anything? Dating for a year, still no kiss even. Just this goody-goody prof's daughter."

"He told you that?" Neha squeaked.

"Of course. You think you are dating a guy or someone asexual? You don't think he has needs?"

"Shut up, Ryan." This from me.

"C'mon man. Show some guts sometimes. This is for your own good."

"Needs?" Neha repeated, dazed.

"Yes, every man has needs. And pretty girls like you are either not aware of them or deny them for power games."

"Power?" Neha repeated.

I wanted to tell Ryan I had just been getting somewhere nicely, thank you, when he whistled by.

"Yes, power. What else?" Ryan said, calming down finally.

"I crave power? Now that is a joke. You guys just don't understand women do you?" Neha said, with a vodka-infused confidence that could take on even Ryan.

"Huh?" Ryan said, proving that we really did not understand women.

Neha had to go home soon after that, so we left the topic there. I wanted to scream at Ryan later, but he rolled two joints for me and gave me a scooter ride back to Kumaon, so I left it. Besides, Neha really did not seem mad or anything.

I had a hunch he might have helped my case!