

A Clever Plan

“Stop! Somebody stop him!”

The desperate cry shattered the tranquillity of the nature reserve. I whipped around and caught sight of a man sprinting down the gravel path, a bulging black backpack bouncing violently against his back. Something about him immediately struck me as odd. Unlike the other joggers, he was clad in a crumpled grey shirt and long trousers, while a pair of polished leather shoes slapped awkwardly against the ground. A mop of greasy hair clung to his perspiring forehead and a jagged scar ran down one cheek. More suspiciously, he kept casting furtive glances over his shoulder. Before Grandfather could stop me, I sprang into action and tore after the stranger.

“Stop!” I yelled, pumping my legs furiously. The man glanced back and our eyes met for a fleeting second. His face paled. Instead of slowing down, he accelerated. I gritted my teeth and pushed myself harder, weaving past bewildered visitors, but the distance between us continued to widen. Within moments, he disappeared around a bend. I finally stumbled to a halt, doubled over and gasping for breath.

Grandfather caught up with me shortly afterwards. Even at seventy, he remained remarkably sprightly, with a ramrod-straight back and a brisk stride that often put people half his age to shame. His usually twinkling eyes were now narrowed in disapproval above his silver-rimmed spectacles. Grandfather had spent forty years as a mathematics teacher and believed that almost every problem could be solved if one remained calm enough to think. Charging after suspicious strangers was clearly not his idea of thinking. Before he could launch into one of his legendary lectures, however, a flustered park volunteer came rushing towards us. An injured hornbill that was being rehabilitated at the visitor centre had disappeared.

We hurried back with her. Staring in stunned silence, I gazed at the empty cage before me. Its metal door hung open while several black-and-white feathers lay scattered forlornly at the bottom. Only half an hour earlier, I had marvelled at the magnificent bird perched proudly inside. Now, it was gone. When the volunteer revealed that someone had spotted the same man loitering near the cage shortly before the bird vanished, realisation hit me like a thousand-pound sledgehammer. My body stiffened. The hornbill did not escape. He stole it! My blood ran cold as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place, the bulging backpack, the furtive glances and his desperate dash towards the exit. Unfortunately, knowing the identity of the culprit was useless if we could not catch him.

As Grandfather contacted the park rangers, I paced restlessly beside the information counter. There had to be another way. My gaze suddenly landed on a folded piece of paper protruding from my younger sister Chloe’s pocket.

The map!

I snatched it from her and spread it across a nearby bench. My finger traced the East Pond Trail along which the thief had fled. At first, my heart sank. It led directly to the eastern exit. Then I noticed that the trail curved almost completely around a sprawling pond before reaching it. In contrast, a narrow boardwalk sliced straight across the reserve and rejoined the trail farther ahead.

An idea flickered in my mind.

Instead of chasing the thief from behind, what if we got ahead of him?

I bent closer to the map. That was when a small red marking near the eastern exit caught my eye.

TRAIL CLOSED FOR MAINTENANCE.

My eyes widened. The thief would reach the barricade and have no choice but to retrace his steps. If the rangers took the shorter boardwalk, they could reach the junction before he returned. My earlier chase had failed because I had tried to outrun him. This time, I would outthink him.

I turned excitedly to Grandfather and explained my clever plan. His stern expression gradually disappeared. The corners of his lips curled upwards and a familiar twinkle returned to his eyes. He gave me an approving nod before relaying the plan to the park rangers. Within minutes, everyone knew exactly where to go.

We hurried across the boardwalk and reached the junction well before the thief. A burly ranger concealed himself behind a dense wall of shrubbery. His broad shoulders strained against his khaki uniform and his weather-beaten face remained impassive as he surveyed the trail. Two other rangers were dispatched farther down the opposite path in case the thief tried to flee. Grandfather, Chloe and I remained a safe distance away.

Then, we waited.

Nothing.

Only the rustling of leaves disturbed the eerie silence.

Ten seconds became thirty.

Thirty became sixty.

I could feel sweat beading on my forehead. What if I had misread the map? What if there was another path I had overlooked? What if the thief had already escaped? My mind was all over the place. I clenched my fists tightly as my heart hammered against my chest. Minutes earlier, my plan had seemed ingenious. Now, countless possibilities for failure flooded my mind.

A twig snapped.

My breath caught in my throat.

Footsteps.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

They grew louder.

A figure emerged from behind the trees.

My pulse sprinted.

The crumpled grey shirt. The greasy hair. The black backpack.

It was him.

Completely unaware that he was being watched, the thief hurried past our hiding place towards the eastern exit. I dared not move. Even Chloe, who normally found remaining silent for ten seconds an impossible feat, had clamped both hands over her mouth.

We waited again.

One minute.

Two.

Then hurried footsteps thundered towards us.

The thief reappeared, his face crimson with frustration. Just as I had predicted, the barricade had forced him to turn back.

The burly ranger stepped onto the path.

The thief stopped dead in his tracks.

For one suspended moment, neither man moved. The thief's eyes darted frantically from the ranger to the surrounding trees. His fingers tightened around the straps of his backpack. Then, without warning, he spun around and bolted.

My heart lurched.

Had my clever plan failed at the very last moment?

No.

Seconds later, two uniformed figures emerged from the opposite end of the trail. The thief skidded to a halt. He looked ahead. Then behind. The burly ranger was already advancing towards him. Trapped between the three men, the thief's shoulders sagged in defeat. There was nowhere left to run.

When the rangers unzipped his backpack, they discovered a small ventilated carrier concealed inside. A frightened rustling came from within before the unmistakable beak

of the missing hornbill appeared through one of the openings. A wave of relief washed over me. The bird was carefully carried back to the visitor centre and returned safely to its cage, apparently unharmed by its ordeal.

The senior ranger commended me for studying the map carefully and anticipating the thief's movements. Swelling with pride, I could barely conceal the grin spreading across my face. Grandfather adjusted his silver-rimmed spectacles and gave me an approving pat on the shoulder. Coming from him, that meant more than any praise.

As we left the nature reserve, I looked once more at the crumpled map in my hand. My first attempt to catch the thief had failed miserably because I had acted without thinking. It was only when I stopped, observed the clues and used the map to predict his movements that my **clever plan** succeeded. That day, I learnt that solving a difficult problem did not always require strength or speed. Sometimes, all it took was a calm mind, careful observation and the ability to think one step ahead.