

# **SAMPLE CHAPTER**

## **The Dark Quest of Countess X -- A Call to the World's Youth**

by

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### **PART ONE**

#### **Chapter One**

United States National Security agent Forster scanned the document on his screen. "I don't like the look of this," he warned his boss.

#### **Invitation**

##### *A Call to the World's Youth – Help Our Missing Women*

**Too many women are MISSING from the world's population.  
Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen revealed their plight in 1990.  
Since then, few adults have been willing to confront this situation.**

**I, known for now as Countess X, believe that young people have the heart,  
creativity and intelligence to help find these women. I ask you to research this situation,  
devise realistic proposals and send me your plans within one month.**

**Full details provided below.**

**I will invite creators of the twenty most effective plans to present them at my European residence two months after acceptance, and meet appropriate accommodation and travel costs.**

**At your presentations will be philanthropists and sponsors pledged to put your plans into practice.**

*Countess X*

His colleague shifted in her chair, stretching her aching back. “Another nutcase. Or a stunt. By students or a women’s group. Did we trace the sender’s IP address?”

“It’s from Europe.” Forster examined two more pages that gave details, deadlines and addresses at a Swiss bank where communications were to be sent. Plus a promise that the anonymous Countess would reveal her identity at a later date *‘to avoid unnecessary publicity and discourage fraudsters.’*

“Fraudsters is right,” Forster sneered. “All the kids’ plans have to be certified as their own work. As if! They just use the Internet now.”

“Nothing to worry about, it’s a fake. Too many crazy promises to bother checking it out. Bin it.”

Forster keyed in the instructions that would stop the invitation from getting to any computer or linked device in the country. Which was a pity.

In Moscow, two weary women working the night shift at the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, Sluzhba vneshney razvedki Rossiyskoy Federatsii, straightened as a warning sounded on their screens. Suspect words in an incoming document.

“Countess X?” The younger operator frowned across at her superior, also peering at her screen. “And Amartya Sen? He’s old news. What’s to worry about here, Sonja?”

“A European Countess with money?” the other woman sniffed. “After all those European Union taxes? Unlikely.”

“Maybe it’s code?” the first woman said. “It’s addressed to all Year 9 teachers; they instruct our fifteen year olds.”

“What about that Swedish girl, the one calling students to strike for climate change? Could this be one of her stunts?” Sonja worried

They studied the document in silence.

“I don’t like it,” Sonja decided. “This goes straight to the cipher section. Get it out of circulation immediately. We can’t be too careful about trouble-makers of any age.”

Many other countries, equally suspicious of words that might menace their national security intercepted and deleted the invitation in the same way. However Azad Patel of India’s External Intelligence Agency, taking a late night nap at his workstation, missed it. Which is

how it arrived in the computer mailbox of Arnya Kaur, Grade 9 teacher at an undistinguished girls' secondary school in the outskirts of Kochi, Kerala in southern India.

Arnya read and re-read the invitation. How odd! Addressed to her personally, even the spelling correct. The pages of detailed instructions appeared authentic. A hoax, surely? Yet where were the trick questions to coax personal information out of her? She pushed back her long braid irritably. Piles of class papers waited to be graded.

A quick text to her cousin then, the computer geek of the family. *Is this a hoax?* She attached the invitation.

An hour later, his reply came back. *Looks okay. Originates from a reputable bank in Switzerland. Bank details, staff names, addresses all accurate but no clues to your Countess. You teach some smart girls. Why not get them to follow it up? If they're chosen you could go with them. Europe in the Spring!*

Smiling, Arnya turned back to her grading. But a moment later, she pushed the papers aside, printing out the complete invitation to study it. Just suppose it was genuine? Imagine, a trip to Europe all expenses paid? She remembered Amartya Sen's 1990 revelation. Women were missing from the world's population count. There weren't enough natural reasons for their absence so many commentators focused on India's culture and traditions, shaming and blaming the second largest nation on earth for neglecting its women. How dare they?

Yes, many poor Indian girls had little chance of education, she knew that well enough. They married too young, worked too hard and bore too many children. But things were improving. More and more girls went to elementary school now. Many of her own students were extremely bright.

Arnya's dark eyes narrowed. If this invitation was a way to yet again point critical fingers at India, then two of her brightest girls would research Europe and America's missing women. Women who'd vanished there because of – because of climate change. That would show this European Countess what Indian girls could do.