

Who Moved My Taxes?

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Introduction

In the beginning, before the long shadows fell across the ledgers and the insidious doubt crept into the hearts of the citizens, there was the Maze.

It was not a labyrinth of damp stone, thorny briars, or subterranean dirt. It was a sprawling, magnificent, terrifyingly complex architecture constructed of towering financial ledgers, polished mahogany corridors, and solemn, vaulted halls where the air itself seemed profoundly weighted with the quiet, dignified labor of

millions. The ceilings were painted in rich, vibrant frescoes of deep cerulean blue and harvest gold, depicting the grand bargain of civilization: the many giving a fraction of their strength so that the whole might endure. Into this vast, intricate system, the people of the land poured their Taxes.

The Taxes were not abstract numbers on a digital screen back then. They were a tangible, living substance—a great and magnificent Treasury of Public Wealth that sat at the very center of the Maze, radiating a golden, warming light that pushed back the shadows of the bureaucratic corridors. This Wealth was the gathered hours of a nation's days, the small, hard-won withholdings from back-breaking wages and bountiful autumn harvests. It was the patient tribute offered by the farmer, the weaver, and the merchant, given under the sacred, unspoken promise that water might finally reach the thirsty roots of the drought-stricken plains, that smooth ribbons of asphalt might join the most distant, isolated villages to the bustling markets, that the heavy, oak doors of knowledge might be pushed open for the poorest child, and that the common life of the citizenry might be lifted, inch by agonizing inch, a little higher than the choking dust of bare survival.

For a long, golden season, the Taxes remained in their appointed, heavily guarded place. The sensory experience of the central hall was one of overwhelming, intoxicating abundance. The air hummed with a low, satisfying vibration—the sound of a society functioning exactly as it was designed to. The scent of the pure Public Wealth guided every honest step. It smelled of freshly minted copper and silver, the sharp, authoritative tang of crisp linen paper and drying black ink, mingling with the earthy, sweet aroma of newly laid soil for public parks and the metallic spark of welding torches building bridges. It was the scent of safety, of progress, and of collective

trust. It was a smell so thick and reassuring you could almost taste it on the back of your tongue like warm honey.

Four seekers lived in the glow of this abundance, dedicating their days to tending, observing, and drawing sustenance from the grand cycle of the Maze.

Two were small, quick, and possessed instincts honed to razor sharpness: Chunmun, whose nose twitched constantly, capable of detecting the most microscopic shift in the barometric pressure of the bureaucracy, and Arvind, a creature of pure, kinetic action, who trusted only the forward motion of his own padded feet on the marble floors. They did not overthink the flow of the wealth; they merely tracked its presence and responded to its physical currents.

The other two seekers were taller, walking upright, vastly more complex, and heavily burdened by the capacity for deep thought: Satya and Prakash. Satya was a creature of profound nostalgia and rigid comfort. He loved the familiar, geometric shape of the world. He wore suits of soft, comforting brown, and he found deep psychological peace in the predictable clatter of the stamping presses and the exact, unchanging temperature of the great halls. Prakash, dressed in the slightly frayed blues of a scholar, was different. He was prone to severe over-analysis, often slowed by heavy sorrow when the system stuttered, yet he possessed a quiet, stubborn elasticity of mind—a rare capacity to unlearn what was broken and learn what was brutally necessary.

They built their lives around the great, glowing mound of the Taxes. Every morning they woke to its comforting, metallic scent. Every evening they went to sleep lulled by the distant, rhythmic thumping of the great public works machines it funded.

Then, one entirely ordinary, violently unremarkable Tuesday morning, the paradigm shattered.

There was no explosion. No alarm bells rang in the high towers. No smoke filled the corridors. The tragedy did not announce itself with a roar, but with a sudden, suffocating vacuum of sound.

When the four seekers arrived at the central hall, the great, glowing mountain of the Public Wealth was gone. The grand pedestal stood bare, stripped down to the cold, grey granite. The golden light that had warmed their faces for years was extinguished, replaced by a flat, shadowless, ghostly grey illumination that seeped from the skylights like dirty water. The temperature in the room had plummeted, leaving a biting, damp chill that seeped immediately into their bones.

Worst of all was the smell. The rich, intoxicating aroma of progress, minted copper, and wet earth had vanished completely. In its place, Chunmun's nose flared violently at a new, sickening bouquet. It was a thin, sour, metallic odor—the smell of stagnant air, rusting iron, and the sharp, chemical tang of evaporating accountability. But beneath that decay, Chunmun smelled something active and malicious: the oily scent of the Kickback. He smelled the crisp, imported leather of briefcases filled with illicit Bribes. He smelled the cloying, expensive perfume of lavish Gifts purchased with stolen public funds. The Taxes had not merely evaporated; they had been transmuted. They had been converted into the dark currency of corruption.

Chunmun locked eyes with Arvind and nodded. Arvind's legs were already in motion, his footsteps clicking frantically against the freezing marble as the two small seekers immediately darted away from the empty pedestal, plunging headfirst into the dark,

uncharted, and widening corridors of the outer Maze to track where the Bribes had flowed.

But the taller seekers froze. Satya dropped to his knees, his hands frantically rubbing the cold granite where the Taxes had once rested, as if friction alone could conjure the wealth back into existence. "It is not fair!" Satya bellowed, his voice echoing off the vaulted ceilings, bouncing back as a hollow, mocking distortion. He closed his eyes tight, trying to summon the phantom scent of the pure treasury, preferring the illusion of yesterday to the freezing, corrupt reality of today.

Prakash stood frozen beside him, his breath pluming in the suddenly frigid air. He felt a heavy, leaden sorrow settle in his chest. He looked down the dark corridors where Chunmun and Arvind had vanished. The Maze stretched out before them, infinitely complex, filled with shadows that seemed to shift and whisper with the rustle of backroom deals.

They did not know, as they first prepared to step away from the center, how many strange, grotesque forms the missing Taxes would take. They could not fathom how many quiet, bureaucratic ways the vast wealth of a nation could be converted into Kickbacks without a single open, violent hand ever closing upon it. They knew only that the old place was terrifyingly empty, and that emptiness, if left unexamined and unchallenged, slowly ferments into a kind of silent consent.

And so, with a heavy heart and a trembling step, Prakash pulled Satya to his feet. The great search began—not a hunt for a cartoonish thief in the night, but a grueling, heartbreaking forensic journey to uncover the thousand small, bureaucratic absences that relocate a nation's very substance into the pockets of the corrupt,